Drawn from more than one hundred interviews, *Freedom on the Border* aims to complicate dominant narratives of the civil rights movement by introducing accounts from Kentucky. The state’s small African American population—nearly seven percent in 1960 (p. 3)—retained voting rights even after black residents of other southern states were disfranchised; but Kentucky’s segregated economy and Jim Crow laws evidenced an environment of racial oppression and prejudice that limited African American opportunities and necessitated the fight against discrimination and exclusion. The stories of activism compiled in *Freedom on the Border* reveal the variability of discriminatory practices in towns and cities across the state, highlighting the ways that location shaped the strategies, agendas, and outcomes of local struggles and reminding readers of the array of campaigns subsumed within the larger civil rights movement.

The interviews in this publication come from the Kentucky Civil Rights Oral History Project, an initiative of the state’s Oral History Commission (KOHC). Starting in 1998, the KOHC conducted interviews with civil rights activists and identified interviews already in archival collections that related to the topic. The commission sought to document the breadth of the movement, and the interviews edited for this book include those of elected officials, organizational leaders and foot soldiers; black and white women and men; those who joined campaigns as children and students and those who work for universities and state government.

*Freedom on the Border* is well organized, with thematic chapters focused on desegregation of public accommodations, schools, housing, political representation, jobs, and cultural expression. Each chapter opens with a contextual essay before presenting approximately two dozen interview excerpts, ranging from one paragraph to two pages in length. Brief biographies of the narrators appear later in the book. The format allows many voices and perspectives to be included and provides corroboration and comparison, but the brevity of excerpts often makes it hard to get a handle on specifics of campaigns or to assess the impact on individuals. Many of the stories seem strangely impersonal as a result, devoid of personal reflections. Five longer narratives interspersed throughout the book, by contrast, allow for the telling of fuller stories that illuminate how activists now
understand their choices and motivations, thereby linking the personal and the political, as well as the past and the present.

A strong conclusion anchors the book, synthesizing the interviews and pulling divergent stories into a larger whole. This conclusion offers valuable insights into the construction of activists’ memories and the relationship of individual memories to a larger narrative of the U.S. civil rights movement. Contrasting Kentucky stories with those from the Deep South, *Freedom on the Border* notes the distinct form of the movement in the Blue Grass state, including the relatively minor role of the church and of black political organizations. “[W]hat is striking,” the editors write, “is the extent to which stories focus on the individual’s actions without associating them with a larger movement,” an observation worth considering in other contexts (p. 255).

*Freedom on the Border* succeeds in calling renewed attention to the influence of location on understandings of civil rights activism, however, the geographical focus also becomes the book’s weakness. Given the very local nature of many of the campaigns described in the book and the variety of tactics and organizational structures employed, the relevance of a statewide examination of the movement becomes unclear. It is hard to know what unites these narratives, other than their common origin in an oral history project. Still, the book offers important evidence that race-based discrimination was not limited to the Deep South and neither were campaigns for social change. Reminding readers that the civil rights movement was neither unified nor homogenous, *Freedom on the Border* presents a strong challenge to prevalent narratives of the black freedom movement.

**Dr. Anne M. Valk** is Associate Director for Programs at the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage at Brown University.