Section II: Race

CLARENCE LANG

Locating the Civil Rights Movement: An Essay on the Deep South, Midwest, and Border South in Black Freedom Studies

Abstract

Over the past few decades, scholars of the post-World War II civil rights movement have revisited key issues related to the goals, strategies, ideologies, participants, and periodization of black freedom struggles. As part of this conceptual remapping, historians of the African American experience have rethought how and where to locate the civil rights movement. This has geographically broadened the movement’s scope to include previously understudied struggles in the North as well as in the South during the movement’s heroic, “classical” period. Notwithstanding its significant insights, this emphasis on “nationalizing” the civil rights movement narrative carries the risk of flattening meaningful differences of historical place. Among other things, this approach can oversimplify the varying modes of white racial control and black agency across regions. This essay responds by suggesting that the task of theorizing the significance of region and place in movement narratives requires historians to more clearly delineate regional distinctions with regard to forms of black racial subordination, political and economic processes, and structures of opportunity and constraint on black mobilization and resistance during the 1960s and preceding decades. It argues in favor of the historical particularity of the South, especially the Deep South, and distinguishes this region historically from the Midwest. Finally, using St. Louis, Missouri as a focal point, the essay asserts the significance of the border South in histories of the civil rights movement more generally. Identifying this region illustrates simultaneously the instability and concreteness of regional distinctions in Black Freedom Studies.

Recent scholars of twentieth-century African American social movements have reimaged key conceptual questions related to the subject, especially the content, strategies, antecedents, connections, and outcomes of the post-World War II civil rights movement. First and foremost, social historians have revisited the movement’s key objectives, focusing on multiple, expansive agendas that involved more than access to public accommodation and the acquisition of the vote. Others have questioned the language employed to describe the period, challenging the effectiveness of “Civil Rights” (1954-1965) and “Black Power”
(1966-1975) as signposts for identifying the contrasting waves of political, organizational and ideological discourses between the 1950s and 1970s. Historians such as Clayborne Carson have inspired scholars to adopt the terminology of “black freedom struggles” or the “Black Freedom Movement” to more fully encompass the scope of this activism. Second, and tied to this turn, historians have questioned the “classical” 1954-1965 movement timeline bracketed between the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Supreme Court ruling, and the passage of the Voting Rights Act. While scholars like Peniel E. Joseph have sought to reconceptualize the dominant ideologies, strategies and objectives of the 1954-1965 period, proponents of a “long” movement thesis have advanced new periodizing frameworks that incorporate this decade into longer heritages of black insurgency before and after this standard timeline. A few scholars, though, have criticized this approach for subsuming distinct eras into overly loose periodization, yielding undifferentiated sequences of events and undercutting meaningful historical analysis. Third, in considering the movement’s leaders and participants, researchers have shifted attention from the ministers, schoolteachers, lawyers, and other black male middle-class professionals typically presumed to have stewarded post-World War II struggles for racial equality. Instead, they have foregrounded diverse, and previously overlooked, groups of working-class African Americans and black women who openly contested for leadership and decision-making power.1

In addition to revising what demands emanated from black freedom struggles, who peopled and led these struggles, and when they occurred temporally, researchers have rethought where the movement took place. This is the most pertinent consideration for this essay. Conversation on this point has pivoted on what level of attention social historians should pay to the national (macro) scale in relation to the local (micro), whether the “North” or the “South” was the most significant regional theater of struggle during this epic period, and how scholars should define and distinguish between these two regions, if at all. The matter of region and place has been a current area of discourse among civil rights scholars, particularly as they have become more attentive to the previously overlooked black protest that occurred in northern cities contemporaneously with better known southern civil rights campaigns in Montgomery, Birmingham, Albany, Selma, and the Mississippi Delta. This growing awareness has been evident in the publication of Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South (2003), edited by Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komzo Woodard, and Thomas J. Sugrue’s Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North (2008); the convening of the 2011 symposium, “South Meets North: The Shaping of a New Narrative of the Civil Rights Movement,” at Northwestern University; the January 2012 issue of the OAH Magazine of History devoted to the theme “Beyond Dixie: The Black Freedom Struggle Outside of the South”; and numerous academic conference panels and roundtables.2

As this essay contends, however, social historians have more work before them in terms of conceptualizing the role of region in 1960s movement narratives. This is a task that requires formulating lines of regional demarcation as well as continuity with regard to the conditions African Americans faced, and the structural constraints and opportunities that either facilitated or inhibited their resistance. For scholars such as Matthew D. Lassiter and Joseph Crespino, editors of the 2010 anthology The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism, settling the matter of
region in Black Freedom Studies depends on refuting the artificial binary between “an exceptional, reactionary South and a normative, progressive North.” From this standpoint, reifying southern exceptionalism buttresses a stubborn American exceptionalism that celebrates the inevitable triumph of U.S. democratic values, and ignores the structural role of inequality in building and maintaining the U.S. nation-state. The objective—for them as well as other scholars associated with the “long” movement thesis—has been to discard the distinction earlier scholars made between “de jure” (legalized) racism in the South under Jim Crow and “de facto” (routinized) discrimination in the North, and discuss black racial subordination as endemic across regional boundaries. A secondary claim among such scholars is that maintaining a North-South binary in Black Freedom Studies results in an oversimplified master narrative that depicts black struggles in the South as heroic and righteous in the face of “bad” white segregationists during the 1950s and early ’60s, and black struggles in the North as a violent and pathological betrayal of the movement which turned “good” white liberal supporters against it by the late 1960s.

Notwithstanding the important insights these interventions add, this essay argues strongly in favor of the continued necessity of regional specificity in Black Freedom Movement histories. I contend that erasing the Mason-Dixon line in Black Freedom Studies reads the nation’s regional past backward from a present in which the North and the South appear more alike than distinct (given the legal demise of racial segregation, and recent immigration and population shifts). This both flies in the face of southern history and threatens to detonate it as a field. Consequently, explaining away the particularities of the South vis-à-vis the North during the 1960s can obscure every bit as much as it can illuminate about the conceptual significance of region to movement histories. “Instead,” as southern historian Orville Vernon Burton advises, “historians need to show how race works differently in different regions.”

The exposition that follows illustrates that it is possible to identify fundamental historical differences between “North” and “South” in a manner that does not buttress a simplistic regional binary in civil rights history, locate anti-black racism only in the South, downplay the existence of institutionalized racism north of the Mason-Dixon line, ignore black freedom struggles outside the South during the 1960s, or gloss over government’s role in reproducing black racial subordination across the nation during this period. To be sure, white supremacy has existed nationally, and indeed internationally. Yet, this essay posits that like the black freedom struggles that have opposed it, the characteristics of white racism have varied across temporal and spatial contexts. Regional differences in black-white relations were stark and fundamental, and the regional differences between southern and northern black freedom struggle were equally as decisive.

As social historians confront the task of rethinking the relationship between the “North” and “South” in new syntheses of the 1960s civil rights movement, explicitly divergent interpretations become more, not less, vital. “[T]he writing of the movement,” admonishes historian Charles W. Eagles, “has yet to produce a range of strikingly different interpretive schools or consistently clashing interpretations.” Thus, rather than aiming for an easy consensus on the meaning of locality in these narratives, this article suggest that historians face the need to refine typologies of place and structural change in assessing the regional particularities of black freedom struggles. This approach necessitates, among other things: (1)
treatment of regional histories, local political economies, and African Americans’ position therein; (2) attention to government processes at the city, state, and federal levels; (3) interpretation of the specific forms of black community and institutional development, and class stratification, present among defined black populations; (4) scrutiny of the regional and local dynamics of migration and immigration, and the impact on African Americans, both interracial and intraracially; and (5) an appreciation of the uneven patterns of political development, organization and mobilization among black communities across time and place.

Toward this end, this essay begins by arguing in support of the historical particularity of the civil rights movement during the 1960s in the Deep South. This is an important starting point precisely because an interpretation of the South as regionally indistinct is at the heart of efforts to reorient discussions of region in current movement historiography. This article contends, to the contrary, that the South was historically singular in its modes of black oppression and resistance, and suggests that distinguishing its characteristics during the 1960s enables historians to similarly limn the features of black freedom struggles that took place concurrently in other regions in the United States. In the interests of space and manageability, this essay primarily contrasts the South with the Midwest as a representative region of the “North.” Finally, using the border-state city of St. Louis, Missouri as a key example drawn from my own previous work, this essay argues for a conceptualization of the “border South” region as a transitional place where both northern and southern political economies, migration and immigration patterns, and modes of black racial control and black politics merged, often prefiguring shifts in the rest of the nation. This paper suggests that the peculiar histories of border states such as Missouri, Maryland, and Kentucky illustrate the simultaneous instability and concreteness of regional distinctions, both in terms of race relations and forms of black agency and resistance.

Defending the Particularity of the Deep South

Notwithstanding present-day declarations of “the end of Southern distinctiveness,” the South’s past has been unique. Primarily encompassing the eleven former Confederate states, the region’s broad historical features have included the legacies of plantation-based agriculture and slavery, political secession from the United States, military occupation by the federal government, and subsequent subordination to northeastern industrial capital and finance in a developing national economy. Persisting after the legal demise of slavery, the one-crop economy of the Black Belt South continued a heritage of plantation slavery through sharecropping, which preserved the existence of large, low-waged African American populations subject to debt peonage, enticement statutes, vagrancy and contract enforcement policies, and similar modes of racialized, labor-repressive class relations. With the exception of the chain gang, coercive forms of work were not singularly of the South, but as historian Heather Ann Thompson has argued, “the nature of the labor that employers required [African Americans] to do, and how many of them were needed to do it” as the region was rebuilt following the Civil War, certainly were unique. This reflected the local dominance of a white agrarian Black Belt elite, an historic regime that presided over an empire of rich land, wealthy planters, and impoverished black labor. As it
had before the Civil War, the regime’s intellectual discourses cohered around the defense of “states’ rights.”

The violently bound character of African American work not only reproduced black working-class poverty, but it also suppressed the incomes and living standards of white southerners, buttressing the region’s identity as a low-wage bastion for northern industry. This arrested the region’s overall economic development, with scarce investment in education, housing, health, and labor-saving technology. Unlike the Midwest’s agricultural economy, for instance, the labor-intensive character of southern agriculture did not shift to capital-intensive farming and greater diversification until the implementation of 1930s New Deal acreage reduction programs. Indeed, the full mechanization of southern agriculture did not occur until the early 1960s.

Long after the growth of urban centers, and urban-based white middle classes and commercial elites, the politics of the rural Black Belt persisted in shaping the region. That is, the rural cotton economy conditioned a course of urban development sensitive to staple agricultural cycles and agrarian labor demands. Functioning largely as intermediary points to and from northern industrial centers, rather than as manufacturing hubs themselves, southern cities generally contained low population densities and reflected metropolitan diffusion—a phenomenon described by southern urban historian David R. Goldfield as “urbanization without cities.” Even in 1960, when the South had become an urban region, small cities and towns had continued to define the landscape, with only one out of eight southerners living in cities of over 100,000 as opposed to one-third of the nation’s populace.

Contemporary black southern urbanization, which had lagged due to fluctuations in staple-crop agriculture, had quickened in the 1940s as a result of mechanization and the Second World War. African Americans had traveled not only from rural to urban areas, but also among urban areas of the South. In contrast to the North, black southern communities until the mid-twentieth century grew through the informally sanctioned expansion of new housing on the urban periphery, where African Americans had clustered since the late nineteenth century. The relative slow growth of black urban populations, and the widespread existence of unincorporated communities (again, a consequence of low population density), dovetailed with liberal annexation laws, enabling southern urban authorities to easily absorb peripheral settlements. This made it easier to accommodate black residential growth without upsetting white racial prerogatives—unlike northern cities, which by then were ringed by middle- and upper-class white suburbanites hostile to annexation. Not until the mid-twentieth century, writes John Kellogg, did “Negro invasion and succession of white residential areas,” typical of the Northeast and Midwest, become the norm for black community expansion in the urban South.

Another distinguishing feature of the South was the relative ethno-religious homogeneity of southern whites. Notwithstanding the influential presence of European immigrant merchants in many river towns, the region’s historical dependence on black labor deflected demands for European or Asian immigration. Most migrants to southern cities were rural, native-born whites, which—coupled with the region’s large black populace—lent southern race relations a pronounced black-white duality. This had fed an intense preoccupation with black subordination and social control, and had fostered a tenuous white cross-
class solidarity supported both by planters and commercial-civic urban elites. The consequence was the erection of what sociologist Aldon D. Morris termed a “tripartite system” of economic, political and cultural domination that stripped African Americans’ electoral power and citizenship, codified Jim Crow-style racial apartheid through law after 1890, and fostered a Democratic Party electoral monopoly backed by racial demagoguery and all-white primaries. Legal terrorism and vigilantism buttressed this system in the Lower South, though in Upper South communities this control was also exercised through white paternalism.17

The Black Belt elite’s power in the region was also accomplished through the malapportionment of legislative districts, which concentrated disproportionate power in rural and small-town areas. “Without a doubt,” contends scholar Douglas Smith, “malapportionment served as a vital component in the exercise of political power and the maintenance of white supremacy in the South. In every state in the region, rural and small-town voters—especially in the Black Belt—enjoyed far more representation than their numbers would have dictated,” particularly when combined with the legal suppression of black voters. Indeed, “[t]he most important reapportionment cases originated in the South.”18 Certainly, the practice of malapportionment existed across the United States, and in the North it was a weapon used chiefly by urban manufacturing and corporate interests to undercut the political influence of organized labor and big-city Democratic machines.19 The politics of reapportionment forged a cross-regional coalition of interest between rural southern segregationists and northern urban business lobbyists, and in time this benefitted the growing influence of a suburban-based politics centered on low taxes, deregulation, and anti-unionism.20 Yet, malapportionment was most acute in the “Solid South,” and even when the practice here intersected with interests outside the South, it nevertheless served purposes historically particular to that region. Considered in this light, southern white racism represented a specific mode of black racial control that, as Jack M. Bloom argues, was “intertwined with the class structure of the South and was, in fact, its lynchpin.”21 From this standpoint, attention to typologies of place in analyses of racism thwarts current efforts to nationalize discussions of white supremacy in the U.S. context.22

A compelling counterpoint, articulated by scholar Charles M. Payne, holds that the success southern politicians achieved in shaping national politics merely illustrates the truth of Alabama governor George C. Wallace’s declaration that “The whole United States is Southern!”23 However, when one considers black disfranchisement, malapportionment, and the one-party rule of southern Democrats—that is, the regional factors that enabled southern Black Belt politicians to affect national policy far out of proportion to their actual numbers—the phenomenon of southern seniority and influence in national affairs actually spoke to the region’s particularity, rather than to its disappearance. As early as the 1930s, white southern Democrats joined with northern business conservatives in the Republican Party to fight the New Deal and, later, roll it back. By the late 1960s, economic, political and legal changes had begun to shift the white southern electorate from Democrat to Republican. Yet, the South largely remained “solid” in voters’ partisan preferences. Indeed, “the economic and population growth of the Sunbelt,” asserts historian Nancy MacLean, “enabled southern and western elites to eclipse the GOP’s former leaders from the Northeast and Midwest.”24 Crespino similarly asserts: “White conservatives from the rural Black Belt that long
dominated the politics of a state like Mississippi played a role in the growth of the Republican Party across the South."

Moreover, the construction of modern, post-World War II conservatism relied heavily on distinctly neo-Confederate discourses to articulate demands of limiting government strictures on private property, championing the deregulation of market processes, protecting hierarchies of race, class and gender, and denying social welfare policies. In a provocative essay about contemporary Tea Party Republicanism, Michael Lind insists that despite the fact that its most visible personalities have hailed from the Midwest, the Tea Party faction “is merely the familiar old neo-Confederate Southern right under a new label,” with most of its representatives in Congress hailing from the Old Confederacy and its highest level of support existing among white southerners.

Detailing the unique traits of the South urges consideration, finally, of how the region has functioned as the historic wellspring of African American cultural formation, the products of which migrated with black people to other regions of the nation. This point has been reflected in the work of black urban historians such as Joe William Trotter, Jr., Kimberley L. Phillips, and others who have emphasized the stabilizing role of southern culture in black urban community building in the North. As Phillips and Matthew Countryman have emphasized, for instance, black southern working-class migrants to northern urban centers like Cleveland and Philadelphia referred to these adopted cities, respectively, as “Alabama North” and “Up South,” making explicit their primary identification with southern regional origins. In the fractious class politics of these burgeoning northern “black archipelagoes,” the cultural proximity of “newcomer” migrants and “old settlers” to the South also served as an index of status among African Americans, who either embraced or consciously eschewed familial, kin and folk connections “down home.” These cultural interactions, then, pivoted on an explicit recognition of regional identity and belonging.

As historian Luther Adams contends, moreover, the South retained deep meaning as “Home” even to those black southerners who migrated within the region during the Second Great Migration between the 1940s and early 1970s. Generations of black radical activists in organizations as diverse as the American Community Party in the 1930s and the Republic of New Afrika in the 1970s have regarded the “Black Belt” as the locus of African Americans’ claims to peoplehood, self-determination, and land-based independence. The idea, articulated by James N. Gregory, of a “southern diaspora” shaping the national landscape does not demonstrate the obsolescence of regional distinctions. Rather, it suggests the centrality of the region in the African American imaginary as not only a site of terror and flight (as millions of African Americans quit the South altogether), but also as a locus of black nationhood and renewal—as illustrated in current trends of reverse black migration to the South. Hence, the region is uniquely significant to the black experience.

The particularities of southern history meant that the conditions of black racial oppression were articulated the sharpest in this region. In Mississippi, which arguably embodied the South at its most extreme, this produced the State Sovereignty Committee to subvert rising demands for racial equality after the Brown decision. In similar reaction, other southern state governments criminalized and outlawed the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), forcing the organization underground until the late 1950s.
Ironically, according to Morris, this preconditioned the emergence of indigenously centered black insurgency built on the dense, overlapping networks of southern black universities, churches, and covert NAACP activism that had been nurtured in the crucible of Jim Crow. Growing out of this matrix, bus boycotts in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Montgomery, Alabama; and Tallahassee, Florida, and student sit-in campaigns in the Upper South, propelled the issue of “Negro rights” to the center of the nation’s domestic agenda. Predominantly rooted in the strategy of nonviolent direct action, these struggles had as their chief aim the ending of legal U.S. racial apartheid in public accommodations, employment, and especially voter registration, which was imagined as a key vehicle toward economic parity. Among urban and rural black communities alike, this necessitated confronting the dominant white agrarian regime, pitting the national Democratic Party against southern Democrats, and promoting crises between recalcitrant white southern governments and the authority of the federal state. However, urban-based black freedom struggles additionally drew support from small, marginalized groups of white southern radicals, and heightened the growing differences between the planters and urban commercial-industrial elites following World War II.29

Moreover, as Bloom notes, black freedom struggles “often took form as a struggle for leadership in the black community”30 based on competing identities of race, gender, class, and generation among African Americans. For instance, one of the outgrowths of racial segregation within black southern communities had been a politics of racial mediation and accommodation. This was a strain of conservatism embodied most famously by Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute, though it was widespread among black clergy and administrators of black southern institutions of higher education. Where the black middle class was extremely small and institutionally weak, modest traditions of black landownership existed, or a significant population was employed in areas beyond the reach of the Black Belt regime (the federal government or the railroad companies, for example), conditions favored alternatives to black appeals to white paternalism. In these environments, robust grassroots insurgent politics had the possibility of prevailing, often drawing upon longstanding rural traditions of armed black self-defense. This was certainly the case in black-oriented farming communities in Lowndes County, Alabama, the Mississippi Delta, and rural Louisiana, where black activists were forced to repel Klansmen with buckshot. White vigilante violence in the cities, by contrast, was not as pronounced, though Birmingham—known for the frequency with which segregationists bombed black institutions and homes—was a notable exception. On the other hand, given the higher institutional density among black urban southerners, their level of class stratification was greater, turning many black communities into intra-racial battlegrounds between those aligned either with white civic elites or the black laboring majority. As civil rights struggles in cities such as Birmingham illustrated, though, the interests of the latter determined the political landscape, forcing black clergy to bend to the will of rank-and-file congregants, school administrators to accommodate the activism of their teaching staff and students, and “old guard” moderates to cede ground to younger militants. The point here is that whether considering political economy, race relations, or patterns of black accommodation and resistance, the history and characteristics of the South fashioned a very specific regional typology of African American freedom activism.31
By the same token, scholars opposed to the thesis of southern exceptionalism are right in challenging civil rights historians not to reduce the “North” simply to any place that was not the South. Black Freedom scholars are still in the "archaeological" stage of "excavating the terrain outside the South," explains historian Patrick D. Jones. Perhaps for this reason, as Lassiter and Crespino observe, “[s]cholars who study the civil rights movement ‘in the North’ still tend to flatten the history of places as diverse and distant as Boston (New England), Detroit and Chicago (Midwest), and Los Angeles (West) into a single unified region defined only by its status as the non-South.” In the interest of promoting a framework that might contribute to understanding northern black freedom struggles as sharply distinct from black southern protest, this section offers general observations about the region of the Midwest (composed of Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, Kansas, Nebraska, and North and South Dakota), and how its key characteristics generally conditioned certain political opportunities for, and limits to, black civil rights struggles. I approach the Midwest here as a region broadly representative of the “North.”

Crafted out of the territories of the Old Northwest, the Midwest developed in tandem with, and as the exemplar of, an ascendant U.S. commercial capitalism in the mid-nineteenth century. The upper region of the Midwest (e.g., Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa) attracted New England migrants, while its lower expanse (including Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois) drew transplants from the Upper South. Because of the mixed northern and southern origins of Midwest settlers, African Americans (who populated the region in much smaller numbers than either native-born whites or northwest European immigrants) experienced widely divergent attitudes and treatment, though white racial antipathy was prevalent throughout the region. Especially in the Lower Midwest, their lives were heavily proscribed during the antebellum period.

Even as midwesterners were committed to white supremacy, the free-labor, anti-slavery interests of eastern capital dominated the region’s commercial agricultural economy. This conditioned the growth of middle-class strata steeped in the ideas of “commonwealth” governance and tied to an emergent Republican Party. The region’s historical trajectory further diverged from the South when Unionist supply needs during the Civil War accelerated the Midwest’s industrial development, fueled the subsequent diversity of its economy and people, and fed its urban growth. The Civil War and its aftermath also amplified black migration to the Midwest’s small towns and midsize cities. Some areas, such as Nebraska, remained thinly populated and demographically homogenous; while others, like Kansas, retained strong agrarian, small-town features associated with its Yankee roots. Nonetheless, the Midwest region overall reflected a pronounced rural/urban, agricultural/commercial/industrial, and native/immigrant balance that dramatically outstripped that of the South.

By the early twentieth century, the Midwest’s key political-economic anchor was the industrial manufacturing corridor around the Great Lakes, encompassing cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee, and Indiana’s Calumet region. Prior to the black migration of the First World War period, new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe had supplied the bulk of industrial labor, contributing to the ethnic-religious diversity and identity of white ethnic populations, and to the
robust labor movement-oriented politics at the municipal and state levels. As a survey of black urban history quickly reveals, the discovery that black northerners encountered racism is not at all novel to the findings of contemporary “long” movement theorists.39 Contemporaneous with the consolidation of Jim Crow in the South, anti-black sentiments and practices continued in the Midwest; yet, in the latter case racial discrimination occurred most often in direct defiance of state laws passed in the North after the Civil War. Protected in their right to vote, black midwesterners experienced electoral manipulation and domination, rather than outright voter exclusion, as the norm. African Americans’ exclusion from public accommodations also accelerated in response to the Great Migration, though poor service, hostility and dissemblance, rather than state-mandated discrimination, were the chief methods employed to exclude them, particularly in areas that marked racial boundaries between neighborhoods.40 Similarly, while African Americans were the targets of white mob violence, as in Springfield and East St. Louis, Illinois, these riots took the form of racial pogroms aimed at expelling African Americans and transforming communities into all-white “sundown towns,” rather than (as was the case in the “American Congo” of the Deep South) disciplining them as workers. White violence was a significant factor propelling African Americans to larger midwestern hubs.41

Black proletarianization—the making of African American industrial working classes—occurred earliest, and most intensely, in areas of the urban Midwest.42 In contrast to the South, where black workers had held a monopoly on certain skilled trades, such occupations in the North were contested by waves of new immigrants.43 Still, Trotter argues, proletarianization for African Americans “was almost exclusively a shift upward into factory jobs, from a depressed status as southern rural sharecroppers on the one hand and from low-paid, northern, nonfactory common laborers, domestics, and personal service workers on the other.”44 Black workers in the urban Midwest enjoyed higher wages and median family incomes than their southern counterparts and, with the advent of the New Deal, relatively more generous public assistance and job relief programs in periods of unemployment (In 1953, for instance, the median black family income was $3,353 in the South, as opposed to $6,454 in the North. In 1964, the figures were $4,597 and $8,010, respectively.)45 Where possible, African American laborers participated in trade unions, and forged tumultuous traditions of solidarity within the House of Labor and the organized left. However, black workers were often barred, especially from craft unions in industries such as construction. In these instances, they pursued their interests through self-organized, independent labor formations and community-based working-class organizations such as the influential Brotherhood of Sleeping Porters and Cleveland’s Future Outlook League.46

Even in northern cities where, unlike Detroit, Milwaukee, or East St. Louis, African Americans were not as concentrated in heavy mass-production industries, black workers’ growing presence in urban-industrial centers aided the building of a range of black social, political, religious, civic, and economic institutions. Many of them were located in black community space, but especially after the Second World War the black urban northern sphere expanded to include the nation’s burgeoning system of newly accessible higher education (e.g., Chicago’s Roosevelt University and Detroit’s Wayne State University), and other similar majority-white institutions.47 These developments paralleled the emergence of a more fully articulated class structure of semi-skilled and unskilled workers and
middle-class professionals. A small, tenuous black capitalist stratum located in media, insurance, and other enterprises also blossomed, though its counterparts in the urban South were older, far more established, and possessed relatively more wealth. Greater class differentiation within midwestern black communities, as well as the unique features of southern-style racism that leveled conditions among black southerners, precipitated “a stronger link between Afro-American workers and the black middle class in the South” than in the North.

The complexity of urban black northern communities was shaped, additionally, by their exercise of the franchise, which propelled the growth of black elected officials such as William Dawson in Chicago, and “even more colorful local black politicians and apparatchiks who were ward heelers and neighborhood party bosses that directly influenced civil rights gains in northern cities through political appointees and patronage jobs,” according to historian Randal Jelks. Through competitive Democratic-Republican politics, as well as involvement in organized labor, African Americans lobbied successfully for municipal and state fair employment laws, with several northern states passing fair employment practice legislation in the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s before the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In the period between 1940 and 1950 alone, approximately 108,100 African American migrated north, with an additional 103,700 joining them the following decade. Among other things, these numbers expanded the black electorate outside the South following World War II, creating a countervailing force to white segregationist influence in the national Democratic Party and the federal government. Combined with the exigencies of the U.S. state’s early Cold War campaign against international communism, the emergence of black electoral power goaded white northerners and government officials toward greater racial liberalism, which (at least symbolically) isolated the South in postwar national affairs.

The ethnic-religious diversity of white midwesterners also contributed to this black northern political landscape. Unlike in the South, where even white racial moderates were suppressed as communities below the Mason-Dixon succumbed to the siege mentality of “massive resistance” following Brown, northern black freedom campaigns drew a cross-section of white support, including progressive Catholic clergy and laypeople, ecumenical religious committees, secular Jewish activists with a common interest in anti-discrimination legislation, liberal philanthropic foundations, white politicians mindful of the growing power of black electorates, and progressive-oriented industrial unions, caucuses and locals. At the same time, as Jones contends, this diversity just as easily resulted in stiff opposition to open housing, largely because of the close intertwining of white ethnicity and space—for instance, rigidly policed neighborhood boundaries marked by Catholic parishes. Blue-collar white ethnic northerners clamored for “neighborhood schooling” where they were in the residential majority, but advocated just as stridently for selective transfers or “open enrollment” in instances where the surrounding neighborhood was predominantly black. Indeed, as scholar Thomas J. Sugrue illustrates in his study of Detroit, the high union wages of white ethnic workers helped fuel their flight to federally subsidized suburban enclaves that ringed declining, and increasingly black, Rust Belt inner cities.

Jones concedes that black freedom insurgency was “considerably more murky in the urban North than in the Jim Crow South.” Yet, the existing literature reveals discernible patterns in northern black freedom struggles. These patterns
were conditioned foremost, though not exclusively, by longstanding grievances against employment discrimination in manufacturing, retail, financial institutions, and the building trades—a pattern of racism that persisted even with the enactment of postwar fair employment laws. This resulted in “selective patronage” boycotts in the early 1960s in cities like Chicago, and a wave of militant construction site protests and shutdowns between 1963 and 1967 led mainly by local chapters of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and their offshoots, which functioned alongside local NAACP branches as the organizational spearhead of northern black freedom campaigns.54 Connected to the goal of fair and full employment were demands for union representation and leadership in industries that had been organized by postwar labor struggles (Out of this emerged organizations like A. Philip Randolph’s Negro American Labor Council in the early 1960s.) Notwithstanding racial fissures within trade unionism, black labor spokespersons took part in challenging the “North-South differential” in wages, working conditions and taxes, which—built directly on the exploitation of black southern labor—attracted manufacturing from the Midwest to Dixie. Such initiatives dovetailed with black activists’ efforts to contest inequitable patterns of postwar metropolitan development in the Midwest, respond to the crippling effects of automation and deindustrialization, and shape the overall priorities of welfare statist growth liberalism.55

The presence of an active black electorate, locally and statewide, lent weight to such demands for meaningful African American participation in economic development, urban planning and state-level governance. The expansion of black elected officialdom, meanwhile, was an objective that northern activists met in many cases by the early and mid-1960s, years before the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act enabled similar possibilities in the South. Another key battleground was open housing, which by the mid-1960s, Jones states, “emerged as the most divisive and often violent civil rights issue in the urban North.”56 Housing discrimination, moreover, was directly connected to the inadequate public primary and secondary schools stemming from residential apartheid—that is, the gerrymandering of school district boundaries around racially “protected” neighborhood borders. These two issues, Sugrue notes, were intertwined in ways not evident in the South.57 In the North, argues legal scholar Davison M. Douglas, “the greatest barrier to integrated schools was not legal—in a constitutional or statutory sense—but rather political and cultural. Most northern states prohibited school segregation by statute during the nineteenth century, and most northern courts enforced those statutes when asked to do so.”58 The initiative in maintaining apartheid in public education lay mainly with local school boards rather than state orders, which gave black northern activists recourse to lawsuits and legislative lobbying in addition to street-level protests and school boycotts. Much like campaigns for open housing, efforts at school integration drew the most brutal responses from white civilians and police—the latter of whom were also a target of movement campaigns due to their long history of abuse in northern black urban communities.59

These multiple theaters of struggle arrayed black freedom activists against opponents as varied as industrial and corporate capitalists, organized labor, real estate firms, and school board officials. They even faced the wrath of liberal, technocratic white mayors, reformist councilmen and progressive civic leaders who eschewed the terrorism of southern segregationists and endorsed the 1963 March
on Washington, yet promoted urban renewal and downtown redevelopment schemes that violently displaced black communities. In southern cities dominated by local commercial-civic elites, “whites chose the leadership of the black community” with greater ease than in cities of the Midwest, where alternative centers of power (such as trade unions and black elected officials) existed. Hence, southern black elites, favoring racial cooperation and negotiation within the boundaries of white paternalism, often promoted “the welfare of the Negro” over black freedom. By the same token, northern black elected officials, where they existed, could themselves be unreliable allies who were just as often antagonists to movement insurgency as they were supporters, especially in cities where they presided over “plantation wards” subordinate to white ethnic-controlled machine politics. These dynamics, coupled with the overall greater class differentiation among black northerners, often resulted in more complex forms of factionalism among movement activists than in Dixie. For example, when Chicago’s NAACP chapter, under the leadership of leftist labor activist Willoughby Abner, embarked on a path of working-class militancy that challenged the centralized authority of Mayor Richard Daley in the late 1950s, it was neither possible nor necessary to outlaw the organization, as had occurred in several Deep South states in reaction to Brown. Rather, Dawson—black Congressman of the city’s South Side, and a Daley ally protective of his own political turf against the encroachments of an insurgent NAACP—mobilized hundreds of precinct workers to become dues-paying members of the Association. They merely ousted Abner from office.

Similarly, a postwar concentration of black media in the North, including the Chicago-based Johnson Publishing Company, privileged black northerners in articulating the values and goals of the movement nationally, and exposing the horrors of Jim Crow—as in the case of the lynching of Emmett Till, whose disfigured body was shown on the pages of the popular Jet magazine. In this manner, historian Adam Green asserts, black Chicago was central to fostering a sense of simultaneity between black northerners and southerners, and pivotal in constructing a modern African American national identity. But in framing the movement for mass audiences, northern-based black media could also limit its discourses by representing the movement as the strivings of a postwar black middle class and presenting the South as atavistic in its race relations.

Still, the clearest indication of the distinctions between southern and northern black freedom struggles (aside from accounts by contemporary movement participants themselves) is the fact that scholars today are divided over whether southern campaigns influenced northern activism, or vice versa. Historian Martha Biondi, for instance, has contended that early postwar black freedom movements in New York City established the political foundations for the mass insurgency associated with southern civil rights struggle. Most scholars, in contrast, have maintained that southern struggles helped mobilize and shape the course of black northern freedom agendas, with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s pivotal 1963 Birmingham project igniting direct action protests across the United States, including Detroit and Chicago. Regardless of which direction scholars imagine the “highway of struggle” ran during the civil rights movement, to paraphrase Aldon Morris, most have recognized that a regional dialectic existed. This implicitly acknowledges a critical North-South differentiation in modes of black community formation, racial oppression, and African American agency.
Black Freedom on the Middle Ground: Missouri, St. Louis, and the Border South

Up to this point, this essay has contrasted the Deep South from the Midwest in terms of historical trajectories, political economies, patterns of migration and immigration, differences of ethnicity and class among the white populace, predominant forms of white racial domination, dynamics of class stratification and politics among African Americans, and the particularities of local black freedom activism conditioned by these distinct regional contexts. The aim has been to counter an emerging tendency among civil rights scholars to overemphasize the similarities between northern and southern black protest movements, an effort borne of the interest to combat the thesis of southern exceptionalism. My contention is that without close attention to regional dissimilarities, social historians of black freedom struggles risk losing sight of the sharply different circumstances in which black economic exploitation, racial oppression, and resistance and negotiation have unfolded.

From the standpoint of regional typologies, the “border South”—encompassing Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, Delaware, Maryland, and (with some qualification) West Virginia—also matters in the effort to locate narratives of local black freedom struggle. The region’s distinctive character stemmed from the contiguous borders these states shared with free territories. Notwithstanding the existence of slavery in border South territories, no plantation system had emerged around a single agricultural product as occurred in the Black Belt. The result was that African American populations were relatively small; and while slaveholding interests enjoyed protection and political authority, the “peculiar institution” did not dominate these states’ economies. Indeed, St. Louis, Missouri; Louisville, Kentucky; and Baltimore, Maryland were commercial-industrial hubs associated with the Northeast. During the antebellum period, moreover, the border South often embodied in miniature the nation’s deep dissonances over the presence of slavery. Missouri’s entry into the United States during the 1820s precipitated the first major national debate about the peculiar institution, while the bitter warfare near the Missouri-Kansas border in the 1850s, as well as the Supreme Court’s ruling in the case of Missouri slave Dred Scott that same decade, presaged the Civil War.

Although the white citizenry was divided internally by the sectional conflict, the territories of the slaveholding border South remained, however tempestuously, within the Union fold during the war—or, as in the exceptional case of West Virginia, was the result of secession from the Confederacy. A source of frustration for the Abraham Lincoln administration, conservative white border state politicians were deemed critical to the federal war effort, preventing the president from attacking slavery in order to preserve their tenuous loyalty. Nonetheless, the border South was a terrain on which the war’s momentum moved awkwardly toward ending the system of black bondage. These moments of transition included General John C. Frémont’s controversial decree (revoked by President Lincoln) freeing the slaves of rebel sympathizers in Missouri and parts of Kentucky; Lincoln’s proposal of compensated emancipation in the border states, which he imagined as a preemptive strike against appeals to border state whites to join the Confederacy in defense of slavery; and the self-emancipation and recruitment of fugitives and ex-slaves into the army.
Even in the absence of military occupation during the war (as a result of the border South not joining Confederate secessionists), the region served as a harbinger of backlash against Reconstruction. Ambivalent about their identity before the war, many white Missourians and Kentuckians came to view themselves as southerners after the war. Indeed, it was not until the early twentieth century that southeast Missouri's “Bootheel” province emerged as a heavily black-populated, cotton-growing region, which belatedly linked it economically and culturally to the Mississippi Delta. Paradoxically, given a relatively small black presence, the border South witnessed no full-scale black disfranchisement of the sort that occurred in the post-Reconstruction South. Not only did African Americans in the border South states remain part of the voting public, but their presence also preserved the Republican Party as a viable alternative to the Democratic Party, which enforced a political monopoly over Dixie.70

Extending from this complex heritage, the border South manifested an in-between, atypically “southern” character, though this varied in expression across individual cases. Hence, St. Louis was symbolic of the political and cultural patterns of the South within the geography of the Midwest while Baltimore, with its cultural, economic, and demographic connections to Dixie, represented “an articulation of the South within the Northeast,” according to historian Andor D. Skotnes.71 In either instance, as scholars from E. Franklin Frazier to George C. Wright, Skotnes, Barbara Jeanne Fields, Peter Levy, Tracy K’Meyer, and Clarence Lang have maintained, the border states were an uncertain mixture of North and South, in terms of politics and culture—a region, according to the sociologist Charles S. Johnson, where the nation’s conflicting racial views and policies met and clashed.72

Located along the Mississippi River, St. Louis had been both a gateway between the centers of eastern capital and the West, and a transition point between the South and the Midwest. Mirroring the Midwest’s economic development, the mechanization of agriculture exploded in Missouri after the Civil War, as did livestock and grain production. Meanwhile, the markets for hemp, cotton and tobacco—all crops formerly produced by slaves—collapsed statewide. In addition to the commercial trade that had defined the antebellum histories of similar riverport cities in the South and border region, food and tobacco processing, flour milling, bricks and tiles, retail, finance, utilities, and construction became local mainstays in St. Louis, though no one sector had dominated the city’s economy. St. Louis’s mixed economy, and its modest yet highly diversified industrial base, had contributed to limited mass-production work available to black workers. This factor distinguished it from nearby Midwest locales such as Chicago and Detroit, where heavy industry was more prominent. Similar to its southern neighbors, though, the indigenous commercial and civic elite of St. Louis—much like its counterparts in Baltimore, Maryland and Louisville, Kentucky—pursued economic growth via northern investment. Previous to the Civil War, St. Louis had attracted Yankee migrants but, emblematic of its southern ties, Missouri’s native-born white residents had also hailed from rural areas of Missouri, Arkansas, and other areas of the Upper South. At the same time, the city became a destination for immigration from southeastern as well as northwestern Europe, which made the white population ethnically and religiously heterogeneous in a manner typical of the Midwest—and, in the case of German immigrants, formed a bulwark of antislavery sentiment. As in the Midwest, this diversity provided a foundation for labor unionization and
radicalism, and a basis for racial liberalism and conflict around the boundaries of white ethnic enclaves.73

At the same time, the northern-like atmosphere created by the presence of working-class white immigrant communities interacted with idiosyncratic patterns of southern-style racial oppression. Split between a multi-ethnic white urban wing centered in St. Louis, and a homogeneous white rural wing that dominated the state capital of Jefferson City, the politics of Missouri’s Democrats embodied, as they did in other border South states, the party’s factionalism nationally. In this regard, St. Louis’s distinctiveness from the cotton-growing “Bootheel” region was analogous to Baltimore’s relationship with Maryland’s rural southern hinterlands and Eastern Shore. Jim Crow apartheid in St. Louis was legal and pervasive, though uneven. In this manner, local race relations encompassed regionally diverse modes of U.S. racial stratification. Public libraries and conveyances did not observe segregation, though swimming pools, ballparks, theaters, hotels, churches, restaurants, and hospitals did. Indeed, public accommodations in the Midwest had similarly observed racial apartheid; yet Missouri’s constitution, in a manner specific to the South, legally enforced segregated public schooling and prohibited interracial marriage. As was the case in West Virginia, Maryland and Tennessee, Missouri officials paid full tuition for black high school graduates to attend professional schools in other states, allowing them to avoid equalizing in-state graduate institutions while maintaining the façade of “separate but equal” higher education. (As in much of the South, Missouri legislators possessed a low-tax mentality that further undermined the possibility of funding equity.) By the 1930s, not surprisingly, states like Maryland and Missouri were the “legal laboratory” for the NAACP’s mounting legal assault on segregated higher education.74

In the area of employment, resistance to black workers had been rampant in such border cities as Baltimore, Maryland, and Louisville, Kentucky, where large numbers of black laborers had come into conflict with an overwhelmingly German- and Irish-derived white working class. At the same time, African Americans in the border South occupied professional and clerical employment more than did black people in most southern cities. Black populations in both regions, however, were less occupationally diverse than African American northerners. In terms of the racial politics of housing, white voters in Baltimore, Louisville, and St. Louis had pioneered the use of legal housing discrimination, in the latter case passing by popular referendum the nation’s first ordinance mandating racially segregated neighborhoods. Rebuffed by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1910s, white border South residents had responded by initiating the use of restrictive housing covenants. Ironically, unlike many urban centers of the Midwest, no single area of black settlement existed in St. Louis and other border South communities until well after the Second World War. Prior to that, black people lived in different pockets around the city. The small to middling sizes of many border South cities, however, begat dense and multiple relationships within their black public spheres.75

Peculiar to other former slaveholding border South communities where African Americans retained the right the vote, black St. Louisans belonged to political patronage networks typical of northern machine politics. Despite their relatively small numbers, according to historian Priscilla Dowden-White, they had used their elective franchise and civic institutions to exercise significant
influence in public affairs within the confines of Jim Crow. Thus, while they had long accepted segregated schools and hospitals as a preferable alternative to outright exclusion, black St. Louisans had mastered what Dowden-White describes as the “manipulation of public culture”: Exploiting the city’s heritage of private voluntarism and associationalism, they had been able to stake claims on public educational and health care resources, giving birth to such segregated institutions as Charles Sumner High School (the first of its kind west of the Mississippi River) and Homer G. Phillips Hospital (which became a premier black medical training and indigent care facility). Taking advantage of the city’s decentralized, fragmented system of government, moreover, African Americans had also leveraged minor appointments and municipal jobs from white officials in exchange for their votes, and by the middle of the twentieth century held office as ward aldermen and committeemen. Because of these clientage relationships, as well as the reality that African Americans were not numerous enough to meaningfully challenge white political hegemony, white civic leaders in St. Louis and similar border South cities historically had embraced a politics of interracial “civility,” which consolidated black subordination and white paternal authority under the guise of cooperation and public voluntarism among black and white professionals.

Precisely because of this mixed political and cultural heritage, black freedom movements in St. Louis and other border South cities married conflicting methods drawn from both southern and northern theaters of struggle—bloc voting by African Americans, ward-level electoral politics, legal action and mass protest against de jure segregation, labor organizing and activism, and black accommodation to racial paternalism. St. Louis’s Board of Aldermen, dominated by Irish Democratic ward-heelers and closely aligned with white ethnic neighborhoods, was a bulwark of Jim Crow in public accommodations and public employment. In contrast, the Mayor’s Office, through close cooperation with a consortium of leading corporate executives from the metropolitan area’s industrial, retail and financial sectors, represented a technocratic, pro-growth politics that aimed at redeveloping the central city core, bringing about metropolitan-wide planning and authority, and attracting outside capital. As in other areas of the Midwest, “massive redevelopment” rather than “massive resistance” characterized white opposition to movement demands for fair employment, expanded black political representation in municipal government, open housing, an end to racial apartheid in public schools, and equitable urban development. In concert with the city’s religious-based white-ethnic liberals, the Office of the Mayor and local corporate capitalist elites favored gradual racial reforms, and these mainly through symbolic gestures.

Internally, African American freedom struggles in St. Louis were complicated by the presence of black political moderates (connected to local white corporate leaders via citizens’ committees and the like) who favored a longstanding tradition of racial pragmatism and negotiation. By the early 1960s, this stance divided them from younger, more assertive black freedom militants promoting southern-style civil disobedience. Another source of intramovement acrimony was black St. Louisans’ engagement in electoral politics at the local and state levels. For many activists, their involvement in social movement organizations often overlapped with their affiliations to competing black grassroots Democratic ward organizations. The result was that disputes within one sphere often shaped their interactions in the other. In the case of St. Louis CORE, for instance, the differences between civil rights “militants” and “moderates” (and even disagreements among the “militants” themselves)
was heavily influenced by the fact that many of the individuals belonged to rival aldermanic ward factions. The same held true for CORE’s stormy relationship with the local NAACP.79

Nonetheless, black elected officials and Democratic operatives were at times able to find common cause with white Democratic ward bosses who were antagonistic to “Negro rights,” but who, similar to many black St. Louisans, opposed efforts by white corporate leaders to impose citywide or regional planning and centralize authority in the Mayor’s Office. To the contrary, black ward officials and labor-oriented neighborhood activists advocated a more robust aldermanic structure, primarily out of concern that centralization would dilute the growing strength of the black vote and place black St. Louisans at the greater mercy of larger white decision-making bodies. Over time, though, the presence of black-led political insurgency (through organized vehicles as diverse as the NAACP, CORE, the Negro American Labor Council, and purely indigenous groups such as the Action Committee to Improve Opportunities for Negroes) heightened the tensions between the Aldermanic Board and City Hall, and in the process advanced black reformist agendas.80

Not only did border South territories condense the regionally diverse experiences of African Americans, but they often also prefigured shifts in race relations for the rest of the nation. “The first [movement] victories,” Jack Bloom assesses, “were gained in the cities of the Upper South,” which were not historically dominated by the agrarian elite.81 Missouri and other border states were the first former slave states to begin dismantling legal racial apartheid in higher education (e.g., the 1938 Lloyd Gaines Supreme Court ruling, and the historic desegregation of Saint Louis University in the early 1940s, the first such event in a former slave state); housing (e.g., the landmark 1948 Shelley v. Kramer decision against racial covenants); and employment discrimination (e.g., Green v. McDonnell Douglas in 1973). By the 1950s, African Americans in Louisville had achieved access to numerous public accommodations, including libraries, parks and schools, and counted black members among the members the city’s Board of Aldermen. Black St. Louisans had similarly resolved, by the early 1960s, issues of civil and voting rights, and political representation for which black freedom activists in the South would fight for several more years.82 Events in the small Eastern Shore community of Cambridge, Maryland, historian Levy writes, prompted “the most direct intervention of the [John F.] Kennedy Administration in the racial affairs of a single community, paling its involvement in Birmingham, Alabama, and Jackson, Mississippi, two cities that have received much study by civil rights scholars.”83

Likewise, black freedom activists in border state cities also encountered the limitations and cynicism of electoral politics earlier than their counterparts further south. Cambridge again provides a telling example. When a measure to repeal antidiscrimination protections in public accommodations came up for a referendum vote in 1963, local organizer Gloria Richardson publicly rejected the premise that civil rights should depend on the preferences of a white majority. She alienated both black and white moderates when she publicly urged African Americans to boycott the election. Predictably, the measure passed.84

As this episode suggests, there was a flipside to the border South’s place on the cutting edge of civil rights reform. That is, the border region was also an incubator of the “New Right,” and signaled the electoral shift of the Democratic
“Solid South” to the Republican fold. By publicly eschewing racist rhetoric, avatars such as Maryland’s Spiro T. Agnew, Missouri’s Patrick J. Buchanan, and Phyllis Schlafly from southern Illinois were critical in linking the GOP to emerging new bases of southern segregationist support (embodied in the third-party presidential campaign of Alabama governor George Wallace), and “wedging” northern white ethnic working-class and middle-class voters from the Democrats.85 The border South also figured in strategies to unite the interests of white southern segregationists with northern urban business lobbyists against reapportionment through racially neutral, “constitutional principles,” as in the case of the conservative National Commission on Constitutional Government (NCCG). It was not coincidental that the NCCG was located in Missouri’s state capital, asserts historian Jeffrey Howison, “since, as a border state, Missouri embodied many historical characteristics that are frequently associated with both the North and the South,” and provided a political bridge between both regions.86

This essay’s conceptualization of the border South centers on former slave states in which slavery was not the dominant mode of production—that is, territories whose trajectories diverged dramatically from those of the Confederacy during and after the secessionist crisis. Because black freedom struggle in border cities contains “many parts of the stories of other regions,” K’Meyer suggests, “it provides new ways of looking at the movement as a whole.”87 But exactly what meaning should scholars derive from narratives of African American protest in the border South? To the extent that we interpret borders as places where “people, ideas, and experiences overlap and where differences blur,” as K’Meyer writes, we might be drawn to the conclusion that “[b]order cities, where no single cultural or political pattern has hegemony, reveal that the distinctions between North and South, and the purportedly different racial problems in each, were not that great.”88 Yet, a border also marks the boundary between two political-geographic entities, by definition signifying the existence of independent and separate identities. Even as it may shade differences, a border allows clear comparisons and contrasts between social forces that otherwise do not meet. From this standpoint, the designation of the border South disrupts a simple North-South binary in African American history. At the same time, it offers the literal space to identify and make sense of the ways in which black historical experiences on the terrain of the “South” stood apart from those in the “North” in concrete, particular ways. More broadly, regional typologies—North, South, and in between—hold the power to illuminate, rather than simply obscure, spatial dynamics in black-white relations and local histories of black freedom struggle.

Conclusion

Civil rights scholars’ attention to struggles outside the South, much like their emphasis on new periodization schema, historical actors, and political framing, is a significant innovation in the scholarship that bodes well for new narrative syntheses. Critically engaging the movement’s regional dimensions is important precisely because an American exceptionalist narrative of the movement’s evolution has held fast. The result has been the perpetuation of a morality play in which, to paraphrase civil rights veteran Julian Bond, Rosa Parks sat down, Martin Luther King, Jr. stood up, white northern liberals came south, presidents
John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson ensured passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts, and the movement’s moral authority faltered when it came north in the late 1960s—though its legacies were fulfilled with the election of Barack Obama as the first black U.S. president.89 Yet, the current emphasis on the similarities in black oppression and resistance across regional boundaries can err in the opposite direction. This outlook can present northern and southern civil rights struggles as mutually reducible, imposing historical confluence in a manner that reflects presentist commitments and distorts the past. But when interpreted against this grain, explorations of black social movements north of Dixie allow historians to observe the regional particularities of white supremacy, and black resistance, negotiation and accommodation—which actually allows us to view the particularity of events in both the South and North in bolder relief. In this respect, this essay has argued that regionality in civil rights movement history is a necessary tool for highlighting the significance of difference to black social movements, and the African American experience overall.90

As a result of the Deep South’s unique history of plantation slavery, black racial domination was articulated the sharpest and, by the beginning of the twentieth century, was enshrined in a body of law that explicitly subordinated African Americans and rejected any claims to their citizenship. Subsequent movements necessarily responded, foremost, to formal policies of exclusion. In contrast, the legal denial of black citizenship in the North had been outlawed by legislative and judicial action by the end of the nineteenth century. Black freedom struggles in the Midwest, then, were largely concerned with enacting existing precedent, buttressed by African Americans’ growing share of the postwar electorate outside the South. It is important here to note that the mere presence of anti-discrimination legislation was not evidence of broad majoritarian support for racial equality in the North, as the passage of such laws owed much to the fact that African Americans at the beginning of the twentieth century constituted a tiny percentage of the whole in most northern states and cities. As the existence of northern black protest movements illustrates, obviously, the actual practice and impact of anti-discrimination laws was complicated by a white northern citizenry as equally committed to black subordination in housing, education, and employment as were white southerners. Still, the meaning and intent of such legislation, de facto racism notwithstanding, gave African Americans and their allies in the Midwest important sources of leverage in pursuing their demands.91

The border South, finally, encompassed a geographic zone wedged between the Midwest and the South (as in the case of St. Louis and Louisville), or as was the case for Baltimore and Washington, D.C., between the Northeast and the South. Embodying the North and South, the border region exemplified many of the social and cultural heritages of the latter, the mixed economies and populations of the former, and the black political traditions and insurgent strategies of both. African American freedom struggles at the border often foreshadowed reforms below the Mason-Dixon, while the evolving tenor of race relations in this region served as a bellwether of southern trends to come.

Social structures—including political economies, class structures, and place—are a significant point of departure for historical inquiry.92 Thus, the larger claim here is that cross-regional generalizations oversimplify the black past at a moment when the field of African American history is in need of more nuanced interpretations of the patterns, trajectories, and meanings of the black experience over time.
Clearly, civil rights movement specialists are only beginning to craft a long national narrative of the movement, and with regional frameworks inclusive of more than the South. Along these lines, historians like Gretchen Cassel Eick have advocated the need for more fine-grained case studies that “consider the full sweep of the movement in specific cities outside the South before broad generalizations about the movement in the Midwest (or in the North or West) are presented with much certainty.” As the work of historians such as Stefan M. Bradley and Brian Purnell suggests, in a densely populated, crowded northern urban center like New York City—where space was painfully scarce—expanding the areas of public recreation, and demanding reliable garbage collection, were vital aspects of black freedom agendas. Scholars of the movement hopefully will investigate how, or even if, such campaigns had dimensions unique to New York and similar northeastern cities. Others may choose to explore what the absence of heavy mass-production industries meant for black migration, community formation, class formation, and civil rights struggles in northeastern cities outside the Rust Belt.

Similarly, while this essay has not specifically addressed the West Coast, scholars have highlighted the region as an important frontier in civil rights studies. California, as a prime example, was heavily multiracial in population, with the numbers of African Americans proportionally small in size. As historians such as Gerald Horne and Josh Sides have maintained, this diffused the forms of racial subordination historically reserved for black people. According to Horne, this produced a “compounded racism” that fostered complex interactions between and among African Americans, Mexican Americans, Japanese Americans, and Chinese Americans. California’s multiple “race problems,” argues historian Mark Brilliant, conditioned the emergence of multifaceted civil rights efforts that made up for their relative lack of cohesion with the robust quality of their achievements. “In the process,” Brilliant avers, “the Golden State emerged as a civil rights vanguard for the nation,” especially in the legislative and legal arenas. From his standpoint, this pluralization of struggle calls for rethinking the civil rights era as not only chronologically long and geographically diverse, but also demographically “wide.”

Civil rights scholars of the Midwest, meanwhile, can strengthen the field as they more fully survey and problematize the differences between cities in the Lower and Upper Midwest, as well as look more closely at midsized and small midwestern cities and towns. While some have pursued this through singular case studies, others like Ashley M. Howard have done this work comparatively. To be sure, the Midwest as a region is deserving of greater treatment and conceptualization. As it regards the border South, moreover, scholars like Henry Louis Taylor, Jr. and Kerry Pimblott have proposed a more expansive definition of the “borderland” that encompasses the southernmost portions of the Lower Midwest states (Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois) that shared contiguous borders, river-based economies, population, and cultural folkways with slave territories such as Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee. This approach to regionality not only distinguishes Missouri and Tennessee from Illinois and Ohio, but it also differentiates Chicago from Cairo, Illinois, Cleveland from Cincinnati, Ohio, and Gary from Evansville, Indiana (a midwestern state, incidentally, that maintained legally segregated schools until 1949).

Additionally, scholars should explore further the role of religion in shaping civil rights politics in the North relative to the South. As Morris and others have
documented, the church was the bedrock of black southern civil society; did the same pertain to northern communities, where African Americans ostensibly had a broader, more secular foundation for institution building, agenda setting, and mobilization? Notwithstanding the cultural significance of Christian faith in the history of the South, perhaps we may find that the black church has been overemphasized in the southern theater of civil rights struggle during the 1960s and undervalued in the northern field. Our ability to answer these sorts of questions requires more scholars to record activists' oral testimonies regarding the cultural and political meanings of region. This is especially critical for activists who engaged in movement work in areas like the Midwest or border South, neither of which oral historians have covered as extensively as the South. Finally, while the standard narrative of the 1960s civil rights movement has focused primarily on the South, even the possibilities here have not been exhausted. As historians such as Charles W. Eagles have maintained, the field remains in need of more studies of "the entire South," including the range of activists, participants, adherents, supporters, bystanders, and opponents who encountered the movement.

A clear sign of a vibrant field is the creative tension among conflicting interpretive frameworks. As scholars pursue a synthesis in which the North meets the South, then, it seems wise to resist any premature consensus in assessing the meanings of region and place in the movement. Indeed, the field of geography, and other disciplines, should draw historians toward more complex and nuanced treatments of "region" and "place" as conceptual categories. The frameworks that emerge will affect not only social historians' understandings of the civil rights movement, but they will also implicitly reflect our philosophies of African American history. Emphases on discontinuities, transformations, and divergences, as well as cohesion, in the black experience equip historians to imagine the multiple, even contradictory ways African Americans have shaped the past and, perhaps, conditioned future possibilities. How black people have responded to their conditions—or rather, the different ways they have done so in varying locations and at varying times—matters. It matters every bit as much as the fact that they have been actors as well as subjects of history.

Endnotes
The author thanks the following individuals for comments on earlier versions of this manuscript: Steven F. Lawson, Daryl Michael Scott, Orville Vernon Burton, Elizabeth Todd-Brelan, David R. Goldfield, Nishani Frazier, Shawn Leigh Alexander, Heidi L. Dodson, Kerry Pimblott, and the anonymous readers of Journal of Social History. This paper began as a presentation for the symposium, "South Meets North: The Shaping of a New Narrative of the Civil Rights Movement," May 5-6, 2011 at Northwestern University. The author is indebted to Martha Biondi, Aldon D. Morris, and Darlene Clark Hine for the invitation to participate. Address correspondence to Clarence Lang, Department of African and African-American Studies, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045. Email: celang@ku.edu.


10. David R. Goldfield, *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region*, 1607–1980 (Baton Rouge, 1982), 8. One has to be cautious about framing the South in monolithic terms. It is more accurate to conceptualize the region in plural terms, drawing differences between the Lower and Upper South, for instance, with North Carolina as a transition point. Consider, as well, the distinctiveness of the Mississippi Delta, South Carolina Lowcountry, Georgia piedmont, or the Arkansas Ozarks. Given their unique demographic histories, moreover, states such as Florida and Texas might be understood as the “peripheral South.” See Shafer and Johnston, *The End of Southern Exceptionalism*, 14, 129–33; and Burton, “The South as ‘Other,’ the Southerner as ‘Stranger,’” 29. For a recent example of scholarship focusing on other subregions of the South, see Wilma A. Dunaway, *Slavery in the American Mountain South* (Cambridge, 2003). I am also indebted to David R. Goldfield on this point.


14. Goldfield, Cotton Fields to Skyscrapers, 5, 32–33, 64–67. In the post-World War II period, moreover, the lower density of the South also made it an attractive region for locating defense installations. During the early Cold War, this led to a rapid militarization of the southern economy and landscape that surpassed the national average. After 1940, high-tech industry, much of it associated with federal military spending, became greater determinants of southern urbanization than staple agriculture. See Kari Frederickson, “The Cold War at the Grassroots: Militarization and Modernization in South Carolina,” in Lassiter and Crespino, 191.

15. Goldfield, Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers, 143–44.


30. Bloom, Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement, 121.


33. Lassiter and Crespino, 20 n23.


44. Ibid., xii.


53. Jones, ibid., 255.


60. Bloom, *Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement*, 126.


64. See, for instance, James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (1972; Seattle, 1997).

65. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 179; Martha Biondi, “How New York Changes the Story of the Civil Rights Movement,” *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 31 (2007): 15–32; Bloom, *Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement*, 2; Jelks, “Up South and Down South,” 94; and comments from Aldon Morris’s keynote address at the “South Meets North: The Shaping of a New Narrative of the Civil Rights Movement” Symposium, Northwestern University, May 5, 2011. Patrick Jones, in one of the sharpest and most succinct conclusions about the particularities of the North, states: “The movement in the North shared a consciousness with those who struggled in the South, but it 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 African American right to vote; and the diffuse nature of discrimination – all
of which set the region apart from the South – critically affected the development of race relations and civil rights activism” in northern industrial locales.” Jones, The Selma of the North, 5.

66. Cha-Jua and Lang, “The ‘Long Movement’ as Vampire.”

67. John H. Fenton, Politics in the Border States: A Study of the Patterns of Political Organization, and Political Change, Common to the Border States – Maryland, West Virginia, Kentucky and Missouri (New Orleans, 1957); Clarence Lang, Grassroots at the Gateway: Class Politics and Black Freedom Struggle in St. Louis, 1936–75 (Ann Arbor, 2009), 9; and Priscilla A. Dowden-White, Groping toward Democracy: African American Social Welfare Reform in St. Louis (Columbia, 2011), 24. See also James Neal Primm, Economic Policy in the Development of a Western State: Missouri, 1820–1860 (Cambridge, MD, 1954); and Barbara Jeanne Fields, Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century (New Haven, 1985), 20–22, 69. In Maryland and Delaware, notably, the presence of free black populations nearly equaled or even surpassed the number of slaves. This is not to suggest, of course, that slavery was more benign in the border region, or that African Americans across condition of servitude enjoyed equality.

68. Lawrence O. Christensen, “Missouri: The Heart of the Nation,” in Madison, 94–99; and Lang, ibid. See also Edward Conrad Smith, The Borderland in the Civil War (New York, 1927); and Michael Fellman, Inside War: The Guerrilla Conflict in Missouri during the American Civil War (New York, 1989).

69. William C. Harris, Lincoln and the Border States: Preserving the Union (Lawrence, KS, 2011), 98–99, 161, 237. “The failure of Lincoln’s border state policies,” Harris writes, “would have ensured the independence of the southern slave republic, dealt a serious blow to the Republican Party in the North, and greatly complicated emancipation, even to the extent of postponing indefinitely the death of slavery.” Harris, 8.


72. E. Franklin Frazier, The Negro in the United States (New York, 1949); George C. Wright, Life Behind a Veil: Blacks in Louisville, Kentucky, 1865–1930 (Baton Rouge, 1985); Skotnes, “The Black Freedom Movement,” 2; Levy, Civil War on Race Street, 7; K’Meyer, Civil Rights in the Gateway to the South, 1; Lang, Grassroots at the Gateway, 7–12; and Charles S. Johnson, Patterns of Negro Segregation (New York, 1943).


75. Adams, Way Up North in Louisville, 41, 160–161; and Lang, Grassroots at the Gateway, 10, 251. See also Colin Gordon, Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City (Philadelphia, 2008).

76. Dowden-White, Groping toward Democracy, x–xii, 2–5, 44, 46; Douglas, Jim Crow Moves North, 179–180; Wright, Life Behind a Veil; Lang, Grassroots at the Gateway, 22; Adams, Way Up North in Louisville, 185; Afro-Americans in St. Louis, Collection 36; Lowe Family Papers, 1922–1970, Collection 123, Folder 1; and David M. Grant Papers, Collection 552, Boxes 1 and 2, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, University of Missouri-St. Louis (hereafter WHMC). See also Segregation Scrapbook, and Race Relations Collection, Box 1, Missouri History Museum (hereafter MHM).


79. Lang, Grassroots at the Gateway, 170–175; Calloway Papers, WHMC; and Negro Scrapbook, volumes 1 and 2, MHM. See also George Lipsitz, A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition (Philadelphia, 1988); Kenneth S. Jolly, Black Liberation in the Midwest: The Struggle in St. Louis, Missouri, 1964–1970 (New York, 2006); Ernest Patterson, Black City Politics (New York, 1974); and William L. Clay, Bill Clay: A Political Voice at the Grass Roots (St. Louis, 2004).

80. Calloway Papers; and Percy Green Papers, WHMC.

81. Bloom, Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement, 89.


83. Levy, Civil War on Race Street, 2.

84. Ibid., 92–102.

85. Ibid., 5, 153–55; and Lang, Grassroots at the Gateway, 225–26.

86. Howison, “‘This Is Not a Cotton Picker’s Dream,’” 684.

87. K’Meyer, Civil Rights in the Gateway to the South, 3.

88. Ibid., 13.

89. Wesley C. Hogan, Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC’s Dream for a New America (Chapel Hill, 2007), 7.

90. Self, American Babylon, 178, 333.


