

**Freedom North: Black  
Freedom Struggles Outside  
the South, 1940–1980**

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## Foreword

*Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham*

There is no greater symbol of the civil rights movement than the March on Washington in 1963. The power of the March as metaphor, as emblematic of the dream of freedom continues to resonate with Americans of all races—in books, television documentaries, Martin Luther King, Jr., birthday celebrations, and even in television commercials having nothing to do with issues of racial equality. As a heuristic device, the March serves also as a window onto the historiography of the black freedom struggle in the 1950s and 1960s, allowing access to the shifting focus of historical interpretation. From this perspective, it 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. Despite the complex and diverse character of this massive demonstration on August 28, 1963, historians assessed the civil rights movement according to the speakers on the raised platform and heard a voice that was singularly nonviolent and integrationist. So great was the platform participants' desire for both racial harmony and homogeneity of message that Malcolm X would strongly condemn the revision of John Lewis's speech during the actual march—the excising of what was perceived to be harsh and militant language by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) leader.<sup>1</sup>

Historians' focus on the platform, thus, presented a top-down, even "heroic" vision of the movement. Research drew overwhelmingly from presidential archives, judicial opinions, legislative records, and the papers of national organizations and their leaders. This important, foundational scholarship emphasized the personality and ideological differences between national leaders, assessed the impact of Supreme Court decisions on the dismantling of Jim Crow practices, analyzed the transformation of political institutions in light of the passage of civil rights legislation, and examined national civil rights, labor, and religious organizations in confrontation and coalition. Yet the focus on the leadership proved to be

limited, since it overlooked the immense phalanx marching for jobs and freedom. Like John Lewis's original speech, the range of voices present was silenced.<sup>2</sup>

As a teenager and a Washingtonian, I stood among the many demonstrators on that historic day. The sight of hundreds of buses, the thousands of banners, and the sea of people en route to the Lincoln Memorial remains in my memory no less vividly than the figure of Martin King perched above and afar, eloquently and intimately proclaiming my own and other African Americans' unfulfilled dream of freedom. Today, I see these images through the eyes of a historian who interprets their meaning based on primary sources, especially the newspaper accounts of the event. Such sources capture the motivations that led relatively obscure individuals to the March, and they capture as well the uniquely local efforts of hundreds if not thousands of organized groups from all over the United States.

It was not until the mid-1980s that scholars began to look more closely at community-level protest. Led by sociologists such as Aldon Morris, Doug McAdam, and Charles Payne and by historians such as Clayborne Carson, John Dittmer, and Adam Fairclough, this scholarship forced a rethinking of social movements and their theoretical and methodological frameworks.<sup>3</sup> Attentive to grassroots activism in southern cities and in rural areas deep in the Delta, the new scholarship explored human agency, moving beyond the charisma of a single personality to discover unheralded, previously unknown men and women in a spectrum of leadership roles and perspectives. The local movement scholars uncovered the influential, at times problematic, role of existing community organizations and institutions, such as labor unions, barbershops, colleges, fraternal organizations, and churches. Their attention to grassroots activism has facilitated important new work on black women's roles in the movement.<sup>4</sup> Although there is certainly more to be done, the study of Southern communities in the struggle for racial equality has persuasively challenged the earlier scholarship's overemphasis on external political forces, leaders, and funding. Yet from the standpoint of the 1963 March on Washington, even this path-breaking work proved limited, since its regional focus unwittingly reinforced the idea that similar goals and tactics were not pursued outside the South during the 1950s and early 1960s. Rendered invisible were the many delegations from the West Coast, the East Coast, and the Midwest—men and women who converged on Washington with banners and placards that identified the civil rights issues of their locales: "We March for Integrated Schools Now;" "We Demand an End to Police Brutality Now;" "We March for Higher Minimum Wages, Coverage for all Workers Now;" and "We Demand an End to Bias Now."<sup>5</sup>

For example, the large number of Philadelphians at the March participated with the knowledge of their own successful fight for jobs and freedom. Between 1959 and 1963, black Philadelphians waged 29 consumer boycotts. According to Leon Sullivan, the black Baptist minister who spearheaded the "Selective Patronage Campaign," thousands of skilled and unskilled jobs opened to blacks as a result.<sup>6</sup> Several thousand New Yorkers traveled to the March in buses, cars, and trains.<sup>7</sup> Twenty-four buses left from Harlem alone. Some of the buses were filled with black and white members of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). One-third of the Harlem buses contained unemployed blacks whose fares were paid by donations and button sales. The bus riders were instructed: "Remember our obligation of dignity and responsibility. Eliminate emotionalism ... no drinking and no alcoholic beverages on the bus. Most important keep a level head."<sup>8</sup>

More than 1,000 persons from Boston participated in the March on Washington. Under the leadership of local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) activists, such as Kenneth Guscott and Ruth Batson, the Boston group rode in 30 buses and in private cars.<sup>9</sup> They were in the middle of their own decade-long fight against de facto segregation in the public schools. In June 1963, the Boston NAACP had led a "Stay Out for Freedom Day." Some 8,000 students boycotted their classes, attending instead "freedom schools," which were set up in homes, churches, and other neighborhood institutions. In February 1964, the Boston NAACP called again for a "Stay Out for Freedom Day." The idea for another school boycott, while in defiance of the threats and injunctions by the Boston school committee, won the support of black community organizations. The Boston NAACP proclaimed boldly in its literature: "We cannot emphasize too strongly that our children will be staying out for education, and not against it. ... We support the Freedom 'Stay Out' so that our children may meaningfully 'Stay-In.'" On February 26, 1964, nearly 20,000 students in the city boycotted their classes. Thus, Black Bostonians came to the March on Washington to reaffirm their ongoing commitment and militant position of defying school board orders, disrupting school board meetings, and holding school strikes.<sup>10</sup>

Some 2,500 persons came from the Chicago area, one even on roller skates. CORE members figured prominently among the Chicago delegates. Like Boston, issues of school desegregation preoccupied much of their civil rights activism. In the months preceding the March, a coalition of civil rights organizations and black working-class neighborhood groups had called for a citywide boycott in protest against mobile classrooms that were set up hastily to address overcrowded facilities, in lieu of integration.

On July 10, 1963, the Chicago CORE launched a week-long sit-in at the Board of Education, and, by the following October, marshaled tremendous support for a boycott. On October 22, 1963, approximately 250,000 students stayed out of Chicago schools for the day.<sup>11</sup>

Activists also came from the West Coast. After picketing an all-white housing complex in Torrance, California, just a day earlier, a group of 87 black and white Californians flew to Washington. Black residents of Seattle, Washington, had been fighting for open housing since the 1950s. Although Seattle was represented at the March, a number of leaders from this city used the same day to call attention to their own protest. One thousand demonstrators in Seattle thus marched for fair housing on August 28, 1963, as a way to emphasize their unity of spirit with the national event.<sup>12</sup>

However, not all the demonstrators at the March on Washington favored integration. Some came to promote new, all-black agendas. Distributing leaflets among the crowd at the March were representatives of the Freedom Now Party, a short-lived but early advocate of a separate black political party—ideologically linked to international struggles against colonialism and distant from either the Democratic or Republican political agendas.<sup>13</sup> Actor Ossie Davis and SNCC workers John Lewis and Cleveland Sellers expressed their surprise at running into Malcolm X in Washington on the day of the March. Taylor Branch notes that Malcolm came alone, and that "he held court for passing demonstrators, mostly students." Branch even posits that Malcolm was among the demonstrators that day—"a faceless dot in the crowd."<sup>14</sup> Nor were all the Southern marchers nonviolent in their beliefs. Outspoken civil rights leader Gloria Richardson from Cambridge, Maryland was present. In June 1963, Richardson had led a militant struggle of sit-ins that resulted in mass arrests, when black Marylanders resorted to armed self-defense in the face of white mobs. Indeed, Malcolm X praised Richardson, who sometimes carried a gun. An article on the Cambridge Movement under her leadership noted: "No one really talks seriously about practicing nonviolence in Cambridge."<sup>15</sup> Even at the March on Washington, some Southern blacks carried placards that expressed a tone more militant than the platform speakers would have wanted. The group from Americus and Albany, Georgia, for example, challenged the legitimacy of the law and the role of the state in administering laws by asking the rhetorical question, "What is a state without justice but a robber band enlarged?"<sup>16</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that such sentiments, already existing in the South and by Southerners in exile like Robert Williams in Cuba, would spring up in 1964 in organized form, specifically the Deacons of Defense

in Bogalusa, Louisiana. Charles Sims, founder of the Deacons, stated in 1965: "Martin Luther King and me have never seen eye to eye. He has never been to Bogalusa. If we didn't have the Deacons here there is no telling how many killings there would have been. We stand guard here in the Negro Quarters. We are the defense team."<sup>17</sup> The Deacons existed alongside the nonviolent movement, functioning as esteemed protectors.

In the late 1990s, scholars came increasingly to question static and bifurcated regional images—generalizations that equated the Southern movement with racial desegregation and the belief in nonviolence and the Northern movement with Black Power and violence. Recent publications and doctoral dissertations point to the range of ideological persuasions, competing goals, racially integrated coalitions, and black separatist agendas that informed communities in every region of the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. This growing body of research proves that there was never a monolithic politics of place; no singular strategy in time. George Lipsitz's wonderful book, *A Life in the Struggle* (1988), is perhaps the earliest to articulate the fluid nature of the black freedom struggle. Through the life of rank-and-file activist Ivory Perry, Lipsitz portrays the black freedom struggle across regions and decades from a grassroots perspective. A migrant from rural Arkansas, Perry's move to St. Louis in the 1950s reflected the burgeoning urbanization and ghettoization of blacks in the years between 1940 and 1970. In the 1950s, he demonstrated against discriminatory hiring practices in banks and against segregated schools, theaters, and restaurants. He grew more militant, as did other working-class protesters, adapting more disruptive strategies, e.g., stopping traffic, marching and chanting through department stores, and blocking entrances to banks.<sup>18</sup> His activism in CORE in the 1960s took him south—to Selma and Bogalusa (where he admired the Deacons of Defense)—but it also took him north to the open housing campaigns in the suburbs of Chicago. In the 1970s and 1980s, Perry, still an activist in St. Louis, joined in community mobilizing efforts for equality in housing, employment, and health care.<sup>19</sup>

Quintard Taylor, in a 1995 article on the civil rights movement in Seattle, argued that "distinctly local agendas" constituted an integral part of the national movement to transform American race relations in the 1950s and 1960s. His important work on the movement in Seattle during this time period reveals a rapidly growing black population in search of jobs and freedom. Attracted to Seattle's fast growing economy due to the Boeing Aircraft Company, blacks soon found themselves embroiled in the fight against job bias, housing discrimination, and de facto school segregation.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, *Freedom North* makes an important contribution toward filling the gaps in our knowledge of the struggle outside the South during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Most important, this book constitutes part of an emergent revisionism of civil rights history, positing a movement broader in time and place. This new interpretation links the North and South, and finds within each region the coexistence and interaction of nonviolent resistance and armed self-defense, interracial coalitions and all-black organizations, and the quest for full inclusion in America and identification with uniquely black cultural traditions.

### Notes

1. John Lewis with Michael D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 218–228; Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963–1965* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 131; David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: W. Morrow, 1986), 282–283.
2. For an excellent historiographical analysis of the early scholarship, see Steven F. Lawson, "Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement," *American Historical Review* 96 (April 1991): 456–471.
3. Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984); Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Clayborne Carson, "Civil Rights Reform and the Black Freedom Struggle," in Charles W. Eagles, ed., *The Civil Rights Movement in America* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1986); Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Adam Fairclough, *Race & Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915–1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995).
4. Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Bettye Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin, eds., *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods, eds., *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941–1965* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1990); Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York: Dutton, 1993); Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long: African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford

- University Press, 1997); Cynthia Griggs Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry: The Liberation of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).
5. See photographs of the marchers in *New York Times*, August 29, 1963, 18.
  6. Leon H. Sullivan, *Build Brother Build* (Philadelphia: Macrae Smith Company, 1969), 70–77.
  7. “Marchers Sing and Voice Hope on Way to Washington Rally,” *New York Times*, August 29, 1963, 19.
  8. “Young and Old Make Bus Trip for March,” *Washington Post*, August 29, 1963, D-15.
  9. “Chicagoan Skates Here for March,” *Washington Post*, August 28, 1963, A-6.
  10. Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 588–591; Amy C. Offner, “‘Too Late for Pleading’: Black Boston and the Struggle for School Desegregation, 1963–1976,” Unpublished senior honors thesis, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 2001, 16, 21.
  11. Ledger Smith, a professional roller skater, skated from Chicago to D.C. in ten days. See “Chicagoans Plan Continuing Civil Rights Rallies in Washington,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 29, 1963; “Chicagoan Skates Here for March,” *Washington Post*, August 28, 1963, A-6; for the boycott, see James R. Ralph, Jr., *Northern Protest: Martin Luther King, Jr., Chicago, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 13–22.
  12. “Marchers Sing and Voice Hope,” 19; Quintard Taylor, “The Civil Rights Movement in the American West: Black Protest in Seattle, 1960–1970,” *Journal of Negro History* 80 (winter 1995): 6.
  13. For discussion of the Freedom Now Party and an illuminating discussion of black radicalism during the early 1960s, see Peniel E. Joseph, “Waiting Till the Midnight Hour: Reconceptualizing the Heroic Period of the Civil Rights Movement, 1954–1965,” in *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 2 (spring 2000): 6–17; also see Timothy B. Tyson, “Robert F. Williams, ‘Black Power,’ and the Roots of the African-American Freedom Struggle,” *Journal of American History* 85 (September 1998): 540–570.
  14. Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 131; Hampton, *Voices of Freedom*, 162–164.
  15. Sharon Harley, “‘Chronicle of a Death Foretold’: Gloria Richardson, the Cambridge Movement and the Radical Black Activist Tradition,” in Collier-Thomas and Franklin, eds., *Sisters in the Struggle*, 186–190.
  16. “One Note of Bitterness,” *New York Times*, August 29, 1963, 17.
  17. *Baton Rouge State Times*, July 19, 1965, 1, quoted in George Lipsitz, *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 96; Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, 340–343; Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).
  18. Lipsitz, *Life in the Struggle*, 13–14.
  19. *Ibid.*, 76–78.
  20. Taylor, “The Civil Rights Movement in the American West,” 1–14.

## Introduction

Jeanne Theoharis<sup>1</sup>

[Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s campaign in] Chicago was the first and only real attempt by the Civil Rights Movement to mount a major campaign of nonviolent direct action in the North.

Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality*<sup>2</sup>

The spontaneous urban uprisings of 1968 ended an era of black struggle, for unlike earlier rebellions involving SNCC and Southern blacks, they dissipated quickly when confronted by powerful institutions.

Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*<sup>3</sup>

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**D**etroit, Michigan, 1941—Thousands of blacks, part of the all-black March on Washington Movement, hold work stoppages and demonstrations to expand job opportunities for black male and female workers in Detroit’s auto and defense industries.

New York, New York, 1958—A group of Harlem mothers refuse to send their children to school to protest segregated and unequal conditions and are brought to trial.

New York, New York, 1960—In a speech to the Urban League, Martin Luther King, Jr., declares, “The racial issue that we confront in America is not a sectional but a national problem. . . . There is a pressing need for a liberalism in the North that is truly liberal, that firmly believes in integration in its own community as well as in the deep South. There is need for the type of liberal who not only rises up with righteous indignation when a Negro is lynched in Mississippi, but will be equally incensed when a Negro is denied the right to live in his neighborhood, or join his professional association or secure a top position in his business.”

Boston, Massachusetts, 1963—Hundreds of parents jam two School Committee meetings, lead sit-ins, commit civil disobedience, and rally—10,000 strong—to protest segregation in Boston's public schools.

Detroit, Michigan, 1963—Thousands walk for freedom to protest racial discrimination and police brutality. King addresses the crowd, declaring it "gigantic" and a "magnificent new militancy."

New York, New York, 1964—464,361 students boycott New York's public schools on February 3 to demand a plan and timetable for comprehensive desegregation of the city's schools—the biggest civil rights demonstration to date in the history of the United States, eclipsing the numbers of the 1963 March on Washington.

Newark, New Jersey, 1974—Puerto Ricans rebel on Labor Day over police brutality. Thousands of African Americans and Puerto Ricans protest Mayor Gibson's decision to declare martial law.

Boston, Massachusetts, 1975—Over 15,000 people march in support of desegregation to counter a year of violent resistance to court-ordered desegregation.

Tens of thousands of people were active in freedom movements of varying ideologies outside of the South from the 1940s to the 1980s. Yet, while scholars have sought to complicate the historiography of the black freedom struggle in recent years, the dominant civil rights story 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. The narrative of the civil rights movement, then, continues to rest on a series of dichotomies: between South and North, nonviolence and Black Power militancy, *de facto* and *de jure* segregation, and the movement before 1965 and after. In history textbooks, college classrooms, films, and popular celebration, African American protest movements in the North appear as ancillary and subsequent to the "real" movement in the South. Because racism is southernized in popular versions of American history and political discourse, the main battle is believed to be in the South. Following this logic, the movement fittingly and exclusively emerges there.

Foregrounding the South has constricted popular understandings of race and racism in the United States during and after WWII—making it seem as if the South was the only part of the country that needed a movement, as if blacks in the rest of the country only became energized to fight after their Southern brothers and sisters did, as if Southern racism was more malignant than the strains found in the rest of the country, as if social

activism produced substantive change only in the South. As Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham points out in her analysis of the March on Washington in the Foreword, where we look determines what we see. These paradigms make it difficult to account for the decisive spread of the Ku Klux Klan and other racial violence out of the South into the rest of the country in the 1920s. They miss the systems of racial caste and power—pervasive and entrenched across the North—that denied people of color equitable education, safe policing, real job opportunities, a responsive city government, regular sanitation services, quality health care, and due process under the law. Northern segregation operated somewhat differently than Southern. Public spaces—bathrooms, trains, movie theaters, and lunch counters—were not legally separated for blacks and whites in the North. But schools, housing, and jobs operated on a strict racial hierarchy with whites at the top and blacks at the bottom. And many public spaces, while not explicitly marked "for whites only," practiced that just the same. By shielding Northern segregation and the economic and social disfranchisement of people of color from full examination, these formulations naturalize the Northern racial order as *not* a racial system like the South's but one operating on class and culture with racial discrimination as a byproduct.

Moreover, they require ignoring local leaders like Mae Mallory in New York, Ruth Batson in Boston, and Reverend Al Cleage in Detroit, all of whom organized against school inequalities in the North. They miss the breakfast programs and gang truces built by the Chicago Black Panther Party, the campaign against lead paint and for adequate sanitation and health services organized by the Young Lords Party, the movement to open up credit and access to decent goods for welfare recipients led by the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), and the drive to elect independent black politicians carried out by residents in Newark, Chicago, and Oakland. Ultimately, they take a national struggle challenging the politics and economics of race in the United States and pigeonhole it as a heroic triumph over Southern backwardness between 1954 and 1965.

Since scholars first began writing the history of the civil rights movement in the late 1960s, black activism in the urban Northeast, Midwest, and West has largely been cast as secondary to the real struggle taking place in the South. Work on Martin Luther King, Jr., often juxtaposes the successes he and the Southern Christian Leadership Congress (SCLC) had in the South with the difficulty they encountered in Chicago when they tried to take the movement North.<sup>4</sup> However, these analyses miss the similarities between SCLC's "failures" in Albany, Georgia, and those in Chicago, as the movements in both cities ran aground on broken promises by city leadership and indifference by the federal government and nation at large. The fact that some black Chicagoans abandoned nonviolence is

not new either, since King had encountered this in both Albany and Birmingham. Similarly, long before Birmingham acquired the name Bombingham, blacks in Chicago suffered hundreds of bombing attacks as they crossed the color line and moved into "white neighborhoods." August Meier's and Elliot Rudwick's 1973 study of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) treats CORE's development of the strategy of nonviolent protest in Northern cities during the 1940s largely as a prehistory to the Southern movement.<sup>5</sup> It dismisses the efforts of CORE's Northern chapters to use nonviolent direct action against employment and housing discrimination as inappropriate to racial conditions in the North.

Even ground-breaking scholarship such as Charles Payne's and John Dittmer's studies of Mississippi that elaborate Ella Baker's pivotal leadership and organizing philosophy treat her Northern activism as background for the pivotal role she plays in Southern struggles.<sup>6</sup> Work on school inequalities that extends to the North, such as James Patterson's recent exploration of *Brown v. Board of Education*, does so by establishing rigid chronologies, maintaining the erroneous notion that activism around schools was virtually nonexistent in the 1950s and early 1960s in the North.<sup>7</sup> Yet, as Kenneth Clark helped prepare the briefs for the *Brown v. Board* case in the early 1950s, he, along with Ella Baker, joined with local activists to organize against school segregation in New York and criticized the NAACP for overwhelmingly focusing its efforts on the South. And Tom Sugrue's seminal study of the ways the politics of race determined the economic, spatial, and social configuration of postwar Detroit does not treat black activism as central to that process.<sup>8</sup> Yet community activists from the March on Washington Movement to the Walk for Freedom to the organization of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers contested—and indeed reshaped—the city.

In more recent years, the vast majority of historical work on black activism in the urban North has focused on the ideological and organizational development of Black Power and other forms of black radicalism.<sup>9</sup> Centered primarily on the biographies of well-known movement leaders, the historiography of Black Power has tended to ignore the local political and economic context for black radicalism, the grassroots activists that nurtured it, and the impact of the radical challenge on the landscape of Northern cities.<sup>10</sup> Other recent studies of racial politics in the postwar urban North have either ascribed Northern protest solely to the influence of Martin Luther King and other Southern leaders or focused primarily on the causes of white backlash against racial reform. In these formulations, the various freedom struggles that emerge outside of the South not only become peripheral to the "Movement" but the geographical particularities of the Northeast, West, and Midwest get clouded. "The North" sometimes

refers to northeastern cities while other times stands in as a larger term for the rest of the country (as we will use it here).

The historical connotations of black freedom in the "promised land" (runaway slaves, the Harlem Renaissance, and black migration during the two world wars) and the "backward" nature attached to Southern racism have made it difficult to focus on Northern injustice and the movements that emerged there for racial change.<sup>11</sup> Yet, as the pieces in this collection show, a fuller inclusion of Northern activism within the postwar freedom narrative challenges the notion that the movement went from civil rights to Black Power, that Black Power caused the decline of the movement, that self-defense was new to the movement in the 1960s, and that well-organized nonviolent movements were not as prevalent or successful across the North as they were in the South from 1940 to 1980. These essays decisively move the story away from charismatic male leadership, show that the movement for full citizenship extended far beyond voting rights, link the struggle for civil rights to economics, reveal the role the media played in discounting Northern struggles, and challenge underclass theory that denies structure as a crucial determinant in the experience of Northern blacks.

This book brings together new work on black social movements outside of the South to detail these individual local struggles and to rethink the nature and place of race in recent American history. Many of these stories are unfamiliar. Others have been told only in a sectarian context. Convinced that these movements demand the rigorous and thoughtful treatment that other twentieth-century social movements have been accorded, these authors take the tools of historical scholarship to demystify groups such as the US organization and the Modern Black Convention Movement and activists such as the Reverend Al Cleage and Fred Hampton, and to reconstruct the narrative of postwar black liberation struggles. By placing these freedom initiatives in a dialectical relationship with conditions and developments in the South throughout the course of the movement, we present a different picture of the racial terrain of the United States during and after WWII. We are not questioning the premise that activism in the South inspired activism in the North or that the racial terrain of the South differed from the North; rather, we maintain that activism in the North also inspired activism in the South. These battles are symbiotic—North and South, East and West.

While WWII helped lay the foundation for the civil rights movement and discredit biological theories of race, postwar America was an increasingly racialized place. The industrial build-up needed for the war, the mechanization of Southern agriculture, and Operation Bootstrap had spurred Black and Puerto Rican migration to Northern cities while veterans' loans and

Federal Housing Administration policy encouraged white migration to the suburbs and fortified white enclaves within cities. African Americans and Puerto Ricans found their housing options limited, and GIs of color had difficulty accessing their housing benefits. Those sections of the city open to nonwhite people received fewer loans for home ownership and improvement, and white violence erupted when people of color moved into "white neighborhoods" or sent their children to "white schools." Public services in nonwhite sections of the city were significantly inferior, and urban renewal razed many historically black and Latino neighborhoods, displacing families and further overcrowding nonwhite neighborhoods.

An increasingly elaborate educational system developed in the North in the postwar period to ensure racial inequality and segregation in resources, hiring, administration, and school upkeep that cannot be merely attributed to residential segregation. The schools that nonwhite students were sent to were significantly disadvantaged in resources, curriculum, and personnel compared to those of their white counterparts—and many students, white and black, traveled farther to school than they would otherwise need to in order to maintain this segregation. The GI Bill (the most successful affirmative action program of the twentieth century) opened up college education and the middle class to a generation of working-class white men, but these opportunities were largely denied to men of color and women of all races. A shifting industrial base in most Northern cities combined with the lack of access people of color had to many public jobs (like teaching, police and fire departments, and many levels of city government) made unemployment and poverty increasingly common.

Northern freedom struggles challenged the racialized political economy of postwar cities like the Southern civil rights movement did. Yet, while the Montgomery Bus Boycott, a disruptive urban protest, is now seen as an inspiring fight for public citizenship, welfare recipients demonstrating against Sears or New York residents taking over Lincoln Hospital to protest unsanitary conditions are not given this moral power. In part, this is due to the emergence of popular and scholarly theories of the "underclass," which have linked black migration to Northern cities with the development of a pathological psychology in the black community.<sup>12</sup> Thus, urbanization is tied to the disintegration of the black family—and, by extension, the black community—as urban blacks, particularly black women, are often pictured as non-virtuous and non-righteous. In much of this literature, the problems Northern blacks faced were now largely due to their own values and culture, and not the structures of society and the aforementioned changes in American cities. Even scholars who have looked at the economic and political structures of cities still locate the

potential for change in black self-help strategies more than social protest.<sup>13</sup> As the Moynihan report demonstrated, black women were seen as too controlling and aggressive, and black men as too emasculated and absent—further obscuring the possibility of Northern activism and placing the burden of change on the structure of the black family itself.

These theoretical formulations are tied to racialized ideas of place, work, and progress. Because rural blacks are seen as emblematic of long-suffering struggle, and urban blacks as pathological (divorced from the kin and culture of Southern black life), the narrative of the movement's demise when it migrates North is self-justifying. In a troubling tautology, a sharecropper can occupy a place of dignity in the American imagination that a welfare mother cannot; thus, the activism of welfare mothers disappears from view because they cannot hold this place of American hero and symbol of national progress. The story cannot be a story because it fits no category. Yet, an examination of these Northern struggles fundamentally critiques underclass theory and the liberal frame that has come to envelope the civil rights movement. These essays show that black communities in the North, far from being in disarray and plagued by dysfunction, waged a protracted fight for justice and equity but constantly had to contend with theories and policies that blamed them for their condition.

Outlining how many of these freedom struggles, whether in the North or South, challenged the very premises of democracy and capitalism, these authors disrupt a teleology of American democracy that has incorporated the Southern civil rights movement into American history by stripping it of its radical critique. The fight for desegregated public facilities—particularly schools—was always a fight for resources because segregation itself was a tool of economic control and resource distribution. Segregation meant that blacks subsidized finer schools and regular sanitation, accessible city government, better public transportation, and a wide array of public services for whites. It was taxation without representation, and thus the lunch counter and the bus and the schoolroom were never just about a seat but always about gaining full citizenship and economic equity. Since the denial of political power was crucial to circumscribing black economic power, the fight for voting rights was seen as inseparable—and indeed a prerequisite—for economic empowerment. At the grassroots, economics were not divorceable from civil rights (for black activists or white segregationists), even if historians and politicians in recent decades have begun to split them.

The vision of a Southern-dominated movement, then, comes in part from a civil rights narrative that is focused on the campaign to secure voting rights, rather than detailing the broad challenge to political, social, and



economic white power. Accordingly, the story is complete when the Voting Rights Act is passed in 1965. This treatment of voting rights dichotomizes the North and South in problematic ways, obscuring the issues of voter registration and political control that became crucial battlegrounds in the North as well. The vote was not completely absent in the South nor fully accessible in the North. Political access was never as simple as "one man, one vote" in the South or the North as political machines in many Northern cities precluded political power and access for blacks, and many black Northerners were thwarted in their efforts to register to vote.

This work demonstrates the geographical specificity of these struggles—Detroit is not Boston is not Newark—and, at the same time, the national impact of these Northern fights. The work here focuses on seven cities—New York, Newark, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Oakland, and Los Angeles—and two national organizations largely, though not exclusively, based in the North—the NWRO and the Nation of Islam. These pieces show the distinctive forms of U.S. racism, the variety of tactics that community members used to attack these inequalities, and the prevalence of reformist and nationalist thinking in the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Three essays on Detroit and Oakland reveal the early roots of black nationalism, locating them within black labor struggles and Christian liberation theology. Beth Bates's study of the March on Washington Movement in Detroit, an explicitly all-black movement that dropped the politics of civility to press for jobs and justice, shows the organizational base of black nationalism in the 1940s. Examining the often-overlooked Christian roots of black nationalism, Angela Dillard takes up the work of Reverend Albert B. Cleage, Jr., to establish links between Cleage's nationalism and his decision to rename his church the Shrine of the Black Madonna with older patterns of radicalism in Detroit. Robert Self traces the political activism of Oakland's black community from the labor organizing of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters to the electoral strategies of the Black Panther Party.

Struggles for school desegregation and equality in the 1950s and 1960s reveal that Northern school struggles did not lag behind the Southern movement and challenge the accuracy of terming Northern segregation *de facto*. Adina Back tells the story of the school boycott and legal battles of the "Harlem Nine," school desegregation activists in New York in the late 1950s who were arrested and tried for keeping their children out of the city's segregated schools. Disrupting the ways Boston's school desegregation has become a story of working-class white resistance to "busing," Jeanne Theoharis traces the 25-year struggle that black community members waged for educational equity in the city's schools.

These movements had different ideological approaches to the issues of gender, citizenship and American capitalism. The Nation of Islam and the NWRO provide contrasting examples of how black people—and black women in particular—constructed strategies for protection and self-reliance in the late 1960s. Felicia Kornbluh's essay on the NWRO shows that the organization's consumer protests were rooted in a campaign to demand their rights as Americans and mothers to provide decent food, clothes, and shelter for their children. Ula Taylor examines the reasons, more secular than religious, that many people joined the Nation of Islam after Malcolm X's death in 1965, given the variety of black nationalist organizations to choose from and the Nation of Islam's gender traditionalism.

Radical, often nationalist, movements carried on the work of black liberation through grassroots mobilization and organized protest in the 1960s and 1970s. Jon Rice examines the development of the Illinois Black Panther Party on Chicago's West Side to demonstrate the ways the Party built a revolutionary (not nationalist) group dedicated to meeting community needs and building cross-racial alliances across the city. Challenging the notion that cultural nationalism lacked a political basis, Scot Brown's essay focuses on the US Organization and their involvement in the Freedom City Campaign, the Black Congress, and anti-Vietnam War resistance. Komozi Woodard looks at Amiri Baraka and the local base of the Modern Black Convention Movement that emerged after the 1967 rebellion in Newark. Through an examination of the Young Lords Party in New York, Johanna Fernandez shows how their actions exposed the crisis of sanitation, health, and lead poisoning in New York and successfully pressured the city to take action on these issues.

As these pieces demonstrate, the civil rights movement was profoundly local, yet it transformed the character of the nation. Many of these struggles were urban; thus, these authors scrutinize the politics of place, the histories of migration, the racialized ways that each city developed, the constellation of city services that were or were not available, and the particular machine politics at work in each city. This local history illuminates the multifaceted character of racial privilege and racial injustice. Housing and public services, for instance, became crucial sites of struggle in cities, somewhat different battlegrounds than are seen in the South. These essays also show that the movement had victories in the North as well as the South—that these Northern battlefields were not immune to social protest, as studies of SCLC too often imply, but could be changed through protest and community pressure. The Young Lords forced New York City to take on landlords over the issue of lead paint; the survival programs

that the Panthers built—particularly the breakfast program—pushed the federal government to do the same.

These essays also present a more complex picture of the nature of racism in America. By picturing the South as the past and the North as the present, racism is often viewed as a redneck phenomenon of long ago—individualized in the persons of Bull Connor and Byron de la Beckwith. That Northern and Southern racism often came cloaked in middle-class clothes and disguised in civilized language (about standards and crime and the rights of the individual) does not fit with images of fire hoses and police dogs, church bombings, and bold proclamations defending segregation “now and forever.” American racism was not only a phenomenon of the working class but had a supple base in the middle class. That racism was imbedded in structures and not just about individual hatred is often missed in the Montgomery-to-Selma story. Part of the power of the Young Lords and the Black Panthers was to make visible the structures that discriminated against people of color. Pulling trash into the street, liberating tuberculosis trucks and garbage brooms, exposing the city’s reluctance to provide adequate medical services for poor people, and organizing police patrols were ways to highlight and challenge the inequality of public services.

Arguing that white backlash in the North must be viewed through the same analytical lens as white resistance in the South, this collection decisively challenges the notion that white opposition to civil rights emerges in the North in the latter half of the 1960s. In terms of local struggles, white resistance to civil rights was ongoing and virulent from WWII on (and certainly before). As exemplified in schools struggles in New York and Boston, many Northern whites vociferously opposed change in their own backyards in 1946 and 1956, as well as 1966—but this resistance (which Martin Luther King notes in the opening chronology) is obscured by the journalistic and subsequent historical focus on the South. This raises a historiographic question: If resistance does not undermine the righteousness of the struggle in the South, then why does it in the North? Why does racial violence look different in the South? These essays challenge the idea of dichotomizing Northern *de facto* segregation with Southern *de jure* segregation. Such distinctions do not adequately foreground the structural roots and institutional sanction that segregation had in the North and the elaborate methods that city governments, school boards, local and state politicians, and courts devised to protect it. The housing and school segregation that was endemic in Northern and Western cities like Chicago and Newark did not just happen, nor was it the result of private housing choices but maintained and reinforced by the political and legal structures of the state.

The civil rights movement was indeed a national movement—and the social changes produced were the result of struggles happening throughout the country, not just the South. The essays in this volume raise critical questions of chronology, expanding, as other scholars have begun to do, the periodization of the movement beyond the 1954 to 1965 time span. The black freedom movement had its roots and branches in the 1930s and 1940s. This activism was not merely a dress rehearsal but a crucial birthplace and battleground for the mass movement that flowered in the 1960s. Similarly, just as Southern activists took up the task of enforcing the *Brown v. Board* decision, so too did Northern blacks in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.

Moreover, the movements’ organized challenges to racial injustice extend well past 1965. Indeed, this new scholarship suggests that post-1968 struggles were not anarchic, spontaneous outpourings of anger but well-organized social protest. Black nationalism was not episodic or emotional, as it is often pictured, but developed within a series of initiatives and groups like the Black Panther Party, the Young Lords Party, the Congress of African Peoples, and US, which pushed city and state governments to provide equitable public services to communities of color, promoted the election of blacks to city government, and inspired profound interest in African and African American history, literature, and culture within the black community. Ideologically, theologically, and strategically rooted, nationalism was not just born out of anger and was often continuous with struggles in the 1930s through the 1960s. In many of these cities, there was not a tremendous gap between civil rights and Black Power—in fact, it was often the same work as black activists (and even their white allies) moved between these ideologies.

Black struggles also became struggles that linked people of color—challenging the ways people of color had been pitted against each other in the United States as well as the ways the second-class status of nonwhiteness was conferred on Latinos and Asian Americans as well as African Americans, albeit with certain differences. Still, blackness was not a unitary—or necessarily unifying—concept as class and cultural differences between South Side and West Side Chicagoans or within Detroit’s religious and labor community make clear. Antiracist work often led to anticolonialist politics as activists made connections between black struggles in the United States and the Vietnam War, the neocolonial status of Puerto Rico, apartheid in South Africa, and the newly independent nations of Africa. Groups like US saw reclaiming the African heritage of American blacks as a cornerstone to political autonomy for black people. Yet, these connections to Africa were also contested and, at times, rejected, as the Nation of Islam’s banning of African dress and hairstyle illustrates.

These essays complicate prevalent understandings of the nature of militancy, challenging the analytical distinctions made between Christianity as passive and the Nation of Islam as militant, between desegregation as politically acceptable and separation as not. They argue that criticisms of movement violence were not always critiques of actual physical violence but instead condemnations of the movement's embrace of disruptive protest strategies and a refusal to work within a politics of civility. Groups were often accused of violence or, conversely, of political naiveté when they began to disrupt the workings of the state. The NWRO's "un-civil" tactics drew the scorn and trepidation of many liberal whites and blacks. And, yet, while the radical imagination may have been more enamored with armed black men in berets than angry black women picketing welfare offices, 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 did. The fight against segregation in New York, Boston, Detroit, and Newark required decades of civil disobedience and disruption, guerrilla tactics, and community mobilization. And it was bitterly resisted. Indeed, while the movements to build independent black schools or for community control encountered fierce opposition, it was often desegregation that prompted the most sustained, politically systematic, and violent white resistance. Just as Black Power was not a new phenomenon in the mid-1960s, desegregation was not irrelevant by then.

Yet many journalists at the time claimed it so, citing increasing white opposition to and black dismissal of desegregation by the later 1960s, without investigating the substance of these claims. The historiography of Northern movements, and lack thereof, has been decisively influenced by these media portrayals. Since the national media were also the Northern media, the ways these movements were covered—many times negatively or not at all—has shaped the ways we now picture Northern struggles. Media-savvy groups like SCLC and SNCC realized that they needed to capture national media attention because local (Southern) media often shared the same political, social, or economic interests of those who opposed the movement. This became more difficult in Northern cities like Chicago, New York, Washington, and Boston, where the local media were the national media, often sharing economic, social, and political positions at odds with many of these movements. The coverage of Boston's desegregation as a story of white resistance or of the Black Panthers as gun-toting thugs certainly has contributed to many of the historical silences around these groups. The media-conscious Young Lords were able to garner some sympathetic news coverage that proved crucial in their lead paint campaign but was not sufficient to save them from historical obscurity.

The media's proclivity for charismatic male leaders also meant that they missed or misunderstood many of the struggles organized by women. Highlighting the grassroots organizing that took place throughout the country and the central role African American women played in many of those struggles, these essays show the long histories of political organization in these communities, particularly among women. As in the South, women led civil rights organizing in the Northeast, Midwest, and West, often doing much of the day-to-day work. Yet, despite this organizing, the visible leadership was often male. These essays force us to rethink the masculinization of black nationalism and the ways that this has obscured many aspects of Black Power movements. Women were not just sitting in the background in these meetings but doing organizing, often pushing these groups towards grassroots mobilization and away from charismatic leadership. Yet, even as many of these groups empowered women, they still held rigid views of the roles women could and could not play. Militant black activism, however, did not preclude an emerging women's consciousness nor was it necessarily oppositional to feminism. Indeed, black women were struggling through and contesting gender issues and female subordination within these organizations. The problem lies more with the definition of what is considered the women's movement and what is left out of this history—with defining feminism as an ideology born in the white women's community and not in tandem with groups like the Young Lords, the NWRO, and the Black Panther Party—with a definition of women's liberation that does not include safe health care, quality schools, and a living wage for women and their families.

*Freedom North* begins during WWII, as protest at home during the war was as formative to the movement as the experiences of black soldiers overseas, and continues through the 1970s. Given space constraints, the book could not span the 1980s and 1990s, despite the presence of organized racial protest movements in these decades. The 11 essays in this volume have been arranged roughly chronologically. To organize them by region or theme risked the kind of simplification that this book set out to critique. There was as much difference as commonality within region (and certainly three essays could not possibly do justice to an entire region) while no piece spoke to just one or two themes. This book is only a beginning of the story. From Cairo, Illinois, to Cambridge, Maryland, to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to Seattle, Washington, many battles have not been detailed here. Nor have the many multiracial, multiethnic mobilizations, from the student strikes and building takeovers at universities like San Francisco State, to the Poor People's encampment on the mall in Washington, D.C., to the formation of the Combahee River Collective,

been explored. As they fill out new details on the rich variety of struggles outside the South and prompt a rethinking of the binaries of much civil rights scholarship, these essays raise as many questions of chronology, ideology, and local detail as they answer. They show how much more work is needed on these local movements before more sweeping histories of the black liberation struggle can be written.

The limited treatment of Northern struggles not only constricts our historical memory but also impoverishes our understanding of the present. If the movement is understood to be Southern and not national, to be focused on the vote as opposed to political power, if segregation is marked by “for colored only” signs and eliminated by the Civil Rights Act, then it has accomplished its goals. But if movements crisscrossed the country attacking the economic, social, political, and cultural structures and belief systems of racial hierarchy, then they made significant gains but are far from over. The erasure of Northern activism not only justifies the present social order but makes it seem as if social change is not possible against the racial inequities we face today. As the gains of the movement have come under attack, only a clear understanding of the past—of the histories of these struggles and what they were fighting for and against—will allow us to see what should be done in the future.

### Notes

1. Ideas are born in dialogue. I would like to thank Matthew Countryman, Paisley Currah, Scott Dexter, Johanna Fernandez, Debbie Gershenowitz, Alejandra Marchevsky, Corey Robin, and especially Komozi Woodard for their careful insights and thought-provoking editorial suggestions.
2. Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming* (New York: Viking, 2001).
3. Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).
4. See Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988); *Pillar of Fire* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998); James Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (New York: Orbis, 1991); Robert Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound* (New York: Penguin, 1990); and David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross* (William Morrow & Company, 1986).
5. August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *CORE: A Study of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).
6. John Dittmer, *Local People* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1994); Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
7. James Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

8. Tom Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).
9. See, for instance, William Van DeBurg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965–1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), who explicitly starts his far-reaching study of Black Power in 1965.
10. A comprehensive history of the Black Panther Party has yet to be written. While two excellent anthologies have recently been published, *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered* and *Liberation, Imagination and the Black Panther Party*, these works, because of their essay format and thematic organization, have not focused as closely on the politics of place and the specific workings of the local chapters. Charles Jones, ed., *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered* (Baltimore: Black World Press, 1998); Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas, eds., *Liberation, Imagination and the Black Panther Party: A New Look at the Panthers and their Legacy* (New York: Routledge, 2001).
11. 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.
12. Nicholas Lemann's *The Promised Land* (New York: Knopf, 1991) is a contemporary example of this problematic history, but these theories have roots in the work of earlier sociologists like E. Franklin Frazier and Oscar Lewis.
13. William Julius Wilson's work, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), exhibits this contradiction—discussing structure while still subscribing to a behavioralist analysis. See Alejandra Marchevsky and Jeanne Theoharis, “Welfare Reform, Globalization, and the Racialization of Entitlement,” *American Studies* 41:2/3 (Summer/Fall 2000): 235–265 for a more extended critique of underclass theory.