Why did American civil rights activists fail to fully implement the Gandhian repertoire before the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 and 1956? How did transnational diffusion of the Gandhian repertoire proceed over time? Classical diffusion theory provides a useful starting point for answering these questions, but it does not fully capture the twists and turns occurring in the transnational diffusion of a collective action repertoire. To account for the non-linear and contingent aspects of transnational diffusion between social movements, this article proposes an alternative theoretical framework and applies it to the case of diffusion between the independence movement in India and the civil rights movement in the United States. The historical case study emphasizes collective reinvention of the Gandhian repertoire by American civil rights networks, instead of critical mass or individual thresholds; and the intergenerational transfer of relevant knowledge and experience from these implementation pioneers to the new generation of civil rights movement activists. Finally, the article examines whether its alternative theoretical framework only applies to this particular instance of transnational diffusion or whether it has more general relevance for social movement theory.

The biggest job in getting any movement off the ground is to keep together the people who form it. This task requires more than a common aim: it demands a philosophy that wins and holds the people’s allegiance; and it depends upon open channels of communication between the people and their leaders. All of these elements were present in Montgomery. . . . It was the Sermon on the Mount, rather than a doctrine of passive resistance, that initially inspired the Negroes of Montgomery to dignified social action. It was Jesus of Nazareth that stirred Negroes to protest with the creative weapon of love. As the days unfolded, however, the inspiration of Mahatma Gandhi began to exert its influence. . . . Nonviolent resistance had emerged as the regulating ideal. In other words, Christ furnished the spirit and motivation, while Gandhi furnished the method (King 1958: 84-85).

With these words in Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story, Martin Luther King, Jr. describes how the Gandhian repertoire helped turn a one-day bus boycott into the American civil rights movement. The Gandhian repertoire not only provided a method for mass protest, but also turned the African American community’s Christian spirit of love into a force of activism. King’s words, however, do not address why civil rights activists failed to adopt and implement the Gandhian repertoire on a mass scale before the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 and 1956. Moreover, it does not indicate how transnational diffusion of the Gandhian repertoire evolved.

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In the chapter following the above quotation, King discusses his personal “pilgrimage to nonviolence” (King 1958: chapter 6). King’s intellectual odyssey, though, is only part of the answer to why and how the African American community in Montgomery fostered the ability to apply the Gandhian repertoire en masse. This article develops a more comprehensive answer by tracing American responses to the Gandhian repertoire historically, from initial awareness in 1917 to full implementation in Montgomery.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR TRANSNATIONAL DIFFUSION

In the past several years diffusion researchers and social movement theorists have finally started to acknowledge each other’s insights and apply each other’s concepts. McAdam and Rucht (1993) have inspired more explicit attention to diffusion processes in the social movement literature. Following in their footsteps, Soule (1997), for instance, confirms that given the presence of mutual interest and channels of communication, the spread of innovative ideas and practices from transmitters to potential adopters depends primarily on cultural and structural similarity (see also, Strang and Meyer 1993). In particular, she argues that the shantytown tactic applied by the student divestment movement in the United States “spread among colleges and universities with similar size endowments, of roughly the same level of prestige, and of the same institutional type (Soule 1997: 955).” Focusing on the transnational dimension, Giugni (1995, 1998), among others, claims that protest only diffuses across borders if both the transmitting movement and the adopting movement face favorable political opportunity structures in their respective countries (see also, Tarrow 1989, 1994).

At the other side of the dialogue, Valente (1995) and Rogers (1995) have stimulated greater awareness for social movements among diffusion researchers. Both Valente and Rogers emphasize the relevance of concepts like critical mass (Marwell and Oliver 1993) and thresholds (Granovetter 1978) for diffusion between social movements. Responding to their cue, recent work has conscientiously incorporated social movements as essential arenas for diffusion processes. Strang and Soule (1998), for example, deliberately include case studies of social movements to illustrate the sources, structural mechanisms, and cultural processes involved in diffusion within and across geographical entities. Moreover, last year’s symposium on “The Social Diffusion of Ideas and Things,” edited by Lopes and Durfee (1999), contains two articles dealing specifically with social movement diffusion. Soule (1999) demonstrates that the perceptual context of protest may allow specific tactics to diffuse among social movement groups despite their lack of success and effectiveness. Ayres (1999), on his part, analyzes the impact of the internet on the dynamics of political contention. The fact that new communication technology has accelerated the global dissemination of information, he points out, does not necessarily facilitate the emergence of sustainable social movements.

Although barriers between the two fields have crumbled, both groups of scholars still take many of the classical assumptions in diffusion theory for granted. Social movement scholars continue to presume that establishing cultural and structural similarity between transmitters and possible adopters is a prerequisite for diffusion within and between social movements. By doing so, they underestimate the socially constructed nature of collective identity, exclude agency from their theoretical framework, and fail to distinguish alternative types of diffusion (Snow and Benford 1999: 24-25). Snow and Benford (1999: 27-37) break new ground by avoiding some of these pitfalls and analyzing four distinct types of diffusion processes: reciprocation, accommodation, adaptation, and contagion. Yet even they do not question the five stages and two-step mechanism identified by classical diffusion theory.

Classical diffusion theory assumes that diffusion proceeds from stage to stage until an innovation is either implemented or rejected (Ryan and Gross 1943; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1944; Hagerstrand 1967; Coleman, Katz, and Menzel 1966; Rogers 1995). This fundamental
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assumption holds for diffusion within as well as across national borders. During the initial knowledge stage, the potential adopter becomes aware of an innovation for the first time, often through exposure to the mass media. The characteristics of the receiving individual or group, the perceived need for the innovation, the norms of the social system, and previous practice help determine whether initial awareness motivates the potential adopter to seek more information about the innovation in question. After gaining sufficient knowledge, the potential adopter forms either a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the innovation at the persuasion stage. During this stage, the potential adopter primarily interacts with interpersonal networks (particularly with trustworthy opinion leaders) to learn more about the innovation’s positive and negative attributes. On the basis of cognitive knowledge and affective perception, the potential adopter is now mentally prepared to either adopt or reject the innovation during the decision stage. The subsequent implementation stage, then, involves translating the new idea into actual practice. Applying the new idea in a different context may warrant reinvention and adaptation. And finally, at the confirmation stage, the adopting individual or group reevaluates whether the innovation meets expectations, and either decides to prolong or discontinue implementation (Rogers 1995: 161-185; Lionberger 1960).

Classical diffusion theory not only identifies five stages, but also posits that diffusion follows regular laws and patterns:

At first, only a few individuals adopt the innovation in each time period (such as a year or a month, for example); these are the innovators. But soon the diffusion curve begins to climb as more and more individuals adopt in each succeeding time period. Eventually, the trajectory of adoption begins to level off, as fewer and fewer individuals remain who have not yet adopted the innovation. Finally, the S-shaped curve reaches its asymptote, and the diffusion process is finished (Rogers 1995: 23; Tarde 1903: 127).

In other words, diffusion either proceeds incrementally until the majority of an adopting group has implemented an innovation, or it stops when members of the adopting group decide to reject that innovation at one of the five stages. Although recent diffusion studies recognize that adopters may reinvent or adapt an innovation to fit their particular environment, most diffusion scholars still adhere to the basic premises of the classical model (Rogers 1995: 174-180; Valente 1995; Lopes and Durfee 1999).

The classical diffusion model underlying contemporary studies of social movement diffusion is too linear and mechanistic to understand the transnational diffusion of the Gandhian repertoire. Before the African American community in Montgomery finally implemented the Gandhian repertoire, various activist networks debated the relevance of the Gandhian repertoire for civil rights protest in the United States. Contrary to classical diffusion theory, however, initial awareness of the Gandhian repertoire actually raised obstacles against transnational diffusion instead of leading to widespread persuasion and adoption. Overcoming these obstacles depended not on a “critical mass” or a “threshold,” nor on established opinion leaders, but on small groups of radical activists who experimented with the Gandhian repertoire despite hostile circumstances. These collective trials helped reinvent the Gandhian repertoire and enabled its

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1 According to the classical diffusion model’s two-step flow hypothesis, most people are directly influenced by face-to-face communication and only indirectly by mass media channels: “The first step, from media sources to opinion leaders, is mainly a transfer of information, whereas the second step, from opinion leaders to their followers, also involves the spread of interpersonal influence. This two-step flow hypothesis suggested that communication messages flow from a source, via mass media channels, to opinion leaders, who in turn pass them on to followers” (Rogers 1995: 285; Katz 1957).

2 “‘The critical mass occurs at the point at which enough individuals have adopted an innovation that the innovation’s further rate of adoption becomes self-sustaining….A threshold is the number of other individuals who must be engaged in
transplantation from India to the United States. But even after adaptation to American circumstances, it took more than a decade before civil rights activists fully implemented the Gandhian repertoire. Clearly, a theoretical framework for studying why and how the Gandhian repertoire traveled across time and space must account for these kinds of unexpected twists and turns in the diffusion process.

My theoretical framework for transnational social movement diffusion acknowledges the existence of various diffusion levels, from knowledge to confirmation, but asserts that the transition from one stage to another is uncertain and nonlinear. The next section deals with specifics, for now I highlight my theoretical framework’s fundamental building blocks.

In the first place, I emphasize that the knowledge stage often produces two obstacles against transnational diffusion: hyper-difference and over-likeness. Hyper-difference refers to the tendency to exaggerate cultural and environmental differences between transmitters and adopters, while over-likeness reflects the impulse to underestimate the need for adaptation and reinvention (Fox 1997). Obviously, the relevance of these obstacles depends on the particular case of transnational diffusion.

Secondly, overcoming these diffusion obstacles requires intellectual dislocation and practical relocation. On the one hand, adopting groups must realize, on a mental level, that the innovative repertoire is not only relevant in its original geographical and temporal setting. On the other hand, adopting groups must translate this mental realization into small-scale practical experiments with the new repertoire. During this relocation process, the adopters reinvent the repertoire of collective action to fit their own situation. Far from diluting the original repertoire, reinvention is essential to full implementation by adopting groups that face different temporal and geographical conditions than the transmitting group (Fox 1997).

And finally, the transition from partial to full implementation (and confirmation) is particularly problematic for transnational diffusion between social movements. While small groups may successfully implement a foreign repertoire on a limited basis, full implementation by a social movement demands mass participation and a favorable external environment. My framework posits that each case study must first verify empirically that this transition has taken place and then concentrate on why and how.

THE GANDHIAN REPERTOIRE AS INNOVATIVE DIFFUSION ITEM

Within social movement theory, the term repertoire generally refers to a limited set of collective action forms that a protest group learns, shares, and implements in its interactions with authorities and the public. These forms of contention emerge from previous experiences of struggle, not from abstract ideas or philosophy (Tilly 1995: 26). The Gandhian repertoire, however, did not contribute any new forms of collective action: strikes, boycotts, non-cooperation, and even civil disobedience were already familiar elements of the political landscape before Gandhi became an activist. Nevertheless, the Gandhian repertoire was innovative, because it fundamentally transformed the substance and meaning of these forms of resistance (Sharp 1979).

In contrast to previous struggles, Gandhi’s campaigns in South Africa and India illustrated that nonviolent action could be active and militant, instead of passive and submissive. Moreover, Gandhi emphasized that he and his associates engaged in nonviolent direct action despite their capacity for violent resistance, not because they were afraid or unable to use violent means. And finally, Gandhi stressed that his ideas were directly based on concrete experiences...
of struggle, not dogmatic ideology. The Gandhian repertoire, therefore, continuously evolved along with changes in the temporal and spatial context (Gandhi 1999, hereafter, CWMG, Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi). To distinguish the Gandhian repertoire from forms of violent or passive resistance, Gandhi invented the term satyagraha and defined it as follows: “Truth (Satya) implies love, and firmness (agraha) engenders and therefore serves as a synonym for force…. [Satyagraha is] the Force which is born of Truth and Love or non-violence…” (Gandhi 1928: 102).

At the individual level, the Gandhian repertoire outlined a code of discipline for participants in direct action campaigns. Everyone was supposed to suffer the anger of an opponent without retaliation, avoid the use of insults or any form of violence, willingly submit to arrest or punishment, and obey the orders of group leaders (Bondurant 1971: 39-40). At the strategic and organizational level, the Gandhian repertoire emphasized self-reliance, honorable negotiation with the authorities, self-discipline, and openness in communication (Bose 1947: 175; CWMG 76: 4-5; CWMG 27: 53-56). Through his journals, books, speeches, and letters, Gandhi encouraged open discourse with followers and critics, particularly on the meaning of satyagraha. And at the most practical level, the Gandhian repertoire stressed several steps that had to precede any campaign involving nonviolent direct action. First, the satyagraha group must try to resolve the injustice through honest negotiation and arbitration. Then, the group must raise public consciousness through publicity and agitation, prepare for mass action by participating in demonstrations, and issue an ultimatum to the authorities. Finally, after these legal attempts at persuasion have failed, the group may initiate nonviolent direct action in the form of a strike, an economic boycott, mass non-cooperation, or civil disobedience (Shridharani 1939; CWMG 76: 11-14; CWMG 20: 303-307).

Although other repertoires contained similar action forms or tactics, the Gandhian repertoire was the first to identify a code of discipline, organizational guidelines, and practical steps aimed at militant and nonviolent direct action on a mass scale. Moreover, the Gandhian repertoire was not only innovative in content, but also in flexibility. Instead of protecting his invention, Gandhi encouraged other protest groups to experiment with the Gandhian repertoire in their own historical and geographical environment (Fox 1989). Gandhi himself helped transplant the Gandhian repertoire from the Indian minority’s struggle in South Africa to the national independence movement in India. For civil rights groups in the United States, of course, transplantation of the Gandhian repertoire was not quite as simple.

MENTAL BARRIERS AT THE KNOWLEDGE STAGE

American activists became interested in Gandhi around 1917, the year he initiated the first satyagraha campaign in India. World War I provided the context for interest in Gandhi as a leader who may help save the world from the destructive menace of white imperialism. The most important diffusion channels during the knowledge stage were international correspondence, sermons, speeches, and the American press (both African American and mainstream). Although information and awareness about Gandhi and the Indian movement spread rapidly during the 1920s and 1930s, few opinion leaders believed that the Gandhian repertoire was directly relevant for the civil rights struggle (Singh 1968; Watson 1989).

Activists fascinated with Gandhi during this initial diffusion period basically divided into three major camps. One camp, represented by the influential National Association for
Mobilization

Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and African American intellectuals like W.E.B. Du Bois, admired Gandhi’s courageous efforts but considered attempts to apply the Gandhian repertoire in the United States unrealistic at best. The second camp, led by the racially exclusive United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and its founder Marcus Garvey, saw Gandhi primarily as a powerful leader of the colored Asian masses and a close partner of the black African masses. This camp gained notoriety, and a large following, in the early-1920s, but quickly faded away after Garvey’s exile from the United States in 1927 (Franklin and Starr 1967: 108-112). The third camp, consisting of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) and religious pacifists like John Haynes Holmes, compared Gandhi to Jesus and presented him as the world’s only hope in the universal struggle against injustice. Closely related to all three camps was a small group of Indian exiles, which had come to the U. S. to promote Indian independence and lobby for American pressure on the British government.

These diffusion networks, each connected to the Indian exile network, unwittingly raised two obstacles against implementation of the Gandhian repertoire in the 1920s and 1930s. Unwittingly, because while none of the civil rights networks intended to delay a social movement based on the Gandhian repertoire, their interactions did exactly that. Public discourse about Gandhi’s relevance for civil rights protest oscillated between two extremes, and neither was conducive to the implementation of the Gandhian repertoire in the U.S.

On one side, civil rights leaders argued that Gandhi’s efforts in India were psychologically important because they illustrated that subordinate groups belonging to the colored races could organize massive resistance against white supremacy. At the same time, however, many of these leaders felt that hyper-difference between the two situations and cultures rendered adoption and implementation of the Gandhian repertoire in the United States impossible. W.E.B. Du Bois represented this paradoxical stance well. On the one hand he greatly admired the efforts of Gandhi and other Indian nationalists. On the other hand, he argued vehemently against modeling African American resistance on the Gandhian repertoire. In one of his columns, Du Bois claimed that cultural differences between African Americans and Indians made adoption of the Gandhian repertoire impossible. Fasting, prayer, sacrifice, and self-torture, he declared, had been “bred into the very bone of India for more than three thousand years...[and] would be regarded as a joke or a bit of insanity” by African Americans in the United States. The reason was that “our culture patterns in East and West differ so vastly, that what is sense in one world may be nonsense in the other (DuBois 1943: 10).” Like most civil rights leaders, Du Bois believed that the NAACP repertoire of legal agitation and publicity had achieved significant progress and deserved to be continued (Broderick and Meier 1965).

On the other side, religious pacifists tended to exaggerate the similarity between Gandhian methods and Christian nonviolence, thereby underestimating the Gandhian repertoire’s uniqueness and the need for reinvention. In 1921, Reverend John Haynes Holmes delivered a sermon in New York entitled “Who is the Greatest Man in the World To-day,” in which he compared Gandhi with Jesus Christ (Muzumdar 1982). Holmes was a prominent opinion leader within the religious pacifist community, with ties to the NAACP, FOR, and Indian exiles (particularly Muzumdar). Following his lead, many other activists started writing articles on Gandhi’s divine personality and the Indian movement’s holy war against materialist civilization (Singh 1968; Watson 1989). Although these journalistic efforts increased public

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4 Prior to 1927, Garvey and his followers emphasized this aspect of the Gandhian movement in India without developing specific plans for implementing the Gandhian repertoire in the United States.

5 During the 1920s and 1930s, Du Bois established close ties with Indian exiles like Haridas Muzumdar and Lajpat Rai. He also met C.F. Andrews during his trip to the United States in 1929, and published a message from Gandhi to African Americans in the NAACP’s The Crisis (“To the American Negro, A Message from Mahatma Gandhi,” July, 1929: 225).

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awareness of Gandhi and the Indian struggle, the abstract over-likeness they created between Gandhi’s fight against British rule and Jesus’s resistance against Rome actually obstructed diffusion of the Gandhian repertoire from India to the civil rights struggle in the United States. Conscientious religious pacifists assumed that Gandhian ideas and practices only applied to their personal lives, not to mass protest. As Richard Fox observes: “For many U.S. activists in the 1930s, even Christian ones, a Christ-like Gandhi gave no political direction (Fox 1997: 72).”

CONFRONTING DIFFUSION BARRIERS THROUGH INTELLECTUAL DISLOCATION

Not all diffusion efforts during the 1920s and 1930s suffered from the dichotomy between hyper-difference and over-likeness. International travel, scholarly writing, and several organizations contributed to the dislocation of the Gandhian repertoire from the confines of Indian culture (hyper-difference) and abstract universalism (over-likeness). The immediate impact of these new insights and personal networks, however, was relatively limited.

Several Gandhian emissaries from India traveled to the United States to eradicate stereotypes about India and Gandhi. In 1929, for instance, C.F. Andrews, Gandhi’s close friend and confidant, came for a lecture tour throughout the country. Soon after, Madeleine Slade, Vithalbhai Patel, Bhicoo Batalivala, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, Vijaylakshmi Pandit, and Manilal Parekh (all co-workers of Gandhi) followed in Andrews’ footsteps (Muzumdar 1962: 11-12). Toward the end of the 1930s, several African American leaders decided to see India and Gandhi for themselves, among whom Howard Thurman and Benjamin Mays. Thurman was dean of Howard University’s Chapel and had close ties with the FOR, while Benjamin Mays was dean of Howard University’s School of Religion and active in several civil rights organizations. Both had an opportunity to meet with Gandhi in private. To Thurman, Gandhi stressed that the Gandhian repertoire was also relevant to the African American struggle by noting: “Well, if it comes true, it may be through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of non-violence will be delivered to the world.” In response to Mays’ queries about mass protest in confrontation with a majority, Gandhi asserted: “I would say that a minority can do much more in the way of non-violence than a majority… I had less diffidence in handling my minority in South African than I had here in handling a majority (CWMG 68: 234-238; CWMG 70: 261-264).” Overall, international travel laid the basis for interpersonal diffusion networks between India and the United States, while the mass media reserved ample column space for sharing the travelers’ insights and experiences with a wider audience (Kapur 1992).

Another way to escape the dichotomy between hyper-difference and over-likeness during the 1920s and 1930s was through academic writing. Two books were particularly crucial in this regard. Richard Gregg’s The Power of Nonviolence, published in 1935, clearly showed that the Gandhian repertoire was indeed applicable in the West and outlined the specific means for doing so. Gregg himself was also an important human bridge between religious pacifists in the United States and satyagrahis in India. The other human bridge was Gandhian activist Krishnalal Shridharani who, in 1939, published War Without Violence, A Study of Gandhi’s Method and its Accomplishments, a virtual handbook on how to adopt and implement the Gandhian repertoire in a Western democracy like the United States. Together with Haridas Muzumdar, Dr. Syud Hossain and Dr. Anup Singh, he was member of the second generation of Indian exiles, establishing close interpersonal links with religious pacifists and civil rights activists in the United States (Muzumdar 1962: 13, 27-28).

Finally, several organizations during this period created fertile settings for dislocation

7 Gregg also corresponded extensively with Gandhi, and stayed at his ashram in 1925 and 1930. For letters, see Reddy (1998: 50-88).
of the Gandhian repertoire. These fertile settings included traditional organizations like the NAACP, churches, and universities, as well as less visible organizations like the Highlander Folk School (HFS), the Southern Regional Council (SRC), the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), the War Resisters League, and the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR). Aldon Morris (1984) refers to the less visible organizations as “movement halfway houses,” and defines them as:

group[s] or organization[s] that are only partially integrated into the larger society because [their] participants are actively involved in efforts to bring about a desired change in society….What is distinctive about movement halfway houses is their relative isolation from the larger society and the absence of a mass base (139).

Despite their lack of mass appeal, movement halfway houses provided valuable resources to civil rights networks, including training, skilled activists, knowledge, media contacts, and experience (140).

During the 1930s, Howard University was perhaps the most important “traditional” organization that contributed to the dislocation of the Gandhian repertoire. Its president, Mordecai Johnson, was convinced that African Americans should adopt the Gandhian repertoire, while its School of Religion (with Howard Thurman and Benjamin Mays) stimulated serious debate about Gandhi and satyagraha. Howard students responded positively to these role models, and in 1930 two of them, Martin Cotton and Vivian Coombs, put the Gandhian repertoire into practice by refusing to go to the back of the bus during their journey from Philadelphia to Washington, D.C. These personal acts of civil disobedience took place several days after the Salt March started in India (Baltimore Afro-American 1930: 3).

Two “halfway houses” were particularly essential for the dislocation process: Highlander Folk School (HFS) and the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR). Myles Horton and Don West founded HFS in 1932 as a community where workers and activists could learn about the world they lived in and apply their ideals in an interracial setting without class distinctions (Adams 1975: 35-36). Starting in the 1940s, civil rights activists regularly came to the HFS to take classes, exchange information, and encourage each other to experiment with the Gandhian repertoire. Besides providing a safe haven for civil rights activists, HFS also served as a real-life model for an integrated society (p. 122). On the basis of this model, HFS developed a mass education program that stimulated oppressed African Americans to find their own answers to daily problems (Morris 1984: 141-157; Payne 1995).

FOR, an interracial organization of Christian pacifists, also facilitated the eventual dislocation of the Gandhian repertoire. Although most of its members initially fell into the over-likeness trap, FOR provided a positive environment for thoughtful discussion of the Gandhian repertoire. Before 1940 these discussions primarily affected individual behavior, but during World War II FOR activists started to realize that real social change depended on confrontational collective action. Due to its pacifist roots, civil rights were not FOR’s primary concern. It did, however, share its personnel, knowledge, and experience with civil rights activists—particularly after the civil rights movement’s emergence (Morris 1984: 157-166).

RELOCATION OF THE GANDHIAN REPERTOIRE

The rise of Nazism sparked a series of changes within FOR. After a dispute between die-hard pacifists and pragmatic realists, FOR members elected A.J. Muste as executive secretary in August 1940. The radical pacifists, led by Muste, regarded Gandhian nonviolence as a total way of life, while the realist group, which included Reinhold Niebuhr, considered nonviolence
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strategically irresponsible in the face of Hitler’s evil empire. In September 1941, at FOR’s annual conference, Muste announced three staff appointments that would have tremendous (but, at that time, unexpected) repercussions for the American civil rights struggle. He nominated James Farmer as race relations secretary, Bayard Rustin as secretary for student and general affairs, and George Houser as youth secretary (Anderson 1997: 68).

As a recent university graduate, James Farmer had already met numerous proponents of Gandhi. At a meeting of the National Negro Congress in 1937, for instance, he heard Mordecai Johnson and A. Philip Randolph speak. And from 1938 to 1940, during his undergraduate studies at Howard University’s School of Religion, he established close ties with two African American leaders imbued with Gandhian philosophy: Benjamin Mays and Howard Thurman (Farmer 1985: 134-135). Thurman became Farmer’s mentor and introduced him to the study of Gandhi. Thurman also helped Farmer land a temporary job at the FOR in New York, where he explored in detail the Gandhian repertoire (Farmer 1985: 142).

As FOR secretary, Farmer tested the practical relevance of the Gandhian repertoire for civil rights activism in the U. S. Disappointed by the lack of progress achieved by the traditional methods of the NAACP and the National Urban League (NUL), he argued that:

> Segregation will go on as long as we permit it to. Words are not enough; there must be action. We must withhold our support and participation from the institution of segregation in every area of American life—not an individual witness to purity of conscience, as Thoreau used it, but a coordinated movement of mass cooperation as with Gandhi. And civil disobedience when laws are involved. And jail where necessary. More than the elegant cadre of generals we now have, we also must have an army of ground troops. Like Gandhi’s army, it must be nonviolent. Guns would be suicidal for us. Yes, Gandhi has the key for me to unlock the door to the American dream (Farmer 1985: 74).

Unlike previous supporters of Gandhi, whose diffusion efforts never surpassed the persuasion stage, Farmer developed an elaborate plan for reinvention and implementation of the Gandhian repertoire. The memo to Muste outlining his specific ideas symbolized Farmer’s intellectual transcendence of the hyper-difference and over-likeness barriers:

From its inception, the Fellowship has thought in terms of developing definite, positive and effective alternatives to violence as a technique for resolving conflict. It has sought to translate love of God and man, on one hand, and hatred of injustice on the other, into specific action. Leading naturally into a study of the Gandhian movement, this quest has been served mightily by the clear analysis in Shridharani’s *War without Violence* and by the work of J. Holmes Smith. New vistas have been opened, new horizons revealed. In general terms, we have spoken of the new technique as “nonviolent direct action.”... Certain social and cultural differences between the United States and India, and certain basic differences between the problems to be dealt with in the two countries, militate strongly against an uncritical duplication of the Gandhian steps in organization and execution. The American race problem is in many ways distinctive, and must to that extent be dealt with in a distinctive manner. Using Gandhism as a base, our approach must be creative in order to be effectual (Farmer 1985: 355-360).

This statement expressed Farmer’s conviction that civil rights groups could apply the Gandhian repertoire without resorting to blind imitation.

Following the Gandhian repertoire, Farmer also proposed an organizational strategy that incorporated all levels of civil rights activism: the mass constituency, the organizers, and the
army of satyagrahis (p. 357). Furthermore, as specific adaptation to the American context, Farmer identified three African American institutions that would help maximize mass involvement in the Gandhian struggle: churches, civic associations, and universities (p. 359). In 1942, after approval of his memo, Farmer founded the interracial Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in Chicago. Unlike FOR, which concentrated primarily on pacifist issues, CORE was exclusively oriented toward civil rights and racial justice.

Houser and Rustin also became members of CORE, although they never relinquished their FOR membership. Prior to CORE, Houser and Rustin (like Farmer) had established ties with various pacifist, civil rights, and labor organizations (including Norman Thomas’s Socialist Party and Randolph’s Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters). After the creation of CORE, however, Houser and Farmer concentrated on organizing small-scale nonviolent direct action campaigns in Chicago,8 while Rustin traveled across the country disseminating the Gandhian message through lectures, articles, and nonviolent workshops. Rustin never committed himself exclusively to one activist organization. Besides FOR and CORE, he was involved in Randolph’s March On Washington Movement (MOWM), the American Friends Services Committee (AFSC), the War Resisters League (WRL), and various other organizations. Later, at the end of the 1950s and the start of the 1960s, Rustin shared his vast knowledge and experience with the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) (Anderson 1997: 111-113).

CORE was not the only civil rights organization reinventing the Gandhian repertoire during the early 1940s. In 1941, African American labor leader A. Philip Randolph decided that the traditional methods of pressuring the American political system were outdated. In contrast to organizations like the NAACP and the NUL, he wanted to involve all segments of the African American community from all sections of the country by initiating a mass march on the capital. He created the March on Washington Committee as the organizing vehicle for the march and, like Gandhi, emphasized the need for self-discipline among the participants (Garfinkel 1959; Pfeffer 1990). The Roosevelt administration, fearing domestic unrest at a time of international war, eventually conceded to Randolph’s demand for opening up the wartime defense industries to African Americans by signing an executive order. Instead of disbanding his organization after the executive order, Randolph took advantage of the favorable national and international political conditions by expanding its activities in the form of the March on Washington Movement (MOWM). In September 1942, influenced by CORE’s direct action campaigns and his friend A.J. Muste, Randolph announced that the MOWM would adopt the Gandhian repertoire (1942: 4-11).

Randolph dislocated the Gandhian repertoire from India by fusing it with the labor movement’s familiar sit-down strike and calling it “nonviolent good-will direct action” (Randolph 1943). Moreover, Randolph’s reputation as labor leader and atheist illustrated that the Gandhian repertoire was also relevant for those without religious fervor or an absolute commitment to pacifism. Randolph relocated the Gandhian repertoire by specifying the organizational and behavioral prerequisites for mass, nonviolent direct action in the United States. He organized smaller forms of direct actions to provide the African American masses with training and discipline, and proposed “Negro mass parliaments” to discuss and act on daily problems. Moreover, like Gandhi, he stressed that negotiation would always precede direct action, and declared that every participant was pledged to nonviolence in word and deed (Pfeffer 1990: 658-60). Besides dislocation and relocation, Randolph also brought well-known American

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8 During these initial campaigns CORE explicitly reminded participants to follow the steps in the Gandhian repertoire: “Remember technique!...Gather facts. Negotiate. Rouse public opinion, and then, if absolutely necessary, and only as a last resort, Take Direct Action” (CORE newsletter, Meier and Rudwick 1973: 13).
Gandhians together. At the “We Are Americans Too!” Conference in July 1943, for instance, Jay Holmes Smith and E. Stanley Jones joined Randolph, Farmer, Rustin, and Houser to discuss ways of implementing the Gandhian repertoire on a mass scale.10

Collectively, Farmer, Houser, Rustin, and Randolph made two essential contributions to the African American community’s adoption and implementation of the Gandhian repertoire. In the first place, they enabled the relocation of the Gandhian repertoire from India to the United States. Instead of blindly copying Gandhi’s precepts, they creatively reinvented his guidelines and methods by adapting them to the contemporary American context. And in the second place, they shared their expertise and practical experience with the next generation of civil rights activists. Although African American leaders during the late 1950s and early 1960s received most of the acclaim for their application of the Gandhian repertoire, it was the core group of Gandhians in the 1940s (led by Randolph, Farmer, Rustin, and Houser) that first experimented with the Gandhian repertoire. Without this intergenerational transfer of ideas and practices, transnational diffusion of the Gandhian repertoire would have ended with the small-scale trials during the 1940s, not the civil rights movement.11

TRANSNATIONAL DIFFUSION IN ABYANCE

Classical diffusion theory’s S-curve predicts that more individuals will adopt an innovation in each succeeding time period, particularly after experimentation and adaptation (Rogers 1995: 23). This case study does not confirm such a prediction. Instead of more widespread adoption of the Gandhian repertoire, most civil rights activists after 1943 reverted back to the traditional repertoire of agitation and publicity without direct action (Broderick and Meier 1965). There were a few trials with the Gandhian repertoire between 1944 and 1955, such as the FOR’s Journey of Reconciliation in 1947 and Randolph’s League for Non-Violent Civil Disobedience, but none matched the intensity or scale of CORE and the MOWM before 1944. Largely due to the national (and international) obsession with anticommunism during this era, American activists shifted much of their attention to “safer” foreign issues like World War II, the United Nations, the Cold War, and the Korean War (Egerton 1994). Domestic civil rights activism concentrated primarily on the federal courts, because any kind of militant direct action was immediately branded communist. Within this inhospitable political climate for further experimentation with the Gandhian repertoire, CORE and MOWM declined while the NAACP achieved a string of legal victories (with, of course, the 1954 Supreme Court decision outlawing school segregation as the most significant victory).

Although transnational diffusion of the Gandhian repertoire during this period generally retreated from the implementation to the adoption stage, several actors took advantage of technological improvements in international travel, creating new diffusion networks between Gandhians in India and civil rights activists in the United States. Rustin, for instance, traveled to India in 1948, while Mordecai Johnson followed his trail the next year.12 Some of the older

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9 Jay Holmes Smith, who had been a missionary in India, founded the Harlem Ashram, the committee for Non-Violent Direct Action (NVDA), and the Free India Committee. E. Stanley Jones, also a missionary in India, was a friend of Gandhi and author of Mahatma Gandhi: An Interpretation. Jones also corresponded with Gandhi over many years: see Reddy (1998: 183-188).
10 Due to race riots before the conference, this core group of Gandhians was unable to fully implement the Gandhian repertoire between 1944 and 1955 (Sitkoff 1971).
11 I stress that collective experiments with the Gandhian repertoire, not just individual activists’ insights, enabled the reinvention of the Gandhian repertoire: “Repertoires . . . do not descend from abstract philosophy or take shape as a result of political propaganda; they emerge from struggle.” (Tilly 1995: 26; italics mine)
12 For Rustin’s trip, see Anderson 1997: 130-139; Johnson describes his experiences in “Gandhi’s Purity of Heart,” Mordecai Wyatt Johnson Papers, Moorland-Springarn Research Center, Howard University [Box 1+: 1-2].
activists’ enthusiasm trickled down to the younger generation. James Lawson (a disciple of FOR’s A.J. Muste and a veteran of Rustin’s nonviolent workshops in the early 1940s), for instance, went to India in 1953 as a fraternal worker for his church. He did not return to the United States until he heard about the Montgomery bus boycott in 1956 (Branch 1988: 143; Morris 1984:162-166).

And finally, one of the Indian Gandhians to come to the United States during this period was Ram Manohar Lohia. In 1951, Lohia, who had organized his own civil disobedience campaigns in India, went on a lecture tour throughout the country. In his speeches, Lohia criticized the traditional repertoire’s gradualist approach and urged African Americans to implement the Gandhian repertoire, instead of talking about it. Like the diffusion pioneers in the early-1940s, Lohia believed that hands-on experience was the only way to grasp the power of nonviolent direct action: “Education by activity in the subject to be taught, basic education we call it, is the newest way, and that is the way I suggest. Not manifestoes or speeches about non-violence, but practice! (Wofford 1961: 86-87)”

UNEXPECTED IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GANDHIAN REPERTOIRE

The emergence of the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 brought new life to the transnational diffusion of the Gandhian repertoire. After the African American community collectively initiated the one-day bus boycott, various pre-1944 Gandhian networks provided the knowledge and experience that allowed it to grow into a full-fledged Gandhian social movement. Although a complete account of the dense ties between the old and new generations of Gandhian activists is beyond the scope of this article, let me sketch a few of the connections. These specific intergenerational connections merely scratch the surface of much broader and deeper transnational diffusion links.

Most obviously, Martin Luther King, Jr. based his knowledge of the Gandhian repertoire on A.J. Muste’s classes at Crozer Theological Seminary, Mordecai Johnson’s sermon in 1950, and Benjamin Mays’ friendly advice. Moreover, during the Montgomery bus boycott, King established close ties with FOR activists Reverend Glenn Smiley and Bayard Rustin (King 1958; Branch 1988). Another Montgomery civil rights leader with significant intergenerational ties was E.D. Nixon. Nixon worked for A. Philip Randolph’s BSCP and, during the 1930s, had helped his friend Myles Horton organize African American workers in the South. At the start of the 1950s, moreover, Nixon joined other African American activists (including Rosa Parks) at HFS workshops (Morris 1984: 144-146; Adams 1975).

The impact of preexisting Gandhian networks stretched far beyond the Montgomery bus boycott. In 1957, Rustin created King’s organizational vehicle, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), on the basis of the Gandhian repertoire (Anderson 1997). In 1961, James Lawson drafted the statement of purpose for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and became a major role model for student leaders like John Lewis, James Bevel, and Diane Nash (Lewis 1999). That same year, Farmer and CORE asked Lawson to train activists preparing for the Freedom Rides, which, of course, were inspired by Houser and Rustin’s 1947 Journey of Reconciliation (Farmer 1985). Finally, the famous March on Washington in 1963 was clearly modeled after March on Washington plans in 1941. As a sign of gratitude toward previous generations of civil rights activists, Randolph himself was appointed director of the 1963 march and Rustin its chief organizer (Pfeffer 1990).

13 Myles Horton invited Lohia to give a speech at HFS, and accompanied him during his six-week tour through the United States (Wofford 1961).
THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Why did civil rights activists fail to fully implement the Gandhian repertoire before 1955? How did transnational diffusion of the Gandhian repertoire proceed over time? It is tempting to highlight the role of Martin Luther King, Jr. in answering these questions. Doing so, however, would seriously underestimate the diffusion efforts of civil rights activists before Montgomery. While King helped popularize the Gandhian repertoire by wrapping it in religious language that the African American masses understood, creative reinvention of the Gandhian repertoire primarily took place at the start of the 1940s. The core group of “reinventors,” in turn, relied on previous generations of Gandhian activists in the United States for knowledge, networks, favorable settings, and resources.

This article approaches the questions concerning why and how transnational diffusion occurred differently. On the one hand, it argues for the relevance of classical diffusion theory. On the other hand, it asserts that, in contrast to classical diffusion theory, transnational diffusion of the Gandhian repertoire did not advance sequentially from one diffusion stage to the next, but experienced several unexpected twists and turns before full implementation. The case study confirms the significance of this assertion and analyzes how transnational diffusion evolved over time. Initial American awareness of the Gandhian repertoire did not simply lead to the persuasion and adoption stages, but raised dual barriers of hyper-difference and over-likeness. Transcending these barriers, moreover, demanded intellectual dislocation and practical relocation by pioneering groups of civil rights activists, not the attainment of a “critical mass” or “threshold” (cf. Rogers 1995; Valente 1994; Marwell and Oliver 1993; Granovetter 1978).

Finally, full implementation of the Gandhian repertoire did not directly follow mental adoption and partial application, as classical diffusion theory would predict, but happened unexpectedly after a “down” period of more than a decade.

The definitive answer to why American civil rights activists did not fully implement the Gandhian repertoire before 1955 is much less clear-cut. Social science in general is unable to paint a complete picture of the panoply of intentions and events involved in such a collective phenomenon. My case study, though, suggests at least three partial (and complementary) answers. First of all, civil rights activists were simply not prepared, in terms of knowledge and experience, to fully implement the Gandhian repertoire in the United States before the experimental trials during the early-1940s. This observation limits the unexplained period to the years between 1944 and 1955. Secondly, events like the race riots of 1943, anticommunist hysteria after World War II, and the NAACP’s legal victory in 1954, created unfavorable political conditions for massive nonviolent direct action in the United States. The end of the Cold War frenzy and the lack of concrete results after the 1954 Supreme Court decision reduced the fear and heightened the combative energy of the African-American community in Montgomery.

Relatively favorable circumstances in 1955, however, did not automatically lead to implementation on a mass scale. Mass implementation of the Gandhian repertoire did not occur until after leaders and common people, in unison, decided to initiate a collective boycott of the Montgomery buses. The emergence of the bus boycott, in turn, impelled previous

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14 After the race riots of 1943, most civil rights leaders retracted even tacit support for MOWM and CORE’s confrontational protest methods. McCarthyism, and fear of red-baiting, only solidified the opposition to militant action (Egerton 1994). And finally, Thurgood Marshall’s successful court cases during this period allowed the NAACP, and its traditional repertoire of protest, to regain an image of superiority.

15 In other words, a less prohibitive national and international POS does not adequately explain the transition to full implementation. The collective initiative to engage in mass direct action and, most importantly, the “older” activists’ willingness to transfer their knowledge and experience to contemporary activists made full implementation (and confirmation) of the Gandhian repertoire possible.
generations of Gandhian activists to share their knowledge and experience with the new generation of civil rights activists. This intergenerational transfer of knowledge and experience, the third element of my answer, explains most convincingly why full implementation of the Gandhian repertoire started in 1955 and 1956, and not earlier.

Even if my theoretical framework helps understand and explain transnational diffusion of the Gandhian repertoire from India to the United States, does this make it relevant to social movement theory in general? Personally, I believe that the three fundamental elements of my theoretical framework—the obstacles of hyper-difference and over-likeness, the necessity for dislocation and relocation, and the problematic transition from partial to full implementation—also apply to other cases of transnational diffusion between social movements. The only way to really test the validity of my theoretical framework, however, is by comparing my case study with various other case studies. One could, for instance, compare my case of transnational diffusion between distinct social movements with cases of transnational diffusion between social movements within a worldwide movement. One could also compare transnational diffusion of a repertoire of collective action with transnational diffusion of one particular collective action routine. In any case, this article will have succeeded if it inspires social movement scholars to translate mental awareness of transnational diffusion into practical application in the form of additional research.

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Transnational Diffusion of the Gandhian Repertoire


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Mobilization


