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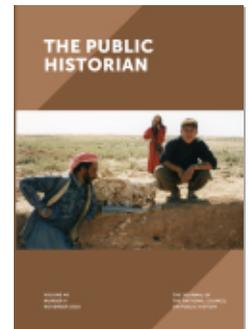
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*A More Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses  
of Civil Rights History* by Jeanne Theoharis (review)

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The Public Historian, Volume 40, Number 4, November 2018, pp. 198-200  
(Review)

Published by University of California Press



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*A More Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History* by Jeanne Theoharis. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2018. ix + 253 pp.; notes, index; clothbound, \$27.95.

A fable is defined as “a short tale to teach a moral lesson, often with animals or inanimate objects as characters.”<sup>1</sup> One of the most famous fables, *The Tortoise and the Hare*, focuses on a race between seemingly unequal opponents: a tortoise and hare. The race ends, however, with a classic fable plot twist: the tortoise wins because “slow and steady wins the race,” showing that “the race is not always to the swift.”<sup>2</sup> Interestingly enough, the fable of the civil rights movement, according to renowned scholar Jeanne Theoharis, pits the freedom “race” between seemingly unequal opponents: the United States and its status quo versus African Americans, the descendants of slaves who finally won the fight for equality promised by the Reconstruction-era amendments in the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, after one hundred years, slow and steady earned African Americans their citizenship rights.

In the powerful, frank, and necessary monograph, *A More Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History*, Theoharis argues that the popular narrative of the civil rights movement is a fable, that is, a short tale to teach a moral lesson, “a story not founded on fact,” and “a story about supernatural or extraordinary persons or incidents; legend.”<sup>3</sup> This historical fable focuses on a one-dimensional, individualistic, heroic, and serendipitous retelling of the civil rights movement that disarms present-day calls for equality from African American and other marginalized communities. To combat this popular narrative, Theoharis provides a more complicated view of the movement, one that highlights how a collective of African Americans and their interracial allies fought a long struggle for numerous decades during the twentieth century against systematic and institutionalized racism. This broad and complex history of the civil rights movement serves as a call to action for historians, both academic and public, to rethink and reframe the struggle and tie it to present-day struggles against inequality.

Theoharis’s research, based on a swath of sources from the civil rights era through present-day, fits with the larger trends in the scholarship that focus on the politics of memory and commemoration (216). She analyzes several primary sources, including monuments and recent events memorializing the milestones of the movement, alongside new archives such as the newest collection of Rosa Parks’s papers, which were recently released by the Library of Congress. Theoharis also cites critical secondary literature that readdresses the struggles of the

1 “Fable,” Dictionary.com, <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/fable>.

2 “The Hare & the Tortoise,” Library of Congress website, <http://read.gov/aesop/o25.html>.

3 “Fable.”

mid-twentieth century, including works by Ashley Farmer and Michel-Rolph Trouillot. In this way, this study highlights the direction that civil rights scholarship is moving in: one that expands the timeline of the movement from the 1940s-1970s; the geographical breadth of the movement that explores numerous movements in the North and West against Jim Crow segregation; and complicates the “happy-ending” narrative of the movement by looking at the many ways that its goals continue to go unaddressed.

Theoharis’s use of quotes at the start of each chapter, the way she uncovers many untold stories, and the corrections she makes to the grand narrative of the civil rights movement provide strength and continuity across the text. For example, each chapter begins with a quote that highlights the major themes to be addressed, including one by James Baldwin that also inspired the book’s title. She also includes popular culture quotes and references, such as one from Chris Rock on Black History Month (“Black History Month is in the shortest month of the year, and the coldest, just in case we want to have a parade”) which shows the appeal to a wider readership. Secondly, Theoharis reveals the names and stories of many of the unsung activists of the era, including Mae Mallory, Celes King, Jeremiah Reeves, and Johnnie Tillmon. In particular, the story of Jeremiah Reeves, killed by police, highlights the roots of present-day calls for criminal justice reform. Moreover, the corrections that Theoharis makes to the fable of the civil rights movement shows how there are no good or bad guys in the struggle; the media, the government, liberal whites, and African American activists were complex and imperfect. Particularly powerful are the sections on Martin Luther King Jr., Coretta Scott King, and Rosa Parks. In these sections, Theoharis eloquently captures the complicated and persistent activists who paid personal costs for their service.

Similarly, Theoharis complicates the idea that the media served as a subversive weapon that assisted the fight during the civil rights movement. By focusing on how mainstream newspapers disregarded and silenced northern struggles for equality, the author highlights how liberal racism shaped and still shapes media and politics. In particular, she shows how the use of coded language and “a cloak of deniability” allowed and continue to sanction racial oppression presented in the nicest and most passive-aggressive manners possible. This colorblind brand of racism has its roots in the popular coverage of the civil rights movement, and Theoharis exposes the dangerous quality of this modern-day version of racial oppression as utilized by journalists, politicians, filmmakers, and historians alike.

Theoharis’s text calls on historians, in particular, to look at how we frame the civil rights movement inside and outside of the classroom. The author makes a strong call for a rapprochement of the easy histories of the era and calls on historians to complicate the narrative in order to fully comprehend and address the goals of the movement, many of which have not yet been achieved, especially in terms of economic and criminal justice disparities. A fable is also defined as

“an untruth; a falsehood,” and in order to fully understand our present, we must move away from the untruths we tell ourselves about history for comfort and convenience. That would be a more substantive way to honor the activists of the civil rights movement.

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*Race, Place, and Memory: Deep Currents in Wilmington, North Carolina*

by Margaret M. Mulrooney. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2018.

1 + 355 pp.: illustrations, notes, bibliography, index; clothbound, \$95.00.

The topic of race and heritage stands at the center of socio-political discussions in America today. The wave of pro and con perspectives on racially controversial monuments of soldiers, physicians, composers, educators, and industrialists has resulted in the removal of some statues and public monuments. At the heart of the controversies is the question, “How do Americans celebrate and commemorate its public history?” Race and heritage controversies come to a head in Margaret M. Mulrooney’s *Race, Place, and Memory: Deep Currents in Wilmington, North Carolina*, a well-documented book that combines historical data with the author’s own role in the current controversy over historic memory in the city.

Mulrooney, professor of history and associate vice provost of university programs at James Madison University, is a specialist on the history of Wilmington and its importance as a colonial and early American port city supporting the economic growth of the United States in the post-Revolutionary period, and beyond. Mulrooney “served as public historian in residence for the 1898 Centennial Foundation planning body,” the civic organization charged with forging a citywide commemoration of the 1898 race riot, or “coup” (2). *Race, Place, and Memory* is an account of her work on the Centennial project as well as a historical narrative to help focus the reader and provide a greater understanding of race and violence in the shaping of Wilmington.

Much of the study focuses on the difficulty of race relations in the history of Wilmington. As early as the eighteenth century, white Wilmingtonians have used violence to buttress white supremacy and racial terrorism. Mulrooney outlines in chapter 1 “that violence especially affected colonial-era residents’ emergent racial and civic identities; the Market where enslaved persons stood on the block for sale held different meanings for blacks than it did for whites; so did places like Nigger Head Road, where whites posted the decapitated skulls of suspected slave rebels” as a public monument to white power and African subversion (8).

The debate between white and black historic memory played out as Wilmingtonians prepared to commemorate the one-hundredth year since the 1898 riot—or coup. One recurring theme in Mulrooney’s history is the indoctrination of new Wilmingtonians, white and black, into the culture of white southern hegemony in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In order to understand the historic