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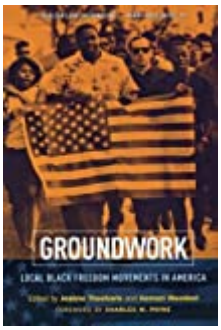

Jeanne Theoharis, Komozi Woodard, eds. *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America.* New York: New York University Press, 2005. 328 pp. $22.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-8285-9.

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Local Heroes

In recent years, scholarship on the civil rights movement has broken away from the King-centered, male-dominated, Montgomery-to-Memphis story of social activism. Important works have complicated the narrative of the freedom struggle by focusing on local people, communities outside the South, and women. Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard's edited volume, *Groundwork*, is a welcome addition to this growing body of scholarship. The book, a tribute to John Dittmer and, in many ways, to part 2 of the editors' previous collection, *Freedom North*, examines thirteen local movements in places as diverse as Milwaukee, Brooklyn, Charleston, and Jackson. Although, as a whole, the essays make a significant contribution to civil rights scholarship, some are stronger than others.

One notable contribution, Katherine Mellen Charron's "We've Come a Long Way," focuses on Charleston in the 1950s and 1960s. Charron analyzes Septima Clark's friendship with Elizabeth Waring and, by extension, her husband, the prominent federal judge J. Waties Waring. "The Warings mentored Clark in a number of ways," Charron argues. "They provided her with valuable advice regarding electoral politics and strategic voting" (p. 123). Clark came to rely on this advice when creating a program of racial uplift that utilized freedom schools. Charron provides an intriguing example of race relations in the South, and demonstrates anew how civil rights politics made for strange bedfellows.

Equally important in this vein is Patrick Jones's fine essay, "Not a Color, but an Attitude." Jones examines the civil rights activities of Father James Groppi in Milwaukee. Groppi, a Catholic priest of Italian heritage, was chosen as advisor for the NAACP's Youth Council in 1965. He led the group in several protests and helped form a self-defense unit called the Commandos. This forceful stance pushed Groppi into Black Power territory. "For more than three years," Jones wryly concludes, "a white Italian-American priest and a group of young, inner-core African Americans led a militant movement for racial justice in Milwaukee, a movement they understood to be informed by Black Power" (p. 277).

Another noteworthy essay is Emilye Crosby's "God's Appointed Savior." Crosby analyzes the impact of Charles Evers on the struggle in Mississippi after the

death of his more famous brother, Medgar. Crosby correctly notes that Evers used local protests to catapult himself into the national spotlight. Indeed, scholars have maligned Evers for his tactics and self-serving aggrandizement of power. But while agreeing with these sentiments, Crosby offers a more nuanced assessment of Evers–she shows his greed, but does not downplay his importance.

Other essays also deserve recognition. Theoharis's piece on school desegregation in Boston and Michael Washington's essay on the struggle in Cincinnati both break free of the 1955 to 1968 chronology. Woodard's essay on the Black Arts movement and political organizing in Newark offers a useful assessment of Black Power before there was Black Power. Similarly, Robyn Spencer's piece on the Black Panther Party in Oakland presents a picture of the Panthers that moves well beyond the conventional focus on Huey Newton and Bobby Seale.

The main problem with this collection is that some of the essays overemphasize the importance of local people and struggles, while others try to accomplish too much and are consequently disorganized. For example, in "Drive Awhile for Freedom," Brian Purnell explores CORE's protest of the 1964 World's Fair in Brooklyn and the use of a new tactic, the "stall-in" or traffic jam. But Purnell overstates the city's importance when he argues, without adequate support, that historians have neglected how Brooklyn "affected other activist communities throughout the country or the ways that its local people influenced the national discourse on civil rights" (p. 46). And while Purnell rightly criticizes media coverage and scholarly treatment that equated stall-ins with violence, he does not acknowledge that critics might have had valid points. "People perceived the stall-in as being violent and its participants as being irresponsible and reckless," he argues (p. 62). Perhaps they were? In any event, for a demonstration that never occurred (according to Purnell only one person stalled-in), the whole discussion seems moot.

Similar problems pervade Tiyi Morris's thoughtful essay on Womanpower Unlimited, a confederation of black women who united to support the Freedom Riders and conducted voter registration and education drives in Jackson, Mississippi. But Morris mainly details the group's founding and daily operations, which makes Womanpower seem more like an elite social club than an important civil rights organization. To be sure, these women succeeded largely because they occupied a social space that appeared non-threatening; hence, opponents of the movement left them alone to accomplish goals like voter registration and school integration. But Morris fails to make this connection.

Other essays are likewise flawed in different ways. Hasan Kwame Jeffries's piece on Lowndes County, Alabama jumps from voting drives to school boycotts to poverty programs to farmers' issues, which makes for a disorganized essay. Peter B. Levy's piece on Gloria Richardson, while a valuable edition to this volume, attempts to explain how Richardson "shared much in common with the movement as a whole," when clearly her leadership style was different from that of other female activists (p. 100). Finally, Reynoldo Anderson's fascinating essay on the Black Panthers in Des Moines is based almost entirely on four oral histories, a rather small source pool.

Despite the inclusion of thirteen essays, the editors entirely overlook the southwest and, excepting Spencer's essay on Oakland, almost leave out the west. Yet important works by Quintard Taylor, Amilcar Shabazz, Josh Sides, and others have demonstrated the importance of civil rights struggles in the west and southwest.[1] The editors' conception of "local black freedom movements," it would seem, remains geographically isolated. Still, they go far in moving the focus beyond the "1955-68 southern" and "post-1968 northern" framework. These criticisms notwithstanding, this book is an important addition to the broader scholarship on the civil rights movement. All of the essays included have something to teach us, and they instruct in informative and thought-provoking ways.

Note

[1]. Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998); Amilcar Shabazz, *Advancing Democracy: African Americans and the Struggle for Access and Equity in Higher Education in Texas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); and Josh Sides, *L. A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

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