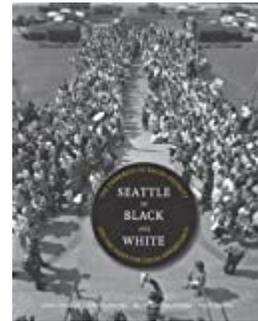


Joan Singler, Jean Durning, Bettylou Valentine, Maid Adams. *Seattle in Black and White: The Congress of Racial Equality and the Fight for Equal Opportunity.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011. xiii + 279 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-295-99084-2.



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Published on H-1960s (May, 2012)

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“This book does not aim to be a theoretical or academic exercise,” write the four authors of *Seattle in Black and White* (p. 4). Joan Singler, Jean Durning, Bettylou Valentine, and Maid Adams eschew historiography debates, social movement theory, and the latest academic interpretations of civil rights movement history. Instead, they ground their history of the Seattle, Washington, chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) “in personal experience,” and they wrote a book whose intended audience is “ordinary readers—newcomers to the Northwest, long-established families, people whose parents and grandparents experienced the 1960s in Seattle, young people for whom the 1960s seem ancient history.” The authors wrote this “participant history” to educate readers about what the 1960s civil rights movement looked like in a northern city, to remind those who lived through that decade about ways of life they may have forgotten, and to “set the record straight from the perspective of participants” (p. 4). *Seattle in Black and White* successfully presents a story of how activists in this northwestern city worked for seven years (1961-68) in CORE, an interracial, nonviolent organization whose mission was to work—day in and day out—to bring about racial integration.

While the book possesses a unique approach to a

fresh and important subject, and a bevy of fascinating primary sources, it also lacks analytical context and narrative coherence. The many strengths that *Seattle in Black and White* derives from its authors’ deep connection to their subject also produce some of the book’s shortcomings and weaknesses. *Seattle in Black and White* attempts to be both an objective historical overview of Seattle CORE and a subjective memoir of its participants’ experiences. The memoir moments of this book are exciting, but too brief. The detailed accounts of Seattle CORE’s history are, at times, burdened by repetitiveness and chronological incoherence. As one of the few books on local CORE chapters, *Seattle in Black and White* makes a very important contribution to our understanding of this understudied civil rights movement organization. Its focus on 1960s-era interracial activism and “northern” racism also place *Seattle in Black and White* within a growing field of studies that is rewriting civil rights movement history to highlight cities, the North, Midwest, and West Coast, and the decades that preceded and followed the 1954-65 period. While the book makes these important contributions to the field of civil rights movement history, it would have been a stronger “participant history” if the authors edited captivating vignettes of Seattle CORE activists’ rich memories and experi-

ences, and presented those first-person narratives alongside copies of some of the amazing primary sources that appear throughout this volume.

Seattle in Black and White has moments where it shines as an excellent example of what the authors call a “participant memoir.” “This book,” the authors hope, “will let twenty-first century readers see and feel the efforts and accomplishments of civil rights activists of the 1960s” (p. viii). As a text that combines memoir and examination of how a social movement organization changed over time, it is also one of the first books, if not the first, whose narrative content is shaped almost entirely by the memories of civil rights movement activists who organized and fought in the urban North. Seattle CORE was an impressive activist group. Its members fought hard to win jobs for African Americans in supermarkets and department stores. They attempted to integrate racially segregated unions, residential neighborhoods, and public schools, but met with limited success. They also worked with an impressive array of local religious and civil rights organization.

One of the most important aspects of Seattle CORE’s activism from 1961 to 1968 is that it involved groups of people who, in many other cities and parts of the country, competed with one another for media attention and fundraising dollars, or otherwise completely shunned the push for racial integration. Similar to other theaters of civil rights movement activism, churches were key sources of support and leadership in Seattle. *Seattle in Black and White* indicates that multiple Christian churches—Protestant and Catholic, black and white—as well as Jewish religious leaders, publicly supported and sometimes actively participated in Seattle CORE’s direct action protests. The local chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League (NUL) apparently did not compete with Seattle CORE for members or money. Instead, individuals floated freely between these three organizations. Local NAACP and NUL leadership boards supported Seattle CORE’s selective buying campaigns, school boycott, and negotiations with realtor organizations and racially segregated unions. The authors present these aspects of Seattle CORE’s history through both personal memories, interviews, and scores of primary sources—meeting minutes, letters, newsletters, maps, and flyers. The documents, interviews, and memoir accounts also document the insidious ways white people in Seattle built up “a wall of vast indifference” against racial integration efforts (p. 192).

Overall, the book’s captivating, at times day-to-day, portrayal of Seattle CORE’s internal operations, protest campaigns, and culture fails to provide a wider lens, especially of Seattle history, through which readers can understand stories about campaigns for racial integration. *Seattle in Black and White* has more information about how Seattle CORE was shaped by events in the southern civil rights movement than it does on the social and political history of Seattle. The seemingly effortless partnerships that existed between Seattle CORE, the NAACP, and the NUL receive very little analysis. It becomes apparent to readers that many members in each organization attended the same churches, especially the University Unitarian Church, but the readers never learn about the history of those churches, their development as progressive Christian organizations, the ways local activists emerged from certain churches, or their clashes with bigots in other local Christian communities. Throughout the book readers also learn about the Seattle Catholic church’s vocal support of CORE’s local campaigns, but they never gain a context for understanding why or how the city’s Catholic leadership came to these decisions.

Another example where additional context and analysis would have strengthened the discussion of Seattle CORE’s activism came in the chapters on housing segregation. The authors discuss the practically all-black residential districts in Seattle, but give no description of the factors that may have motivated black residents to want to move out of those neighborhoods. “Minority housing in Seattle resembled ghetto neighborhoods found in other northern cities around this country, though on a smaller scale,” the authors summarize. They then state that 75 percent of the city’s 26,901 black residents in 1960 lived in that central district, and that by 1965, 8 out of 10 black residents lived there. “From the forties to the sixties,” the authors write, even while racial and religious discrimination in housing became illegal, “a housing ghetto became a reality. Most white Seattleites ... were happy to have no contact with Negroes” (pp. 101-102). Readers can see how a racial “ghetto” took shape, but there is no description of life within those communities and no analysis of how housing conditions, amenities, city services, or overcrowding motivated black citizens to seek housing opportunities in predominantly white sections of the city. The authors contend that Seattle’s black communities “resembled ghetto neighborhoods found in other northern cities,” but are all black “ghettos” really the same? Overall, the book is rich in narrative detail but lacks a unified argument and analysis within which readers can understand that detail.

Also under-analyzed is how the chapter's culture created divisions, tensions, and splits within the membership. Much of *Seattle in Black and White* presents Seattle CORE members as practicing an almost orthodox adherence to National CORE's "rules of action," which emphasized that local chapters' campaigns closely followed patterns of investigation, education, negotiation, moral suasion, and, only as a last resort, direct action protest. Seattle CORE's culture also placed a heavy emphasis on members' respectability: their dress had to be neat and clean; their comportment on picket lines, disciplined and calm; and they were expected to practice nonviolence at all times. These were certainly common cultural norms in other CORE chapters during the early 1960s. Such social movement cultural norms also inevitably stemmed from the middle-class, Judeo-Christian mores that shaped many of the worldviews people brought to organizations like CORE. Not until chapter 9, however, do the authors discuss how an influential minority within Seattle CORE subverted these cultural norms. "The faction," as the authors refer to this small sect, were boisterous and crass. Their placards and slogans were confrontational. The authors discuss how they attempted to take control of the organization and steer it away from its disciplined, focused approach.

The book's discussion of "the faction," as well as its mention of possible influence of Communists, socialists, and trade unionists, and infiltration of the chapter by government agents, is too cursory and anecdotal. The thin analysis of internal debates and tensions, in addition to unexplained presentation of Seattle CORE's strict

adherence to politics of respectability and CORE orthodoxy, weakens the book's final chapter on Black Power. The authors present the Black Power movement in Seattle CORE as a "sustained period of uncertainty, confusion, and frustration," and "the beginning of the end of an era focused on civil rights and integration and the dawn of an era of insistence on black identity and self determination" (pp. 199-200). Parts of that argument are certainly true, but if Black Power was confusing and frustrating for interracial activists who spent a formative period of their adult lives in an integrationist movement, it was also inspiring and clarifying for other activists, some of whom came out of the integrationist movement and some of whom may have been very critical of that early period of activism. An analysis of the Black Power movement as both continuity and change, rupture and continuation, with the social movements that preceded it is unfortunately absent from this book. It would not have been had the authors grounded their work in some of the academic debates and arguments coming out of new studies of the civil rights and Black Power movements. Readers should approach *Seattle in Black and White* with these analytical and historiographical shortcomings in mind.

The book does make up for these analytical shortcomings with its narratives of activists' daily lives as members of Seattle CORE. These women and men spent many years fighting against American racism. Scholars, students, and general readers alike are lucky to have this book. It provides an important window into the history of the interracial, nonviolent movement to eradicate racial discrimination in a northern city.

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Citation: Brian Purnell. Review of Singler, Joan; Jean Durning; Bettylou Valentine; Maid Adams, *Seattle in Black and White: The Congress of Racial Equality and the Fight for Equal Opportunity*. H-1960s, H-Net Reviews. May, 2012.

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