

## INTRODUCTION

### UNTOLD STORIES: THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON – NEW PERSPECTIVES AND TRANSATLANTIC LEGACIES

**Marcia Chatelain and Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson**

If you were to peruse a volume on the most famous, easily recognized, or frequently cited speeches of the twentieth century, you would likely find Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom address, commonly known as the “I Have a Dream” speech. In less than twenty minutes, King framed the root causes and consequences of the nation’s racial and economic injustice in the “five score years” between the Emancipation Proclamation and August 28, 1963. Although King’s speech included a pointed critique of police brutality, race-based economic malfeasance, and the limits of black social mobility, most references to King’s speech focus on the latter section in which the evocative preacher shared the vision of his dream and exclaimed, “let freedom ring.”<sup>1</sup> Repeated references to only the most optimistic parts of King’s speech, delivered before hundreds of thousands of marchers and television viewers, have skewed perceptions of what happened that day and led to a distancing between King’s rhetoric of dreams and freedom and the historical realities of that day, King’s leadership, and the freedom struggle. Among the myriad annual remembrances and recitations of King’s vision of a world where the content of one’s character would supplant the importance of the color of one’s skin, there are critical absences. Often, the celebration of these very specific elements of King’s speech obscures the richness and intricacies of the event that brought King to Washington, DC — the actual March on Washington.

Instead of rehearsing popular notions about King’s dreams, this volume seeks to ask questions that are often forgotten in one-dimensional approaches to celebrating the march. The essays that follow use the sharp tools of historical analysis to ask better questions about why King’s speech happened as it did, and why it had such a tremendous impact at that particular moment. This process generates highly useful and intriguing inquiries: How did organizers pay for all the elements of the march, from its placards and sound equipment to the travel expenses of guests from across the country? Despite a program with 18 distinct segments with their own speakers or performers, why do we commemorate so few of the others who approached the podium facing the Lincoln Memorial that day? By focusing on the others who addressed the crowd, what can we

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “Address at the March for Jobs and Freedom, August 28, 1963,” in *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches That Changed the World*, ed. James M. Washington, 102-106 (Glenview, 2003).

understand about the position of the civil rights movement in 1963? Considering the integral role music played in movement organizing, what kind of music did the marchers listen to as they stood shoulder-to-shoulder on the National Mall? What do we make of the near absence of women among the speakers and featured guests? Which African Americans supported the march, which disapproved, and why? How was news of the march reported elsewhere in the world, and how did U.S. allies and enemies understand what was happening? *Untold Stories* attempts to answer these questions and to add a transnational perspective by bringing together an array of fresh scholarly reflections on the March on Washington. By delving more deeply into the events of that seemingly understood and widely known occasion, this volume's contributors — scholars from the U.S., the United Kingdom, and Germany — assess the traditional narratives about the march while adding new and exciting stories, expanding upon the existing literature on the civil rights movement.

As the traditional markers of the civil rights movement — organized marches, grassroots activism, and legislative battles — slowly wound down in the late 1970s and 1980s, scholars crafted a narrative of movement building, which in many cases focused rather narrowly on great men and great organizations, while paying limited attention to the role of female leadership. One of the most significant contributions of this first generation of scholarly and cinematic work came in the form of a documentary series: Henry Hampton's highly regarded public television series *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Struggle*. Its companion guide of edited documents from the movement provided some of the best oral histories as well as footage of the movement from those who were at the forefront, including Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, Myrlie Evers, and Bob Moses.<sup>2</sup> Taylor Branch's multivolume series on King and the civil rights movement introduced a popular audience to the many figures and turning points of "America in the King Years."<sup>3</sup> Organizational histories such as Clayborne Carson's *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* provided context for understanding the vital and exhaustive work of organizing on many fronts in order to achieve gains in civil rights while absorbing the fallout from conflict and shifts in institutional dynamics and membership.<sup>4</sup> And, of course, there is an ever increasing number of King biographies as well as studies of his leadership style, his religious and philosophical development, his rhetoric, his death, and other topics.<sup>5</sup>

Gradually, scholars of the movement — shaped by the rise of women's and gender history, critical race theory, and the challenge of

2 The citations that follow are by no means a thorough accounting of the scholarship on the civil rights movement. Rather, they highlight the evolution of the ways the scholarship has shifted over the past thirty years. Henry Hampton, "Eyes on the Prize." Blackside Inc. (1987, 1990); and Juan Williams, ed., *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965*, 2nd ed. (New York, 2013).

3 See Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York, 1988); idem, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-1965* (New York, 1998); and idem, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-1968* (New York, 2006). See also David J. Garrow, ed., *We Shall Overcome: The Civil Rights Movement in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s*, 3 vols. (New York, 1989).

4 Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA, 1981).

5 See, e.g., David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York, 1986 and 1999); Peter Ling, *Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York, 2004); Harvard Sitkoff, *King: Pilgrimage to the Mountaintop* (New York, 2008); and Sherman E. Pyatt, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York, Westport, London, 1986).

gearing scholarship to examine historical intersections — began to ask new questions about civil rights. Moving away from a singular focus on male leaders and powerful groups, John Dittmer, Jo Ann Robinson, Vicki Crawford, Angela Davis, Barbara Ransby, Kay Mills, and other scholars considered the roles of class, region, and gender to broaden the received notions of 1960s leadership and strategy.<sup>6</sup> Further, heeding Jacquelyn Dowd Hall’s call to rethink periodization in the history of civil rights, scholars such as Danielle McGuire created a new timeline for the movement, viewing its origins in black women’s activism against sexual assault.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, an increasing number of studies focusing on the relationship among international human rights, anticolonialism, the Cold War, and African American civil rights advocacy, also revise the timeline, extending it significantly further back than the classic “1954–1968” period.<sup>8</sup> Recently, cultural historians have also focused scholarly attention on the art, literature, photography, fashion, and music of the movement, deepening our appreciation of the many avenues for expression during this tumultuous yet creative era.<sup>9</sup>

As U.S.-based scholars have shaped and shifted the conversations about the civil rights movement, their colleagues across the Atlantic have also embarked on dynamic approaches to this voluminous history.<sup>10</sup> British and German historians have used the U.S. civil rights

6 John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana, 1995); Jo Ann Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It* (Knoxville, 1987); Vicki Crawford et al., eds., *Women in the Civil Rights Movement Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941–1965* (New York, 1990); Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York, 1981); Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill, 2003); and Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York, 1993).

7 Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Use of the Past,” *Journal of American History* 91,

no. 4 (March 2005): 1233–63; Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape and Resistance — a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York, 2011).

8 See, e.g., Carol Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955* (Cambridge, UK, 2003); and idem, *Bourgeois Radicals: The NAACP and the Struggle for Colonial Liberation, 1941–1960* (Cambridge, UK, 2014); as well as Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, MA, 2001).

9 See, e.g., Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black*

*Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley, 1998); Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill, 2013); Tanisha C. Ford, “SNCC Women, Denim, and the Politics of Dress,” *Journal of Southern History* 79, no. 3 (2013): 625–58; Ruth Feldstein, *How It Feels to Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford, 2013); Shana L. Redmond, *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora* (New York, 2013); Sharon Monteith, *SNCC’s Stories: Narrative Culture and the Southern Freedom Struggle of the 1960s* (Athens, 2015); and Emily Raymond, *Stars for Freedom: Hollywood, Black Celebrities, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Seattle, 2015).

10 The earliest examples of such scholarship include Immanuel Geiss, *Die Afro-Amerikaner* (Frankfurt, 1969); and Heinrich Grosse, *Die Macht der Armen: Martin Luther King und der Kampf für soziale Gerechtigkeit* (Hamburg, 1971). Some other examples of groundbreaking British and German studies of the civil rights movement are Richard H. King, *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom* (Oxford, 1992); Brian Ward, *Media, Culture, and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle* (Gainesville, 2003); Sharon Monteith and Peter Ling, *Gender in the Civil Rights Movement* (New Brunswick, 2004); Manfred Berg, *The Ticket to Freedom: The NAACP and the Struggle for Black Political Integration* (Gainesville, 2005); and Iwan Morgan and Philip Davies, eds., *From Sit-Ins to SNCC: The Student Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s* (Gainesville, 2012). See also Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson, *From Protest to Politics: Schwarze Frauen in der Bürgerrechtsbewegung und im Kongress der Vereinigten Staaten* (Frankfurt, New York, 1998); idem, *Dreams and Nightmares: Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and the Struggle for Black Equality in America* (Gainesville, 2012); and Simon Wend, *The Spirit and the Shotgun: Armed Resistance and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Gainesville, 2006). Of course, much excellent scholarship exists on the civil rights movement in other European countries, but it is beyond the scope of this volume to include it here.

movement as a sounding board for comparing and contrasting racial and ethnic tensions among European populations of color. Post-1945 Europe witnessed significant growth in the population of blacks due to romantic relationships and marriages between African American soldiers and European women against a complex backdrop of rising immigration from former colonies. The visibility and activism of these communities naturally led to comparisons to the black civil rights movement in the U.S. Additionally, the movement's idealism and commitment to democracy also prompted young Europeans to consider the future of their respective nation's commitment to these principles, as well as the role Europe should play in securing global peace in the decades of post-World War II reconstruction.<sup>11</sup>

African American artists, scholars, and soldiers fueled the notion that France, Britain, and postwar Germany were racial havens for blacks seeking refuge from Jim Crow, and historians sometimes uncritically reproduced these characterizations. But European scholars have also provided a sound corrective to this truncated perception by highlighting the way icons of the U.S. civil rights movement helped European communities of color coalesce around issues of race and class discrimination. Relatedly, transatlantic communication about what civil rights means in each national context helps scholars appreciate the specificity of place, as well as the intricacies of confluences and collaborations. In his new study on Malcolm X's visit to Britain in 1964, volume contributor Stephen Tuck captures British understandings of the Black Power movement in the last moments of Malcolm X's life and examines how American racial politics informed a burgeoning racial consciousness among British people of color.<sup>12</sup> Transatlantic connections are also important to Maria Höhn and Martin Klimke's examination of black soldiers in occupied Germany after the fall of Nazism because they credit exchanges between these soldiers and West Germans with broadening awareness of U.S. civil rights and fortifying the hopes of those dedicated to establishing a truly democratic Germany.<sup>13</sup>

With a strong foundation of scholarship on both sides of the Atlantic, a conference at the German Historical Institute in Washington, DC, held in September 2013, served as the inspiration of this volume. Initiated by three movement scholars — from Germany (Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson), the United Kingdom (Sharon Monteith), and the United States (Marcia Chatelain) — this meeting of historians and civil rights activists from the United States and Europe convened to commemorate the

11 See, e.g., Norbert Finzsch and Dietmar Schirmer, *Identity and Intolerance: Nationalism, Racism, and Xenophobia in Germany and the United States* (Cambridge, New York, 1998); Günter H. Lenz and Peter J. Ling, eds., *Multiculturalism, National Identity, and the Uses of the Past* (Amsterdam, 2000); and Robin D. G. Kelley and Stephen Tuck, eds., *The Other Special Relationship: Race, Rights, and Riots in Britain and the United States* (New York, 2015).

12 Stephen Tuck, *The Night Malcolm X Spoke at the Oxford Union: The Transatlantic Story of Antiracist Protest* (Berkeley, 2014).

13 Maria Höhn and Martin Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom: The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany* (New York, 2010). Photography scholar Tina Campt takes up the issue of Afro-European identity in *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham, 2012). See also Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson, "We Shall Overcome": The Impact of the American Occupation and the Black Civil Rights Movement on Race Relations and Social Protest in Germany," in *The Transatlantic Sixties: Europe and the United States in the Counterculture Decade*, ed. Clara Juncker, Gregorz Kosci, Sharon Monteith, and Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson, 66-97 (Bielefeld, 2013).

fiftieth anniversary of the march. Determined to tell the march's untold stories and to assess the immediate as well as long-term legacy of this seminal event, the new research contained in this *GHI Bulletin* aims to capture the multiplicity of perspectives and conditions that made and sustained that moment in 1963 on both sides of the Atlantic.

This volume begins with a prologue by movement alumnus, scholar, and editor of Martin Luther King Jr.'s papers, Clayborne Carson, who challenges the reader to reconsider the periodization of King's life as a political and intellectual radical. Resisting the narrative of King's slow crawl toward an anti-capitalist position, Carson argues in favor of a long view of King's appreciation of socialism, his embrace of economic and structural analyses of racism, and the high stakes involved in keeping King's ideological commitments quiet. He presents King as a scholar, activist, and pragmatist who may have only been able to fully share his views with his spouse, Coretta Scott King, and encourages scholars — junior and senior — to use not only King's public proclamations but also his private papers, especially his letters to Coretta, to develop a more complete picture of the famous leader.

Despite the contemporary focus on the "I Have a Dream" speech, the actual March on Washington program was filled with presentations that warrant serious, scholarly attention. The first section, "Music and the March," thus highlights one type of presentation — the musical performances — to consider the relationship between the movement and popular music. In his piece, Brian Ward analyzes how the interracial lineup of musical acts — from Peter, Paul, and Mary to Joan Baez and the SNCC Freedom Singers — reflected the way that folk music and reworded Negro spirituals became freedom music. While protest songs helped to organize and inspire those involved in the mass movement, popular musical acts were slow to enter the public fray of civil rights. Ward seeks to answer why, despite the clear interest of rhythm-and-blues artists in the civil rights movement, so few of them were publicly visible in its activities, including the March on Washington. Using oral histories and biographies, Ward looks at how black popular musicians in jazz and rhythm and blues negotiated their politics and their popularity. Ward's essay reminds us of the importance of the sounds of freedom present at the march and throughout the African American freedom struggle.

The second section, "Transatlantic Legacies," then moves away from the march itself to reflect on the ways that the march, the

civil rights movement more generally, and Martin Luther King Jr. were perceived in Germany and England. Given King's position as an ordained Baptist minister, it may come as a surprise that so few people in former West Germany thought of King as a theologian. In his contribution, Michael Haspel considers why this was so and contrasts this West German view, which remains dominant even today, with the East German context in which King's spiritual significance was widely recognized. By examining the impact of King's life and legacy on Germany before unification in 1990, Haspel traces the origins and demonstrates the limits of the West German view of King as primarily a social activist. By exploring King's theological texts, homiletics, and "his understanding of the *imago Dei*," he makes a compelling case for understanding King as a leader of both social and spiritual significance.

Activist and religious leader Heinrich Grosse, who traveled to Mississippi in the 1960s, writes a tribute to King's impact on German social movements after the 1963 march and beyond his death five years later. Grosse emphasizes the transnational nature of the movement and contends that many Germans "remembered the disturbing pictures of the brutal attacks on peaceful demonstrators in Birmingham, Alabama, only a few months [before the march]," and that these memories profoundly shaped their reactions to this historical event. Grosse's essay is a beautiful meditation on King and an introduction to the German context for understanding U.S. civil rights, with a brief history of the social movements that challenged the divided nation. From protests against the *Notstandsgesetze* (German Emergency Acts) in 1968 and the anti-nuclear proliferation movement to the rise in environmental activism, the March on Washington was present at the inception and growth of all efforts to organize Germans to resist state power and abuse. Grosse also pays particular attention to the immediate and long-term effects of King's visit to both West and East Berlin in 1964 and illustrates the centrality of the movement and its legacy for the demonstrations in East Germany that eventually brought down the Berlin Wall and the communist regime in 1989.

This section concludes with British scholar Stephen Tuck's piece on the ways the March on Washington was interpreted and understood around the world, and particularly among communities of color in the United Kingdom. After noting that "there were demonstrations

in support of the March on Washington outside the American embassies in Egypt, Jamaica, Paris, Ghana, Israel, and Norway,” Tuck shifts his attention to London, where 750 people marched from the Ladbroke Grove subway station to the American embassy three days after the march. Although Tuck cautions against making false equivalencies between the U.S. and the U.K., calling the British movement “asymmetrical” to King’s movement, his essay reveals how Jamaican immigrants sought their own remedies for racial exclusion. By examining the “James Crow, Esquire” system of racism in the U.K. in a transatlantic context, Tuck’s research advances a movement history steeped in diasporic, transnational conceptions of the world.

The third section, “Different Views and Voices,” sheds light on features of the march and people’s responses to it that have heretofore been rather hidden from view. Stephen Whitfield highlights Rabbi Joachim Prinz, the barely remembered president of the American Jewish Congress who spoke at the march. Whitfield’s examination of Prinz and his influence on the lives of American Jews emphasizes the interreligious and interfaith aspects of both the march and the larger movement. Having fled the growing persecution of Jews in Germany in the 1930s, Prinz found Southern racism in the United States as intolerable as Nazism — a racism of which Jews were also sometimes guilty. Writing of Prinz’s reaction to a racial incident that involved a black friend in Atlanta in 1937, Whitfield explains how Prinz “told his hosts how appalled he was that Jews, who were ‘the classic victims of racial persecution,’ could be racist.” Prinz also compared the fate of Southern blacks to the experiences of the Jewish people in Europe during the Nazi era. Whitfield elaborates on the comparison via a textual analysis of Harper Lee’s 1960 novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which portrays racism in a Southern town during the Great Depression. As Whitfield shows, Prinz’s presence of mind and his commitment to justice placed him in an important genealogy of progressive Jews who supported civil rights.

The other often hidden voices were those of conservative blacks who were highly critical of the March on Washington, which Angela Dillard studies in her contribution. While the historical footage and photographs of the more than 250,000 marchers on the National Mall indicates widespread support for the freedom struggle, it does not mean there was a univocal idea of freedom and civil rights. Dillard’s treatment of James Meredith — the Air

Force veteran who integrated the University of Mississippi in 1962 — and Reverend J. H. Jackson — president of the National Baptist Convention and head of the prominent Olivet Baptist Church in Chicago — is a refreshing break from expected statements about conflicts between King and the supposedly more radical, black nationalist Malcolm X. Incorporating Meredith's and Jackson's conservative critiques of King, the march, as well as the goals of the mainstream civil rights organizations into her analysis, Dillard challenges scholars to engage more deeply with intra-racial dissent. She also cautions against letting present feelings about the march stand in for historical analysis and shows how divisive the March on Washington was among contemporary Americans in general as well as within American African communities. By exposing neglected but principled stances against the march, Dillard's essay provides a new lens through which to look at these political, social, and ideological fissures.

The final section, "Visual Histories and Cultural Memories," turns to media presentations relating to the march and to Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination five years later, highlighting the media's role in generating the contemporary importance, as well as the cultural memories, of these events. Allison Graham elucidates the context of the march's media presentation within 1960s news programming, documentary filmmaking, and American celebrity culture, bringing connections together with an examination of the broadcast of a public affairs show entitled *Hollywood Roundtable* that aired immediately after the march. The roundtable featured writer James Baldwin, actors Harry Belafonte, Marlon Brando, Sidney Poitier, and Charlton Heston, and director-screenwriter Joseph Mankiewicz. As Graham's analysis shows, these men successfully turned "attention from the cause of the march to the fact of the march" by discussing the paradox of a democracy that allowed for such a public demonstration even as it needed such a call for equal rights.

Lastly, David Chappell's essay tackles common misconceptions about the aftermath of King's 1968 murder in Memphis, namely, the belief that the announcement of his assassination on April 4 led to widespread violence on America's city streets. Chappell illustrates that many textbooks and retrospective media accounts of King's assassination to this day recall a "national upheaval, a great orgy of violence and destruction" that is actually quite misleading. By looking



at the facts of the days after King's death rather than fears about the effects people expected King's death to have, Chappell not only corrects the myth of a violent uprising but also alerts scholars to King's legacy beyond the "I Have a Dream" speech. He places special emphasis on the important political gains of the civil rights movement after King's death, including the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1968 (which focused on King's goal of eliminating discrimination in housing), the renewal and extension of the 1965 Voting Rights Act in 1982, the adoption of the King Holiday in 1986, and King-inspired activism surrounding sanctions applied to apartheid South Africa. By drawing a direct line from 1963 and 1968 to the present, Chappell points to both dreams that have been realized and those yet to be fulfilled.

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We know some of the names — Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Abernathy, Rosa Parks, and Ella Baker — but these are not the only ones that represent the magnitude and importance of the struggle; we know some of the places — Montgomery, Oxford, Greensboro, Selma — but we still need to expand our ideas about the geographical boundaries of the movement; we know some of the legacies — the passage of civil rights legislation, the end of apartheid, and the election of President Barack Obama — yet we know that we are always building upon the past. Given the state of race relations in America today, it is clear that many of the movement goals have yet to be fulfilled. This volume is dedicated to all the individuals whose courage

and selfless commitment to the struggle for justice still inspire us. Their visions of freedom were expressed in the many marches and movements whose stories we are still challenged to discover, research, teach, and tell.

### About the Editors

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**Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson** is Deputy Director of the German Historical Institute in Washington, DC, and Professor of American History at the University of Munich. Her main research interests are Transatlantic History, African American Studies, Gender, and American Religious History. Her recent publications include *Dreams and Nightmares: Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X and the Struggle for Black Equality in America* (2012); *The Transatlantic Sixties: Europe and the United States in the Countercultural Decade* (2013); and *Malcolm X: Der schwarze Revolutionär* (2015).

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**Marcia Chatelain** is Assistant Professor of History and African American Studies at Georgetown University in Washington, DC. Her book *South Side Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration* was recently published by Duke University Press. She is currently researching a book about the relationship among civil rights, fast food, and black capitalism.

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**Sharon Monteith** is Professor of American Studies at the University of Nottingham and Co-Director (with Zoe Trodd) of the Centre for Research in Race and Rights located there. She works across literature, history, film, media, and cultural studies, usually in interdisciplinary studies of the civil rights movement and the American South. She has written and (co-)edited several books, including *The Cambridge Companion to Southern Literature* (2013) and is currently completing *SNCC's Stories: Narrative Culture and the Southern Freedom Struggle of the 1960s* for the University of Georgia Press and *The Civil Rights Movement: A Literary History* for Cambridge University Press.