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## Writing the Wrongs of History? Mississippi c. 1945–c. 1970

by George Lewis

The drafting of history is often an incremental affair, which tends to be more reliant on gradually expanding the breadth and depth of existing knowledge than on radically reinterpreting it with a single, transformative work. In the case of the history of Mississippi's turbulent post-war epoch, there has also proven to be another route into the state's written memory. In 1964, drawing upon his president's address to the previous year's Southern Historical Association annual meeting, historian turned historical witness James W. Silver published *The Closed Society*. In it, he described a state in which the power structure had become so insular and defensive that it had lost its ability for critical self-reflection. In Silver's account, Mississippi's political leaders were so desperate to protect their long-standing White supremacist hegemony against the threats posed by civil rights protest that, effectively, they sought to impose their own version of an "official orthodoxy" of White supremacy on the state. The first casualty of that approach, Silver believed, was "the search for historical truth."<sup>1</sup> Silver's book has been remembered as much for its emotional impact and capturing of a zeitgeist as for its historical detail. Fifty years after it was first published, histories of the period which do not cite Silver's work are few and far between, and one key scholar of post-war Mississippi still reflexively chooses to refer to the state as "the closed society."<sup>2</sup>

Silver's role as the on-campus advisor to African American student James Meredith, coupled to the book's publication in the immediate aftermath of the murder of Council of Federated Organization volunteers

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<sup>1</sup> James W. Silver, "Mississippi: The Closed Society," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Feb., 1964), 3-34; Silver, *Mississippi: The Closed Society* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966);

<sup>2</sup> John Dittmer, "Local People and National Leaders: The View from Mississippi," in Emilye Crosby [ed.] *Civil Rights from the Grassroots Up: Local Struggles, a National Movement* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 43-51.

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James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, brought the search for that truth into sharp focus. If, as a native of Rochester, N.Y., there was always a lingering sense that he could be dismissed as an “outsider” by those who wished to diminish the power of his critique, he had nevertheless been employed by one of the institutional pillars of White Mississippi for nearly thirty years by the time that his study was published. Writing three decades later, another president of the SHA, historian James C. Cobb, appeared to consolidate Silver’s view by re-appropriating geographer Rupert B. Vance’s 1930s description of Mississippi as *The Most Southern Place on Earth*. Cobb set out to use Mississippi to distill the essence of the Deep South, and encountered a state and a system in which, even by the 1960s, “the white planter’s word was still the law.” Even as he did so, however, Cobb found greater complexity than he had initially imagined in a state that was also a transmission belt for a range of consistent cultural, economic, and political interactions across the modern United States.<sup>3</sup> This was no closed society, and if there is an irony in Silver’s words on historical truth, it is that the years that followed his 1964 book have seen the creation of a densely-textured and nuanced historical record, complete with detailed analyses of the state-sanctioned systems of repression and oppression to which he was referring, that is unparalleled in the United States. It is a record which Cobb and many others have subsequently helped to uncover.

Historians who have sought to chronicle Mississippi in the three decades following World War II have, for obvious reasons, often concentrated on various aspects of the struggle for civil rights. Indeed, while the historiography of the Movement and of Mississippi are not interchangeable, the relationship between the two during that period has been greatly inter-twined and largely symbiotic. Mississippi’s historians have not been immune from developments in the wider historiography of the civil rights struggle, but equally have also often been in the vanguard of changes of approach or have triggered significant shifts within that field themselves. Broader questions have caught the attention – and informed the work—of historians of Mississippi, and vice versa. Issues that have passed back and forth include regional identity, ways of understanding the dynamics of social movements, the relationship between citizens and power, timescales of protest, relationships between

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<sup>3</sup> James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). See in particular Cobb’s self-effacing “Preface,” quotations from pp 231 and 329.

violence and non-violence, and the politicization of commemorating the past. That relationship is probably best expressed in the development of local community studies. Where, for example, pioneering and transformative works were first published on areas beyond Mississippi's borders, most notably on Greensboro, North Carolina, St Augustine, Florida, and Tuskegee, Alabama, subsequent studies on Mississippi communities have set a new benchmark. Seminal books by Charles M. Payne and John Dittmer have been followed by illuminating work by a wealth of scholars including J. Todd Moyer, Emilye Crosby, and Françoise N. Hamlin, and those curated in collections, for example by Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard. Each of those studies has pushed and added to knowledge. In doing so, however, they have also collectively added to the complexities of the historical picture at hand.<sup>4</sup>

With the addition of new thematic studies, whether on armed resistance during the civil rights years, on the practical political management of segregation, or on the impact of federal anti-poverty programs on the state at the end of the "classical" civil rights era, the most pressing question may no longer be whether we have a sufficiently weighty and dense historiography of Mississippi in the quarter century

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<sup>4</sup> William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); David R. Colburn, *Racial Change and Community Crisis: St. Augustine, Florida 1877-1980*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Robert J. Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1985); J. Todd Moyer, *Let the People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945-1986* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard [eds.] *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); Emilye Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom: The Black Freedom Struggle in Claiborne County, Mississippi* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Françoise N. Hamlin, *Crossroads at Clarksdale: The Black Freedom Struggle in the Mississippi Delta after World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012). Moyer, notably, has pushed at the class assumptions that were common to previous community studies, arguing for the need to explore the experience of poor, rural communities in and of themselves.

since World War II.<sup>5</sup> Instead, it may be more pertinent to ask whether it is possible to unite the increasingly balkanized strands of that history into a single narrative, without falling foul of scholars claiming that their own particular specialist area has been neglected or omitted entirely. As Charles M. Payne acknowledged when returning to his majestic 1995 community study, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, for a new edition in 2007, what was once an over-arching master narrative that was almost parable-like in its simplicity—which, in his words, was “so familiar as to constitute almost a form of civic religion”—had been dismantled “assertion by assertion” by “a remarkable flowering of movement scholarship.”<sup>6</sup> The way in which historians have tried to reconstruct a single-volume history in recent times from what has become an interconnected, interdependent ecosystem of separate studies highlights both the issue at hand and potential solutions to it. For Ted Ownby, who sought to capture the history of *The Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi*, the answer included an admission that “for years” the flow of that history “had seemed relatively clear,” but in its current state was one best addressed by bringing together a collection of short essays from scholars whose work had established new tributaries. For Dennis J. Mitchell, *A New History of Mississippi* was to be found in a single volume providing an “interpretative narrative” unencumbered by notes, but fully freighted with the findings of the most recent research, and “new” in terms of its inter-disciplinarity and reach rather than its reassessments of the known past. Rare indeed is the 500-plus page book which concludes with ten densely-packed pages of suggested further reading, but in light of the richness of Mississippi’s history, the range of the published studies which have done justice to it, and the insightful and controlled narrative that Mitchell has woven across those previous 500 pages, here it is both justified and welcome.

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<sup>5</sup> On an armed response which was “persistent and pervasive” in Mississippi civil rights, see Akinyele Omowale Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2013); on practical management of segregation, see Robert E. Lockett Jr., *Joe T. Patterson and the White South's Dilemma: Evolving Resistance to Black Advancement* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015); on White resistance and Federal aid programs, see Emma J. Folwell, *The War on Poverty in Mississippi: From Massive Resistance to New Conservatism* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Charles M. Payne, “Preface to the 2007 Edition,” *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* [A Centennial Book] (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), xiii-xiv.

The clearest vision of the subject's future, though, most probably lies with the flexibility and accessibility offered by digital platforms. *The Mississippi Encyclopedia* is the current field leader of these, offering updates and reorganization without reprinting, and, increasingly importantly for those without ready access to an institutional library, offering ready access without the hefty price tag of a monograph.<sup>7</sup>

Under such circumstances, it can be helpful—and no little relief—to have an overall structure imposed upon all of that history, whether as a student seeking to study it or as a scholar seeking to define a new project with which to add to it. Historians have sought to find that structure not just in meta-studies such as Ownby's and Mitchell's, but also in regular reviews of the state of the field in the shape of historiographical essays. In conjunction with the histories that they have sought to analyze and compartmentalize, the importance of those essays has developed over time, and can now be felt in four distinct ways. Their primary importance remains their attempts to impose some comprehensible order on the panoply of available published works. The most effective of them have done so by either noting or imposing the development of a pleasingly progressive linear pattern: first, initial histories which tended to focus on a single leader at the helm of one national organization in a sketchy first draft of the battles of the post-war Freedom Struggle; then, as it became increasingly clear that the dynamics of that struggle could not be forced to conform to a single triggering start date – whether it be a Supreme Court decision in 1954 or a bus boycott the following year – came the idea of a “two act play,” in which much of the activism of the 1950s and 1960s could only be explained through the groundwork provided by the first act of previous decades; next came an interactive model which sought to posit a “third way” connective approach merging early top-down histories with grassroots community studies; and, most recently, the replacement of the two-act play with a four-phase production, in a move that broke away from a traditional chronological

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<sup>7</sup> *The Mississippi Encyclopedia* is a partnership between the Center for the Study of Southern Culture and the Mississippi Humanities Council. It is also available at [www.mississippiencyclopedia.org](http://www.mississippiencyclopedia.org).

explanation of events to one based around analytical themes.<sup>8</sup>

Not all readers have been in agreement with those structural approaches, but most historians would acknowledge the importance of the way in which, at the very least, they have offered a means of stepping back, pausing for breath, and taking stock before careening into yet more scholarship. Over the past quarter century or so, as those historiographical reviews have proliferated either as free-standing essays or as discrete sections within larger, broader works, they have also become important sites for suggesting new modes of study. Projects have come into production which have filled many of the gaps that those works have identified. It would be wrong, though, to suggest that historians were always doing so consciously. As at least one of the historians involved in recent Mississippi histories has intimated, working to fill voids identified by earlier historiographical reviews is not necessarily the same as working to placate the concerns or demands of a particular reviewer. If, as one such historiographical essay has recently described, the increasing number of published local community studies has left a picture that is “messy” and “complex,” it is no more complex than the process which often takes a historian from the original genesis of a project to its eventual completion.<sup>9</sup> The journey through identifying, researching, writing and publishing a history is rarely an entirely tidy one, and is usually the product of a combination of factors. Only some of those fall within an author’s direct sphere of control, and many take considerable time.<sup>10</sup> It is entirely possible—even probable—for a subject identified by a historiographical essay as ripe for future study to be already underway, but yet to have come to fruition. That is particularly true of Mississippi, which Ownby has correctly called “one of the most studied states,” not least because of its

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<sup>8</sup> Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1980* (Hill and Wang, 1981); Adam Fairclough, “State of the Art: Historians and the Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of American Studies* 24, no. 3 (Dec. 1990): 387-398; Steven Lawson, “Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement,” *American Historical Review*, No. 96 (April 1991), 456-471; Ted Ownby, “Introduction” in Ownby [ed.] *The Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi*, vii-xvii.

<sup>9</sup> Emilye Crosby, “The Politics of Writing and Teaching Movement History,” in Crosby [ed.] *Civil Rights from the Grassroots Up: Local Struggles, a National Movement* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 8.

<sup>10</sup> For one such experience, see, J. Todd Moyer, “Focusing Our Eyes on the Prize: How Community Studies are reframing and Rewriting the History of the Civil Rights Movement,” in Crosby [ed.] *Civil Rights from the Grassroots Up: Local Struggles, a National Movement* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2011), esp. 147-163.

provenance as the geographical home to what he has also identified as the most intense series of civil rights struggles in the United States.<sup>11</sup>

The third and fourth points at which the impact of those historiographical essays have been felt are more tightly bound together. As the histories that have been written to describe, analyze, and understand Mississippi's past have become more fragmented, so the processes and structures through which historians have sought to understand them have also become increasingly complex. Argument has always been a core value in modern history, often over conclusions, sometimes over evidence, and occasionally over approaches. One of the unintended consequences of the billowing of historiographical essays, however, has been the proliferation of arguments between reviewers of history, rather than within histories themselves. It may seem a specious difference, but it has had a tangible impact. Some of the debates that have been generated between reviewers on how best to represent the past have become almost as dense and entangled as some of the works under review, as it has become increasingly apparent that, as well as being helpful, historiographical essays can also prove highly contentious. It is a quirk of the profession that historians struggle to explain to those beyond the academy, but historiographical essays dealing with some aspect of Mississippi's past have become so central to the way in which histories of the state have been written and understood that they have, in essence, created their own sub-field. In the historians' equivalent of breaching the fourth wall, historiographical reviews have become the subject of significant space and debate in their own right, and are now regularly cited in the histories that have followed their publication.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, it has become sufficiently common as to appear obligatory for authors of new works on aspects of Mississippi history to contextualize their work twice: once within the historiography of which they form a part, and once within the debates surrounding that historiography

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<sup>11</sup> Ownby, "Introduction" in Ownby [ed.] *The Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi*, vii-viii.

<sup>12</sup> The irony of this situation is not lost here.



within which—consciously or otherwise—they are also participating.<sup>13</sup>

The most notable of these reviews has been Charles W. Eagles's 2000 essay, "Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era," which is now known as much for the debate that it has engendered as it is for the scope of its coverage.<sup>14</sup> With its titular reference to a field that was still in development, and with its nod to the growing impossibility of a single history that could do justice to the complexities of the field, much of Eagles's work was, and continues to be, appreciated by historians and students alike, especially for his critique of the "asymmetrical" history of civil rights scholarship. His contention that much of the existing scholarship was loaded in favor of civil rights' proponents because it was written by activist-scholars who had sympathies with Movement ranks, and who were unable or unwilling to bring critical perspective to their work, has, however, proven to be more contentious.

In terms of post-war Mississippi, the headline assumption of an asymmetrical view of the state's history is a beguiling idea, but the detail is as problematic for what it misses as for what it seeks to critique. It is certainly true that a greater number of histories were initially written from the point of view of civil rights activists and organizations than of their segregationist foes or the state apparatus which sustained them. That is despite the fact that, as Payne has written in terms at least as strident as Eagles, many of those activists did not recognize the histories of which they were supposed to have been a part.<sup>15</sup> Where Whites did

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<sup>13</sup> Eagles' provocative work is often the focus here. See, for example, debates between Crosby and Eagles in Emily Crosby "The Politics of Writing and Teaching Movement History," in Crosby [ed.] *Civil Rights from the Grassroots Up: Local Struggles, a National Movement* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2011), esp. footnote 18; Lawson and Eagles in Steven F. Lawson, "Freedom Down to Now," in Steven F. Lawson, *Civil Rights Crossroads: Nation, Community, and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2005); Moye and Eagles in J. Todd Moye, "Focusing Our Eyes on the Prize: How Community Studies Are Reframing and Rewriting the History of the Civil Rights Movement," in Crosby [ed.], *Civil Rights from the Grassroots Up*. Elsewhere, see, for example, David L. Chappell and Lawson in Chappell, "Civil Rights: Grassroots, High Politics, or Both?" *Reviews in American History*, 32 (December 2004); Draper critiquing Dittmer and Payne, beginning in Alan Draper, "The Mississippi Movement: A Review Essay," Alan Draper, "The Mississippi Movement: A Review Essay," *Journal of Mississippi History* 60, no. 4 (1998): 355-66, and then continuing in Payne, "Preface to the 2007 Edition," in *I've Got the Light of Freedom*.

<sup>14</sup> Charles W. Eagles, "Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era," *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 66, No. 4 (Nov., 2000), 815-848.

<sup>15</sup> Payne, "Preface to the 2007 Edition," *I've Got the Light of Freedom*.

appear in those narratives—whether as White Mississippians or as “outsiders”—the way in which they were often portrayed did not always reflect well on the discipline of history. As Payne argued elsewhere, the core of that problem lay with the racial politics of those Whites who were included in published accounts, and the distorting effect that this representation had on the histories that were being produced, rather than with any concentration on African American histories per se. He berated in particular the publication of poorly conceived historical works in which history itself was only understood as “something that happens when the White Folks show up and stops when they leave.” Warning to his theme in one particularly savage critique of a limited attempt to condense the complexities of the civil rights struggle into a single volume, Payne bridled at the study’s sense that, “The White Folks are here, therefore something historically important must be happening, therefore we slow down a little.”<sup>16</sup> Two correctives were needed: one was to end the long-enduring trope of the “white savior”; the other, to restore segregationist Whites to that history as actors in their own right. Eagles was entirely correct to note that, for too long, there had been a reliance upon three substantial but increasingly tired texts on the segregationist side of what had, after all, been a struggle between different sides: Numan Bartley’s work on the rise of massive resistance to civil rights change, Neil McMillen’s work on the White Citizens’ Councils which sought to organize strands of that resistance, and I. A. Newby’s intellectual history of segregationist science.<sup>17</sup>

Those who were keen scholars of Mississippi’s post-war racial conflicts, though, would have been aware of other, state-specific segregationist studies which did exist by the time of Eagles’s review, however narrow in focus. Charles Marsh, for example, sought to give voice to Mississippi Whites who, while supporting Jim Crow, sought to

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<sup>16</sup> Charles M. Payne, “The Social Construction of History,” in Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), esp. pp. 424 and 433. Payne was particularly damning of Robert Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound: A History of America’s Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Norton, 1989).

<sup>17</sup> Numan V. Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the South During the 1950’s* (Baton Rouge: University of Louisiana Press, 1969); Neil R. McMillen, *The Citizens’ Councils: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction*, (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1971); Idus A. Newby, *Challenge to the Court: Social Scientists and the Defense of Segregation, 1954-1966* (Baton Rouge, University of Louisiana Press, 1967).

separate themselves from “extremist zealots.” Notably, too, Tony Badger offered a nuanced take on the politics of Mississippi’s racial liberalism, in which a lack of political will to lead the state to a middle ground of gradualism and away from stark segregation was analyzed through a series of short case studies. Those included analyses of a clutch of Magnolia State politicians and laid the groundwork for later studies on Mississippi’s “southern moderates,” however that moderation might be defined, and however much their authors took issue with Badger’s view of the “fatalism” that undermined the potential of their leadership.<sup>18</sup>

More seismic, however, in terms of its foretelling of histories to come, was what was billed awkwardly as “An Interpretive Documentary with Personal Experiences” by Erle Johnston, published a decade before Eagles’s essay. In the second of what was a triptych of books based around his own political activism in the Magnolia State, Johnston tested the logic of Eagles’s critique of asymmetrical history and a “lack of detachment” from authors whom, Eagles contended, had been compromised by a “participant-observer status.” A decade before Eagles’s review appeared, Johnston’s book began the historical autopsy of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission (MSSC), of which he was both a participant and an observer during his eight years as public relations director during the 1960s. Rumors of the scale of MSSC activities had been rife for years, but details had remained as elusive as the Commission’s formal archives, which were yet to be opened when Johnston’s account appeared. The architecture of the production of his study offered a clear attempt to mitigate the role of the Commission and his work within it. A “Foreword” by former governor of Mississippi William F. Winter now serves as an early example of what has become the lingua franca of politicians wanting to explain palatable truths from the recent past in a tone that mixes acknowledgement of pain with attempted rationalization: these were different times, with different circumstances. Johnston, too, was careful to contextualize his own personal role with equally carefully worded “Testimonials”

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<sup>18</sup> Tony Badger, “Fatalism, Not Gradualism: The Crisis of Southern Liberalism, 1945-65,” in Ward and Badger [eds.] *The Making of Martin Luther King*, 67-95. Badger reprised this line of argument in, “Closet Moderates: Why Liberals Failed, 1940-1970,” in Ted Ownby [ed.], *The Role of Ideas in the Civil Rights South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 83-112. For later studies, see in particular the chapter on J.P. Coleman in Anders Walker, *The Ghost of Jim Crow: How Southern Moderates Used Brown v. Board of Education to Stall Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 11-48.

from a range of historians, publishers, politicians, and activists from both sides of the struggle. Perhaps most importantly, Johnston alerted researchers to the probable wealth of the Commission's archival files, and whetted researchers' appetites for their potential future release.<sup>19</sup>

It took almost a decade of legal challenges for those files to be opened in 1998, at which point Yasu Katagiri won the race to provide the first monograph of the Commission's activities. Katagiri's account was not as intellectually ambitious as Jenny Irons's later work, which sought to use the Commission's activities to test and reveal fluidities in White identity – especially when that fluidity served the purpose of maintaining White hegemony – but nevertheless transmitted the core activities of the Commission clearly. Readers were left with uncompromising truths and a level of detail which, until then, had largely been the preserve of local community studies. A state with citizens living in severe poverty had spent vast sums of taxpayers' money creating and supporting a secret architecture of oppression. In the midst of a Cold War against a totalitarian foe, a democratic state had spent a portion of those funds to spy on its own citizens, keep files on their activities, infiltrate legitimate private groups, and distort judicial processes. And, on a scale that far outstripped state-sponsored segregation agencies in Louisiana and Florida, the Commission provided hard-copy propaganda and hosted junkets with the sole purpose of defending the state's White power structure.<sup>20</sup>

By the turn of the century, the age of representing Mississippi segregationists as monolithic reactionaries in the academic historical record was clearly over. The drivers of that shift have been manifold. In a time at which the community study approach—while still richly valuable—had begun to offer gradual, incremental gains to the knowledge of the state's past rather than transformational difference, a sea change in the availability of source materials such as those MSSC records enabled scholars to develop increasingly complex projects centered upon segregationists. The difficulties of securing oral history interviews with active segregationists has long brought its own lack

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<sup>19</sup> Erle Johnston, *Mississippi's Defiant Years 1953-1973: An Interpretive Documentary with Personal Experiences* (Forest, MS: Lake Harbor Publishers, 1990); Charles W. Eagles, "Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era," *Journal of Southern History* 66, No. 4 (Nov, 2000): 815-848. See esp. 815-6 and 820.

<sup>20</sup> Yasuhiro Katagiri, *The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission: Civil Rights and States' Rights* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001); Jenny Irons, *Reconstituting Whiteness: The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2010).

of symmetry: where oral histories have traditionally provided the backbone of community studies, historians of segregation have relied on them far less often. That may have allowed those historians to side-step some of the more contentious debates over the veracity of community history oral interviews, but it has also reduced the richness of those works. As the events of the period have receded further into the past, though, and as the national narrative surrounding civil rights has shifted, so oral histories have also become more common for those studying segregationists, and have been put to use alongside the opening of an increasing number of formal archival collections.<sup>21</sup> Recent developments in the digitization of archival records, too, and, even more importantly, the decision to make those collections open access to anyone with an internet connection, has democratized the process of researching history in a way that is particularly useful to those focusing upon segregationists. Those processes of democratization have been relevant to both content and access. Where, for example, viewers once had to watch short clips of oral history interviews seen through the prism of the “Eyes on the Prize” documentary series’ editors, they can now be viewed in their original, full, and unedited form. Where once scholars had to spend significant resource tracking down the Citizens’ Councils “Forum” radio broadcasts, these are not only freely available via Mississippi State University library, but also come with transcripts created and then donated by scholar Stephanie R. Rolph, whose work has brought a much-needed update in terms of breadth, depth, and

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<sup>21</sup> Moyer takes issue with Eagles on the oral history point in Moyer, “Focusing Our Eyes on the Prize,” 165. For a biography which includes segregationist sources including oral histories, see Charles C. Bolton, *William F. Winter and the New Mississippi: A Biography* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2013). Elizabeth Gillespie McRae, *Mothers of Massive Resistance: White Women and the Politics of White Supremacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018) draws from archival materials deposited in four separate special collection archives in Mississippi alone.

analysis to McMillen's sound but ageing study on those Councils.<sup>22</sup>

With momentum clearly behind the production of segregationist histories, the question remained of how best to capture and present their many complexities. There were many potential routes towards creating a more symmetrical record of Mississippi's post-war racial politics, but attempting to do so by producing facsimiles of previous studies, this time read through a segregationist-centric lens, was clearly not a useful one. What have begun to emerge are two broadly separate approaches. First, in a way that offers greater continuity, have come closely-focused studies on the figures and flashpoints of Mississippi's civil rights past, which have been augmented by greater analysis of segregationists' roles and are strengthened by the use of segregationist sources, especially those of the MSSC.<sup>23</sup> Second are an invigorating, detailed, and important set of studies which have sought to bring nuance and weight to an understanding of Mississippi's segregationist power structures and the citizens who supported and sustained them. These are far from the "white savior" histories rightly berated by Payne, and closer, if anything, to the cathartic experience of South Africa's post-Apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission.<sup>24</sup> Once again, as there had been with the early genesis of civil rights histories, so with these segregationist-centric studies was there a symbiosis between studies published on Mississippi itself, those on the wider region of which the state was a part, and those on segregationists' relationships both to the wider United States and to the international community. Those wider histories, for

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<sup>22</sup> The original "Eyes on the Prize" interviews are now available here: <http://digital.wustl.edu/e/eyes/browse.html>; the Citizens' Council "Forum" shows are available at <http://lib.msstate.edu/digitalcollections/citizenscouncil/>; Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission materials are also increasingly on-line, too: [https://www.mdah.ms.gov/arrec/digital\\_archives/sovcom](https://www.mdah.ms.gov/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom). Stephanie R. Rolph, *Resisting Equality: The Citizens' Council, 1954-1989* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2018). The second edition of McMillen's study contained a much-needed and thoughtful new preface. See Neil McMillen, *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954-64*, [Second Edition] (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994). Segregationists' global networks are also explored in Zoe Hyman, "American Segregationist Ideology and White Southern Africa, 1948-1975," (PhD, University of Sussex, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> For one of the first of these studies to use the MSSC documents, see Gilbert R. Mason with James Patterson Smith, *Beaches, Blood, and Ballots: A Black Doctor's Civil Rights Struggle* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> Evangelical attempts to promote racial reconciliation via "Mission Mississippi" are documented in Peter Slade, *Open Friendship in a Closed Society: Mission Mississippi and a Theology of Friendship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

example, have ranged from studies detailing the relationship between organized segregationist politics and groups of progressive White women who sought to curb segregationists' greatest excesses to Elizabeth Gillespie McRae's long-gestated but truly groundbreaking study of White women's relationship to the politics of segregationist massive resistance. Such studies range far beyond the Magnolia State's borders, but nevertheless include—and often center upon—analysis of examples and even case studies drawn from Mississippi.<sup>25</sup> Collectively, this new generation of studies has brought a signal shift in the way in which Mississippi's post-war past has been understood and documented.

Away from the prosaic issue of sources, it is also because historians of Mississippi have begun to move away from their previous concentration on the “set pieces” of segregationist resistance to racial change—from those episodes of near theatrical but also visceral conflict—that those more nuanced histories of segregationists in the state have been allowed to emerge. One of the most informative outcomes of these new histories is the way in which they have not just illuminated segregationists as multi-dimensional historical actors with often significant personal agency, but that they have also used that focus on segregationists to look outwards. So, for example, segregationist-focused studies have developed new ways of exploring the most suitable chronological timeframes through which to understand Mississippi's postwar past, as well as issues around class, gender, and politics. They have also enlivened readers to the ways in which the Magnolia State's segregationists fitted in with broader national debates and regional, national, and international networks. Thus, for example, although Rolph's work ostensibly focuses on the Councils as a whole, she sensibly centers much of her work on the complex interactions between grassroots activists and political elites in Mississippi, whilst also defining the lattice of inter-connecting alliances which the Councils were able to build across the United States and globally. Others, too, have brought attention to the way in which Mississippi's segregationists worked to forge links with White supremacist regimes across the world, notably in Rhodesia and South Africa. If Mississippi was a

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<sup>25</sup> Helen Laville includes a chapter on the group “Wednesdays in Mississippi” in her *Organized White Women and the Challenge of Racial Integration, 1945-65* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). A pivotal work within these new segregationist histories is Elizabeth Gillespie McRae, *Mothers of Massive Resistance: White Women and the Politics of White Supremacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

“Closed Society,” nobody, it seems, had told organized segregationists.<sup>26</sup>

As Mississippi historians have joined others to test what had long been accepted as the chronological framework of White segregationist “backlash” to civil rights activism, a number of studies have sought to expand the idea of what might be termed a “long massive resistance.” In one sense, then, this appeared to be the segregationist equivalent of the paradigm shift to a “long civil rights movement” that gained purchase in the wake of Jacquelyn Dowd Hall’s work on Black activism. It is notable, though, that the studies which sought an elongated timeframe in order to mirror Hall’s argument—to create, in other words, a “long segregationist movement”—have not been as persuasive as those studies which have sought to alter timeframes organically, as a direct reflection of sources discovered in archives.<sup>27</sup> Amidst a number of works which, at least in part, might be most simplistically described as answering the question of “what happened to massive resistance?”, the standout transformative work in this respect remains Joseph Crespino’s *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution*. The brief answer is that a more politically savvy and less myopic generation of leaders sought to develop a moderate façade of what has variously been tagged “responsible resistance,” “evolving resistance” or, in the phrase that has come to gain most traction, “strategic accommodation.”<sup>28</sup> These were the means by which they guided the state to minimum compliance with the new legal and political imperatives on race relations created by civil rights movement pressures, but did so whilst maintaining as much “practical segregation” as possible in all other aspects of Mississippi life.<sup>29</sup> More ambitiously still, Crespino also plots Mississippi’s transformative path into Republicanism and national conservatism, via a politics ostensibly

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<sup>26</sup> Rolph, *Resisting Equality*; Segregationists’ global networks are also explored in Zoe Hyman, “American Segregationist Ideology and White Southern Africa, 1948–1975,” (PhD, University of Sussex, 2012).

<sup>27</sup> An example of the former is Jason Sokol, *There Goes My everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945–1975* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007). For the latter, see Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy: The making of a Segregationist Movement & the Remaking of Racial Politics, 1936–1965* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2011), who invokes that idea because of the impact of federal challenges to southern segregation during the New Deal Era and, later, during World War II.

<sup>28</sup> Ward, *Defending White Democracy*, p.4; Luckett, *Joe T. Patterson*; Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution*, (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2007), 11 and 18.

<sup>29</sup> Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 11 and 18.



blanched of racism, but which nonetheless retained the dog whistles of racial politics. As Rolph's later focus on the Citizens' Council movement reinforced, organized segregationists in Mississippi were, for the most part, sufficiently patient to wait for the currents of national conservatism to drag the rest of the nation to a position which reflected the practical segregation Crespino had identified in the Magnolia State. Many of Mississippi's segregationists, those scholars have showed, were shrewd, adaptable, sensitive to their environment and even, at times, dynamic.<sup>30</sup>

Studies that have sought to place Mississippi's political and racial adaptations into broader context have also by necessity had to wrestle with the myth of Mississippian exceptionalism, which has generated its own lively scholarly debates for generations.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, in his contemporary review of Silver's *The Closed Society*, Mississippi-born Louis R. Harlan noted that the urban riots of the late 1960s had weakened "public belief in Mississippi's singularity as a rural cancer-spot of bigotry isolated from an urbanizing, progressive America. It is now clear that there is a bit of Mississippi in the heart of every metropolis," he concluded, and "that the suburbs are still 'closed societies.'"<sup>32</sup> For some, Mississippi's lack of exceptionalism was most clearly exposed by its natural home in a grouping of "the Gulf South," which runs from Texas to Florida.<sup>33</sup> More consistently, others have seen commonalities with what Atlanta historian Kevin M. Kruse has referred to as the politics of suburban secession.<sup>34</sup> The consensus that emerges is one of a myth of Mississippian

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<sup>30</sup> Rolph, *Resisting Equality*, 186-187.

<sup>31</sup> Although it is a debate that has touched a number of other studies, its timelines are best crystallized as running between John Egerton, *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southernization of America* (New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974) and James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>32</sup> Louis R. Harlan, "Review of Mississippi: The Closed Society," *Journal of American History*, Vol. 54 (Dec. 1967): 724.

<sup>33</sup> Samuel C. Hyde, Jr. [ed.] *Sunbelt Revolution: The Historical Progression of the Civil Rights Struggle in the Gulf South, 1866-2000* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003).

<sup>34</sup> Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005). See, too, M. D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South*, (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2006). Crespino argues less that the new color-blindness was a side-product of that suburban shift, and more that it was and always had been an integral part of the Magnolia state's segregationist politics. This may have been a new politics for the Sunbelt South, but for Mississippi, it was closer to representing continuities both in the style and the substance of the state's segregationist politics.

exceptionalism, although, as with many such historical myths, this one, too, had a purpose: a Mississippi long imagined as so exceptional as to be “the South on steroids” at least offered the state’s Whites the defense of having become a convenient scapegoat for wider ills.<sup>35</sup> In much the same way that being a named state in one of the original Brown cases led to enhanced scrutiny of segregationist practices and resulted in greater pressures to desegregate, so, surely, other states which overtly or covertly tolerated racist practices benefited from Mississippi’s mythical position as somehow separate from the norms of United States racial practice and standards of justice. Mississippi, though, was not exceptional in the South, and nor was the South exceptional in the United States. Indeed, as the growing number of transnational racial histories triggered by Mary L. Dudziak’s pivotal work attest, the United States was not even exceptional among White, avowedly democratic nations.<sup>36</sup>

The protection of the race- and class-based privileges of suburban White America, often under the moniker “freedom of choice,” came to replace the violent repression of civil rights activism, a shift which was perhaps best exemplified by the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission’s late term attempts to suppress the rougher edges of both Council and Klan. Indeed, at least in a symbolic sense, these new histories reaffirm that what have been termed the “set pieces” of Mississippi’s massive resistance acted as a conjurer’s trick to draw the eye, while the real work of sustaining White privilege continued quietly but effectively beyond the immediate gaze. As an increasing number of studies are now beginning to show, many of the issues which intersected in the daily lives of both civil rights activists in the Delta and the segregationists who opposed an increase in those rights continued to be felt once the national spotlight brought by the “classical phase” of Movement activity

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<sup>35</sup> Crespino, “Mississippi as Metaphor: Civil Rights, the South, and the Nation in the Historical Imagination,” in M. D. Lassiter and J. Crespino (eds.), *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*, (Oxford University Press: New York, 2010). This is freely available, although without page numbers online, at: [https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=0xNbY2CehHgC&pg=PT76&dq=M.+D.+Lassiter+and+J.+Crespino+\(eds\),+The+Myth+of+Southern+Exceptionalism&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwio0OSBqP\\_hAhVeQRUIHaVICYQQ6AEIODAD#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=0xNbY2CehHgC&pg=PT76&dq=M.+D.+Lassiter+and+J.+Crespino+(eds),+The+Myth+of+Southern+Exceptionalism&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwio0OSBqP_hAhVeQRUIHaVICYQQ6AEIODAD#v=onepage&q&f=false)

<sup>36</sup> Mary L. Dudziak, “Desegregation as a Cold War Imperative,” *Stanford Law Review* 41, No. 1 (November 1988), pp. 61-120 and *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000); Rolph, *Resisting Equality*; Hyman, “American Segregationist Ideology and White Southern Africa.”

in the state had dimmed. The management of, and protests against, endemic poverty and inadequate funding for services ranging from childcare to education has lent historians a new lens through which to view the lives of many Mississippians as the 1960s drew to a close. The recent growth in studies of the War on Poverty in the Delta have served to show not only the sheer scale of the Johnson Administration's endeavor and just how entangled its bureaucracy became, but also why and how it became a new locus for protest. Again, this is a history of continuity and not change.<sup>37</sup> It was Mississippi's Freedom Schools which begat the Child Development Group of Mississippi as one of the War on Poverty's Head Start programs, and it was through the unequal dispensing of War on Poverty funding that segregationists found yet another mechanism for perpetuating inequalities and sustaining White hegemony well into the 1970s.<sup>38</sup> Again, where scholars have begun to look nationally in a bid to identify the origins of what is now known widely as the New Right, much of the conservative populism that underpinned that rise in Mississippi found clear voice in sustained attacks against the War on Poverty's Community Action Programs.<sup>39</sup>

In a final strand of Mississippi's history that has grown significantly in stature and purpose in the very recent past, historians have been questioning the processes by which that history is remembered, and, increasingly, how it might best be commemorated. Some of the momentum behind this emerging sub-field has come from books that look not at the postwar epoch *per se*, but at the development of "cold

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<sup>37</sup> For continuities and, in particular, for issues of legacy, see A. Jordan, 'Fighting for the CDGM: Poor People, Local Politics and the Complicated Legacy of Head Start' in A. Orleck and L. G. Hazirjian (eds), *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History 1964-1980* (University of Georgia Press: Athens, 2011), 280-307.

<sup>38</sup> J. N. Hale, "The Struggle Begins Early: Head Start and the Mississippi Freedom Movement", *History of Education Quarterly* 52, No. 4 (2012) 506-534; Emma J. Folwell, *Poverty Wars in Mississippi* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, forthcoming) and "The legacy of the Child Development Group of Mississippi: White Opposition to Head Start, 1965-1972" *Journal of Mississippi History* 76, No. 1 (Spring/Summer 2014): 43-68.

<sup>39</sup> Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* [Revised Edition] (New York: Cornell University Press, 2014); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Ronald P. Formisano, *Boston Against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s* [Revised Edition] (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Folwell, *The War on Poverty in Mississippi*. For a study bridging conventional timeframes, see C. Danielson, *After Freedom Summer: How Race Realigned Mississippi Politics, 1965-1986*, (University Press of Florida: Gainesville, 2011).

case” investigations of crimes committed during that period.<sup>40</sup> Scholars have shown that work centered on memory can be outward-looking, and can bring new analyses of wider issues to the fore. A concerted historiographical wave in the 1990s re-centered the role of female activists in the civil rights era, for example, but that scholarship, too, has been revived by the emergence of memory studies. As Steve Estes has shown, not simply women’s history but gender more broadly has been central to the way in which some of the epochal events of Mississippi’s postwar past have been recalled and continue to be remembered.<sup>41</sup>

Elsewhere, however, the driver has been one of reconciliation: how to reconcile the complexities of this past with the simplicity of the narratives that society prefers to tell when discussing it, and how to do so in such a way that allows the space for different Mississippians to remember—and commemorate—different pasts. Much of that literature probably belongs to an analysis of Mississippi history in the twenty-first century, but placing it can become as complex as the histories it has tried to commemorate. As Chris Myers Ash has written when explaining the Sunflower County Freedom School of which he formed a part, living with a university library named after James O. Eastland and a reservoir after Ross Barnett demands careful negotiation. As important work on the national commemoration of the history of this period continues to appear, so it becomes clear that acts of commemoration can be as political as the acts which they attempt to commemorate.<sup>42</sup> That can prove a particularly difficult balancing act for those institutions which had an active role in the sustenance of White supremacy in

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<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Maryanne Vollers, *Ghosts of Mississippi: The Murder of Medgar Evers, the Trials of Byron de la Beckwith, and the Haunting of the New South* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995).

<sup>41</sup> Steve Estes, “Engendering Movement Memories: Remembering Race and Gender in the Mississippi Movement,” in Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford [eds.] *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 290-313.

<sup>42</sup> See in particular Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford [eds.] *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2006) and Crosby [ed.] *Civil Rights History from the Ground Up* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011). For Mississippi-centric studies, see Chris Myers Ash, “The Movement is in You: The Sunflower Freedom Project and the Lessons of the Civil Rights Past,” and Emilye Crosby, “Looking the Devil in the Eye: Race Relations and the Civil Rights Movement in Claiborne County History and Memory,” both in in Ownby [ed.] *The Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi*, 250-265 and 266-299 respectively.

the mid-twentieth century, but which have—ever so slowly—turned to commemorate those struggles at the start of the twenty-first.<sup>43</sup> As the institutions of White supremacy grapple with the very real issues of how to commemorate—and even whether to acknowledge—their own roles in the many battles of the post-war era, it is fitting here to return to the figure with whom this essay first began. When a new edition of James W. Silver's most critical work was published half a century after he left Ole Miss and in time to commemorate 50 years since the riots which greeted James Meredith's attempted entry to the university, it was not with the same northern New York-based press which had issued his initial work. In one appropriate symbol of a state striving to come to terms with its own racial past, at least, a new edition of *The Closed Society* was published by the University Press of Mississippi, to which Ole Miss was and remains a core contributor.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> See, for example, the film *Rebels: James Meredith and the Integration of Ole Miss*, (Dir. Matthew Graves, 2012), which was produced by the Southern Documentary Project, an institute of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture affiliated with the School of Journalism and New Media at Ole Miss. The documentary revealed the lack of knowledge among contemporary students of the events surrounding Meredith's admission, but also left difficult questions unasked of interviewees, who consistently positioned themselves as witnesses but not participants.

<sup>44</sup> Silver, *Mississippi: The Closed Society* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012).

