

# ‘How long? Not long’: *Selma*, Martin Luther King and civil rights narratives

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**ABSTRACT** Richard H. King’s article begins by examining the way Ava DuVernay’s recent film *Selma* deals with the relationship between Martin Luther King and previous accounts/representations of the Civil Rights Movement, and how other feature films such as *Mississippi Burning* and documentaries such as Stanley Nelson’s *Freedom Summer* depict the movement. This in turn raises the question of what the dominant narrative of the Civil Rights Movement actually has been, and still is. King concludes that it is the King-centred ‘From Montgomery to Memphis’ narrative. He goes on to explore the ways in which this dominant narrative has been challenged by, for instance, the SNCC-related narrative found, most accessibly, in Nelson’s documentary and, more broadly conceived, in Jacqueline Dowd Hall’s influential 2005 article ‘The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past’. Also, along the way, King discusses the relative strengths of feature films *v.* documentaries in illuminating the past. When comparing this with the written historiography of the Civil Rights Movement, he also explores the importance of the public *v.* private and the history *v.* memory debates for understanding the past. King’s article concludes by examining the persistence of the Martin Luther King tradition in American politics and of Reverend King’s reputation, as suggested by recent works such as David Chappell’s *Waking from the Dream*.

**KEYWORDS** Ava DuVernay, Civil Rights Movement, CORE, David Chappell, documentary films, history *v.* memory, Long Civil Rights Movement, Lyndon B. Johnson, Martin Luther King, SCLC, SNCC, *Selma*

An enduring cliché about the United States is that its collective memory is a pretty frail thing. The idea of starting over always, it is claimed, trumps the lessons of tradition. But that is only a partial truth. Historically, the white South has nurtured cults of memory that possess considerable political power and are far from mere cultural window-dressing. Activities such as Civil War re-enactments remain popular in the region, while the recent funeral for Reverend Clementa Pinckney in Charleston, South Carolina forcefully made the point that the Civil Rights Movement is not past history but something that remains alive in contemporary consciousness. Of the unsavoury role that the Confederate battle flag has played in preserving enthusiasm for the ‘Lost Cause’, little more needs to be said. In general, the way that the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King in particular, has

been incorporated into the standard narrative of American political history is a remarkable testimony to the presence of the past in the present.<sup>1</sup>

2015 has been a year rich in reverberations from the racial past of the United States. It is no accident that the film *Selma* was released on 9 January 2015, since this year was also the fiftieth anniversary of the Voting Rights Act that President Lyndon Johnson signed into law in early August 1965, while the Civil War ended 150 years ago on 9 April 1865 and President Lincoln died from an assassin's bullet just under a week later, on 14 April. President Obama also journeyed to Selma, Alabama to deliver an address marking the fiftieth anniversary of 'Bloody Sunday' on 7 March 2015. On that day, fifty years earlier, civil rights marchers, mainly citizens of Selma, were beaten to the ground by Alabama state troopers as they retreated back across Edmund Pettus Bridge after having barely started their march to the state capital in Montgomery. Without the Selma campaign and the eventual march from Selma to Montgomery, there would have been no Voting Rights Act in August. Early in his campaigning for president, Obama spoke at Brown Chapel AME Church in Selma on 4 March 2007 to an audience full of ministers and other veterans of the movement and of the 1965 march. Finally, when Obama spoke in Selma on Bloody Sunday 2015, he had been invited there by former civil rights activist and now Congressman John Lewis of Georgia. Those who have seen the documentaries of the movement or Ava DuVernay's *Selma* (more of which shortly) will remember the young John Lewis, then chairman of SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee), as one of the two leaders of the first march across Edmund Pettus Bridge.<sup>2</sup> All the more appropriate, then, that Obama and Lewis returned to be the two featured speakers on Bloody Sunday 2015.

In light of all this, how do we assess DuVernay's new film *Selma*? Does it tell us anything new about Martin Luther King? And how does it fit into the various narratives of the movement in circulation? I emphasize 'various' here since, for most Americans of both races, the dominant narrative of the movement moves geographically, politically and symbolically from Montgomery (Alabama) to Memphis (Tennessee), from the sudden appearance on the public stage of a twenty-nine-year-old black Baptist minister to lead a bus boycott in December 1955 to his assassination at the Lorraine Motel in April of 1968. Yet historically this King-centred narrative has never gone unchallenged, especially from the black college students and community-based organizations that constituted another wing of the movement that emphasized the importance of SNCC and CORE (Congress of Racial

1 Under a certain amount of pressure, President Ronald Reagan signed into law a bill making King's birthday a national holiday in 1983. See David L. Chappell, *Waking from the Dream: The Struggle for Civil Rights in the Shadow of Martin Luther King, Jr* (New York: Random House 2014), chap. 4, 91–123.

2 *Selma*, dir. Ava DuVernay, 2014, UK release 6 February 2015. For Obama's first Selma speech, see David Remnick, 'Prologue: the Joshua generation', in David Remnick, *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama* (London: Picador 2010), 3–25.

Equality). More recently, historian Jacqueline Dowd Hall's influential article 'The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past' (2005) has also attracted no little attention, since it also challenges the King-centred version of the movement's history.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, then, does DuVernay's *Selma* help shed light on this historiographical dispute? Can a narrative 'feature' film do that sort of historical work? What are the relative strengths and weaknesses of such films and, say, documentaries? How does the King-dominated narrative of the movement hold up and how important was his tradition in American politics after his assassination in April 1968?

### **Selma/Selma**

Hollywood has always had a problem with films about the Civil Rights Movement. Obviously, there has been a problem financing them. That is, how can they be made palatable to white southern audiences, in particular, and to white Americans, in general? In the case at hand, credit belongs to actor Brad Pitt and especially Oprah Winfrey for their financial aid making it possible for Ava DuVernay to make *Selma*. There are also, however, generic and artistic considerations. Hollywood directors know how to make war movies and murder mysteries, but not movies about racial lynchings or the process of organizing grassroots political movements in the rural and small-town South.<sup>4</sup> For example, British-born director Alan Parker's *Mississippi Burning* (1988) vividly captured the ominous atmosphere of white Mississippi during Freedom Summer in 1964. Its strongest suit is its verisimilitude in capturing the brooding sense of violence in the Magnolia state. Yet Parker and his scriptwriter Chris Gerolmo sacrificed the film's historical credibility by making two FBI agents the heroes of the film and failing to mention, much less explore, the work that the civil rights organizations (known under the umbrella term COFO) actually did.<sup>5</sup> Two FBI agents—played by Gene Hackman and Willem Dafoe—become law enforcement heroes who spearhead the effort, not to mention the black FBI man who we see intimidating witnesses to get information about the three missing civil rights workers. In fact, the FBI sent no African American agents to Mississippi, while to make the FBI

3 Jacqueline Dowd Hall, 'The Long Civil Rights Movement and the political uses of the past', *Journal of American History*, vol. 91, no. 4, 2005, 1233–65. For the early post-assassination years, I will be examining Chappell's *Waking from the Dream* later in this piece.

4 Historically, it has done somewhat better with labour organizing and protest. In recent memory, *Norma Rae* (1979) and *Silkwood* (1983) are two mainstream movies that stick in the mind.

5 COFO stands for Council of Federated Organizations, the name of the umbrella organization that coordinated civil rights activities in Mississippi between 1962 and 1965. It was constituted by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), CORE and SNCC, with Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) playing hardly any part.

itself the key organization in the Mississippi freedom struggle verges on the politically and morally grotesque. Perhaps Parker thought that it would have diverted too much from the narrative thrust of the film to suggest, much less show, that FBI director J. Edgar Hoover was an arch-enemy of the movement. (Perhaps Parker and company didn't really know this or consider it that important.) But *Selma* has no such qualms about showing Hoover out to get King and the movement generally.<sup>6</sup> It fits very comfortably into the standard, King-centred, Montgomery-to-Memphis narrative of the movement. In fact, the organizing and marching from Selma to Montgomery for voting rights was the last great success of the King-led movement.

Still, *Selma* has ignited a historical controversy. Professional historians (an overwhelmingly liberal lot) and political veterans of the time (of both races) have protested at the way that the film depicts the relationship between Martin Luther King and President Johnson in the half-year after the latter signed the Public Accommodations Act on 2 July 1964. As the film tells the story, Dr King's preference was for a strong voting rights bill and thus further public protests, marches and action outside of the normal political institutions, while President Johnson, less than a year in office, wanted to shift the focus to economic issues and thus *also* get people off the streets in order to calm things down. Many felt that it was time, as activist Bayard Rustin phrased it, to move 'from protest to politics'. Picketing, mass marches, freedom rides and sit-ins had been crucial in bringing the movement to where it was; but it was time, claimed Rustin, to pay more attention to changing public policy, particularly in the area of economic relief and recovery for poor Americans of all colours.<sup>7</sup> One of King's lieutenants (Andrew Young), former SNCC worker and later historian Julian Bond, Clifford Alexander, a black cabinet member under Johnson, and one of Johnson's closest advisors, Joseph Califano, have all claimed that DuVernay's film places way too much emphasis on the conflict between King and Johnson.<sup>8</sup> More seriously, *Selma*

6 For an overview of *Mississippi Burning's* relationship to the historical record, see Wayne King, 'Film; fact vs. fiction in Mississippi', *New York Times*, 4 December 1988. In Stanley Nelson's excellent documentary *Freedom Summer*, tapes from the Johnson White House allow us to hear Hoover say to President Johnson: 'She's a Communist', in reference to Rita Schwerner, the wife of one of the three missing civil rights workers; Johnson replies that she acted 'worse than a Communist' (*Freedom Summer*, dir. Stanley Nelson, Firelight Media (2014), 113 minutes). Season 1 of Henry Hampton's *Eyes on the Prize* contains six episodes including 'Mississippi: is this America? (1962-4)' and 'Bridge to freedom (1965)': *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years 1954-1965*, dir. Henry Hampton, Blackside Films (1987). See also James I. Deutsch's review of *Selma* in *Journal of American History*, vol. 102, no. 1, 2015, 321-2. Refreshingly, for historians, Deutsch concentrates on formal/technical issues and how they affect the substantive message of the film.

7 Bayard Rustin, 'From protest to politics: the future of the Civil Rights Movement', *Commentary*, vol. 39, no. 2, 1965.

8 Darryl Pinckney, 'Some different ways of looking at Selma', *New York Review of Books*, vol. 62, no. 3, 2015, 23-5 (23); Joseph A. Califano, Jr, 'The movie "Selma" has a glaring flaw', *Washington Post*, 26 December 2014.

also suggests that Johnson, frustrated by King's refusal to fall into line, gives Hoover the go-ahead to send incriminating evidence of King's extramarital activities to a number of national and regional newspapers, and to Coretta Scott King herself.

The problem is that the historiography of the movement and the testimony of those close to the situation fail to corroborate the story told in *Selma*. It was Attorney-General Bobby Kennedy who gave Hoover permission to tap King's phones, not LBJ. Moreover, civil rights historian David Garrow has noted that the decision to wiretap King and send the tapes out to the press (and to Coretta Scott King) was made in late 1964 and had no 'direct connection to Selma or to Johnson'.<sup>9</sup> Nor was there a major division of opinion between King and Johnson about legislative strategy after the summer of 1964. In short, they were allies not adversaries. Yet it is not at all implausible that there was tension between King and Johnson; nor does it speak ill of LBJ particularly. King and Johnson were two strong-willed political men, shown arguing forcefully with each other in a private meetings and communications. DuVernay shows King assertive in these confrontations, right up in LBJ's face with his demands. In fact, most people in the movement were suspicious of Johnson. He had a well-earned reputation as a wheeler-dealer, and many thought he was a typical 'cracker' (southern) politician. In addition, there was already growing unease with the deepening involvement in Vietnam. (The Johnson-supported Gulf of Tonkin resolution in the late summer of 1964 was partly responsible.) Most of all, Johnson had rejected the movement's argument against seating the regular white Mississippi delegation at the August 1964 Democratic Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. King was one of those who finally accepted the compromise Johnson offered on the issue, but no one in the movement was happy about it, including King. SNCC workers, almost to a man and women, were bitterly opposed to accepting the Atlantic City compromise that would have given the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party only two seats in the delegation. So feelings were running high and disagreements were inevitable between the President and the movement.<sup>10</sup> But the serious issue with regard to the film is that it *does* unfairly tarnish Johnson's reputation by suggesting that he was the one who gave Hoover the go-ahead to use the tapes against King and his wife.

'Ava DuVernay Didn't See the Reaction to *Selma* Coming' runs the title of one article on this controversy in the media. Overall, DuVernay claimed that her film was supposed to be about the African American people who were involved in the momentous events of the 1950s and 1960s. For her, it is

9 Alec Harrington, 'Selma vs. LBJ', *First of the Month* (online), February 2015, available on the *First of the Month* website at [www.firstofthemonth.org/archives/2015/02/in\\_1991\\_oliver.html](http://www.firstofthemonth.org/archives/2015/02/in_1991_oliver.html) (viewed 21 September 2015). Surprisingly, Deutsch bypasses this issue entirely (see note 6), while, otherwise, making a good case for DuVernay's fairness to Johnson.

10 See also *Freedom Summer* for a documentary version of the Atlantic City dispute between Johnson and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

neither Martin Luther King's nor Lyndon Johnson's film. But, she has admitted that she was more worried by the warts-and-all-portrait she drew of King than she was about her treatment of Johnson.<sup>11</sup> Her approach is one, she adds, that is 'not concerned with the minutiae of history'. What the movie represents (she noted to PBS *NewsHour* interviewer, Gwen Ifill) 'is the way I see it'. It is 'one vision' of Johnson but not the only one possible. In fact, DuVernay reports that she 'gets applause in most screenings'.<sup>12</sup>

She is not the only person, white or black, then or now, who has failed to respond with much sympathy to Lyndon Johnson. (Once, when Johnson complained to Dean Acheson that people didn't seem to like him, Acheson responded tartly: 'Mr President, you aren't very likable.') On the other hand, the importance of Robert Caro's great biography of Johnson, which now stands at four volumes, has been to deepen our understanding of Johnson and, for many, to increase their sympathy with him (though Caro's yet-to-appear last volume is the one in which Vietnam will be treated). The most bothersome thing in all this is that DuVernay doesn't seem to 'get' the objection to her treatment of Johnson. It's not a matter of her particular interpretation or personal preferences ('the way I see it'). On the interpretive level, her desire to avoid 'white-saviour' history is also understandable.<sup>13</sup> Where she goes wrong is in *inventing* an actual event—LBJ's phone call to FBI Director Hoover—to bolster her interpretation. To make things even murkier, the scene fades out before we hear Johnson speak to Hoover, so we don't know exactly what he's calling Hoover about, but the context definitely leads us to believe that he's giving Hoover the go-ahead to disseminate the tapes. It is hard to see this divergence from the record as just a matter of the 'minutiae of history'. Clearly much of what historians do is interpretive, trying to grasp and then construct a narrative of the overall meaning of historical events. But they are also concerned with, and responsible for, getting facts correct, including not making things up without labelling them as such. Of course, feature films such as *Selma* can emphasize matters of fact in ways that shape the meaning of its subject matter. Some historical films combine or omit characters for purposes of narrative efficiency or power. But inventing new facts to cast doubt on the reputation of a major historical figure pushes cinematic license beyond what should be allowed.

DuVernay comes to her director's role from a complex background. Originally from Southern California, her stepfather hailed from Hayneville, Alabama, to which she returned every summer when she was growing up. What neither she nor anyone else has mentioned is that Hayneville, the

11 Ava DuVernay interview with A. O. Scott, 'Ava DuVernay didn't see the reaction to "Selma" coming', *New York Times Magazine*, 15 February 2015.

12 Ava DuVernay interview with Gwen Ifill, broadcast on PBS *NewsHour*, 8 January 2015, available on *YouTube* at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=XmVZReyHa-M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XmVZReyHa-M) (viewed 21 September 2015).

13 Ava DuVernay interview with Gavin Edwards, 'We shall overcome: Ava DuVernay on making *Selma*', *Rolling Stone*, 5 January 2016.

county seat of the notorious Lowndes County ('Bloody Lowndes') adjoins Dallas County, of which Selma is the county seat. One salient fact: there were exactly *no* black voters registered to vote in Lowndes County in the summer of 1965, though African Americans made up 80 per cent of its population. The small town was the site of the cold-blooded murder on 20 August 1965 of a white civil rights worker, Jonathan Daniels, by local white man Tom Coleman. This was a mere two weeks *after* Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act. (Apparently, Daniels had earlier shared a jail cell with prominent SNCC activist Stokely Carmichael, who was powerfully affected by his friend's death.) But DuVernay's *Selma* never shows much interest in what SNCC was doing in Lowndes County, where her relatives lived. The film presents James Forman, the executive secretary of SNCC, as a sulky youth who initially refuses to participate in the King-led march. In fact, Forman was a year older than Martin Luther King. Ironically, Lewis's prominent role in the Selma campaign and the march to Montgomery, and his cooperation with King's SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) in this period, weakened his position in SNCC. Later, in early 1966, Stokely Carmichael succeeded Lewis as chair of SNCC and took the organization down the road to Black Power as an all-black organization. Parenthetically, SNCC eventually allowed its workers and organizers to participate in the march as individuals, something that Forman himself did. More explanation of this conflict between King's SCLC and SNCC might have been worked into the film.<sup>14</sup>

What will audiences presented with a representation of the Selma campaign for the first time take away from *Selma*? It is a film that unfolds at a solemn, measured pace and is aware of its duty to educate its audience. DuVernay deserves considerable credit for expecting the movie's viewers to be interested in debates about strategy and tactics in the Selma campaign. With little fanfare, Malcolm X is shown briefly assuring Coretta Scott King that he is not there to disrupt the plans her husband has for the campaign. These touches contribute to the verisimilitude of the film, giving it the feel of authenticity that fictional films, with an historical interest, need to convey. One delightful scene shows King and his lieutenants having breakfast at a supporter's house in Selma just after they have arrived. It is one of the places where the film almost palpably relaxes. Those present are ribbing each other, playing

14 In Lowndes County, SNCC workers, who were trying to register and organize black voters, faced the constant possibility of death. This began in the autumn of 1965 when SNCC began organizing the (original short-lived) Black Panther Party, or the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, so that black voters could vote for BPP candidates, not for the regular Democratic Party ones in the primary elections. (The Alabama Democratic Party had a Whites-only policy for candidates in Black Belt counties like Lowndes.) For a brief history of SNCC and Lowndes County, see Rebecca Woodham, 'Lowndes County Freedom Organization', *Encyclopedia of Alabama* (online), 25 September 2008 (revised 29 November 2012), available at [www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-1781](http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-1781) ofalabama.org/article/h-1781 (viewed 21 September 2015); and Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Vintage 1967), 98–121.

things for laughs. King had a good sense of humour and didn't exude measured gravitas all the time. The meeting of the representatives of the various civil rights organizations after the second, aborted march also conveys a real sense of the tensions at work among the various personalities and different organizations involved in the Selma campaign. Still, the film can also seem stiffly acted and lacking a certain fluidity.

Moreover, *Selma* simply can't compete with the terrific documentaries of the movement such as Henry Hampton's *Eyes on the Prize* and Stanley Nelson's more recent documentaries depicting collective action.<sup>15</sup> That said, *Selma*'s recreation of the state troopers' attack on the first marchers (on Bloody Sunday) is awful to see again and awfully well done. It manages to convey the claustrophobic panic of the marchers as they flee, blinded, through the haze of tear gas. At one point in the film, Coretta King speaks of the 'fog of death' hanging over the movement; the scene on the bridge is a cogent example of what she is talking about. But though the bridge scenes are powerful, the film's crowd scenes with Sheriff Jim Clark in downtown Selma palpably lack the aura of authenticity linked with newsreel footage that in turn contributes to the verisimilitude of the film. On the other hand, a documentary does not take us inside the home, much less into the bedroom. We have no newsreel footage of private moments when the subtleties of intimate exchanges are explored. That isn't what documentaries are 'for'. A documentary is concerned with learning the facts and circumstances about its subject matter that are then used to construct a broader historical narrative. But though it strives for factual truth and a convincing narrative, a documentary film generally doesn't strive for verisimilitude, the illusion of historical reality unfolding, so much as it tries to give us the truth about the building blocks of that historical story. In *Selma*, the scene in which Coretta and Martin listen to the tape Hoover's FBI has sent to her is uncomfortable, even for the viewer. Most of us know that he has been guilty of betraying his wife. When she asks him 'Do you love me?', he answers, 'Yes'. But her follow-up question, 'Do love me more than them?', puts him in a classic double-bind. An answer of *either* yes *or* no will confirm his infidelity. After a long pause, his answer is 'Yes'. We later learn that Martin and Coretta were estranged during part of the Selma crisis, but she returned to join him for the actual march. These scenes between them are acted—and directed—with great self-possession and the simulacrum of the real thing carries conviction.

A final comment about authenticity/verisimilitude. Copyright law has allowed Steven Spielberg to buy the intellectual property rights to King's words from King's estate. As things now stand, King's exact words were not allowed to be used in the film. The puzzling thing is that the documents

15 *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years 1954–1965* (Season 1) and *Eyes on the Prize: America at the Racial Crossroads 1965–1985* (Season 2), dir. Henry Hampton, Blackside Films (1987 and 1990, respectively).

containing those words are in the public domain and have been reproduced and cited in everything from student essays and term papers to scholarly books (including the title of this essay). Strangely, Darryl Pinckney in the *New York Review of Books* doesn't think this much matters, but it does. For example, 'Soon and very soon' is not a patch on 'How long? Not long', the motif/mantra King recited in his actual speech on the steps of the capital in Montgomery.<sup>16</sup> The film races through President Johnson's momentous speech to a joint session of Congress on March 1965 including his dramatic concluding lines: 'And we *shall* overcome.' But he is *so* obviously not speaking to a joint session of Congress in the US Capitol that the scene is practically thrown away. This is really a shame. The only time King's aides reported that they ever saw him cry was when he heard Johnson utter those now famous words. (I watched the speech on television in March 1965 and it was a real cold-chill moment when we saw and heard Johnson's east Texas accent pronouncing those four magic words.) But, as it now stands in *Selma*, this whole episode has a low-rent, low-budget feel to it. There is no moral or historical justification for the restriction on the use of King's own words in feature films or documentaries.

### **Challenges to the standard civil rights narrative**

Even during the movement years, there were conflicting narratives about how the Civil Rights Movement should be understood. Already, the dominant narrative tended to make Martin Luther King its central figure, with movement goals being, first, the end of the Jim Crow system, that is, equal civil, social and political rights and, after 1965, social and economic justice. DuVernay's narrative of the movement may have eliminated the white saviour, but it tacitly proposes the need for a black one in the person of Martin Luther King. Yet others, often associated with SNCC and CORE, argued that the King tradition diminished the importance of community organizing of a participatory nature, while equating community mobilization with turning out people for mass marches. For SNCC, the goal was to 'organize these communities to take care of their own lives',<sup>17</sup> rather than departing the community before the new mood had taken root. There was also the feeling that King and the SCLC worked fairly closely with existing political institutions to accomplish its goals. More than SNCC or CORE, it was often in close touch with the White House, the Justice Department and even the FBI. The reason King turned his marchers around on the second attempt to march to Montgomery, as shown in *Selma*, was his agreement not to violate the *federal* court injunction against marching until that injunction (issued by Judge Frank Johnson) had

16 Pinckney, 'Some different ways of looking at Selma', 25; see also David Denby, 'Living history: "Selma" and "American Sniper"', *New Yorker*, 22 December 2014, 150–1.

17 *Freedom Summer*, dir. Nelson.

been lifted. *Selma* shows brief conversations with one of the best of the Justice Department officials, John Doar.<sup>18</sup>

The closest thing to a King-figure on the SNCC side was Robert Parris Moses, whose leadership style was ostensibly anti-charismatic, everything that King's wasn't. He did not seek to speak *for* the Mississippi communities where COFO was active, but to mobilize communities around the issues they thought were most important. Leaders would be drawn from the 'local' people. Where non-violent direct action was the political theory informing the early SNCC, CORE and King's SCLC, many in SNCC increasingly considered non-violence to be a tactic not a philosophy, a means not an end in itself. SCLC was clearly a religiously oriented and a predominantly southern organization, while SNCC was a much more secular and, truth to tell, a much more northern-oriented organization. SNCC increasingly scorned mainstream institutions and embraced an explicitly racial politics after 1965. Though SNCC was more racially mixed than SCLC before 1966, it moved quite quickly to embrace what became known as 'Black Power' and abandon non-violence as a philosophy. Thus, by the mid-1960s, or even earlier, significant differences divided the movement.<sup>19</sup>

If the narrative arc of the King tradition runs from Montgomery to Memphis, the SNCC-led narrative begins with the Greensboro sit-ins of February 1960 and the organization of SNCC in April 1960 in Raleigh, North Carolina. It was then consolidated and expanded by the Freedom Rides campaigns in which Reverend James Lawson and the mostly black students from Nashville along with CORE organizers and workers played a central role. Early voter registration drives in Mississippi led to the Mississippi Summer Project of 1964, at the end of which the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party challenged the credentials of the regular Mississippi delegation to the Democratic Convention in Atlantic City. Its last hurrah was the attempt to organize a Black Panther Party in Lowndes County, next door to Selma.<sup>20</sup>

One of the best ways to understand the emergence of the SNCC narrative of the Civil Rights Movement is to study Nelson's documentary, the anti-type of Parker's *Mississippi Burning* and a much needed complement to *Selma*. Both films, it should be emphasized, offer interpretations of the meaning of

18 See Raymond Arsenault, 'Lives: John Doar '44', *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, 4 February 2015, available on the *Princeton University* website at <http://paw.princeton.edu/issues/2015/02/04/pages/0555/index.xml> (viewed 21 September 2015).

19 For a general history of SNCC, see Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1981); for conversations with Robert Moses and Stokely Carmichael, see Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (New York: Random House 1965).

20 Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press 2006) is the definitive study of the Freedom Riders, but also emphasizes the importance for the evolution of the Civil Rights Movement as a whole of the Freedom Rides. For an outstanding documentary that is largely based on Arsenault's study, see *Freedom Riders*, dir. Stanley Nelson, American Experience, DVD AMX62308 (2011).

Freedom Summer, when somewhere between 800 and 1,000 mainly white college students from the North descended on Mississippi for the summer. But where Parker's film omits almost everything about the movement, except its link with the missing (because murdered) civil rights workers, Nelson's documentary follows the Mississippi Summer Project as the volunteers gathered at a college campus in Oxford, Ohio where training sessions were held. The bulk of the film focuses on Mississippi itself, while the climax comes with the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City. Nelson skilfully uses existing news and television footage, plus especially valuable interviews with volunteers, SNCC workers and local Mississippians, and plays these sources off against the pervasive anxiety among volunteers about the fate of James Chaney, Michael Schwerner and Mitchell Goodman, whose disappearance (and murder) on 21 June was announced in Ohio to volunteers, including Rita Schwerner. Where Parker's film goes for all the easy effects of violence and terror in the Mississippi night, Nelson's documentary operates according to another, more subtle and modulated, kind of dialogic, rather than narrative, verisimilitude. Remembered experiences are at the heart of Nelson's film. We see and hear Rita Schwerner, wife of Michael, being interviewed both in 1964 and much later when Nelson's documentary is being made. We learn about the very real doubts some black SNCC workers, such as Charlie Cobb, had about bringing white college students to Mississippi as volunteers. Some feared that 'white skin privilege' would intimidate the local black people in Mississippi but, instrumentally, the presence of young white people also guaranteed attention from white America if something happened to them. Robert Moses makes several appearances in Nelson's documentary, both as he *was* during Freedom Summer and as he *is* circa 2014. He talks about feeling considerable guilt about bringing young white students to Mississippi and the guilt, of course, became a reality. It is also interesting to note that Nelson's *Freedom Summer* includes almost nothing on Martin Luther King and the SCLC, since they played only a minimal role in Mississippi.<sup>21</sup>

But Nelson's documentary does incorporate a significant analytical dimension, something that feature films generally avoid for fear of being didactic. Where *Mississippi Burning* and *Selma* are judged by the verisimilitude of the narrative they construct, documentaries can also not just use, but also literally incorporate, actual interviews and news footage to establish the aims and goals of, in this case, Freedom Summer. It is not an interruption to spend time on such matters. But feature films, that is, fictional films, are in no position to discover new or different 'facts of the matter'. Nor are they in the business of telling the truth about an experience, as opposed to creating a meaningful narrative of that experience: one aims, first, for verisimilitude and then, perhaps, for truth. When a director such as DuVernay talks of not

21 King is shown briefly testifying before the Credentials Committee at the Democratic Convention, but nothing more.

being bothered by 'minutiae', she fails to recognize the need for *both* an interpretive *and* a factual dimension in constructing a narrative of the past. In sum, narratives have interpretive flexibility, as witness the dispute between the King-centred and the community-centred accounts of the movement; but they also must work within a certain framework of facts.

Beyond that, the analytical component of *Freedom Summer* helps create a deeper and fuller understanding of the Civil Rights Movement. Nelson's film contends that there were three aspects to Mississippi Freedom Summer. The first was to organize and register black voters in Mississippi. A second and more innovative aspect was to start Freedom Schools, where young black people in the hamlets and small towns of the state could study and discuss Mississippi and black history not in the regular public schools but in local community centres that were open in the summer. Finally, the third focus fell on the effort to organize the MFDP to challenge the regular, all white, Mississippi delegation to Atlantic City, a formidable task by any measure. What SNCC was doing in Lowndes County in 1965–6—voter registration and formation of the Black Panther Party—was a direct spin-off of Mississippi Freedom Summer.<sup>22</sup> With the documentary built on these three goals, it also takes on a momentum that builds to a climax; that is, it is not just feature films that create narratives.

In recent years, there has also been a powerful challenge to the dominant King-centred narrative from within the ranks of professional/academic scholars of African American history, Southern history and US history. Its radical orientation aligns it with the SNCC narrative of the movement to a degree, but it encompasses a greater time span and other political traditions. The source of this critique is University of North Carolina historian Jacqueline Dowd Hall's 2005 article 'The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past'.<sup>23</sup> Her substantial essay was published in the *Journal of American History*, and it bristled with footnotes and was crammed with references. Claiming that hers was a 'more progressive and *truer* story' of the Civil Rights Movement than the King-centred narrative,<sup>24</sup> the way she recalibrated the historical perspective can be seen in her contention that, for example, the origins of the movement lay not in the responses to the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 or the Montgomery bus boycott, but in

22 Classic works in this tradition of civil rights historiography are Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press 1995); and John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press 1995).

23 Hall, 'The Long Civil Rights Movement and the political uses of the past'. For an important response, see Erik Arnesen, 'Reconsidering the "Long Civil Rights Movement"', *Historically Speaking*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2009, 31–4. For a more recent article, focusing on the conflicting interpretations of the legal-constitutional aspects of the movement, see Tomiko Brown-Nagin, 'The civil rights canon', *Yale Law Journal*, vol. 123, no. 8, 2014, 2698–739.

24 Hall, 'The Long Civil Rights Movement and the political uses of the past', 1235.

the Popular Front liberalism and radicalism of the late 1930s and on into the Second World War.

After 1945, however, Hall contends that the nascent movement was stifled by a newly emergent political conservatism of anti-New Dealers and the red-baiting anti-Communists of the Cold War-to-be. In the post-war mood of ideological retrenchment, the labour movement and union organizing were branded as too radical and seen as vehicles of subversion rather than as mainstream reform.<sup>25</sup> Thus, when the movement emerged in the mid-to-late 1950s, there was no secular labour movement to serve as an ally, not to mention the South's traditional hostility to unionism anyway. In the wake of the Brown decision, the white South gradually took a hard right turn into the Republican Party, what became known as 'white backlash'. By the late 1960s journalist Kevin Phillips could write of an 'emerging Republican majority' in the entire nation, the key to which was the movement of white Southerners from the Democratic to the Republican Party all over the nation.<sup>26</sup> With suspicion of the power of the state and commitment to the free market growing apace in the 1970s, most governmental programmes to counter existing discrimination such as affirmative action, anti-discriminatory legislation and bussing came under sustained attack by conservatives. The emerging Republican majority became a reality with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980.<sup>27</sup>

In general, Hall's article defined the movement not only as a southern phenomenon, but as a political development that emerged in response to the *national* spread of segregation with suburbanization in the post-Second World War boom years.<sup>28</sup> Her emphasis fell also on the economic goals of the movement, including King's late turn to radical social and economic change, rather than the achievement of full civil rights and the idea of the beloved community. Overall, King played a distinctly minor role in Hall's narrative of the Long Civil Rights Movement just as he did in the radical narrative based on the SNCC and CORE experience. By the 1970s, there was, Hall suggested, a set of interwoven political forces that was committed to reform in areas having to do with 'gender, class and race'. The result was a kind of 'movement of movements', a coalition that embraced by the marginalized in American life.<sup>29</sup> With this, Hall directly challenged the idea that the Civil Rights Movement went into steep decline after King's death when it moved out of the South. Beyond that, recent revisionist accounts, such as works by Thomas J. Sugrue, have emphasized the importance of a northern-oriented movement that had more union and secular radical support than the

25 Ibid.

26 Kevin P. Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House 1969).

27 Hall, 'The Long Civil Rights Movement and the political uses of the past', 1237.

28 Ibid., 1241–2. See also Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House 2008).

29 Ibid., 1235.

movement in the South. Indeed, after the disillusionment of Atlantic City, several SNCC workers began looking to Africa and colonial liberation movements with considerable interest. In this geographically expanded version of the movement, Malcolm X sometimes replaced Martin Luther King as the symbolic and actual source of inspiration for the Freedom Struggle in the United States which was thereby linked to Third World independence movements.<sup>30</sup>

Hall's article has been the subject of much discussion, both pro and con. One commonly observed problem with the Long Civil Rights Movement thesis is that it confuses the idea of a 'movement' with that of a 'tradition'. For example, advisor to King and civil rights historian Vincent Harding, in his *There Is a River* (1981)—a volume concerned with establishing the historical credentials of a tradition by going back at least to the revolutionary era of the United States—referred to the 'Great Tradition of Black Protest' as roughly the same as the 'long black movement toward justice, equality and truth'.<sup>31</sup> But the tradition of anti-slavery and abolitionist protest, beginning with the Declaration of Independence, was the long-range historical and moral condition of possibility for the Civil Rights Movement, not the movement itself. As Erik Arnesen has insisted, the movement was a specific historical formation, constituted by a fairly uniform set of goals, proposed by a cluster of organizations and carried out by mass protests, organized movements and demonstrations with a fairly clear ending and beginning. Arnesen pinpoints the implications of Hall's thesis quite succinctly when he observes that Hall interpreted civil rights activity in the second half of the 1930s not just as a 'precursor' of the later Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s but as 'its decisive first phase'.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Hall's focus on the labour movement and the secular, economic-oriented policies of civil rights protest in the North particularly led her to minimize the startling, unexpected political mobilization of black Southerners, with roots in the southern black church and black communities. In fact, prior to the March on Washington in 1963, it is difficult to find any significant union involvement in the southern campaigns of the movement, though individuals such as E. D. Nixon in Montgomery, Ella Baker, who was a much revered advisor to SNCC, and Bayard Rustin, who organized the 1963 March and was a key advisor to King, were veterans of the union movement.<sup>33</sup> However, the experience of the movement in the South was that the white-controlled unions were little help at all in achieving movement goals.

30 Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2005) is an intellectual history of the Long Civil Rights Movement from a global perspective. Frantz Fanon's work was of particular importance to radicals in the Civil Rights Movement after the mid-1960s.

31 Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (San Diego, CA, New York and London: Harcourt Brace 1981), xx–xxi.

32 Arnesen, 'Reconsidering the "Long Civil Rights Movement"', 32.

33 Hall, 'The Long Civil Rights Movement and the political uses of the past', 1253.

Another related problem is that Hall's article all but contextualizes the southern Civil Rights Movement right out of existence. The genuinely new aspects of the movement of the 1950s and 1960s tend to be swallowed up by precursors and predecessors in the struggles of the 1930s, which were pretty far from the experience of most black Southerners who joined the movement. (It turns out that the left, as well as the right, is afraid of sudden breaks in history and the emergence of new forces, particularly when in this case they are religious in origin.) Beginning with Rosa Parks and the students who started the sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina, the challenges to the segregated southern order by black Southerners took pretty much everyone by surprise. In fact, the Civil Rights Movement revitalized a different conception of the political, one that emphasized participatory over representative politics. Bayard Rustin's famous article might have better been titled 'From Authentic Politics to Normalized Politics'. Put another way, the 'Great Tradition of Black Protest' and the 'Long Civil Rights Movement' were preconditions for the modern Civil Rights Movement, but they did not explain how and why it, led as it was by ministers of the gospel, propelled by mainly black students and involving black Southerners from all classes, emerged *when* it did or took the course *that* it did.

### **'What happens to a dream deferred?'**

But, of course, things are never as neat as we might think. David Chappell's recent *Waking from the Dream* (2014), one of the first works to assess the political, as opposed to the protest, legacy of Martin Luther King, reflects elements of *both* the standard narrative *and* the Long Civil Rights Movement thesis. Chappell, a historian at the University of Oklahoma, is the author of an earlier volume on King and the movement called *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (2004).<sup>34</sup> *A Stone of Hope* identified the prophetic black Protestantism articulated by Martin Luther King, not the secular liberal rationalism of predominantly northern and mainly white liberals, as the intellectual bedrock of the movement. In theological terms, however, King's thinking was shaped not only by southern black Protestantism, but also by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's work. Niebuhr's theology rejected the liberal Social Gospel movement, while emphasizing human limitation, a sense of sin and guilt, and the necessity of avoiding pride and self-righteousness. Though King rejected Niebuhr's scepticism about non-violence (for the theologian, politics was 'about' power and coercion not 'soul force' or the 'beloved community'), he very much took to heart Niebuhr's critique of liberal optimism about human nature. Strangely, Jacqueline Dowd Hall's thesis makes practically no mention of the intellectual and cultural history

34 David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2004); Chappell, *Waking from the Dream*.

of the movement, which is ironic considering the enormous role played by the black southern church (and church music) in the struggle for civil and political rights, not to mention the tradition of blues, jazz and popular music, and the importance of southern (and Great Migration) black writing and visual culture from the inter-war years on. In fact, Hall's vision of the movement is a prototypical example of the secular liberal political tradition with which, Chappell claims in *A Stone of Hope*, King was less than comfortable, even though his M. A. was from Crozer Seminary in Pennsylvania and his Ph.D. from Boston University.

But *Waking from the Dream* is a different kind of book from *A Stone of Hope*. It shifts from political concepts and theological visions to the fate of the King political tradition *after* his assassination in Memphis in 1968. Chappell's book thereby chimes quite well with Hall's rejection of the idea that there was no 'declension' or great falling off of the movement after King's death.<sup>35</sup> According to Chappell, King's dream was less deferred than we have thought. Rather, in the post-1960s period, the King tradition made the move that Bayard Rustin had urged from 'protest' to 'politics'. The result has been, according to Chappell, that King's legacy has become a permanent presence in national, state and local black politics, often in coalition with organized labour and/or working with and through the Congressional Black Caucus and other black political organizations. King's SCLC, along with figures such as Coretta Scott King and Jesse Jackson, did not 'just lengthen the story of civil rights, but broaden and deepen it'.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the King tradition took on a more stable, institutional form that allowed it to cooperate with all sorts of interest groups and forces for change. No longer was it just an organization of black Southern Baptist ministers.

To make his point, Chappell devotes a chapter to the passage of the much too neglected Civil Rights Act of 1968, which outlawed discrimination in the American housing market. What its supporters hoped for was the prevention of 'white flight' (and also middle-class black flight) to the suburbs, and 'blockbusting' by real estate agents to change the racial composition of neighbourhoods. Though the bill was initially weakened by compromises, by the 1980s, it had been amended enough that it had real teeth. That this happened in the Reagan years shows that sectors of the former Civil Rights Movement had amassed a certain political clout within the system. Chappell also explores the several attempts in the early 1970s to put together a black coalition of forces at national conventions in Newark, New Jersey, Gary, Indiana and Little Rock, Arkansas. These coalitions were not based on the illusion of black unity (and the lure of black nationalism) as such; rather, they sought to create the more modest goal of a viable tradition of black political cooperation and to duplicate the electoral successes enjoyed by the election

35 Hall, 'The Long Civil Rights Movement and the political uses of the past', 1254.

36 Chappell, *Waking from the Dream*, xiii.

of Carl Stokes and Richard Hatcher as the first black mayors of Cleveland and Gary, respectively, both having assumed office in January 1968.

Another chapter explores the efforts to pass the Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment Bill in the 1970s. Chappell chose this campaign because it illustrates the way the King tradition addressed economic, and not just political and legal, issues. It sought guarantees of 'full employment' rather than concentrating its energies on efforts to strengthen affirmative action programmes, which were most helpful to the black middle class. Again, coalition-building brought African Americans together with organized labour and other minorities.<sup>37</sup> It is surprising that Chappell fails to spend more time assessing the earlier Poor People's Campaign, to which King was fully committed at the time of his assassination in the spring of 1968. At the time, Bayard Rustin urged King to drop the whole idea, but King went ahead with planning for the campaign. By all accounts, it was largely a failure, achieving very little of a tangible nature. What were its lessons? That a charismatic leader such as King was indispensable? That interracial campaigns, like the Poor People's Campaign, didn't actually work very well? Did it show the limits of inclusiveness in 1960s politics? Or what?

Chappell also tries to do full justice to the achievements, as well as the shortcomings, of Jesse Jackson's efforts. He gives the former King aide considerable credit for his efforts to promote black voter registration in the 1970s and 1980s. This helped prevent the ruling conservative coalition during the Reagan years from having its own way on everything. In addition, Jackson's presence in national politics, albeit grounded in a Chicago power-base, made possible the articulation of the political programme that derived from the King tradition. In the meantime, older SCLC stalwarts such as Ralph Abernathy and Joseph Lowery gradually disappeared from the scene, though the genuine involvement and effectiveness of Coretta Scott King in politics in the 1970s was much greater than many people might think. Chappell sums up the lessons of post-1960s black politics thusly: 'The American political system could be compelled to make gestures in black America's direction. But it was not going to yield the millennial sorts of changes it had yielded in 1964, 1965, and 1968.'<sup>38</sup> Surprisingly, perhaps, the King tradition in black politics did not assume a supplicatory position in the Democratic Party, the main beneficiary of the entrance of black Americans into national politics. Rather, that tradition transformed the Democratic Party and also kept it from moving too far to the right. The New Deal and President Johnson's Great Society traditions had to make a place for the African American tradition rooted in the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. As white Southerners rallied to the Republican

37 *Ibid.*, 88.

38 *Ibid.*, 91. Chappell's analysis of post-King African American politics would have also been more convincing had he spent more time on two major issues that were also part of the black political 'project' in these years: bussing and affirmative action.

Party, African Americans became one of the main partners in the Democratic coalition.

In some ways the most interesting chapters in *Waking from the Dream* take up questions of symbolic politics. For what and for whom did King stand? In the last third of the book, Chappell focuses on the question of Martin Luther King's character as revealed in two areas: 'personal morality', which is to say the question of King's extramarital affairs, and his 'intellectual honesty', as revealed in the discovery that he had plagiarized much of his Ph.D. dissertation in theology at Boston University.<sup>39</sup> King's adultery was an open secret by the 1970s, but the discovery of plagiarism came around 1990 and was much more unexpected, as Chappell notes. King's supporters quite understandably wanted to finesse these issues. For one thing, it made King's wish in his 'I Have a Dream' speech that his children be judged by the 'content of their character' and not the 'color of their skin' ring particularly hollow. More serious was the fact that King, as Chappell notes, refused to stop his extramarital liaisons, even when he knew they could endanger not only his reputation and his marriage, but also movement gains and future prospects. Chappell nicely captures the tortuous logic with which some defended King: his 'followers put him on a pedestal, and he needed to come down, for their sake'. According to this stance, King's affairs revealed his 'humanity', as though he had intended to make us feel better about ourselves by making us feel worse about him. But Chappell is not having any of this. 'The more natural point—that King recklessly and irresponsibly put his followers and his cause at risk with his selfish lack of restraint—was all but lost.'<sup>40</sup> This seems to me just right.

Also at issue here is the uncertain relationship between private and public morality. In general, it is not that there is no morality in politics; rather, most politics operates according to different principles than, say, a marriage. Commitment to the public good or a great public cause should be a concern of a political leader, but that very commitment may lead him to neglect the sphere of intimacy involving his wife and family, and vice versa. The marriage of Martin Luther and Coretta Scott King almost came to grief because of this split. There are no easy answers here, but clearly a leader's personal traits and behaviour can be relevant in considering his public achievement. In this case, King's therapeutic notion of sexuality (as good for mental health) could have damaged his public credibility. As already indicated, the film *Selma* faces this issue of the King marriage forthrightly and without pulling its punches.

On the matter of plagiarism, the case against King is undeniable. The conventions of ghostwriting and acknowledgements were fairly well established by the 1960s, but that sizable chunks of his doctoral dissertation were copied was clear evidence of intellectual malfeasance. Chappell also makes the important point here that King's 'intentions' in these matters have gone

39 Ibid., 161.

40 Ibid., 159.

undiscussed. Was he rushed to submit his dissertation on time? Did he think he was above the rules? Or did he forget to go back and acknowledge and/or paraphrase?<sup>41</sup> These are tricky questions but, as Chappell observes, the author of a dissertation knows how to avoid them if he is concerned to avoid the appearance, and the reality, of dishonesty.

The standard narrative of the Civil Rights Movement with its focus on a single figure like Martin Luther King is bound to worry about the character of the figure who occupies its moral centre. For a Hegelian or a Marxist narrative, or any narrative that emphasizes the importance of impersonal historical and social forces, a political leader's character, his/her sincerity or personal qualities, are of relatively little importance. Rather, it is his or her ability to read the historical setting, and to act in consonance with historical tendencies, that counts. But in a republican (civic humanist) or a liberal narrative, the tendency is to assume that the great leader has some special public virtue (for instance, commitment to the common good) and/or, in the case of liberalism, he or she has private virtues that make them suited to hold office (courage, honesty and so on). Americans worry about whether their president is untrustworthy as a leader, if he is untrustworthy as a husband and father, or if he fiddles his or her tax returns. Chappell clearly shares this worry. In fact, his treatment of the character issue is intellectually more interesting and complex than much of his analysis of King's politics or the politics of his followers. Finally, it was lucky that neither King's sexual morality nor his academic probity had become part of the public debate when the bill to make his birthday a national holiday came up for debate and was eventually passed in 1983.

Overall, Martin Luther King's reputation as a leader has survived the last half-century better than, for instance, John F. Kennedy's has. *Selma* solidifies, even augments, that reputation. Where Kennedy is condemned to be judged by his promise, King can be judged on his record as a public man and leader of a mass movement, aside from his record as a husband or scholar. For a time, it looked as though Malcolm X would replace King as the central figure in post-Second World War African American political history, but over time Malcolm's limitations, rather than his strengths, have become more apparent. In the 1960s, the participatory vision of grassroots politics advanced by SNCC and CORE seemed more authentically democratic than King's mass-march/mass-meeting model of popular participation. But SNCC failed to develop a stable organization that would nurture the vision or develop the policies that would perpetuate its radical tradition. By the mid-1960s, it had become obsessed with racial politics and drawn to ideologies of violence that foreclosed support from beyond the colour line as well as putting off many African Americans. More moderate SNCC figures such as Julian Bond and John Lewis drifted away from SNCC after the 1966 radical

41 *Ibid.*, 168.

housecleaning, but Stokely Carmichael was linked for a time with the Black Panther Party and then took up residence in Africa, changed his name to Kwame Turé and devoted his time to Pan-Africanism.<sup>42</sup> CORE leaders James Farmer and Floyd McKissick flirted for a time with the Republican Party, while Roy Innis was firmly in the black conservative camp by the 1990s.

In sum, the political tradition and culture Martin Luther King helped establish has endured in part because of its persistent engagement over the years with the major issues of the day. Not to mention his permanent contribution to the theory and practice of the American tradition of civil disobedience. These are lasting achievements, not symptoms of decline. Nevertheless, it is important that the rival narratives of the Civil Rights Movement—not just Montgomery-to-Memphis, but also Greensboro-to-Lowndes County and the Long Civil Rights Movement—not be forgotten, since they help keep the participatory dimension and the economic concerns of the movement alive, and make us remember that it was much more than the lengthened shadow of one man: Martin Luther King. Finally, whether fictional or documentary films will become indispensable in helping us understand the history or meaning of the Civil Rights Movement remains to be seen. Seeing may not always be believing but it can contribute mightily to historical understanding—though also to its opposite.

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42 See Randall L. Kennedy, 'Protesting too much: the trouble with Black Power revisionism', *Boston Review*, March/April 2015, available on the *Boston Review* website at <http://bostonreview.net/books-ideas/randall-kennedy-protesting-too-much-black-power-revisionism> (viewed 22 September 2015). Kennedy's point is that figures such as Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael and Huey Newton tend to be ritually praised rather than critically analysed in recent histories and biographies.

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