



FOREVER SCHOLARS

RETHINKING MID-20TH CENTURY BLACK FREEDOM STRUGGLE Professor Jill Ogline Titus

Starting Thursday, March 9, 2023

[To register click here](#)

Course Syllabus

The popular memory of the 20th century Black freedom struggle in the United States, as trotted out every winter between Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend and the end of Black History Month contains kernels of important truths, but is deeply flawed, perpetuating a narrative of a limited struggle for legal change in the American South, carried out by courageous but faceless masses lined up behind a handful of (largely male) charismatic leaders and broadly supported by the political mainstream. As Julian Bond, a former Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) leader who served as the head of the NAACP in his later years, summed up this gross mischaracterization of the movement: “Rosa sat down, Martin stood up, and the white kids came down and saved the day.” This course will offer participants a window into the 20+ years of vibrant historical scholarship that has fundamentally changed historians’ understandings of the chronology, demographics, geography, goals, and scope of the mid-20th century civil rights movement. We will explore the movement from the bottom up, examining grassroots struggles for equality on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line; highlighting less well known stories of women, young people, and local leaders; providing new angles of approach to understanding Black Power; and probing the connections between domestic civil rights campaigns and international events such as World War II, the Cold War, and the collapse of colonialism. We will also wrestle with questions of periodization and the concept of the “long civil rights movement.”

Session 1

March 9, 2023 - Thursday at 6 p.m. ET

A Richer, Truer and More Challenging History

This introductory class session will be devoted to broadening participants' understandings of the stories, figures, movements, etc. outside the edges of the traditional narrative of the mid-20th century struggle for civil rights. How does the history of the Black Freedom Struggle look different when we apply new geographical and chronological lenses? How does it look different when we tell stories from the ground up, focusing on the remarkable capacity of "ordinary" people to effect change? How did movement activists themselves define success and failure? And, finally, besides making us better students of history, why does it matter how well we understand the movement? Can a more nuanced, expansive view of the mid-20th century Black Freedom Struggle better equip us to combat the problems of our own historical moment?

Session 2

March 16, 2023 - Thursday at 6 p.m. ET

Myth and History: The Montgomery Bus Boycott

For most Americans, the name Rosa Parks conjures up images of a tired seamstress who quietly changed history by refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery city bus, sparking a nonviolent boycott that lasted for 381 days and involved almost 30,000 people, rocketed Martin Luther King, Jr. to fame, and gave the modern civil rights movement its first clear-cut victory. But this traditional narrative of both Parks and the boycott itself is deeply flawed, obscuring a much more complicated story of decades of political organizing on the part of Montgomery's Black women; conscious attempts to rewrite the origins story of the protest; and a ferocious backlash that drove the Parks family from the city, ultimately replanting them in Detroit. This class session will focus on "cracking open" the history of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, introducing new characters, and revealing the rich layers underneath the familiar narrative. In examining the interplay of history and myth surrounding the boycott, we'll explore how "The Montgomery Story" emerged, spread, and ultimately edged out more complex accounts of this important chapter in movement history.

Session 3

March 23, 2023 - Thursday at 6 p.m. ET

Books, Buses, and Bombs: School Desegregation Battles Nationwide

Did Brown v. Board of Education actually desegregate American schools? Was school segregation limited to the South? Did international politics play a role in prodding the federal government to take steps to combat segregation in education? Did politicians hold northern and southern schools to different

standards? What did the children on the front lines of school desegregation experience? How do our popular images of school desegregation and resistance to it continue to reflect an inability to recognize the depth of northern segregation (i.e, portrayals of Little Rock segregationists as racist mobs and Boston bomb-throwers as neighborhood defenders)? And finally, are American schools actually more segregated today than they were pre-1954? All of these questions and more will be explored in this session.

Session 4

March 30, 2023 - Thursday at 6 p.m. ET

"I Question America:" The Mississippi Summer Project

Freedom Summer was a massive effort by civil rights activists to demolish Jim Crow by opening the political process to the disenfranchised. The organizers of Freedom Summer believed that registering African-Americans to vote and organizing for political participation were the keys to dismantling white supremacy. They thought that if they could crack Mississippi open – the poorest and most racially violent state in the country – the rest of the South would follow. This class session will explore the stories of local people and student volunteers who risked their lives to make democracy real in Mississippi; the end-of-the-summer showdown between the new Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and the national Democratic Party; and the impact of party leaders' betrayal of the MFDP in eroding movement activists' trust in the American political system.

Session 5

April 6, 2023 - Thursday at 6 p.m. ET

Panthers and Power: The Lowndes County Freedom Party & the Black Panther Party

The year 1966 brought the emergence of two new political organizations bearing the symbol of the black panther; the Lowndes County Freedom Party was established in the heart of the Alabama Black Belt and the Black Panther Party in the port city of Oakland, California. Both chose the panther as a symbol to make a statement about their commitment to self-defense and racial pride. Examining the two parties together – both in different ways committed to establishing an independent base of Black political power – provides a unique vantage point to rethink the relationship between civil rights campaigns and the quest for Black Power. This final class session will use the two Panther parties to challenge the popular notion of Black Power as the civil rights movement's evil

twin, focusing on the overlap and continuities, as well as the distinctions, between these two different ideological approaches to Black freedom.