

Freedom Rights: New Perspectives on the Civil Rights Movement. Edited by Danielle McGuire and John Dittmer. Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011. 402 pp.

In this book on the mid-twentieth-century Civil Rights movement, editors McGuire and Dittmer present a new collection of essays that examine the movement in non-traditional, historical ways. Traditional scholarship on the movement is presented from an organizational leadership approach that centers mainly on African Americans, mostly men, and a specific fight for political rights and economic fairness. However, this collection seeks to expand that traditional narrative by exposing “a black freedom movement that is multiracial, cross-regional, and international, with local and national actors and organizations working in concert” (1). It also seeks to contribute a specific gendered analysis that critiques conventional notions of sexuality and the black family within the movement.

Freedom Rights includes essays that discuss Walter White and the NAACP’s activism in Hollywood for more positive portrayals of Africans; the plight of black communists in the 1950s; the politics of sex and sexuality that affected public perception and policing of activists, as demonstrated by the Johns Committee of the Florida state legislature; Clarence Thomas’s administration of the EEOC during Ronald Reagan’s presidency; black citizens’ quest for control of local county government in Alabama in the 1970s; and the meaning of Barack Obama’s historic presidential election in terms of a “post-racial” America.

Steven Lawson’s opening essay, “Long Origins of the Short Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1968,” seeks to re-periodize the beginnings of the movement itself. He argues that instead of a long movement, historians should categorize the movement as short and the origins of it as long in order to uncover the multiple actors and methods of the early twentieth century, which culminates in the Civil Rights portion of the black freedom movement. He charges that historians have sought to retain the traditional master narrative in order to preserve continuity and historicity, which unintentionally obscures the nuances of people and events that laid a foundation for the movement.

McGuire also provides an article on Joan Little and her 1975 trial for murdering her white correctional officer. This essay falls in line with McGuire’s recent book, *At the Dark End of the Street*, in which she asserts that for black women the Civil Rights movement was much more than just a protest against political and economic inequality; for them it was also a movement to fight rape and sexual assault at the hands of white men and reclaim dominion over their own bodies.

The essays are great pieces of scholarship that succeed in expanding the classical notions of the goals of the movement, the principal actors, and their effects on the quotidian lives of African Americans. However, the collection would do well to have an introduction that not only weaves the essays together but also describes, in greater detail, the meaning of this expansive knowledge to American history as well as the scholarly doors it opens by looking at the movement from more than just a political perspective.

Sam Davis
Indiana University, Bloomington