

Introduction

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Today is the seed time, now are the hours of work, and tomorrow comes
the harvest and the playtime.

W.E.B. DuBois

Moving beyond what some have termed the “master narrative,” embodied by the first six episodes of the television documentary *Eyes on the Prize*, the essays in this collection complicate and ultimately enhance our understanding of the modern struggle for racial equality. When the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) released *Eyes on the Prize* in 1987, it was met with virtually universal acclaim. One national magazine called *Eyes* “required watching” and another declared that the film presented “not only a splendid accounting of what happened during the most active years of the movement, but also why it was so important.”¹ Building on nearly a generation of studies of the civil rights movement, written by journalists, veteran activists, and historians, as well as the advice of over a dozen scholars, the documentary traced the rise and development of the movement. Opening with coverage of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), Emmett Till’s murder in 1955, and Rosa Parks’s refusal to relinquish her seat on a Montgomery bus, the documentary moved through the 1950s to the triumphant march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, a decade later, which culminated with President Johnson’s signing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. As the editors of this book can attest, the film has the ability to capture the attention of students like few others ever made and leaves viewers with a firm sense of the courage and sacrifices of thousands of ordinary men and women, from the freedom riders who braved firebombs and white mobs to school children who risked their lives in face-offs with snarling German shepherd dogs and baton-wielding state troopers.

Yet as even the producers of *Eyes* recognized, this “master narrative” had its shortcomings. Especially when coupled with “remembrances presented during Black History Month and Martin Luther King, Jr. birthday celebrations,” as well as “heritage tours, museums, public rituals, textbooks, and various artifacts of mass culture,” these works “distorted and suppressed as much as they . . . revealed about the civil rights movement,” to borrow Jacquelyn Dowd Hall’s words. Put somewhat differently, the master narrative de-radicalized figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks, truncated the timeline and geography of the movement, and exaggerated the achievements of the black freedom struggle in order to fit with the dominant progressive storyline of American history. It also tended to overemphasize the role played by men and national organizations while underestimating the significance of women and community-based institutions.²

Even before *Eyes* was aired, a handful of scholars had begun to publish case studies that suggested an alternative or revisionist approach to understanding the civil rights movement. Somewhat along the same lines, the producers of *Eyes* developed eight additional episodes that tracked the rise of Black Power in the years following the march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge.³ At the forefront of this effort to complicate the master narrative stood Patricia Sullivan and Waldo Martin, who, in addition to publishing their own works on what became known as the “long civil rights movement,” began in the mid-1990s to codirect a succession of summer institutes on the civil rights movement at Harvard University’s W.E.B. DuBois Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts.⁴ Indeed, *The Seedtime, the Work, and the Harvest: New Perspectives on the Black Freedom Struggle in America* grew out of one of these institutes, or seminars. For four (hot) weeks the seminar’s participants immersed themselves in the literature of the centuries-long fight for racial equality. Along the way, they interacted with numerous scholars, from Leon Litwack, the elder statesman of the revisionist school of race relations in America, to Peniel Joseph, the driving force behind the emerging field of Black Power studies. They were also blessed by visits from a handful of veteran activists, including Esther Cooper and Dorothy Burnham, whose efforts to tear down Jim Crow while members of the Southern Negro Youth Council in the 1930s and 1940s helped plant the seeds for the rise of the modern civil rights movement. Coming from a wide array of institutions, from HBCUs, such as Florida

A&M, to small liberal arts schools like Wheaton College, the participants brought with them a diversity of life experiences and perspectives that immeasurably enriched their discussions. Both during the seminar's official meetings and in bars, restaurants, and dorm rooms (as well as poetry slams) they discussed their own research on subjects ranging from youth in the movement to urban rebellions and shared thoughts on ways to enhance their work as teachers. As they met, the Trayvon Martin case, which involved the shooting of an unarmed black youth by George Zimmerman, a self-appointed neighborhood watchman, came to a conclusion when a jury acquitted Zimmerman of all charges, reminding the seminar's participants (if they needed reminding) of the ongoing nature of the struggle for racial equality and of the urgency of their work as educators. While not all of the seminar's participants have essays in this volume (some because they had previous publication requirements), all contributed to the final product either directly, by reading all or some of the works, by sharing their thoughts during the seminar itself, or through some combination thereof.

Since the release of *Eyes on the Prize* scholars have pushed the boundaries of the movement back in time, expanded the field of subjects well beyond national figures and organizations, incorporated women into their narratives, produced a startling array of community studies, explored the intersection of the black freedom struggle and the Cold War, and forged a reconsideration of the history of Black Panther Party. Included in this outpouring of research and writing are a number of outstanding anthologies, several of which themselves helped spur innovative approaches to our understanding of the movement.⁵ At the same time, the proliferation of college courses and public discussions of the civil rights years suggests that the demand for more works has not abated. In the past couple of years alone, a half dozen works on the civil rights movement have been highlighted in the *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, including Peniel Joseph's biography of Stokely Carmichael and Waldo Martin's examination of the Black Panther Party. The fact that works such as Danielle McGuire's *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance* and Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* have generated so much buzz both inside and outside academia confirms that the appetite for fresh examinations of the black freedom struggle remains high. Needless to say, the ongoing struggles for racial equality from Ferguson and Baltimore to

Charleston and Fruitvale Station demand that we continue to interrogate the past so that we can arrive at a more informed understanding of our own times.

The essays in this collection both confirm some of the findings of this recent outpouring of scholarship and suggest new avenues of investigation. First, several of the essays demonstrate the value of the revisionist impulse to place the modern struggle for civil rights within the context of the longer black struggle for equality and to focus on places and times that often lie outside the master narrative. For instance, Reginald Ellis's study of Thomas DeSaille Tucker, who served as the first president of Florida A&M, one of the oldest and largest historically black colleges in the nation, disrupts one of the most firmly held assumptions about the black freedom struggle, namely that Booker T. Washington dominated the debate over the role that black colleges should play in the South until W.E.B. DuBois challenged him. On the contrary, Ellis shows that Tucker promoted a vision of education in the Deep South that paralleled DuBois's vision—namely one that was equal to that provided to the most talented white students—before DuBois issued his sharp critique of Washington early in the twentieth century. Similarly, by focusing on Norfolk, Virginia, Jeffrey L. Littlejohn and Charles H. Ford contest one of the fundamental premises of the master narrative, namely that the NAACP was a voice of moderation that focused primarily on attaining racial equality by pursuing legal suits and backroom lobbying. On the contrary, James Gay and his brother Milton employed a wide array of strategies, from voter registration drives and marches to sit-ins and boycotts. And they continued to press for equality even after the federal government enacted sweeping civil rights legislation, by opening black businesses, running for political office, and filing suits in the courts that demanded that the city and state comply with the law. Likewise, in his examination of the urban revolt in York, Pennsylvania, Peter Levy reminds readers that urban rebellions took place in hundreds of cities, including small and midsize communities, rather than just large metropolises with majority- or near-majority-black populations, like Detroit and Newark. He also shows that the claim that the racial uprisings of the 1960s differed from those earlier in the century, that they were “commodity” rather than “communal” riots, meaning that they largely involved attacks on property as opposed to interracial violence between blacks and whites, demands reevaluation.

Furthermore, several of the essays in this collection suggest that we are

only beginning to adequately answer the question, what did the black freedom movement want? This question did not originate in the mid-1950s and early 1960s. On the contrary, the stirrings of black activism during the early decades of the twentieth century prodded various individuals and organization with vastly different viewpoints to pose it. For instance, the NAACP issued a pamphlet titled “What Does the Negro Want?” in 1918, during the First World War. Its author, Professor John Hawkins, listed fourteen “articles” or goals—including an end to lynching, better housing, and equal job opportunities—to parallel the fourteen points laid out by President Wilson in his famous “Fourteen Points” declaration. About a dozen years later, the Commission on Interracial Cooperation published a similar declaration with the same title. This version highlighted nine goals, most notably the eradication of legal discrimination based on skin color, equal educational opportunities, better housing, sanitation, and police protection, better job opportunities, and the vote. The demand was for “in short[,] . . . no special privileges, but simply even-handed justice and a fair chance in the struggle for existence.”⁶ As the southern-based civil rights movement personified by Martin Luther King Jr. and the demand for desegregation and the vote was eclipsed by the Black Power movement, personified by Malcolm X and his successors, Robert Penn Warren, the famed southern author, reiterated this question in a book entitled *Who Speaks for the Negro?* Likewise, in their jointly written work, *Black Power*, Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton sought to clarify the presumably new demands posed by the more radicalized movement. In different ways, these works revealed that more than just a desire to end legal discrimination lay at the core of the civil rights movement—that a quest for political power (not just the vote), economic independence, and cultural pride underlay the movement.⁷ To this list of goals, the articles by Teresa Holden and Mary Potorti add the demands for food and health care. Indeed, as both of these pieces suggest, in the absence of these fundamental needs, the rest of the demands appeared somewhat superfluous. Yet at the same time, movement activists learned to weave the fight for food and health care together with the struggles for the vote, economic independence, and self-worth, in part by demonstrating the degree to which the foes of racial equality used their political and economic power to keep blacks hungry and in ill health.

In addition, several of the essays in this volume illustrate the impact of the “cultural turn,” on the historical scholarship of the black freedom

struggle. At about the same time as Jaqueline Dowd Hall began to call for a revision of the master narrative of the struggle for racial equality, a variety of scholars and social critics began to push for a reorientation of focus of historical scholarship in general.⁸ And two of the pieces illustrate the ways that the “cultural turn,” which has reenergized the study of history in the recent past, can and does enhance our understanding of the struggle for racial equality. More particularly, Rosie Jayde Uyola’s interrogation of the public’s uses (and abuses) of the memory of the urban rebellions in Newark and Baltimore in 1967 and 1968 exemplifies the influence of the cultural turn. Written by a scholar comfortable with and adept at interpreting cultural sources, this essay reminds us that to understand the nature and impact of the movement we must move beyond the master narrative that focused on the fight for civil and legal rights and political power, narrowly defined. Indeed, as more than a handful of scholars and veteran activists have contended, the most lasting legacy of the surge of the black freedom struggle of the 1950s and 1960s may have been on culture. Or, as Komozi Woodard has written, “the Black Cultural Revolution was so unprecedented that important historians such as Vincent Harding and Manning Marable have reached for such terms as watershed and zenith to calibrate its sustained impact during the Second Reconstruction in the United States.”⁹

Finally, since W.E.B. DuBois’s legacy loomed large throughout the 2013 NEH Seminar, we felt it was imperative to include in this volume writings by scholars who, like DuBois, have coupled their research expertise with their commitment to battling racial injustice. In August 2014, Stefan Bradley, a professor at St. Louis University, joined his students to protest the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and then in a series of blogs, one of which is reproduced here, to explicate and give voice to his and his students’ actions. Similarly, Phil Sinitiere reacted to the death of Sandra Bland by crafting a blog that sought to provide historical perspective on the decades-long local struggle against racial injustice in Waller County, Texas—where he lived and where Bland, a former student returning for work at Prairie View A&M, had been arrested for failing to use her turn signal and later died in police custody. In addition to exemplifying DuBois’s legacy as a scholar-activist, these two pieces also demonstrate that the black struggle for freedom is not simply something that took place in the past but, rather, is a vital part of the world in which we live.

Put somewhat differently, by expanding the chronology and geography of the movement, beyond the “old South” from roughly 1955 to 1965, by analyzing individuals who stood outside the oversimplified molds of accommodationist or radical, by moving beyond the call for legal and civil rights to the broader demand for basic human rights, and by considering the impact and intersection of politics and culture, past and present, the essays in this volume both reflect the new directions that the study of the black freedom struggle have taken and expand our understanding of it. Indeed, by reconceptualizing the black freedom struggle and encouraging readers to view the South as more than a narrowly defined, geographic and time-bound region, this collection reflects the claims of revisionist scholars who argue that race was never just a “southern problem.” On the contrary, as Matthew D. Lassiter and Joseph Crespino have argued, “the notion of the exceptional South has served as a myth, one that has persistently distorted our understanding of American history,” one that allows those who reside outside of the South (defined geographically) to maintain a belief in “white racial innocence” and their faith in “an essentially liberal national project (if only the red states would stop preventing the blue states from resurrecting the Great Society.)”¹⁰ In other words, this book fits into the Southern Dissent series because, not in spite of, its investigation of the “race problem” all across the nation.

Notes

1. “Reviews,” *Eyes on the Prize* website, accessed June 30, 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150502220302/http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize/about/press.html>.

2. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History* 91 (Mar. 2005): 1233–63. For good reviews of the scholarly literature on the eve of Dowd Hall’s review essay, see Steven F. Lawson, “Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement,” *American Historical Review* 96 (Apr. 1991): 456; Adam Fairclough, “Historians and the Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of American Studies* 24 (Dec. 1990): 387–98; Charles W. Eagles, “Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era,” *Journal of Southern History* 66 (Nov. 2000): 815–48; and Kevin Gaines, “The Historiography of the Struggle for Black Equality since 1945,” in *A Companion to Post-1945 America*, ed. Jean-Christophe Agnew and Roy Rosenzweig (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 211–34. For critiques of Hall’s “long civil rights movement” framework see Eric Arnesen, “Reconsidering the ‘Long Civil Rights Movement,’” *Historically Speaking* 10 (Apr. 2009): 31–34; and Sundiata