Lift Every Voice

The civil rights movement wasn't just about racial equality. It was about expanding American democracy.

RALPH ELLISON: A BIOGRAPHY BY ARNOLD RAMPERSAD • KNOPF • 2007 • 672 PAGES • $35

GOING DOWN JERICHO ROAD: THE MEMPHIS STRIKE, MARTIN LUTHER KING'S LAST CAMPAIGN BY MICHAEL K. HONEY • W.W. NORTON • 2007 • 640 PAGES • $35

NEW ORLEANS AFTER THE PROMISES: POVERTY, CITIZENSHIP, AND THE SEARCH FOR THE GREAT SOCIETY BY KENT B. GERMANY • UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA PRESS • 2007 • 460 PAGES • $24.95

By virtue of their initial status as legal property during antebellum slavery and their disenfranchisement during the Jim Crow era, black Americans' relationship with democracy has always been a star-crossed one. To some that may seem an obvious point, yet it goes against received ideas about the civil rights era, most often remembered as a movement to end racial segregation, restore black voting rights, and expansively redefine American democracy. It was thought of, then and now, as an era of progressive consensus, in which civil rights organizations focused wisely on issues with broad sympathetic appeal like jobs, education, housing, equal protection under the law, and police brutality. And so we remember the decade between *Brown* and the Voting Rights Act fondly as the civil rights movement's heroic period, when Martin Luther King Jr., Freedom Riders, and sit-ins shamed Jim Crow

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into submission and galvanized America's collective democratic consciousness. Yet for all of its high drama, the conventional view of the modern civil rights movement ignores much of the harder-to-define struggles—both individual and collective—that complicate the era's history.

For instance, while it is true that before 1965, King's commitment to nonviolent social change galvanized large sectors of American society, during his last three years his rhetoric grew more confrontational and combative, and much of the applause and adulation receded as he repeatedly indicted a military-industrial complex that waged war internationally at the expense of poor citizens at home. For King, such indictments always grew from the same ideas that motivated his desegregation and voting-right efforts. An America that sent its poor to fight an unjust war at the expense of social programs at home could never fulfill the democratic promises of the Constitution. By the late 1960s, King challenged America to "take this rage, that's all around us now, and transmute it into a powerful force for social transformation." Democracy was not just about giving blacks the right to vote; it was about binding society together through active, public commitments to the lesser-off.

Moreover, for every Martin Luther King Jr., wedded to the belief that the fate of black individuals remained attached to a collective racial group destiny, there was a Ralph Ellison, who steadfastly held onto individual identity as the hallmark of American democracy. Ellison's strident individualism was less concerned with civil rights for the collective good than with breaking down barriers that prevented individual excellence. In doing so, Ellison anticipated post–civil rights debates regarding racial symbols and representation, along with a type of rugged individualism and distrust for collective racial ideology most often identified with such contemporary black conservatives as Shelby Steele and Thomas Sowell.

In contrast, Black Power advocates challenged both King's concept of a beloved community and Ellison's aloofness to community-wide activism by embracing racial militancy as the only means toward real democracy. In the popular imagination, the Black Power era is reduced to symbols of violence, ranging from gun-wielding Black Panthers to urban riots and raised fists at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics. But in many instances, Black Power proved to be much more than bellicose rhetoric. In cities across America, activists created local organizations and political structures that challenged civil rights advocates and liberal politicians for a more expansive definition of democracy: one that would include ex-convicts, street hustlers, and the hard-core urban poor.

King's radicalism, Ellison's rugged individualism, and Black Power's (at times surprising) political pragmatism reminds us that the civil rights move-

ment, far from being monolithic, was in actuality a mosaic of diverse voices and viewpoints. Debates over racial integration versus separatism were part of a larger conversation over how African Americans could (and would) relate to American democracy at the local, national, and international level. Civil rights was not just about joining whites; rather, it was about creating new political and cultural spaces that would put them on equal footing with whites. For some that road led to integration; for others, it meant temporary or permanent racial separatism.

If Barack Obama's presidential candidacy inspires hopes for a new type of racial transcendence, Hurricane Katrina, the Jena 6 case, and record levels of African-American incarceration evokes the specter of America's ugly racial past. But they all remind us that American race relations in the post–civil rights era are still defined by striking—and paradoxical—images of both racial progress and political retrenchment, images that continue to raise questions about the relationship between African Americans and the democratic ideal. Ellison, King, and Black Power activists represent three strikingly different ideas about democracy; only by understanding how they intersected and defined the black struggle from the early 1950s on can we begin to understand how the black struggle continues today.

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One of the spheres of black life where the tumult over the meaning of democracy was culture, in no small part because, from the early 1950s to the 1980s, that sphere was dominated by Ralph Waldo Ellison, who helped set the intellectual stage for the civil rights era with his classic novel *Invisible Man*. Published in 1952, the book anticipated the era's coming racial storms, even as it sidestepped notions of racial confrontation in favor of artistic excellence and literary merit. Ellison only published one major novel in his lifetime, but his contribution extended to his role as a public intellectual who made his views on race and democracy clear. As Arnold Rampersad demonstrates in his illuminating new biography, after a brief flirtation with Marxism during the Great Depression, Ellison came to view American democracy as essential to black progress. But unlike King or, later, the Black Power movement, his view of democracy was essentially conservative; he saw it as a two-way street, where African Americans would have to earn their place at the table of citizenship through excellence that transcended their peculiar origins in chattel slavery,

just as they overcame their harsh conditions under Jim Crow. For Ellison, black militants perpetuated “the myth of the Negro American’s total alienation from the larger American culture.” Sit-ins, marches, and demonstrations that overtly confronted racial segregation seemed, to Ellison at least, theatrics that substituted emotion for the potentially restorative intellectual high ground where blacks and whites could relate as equals.

Historical events would undermine Ellison’s efforts to distance black artistic efforts from racial protest. Black Arts militants like LeRoi Jones (later known as Amiri Baraka) and radical public intellectuals like James Baldwin placed civil rights protest at the center of their art, even as Ellison regarded these younger writers as literary and personal disasters. By 1967, with the summers in America being marked by civil disturbances that the government called “riots” and Black Power militants characterized as “rebellions,” Ellison agreed to a rare exchange with a group of young black writers, to be published in *Harpser’s*. In broad brushstrokes, Ellison painted the Black Arts as bellicose and anti-intellectual; a cultural hustle in blackface that represented the race’s worst impulses, leading “to a stubborn blindness to the creative possibilities of cultural diversity, to the prevalence of negative myths, racial stereotypes and dangerous illusions about art, humanity, and society.” Needless to say, this did not endear him to younger, more militant readers. Indeed, the more Ellison launched invective against black nationalist-based art, the more doors of criticism seemed to open up. Attacked as an Uncle Tom following a panel at Grinnell College, Ellison broke down, crying, “I am not a Tom, I am not a Tom.”

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Ironically, Ellison missed the complexity—one of his favorite words in lectures and interviews—beneath the militants’ fiery words. For artists like Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Larry Neal, and Nikki Giovanni, the Black Arts movement provided the perfect vehicle to analyze, confront, and transform American democracy. Black Arts advocates promoted their own radical vision of cultural diversity—one that indelibly transformed intellectual and artistic aesthetics—by confronting the way in which American cultural institutions marginalized, distorted, and defamed black folk. In doing so they extolled the virtues of America’s messy, violent, and unresolved political history and its connection to the nation’s cultural and artistic institutions.

Such disputes complicated the idea that racial equality was simply a matter

of exorcising Jim Crow. Although Ellison and Black Power activists often talked past one another, they both shared hard-earned reputations as political mavericks and literary iconoclasts, not to mention a penchant for angry outbursts. In the end, the "lower frequencies" mentioned in the final line of *Invisible Man*, suggesting universal impulses that transcend difference, were tapped by both Ellison and his critics as they searched, in contrasting fashions, for new fields of vision in a land blinded by race.

Whereas Ellison saw democratic virtues resting primarily in the individual right to achieve artistic excellence, unattached to group identity, civil rights activists defined democracy as a collective endeavor, a goal that could only be achieved by a racially unified society. And perhaps no American activist in the postwar era better articulated this vision than Martin Luther King Jr. For much of his political career, King gauged the pulse of democracy by measuring the way in which America treated its expanding black underclass. King's course was not an easy one; after a decade of successful struggle for integration, by 1965 his adherence to nonviolent social change was becoming caught in history's maelstrom. Black Power militants, the Vietnam War, and strained relations with onetime political allies (most notably Lyndon Johnson) left him open to attacks from all sides.

In early 1968, King responded with a daring call for massive civil disobedience against economic injustice that critics labeled as reckless and militants regarded as passé. The Poor People's Campaign, according to historian Michael Honey, would organize a "broad multiracial alliance that included the middle class as well as students, workers, religious, unemployed, and angry young people" in a struggle for economic justice that would fundamentally transform American democracy. For King, this was not a new tack. It was rather an extension of his long-standing belief that true democracy was not just about ending legal discrimination but involved active efforts to bind a society together.

King encountered throngs of supporters and critics as he touted his Poor People's Campaign in a packed cross-country speaking schedule befitting a seasoned politician. In Washington, he participated in delicate, behind-the-scenes negotiations with Black Power leader Stokely Carmichael over their role in the campaign; while in Chicago, he was verbally chided by welfare rights activists who questioned whether the campaign focused enough on the plight of welfare mothers. But by March, the Poor People's Campaign was headed not to Washington, D.C., but to an unexpected place: Memphis, Tennessee, where black garbage workers were waging a risky strike in hopes of earning a living wage.

For working-class African Americans, Memphis represented a "plantation

city" ruled by local officials who regarded labor activism and civil rights as twin engines of communist agitation. As Honey documents in his powerful history of the strike, *Going Down Jericho Road*, by the late 1960s, escalating work for decreasing pay, coupled with Mayor Henry Loeb's unwillingness to engage in reasonable negotiations (or even recognize the union), had precipitated a massive garbage workers' strike. King's ally James Lawson, a local organizer, invited him to the Bluff City to speak in March. A planned one-time appearance on March 18, 1968, proved galvanizing enough to schedule another visit, which took place ten days later. That rally, however, proved disastrous, and for the first time in his career, featured violence from undisciplined marchers. Instead of providing a preview of the sort of struggle for economic justice King wanted to see in Washington, Memphis threatened to unravel those same larger efforts. Increasingly desperate, King vowed to return to Memphis to lead a peaceful demonstration.

On April 3, King delivered a mesmerizing address at the Mason Temple, regaling the several thousand people in attendance with the biblical story of the Jericho Road. The path to genuine democracy, suggested King, required personal sacrifice and deep political commitment, even in the face of withering assault. "When people get caught up with that which is right and they are willing to sacrifice for it, there is no stopping point short of victory," he said. Implicitly indicting Ellison's idea of democracy as a matter for the individual, King proclaimed that American democracy was at a crossroads, one that required clothing the poor and feeding the hungry through a collective act of generosity that would ultimately redeem the nation's soul. If it did not, no amount of artistic excellence could redeem it.

The next day, an assassin's bullet ripped the life out of King. But within a week Loeb recognized the garbage workers' union, and a settlement was achieved even as flames of violence and rage ripped through urban centers (including Memphis) in shock and anger over King's death. King did not live to see it, but as Honey shows, his final effort did much to advance America toward the democratic vision he sought.

Social campaigns by African Americans, such as King's in Memphis, soon ceased to be of interest to the larger public, but black struggles for citizenship continued throughout the 1970s. Nor did the debate over the meaning of democracy for blacks end with King's death. Indeed, perhaps nowhere does this struggle resonate more poignantly than in New Orleans. Of course, the 2005 devastation triggered by Hurricane Katrina tends to overwhelm the historical analysis necessary to understand the city's recent history, one that

underlines yet another viewpoint in black America's struggle to come to grips with American democracy.

In contrast to both Ellison and King, black leaders in New Orleans defined racial justice as community self-empowerment, primarily meaningful access to democratic institutions. Part of their success came from the opening afforded by the election of the liberal Moon Landrieu as mayor in 1970, which seemed to usher in a new spirit of interracial democracy in New Orleans. Neighborhood activists sought political power through the Community Action Program, the controversial War on Poverty initiative designed to foster local participation in federal programs. Such efforts, according to historian Kent Germany in his eye-opening *New Orleans after the Promises*, resulted in "more control over civic space, to refine the quality of that space for the poor, and to mobilize community sentiment" in predominantly poor black neighborhoods. Welfare and tenant rights activists, comprising mostly black women, made important inroads through at times bruising local demonstrations. Thugs United, a Black Power group, tried to redirect anti-poverty efforts to focus on at-risk youth, while the New Orleans chapter of the Black Panthers engaged in a well-publicized shoot-out with the local police that left the city teetering on the edge of panic.

The failure to identify black activism with efforts to expand democracy diminishes American history.

Black militancy tested the limits of Southern liberalism, with Landrieu balking at negotiating with Black Panthers. Yet the Panthers, whom the mayor judged to have "embarked on a reign of terror," showed a more compassionate side in serving free breakfasts to residents of the Desire Projects, which included about a dozen white children. In New Orleans, just as across the nation, Black Power activists blended radical, at times revolutionary, rhetoric with political pragmatism. The movement is often remembered as synonymous with violence and separatism. To be sure, some elements were precisely that. But the movement was hardly unified: If some, like the Panthers, were willing to deploy violence toward expanding their own political power, others sought a seat at the political table that relied more on guile than guns. In this way, the New Orleans Black Power groups stand in stark contrast to both Ellison—who saw democracy as a matter of individual effort—and King, who saw it as a collective goal that transcended politics and the interests of one societal group.

But, in retrospect, despite the sharp polemics emanating from Panthers and City Hall, both sides held similar ideas about American democracy and the potential to transform it. Liberal politicians sought change from the inside,

while Panther-styled militants scandalized long-standing democratic institutions by waging bellicose struggles just outside the corridors of power. But for both, democracy was inextricable from politics, and they understood that competition for limited social resources was thus the sine qua non of democratic struggle. Yet disagreements between militants and moderates over what Black Power meant set these two groups on a collision course that left New Orleans at once awed by the substance of measurable racial progress and heartbroken by opportunities found and lost over political quarrels rooted in legacies of racial mistrust.

New Orleans staggered into the decades leading up to Hurricane Katrina with a new generation of black mayors providing intermittently brilliant and corrupt leadership. The increasingly black and brown central city was overwhelmed by ratcheting poverty, gun violence, incarceration, teenage pregnancy, and unemployment that civil rights laws and Great Society programs had promised to permanently eradicate, or at least dramatically reduce. Nevertheless, though the flooding let loose by Hurricane Katrina swept away buildings and bodies, it could not extinguish the stubborn dignity of New Orleans residents, who remain resolute in their belief that they are an integral part of American society. The continuing storm of protest and controversy that engulfs America's post-Katrina political discourse serves as both an elegy to the civil rights era's heyday and signposts for future democratic moments yet to come.

Historians, journalists, and the larger public have been slow to recognize and acknowledge the intersection between race and democracy in dramatically reshaping the national character. Despite the importance given to the civil rights movement, the changes wrought by "the Sixties" are too often thought of as the product of white, middle-class Baby Boomers bucking their parents' generation—an important historical turn, but one that pales in comparison to the impact of the black social revolutions on our contemporary understanding of democracy and American society. This is as unfortunate as it is ill-considered. The failure to identify black activism, whether radical, liberal, or conservative, with efforts to expand democracy diminishes American history and isolates contemporary racial justice movements.

American democracy's expansion in the postwar era was remarkable and, in many respects, unprecedented. But the swirling controversies of Katrina and Louisiana's Jena 6 stand as poignant testaments to postwar America's unfinished quest for racial and economic justice. Blacks continue in their insistent belief that democracy matters, and it remains at the core of movements for social, economic, and racial justice. But what it means, precisely, continues to be a locus of debate. Whether or not American democracy justifies this faith

remains to be seen, but it is imperative that progressives of all stripes recognize and acknowledge how the vast spectrum of movements for racial justice are, in fact, all movements for democracy. Because without such an understanding, it is doubtful that twenty-first-century America—which promises to be even more racially complex—will be able to cope with the challenges it faces in continuing toward achieving justice for all of its people. D