
Introduction

The American Negroes are the only people in the history of the world, so far as I know, that ever became free without any effort of their own. . . . They twanged banjos around the railroad stations, sang melodious spirituals, and believed that some Yankee would come along and give each of them forty acres and a mule.

—W. E. Woodward, *Meet General Grant* (1938)

Historical analysis of African American activism has certainly improved since Woodward's day, but less than one might suppose. Though they might take issue with the suggestion, until very recently most American scholars discussed African American agency in ways that were little more than dignified versions of Woodward's caricature. Popular thought, including some African American popular thought, all too often has proceeded from similar assumptions. Younger Black Americans, for example, sometimes seem to think that struggle began with Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and that prior to them Blacks did little to challenge their oppression.

Scholars know better, but even in scholarly work on the modern Civil Rights Era one finds reluctance to acknowledge the depth of African Americans' activist initiative. What Julian Bond, among others, calls the Master Narrative of the civil rights movement, a history framed around Dr. King, the Kennedys, and the redemptive days of Montgomery and Memphis, highlights national spokesmen and power brokers, rendering the mass of Black people invisible, as if they were off somewhere engaging in the contemporary equivalent of strumming banjos.¹ Though it makes a dramatic and even inspiring story, the Narrative does so by refusing to take seriously "ordinary" people whose years of persistent struggle often

made the big events possible. Delivered from the wilderness of Jim Crow law and custom, Black folk's scripted role becomes that of the rescued survivors.

Seen in this light, the dignity of suffering and the power of eloquent witness are the core lessons of the civil rights struggles, rather than the birth of modern movement practice and the radicalization of the very idea of citizenship. Romantic notions of consensus across the color line obscure the real difficulties activists had in sustaining cross-racial alliances. Faith in the rule of law and the power of the national conscience displaces a historical record in which some activists who placed their confidence in the national sense of fair play paid for that with their lives while others grew angry and desperate. This kind of normative history automatically marginalizes radicalism. If we are such a morally responsive society, militant response is hardly justified. The Narrative consistently underestimates how arduous and uncertain it has been—and remains—to remake a nation anew, as the nonracist society its founders in fact never intended it to be, and how much of that burden has been borne by the least privileged Americans.

The easy triumphalism of the Master Narrative, of course, rings false to many of those who took part in the struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. As the work of reconstructing the Civil Rights Era in public memory has been taken up by this group witness, the story has become less one of the heroism of a few and more one of mass activism. Over the last decade or more, a new generation of scholars has joined this debate, overturning virtually every tenet of the traditional story of the modern movement. That scholarship has led to more emphasis on local movements and local leaders, on women, and on the historically creative roles that non-elites can play under the appropriate structural circumstances.² Even our basic conception of what constitutes opposition has been transformed by the application to twentieth-century struggles of the idea of “everyday resistance.”³

The growing interest in the ordinary roots of extraordinary change has begun to define study of earlier periods as well. The essays included in this volume extend this revision, demonstrating over and over again the depth and breadth of Black oppositional spirit and activity. The sections in which they appear are organized roughly by chronology. There are some significant points of disagreement among them but there are also some very important unifying themes.

The quest for economic justice is arguably the first and most significant of these themes. Several of these essays show that Black responses to eco-

nomic exploitation and labor abuse have defined some of the most challenging, imaginative—and underappreciated—campaigns to better Black life conditions. Nan Woodruff’s essay on Arkansas’s Elaine Massacre of 1919, for example, shows how tenant farmers throughout the Mississippi/Arkansas delta pursued an energetic campaign to reform labor practices and increase compensation, the spark for one of the most profound examples of racist atrocity during the twentieth century. Greta de Jong and Michael Honey examine efforts later in the twentieth century to organize sharecroppers in rural Louisiana and factory workers in Memphis, respectively, pointing out, among other things, the important—though not determinative—role of white leftist organizers in fostering the birth and growth of the Louisiana Farmers’ Union and the southern Congress of Industrial Organizations, while also demonstrating how each community’s legacy of labor activism demanded a more material orientation from subsequent local antidiscrimination campaigns during the 1960s. It may be common now to separate the civil rights struggle from labor struggle, but Paul Ortiz demonstrates conclusively that such a separation was completely alien to the thinking of Black activists in early-twentieth-century Florida and to the people who were oppressing them. These essays do more than place Black workers at the center of the Black activist tradition. They establish, in distinct yet linked ways, how local economies of sugar, cotton, and rice, steel and mining, and machine manufacture informed the course of activist struggles in a given community and among particular groups of Black workers.

No matter how demeaning the job, workers may be able to redefine it, to find value where the broader society denies it. Michael Honey’s analysis of the oral narratives of Black workers in twentieth-century Memphis foregrounds how their artisan-like sense of the dignity of their work, far from constituting a concession to the terms of their oppression, could constitute the psychic cornerstone on which those workers raised challenges to the material deprivation of their lives. One is reminded here of the famous first-person narrative of Alabama tenant farmer and Sharecroppers’ Union member Nate Shaw, whose sense of himself as “an overaverage man,” derived in part from his expertise in so many different lines of work, consistently informed his willingness to challenge the supremacist presumptions of his white neighbors. Seen in this light, the spaces and institutions of worker unity and workplace justice take on new importance within the development of black activism, as important to the broader movement as the Black church and press have been seen to be in more traditional accounts.

Too, Black labor's priority as a social concern often defined lines of political affiliation not only for whites, but also Black elites, as Brian Kelly's analysis of turn-of-the-century Birmingham shows.

This last observation illuminates another theme linking these pieces as a group: their stress on the everyday nature of Black political concerns and organizing. That everyday life for Black folk was invariably politicized, as historians of the post-emancipation period have noted, characterizes most depictions of Black experience, from Ida Wells to Malcolm X. The inverse formulation—that everyday life constitutes the core substance of Black politics—is less readily acknowledged. Yet it is precisely the interplay between everyday conditions and motivating ideas that these essays illuminate so well—Paul Ortiz's discussion of “nonpolitical” lodges and mutual benefit associations and their crucial role in the political mobilization of Black Floridians; Elsa Barkley Brown and David Cecelski's depiction of the fervent yet precarious process of community formation in Richmond, Virginia and Wilmington, North Carolina following emancipation; and Thavolia Glymph's analysis of community celebrations during the same period. Mundane activities like church meetings and outdoor sermons, freedom jubilees and holiday drill marches all served as rehearsals for more ambitious expressions of struggle and engagement. Barkley Brown's essay captures, as few others have before it, how an everyday interpretation of Black politics clarifies in particular the role played by Black women in articulating group concerns, providing effective checks on leadership's tendency to define community in self-serving terms, and transforming the ballot into a representation of collective interest rather than individual preference. Similarly, Cecelski points out that the contraband camps of slave refugees accompanying Union soldiers behind southern lines during the Civil War have generally been overlooked as important sites of social and political formation for the freedmen. If traditional scholarship tends to marginalize militance, more recent scholarship often romanticizes it. Glymph's essay normalizes it, finding a recognition of the need for armed self-defense deeply rooted in the ordinary rituals of local communities, even if it was not clearly reflected by the pronouncements of national spokespersons.

The term “activism” hardly conjures up the issue of how people construct their past, but several articles here—in particular those by Glymph, Barkley Brown, Ortiz, and Scott Sandage—make a persuasive case for the centrality of “memory-work.” The ability of a community to control the images of its past can be a vital form of social capital. An alternative un-

derstanding of the past can help people envision alternative futures and the steps that lead there. Many of the essays here emphasize the decades of self-education, of building community by building shared memories, that then informed stands against oppressive conditions. Indeed, a case could be made that when the movement downplays these more mundane elements of struggle in favor of its more dramatic expressions, it undermines its own long-term viability. At the same time, “memory-work” often involves a constant reinvention of the idea of America itself, exemplified by Scott Sandage’s analysis of the changing meaning of the Lincoln Memorial.

Yet the power of group memory has at times imposed strict limits on the political imaginations of Blacks and other Americans. For Charise Cheney, the long memory of U.S. Blacks and the hunger for respect engendered by that memory encouraged an ongoing conservation of masculinity, so that both classical and modern phases of black nationalism as cultural practice revolve around aggressive—and often reflexive—invocations of manhood. Converging with recent work in the field of political science, Cheney presents the masculinist bias in various iterations of nationalist culture and insurgency as a “linked fate” approach: one in which unity of outlook and agenda among blacks is presumed rather than achieved, and alternative conceptions of the root conditions of racial oppression are dismissed as unhelpful distraction.⁴ Peter Wood takes up the question of how slavery itself is remembered in classroom and popular history, arguing that much discourse on race and racial activism, past and present, amounts to a trivialization of the American racial experience. We hide the reality even as we study it exhaustively.

Trivialization can take flattering forms. If students of Black struggle have had to overcome the deeply rooted stereotype of Black passivity, there has also been a tendency, from the other side, to find heroic resistance in all social and political acts, to the point where oppositional activity seems natural, even omnipresent.⁵ Indeed, some of the relatively new, bottom-up history is really not so different from the scholarship it is critiquing as its authors suppose. A number of articles here, Cheney’s most explicitly, suggest that critics of the Master Narrative may reject some aspects of it only to uncritically embrace other aspects.

Rigid conceptions of the boundaries of racial community are one source of uncritical thinking. A central element of conveying a sense of a redeemed future is acknowledging the real breadth of the very idea of “Black community.” Works produced by the past generation of scholars have foregrounded how attention to sexuality, diasporic roots, ethnicity,

class, and in particular gender require a much broader conception of what is meant by Black community than had been habit in both scholarly and popular writings. The essays in the collection build on this crucial intervention. Indeed, they attest in strikingly uniform fashion to the need to think expansively about the parameters of black group experience and aspiration, by addressing in diverse ways the question of how to represent the indigenous base for a given campaign or struggle. Ula Taylor's groundbreaking examination of the role of Amy Ashwood Garvey and Amy Jacques Garvey in the rise of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, to cite one example, demonstrates how even when women are, in some senses, treated as being outside the political community, their work can still help create and sustain that community. Similarly, negotiation of class differences is as central a problem for scholars as for activists. Taken collectively, the essays implicitly warn against any of the either-or formulations that have dominated much of this discourse. Does the Black middle class consist of the "house Negroes" that Malcolm X derided, supporting the social systems that oppress all Black people; or are they the Talented Tenth, providing the leadership the larger struggle has to have? Brian Kelly finds elements of the Black middle class in Birmingham as corrupt and self-serving as anything E. Franklin Frazier ever described, but Caroline Emmons and Wim Roefs remind us that from the same social strata came much of the post-World War II leadership that changed the South, often at great cost to themselves, similar to what Ortiz found in Florida decades earlier. Here again, these essays provide grounds for wondering whether a significant part of the variation in response to class privilege is a function of how different actors construct the racial past.

Winston James is centrally concerned with the issue of how African Americans understand the nature of their "community." Whether African Americans should organize on the basis of racial oppression or on the basis of their exploitation as workers is a question that has at least 150 years of debate behind it. If the measure of victory is the ability to appeal to the Black masses, then the nationalist position has ordinarily trumped the socialist one. But even as he explains that, James demonstrates that the socialist position has greatly enriched the activist discourse.

Several other authors, including Glymph, Ortiz, Barkley Brown, and Cecelski, are concerned with the issue of exactly how Blacks forge solidarity among themselves on a day-to-day basis. This contrasts with the more common stance among scholars of taking Black-on-Black relationships for granted and focusing on Black-white interaction, be it good or bad. Com-

pare, for example, the number of books written about the integrated experience of Mississippi's Freedom Summer with the number written about the mostly Black period of organizing that preceded it. For different reasons, radicals—especially Marxists—and more conservative scholars can end up portraying interracial cooperation as a vital and, again, a natural part of the movement. The essays by de Jong, Honey, James, K'Meyer, and Kelly suggest that there have indeed been moments at which interracial cooperation has been crucial, but they may be both powerful and fragile.

Sandage's essay offers the most explicit development of the idea of America, as much as Africa, as invented tradition. Rejecting official representations of the Lincoln Memorial as a shrine to sectional reconciliation, Blacks worked to make the shrine a memorial to Emancipation, an act of popular historical revision that long predated the similar turn in formal scholarship. This argument resonates with many if not most of the pieces in this collection—from Barkley Brown and Cecelski to Emmons and Ortiz—in recognizing the ambition and ingenuity of Black folk in conceptualizing their own sense of place in this country. Everyday rituals of democratic practice like parades and drill teams, party organizing, and election law reform come together as a fundamental field of engagement and struggle. The quest for authorized status within the national polity—often presumed an acquiescent form of Black group struggle—now appears imaginative and ambitious in ways often attributed to approaches seeking “ways out” through either emigration or extraterritorial notions of group solidarity and affinity. Several of the essays here that do not foreground electoral politics—such as Honey, de Jong, and K'Meyer—consider extrapolitical institutions, from labor unions to federal assistance programs to civic associations and fraternal organizations, as crucial stages for articulation of Black struggle and intervention.

In sum, these renegotiations of formal public roles for Black people make clear the dynamic nature of African Americans' relationship to their adoptive, though all too often unwelcoming, home. We feel that this suggests that the idea of critical citizenship (the phrase is Adam Green's), the belief that Blacks realized full public participation in this country to the extent that they acutely noted its hypocrisies or outrages concerning themselves or others—how they “read” America, as vernacular usage would have it—undergirds many of the essays, and much of Black conception and practice of social struggle in this country. Certainly nineteenth-century activists like Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Ida B. Wells anticipated, through their efforts, the observation of W.E.B. Du Bois that

Blacks' unique powers of "second sight" enabled and obliged them to a unique role in this country, and in the realization of the ideal of developed egalitarian politics globally. Blacks' progressive comprehension of their own citizenship was critical, then, in two senses: as evidence of their own ingenious use of formal political resources to generate searching comment upon their own unacceptable circumstances and as realization of the most ambitious, enduring, and transformative tradition of public dissent that this country has known. Students of modern citizenship generally would do well to note this aspect of African American political thought and activity, for it constitutes a singularly robust example of utopian outlook and commitment—an element often identified as crucial to any comprehensive manifestation of civic affinity and public trust—in recent U.S. history.⁶

NOTES

1. Following Bond, we can think of the master narrative as saying something like:

Traditionally, relationships between the races in the South were oppressive. Many Southerners were very prejudiced against Blacks. In 1954, the Supreme Court decided this was wrong. Inspired by the Court, courageous Americans, Black and white, took protest to the street, in the form of sit-ins, bus boycotts, and Freedom Rides. The protest movement, led by the brilliant and eloquent Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., aided by a sympathetic Federal government, most notably the Kennedy brothers and a born-again Lyndon Johnson, was able to make America understand racial discrimination as a moral issue. Once Americans understood that discrimination was wrong, they quickly moved to remove racial prejudice and discrimination from American life, as evidenced by the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965. Dr. King was tragically slain in 1968. Fortunately, by that time the country had been changed, changed for the better in some fundamental ways. The movement was a remarkable victory for all Americans. By the 1970s, southern states where Blacks could not have voted ten years earlier were sending African Americans to Congress. Inexplicably, just as the civil rights victories were piling up, many Black Americans, under the banner of Black Power, turned their backs on American society.

2. Connie Curry, *Silver Rights* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights*

Struggle in Louisiana, 1915–1972 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995); Cynthia Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry: The Liberation of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998); Vincent Harding, *Hope and History: Why We Must Share the Story of the Movement* (New York: Orbis, 1990); Robin Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1996); Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984); Robert Moses and Charles E. Cobb, *Radical Equations—Math Literacy and Civil Rights* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001); Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Rural Organizing and Cultural Center, *Minds Stayed on Freedom: The Civil Rights Struggle in the Rural South—an Oral History* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1991); Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams & the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

3. E.g., Kelley, *Race Rebels*.

4. Michael Dawson, *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African American Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994); Cathy Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

5. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985), and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990).

6. See especially John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), Introduction and part I.