

HNRS 3025: Reframing Leadership: (Auto)biography, Engagement, and the National Black Freedom Movement, 1954-1969

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Thursdays, 4:30-7:20 PM

In the US academy, a central focus of leadership programs, as Joel Christensen and Eli Embleton note, is the biographical or autobiographical text that features “heroic individuals,” like Elon Musk, Steve Jobs, Jack Welch, or Bill Clinton. These success narratives have a long history in the US and present an individualist perspective; the typical narrator, as Richard Ohmann points out, is a white man “characterized by his power, of thought and of will. His achievement flows from extraordinary personal qualities and especially from his strength and determination.” These narratives endorse a deracialized and ahistorical model of American success and citizenship, one that foregrounds charismatic leadership at the expense of representing historical struggle and collective action. One way to learn a democratic version of American leadership is to analyze the autobiographies, biographies, and speeches of Black Americans who participated in National Black Freedom Movement during the 1950s and 1960s. Their experiences and stories present an alternative to the dominant individualist model and show us a powerful version of solidarity that relies on collective action and sustained social engagement.

