Analysis of the Long Civil Rights Movement Thesis
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The narrative of the civil rights movement is a familiar story from America’s past, yet like all history is subject to the biases of selective and intentional remembrance. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall proposed an alterative interpretation of the civil rights movement, arguing that its remembrance had altered the movement’s true nature and intent for political purposes.¹ Hall’s thesis gives a more complete and inclusive understanding of the civil rights movement, not just in length but in breadth of the people, places, and ideas it includes. The civil rights movement took place before and after the time boundaries of the classical phase, and was a national struggle involving women, many racial minority groups, and often those outside of mainstream political and economic thought. The long civil rights movement thesis is a more complete understanding than the traditional narrative because of these inclusions, and portrays a diverse and evolving movement united by common goals of racial equality and economic justice.

The civil rights movement was long in time, with activism taking place well before the Brown vs. Board of Education decision and continuing after the traditional narrative of decline. More narrow date boundaries of the civil rights movement ignore earlier activism that laid the foundation for the classical phase. As early as the Reconstruction period, African Americans were already fighting for greater political, social, and economic equality. Ida B. Wells dedicated her life to the fight for civil rights and is an example of the movement’s beginnings as early as the 1880s. Though Wells’

efforts were largely dedicated to the fight against lynching, ending racial violence was not the exclusive cause of the early movement. Wells also directly challenged segregation, and took on labor issues and discrimination in pay, two goals of the longer movement. In 1883, Wells refused to give up her seat on a Chesapeake and Ohio Railway train to be taken to a colored car. In taking the incident to court, Wells directly challenged segregation by fighting Jim Crow when it fell short of its unachievable separate but equal promise.

Early activists in the South also participated in civil rights reform to break down “separate but equal” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of the successes of the later movement had already been accomplished to some degree through gradual legal reform at the state level in the South. In an attempt to actualize the promises of separate but equal, reformers during this time improved the quality of education for African Americans, passed anti-lynching laws, and removed voting restrictions. In 1935, Gaines vs. Canada struck down separate but equal in law schools, setting a precedent for Brown vs. Board decades before 1954. The so-called Jim Crow Reformers sought to improve the quality of life for African Americans and to democratize the South, even while maintaining separate but equal. In doing so they demonstrate simultaneously the early activism of the long civil rights movement and the diversity of the movement’s philosophies as it evolved over time. The early activism of Ida B. Wells and these

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3 Ibid, 62.
5 Ibid, 154.
Southern reformers should be considered a part of the civil rights movement, not just its precursors, because of their shared goals with the later movement.

Hall’s thesis addresses the boundaries of place as well as time conventionally placed on the civil rights movement. The myth of Southern exceptionalism creates the false assumption that racism was a Southern problem and that the civil rights movement played out only in the South. While Hall perhaps too strongly disregards the unique role the South played in the struggle for civil rights, her thesis allows for a more inclusive understanding of the movement as a national phenomenon. This broader interpretation of the movement includes the North, Midwest, and especially the West, an area where diversity cannot be summarized with a racial binary. Though the South played a distinctive role in the movement, the nation as a whole experienced a larger, more diverse civil rights movement; decreasing emphasis of Southern exceptionalism creates a more complete picture of the civil rights movement, inclusive of the multiple philosophies, goals, and groups of people involved.

Where the older narrative of the movement told of a top-down hierarchy dominated by men, the long civil rights thesis acknowledges the important roles of women both in mass mobilization and even in leadership. First, women were central to the movement in executing successful boycotts and grassroots campaigns. Because the majority of bus passengers were women traveling to domestic jobs, the impact of the bus boycotts of the classical phase of the movement were utterly dependent upon female participation. Women were critical members of grassroots efforts as well. Yet women

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were not confined to mass participation roles; like Ida B. Wells before her, Ella Baker played a prominent leadership role in the movement. Though sometimes slighted by male leadership, Baker was a talented grassroots organizer, working to mobilize African American men and women for protests and voting.⁸ Women were central to the successes of the civil rights movement, from as early as Ida B. Wells, serving as both foot soldiers of boycotts and a key leaders.

The civil rights movement in the West brought the unique struggles of Mexican Americans and Japanese Americans into the understanding of the long civil rights movement. In The Color of America Has Changed, Brilliant argues that “the presence of multiple ‘race problems,’ each of which tended to attach itself to the state’s different racial groups in different ways or degrees, mitigated against the making of a single civil rights movement.”⁹ However, the diversity of agendas and activists in the West contributes to the long and wide civil rights thesis as unified in underlying goals, not as a separate movement. While Brilliant is correct in that the movement in the West faced different challenges and addressed different specific issues, California activists were still a part of the unified long civil rights movement, not a branch off of it.

The civil rights struggles of Mexican Americans and Japanese Americans in California illustrate the unity of the long, and wide, civil rights movement. These two groups rarely operated as a unified front but were ultimately both a part of the long civil rights movement in their fight for equality regardless of race. First, Japanese Americans faced a structure in California as discriminatory as the Jim Crow South. Disqualified

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⁸ Ransby, Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement, 211.
from citizenship, Japanese American civil rights activists fought against a government and society that had labeled them as permanently “other.” The Oyama case in 1948 challenged a California law preventing noncitizens from owning land on the grounds that the law was targeted to discriminate against the Japanese, a specific racial group. Activists in the Oyama case faced the same frustrations of fighting a discriminatory law masked as colorblind that later activism, like the fair housing movement, addressed. Japanese Americans in California fought for basic rights as citizens, like the right to own land, earn a fair income, and receive an education, all goals congruent with the long civil rights movement.

Mexican Americans in the West faced unique challenges regarding civil rights, as an undermined racial group legally classified as “white” in California. The colorblind argument affected Mexican Americans as well in their fights for racial equality in the public school system and for fair employment practices. Segregated to poor-quality schools, Mexican Americans used the legal system to prove the ambiguous nature of defining race and to challenge the “colorblind” rhetoric that placed their children in inferior schools. One such case, Mendez vs. Westminster School District, dealt a significant blow to school segregation a full decade before Brown vs. Board. Mexican Americans also played a central role in the civil rights movement for workers’ rights. Leaders like Cesar Chavez fought for the rights of laborers to unionize and to receive a fair wage. These focuses on public education and workers’ rights are foundational goals

10 Ibid, 49.
11 Brilliant, 54.
12 Ibid, 59.
13 Ibid, 58.
14 Ibid, 185.
of the long civil rights movement and prove that the diverse civil rights movement of the West was indeed a part of the larger movement as a whole.

The long civil rights movement thesis’ greatest value is in its emphasis of the relationship between race and class. Earlier interpretations of the movement fail to acknowledge the deep connection between racial and socioeconomic inequalities, a connection the movement itself recognized and addressed from its early stages. First, some sought to address the larger structural problems behind racial issues with solutions that fell outside of mainstream American thought. Seeking to end racial discrimination by uprooting a system of socioeconomic oppression, many civil rights activists turned to Communism as the solution to a larger problem. In the early twentieth century, Communists were often the only activists truly pursuing full social equality and willing to challenge the Jim Crow order. As a result, Communism had a strong though historically overlooked presence in the early civil rights movement.

These early activists looked to global influences like Communism for a more radical solution to the deep structural inequalities they saw as endemic to the American system. By attempting to uproot and reform capitalism, which they viewed as the source of racial inequalities, they fought for the goals of the long civil rights movement using a unique method. Using the lost hope in capitalism caused by the Great Depression, Communists gained ground in America through the 1930s, although they were never able to unite an interracial proletariat in the United States. However, incidents like the Scottsboro case prove that Communism did experience some successes in the civil rights movement of the early twentieth century. The Communist Party of the USA provided

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legal defense for the accused Scottsboro Nine and organized demonstrations and protests both in American and abroad to show support.\textsuperscript{16} In doing so they drew international attention to the failure of Southern justice, to the extent that Scottsboro “became shorthand for Communist involvement in the South.”\textsuperscript{17} Communists played a critical role in the story of the long civil rights movement, not just in the influence of their more radical philosophy but in the global attention they drew to the civil rights struggle in America.

The fight for economic justice is a unifying goal of the long civil rights movement, though the connection between race and class has often been overlooked. The March on Washington, remembered as a central moment in the classical phase, was in fact a march for “Freedom and Jobs,” revealing the often-ignored economic goals of the movement.\textsuperscript{18} This emphasis on economic opportunity and employment is a unifying factor in the long civil right movement, one which continued from Ida B. Wells to the Black Panthers, and even into the present.

Lastly, the long civil rights movement thesis corrects the flaws of the declension narrative, which marked the end of the movement with the rise of Black Power. Black Power was not the end but the continued evolution of the civil right movement, with the same overarching goals of equality and economic opportunity, though expressed differently for a different time with distinct needs. After the most significant legal and structural barriers to civil rights had been removed through legislation and court decisions, the Black Power movement recognized the vestiges of discrimination and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 109.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Gilmore, 118.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement,” 1252.
\end{itemize}
social inequality that still remained, and sought to use new methods to address these new challenges. Economic goals, like addressing unemployment and poverty in black urban neighborhoods, were central to the work of the Black Panthers. In the context of deindustrialization, high unemployment, and other elements of the “urban crisis,” the Black Panthers sought to “redistribute economic and political wealth” to the benefit of African Americans in cities like Oakland, California. This image of the Black Panthers as activists fighting socioeconomic inequalities and mobilizing African Americans to be more politically involved stands in contrast to an interpretation of the group as almost senselessly violent and angrily militant. Traditional date boundaries discredit later activism like that of the Black Panthers that continued the work of the earlier movement to fight for social equality.

The civil rights movement has never been monolithic in philosophy, from the differing visions of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois to the divisive goals and methods of the Black Panthers. Nevertheless, the civil rights movement is united as a cohesive whole in its fight for racial equality adapted to address the challenges of the present and subject to the evolving philosophies about methods over time. The weakness of the long civil rights thesis is in its collapsing of the phases of the movement. Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang challenge Hall’s thesis on these grounds, saying that the distinctions between phases of the movement are too great to count the movement as

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20 Ibid, 763.
a cohesive whole. Though the underlying goals of racial equality and economic justice remained consistent, phases and factions of the movement were not only diverse but at times even contradictory. Because even basic issues like whether or not integration was the goal and whether or not to use violence were debated, the long civil rights thesis must take into account the diversity of ideas present within it. It is beneficial to see the movement as a unified fight for civil rights with the same central goals; however, it is also important to understand how those goals were addressed differently over time by different generations fighting distinct systematic problems.

Ultimately, the long civil rights movement thesis is a more inclusive understanding of the struggle for equality. Hall’s proposal reintroduces key people excluded from the dominant narrative of the movement to emphasize the important roles of women, other racial minorities, and political “radicals.” The long movement also becomes consequently wide, to include regions other than the South and alternate philosophies that coexisted with the dominant story of passive resistance in the 1950s. By beginning the movement as early as the 1880s and continuing through even to the present, the long civil rights thesis more accurately shows the evolution of the movement over time and the numerous accomplishments it won before Brown vs. Board and after the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

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