
Place Matters

The Indispensable Story of Civil Rights Activism beyond Dixie

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When I started graduate school in 1993 at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, the history of the civil rights era was undergoing a dramatic and exciting transformation. A host of scholars were in the process of dismantling the Master Narrative, which privileged the South, exalted nonviolence, and focused overwhelmingly on heroic leaders, national politics, and legislative achievements. Collectively, their work challenged the idea that the southern movement was a clear and triumphant story about redemptive American democracy, suggesting instead a much murkier and complex history of both achievement and failure. It was an energizing time to be a movement scholar.

Yet, as important as these and subsequent historiographical developments have been, movement histories have remained stubbornly and overwhelmingly focused on the South. Wittingly or not, they have reinforced the notion that racism was primarily a regional affliction in the United States and that the movement was most significantly a function of “southern exceptionalism.” From my own experience growing up in Cleveland, Ohio, I knew that there was a whole other landscape of racial struggle during the postwar era waiting to be rediscovered, explored, and added to the narrative of the civil rights movement.

Despite this persistent bias, each year compelling new work emerges on the black freedom struggle outside the South, further adding to our

still-evolving understanding of the northern movement for racial justice and bringing greater clarity to the full measure of its importance. In an era of renewed racial crisis and the #BlackLivesMatter movement, these stories of racial activism "beyond Dixie" have become even more significant as many Americans try to make sense of a tragic stream of police killings of unarmed black men and women, urban uprisings in Ferguson, Baltimore, and Milwaukee, and the persistent racial inequalities that plague every medium and large U.S. city more than fifty years after the landmark legislative achievements of the civil rights era.

As with all academic work, when we looked in new ways at old topics, we began to see new things. So, what do we see when we look at the movement "beyond Dixie"? What are some of the broad contours of this important emerging area of civil rights scholarship? What key insights do we gain by exploring northern movement stories? And why is it imperative that we teach this aspect of the broader postwar struggle for racial justice?

To make sense of northern struggles for racial justice in the post-WWII era, we have to first understand the unique terrain of race relations in the urban North out of which these struggles emerged. While northern activists often shared a consciousness with those in the South, their campaigns took place within and responded to a distinctive context. The industrial base of the economy, with its strong labor movement, the presence of white ethnic groups, the dominance of the Catholic Church, the strong link between race, ethnicity, and urban geography, the relatively secure, if limited, right to vote, and the diffuse nature of discrimination—all of which set it apart from the South—critically affected the development of race relations and civil rights activism in the urban North, Midwest, and West.

While there is a deeper history of racial struggle in the northern cities, the Great Migration played a pivotal role in transforming race relations outside of the South, calcifying northern-style Jim Crow, catalyzing white reaction to racial change, spurring black community building within the bounds of segregation, and, ultimately, propelling civil rights activism. During that period, millions of rural, southern African Americans moved to industrial cities in the East, Midwest, and West, seeking safety, equality, and new opportunities in what they hoped would be the "Promised Land." Yet, despite a modicum of freedom and opportunity not found in the Jim Crow South, in reality most black

people did not find liberated terrain or full autonomy, but a new and distinct system of white supremacy, discrimination, and racial subordination. Pervasive employment and housing discrimination, segregation, dilapidation, inferior public schools, social isolation, limited political and civic representation, and police brutality were all typical features of northern cities, defining the conditions under which most African Americans lived, played, worked, and struggled.

In the late 1910s and 1920s, the "New Negro" movement brought forth a more assertive generation of black political leadership and a flowering of cultural politics in Harlem, Chicago, Washington, DC, and elsewhere. On street corners and in the pages of the *Crisis*, *Opportunity*, the *Messenger*, the *Crusader*, the *Chicago Defender*, and similar smaller publications, progressive and radical African American thinkers, including W. E. B. Du Bois, A. Philip Randolph, Marcus Garvey, and Hubert Harrison, vociferously (and sometimes viciously) debated political ideology and strategies for racial uplift. More moderate organizations, such as the NAACP and National Urban League, both headquartered in New York City, chose institutional approaches and quiet, behind-the-scenes negotiation over radical ideology and protest politics to open up new opportunities in employment and housing for African Americans. Young artists, including Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Aaron Douglas, created works of art that articulated a more complex and uncompromising view of the black experience that challenged degrading stereotypes of African Americans and often pushed back explicitly against various forms of racial injustice in the North, as well as in the South.

During the 1930s and 1940s, economic issues dominated black political activism in the urban North. A wave of "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaigns in several large and medium-sized cities targeted local businesses that discriminated against African Americans. Black industrial workers joined with white labor organizers, socialists, communists, and other radical organizations, such as the National Negro Congress, to protest unfair labor practices and demand jobs, better wages, and benefits. These groups often fought against war and fascism, as well as racial discrimination. The March On Washington Movement, an all-black effort spearheaded by socialist labor leader A. Philip Randolph, drew thousands of African Americans in dozens of cities in an effort to utilize nonviolent direct action to open up wartime industries to black workers and establish a permanent Fair Employment Practices

Commission (FEPC). In 1942, an interracial coalition of pacifists and civil rights activists, influenced deeply by Gandhian nonviolence, formed the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). In May 1943, the group organized sit-ins at the Jack Spratt Restaurant and White City Roller Skating Rink in Chicago, followed by similar protests in Washington, DC. In 1947, CORE sent sixteen members to participate in the "Journey of Reconciliation" through Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, and Tennessee in an effort to end segregation in interstate travel. The protest was the precursor to the more famous Freedom Rides in 1961. During the 1930s and 1940s as well, the NAACP, which had chapters in dozens of northern cities and a growing number of southern locales, established its Legal Defense Fund, led by Charles Hamilton Houston, and began the slow march through the courts to challenge the formal system of segregation in the South, which culminated in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.¹ Of particular import in the urban North, the Supreme Court's 1948 decision in *Shelley v. Kraemer*, a case also brought by NAACP lawyers, outlawed racially restrictive housing covenants, a key tool used by white property owners to bar African Americans from purchasing homes in white neighborhoods. And in a more dramatic display of African American resistance to the northern Jim Crow system, 1943 saw major urban rebellions in Detroit and Harlem, two of the largest and most significant black communities outside of the South.

In the postwar period, between the late 1940s and early 1960s, African American activists continued to focus on the intersections of race and economic equality, while also mounting numerous nonviolent campaigns in northern cities, including picketing, boycotts, sit-ins, "wade-ins," "call-ins," and "stall-ins," to challenge segregation and outright exclusion from a wide array of public accommodations, from restaurants and hotels to movie houses and theaters, libraries and public parks, beaches, swimming pools, amusement parks, and public transportation, all with varying degrees of success. Early sit-ins broke out in Baltimore (1955), Wichita (1958), and Oklahoma City (1958) to challenge segregation in local retail stores. Between 1952 and 1954, prior to the Montgomery Bus Boycott, members of the Omaha DePorres Club, an interracial civil rights group that started at Creighton University, mounted a successful boycott against the Omaha and Council Bluffs Street Railway Company's policy of not hiring African American bus

drivers. Another notable action took place in 1960 at Chicago's Rainbow Beach, where thirty members of the NAACP Youth Council, led by Velma Hill, staged a water protest against the long-standing custom of racial segregation at the beach, as well as a recent mob attack on a black family there. White onlookers met the demonstrators with a hail of rocks, one of which clunked Hill on the head. During this same period, northern civil rights advocates pushed for increased political and civic representation, as well as public housing to address broad housing shortages in urban America for poor and working-class African Americans. While public housing had been embraced by the white working class during the 1940s and early 1950s, when they were the primary beneficiaries, many of these same voters opposed new public housing development in the mid- and late 1950s, particularly in white neighborhoods, as black residents pushed for inclusion and large numbers of whites increasingly saw public housing as a dangerous social experiment in integration. At the same time, growing frustration in deteriorating black and brown central city neighborhoods led to rising tensions and periodic clashes between local African Americans and the overwhelmingly white, working-class police forces that patrolled the color line in urban America.

As the national struggle for racial justice reached a crescendo during the 1960s, African American civil rights activism in the North accelerated on a number of fronts. In terms of economic justice, African Americans continued to push for expanded employment opportunities within the industrial and service economies, construction and building sectors, skilled trades, clerical workforce, public transportation, and a variety of white-collar professions. "Selective patronage" campaigns in a number of cities, which entailed targeted boycotts of employers who hired few or no African Americans, carried on the legacy of the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" movement from the previous generation. And it is important to remember that the historic 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom accentuated economic demands and was supported by thousands of northern African American workers and union members. Once hired, black workers fought for equal treatment from white co-workers and bosses, fair pay, honest assessment based on merit, and, ultimately, advancement through the ranks into management and ownership positions. In the 1970s, affirmative action became an important, if hotly contested, tool for black workers to press for further change.