

Civil Rights in *America* and the Caribbean,  
1950s–2010s

Jerome Teelucksingh

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the Caribbean,  
1950s–2010s

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*Dedicated to those unknown men, women, students, and children who  
contributed to the success of our generation.*

## FOREWORD

Ella Josephine Baker an African American Civil Rights and Human Rights activist once said that in order for us as poor and oppressed people to become a part of a society that is meaningful, the system under which we now exist has to be radically changed. This means that we are going to have to learn to think in radical terms. This book *Civil Rights in America and the Caribbean, 1950s–2010s* certainly reflects radical ways of thinking. I commend Jerome Teelucksingh for this publication that details two complex and interrelated human rights struggles. While the book itself is not the first publication on the social movements, it is of great significance because it is being written from the perspective of a Caribbean scholar which is interesting as many of the leaders of social movements world over had deep Caribbean roots. The work and words of Frantz Fanon, Marcus Garvey, C.L.R. James, George Padmore, Walter Rodney, Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Jan Carew, and other Caribbean immigrants or American-born of Caribbean parentage, revolutionized the politics and the intellectual discourse in the North Atlantic, the Caribbean, as well as in the African and European continents in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Moreover the close linkages of Blacks across the globe go beyond blood ties to the experience of a shared institution of slavery and Jim Crow rules that forced the birth of a common ideological position of resistance.

However, the feat of writing Black and working class history of the civil rights and Jim Crow period is not always popular—and certainly not well published. There is a tendency in North American social history

research to take the working class identity out of social and political movements. It is as if working people lack a political life when, in reality, their economic and social circumstances are quiescently political. In this book, Jerome Teelucksingh challenges us to rethink the Black working class role in opposing Jim Crow in the USA and against colonisation in Canada, Britain, and the Caribbean. He approaches the history of the Black working class from the bottom up and encapsulates the global experiences of people of colour. However, I see this publication as the beginning and not the end, because more research on Black working people's experiences is needed because they are the core to the social, economic, and political development of all societies. But then again, do we really want to unearth this history—because it may not always yield what we want to hear. Frantz Fanon refers to this phenomenon as *cognitive dissonance* whereby people *rationalize, ignore, and even deny anything that does not fit in with their core belief*. Teelucksingh's book certainly will take some people out of their comfort zones of knowledge and beliefs. Nevertheless, the desire and need for social justice presented in this book prompts us to continue to produce emancipatory research wherever we may reside on the planet earth.

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## PREFACE

There are many works on the significant achievements during the Civil Rights and Black Power eras of the 1960s and 1970s in the USA but few authors present a comparative approach that assess the transnational impact these movements had in Canada, England, and the Caribbean. Most of the existing books tend to focus narrowly on the USA and not include the broader global context.

Undoubtedly, this research will be relevant to contemporary society because of the ongoing struggle among Afro-Americans and Blacks in Canada, the Caribbean, and England for equality and greater political participation and better treatment. There is the perception from some sections of the public that the freedom and rights that was won during the 1960s and 1970s has been gradually undermined and reversed in the twenty-first century. One of the distinctive features of this work is that it illustrates the parallel struggles among Blacks in Canada, the Caribbean, and England for equality and greater political participation and equal treatment, during the 1960s and 1970s.

In revisiting the Civil Rights and Black Power eras in the USA, I have utilized historical material from the Constance Curry Papers at Emory University, and the Julian Bond Papers and the Rev. Hosea Williams Papers available at Atlanta-Fulton Public Library at Atlanta, in the USA. This analysis of the historical evolution of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movement eras focused on lesser known individuals and groups that are either overlooked or undervalued but made substantial contributions to the 1950s and 1960s. I have argued that these personalities

and smaller organizations made valid contributions to the betterment of American and Caribbean societies.

Additionally, many persons are not aware that in the USA, the presence of Whites in leadership and other positions added a defining biracial and interdenominational flavor to the Civil Rights movement. Some of the Whites who were sympathetic to the struggles of Black America and were active during the 1960s included Rhoda Blumberg, Matthew Ohmann, and Bernie Schweid. White youth countercultures that emerged during the 1960s also need to be considered when evaluating the success and shortcoming of the Civil Rights Movement. These Whites rejected the hypocrisy, materialism and bland nature of the middle-class lifestyle. Discontentment manifested itself in protest marches and antisocial actions.

Events in the late twentieth century such as the call for the reopening of the case against James Earl Ray accused of assassinating Rev. Martin Luther King, the Million Man March in 1996 organized by the Nation of Islam, the Rodney King beating, and the O.J. Simpson verdict have appeared, to many Afro-Americans as a renewed call to arise, account for their conditions and reclaim the hard-won legacies of the Civil Rights Movement. In the twenty-first century, there are also significant milestones such as in 2008, the election of Barack Obama as President of the USA which certainly seemed to be a culmination of events that began in the early twentieth century.

Furthermore, the six-part British drama miniseries, *Guerilla* (2017) dealing with Black Power; the Canadian documentary *Ninth Floor* (2015) which examines Caribbean students protesting against racism in 1969, and the US television shows such as the PBS series *Black America Since MLK: And still I rise* (2016) coupled with movies as *Selma* (2015) and *Hidden Figures* (2016) provide evidence of the continued fascination with historical events relating to the struggle for civil rights during the 1950s and 1960s.

The terms “African-American,” “Afro-American,” “Afro-Caribbean,” “Black Canadians,” and “Blacks” will be used to denote persons of African descent who participated in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements in the USA, the Caribbean, Canada, and England. Likewise, the label “White” will be utilized to refer to the Anglo-Saxons and other Europeans residing in North America, the Caribbean, and Britain during the turbulent era of the 1950s and 1960s. The terms “Indo-Trinidadian” or “Indian” denotes persons of Indian descent in Trinidad

and Tobago. And, the term “Black Studies” includes Africana Studies, African Diaspora Studies, African American studies, Pan-African Studies, and Afrocentric Studies. Different labels have been used to describe the events of the 1960s and 1970s in Trinidad and Tobago and the rest of the world. Some have used terms as “revolution,” “disturbances,” “uprising” and “movement.” These words possess different meanings for different persons.

The pride and consciousness of persons of African descent were visible with such symbols as the dashiki, Afro-hairstyles and clenched fist of the Black Power Movement.<sup>1</sup> This was part of the identity formation of supporters and activists. The songs from Trinidadian calypsonians such as Valentino, Kitchener, and Black Stalin reflected the impact historical events had on Caribbean culture and music. Writers, trade unionists, thinkers, and scholars played crucial roles in assisting activists in the Black Power movement that swept across the Caribbean, North America, and England. These included Dr. Trevor Munroe (of Jamaica), CLR James, Dr. Roosevelt Williams, Lloyd Best, Professor James Millette (Trinidadians), Rosie Douglas (former prime minister of Dominica), Maurice Bishop (former prime minister of Grenada), and George Odlum of St. Lucia. The global linkages among countries during the 1950s and 1960s and the close ties of nationalism, colonialism, racism, and Black Power will be addressed.

The turning point in the 1950s which is often identified with the Civil Rights Movement is the historic the US Supreme court decision in *Brown versus Topeka Kansas Board of Education* in which racial barriers were overturned and Blacks were admitted to public schools.<sup>2</sup> From the White House to the poor, urban slums, the clamouring for equal treatment of Blacks grew louder. There was a feeling of apprehension among some Whites of the events of the 1950s and 1960s and few realized it would have lasting effects on society and forever change the position of Afro-Americans in society.

During the 1950s, in the USA, successful boycotts, challenges to education restrictions and the mobilization of civil rights groups were consequences of a Black populace fiercely determined to succeed in their struggle. States such as North Carolina, Mississippi, and Alabama felt the wrath of a people long oppressed and struggling for tumultuous changes. During the 1960s, a string of urban uprisings in Detroit, New Jersey, California, Ohio, and Michigan coupled with uprisings in the Caribbean, Canada, and Britain were evidence that if Whites did not accept the

peaceful attempts at change then Black militancy would serve as the much needed catalyst for reform to expose American injustices to the world.

The connective analysis of the book is evident as the chapters deal with various aspects of racism, inequities, and the responses by Black America. The central thesis of Chap. 2 is that personnel within public and private institutions discriminated against Black America. This includes schools, universities, and businesses. There will be an assessment of the disastrous impact of the rule of prime ministers in the Caribbean, who refused to acknowledge the importance of Black Power. Most of these rulers in the Caribbean islands refused to listen to the grievances of trade unions. Also there will be an examination of the USA unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) especially their reaction to discrimination against Black employees. During the 1950s and 1960s the AFL-CIO held regular constitutional conventions on the issue of segregation and discrimination of Blacks. Specific illustrations will be used to demonstrate that racism was not intense amidst some companies, for instance, the United Auto Workers at the Chrysler truck plant in St. Louis. There will be an assessment of the reactions of trade unionists to overcome discrimination in housing, education, and segregation of public spaces.

The subsequent chapter deals with the emergence of Black Studies and its challenge to the status quo at the tertiary level. Most of the research on the 1960s overlooked the evolution and development of Black Studies in the USA. Furthermore, global and transnational forces have shaped Black Studies in the Anglophone Caribbean in the post-1970 decades. The globalization of racial ideas constituted a significant component of the transatlantic epistemology which has been evolving at the campuses in the Caribbean and the USA and the public sphere in the second half of the twentieth century. The evolution of Black Studies in the former British West Indian colonies is unique as it underwent a cross-fertilization from Britain and the USA. The Caribbean diaspora who were trained at the USA and British universities exerted considerable influence in shaping Black Studies in the Caribbean. There is also emphasis on the roles of literary scholars and activists such as George Lamming, Stokely Carmichael, and C.L.R. James who were not only strong advocates for the teaching of Black Studies at educational institutions but whose Afrocentric writings helped forge a unique Caribbean scholarship and Black identity. Finally, there will be an examination of the perceived lack of interest and critics of Black Studies.

The main argument of Chap. 4 is that the USA government was at times reluctant and slow in its decision to grant equal rights to Black America. The denial of voting rights to Blacks was a major challenge that organizations such as SNCC and CORE sought to address. Focus will be on the presidents of the United States Congress during the 1950s and 1960s and their efforts to examine and pass legislation such as the Voting Rights Act. Slow political reform was one of the major reasons for the decision by Blacks to become directly involved in the political process and to form organizations to increase voter awareness. There will also be a focus on the underhand tactics of the FBI and CIA in undermining the work of Civil Rights groups and leaders. Both the US agencies sought to portray certain Black leaders and their organizations as part of the Communist threat. This posed a formidable challenge for organizations to effectively operate and function. Similarly, the emergence of Black Power in Jamaica, Bermuda, and St. Kitts was closely monitored by the governments. This chapter will also include the reaction of Civil Rights leaders and groups to legislation which appeared limited and useless. In the Caribbean, Blacks possessed voting rights but were dissatisfied with the state of governance and the plethora of social problems. The inaction and slow responses of the government coupled with the work of the FBI and CIA warranted the need for Black America to mobilize its activists and increase its radicalism.

There will be considerable emphasis in Chap. 5 on the work of student organizations as Northern Student Movement Coordinating Committee and Rhode Island Student Movement in sit-ins and boycotts in their demand for equal treatment in the USA. This will be compared to similar activities in the Caribbean in which student groups as the National Joint Action Committee and National Organization of Revolutionary Students sought racial equality and better political representation. Emphasis will also be on the involvement of women such as Unita Blackwell, Ella Baker, Septima Clarke, and groups as the Black Women's Liberation Committee and Women Concerned About Urban Problems. This is one of the more unique subsections of the book which will focus on the contributions and support given, by Whites and ethnic minorities, to the Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. These groups included the Students for a Democratic Society, in the USA, which comprised mostly White students. Likewise, in the Caribbean there were persons of Indian and Chinese descent who were part of the Black Power protests. This

chapter builds on earlier chapters as it demonstrates the strategies of personalities and organizations to institutional racism and unfair government.

Chapter 6 will focus on the manner in which religious leaders sought to ensure that their various faiths, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were regularly presented to the public as relevant to the struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. Evidence of this would be sermons and newspaper articles which addressed the problem of race in America and the Caribbean. These progressive religious leaders such as Rev. Ashton Jones sought to integrate a Whites-only church in Atlanta. Similarly, proactive groups included the National Black Catholic Clergy, Rabbinical Association of America, the biracial Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR), and the National Conference of Black Nuns. In dealing with the Caribbean, there will be a focus on public demonstrations against the Roman Catholic Church and also the role of ordained Protestant ministers in the Black Power protests of the 1970s. Hindu and Muslim leaders tended to avoid any public display of support of Black Power. This suggested that the majority of the Indo-Caribbean population was not willing to align themselves to this radical ideology.

Chapter 7 examines the under-representation of Blacks in the United States Armed Forces (Navy, Army Marine Corps, and Air Force) endured blatant racism and abuse. During the 1950s and 1960s, there were groups such as the US Organization that sought to encourage desegregation. Reports and conferences were presented which championed integration. In Trinidad and Tobago, the Blacks in the Armed Forces were in the majority. However, the Indo-Trinidadians and other ethnic minorities were underrepresented and tended to avoid this occupation. The mutiny of April 1970 among eighty soldiers in Trinidad and Tobago occurred during the wave of Black Power protests. However, the actions of these soldiers were due largely to their discontent with the inefficiency and corruption in the army. During the 1950s and 1960s, there were diverse voices in song, poetry, literature, and drama. These persons championed against segregation and the injustices facing Afro-Americans. Artistes as James Brown, Curtis Mayfield, and Percy Sledge captured the era in their songs. And, novelists as James Baldwin and Le Roi Jones also incorporated the unfolding history in their works. Likewise, in the Caribbean there were novelists and calypsonians who boldly addressed the socioeconomic problems confronting citizens. Some persons involved in the annual Carnival festivities, used costumes

and portrayals as a peaceful medium to highlight the grievances, inequalities and racism in the Caribbean. This was similar to the radical culture of the 1950s and 1960s in the USA. This chapter reinforces the institutional racism in the spheres of military and sport.

The struggles, achievements, challenges, and setbacks have been part of the societal development during the 1950s to 2010s. It is also crucial to assess the state of Black America and the Caribbean in the post-Civil Rights and Black Power eras. Certain statistics and viewpoints will be considered including levels of poverty, housing, income level, social mobility, educational attainment, and jobs. The views of scholars and activists would be incorporated in the criteria used to gauge the successes and shortcomings faced by Blacks from the 1950s to 1970s.

In the twenty-first century, the increased presence of Blacks in politics, killings of Afro-Americans by police, the formation of groups as Black Lives Matter, and the relatively high levels of murders in the Caribbean countries as Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica indicate a defect in the societies. There will always be the need to analyze the factors that created and transformed institutional and individual experiences including power and social relations. And, hopefully my findings and analyses reflect the processes through which societies and the diverse groups within them come to terms with community life and the challenges.

St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago  
2017

Jerome Teelucksingh

## NOTES

1. Comments by Eric Williams in his untitled manuscript on Black Power, p.1112. Eric Williams Memorial Collection, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, West Indies.
2. See Gary Lavergne, *Before Brown: Heman Marion Sweatt, Thurgood Marshall, and the Long Road to Justice* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations
BPP	Black British Panthers
BWLC	Black Women's Liberation Committee
CCC	Caribbean Conference Committee
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CNAC	Cambridge Nonviolent Action Committee
COFO	Council of Federated Organizations
COINTELPRO	Counter Intelligence Program
CORE	Council of Racial Equality
CWU	Communications Workers Union
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
ISA	Industrial Stabilisation Act
LCFO	Lowndes County Freedom Organization
MFDP	Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party
MIA	Montgomery Improvement Association
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NCNW	National Council of Negro Women
NJAC	National Joint Action Committee
NSMC	Northern Student Movement Coordinating Committee
NUFF	National United Freedom Fighters
NUGFW	National Union of Government and Federated Workers
PNM	People's National Movement
PTSC	Public Transport Service Corporation
RAM	Revolutionary Action Movement
RISM	Rhode Island Student Movement

SCLC	Southern Christian Leadership Conference
SDS	Students for a Democratic Society
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
SRE	Students For Racial Equality
TIWU	Transport and Industrial Workers' Union
U-JOIN	Union for Jobs or Income Now
USA	United States of America
UWI	University of the West Indies
WPC	Women's Political Council

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