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Civil Rights History  
from the Ground Up

*Local Struggles,  
a National Movement*

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## Challenging the Civil Rights Narrative

### *Women, Gender, and the “Politics of Protection”*

#### WHO'S IN THIS PICTURE?

In the upper right-hand corner of the frame, striking Memphis sanitation workers sporting recently printed placards that read, “I AM A MAN,” mill around in front of Clayborn Temple in anticipation of a mass strike support march to be led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. later that Thursday morning of March 28, 1968. Paradoxically, perhaps, dozens of black women of various ages—many talking and laughing, others more serious, some holding signs with messages such as “Workers Walk for Wages,” and all poised to move out—fill most of the rest of the image. As photographer Ernest C. Withers snapped the picture, women at the center of the frame proudly lifted up their signs. At the time, then, both men and women, the preprinted “I AM A MAN” signs and these handmade ones, all proved newsworthy.<sup>1</sup>

This photograph, however, has not become an iconic image. It is symbolic of neither the 1968 strike nor the black freedom movement in general. The strike pictures that instead come to mind focus on the male workers bearing the “I AM A MAN” placards. So emblematic has the sign become of the crucial year 1968, and indeed a whole era of struggle, that one preserved sign recently sold at auction for \$34,000.<sup>2</sup> The repeated reproduction of these images, especially over the last decade, frames a historical narrative in which the

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Figure 3 A crowd of sanitation strike supporters gathering in front of Clayborn Temple, March 28, 1968. © Ernest C. Withers Collection, courtesy of Decaneas Archive.

struggle for dignity by otherwise subordinated black men stands in for the larger African American quest for freedom. Ironically, even as local scholarly studies now regularly make visible the extent of women's activism, the repetition of these representations suggests otherwise. What brought these women out to the streets that Thursday morning, on a workday? Even the question begs explanation.

As seen in this volume and in other recent studies, the shift over the last two decades from national to local civil rights studies, from stories about political leaders to those centered on the grass roots, has revealed the scope of women's activism. Viewing the movement through these new lenses is uncovering dimensions of struggle eviscerated in historical accounts based on national narratives, including those most frequently cited in popular and educational accounts of civil rights. These local grass-roots studies demonstrate the extent, the determination, and the creativity of women's participation in the civil rights movement. In addition, they expose the pernicious consequences of failing to grapple with the scope of women's activism. So why does black women's activism remain invisible to many and undigested to most? Why has the overall historical narrative of the movement proved so resistant to change?

Building on previous efforts to answer these questions, this chapter takes a step back to further assess underlying ways in which gendered understandings of racial inequality, oppression, and citizenship, and the means of achieving them, have structured the civil rights narrative. Analyzing how gender has influenced historical narrativity itself can become a prism that illuminates how freedom and rights were articulated and pursued in various contexts. By gender, I do not refer only to men and women's different roles as activists, about which we now know a good bit. In this essay, I am equally concerned with assumptions about manhood and womanhood built into struggles against racial injustice during the civil rights era—which for the purposes of this chapter I take to mean the period from World War II through at least the sixties—and into subsequent historical writing.

As indicated by the example of “I AM A MAN” and the sanitation strike, what may have been more flexible and expansive meanings of freedom and rights during the actual strike have nevertheless been discussed in much historical literature such that freedom equals manhood equals dignity and authority denied to black men in racist U.S. society. In addition to precluding an analysis of women's activism and aspirations, this approach takes the perquisites of white manhood as the measure of black freedom. By boxing rights into those typically associated with manhood in that era (individualism, particularly in labor and politics, authority as head of household), it thwarts consideration of concerns such as raising one's children in a racist society, or rescuing oneself from charges of promiscuity, both of which women made pivotal to the idea of freedom.

The chapter as a whole critically explores areas that have become focal points for studying women, gender, and race in civil rights history. Each section uses examples from the research of other historians, as well as my own research on the black freedom movement in Memphis, as points of departure for considering how civil rights historians have scrutinized the impact of gender in mainstream narratives and, in some cases, how we might push this analysis further. The first two sections, for instance, address how and why historians of women in the movement have confronted gendered assumptions about leadership and about local versus national campaigns. A third section examines issues of labor and household that have captured attention in recent historical literature, and borrows from historians of Reconstruction to speculate about further work.

The final sections—one on racial violence and another on health, hunger,

and poverty—juxtapose two sides of what I refer to as the “politics of protection,” which I argue is as cogent to the problem of gender and historical narrativity as are leadership and local dynamics. Historians have convincingly argued that when the sanitation strikers and myriad other male activists staked their claim to freedom in terms of manhood, they rejected the racist degradation and demonization of black men that obstructed their efforts to economically support and physically protect mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters from sexual assaults by white men. And yet this very insight can obscure other aspects of the politics of protection equation: struggles among African Americans about who bore the responsibility for safeguarding black women and communities; women's investments in their own roles as protectors, not just as dependent recipients of protection, against racial violence and other hardships; and the impact of conflicting beliefs about race, gender, and protection on the civil rights movement.

Scholars of women and gender have illuminated how traditional concepts of leadership and politics have rendered women's activism invisible. In countering these standpoints, we have made more visible their extensive mobilization, most often at the grass roots in local movements, but also in national settings. Given this greater visibility, we can now delve more deeply into women's motivations, aspirations, and ideas about freedom while asking why they frequently get subsumed in ideas about manhood.<sup>3</sup> Again, what impelled black Memphis women to support the sanitation strike, even if that meant skipping work and other obligations to march downtown? By posing “politics of protection” as a category of analysis, this chapter explores one pathway for further analyzing how gender has impacted the historical narrative of the civil rights movement.

#### WOMEN, GENDER, AND LEADERSHIP IN CIVIL RIGHTS SCHOLARSHIP

Historians concerned with women and gender in the history and memory of the civil rights movement have extensively documented women's activism and critiqued silences in the mainstream literature. As far back as 1988, a group of civil rights scholars and activists convened in Atlanta to address the persistent obscuring of the scope and significance of women's participation in what had become the accepted narrative of the movement, based on charismatic leadership and national organizations. Georgia State University

and the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Change cosponsored "Women in the Civil Rights Movement. Trailblazers and Torchbearers: 1941–1965," a conference organized by Marymal Dryden and Judith Allen Ingram. Participants referenced historian William Chafe's 1980 statement, based on his research on Greensboro, North Carolina, that women formed "the backbone" of the freedom movement. They demonstrated that women had comprised a majority of local activists and contributed ideas rooted in their own experiences that became crucial to organizing.<sup>4</sup>

The 1988 Atlanta conference thus created a space for a set of scholars to collectively confront women's invisibility in mainstream civil rights literature and the misconceptions that resulted when they dropped out of the historical narrative. Charles Payne titled his paper, "Men Led, but Women Organized," and cited SNCC member Lawrence Guyot's assertion, "It's no secret that young people and women led organizationally." Other papers explored women's theological and organizational groundings in the black church; their understandings and pursuit of "empowerment, citizenship, and community building"; and the intersections of race, class, and gender that shaped women's activism. Speakers addressed the historical legacies of Ella Baker, Septima Clark, Fannie Lou Hamer, Gloria Richardson, and Modjeska Simkins. They discussed local movements ranging from Mississippi to Boston and institutions as diverse as the radically oriented Highlander Folk School and the Methodist Church. These papers appeared in an anthology by the same title as the conference edited by Vicki Crawford, Jacqueline Rouse, and Barbara Woods, still in print.<sup>5</sup> Together, this conference and volume set the stage for an extensive body of work that has expanded upon these early studies and taken them in important new directions.

Nevertheless, authors of such works continue to question why women activists commonly appear in the sidebars of social studies and history textbooks, while the overall narrative in textbooks and in many widely acclaimed studies remains the same. Christina Greene eloquently declares in her 2005 book on women in the Durham freedom movement that "analysis of women's activism suggests new ways of understanding protest, leadership, and racial politics. The inclusion of women, especially African American women, in this history demands an entire rethinking of a movement that changed forever a region and a nation." The problem may begin with a lack of inclusion, she argues, but it ends with distorted interpretations of the movement.<sup>6</sup>

Along similar lines, authors of recent studies of the welfare and tenant

rights movements argue emphatically that absencing poor black women from chronicles of the civil rights movement reinforces truncated perceptions of rights and freedom and struggles to achieve them. From the perspective of these historians, one cannot imagine the civil rights movement concluding in the mid-sixties, rather than finding new life through the antipoverty movement, which was just then gaining steam. Nor can one identify "Black Power" solely with young, urban, single men and their claims to manhood when one analyzes the language of self-respect and community solidarity used by welfare rights and other antipoverty activists. When we acknowledge that women headed the national welfare rights movement and personally confronted a gamut of local, state, and federal officials, leadership also takes on different parameters.<sup>7</sup>

Historian Kathy Nasstrom in a 1999 publication interrogates the construction of historical memory of the civil rights movement, after wondering why black women's extensive roles in postwar voter registration campaigns in Atlanta seem to have been forgotten by all but the aging participants. She constructs a "genealogy" of historical memory in which she explores how and why the accepted narrative of these voter registration movements shifted at different junctures. Ultimately, grass-roots participation by women, not to mention youth, took a backseat to black candidates' success in garnering the votes to win public office. This gendered dynamic of historical memory, Nasstrom asserts, nearly erased the legacy of black Atlanta women—not to mention youth and some working-class men in these communities—who collectively defied the political disempowerment of black Atlanta residents.<sup>8</sup>

Scholars of women in social movements have increasingly rejected conceptions of leadership that focus exclusively on formal authority figures. Anthropologist Karen Sacks assigns the term "centerwomen" to women who were highly respected in their communities and took on informal authority roles in movement activism. Sociologist Belinda Robnett casts such women as "bridge leaders," in recognition of their crucial roles in negotiating the spaces between grass-roots communities on the one hand, and official, frequently national, leaders on the other. Together, Sacks, Robnett, and others show that the movements they study would have disintegrated without the intervention of "centerwomen" and "bridge leaders." This gendered concept of leadership has opened new avenues for evaluating women's activism.<sup>9</sup>

Life stories of women who younger movement activists did hail as leaders—if not heads of organizations—suggest that some earned respect

precisely because they challenged traditional leadership hierarchies inherited from black churches, businesses, and older civil rights organizations. Biographies of Septima Clark and Ella Baker, for instance, highlight their articulation of a radical vision of democracy and citizenship. Both women perceived the domination of male charismatic leaders as injurious to the freedom movement, and instead promoted a kind of democracy in which the voices of even the most oppressed became important to the direction of the movement. Charles Payne argues in his study of Mississippi that what was distinctive about the two women was their support for—as Ms. Clark put it—“broadening the scope of democracy to include everyone and deepening the concept to include every relationship.” Barbara Ransby expands on this view, asserting that “[Ella] Baker’s message was that oppressed people, whatever their level of formal education, had the ability to understand and interpret the world around them, to see that world for what it was and to move to transform it.” Both Clark and Baker closely associated the top-down leadership structure with male charismatic leadership, especially that of the ministers affiliated with King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference.<sup>10</sup>

Historians of local movements, however, have also had to confront more contradictory approaches to gender and leadership in the freedom movement that involve households as well as organizations. Christina Greene writing on Durham, North Carolina, and Emilye Crosby analyzing the movement in Claiborne County, Mississippi, found that women who took on formidable, sometimes dangerous work in the freedom movement frequently considered it a given that men would lead both their organizations and their households. Crosby asserts, “In Claiborne County, [Leesco] Guster and other women stepped up to do the work that needed doing—whether it was canvassing, challenging whites through public marching, or defending their homes with weapons—and simultaneously accepted prevailing gender hierarchies.”<sup>11</sup> And yet, understandings of manhood and womanhood did not necessarily remain static in such circumstances. Women “defending their homes with guns” hardly fit bourgeois assumptions about gendered power relations, an issue to which I return later in this chapter.

To further complicate matters, many women identified with the language of manhood that had for generations been used by some church and community leaders to exhort their constituents to shed fears of white reprisals and adopt a bolder standpoint. In Memphis, Hazel McGhee, wife of a sanitation worker, mother, and worker at an industrial steam laundry plant,

recalls pushing her husband to “be a man” by living up to *her* example as a tenacious participant in a lengthy strike with the laundry workers union that directly preceded the sanitation strike. “I would not have liked it,” she asserts, “after I done been out seven months and two weeks, and he done went out and stayed two days. That would make me feel like that he wasn’t like the slogan, a man.” McGhee rejected neither her sense of herself as a woman nor her husband’s position as head of household, but in her memory the boundaries between manhood and womanhood blurred.<sup>12</sup>

At one level, then, some of the most articulate and respected women, like Ella Baker and Septima Clark, openly espoused conceptions of leadership and participation that countered precisely the national political formations that many civil rights historians have reified. At another level, many women activists in local, grass-roots movements pushed the cultural boundaries of manhood and womanhood just shy of the breaking point, even as they continued their investments in existing gendered ideas of authority.

#### RETHINKING THE OPPOSITION BETWEEN NATIONAL AND LOCAL

Turning away from national studies and toward analyses of local grass-roots black freedom struggles opens both opportunities and hazards for historians concerned with women and the gendering of the civil rights movement narrative. Although there is no doubt that analyses of the local and the “grass roots” have illuminated gendered racial and class dynamics of black freedom struggles—indeed, assessing the extent and significance of women’s activism proved impossible until a critical mass of historians and social scientists departed from national studies and embarked on local ones—terms like “local” and “grass roots” can convey unintended gendered meanings. We run the risk of consigning women and, for that matter, working-class people, to the local, and counterposing them to the national. Similarly, identifying women with the grass roots hazards obscuring their significance to the larger movement.

In their introduction to *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America*, Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard address such concerns when they warn against efforts to “reaffirm a binary opposition between the local and the national,” and insist upon a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the two. They argue that local activists, through exposure to movement ideas, frequently began to ascribe greater meaning to what

they had previously perceived as merely personal or individual problems. Concomitantly, they assert, local struggles in many cases spurred national initiatives and inspired national leaders. "The local," Theoharis and Woodard argue, "is where the national and international are located."<sup>13</sup> No doubt this last point holds true for Memphis in 1968. Only the unity, determination, and deep-reaching ideas of justice among both sanitation workers and their communities convinced King to interrupt planning for the national Poor People's Campaign and come to Memphis—not just once, but three times in as many weeks. Addressing a crowd of over fifteen thousand, March 18, he announced that the Poor People's Campaign would start in Memphis, because this kind of freedom movement exemplified what the campaign was about.<sup>14</sup>

Theoharis and Woodard do not directly address gender here, but the binary opposition between local and national they contest usually assigns women to the local. In some cases, this move inadvertently neglects the far-reaching consequences of women's activism. Acknowledging women as the backbone of local campaigns as organizers, networkers, and supporters does not necessarily lead to assessing their impact on national politics and leaders. If the national is construed as the place from which initiative and leadership emanate, then the local can mistakenly be relegated to a dependent or satellite status—a source of energy and momentum, but not direction.

The outpouring of new scholarship on antipoverty activism challenges this gendered duality of local/national. It shifts attention from the Johnson administration's federal War on Poverty to community-based organizing without ignoring the national political scene. Several scholars reconfigure the opposition between local and national, for example, detailing cross-country trips made by community-based women activists to attend national conferences, testify at congressional hearings, and support other local battles. Out of this local activism and national networking emerged a set of formidable and talented leaders, most black, many young, all poor mothers who had a seat at the table in larger discussions of civil rights, poverty, politics, and policy.

These historians also illuminate how poor black activists involved in anti-poverty struggles deliberately politicized issues of household, parenting, health care, nutrition, and intimacy, and forced them onto the agenda of the larger black freedom movement. Their successful efforts to push these issues onto national agendas emanated from their determination to protect and advance their children. Although this activism did not exclusively involve

women, it rested on a gendered understanding of rights that bridged the gap between domestic and political by acknowledging political ideas of freedom forged in neighborhood, household, and even intimate spaces.

#### RACE, WORK, AND THE HOUSEHOLD

The civil rights narrative shifts if we consider how ideals of freedom itself may have been gendered. Civil rights scholars might look to historians who have analyzed how gender infused political meanings of freedom during the American Revolution and Reconstruction. Writing about these contested ideas of freedom during Reconstruction, Nancy Bercaw contends that the destruction of the antebellum plantation household during the Civil War made the very concept of household, along with attendant issues of mastery, autonomy, dependency, and intimacy, central to the politics of Reconstruction. In contrasting ways, planters and freed people strived to reimagine and reconfigure the household, perceiving this process as key to their claims to freedom and citizenship.<sup>15</sup> Hannah Rosen moves this discussion in a different direction by analyzing racialized sexual violence wreaked upon black women. Women's testimony revealed that these assaults usually began with invasions of freed people's homes by disguised white male "night riders." Ku Klux Klansmen and others who resorted to violence as part of the "redemption" of the South staged belligerent disruptions of the domestic arrangements established by ex-slave men and women, culminating with the rape of women.<sup>16</sup> Bercaw and Rosen both build on Elsa Barkley Brown's insights into freed women's claims to citizenship, which she argues were grounded more in ideas about the rights of families and communities than on liberal ideas of individualism. Brown illustrates how women ensured that the ballot itself belonged not only to their husbands but themselves, despite the fact that the Fifteenth Amendment had extended suffrage only to black men.<sup>17</sup> By looking outside more familiar sites of political conflict and rethinking categories of political analysis, these historians and others provide deeper understandings of the contested meanings of freedom during Reconstruction.

Our scholarship on the civil rights movement might examine similar sites. Deeply rooted problems of race and gender imbedded in household forms persisted in the twentieth century and spurred responses ranging from migration to participation in the black freedom movement. In complicated ways, urban migrants who left plantation regions during and after

World War II, especially young adults, seized upon opportunities to disrupt tenant farmer household arrangements that emerged during Reconstruction. These included power dynamics that prevailed both *within* these households—particularly the imposition of adult male authority as both father and foreman—and *between* these households and white landowners or managers. That rural black women increasingly took jobs as domestic servants or in cafés during and after the Great Depression further complicated this scenario. Yet the fact that most women migrants to the city and a significant number of men continued to labor as domestic servants in private households or in cafeterias, hospitals, and laundries underscored their inability to fully uproot the gendered equation of dependency and authority they associated with the old plantation form.

Although rural and urban contexts differed from each other, rhetorically migrants and others compared their city workplaces, including factories, to plantations, and brought historical memory to bear on the present. As I have discussed elsewhere, they rejected a set of power relations and mental attitudes associated with both labor and domesticity. Hazel McGhee, the laundry worker and sanitation striker's wife quoted earlier—a migrant from Tallahatchie County, Mississippi, where she had been raised in a tenant farm family—illuminated these connections when she condemned supervisors in the urban sweatshop because they “wanted to . . . drive you, that you hadn't worked enough,” and that they “talked to you . . . like you was their child. . . . You don't talk to adults like you're talking to a child,” she declared. “And you ask them to do things, don't tell them you got to do nothing.”<sup>18</sup> Her choice of the adult/child metaphor is significant in that it articulated a deeply rooted critique of a set of historical social relations that encompassed both production and the household in the plantation and the city.

Indeed, the sanitation workers, all of them African Americans, performed labor that identified them as both public employees and mobile domestic servants. Despite being organized in crews, they trudged as solitary individuals through the yards of families not their own bearing leaking tubs on their shoulders, in an act repeated hundreds of times a week. Although the view of black men stepping onto the terrain of white households might otherwise have sounded alarms, the familiar image of the black domestic servant shaded them into a part of the scenery. Frequently they wore outsized garments cast off and donated by homemakers, making it appear as if they were dependents incapable of choosing and purchasing clothes. In their own

homes these men represented heads of household, and yet low wages and nonexistent benefits forced many to depend on earnings of wives and older children or on government assistance. Workers and strike supporters alike recognized that manhood struck a deep chord precisely because it staked black men's rights to authority and respect as heads of households to their demands for recognition in the workplace.

Working-class women strike supporters identified with these sentiments, albeit from different positions. They toiled outside their homes to support their families yet racist labor practices kept most in servant jobs. Or, if they secured manufacturing work—which women increasingly did in the 1960s, especially after passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act—employers paid them wages low enough for them to qualify for food stamps. This situation also impacted women, who as sole supporters of their children, had become heads of household but had been forced by circumstances to leave jobs and depend fully on government income.

Both black men and women articulated gendered understandings of freedom and racial justice that counterpoised these ideals to their actual consignment by white racist practices and attitudes to economic dependency, vulnerability, and disrespect. Their critiques acknowledged historic links between labor and household that had obviously changed since Reconstruction yet continued to serve as reference points in the postwar politics of race, gender, and freedom.

#### RACIAL VIOLENCE AND THE “POLITICS OF PROTECTION”

The sanitation strike turned on the dime of racial violence, however. A week and a half into the strike policemen attacked a march of strikers and supporters by opening fire with their new riot control weapon, mace, spraying it directly into the marchers' faces. The provocation came with a rapid-fire series of occurrences: a police car edging marchers to the curb, a prominent female supporter screaming when the car rolled over her foot, and angry men rocking the police car in protest of this injury to black women. The macing of the marchers (soon to be known as the macing of the ministers who, to their shock, became police targets) united black Memphians as never before, transforming the strike into a mass community movement that drew in King and captured national attention. Police assaults on sanitation workers, professionals, and ministers convinced the latter that regardless of

their station, race marked them as objects of derision, dehumanization, and violence.<sup>19</sup>

Looking backward on the black freedom movement from the vantage point of 1968, racial violence stands out as the issue that fueled both the most heated reactions against white domination and the most fraught controversies within black communities over how to respond. One has only to consider the impact that news of the 1955 Mississippi lynching of Emmett Till had on young African Americans who later joined the civil rights movement to grasp the intense—and gendered—symbolic significance of this violence. The point here is not only to trace struggles over racial violence during the civil rights era but to show how they fueled and complicated the movement for racial justice.

Fully comprehending the fierce responses evoked by certain kinds of violence—for instance, against veterans and young women—involves grappling with a highly charged, gendered “politics of protection” that surrounded them. Although this politics of protection involved more than racial violence, it sharply emerged in that context. Within black communities racially inflected ideas of manhood and womanhood, which frequently intersected with class, ascribed powerful meanings to police brutality and influenced debates about how to respond. Although masculinity and femininity were hardly the sum of what was at stake, these gender issues riddled nearly every aspect of postwar racist police violence. Together they became a lightning rod for fighting over what was at stake, who mattered in U.S. society, who had the right to power over whom, who were the aggressors, and who were considered the potential victims. In essence, the question of who had responsibility for protecting and defending the vulnerable galvanized and complicated postwar conflict over racist police violence, both between black activists and white officials and among them.

Until recently the scholarship around gender and racial violence has largely addressed earlier time periods: the slavery era, when there was no legal category addressing the rape of slave women because they were deemed property; and the post-emancipation period, when lynching and “night riding” skyrocketed amidst contests over equal citizenship rights, segregation, and economic autonomy. Several historians writing about post-emancipation lynching, mob violence, sexual assault, and other forms of vigilantism see gender as crucial to their historical analysis. Most take off from black journalist and antilynching crusader Ida B. Wells’s incisive observation in the

1890s that lynching was really about white men destroying black men’s economic and political advances, not protecting defenseless white women from bestial black rapists.<sup>20</sup>

Nearly a century later, in 1983, historian Jacquelyn Hall extended Wells’s analysis of the vicious cycle that tied together lynching and rape. Lynching, she agreed, constituted an act of terror against the authority and bodies of black men under the guise of protecting white women from rape. Hall added that interracial rape in fact usually comprised acts of white male brutality against black women that violated their bodies and flouted their marital and maternal status. Hall’s work challenged analyses of rape that dealt with gender by reducing rape to a struggle among men, as articulated in structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss’s oft-noted theory of kinship and communication in which women symbolize the “verbs” in men’s transactions over power and property. Hall recognized the partial truth in Lévi-Strauss’s analysis; the rape of black women threatened black men’s power and property. However, she underscored the racial misogyny of sexual violence and its impact on black women. She also analyzed the antilynching activism of some white southern women, asserting that it represented a rejection of sexist stereotypes of them as passive victims.<sup>21</sup>

Several recent studies develop Hall’s argument by further exploring the extent and historical significance of sexual violence and lynching. Hannah Rosen argues that sexual assaults associated with mob violence and “night riding,” and protests against them, reveal what was at stake in the post-emancipation struggle. She analyzes women’s official reports of rape, arguing that they illuminate the meanings of freedom for newly emancipated ex-slaves. Women insisted that citizenship made rapes of black women illegal. Moreover, their narratives framed the sexual violence of “night riders” as contraventions of marital, maternal, and political rights they linked to citizenship. Crystal Feimster extensively documents the previously forgotten murders and rapes of women at the height of racial terrorism (1880–1930), and analyzes black and white women’s political activism in this same period. Numerous scholars have studied women’s club and suffrage campaigns, but Feimster uses the lens of lynching to confront parallels and sharp racial tensions that surfaced as black and white women both sought to use the vote to address lynching and rape, but from opposing racial standpoints.<sup>22</sup>

Studies of racial violence in the mid-twentieth century must address its continuities and discontinuities in the changing historical context. In rural



areas, historian Hasan Jeffries argues, police violence rose in importance during the postwar era as lynching became less frequent, a result of both federal intervention against mob violence and advances such as road paving and use of automobiles that afforded more mobility to police officers.<sup>23</sup> Police brutality was no newcomer to southern cities, but it became more prevalent in the postwar era as migration brought millions of rural black and white southerners into high-density northern and southern cities from World War II through the 1960s.<sup>24</sup> Migrants from farms and small towns in agricultural regions transformed by mechanization moved into crowded, segregated neighborhoods patrolled by white policemen (at least in the South for most of this period). Within these neighborhoods black youth walked to school and congregated. Both youth and adults rode segregated city buses, bringing them into close, tense contact with whites. Active-duty and demobilized servicemen became far more visible in the downtown—and heavily policed—sectors of cities near military bases.

Policemen may have winked at or supported lynching—and sheeted individual officers may have participated—but they increasingly *were* the face of racial violence during the civil rights era, whether their assaults were conducted as part or outside of official police business. Protest against police brutality thus pitted black families and communities against city and county police departments and governing public officials, politicizing racial violence even more than had been the case in the intervening years since Reconstruction. Deeper into the civil rights era, large contingents of Ku Klux Klan members and white mobs revitalized earlier modes of extralegal racial violence through murders of activists and threats of mob retaliation. Even then, however, civil rights groups strived to secure police protection, pressuring the federal government when local and state assistance was denied or, even worse, turned against the movement.

And yet, there is no necessary reason that the narratives about racial violence would continue to be gendered ones. Even so, gender did persist as a central component of postwar police violence that affected who police targeted and how communities reacted. Police officers stirred up by public outcry against supposed outbreaks of crime beat, shot, and killed young black men identified as perpetrators, and harassed neighborhood youth as both potential criminals and violators of their authority. With some notable exceptions, the victims of these attacks failed to win universal community support because they were deemed outside the bounds of respectability. However,

the cases that provoked the most outrage usually revolved around assaults of servicemen and veterans, labor and civil rights activists, and sexual abuse of young women. Reactions to these incidents of racial violence were fraught with imagery about violations of manhood and womanhood.

African American men's ability to protect and defend African American women figured as a primary axis of black community politics in the post-World War II period. Two scholars of women and gender in urban racial politics identify historical changes in ideologies framing such politics. In her study of African American women in Detroit, Victoria Wolcott marks a shift during the Great Depression from female "bourgeois respectability" as the driving force behind racial advancement to a masculinist discourse of black self-defense and self-determination, to which the protection of women, children, and families was key. As the latter ideology became predominant, it partially eclipsed women's activism by depicting them as the objects, not subjects, of self-defense. Marilyn Johnson demonstrates that gendered rumors served as triggers for wartime race riots. She too identifies an ideological shift from the earlier period among black Detroiters. Instead of focusing on sexual violations of black women and men's abilities to protect them, the rumors that sparked the 1943 race riots involved either police brutality against servicemen, or rumored incidents of white violence aimed at women and children. The family, she argues, became the primary object of black protection.<sup>25</sup>

As Wolcott and Johnson demonstrate, grasping the continuities and discontinuities in postwar black urban movements is crucial. Urban migration to southern cities did not simply wipe out plantation-based narratives of racial violence in part because neither black nor white migrants had purged themselves of recent memories and narratives of violence. Additionally, the gendered narrative of black male defense of black women from sexual abuse may not have receded as quickly as Johnson's analysis of the wartime riots suggests. Tragically, in the postwar era actual sexual assaults of black women, not rumored ones, were what spurred outpourings of rage and militant assertions of black male defense. And yet the complicated politicization of racial violence did mark important discontinuities.

That tension between continuities and discontinuities sets the stage for analyzing the gendered narratives of black protest as a "politics of protection." This term builds on Wolcott and Johnson's work by marking a further dynamic in the postwar era within this pursuit of racial justice.

"Politics of protection" refers to a complex set of struggles, both between blacks and whites, and within black communities. Competing claims to manhood were central to this dynamic, but so were bold assertions of responsibility by women. Gendered conflicts among various organizations, leaders, and individuals, including women, about black self-defense and protection of families and communities significantly impacted the course of the civil rights movement.

Local communities, sometimes aided by the NAACP, protested a slew of police assaults and shooting deaths of servicemen and veterans in the immediate aftermath of World War II. They denounced white officers' demands for servility from black men who had served the nation at war and their assaults when the men failed to comply. In Columbia, Tennessee, in February 1946, an altercation between a white veteran and a black veteran culminated in the armed defense of the black community against a police rampage. Rage over the racial emasculation of these servicemen nourished a politics of black manhood based on the power to not only serve the nation but defend and protect their own communities.<sup>26</sup>

Collective responses to police sexual assaults of black women concentrated on women's vulnerability to rape by white men in positions of authority and black men's responsibility to protect and defend them. In Memphis in 1945 and Montgomery in 1949, white patrolmen forced women into squad cars by claiming they were streetwalkers or drunk, then sexually molested them. The outrage that followed translated into political mobilization against police officials and city administrators. As stories of police sexual assaults and the brutalizing of veterans entered into political parlance, they energized black voter registration, community meetings, and election day turnout. In Memphis, these responses impacted the outcome of key elections in 1948, while in Montgomery uproar over the 1949 assault spurred the community organizing that culminated in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Important developments in the civil rights narrative, in other words, cannot be fully understood without analyzing the gender dynamics of these protests against police brutality and their implications for the freedom movement.<sup>27</sup>

Historian Timothy Tyson, writing about Black Panther forbearer and World War II veteran Robert Williams in North Carolina, for example, stresses that Williams's notorious enjoinder to "fight violence with violence," as opposed to King's advocacy of a philosophy of nonviolence, followed several assaults of black women by white men. Williams declared that they

represented "a challenge to our manhood, especially to veterans, who had been trained to fight. . . . We as men should stand up as men and protect our women and children." He also declared, "I am a man and I will walk upright as a man should. I WILL NOT CRAWL." This encounter with racist sexual violence came on the heels of Williams's and other Monroe NAACP members' confrontation with threats of race war from the Ku Klux Klan. The militant stance Williams and his comrades adopted in the face of sexual assault and the threat of mob violence impacted the course of both the Monroe movement and the black freedom movement more generally. Williams's defiant public support of armed resistance led to the Monroe group's expulsion from the NAACP, and he became a role model of sorts for the founders of the Black Panther Party several years later.<sup>28</sup>

This gendered "politics of protection" in some cases also helped incite the 1960 sit-in movement for Freedom Now. Typically, civil rights histories view the movement as the outcome of young people's growing impatience with the slow legal process pursued by the NAACP to force the implementation of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), combined with extended rage at the lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till (1955). Certain evidence suggests that in some locales fury over racial and sexual violence at the end of the 1950s persisted beyond the Till slaying and helped tip the balance toward direct action (e.g., sit-ins). Danielle McGuire demonstrates that in Tallahassee, the spring 1959 Mississippi lynching of Mack Charles Parker after he was accused of raping a white woman, followed immediately by the gang rape of a Florida A&M student by four white men, ignited mass protest among college students in Tallahassee. To a crowd of 1,500 A&M students, female and male, the student government president declared they "would not sit idly by and see our sisters, wives, and mothers desecrated." Some speakers criticized the young woman's date for not confronting the armed attackers, while a speaker at another rally exhorted college men to protect their women: "You must remember it wasn't just one Negro girl that was raped—it was all of Negro womanhood in the South."<sup>29</sup> These fiery gendered declarations helped catapult the Tallahassee students into the sit-in movement that swept across the South less than a year later.<sup>30</sup> This 1959 context differed significantly from the 1945 situation in Memphis, yet in both cases standing up to racist and sexual violence and legal injustice became central to an ascendant militancy by a new generation that rejected passivity, fear, and dependency.

The politics of protection that infused postwar responses to racial violence

sometimes erupted into public denunciations of black leaders, who were accused of being spineless in the face of such attacks. In 1945, such statements in the local black newspaper pressured some black elites to speak out against the police rapes of two young women, and to push city officials—part of the Boss Crump political machine—to prosecute the policemen. Similarly, a 1952 editorial in the Durham *Carolina Times*, also a black paper, railed against established leaders for their “lethargy” and silence following the rape of Mrs. Ersalene Williams by Thomas Clark, after he had engaged her supposedly to clean his house. As in Memphis, this public criticism made their lack of “manhood” symbolic of a broader political anemia. Christina Greene shows that the *Carolina Times* underscored this point through a gender reversal that contrasted male leaders’ quiescence to the support offered to Mrs. Williams by the female Sojourners for Truth and Justice.<sup>31</sup>

As Greene shows in further comments on activism by the Sojourners for Truth, this internal politics of protection involved more than exhorting black men to defend their communities against white men’s racial and sexual domination. Historical analysis that begins and ends there eclipses women’s protest against racial and sexual violence and their participation in this politics of protection. Mothers of the young Memphis women, both heads of household, contacted civil rights leaders, pressed charges, and submitted testimony. Their daughters withstood a court trial, the first in Memphis to try white men on charges of sexually assaulting black women. White attorneys attempted to taint their characters by portraying them as promiscuous and dishonest. McGuire shows that substantial numbers of female students participated in the Tallahassee rallies despite the rhetoric of masculinity. To reduce this complex politics of protection to declarations of manhood misses the complexity of political dynamics *within* black communities, and the gendered activist identities that adhered in protest against racial and sexual violence.

In addition to recouping women’s historical agency, we need to puzzle through what it meant for women to embrace and rally behind a politics of protection that was articulated in terms of manhood. Both women and men pushed back against the dehumanization at the core of racial violence including rape, but they used gendered terms to stake out their right to protect themselves and their families and communities. The language of manhood heard at the Tallahassee rallies had become a familiar, universal mode of political expression, yet it was also quite literally about men protecting women.

Not surprisingly, women strongly supported men’s determination to stand up for them, but that support could shade into emasculating criticisms when they felt men weren’t living up to the ideal of manhood. Following the Tallahassee trial, a female reader of the New York *Amsterdam News* accused black men of being “mice” because they failed to protect their women. In North Carolina, Robert Williams faced condemnation by angry black women who blamed him for the lack of justice accorded by the courts in two 1959 assault cases, after Williams resisted their demands for armed responses to the attackers.<sup>32</sup>

Beyond their support for and/or criticism of men as protectors, there is further significance in black women’s participation in protests such as the Tallahassee student rallies. Besides identifying with manhood as a universal, women’s claim to their own agency articulated a kind of split or dual female subjectivity, in which they represented both dependents and activists, both object and subject of protection. Moreover, confronting racial violence, dehumanization, and injustice cultivated collective identities that encompassed more than those of individuals, of daughters, wives, or mothers. In the context of the postwar black freedom movement, in other words, protection was not just a feature of manhood (in either its universal or gender-specific meanings), but was central to a politicized understanding of womanhood that broke down divisions between individuals, households, and communities. Yet the prevailing emphasis on men’s claims to manhood in historical accounts of the civil rights movement instead of the full complexity of this politics of protection partially obscures the dynamics and goals of the movement.

#### EXPANDING THE MEANING OF RIGHTS: HEALTH, HUNGER, AND POVERTY

This politics of protection also shaped conflicts over health and poverty that were integral to the black freedom movement. This section builds on work by historians of welfare rights and other antipoverty campaigns by examining how a dynamic of protection, to which gender, race, and class were central, influenced these struggles around health and poverty.<sup>33</sup> It is not insignificant that the Memphis sanitation strike erupted in the midst of the antipoverty movement of the mid-1960s to mid-1970s. Indeed, strike supporters including welfare rights activists emphasized that the sanitation workers and many

other black city service employees earned such low wages that they qualified for food stamps. These concerns underscored that problems of labor were also problems of the household. As we have seen, this was true decades before poverty and labor entered the spotlight in new ways in the 1960s.

The sanitation strike highlighted indignities faced by male service workers whose wages were insufficient to support their families. However, it also reflected efforts by black women in low-income communities to address health and hunger crises, in another manifestation of the politics of protection. Poor women in Memphis, Mississippi, and elsewhere helped redefine the black freedom movement in spring 1968 when they publicly articulated these concerns during U.S. Senate hearings conducted at the same time when they and thousands of others were encamped in the nation's capitol for the Poor People's Campaign. In their roles as witnesses, they presented gripping testimonials that helped shift hunger, malnutrition, and poverty to center stage.

Although much popular discourse at the time portrayed women receiving public assistance as lazy, licentious dependents on tax monies, welfare rights activists focused on their need to support and protect their children. Only when health crises prevented them from working, they insisted, had they sought government support. These requests for public assistance placed them in dependent positions but did so because of their determination to care for their children. While the sanitation workers' positions as heads of household rested on childcare by wives and older children, these women became heads of household following the deaths or departures of their husbands. Several heroines of Annelise Orleck's *Storming Caesars Palace* applied for welfare only after illness or injury made it impossible for them to hold down jobs. Ruby Duncan, a leader of the Las Vegas welfare rights movement and Operation Life, a community development corporation that eventually hosted a full-fledged medical clinic, sought public assistance after an accident at work injured her spine in 1967. Until then, she had eked out a living for herself and seven children by laboring as a hotel cook. Mary Wesley, Orleck writes, supported eight children by working two waitress jobs until her health failed. Losing these jobs in 1965 forced her to place her children temporarily in a home for destitute children and apply for public assistance. Ongoing medical problems and inadequate health insurance meant she had to rely on welfare and Medicaid periodically for years. And Rosie Seals suffered a stroke while trying to support her children by working two jobs, one as a domestic worker, the other in a laundry.<sup>34</sup>

Yet the materiality of indigence and poor health did not alone transform these women into activists. Indignation at humiliating treatment by social workers, combined with the larger social climate engendered by the black freedom movement, motivated them to collectively pursue policy changes they believed would win them both adequate income and respect. In Las Vegas, Memphis, and other cities, young women in the welfare rights movement participated in multiple aspects of civil rights, antipoverty, and Black Power movements. They seized on the language and symbols of the movement to reject prevailing racist images of black womanhood that dominated discourse around welfare, and claimed different ones based on dignity and respect. In doing so they, like the Las Vegas women, expanded "civil rights" to include their right as mothers to provide for and protect their children.<sup>35</sup>

Civil rights investigations in the 1960s, meanwhile, documented egregious racial discrimination in the medical system that exacerbated poor women's efforts to ensure the health of their children as well as their own health. During U.S. Civil Rights Commission hearings held in Memphis in 1962, commissioners made racism in the health care system one of their priorities. Statements by public health officials, hospital administrators, and black medical professionals convinced them that racist practices had impacted the provision of health care for African Americans. Their hearings revealed that major private hospitals, most of them church-run, all excluded black patients and doctors, and that the one public hospital that admitted blacks as patients excluded black doctors from its active medical staff. Commissioners found this situation so troubling that a 1963 report on nationwide racial discrimination in hospitals relied on evidence from Memphis.<sup>36</sup> A half decade after the Civil Rights Commission issued this report, a nonprofit black community organization in south Memphis reported that formidable barriers—inconvenient locations, lengthy bus rides, lack of nighttime hours, and packed waiting rooms—made it difficult for poor African Americans to secure medical care for themselves and their children at public health clinics.<sup>37</sup>

The 1962 Civil Rights Commission hearings also revealed that city health officials made decisions about health care based on racist beliefs about poor black women, which limited their efforts to tackle the high black infant mortality rate. A city/county health department official attributed this differential not to factors such as sparse prenatal care, poor nutrition, and unsanitary conditions, but to a high rate of "illegitimacy" among black mothers.<sup>38</sup> The health department report concluded that quelling immoral behavior was the

antidote to black infant mortality. Such reports may not have been as dramatic as acts of racial violence, yet they ultimately had equally severe consequences.

Poor women's welfare rights activism directly countered this ideology with one of their own. It made problems of black womanhood as significant as those of black manhood when it came to protecting black families and showed that women held positions of responsibility that equaled those of men. Few women would have disrespected black men's claims to manhood, but in this complicated politics of protection they combated stereotypes of immoral and lazy black women, established new health programs, and demonstrated that poor women's rights were as important to the movement for racial justice as those of men. By claiming identities as caring and protective mothers who were the experts in determining their children's needs, poor women activists fused these qualities to their identities as activists. Conversely, they posited the state's denial of economic and medical assistance as racial injustice that thwarted their efforts to protect and provide for their children. Based on this alternative narrative, welfare rights activists shifted the discussion from laziness, immorality, and dependency to prenatal care, pediatric medical screening, adequate nutrition, and income. In the same period the Black Panther Party expanded self-defense from police brutality to the self-determination of poor black communities and created free medical clinics and breakfast programs—run largely by women—independent of government assistance.

#### GENDER AND THE BLACK FREEDOM MOVEMENT, FROM FORTY YEARS LATER

If we flash back to the scene captured by camera in late March 1968 in light of this "politics of protection," it becomes more complicated to answer the question posed at the beginning of this chapter about what brought all these men and women to Clayborn Temple that weekday morning to rally around the sanitation workers' declaration, "I AM A MAN!" The presence of both civil rights leaders, including King, and union officials from AFSCME (American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees) and elsewhere underscores that the strike united the labor and civil rights movements. Yet the strike also reflected struggles over poverty, welfare, health, and hunger—all issues that were starkly highlighted later that spring when a "mule train"

surrounded by freedom movement activists departed from the Lorraine Motel, where King had been shot on April 4, to mark the beginning of the Poor People's March.<sup>39</sup> (For more on the Mule Train, see Amy Nathan Wright, "The 1968 Poor People's Campaign, Marks, Mississippi, and the Mule Train: Fighting Poverty Locally, Representing Poverty Nationally," chapter 4, this volume.) Similarly, support for the strike invoked decades of protest against police brutality in its numerous forms. Rather than focusing on pictures that show only the pending arrival of King, or the strikers with their "I AM A MAN!" signs, we need to expand narratives of this pivotal moment in the civil rights movement to explore the multiple strands of activism that coalesced in this same movement, to which the gendered politics of protection was central.

A majority of histories of the movement concentrate on attempts to break down de jure and de facto racial segregation in all facilities open to the public, whether they were under the aegis of local and state government, such as schools and libraries, or privately owned and operated, such as restaurants and movie theaters. Or, they trace voting rights campaigns, including efforts to register, educate, and rally potential voters despite legal and extralegal barriers. Despite significant local distinctions, African Americans across the South assailed their exclusion from the mainstream political process and fought for political expression and clout. These two avenues of struggle shaped and energized postwar civil rights movements, and they attracted massive attention and support from outside of the South.

Together, however, they comprise a gendered narrative of civil rights that revolves around public facilities and public policies. As a number of scholars point out, particularly those writing about antipoverty struggles, this narrative obscures equally hard-fought struggles centered on home, work, family, and community—areas of daily life commonly perceived as outside the realm of political conflict. These struggles became absolutely germane to the freedom movement. They represented key concerns in and of themselves and also redefined the larger civil rights movement by shaping activists' beliefs about meanings of rights and justice. Deepening understanding of the freedom movement demands a regendering of the narrative, not just by mapping out women's contributions, but by rethinking what constitutes the political and which domains of struggle matter in the claiming of freedom.

Just as importantly, we need to assess, not reproduce the ways in which manhood and womanhood became pivotal to understandings of freedom.

Manhood became the medium through which many activists conceived of freedom. However, as seen in the cases of Durham, Memphis, and Monroe, North Carolina, that language also animated contention among different voices within black communities, as certain parties with conflicting ideas about manhood vied with each other over the direction of local movements. That power struggle pressured some African American leaders to take positions from which they might otherwise have shirked, resulting in changes of course that influenced the larger direction of local and national movements.

These power struggles based on conflicting claims to manhood, however, can still keep the civil rights narrative trained on black male leadership. Women, too, appropriated a masculinist language of self-defense to goad male activists into adopting more militant positions. As we have seen, during the Tallahassee demonstrations a woman observer demanded that men be more than "mice"; female activists in Monroe pressured Williams to punish the white rapists of black women by taking up arms; and some working-class women supporters of the sanitation strike like Hazel McGhee insisted that the workers live up to the claims to manhood exhibited on their signs—"I AM A MAN!" Such exhortations may or may not have influenced the men at which they were aimed, but they certainly allowed women to carve out unique spaces for themselves in which they kept pressure on male activists in the limelight of these movements. In addition, their critical mobilization in supporting roles also energized their pursuit of other struggles, from welfare rights to labor battles.

Finally, we need to take stock of activism by poor black women who served as heads of households in lieu of male breadwinners. In this case, women did not deploy a language of manhood, but made the provision for and protection of their children the basis for their identities. In doing so, they articulated an idea of womanhood that was shorn of the racist images of black women as pariahs that adhered to them in white public discourse. Such parlance, unlike bourgeois ideals of womanhood, rejected dependency while claiming authority as protectors of their households. By firing up women's convictions in their own value, these assertions spurred women to pursue struggles that might otherwise have appeared too daunting.

All movement activists could unite behind the idea of protecting black communities from racist violence. However, there was not necessarily unanimity about what that entailed (prayer and patience? armed self-defense?). Black masculinity, defined in terms of self-defense and protection, offered a

language through which to mobilize activists but it also provided a means by which both male and female activists challenged authority figures and their agendas within black communities. Concomitantly, both men and women fought against demeaning racist labels of dependency that depicted men as boys and women as lazy during and even after the Jim Crow era, and that produced material consequences exemplified by the sanitation workers' plights. For women, doing so involved a significant contradiction; particularly in the context of 1960s antipoverty struggles they insisted upon the respect and security accorded to white women yet rejected racist images of dependency assigned specifically to black women. Moreover, they demanded the right to protect their own dependent children and households. During the postwar civil rights era, these questions of who would or could protect African American women, men, children, and families from white racist violence and other forms of injustice alternately defined, motivated, and complicated the movement for freedom.

#### NOTES

1. Ernest C. Withers, Sanitation strike supporters gathering outside Clayborn Temple, March 28, 1968, Panopticon Gallery. Some signs read, "Dignity and Respect for the Sanitation Workers," and "Keep Your Money in Your Pocket"—a reference to a downtown boycott.
2. Michael Lollar, "I Am A Man' poster from Memphis strike draws \$34K bid at auction," *Commercial Appeal*, posted February 25, 2010, <http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/2010/feb/25/i-am-man-poster-memphis-strike-draws-five-figures-1>, accessed June 13, 2010.
3. Biographies of leading women activists explore their motivations particularly well. See, for example, Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Bloomington: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).
4. William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 125.
5. Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods, eds., *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965* (1990; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), Payne quote on p. 1. See also 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).

6. Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).
7. See Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Annalise Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace: How Black Women Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston: Beacon, 2005); Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles Against Urban Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Greene, *Our Separate Ways*.
8. Kathryn L. Nasstrom, "Down to Now: Memory, Narrative, and Women's Leadership in the Civil Rights Movement in Atlanta, Georgia," *Gender & History* 11, no. 1 (April 1999): 113-44.
9. Karen Brodtkin Sacks, "Gender and Grassroots Leadership," in *Women and the Politics of Empowerment*, ed. Ann Bookman and Sandra Morgan (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 77-94; Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
10. Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 68; and Ransby, *Ella Baker*, 7.
11. Emilye Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom: The Black Freedom Struggle in Claiborne County, Mississippi* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 137-38. Greene notes, "Even when they were in the majority, women sometimes relinquished public roles to males" (Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 97).
12. Hazel McGhee, interview by author, Memphis, August 11, 1995, transcript in "Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life in the Jim Crow South," Special Collections, Duke University, Durham, cited in Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 261 (hereafter cited as *Battling*).
13. Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, Introduction, *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 7.
14. Green, *Battling*, 251-52.
15. Nancy Bercau, *Gendered Freedoms: Race, Rights, and the Politics of Household in the Delta, 1861-1875* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003).
16. Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), esp. 202-20.
17. Elsa Barkley Brown, "To Catch the Vision of Freedom: Reconstructing Southern Black Women's Political History, 1865-1880," in *African American Women and the Vote, 1837-1965*, ed. Ann D. Gordon, with Bettye Collier-Thomas, John H. Bracey, Arlene V. Avakian, and Joyce A. Berkman, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 66-99.

18. McGhee interview, quoted in Green, *Battling*, 260-61.
19. Details of this incident are in Joan Turner Beifuss, *At the River I Stand: Memphis, the 1968 Strike, and Martin Luther King* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing Inc., 1985), 109-21; and Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007), 200-10.
20. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *On Lynchings*, Introduction by Patricia Hill Collins (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 2002).
21. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "'The Mind That Burns in Each Body': Women, Rape, and Racial Violence," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 328-49; Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, rev. ed.); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 52-68.
22. Rosen, *Terror in the Heart*; Crystal Nicole Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009).
23. Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 34-35.
24. The following analysis draws on the work of several historians but where not noted otherwise it is based on my research for *Battling the Plantation Mentality*.
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26. Gail Williams O'Brien, *The Color of the Law: Race, Violence, and Justice in the Post-World War II South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999). On police brutality over a longer period, see Leonard Moore, *Black Rage: Police Brutality and African American Activism from World War II to Hurricane Katrina* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 2010).
27. Green, *Battling*, 81-111, 136-40; J. Mills Thornton, *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 34-35; Stewart Burns, ed., *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 8; and Danielle L. McGuire, "'It Was Like All of Us Had Been Raped': Sexual Violence, Community Mobilization, and the African American Freedom Struggle," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 3 (December 2004): 910-13 (hereafter cited as "'All of Us Had Been Raped'").
28. Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams & the Roots of Black Power*

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), quotes from 141, 158, discussion of Klan 86–89.

29. McGuire, “All of Us Had Been Raped,” quotes from 916, 917, aftermath of trial, 930. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 143–49.

30. McGuire, “All of Us Had Been Raped,” 930; Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 144.

31. Green, *Battling*, quote on 96; Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 7–8.

32. McGuire, “All of Us Had Been Raped,” 928; Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 146–49.

33. Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace*; John Dittmer, *The Good Doctors: The Medical Committee for Human Rights and the Struggle for Social Justice in Health Care* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009), 229–50; Jennifer Nelson, “Hold Your Head Up and Stick Out Your Chin’: Community Health and Women’s Health in Mound Bayou, Mississippi,” *National Women’s Studies Association Journal* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2005); Bonnie Lefkowitz, *Community Health Centers: A Movement and the People Who Made It Happen* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 29–49; and Greta de Jong, “Staying in Place; Black Migration, the Civil Rights Movement, and the War on Poverty in the Rural South,” *Journal of African American History* 90, no. 4 (2005), esp. 400–2. Alice Sardell, *The U.S. Experiment in Social Medicine: The Community Health Center Program, 1965–1986* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988).

34. Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace*, 73–74, 79–82, 94.

35. Willie Pearl Butler, interview by author, Memphis, August 19, 1995, transcript in “Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life in the Jim Crow South,” Special Collections, Duke University; and Juanita Miller Thornton, interview by author, Memphis, June 6, 2001, tape in possession of author.

36. *Hearings before the United States Commission on Civil Rights: Hearings Held in Memphis, Tennessee, June 25–26, 1962* (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1962); U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, ed., *Equal Opportunity in Hospitals and Health Facilities: Civil Rights Policies under the Hill–Burton Program* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1965).

37. Autry Parker, “Memphis Area Project—South Annual Report for 1967,” unpublished report, 1968; and Autry Parker, “Politics of Community Organization: Map South, Inc.,” unpublished paper for Administrative Theory class, Memphis State University, 1975. Memphis Area Project-South Offices, Memphis.

38. *Hearings in Memphis, Tennessee, June 25–26, 1962*.

39. “Poor People Remain in Citadel of Poverty: Poor People’s Campaign More Than A March,” and accompanying photograph, “On To Washington,” by Ernest Withers, *Tri-State Defender*, May 11, 1968; and Thornton interview.

CHARLES W. MCKINNEY JR.

## Finding Fannie Corbett

### *Black Women and the Transformation of Civil Rights Narratives in Wilson, North Carolina*

In 2000, Fannie Corbett retired from the Wilson Community Improvement Association (WCIA) after thirty-two years of service to the community of Wilson, a midsize town in eastern North Carolina. As one of the principal founders of the organization in 1968, Corbett oversaw the evolution of the WCIA from a loose consortium of programs—such as a daycare, peer counseling, and job training—into an organization that through the years developed over three hundred units of affordable housing for low-income residents. An effusive article in the *Wilson Daily Times* praised Corbett’s three-decade effort to provide housing for the less fortunate, particularly for elderly citizens. The article congratulated Corbett on the good works she performed in the region; state representatives praised her for her hard work and determination and several city officials lauded her efforts to improve the lives of the less fortunate. Fellow Wilsonian, civil rights activist (and future U.S. congressman) G. K. Butterfield Jr. proclaimed that, when it came to being an advocate for the dispossessed, Corbett “[had] done just as much if not more than any citizen in this community.” He went on to praise her as a “positive force in the lives of countless people.”<sup>1</sup>

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