



**American Social
and Political
Movements of
the Twentieth
Century**

ROUTLEDGE

Rethinking the Black Freedom Movement



Yohuru Williams

RETHINKING THE BLACK FREEDOM MOVEMENT

The African American struggle for civil rights in the twentieth century is one of the most important stories in American history. With all the information available, however, it is easy for even the most enthusiastic reader to be overwhelmed. In *Rethinking the Black Freedom Movement*, Yohuru Williams has synthesized the complex history of this period into a clear and compelling narrative. Considering both the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements as distinct but overlapping elements of the Black Freedom Struggle, Williams looks at the impact of the struggle for Black Civil Rights on housing, transportation, education, labor, voting rights, culture, and more, and places the activism of the 1950s and 1960s within the context of a much longer tradition reaching from Reconstruction to the present day.

Exploring the different strands within the movement, key figures and leaders, and its ongoing legacy, *Rethinking the Black Freedom Movement* is the perfect introduction for anyone seeking to understand the struggle for Black Civil Rights in America.

Yohuru Williams is Professor of History and Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Fairfield University.

American Social and Political Movements of the Twentieth Century

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By Yohuru Williams

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Yohuru Williams

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EDITOR'S SERIES INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the *American Social and Political Movements of the Twentieth Century* series at Routledge. This collection of works by top historians from around the nation and world introduces students to the myriad movements that came together in the United States during the twentieth century to expand democracy, to reshape the political economy, and to increase social justice.

Each book in this series explores a particular movement's origins, its central goals, its leading as well as grassroots figures, its actions as well as ideas, and its most important accomplishments as well as serious missteps.

With this series of concise yet synthetic overviews and reassessments, students not only will gain a richer understanding of the many human rights and civil liberties that they take for granted today, but they will also newly appreciate how recent, how deeply contested, and thus how inherently fragile, are these same elements of American citizenship.

Heather Ann Thompson
University of Michigan

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PREFACE

Under Our Own Power: Rethinking Black Freedom Struggles

This is a national, not a southern, phenomenon. And it is largely unrelated to whether a particular State had or did not have segregative school laws.

Justice Lewis F. Powell, *Keyes v. School District No. 1* (1973)¹

On the afternoon of April 24, 1942, thousands of African American protestors convened on the state capitol at Annapolis, Maryland. The demonstrators came to protest the killing of an unarmed soldier named Thomas Broadus who was shot by Baltimore police officer Edward Bender. Broadus was one of 10 Black persons killed by police in Baltimore since Robert Stanton had become Commissioner of Police in that city in 1939. When local protests to remove Stanton and bring Broadus' killer to justice produced no results, the organizers turned their attention to the Governor. Lillie Jackson, the President of the Baltimore National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the *Baltimore Afro-American* newspaper editor Carl Murphy had teamed up to mobilize more than 150 organizations and approximately 2,000 people under the aegis of a group called the Citizens' Committee for Justice. Lillie Jackson set the tone for the demonstration, reminding Governor Thomas O'Connor "this meeting is the direct result of your refusal to answer the letters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People asking for a conference in police killings in Baltimore."² While the protestors presumably came to ask for redress in the Broadus case, their demands covered what Carl Murphy described as five planks representing Black Baltimoreans' grievances including concerns over police brutality, high incarceration rates, employment discrimination, and greater representation on state boards. Prominent among the speakers that day were several Black women who, like Jackson, were key organizers of the march.

While the Annapolis protest focused on a local killing, it attracted national attention. The night before the march, New York Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., then one of only two African American representatives serving in Congress, arrived in Baltimore to address an overflow crowd gathered at a local church. “This year,” Powell defiantly told those in attendance, “the future of the Black man is being written for the next 100 years.” He continued: “It is up to the colored people now to save democracy in America, for it seems there is no one left in America who knows what democracy is.” With “Nazism fascism on one hand and pseudo democracy on the other,” Powell warned of the challenges ahead. We “have twelve million colored Americans without great leaders – misguided, misled, divided.” Nevertheless, he remained hopeful. “It is up to us to move or die,” Powell strenuously asserted. “We must move now under our own power or be exterminated.”³

The 1942 Annapolis march was by no means an anomaly. In 1941 labor and Civil Rights leader A. Philip Randolph organized a campaign aimed at compelling President Franklin D. Roosevelt to end discrimination in the nation’s defense industries. The President narrowly averted a mass march on Washington, the central feature of the campaign, by issuing Executive Order 8802 outlawing such discrimination. One of Randolph’s chief lieutenants was Benjamin F. McLaurin, a longtime labor leader who had helped to organize sleeping-car porters in the 1920s and 1930s and who Baltimore activists called upon in April of 1942 to help organize the Annapolis march. NAACP activists such as Lillie Jackson were critical to local and national desegregation efforts. For instance, the NAACP legal campaign against segregation helped secure important Supreme Court decisions in interstate transportation, voting rights, and education. Unrest nevertheless punctuated the period. Serious race riots in Detroit and New York in 1943 preceded postwar violence against African Americans, especially in the South where loose efforts at attacking segregation and inequality took shape.

As in Baltimore, in the years during and after World War II, African Americans and their allies confronted racial segregation in six key areas: housing, education, labor practices, access to places of public accommodation, voting rights, and Jim Crow Justice. At the 1942 Annapolis March, for instance, Mrs. Virgie Waters, president of the Master Beauticians used the occasion to challenge exclusion by demanding representation on the State Board of Beauty Culturists and Hairdressers for the “1,100 of the 2,340 beauticians in the State of Maryland” of color and the 400 shops “operated by colored beauticians.”⁴

As should be clear, this story of police brutality in Baltimore and the subsequent Annapolis march is not a discursive digression into antiquarian protests of a bygone era. It is an affirmation of the relevance, as well as the need to consider a much longer view of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements of the 1950s and 1960s—characterized in this volume as the Black Freedom Struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. As the historian Rhonda Y. Williams has

observed, the ideas that informed Black Freedom Struggles, such as the Black Power Movement, “were not only firmly grounded in the experiences that punctuated black lives and freedom struggles for many decades, but also produced the particular child of the post–World War II era.” “Providing a longer narrative arc,” she continues in *Concrete Demands*, “exposes not just the activists and organizations, but also Black Power’s coming of age process with stages of development, contingencies, ruptures and continuities, and historical markers that help to expose a rich and nuanced story—not necessarily a lengthier story without distinctions.”⁵

Reimagining Black Freedom Struggles

In the opening to every volume of the Harlan Davidson American History book series, historians John Hope Franklin and Abraham Eisenstadt write that, “Every generation writes its own history, for the reason that it sees the past in the foreshortened perspective of its own experience.”⁶ As the nation pauses to remember the 50th anniversary of the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 in 2015, there is perhaps more interest in Black Freedom Struggles than at any time in the nation’s history, even as much of what those struggles fought to accomplish seems to be in jeopardy.

Alongside the victories accomplished by the Black Freedom Struggles are the challenges of the contemporary moment, including staggering Black unemployment rates, widespread police brutality, and unprecedented mass incarceration. A boom in the number of studies dedicated to Black Freedom Struggles over the last two decades has resulted in an enriched historiography of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements—one that has not only documented the past and sought to make sense of the present, but also raised substantive questions about how we understand the history and legacies of both.

Periodization and Parameters

Much of the new scholarship has displaced an older narrative that viewed the Civil Rights Movement, in particular, as the product of distinct forces inspired largely by the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* and coalescing in the early 1950s. The dominant 1954 to 1968 paradigm that bracketed the Civil Rights Movement between the *Brown* decision and the assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. has given way, at least in academic circles, to a much broader view. More recently published historical works have pushed the temporal boundaries of the movement to the World War II era where much of the groundwork and antecedents for both the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements can be found.

Periodization of the movement, nevertheless, remains a cause of disagreement. While the *Brown* decision still looms large in most accounts of 1950s and

1960s Black Freedom Struggles, scholars have recognized the limitations of any periodization that does not take into account the histories and activism of various persons and groups who contributed to lesser-known precedents. The *Brown* case was the culmination of more than 30 years of legal wrangling and hard won legal precedents established by the NAACP as it sought to undermine “separate but equal” as established by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896).

Several historians, including Jacqueline Dowd Hall, Robin D.G. Kelley, Thomas Sugrue, and Nikhil Singh, have suggested pushing the temporal boundaries of the Civil Rights Movement beyond the standard 1954 to 1968 paradigm to stress important antecedents that help lay the groundwork for the Civil Rights Movement. Expanding the time frame of the movement has allowed for important events—such as the passage of Federal Employment Practices Commission, the desegregation of the military, the integration of baseball, and the 1947 Freedom Rides—to be included in the narrative of the movement.⁷ This “long” Civil Rights Movement thesis also has created room for some historians to highlight what they consider important organizational ties between Civil Rights groups and organized labor that coalesced around the New Deal and World War II, as well as crucial intersections between Black activism, Third World anticolonial struggles, and the often overlooked peace and pacifist movement.⁸ Labor historians Nelson Lichtenstein and Robert Korstad, for example, situate the origins of the Civil Rights Movement (not without some debate) in radical labor activism in the 1940s, “when the social structure of black America took an increasingly urban proletarian character.”⁹ In his book *A New Deal for Blacks*, Harvard Sitkoff likewise traces the emergence of Civil Rights as a national concern to the Depression decade—a time period that saw an incredible increase of the national NAACP’s membership from 50,000 to 450,000 members.¹⁰

While the birth of some organizations and the expansion of others was an important step in the growth of Civil Rights struggles, historian Robert Norell also asked readers to pay attention to local differences. He insisted that the Civil Rights Movement had a “different experience in each place.” In other words, he maintains that, unlike in the 1950s and 1960s, there was no centralized national movement in the earlier decades. In the 1930s and 1940s, the South witnessed “not just a few tantalizing moments of protest but a widespread, if not yet mature, struggle to overthrow segregation and institutionalized racism.”¹¹ There is certainly abundant evidence to support this argument and to serve as a reminder that in rethinking the Black Freedom Struggles, one must pay attention to not only the existence of similar struggles, but also how they might be dissimilarly expressed.

While the notion of a long Civil Rights Movement or long Civil Rights era extending back to the 1930s has gained currency, unsurprisingly there are dissenters from this view. Historians Sundiata Cha Jua and Clarence Lang, for

instance, have argued most vociferously that a lack of distinctiveness in the way that scholars approach the movement denies the unique elements of particular Black Freedom Movements and problematically reduces Civil Rights and Black Power to one continuous struggle. While this argument has merits, the linking of Civil Rights and Black Power Movements under the banner of Black Freedom Struggles does not have to diminish their uniqueness, but also can serve to highlight the similarities and continuities as historical actors traversed familiar issues of social, economic, and political inequality, not to mention cultural identity, over the course of the 20th century.¹²

For the purposes of this volume, therefore, I have adopted the notion of a Long Black Freedom Movement as an umbrella for any number of distinct local, national, and international Black Freedom Movements that have taken place that have been geared toward addressing issues of Black inequality. In the United States these issues have coalesced around what Hasan Jeffries has aptly described as “Freedom Rights” or “Freedom Politics” and what I like to call the “Six Degrees of Segregation.” These include campaigns for decent housing, quality education, the right to vote, equal access to transportation and places of public accommodation, fair labor practices, and freedom from both legal and extralegal forms of Jim Crow Justice.¹³

While the Six Degrees of Segregation simply represents an easy way to identify certain core issues around which activists organized and or mobilized, Jeffries’ notion of Freedom Politics includes an assessment of how activists sought to combat these issues. “Freedom rights,” Jeffries argues, encompasses essential civil and human rights, including “the franchise, quality education, and the chance to earn a decent living,” which African Americans in Lowndes County, Alabama, the subject of his scholarship, had fought to secure since their emancipation that first allowed for a “local organizing infrastructure.”¹⁴ While Jeffries effectively charts local Black people’s various victories over many years, his study *Bloody Lowndes* also points to the ways in which other communities organized around related issues within their own local organizing infrastructures. How communities responded depended on a host of factors. In his comprehensive study of Black Freedom Struggles in the North, historian Thomas Sugrue, for instance, explores how efforts to secure open housing and create opportunities for economic development in the Black community were essentially different, conditioned by the needs of the community and the activists who spearheaded them.

Our ability to recognize activists organizing around freedom politics in early movements, such as a campaign in 1900 to end segregation on trolley cars, is one way of seeing the connective tissue that binds without suggesting one continuous movement. In this way, persons in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955 could act to end segregation on local buses completely unaware of the campaigns at the turn of the century, but organizing roughly around the same principles and with the same purpose to live without the humiliating sting of Jim Crow

accommodations on public carriers.¹⁵ Thus, while acknowledging Rosa Parks as a catalyst for the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King nevertheless could proclaim that the situation with Montgomery buses was “not at all new.” “The problem,” he told those in attendance at a mass meeting to call for a boycott of the city’s buses, “has existed over endless years.”¹⁶ The problem was obviously not confined to southern buses. As studies such as Jeff Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* (2007) and Stephen Grant Meyer, *As Long As They Don’t Move Next Door: Segregation and Racial Conflict in American Neighborhoods* (2000) illustrate, protests emerged around a variety of issues easily mapped to the Six Degrees of Segregation. The other side of this, as Andrew W. Kahrl demonstrates in his book, *“The Land Was Ours”: African American Beaches from Jim Crow to the Sunbelt South* (2010), was the autonomy and freedom from Jim Crow African Americans could enjoy on their own separate beaches—what he called “Black Privatopias,” its own form of Black Power.¹⁷

Personalities and Organizations

Popular studies of the 1950s and 1960s Black Freedom Struggles have generally focused on key leaders and organizations. A slew of autobiographical accounts by movement participants complement these accounts. David Garrow’s *Bearing the Cross*, Harvard Sitkoff’s *King: Pilgrimage to the Mountaintop*, and Taylor Branch’s trilogy of works of books on American in the King years have focused their gaze on the activism of Martin Luther King and the campaigns that intersected with his work beginning in Montgomery in 1955 and culminating with his assassination in Memphis in 1968. These works have tremendous value as scholarly resources on the movement but tend to privilege the work of King over other activists and organizations. While distinct in depth and scope, they all position King as a central force behind the mainstream movement. Although clearly not working in a vacuum, they credit King’s charismatic leadership as the driving force behind the national movement that helped to transform law and social custom in the South and fortify voting rights for African Americans.¹⁸ While the authors of these works readily acknowledge King’s debt to scores of individuals and groups who helped to achieve these victories, they argue that King’s national leadership was indispensable to major legislative victories including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Recent studies have explored the lives of advisors who facilitated and in many cases preceded King in this work. These include studies of the lives of Ella Baker, Bayard Rustin, and James Farmer at the national level. In addition, local studies that seek to recover the stories of local leaders such as Gloria Richardson in Cambridge, Maryland, Catholic Priest James Groppi in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, James and Grace Lee Boggs in Detroit, Michigan,

and Raymond Pace Alexander in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to name a few have been instructive in demonstrating the contours of the movement at the local level.

New scholarship has also sought to frame the lives of proponents of Black Power. Political scientist Manning Marable's 2010 book *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* surprisingly was the first major scholarly excavation of the fiery Muslim minister. For years, scholars and the public relied on Alex Haley's autobiography of Malcolm published shortly after his death as the major source on Malcolm's life. While challenging elements of the autobiography for its re-creation of Malcolm, Marable's own work has come under fire demonstrating the challenges of presenting the life of iconic figures. Peniel Joseph's 2014 biography *Stokely: A Life* has also sought to recover one of the most controversial figures associated with the Black Freedom Struggles of the 1960s.

Unquestionably, however, more work is needed on key figures to flesh out the philosophical and personal motivations that compelled individuals to dedicate themselves to making social change.

Critical to moving beyond a focus on marquee, charismatic, or individual leaders who grace the national stage is paying attention to the engagement of local leaders and organizations. Two of the most important studies on the significance of local activists, John Dittmer's *Local People* and Charles Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, focus their scholarly attention on the state of Mississippi. Despite being widely regarded as one of the primary citadels of white supremacy, and the site of some of the bloodiest showdowns with segregationists, Mississippi is often overlooked in popular accounts of the movement because it ultimately did not serve as one of the key battlegrounds in the King-led national movement. Numerous other cities and the local struggles that took place there suffer the same fate. Interestingly enough, activists, early on, had actually identified Mississippi as a key battle state, thereby illustrating one of the central points advanced by Dittmer and Payne—that the Civil Rights Movement at its core emerged from the numerous local revolts against Jim Crow that swept the nation in the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁹ As Dittmer explains, “there would have been no organization, no movement, no victories” without the local people.²⁰ Local studies have thus provided a rich portrait of the movement beyond the national story.

Part of the rethinking of the movement, therefore, involves looking beyond those individuals and organizations most associated with the standard narrative. Traditionally the story of the Black Freedom Struggle has been told through the Civil Rights lens of the charismatic leadership of the “Big Six” leaders and their organizations. This includes Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the NAACP, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, pronounced ‘snick’), the National Urban League (NUL), and A. Phillip Randolph and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.²¹

In this regard Glenda Gilmore's 2009 book *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919–1950* was exemplary. Set in the 30-year period before the traditional date given for the start of the movement, Gilmore explores the work of numerous important, if altogether forgotten, including socialists and Communists whom, she argues, helped pave the way for the likes of more well known historical actors like Rosa Parks and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King. In the process Gilmore illustrates the paradox of activists who would have been considered un-American and the role they played in strengthening American democracy.²² Brenda Gayle Plummer's *In Search of Black Power: African Americans in the Era of Decolonization* (2013) and Minkah Makalani's *In the Cause of Freedom Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917–1939* (2011) are two works that explore the work of comparable groups and individuals for Black Power. Rod Bush's *We Are Not What We Seem: Black Nationalism and Class Struggle in the American Century* (1999) is also notable for its broad view of Black Power.²³

Drawing on the examples and rich research of others like Gilmore, Jeffries, and Williams, this volume will share the experiences of a range of actors beyond the most familiar and well known who played a variety of roles in challenging racial oppression on the path to seeking justice.

Women, Gender, and Sexuality

Other studies that consider the importance of gender have also been helpful in helping historians and social scientists rethink the history and legacy of Black Freedom Struggles. These have included notable biographies of prominent women within the movement such as Barbara Ransby's *Ella Baker & the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* and Jeanne Theoharis' *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*.²⁴ Studies have also explored the significant grassroots organizing and leadership Black women displayed in shepherding both national and local protest movements and organizations.

Danielle Maguire's *At the Dark End of the Street* meticulously documents the rampant sexual violence and abuse visited on Black women by white men under segregation and how resistance to such violence played a key role in setting the context for 1950s and 1960s Black Freedom Struggles. The sadistic gang rape of 24-year-old sharecropper Recy Taylor in 1944 is the backdrop for Maguire's work. A group of seven armed white men brandishing knives and shotguns assaulted the respected wife and mother as she was returning from a prayer meeting at the Rock Hill Holiness Church in Abbeville, Alabama. The president of the local branch assigned one of his surest organizers, Rosa Parks, to the case in an effort to win justice for Mrs. Taylor.²⁵

This was just one of many actions that Parks had been involved in to challenge Jim Crow Segregation before and after Montgomery—which has led her biographer Jeanne Theoharis to lament the “southernization” of her story.