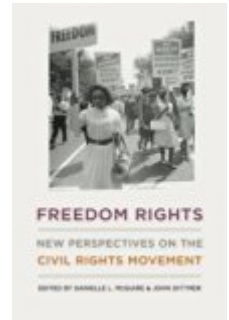


**Danielle L. McGuire, John Dittmer, eds..** *Freedom Rights: New Perspectives on the Civil Rights Movement*. Civil Rights and the Struggle for Black Equality in the Twentieth Century Series. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011. 402 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8131-3448-2.



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**Commissioned by** Rebecca K. Root (Ramapo College of New Jersey)

Answering Steven F. Lawson's 1991 call for a more synthetic, yet nuanced history of the civil rights movement, *Freedom Rights*, edited by John Dittmer and Danielle L. McGuire, attempts to build a new foundation for future histories of the struggle for civil rights.[1] The twelve essays within offer fresh approaches to a subject that nonspecialists might have thought was a well run dry. The individual authors collectively redefine the boundaries of civil rights scholarship by demonstrating that the vibrant movement was at once "multiracial, cross-regional, and international, with local and national actors and organizations working in concert" (p. 1).

Not surprisingly, traditional political histories make up a significant portion of the essays. These essays cover politics at the most basic level, such as Krystal Frazier's examination of the murder of Emmett Till as a catalyst for young African Americans across the country to join the growing movement. Other chapters examine politics at the highest levels of government, such as the interesting take on Clarence Thomas's work as the head of

the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). To be sure, the "silent justice" of the Supreme Court has earned a reputation as a staunch opponent of affirmative action programs during his term as the head of the EEOC during the Reagan administration. However, Emily Zuckerman's essay complicates this portrait. She argues that initially, Thomas slowed Ronald Reagan's efforts to dismantle the EEOC through the rhetoric of color-blindness and equal opportunity with so-called reverse-discrimination cases. This position may not be completely convincing to all readers, but Zuckerman deserves credit for steering the conversation in a new direction.

Indeed, the chapters cover a wide range of political histories, from Abigail Sara Lewis's study of the efforts of the multiracial Young Women's Christian Association to build a more inclusive postwar American society to Sara Rzeszutek Havi-land's work exploring James and Esther Cooper Jackson's setbacks from Cold War red-baiting; from George Derek Musgrove and Hasan Kwame Jeffries's chapter on the local struggles of black

political organizations fighting voter suppression in the Alabama Black Belt in the 1970s and 1980s to Stacy Braukman's essay on the infamous Johns Committee in Florida as insight into the supposed race-blind language of morality. Pippa Holloway's piece examining the role of race and partisanship in criminal disfranchisement is particularly relevant in linking the past with the present. The essays work their way into the Barack Obama era as well, with Brian Ward's essay, "I Want My Country Back, I Want My Dream Back: Barack Obama and the Appeal of Postracial Fictions," which counters popular opinions that a postracial era was inaugurated along with the forty-fourth American president, while also highlighting that these dreams of postracialism were one of Obama's "genius" moves during the 2008 campaign.

Gender issues are also political issues. McGuire's essay uses North Carolinian Joan Little's self-defense against rape and the broad coalition of second-wave feminists who supported her to explore the long history of sexual violence against African American women. McGuire posits that while white, middle-class women may have been new to the anti-rape activism bandwagon, this activism "was rooted in African Americans' struggle for human dignity and constituted a crucial part of the modern civil rights movement" (p. 194). In doing so, McGuire reminds the reader of something that the title of the book suggests. The civil rights movement for freedom was about more than achieving uninhibited access to the ballot box or to an integrated schoolhouse; it was also about the most basic human right of being secure in one's person.

Perhaps one of the most useful essays for specialists and nonspecialists alike comes from the inspiration for the book itself. Lawson's chapter on the periodization of the civil rights movement historiography convincingly argues for a "short" civil rights movement bounded by the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. While propo-

nents of the "long" civil rights movement, such as Glenda Gilmore and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, have made important contributions to our understandings of the African American freedom struggle, these histories detract from the distinctive context and character of the 1950s and 1960s that made the civil rights movement a *movement*. Lawson convincingly argues that civil rights advocates not only had to work around white supremacy (which was true for any era of the freedom struggle), but also had to deftly work within a political environment characterized by Cold War fears of a communist takeover.

The political essays are very good, but cultural historians will not be disappointed, either. Cultural histories, such as Jacqueline Castledine's rich portrayal of women's use of jazz music and protest songs that challenged white supremacy throughout the diaspora, and Justin T. Lorts's essay on the foray of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) into combating negative portrayals of African Americans in film, radio, and television weave new threads into the traditional political histories. Most, if not all, historians are familiar with the organization's indispensable role in the legal campaign against segregation and disfranchisement, but Lorts shines the spotlight on the NAACP's recognition of the link between culture and politics, and mass media's influence over both. Lorts's timing could not be more serendipitous, coming out at the same time that Hollywood and historians have clashed over portrayals of African American women and the civil rights movement in the Academy Award-winning 2011 film, *The Help*.<sup>[2]</sup>

On the whole, there are more strengths than weaknesses in *Freedom Rights*. The contributors offer ample primary evidence while couching their arguments in the broader historiography. Perhaps the collection's greatest strength is that it takes moments, people, and concepts that could be merely footnotes and reasons persuasively that those topics deserve much more attention from

scholars. Readers can expect a palpable enthusiasm for these subjects that emanates from each chapter. Simply stated, editors Dittmer and McGuire should be commended for their broad scope and far-reaching claims. As a whole, the contributors' essays largely succeed in boldly answering Lawson's call for a newer, interactive civil rights history. *Freedom Rights* is a worthy and necessary update to civil rights historiography.

#### Notes

[1]. Steven F. Lawson, "Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement," *The American Historical Review* 96, no. 2 (April 1991): 456-471.

[2]. See, for instance, Ida E. Jones, Daina Ramey Berry, Tiffany M. Gill, Kalie Nicole Gross, and Janice Sumler-Edmond, "An Open Statement to the Fans of *The Help*," The Association of Black Women Historians, August 7, 2011, [http://www.abwh.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=2%3Aopen-statement-the-help](http://www.abwh.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2%3Aopen-statement-the-help) (accessed February 1, 2012); and Vanessa May and Rebecca Sharpless, "Historians on 'The Help': Vanessa May and Rebecca Sharpless Respond," University of North Carolina Press Press Blog, August 24, 2011, <http://www.uncpressblogg.com/2011/08/24/historians-on-the-help-vanessa-may-and-rebecca-sharpless-respond/> (accessed February 1, 2012).

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