As a recent graduate from Howard University, James Farmer moved to Chicago in August 1941, where he found a job as race relations secretary of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR). The one thing these two institutions had in common was their close affinity with the Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence. On the one hand, Farmer’s mentor at Howard University, Howard Thurman, had personally met and spoken with Gandhi at his ashram, while Mordecai Johnson, the university president, was famous for his eloquent speeches on India’s nonviolent struggle for independence. On the other hand, as an interracial and Christian pacifist organization, the FOR had long been interested in the Gandhian approach to activism. This social environment, as well as his childhood confrontations with racial bigotry in the Deep South, inspired the young Farmer to formulate a plan for adapting the Gandhian repertoire of contention to the situation faced by African-Americans. After discussing his ideas with friends and fellow activists, he wrote a memo to FOR president A.J. Muste entitled “Provisional Plans for Brotherhood Mobilization.” In it, Farmer proposed a Gandhian framework for fighting racial injustice in the United States:

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 (February 19, 1942; quoted in Farmer 1985: 355–356).

Farmer’s memo must have struck a chord, because in 1942 a small and interracial group of activists formed the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). The following years CORE, with Farmer as its executive director, initiated numerous collective experiments with the intention of putting the Gandhian repertoire into practice. These experiments remained small-scale and received little attention at the time, but they provided the repository of knowledge and experience that helped turn the civil rights movement into the first American mass movement based on nonviolent direct action.

Scholars specializing in the American civil rights movement generally acknowledge the relevance of CORE and nonviolent direct action, yet they seldom focus explicitly on how the Gandhian movement in India influenced the civil rights movement’s adoption of nonviolent direct action. Instead, they tend to emphasize the local or national roots of mass nonviolent direct action in the United States. Without denying the importance of these local and national factors, I assert that the gradual diffusion of the Gandhian repertoire from India to the African-American community prepared the underlying soil within which nonviolent direct action came to fruition. In other words, the preliminary efforts of innovative individuals like Thurman and Farmer, and activist organizations like FOR and CORE, were crucial because they creatively adapted the Gandhian repertoire to local and national circumstances. Over time, this process of transnational diffusion affected not only individual and organizational pioneers but also, most importantly, broad segments of the African-American community.

After defining terms and critically reviewing diffusion analysis within the civil rights movement literature, I introduce the concept of submerged diffusion. Submerged diffusion takes place before the emergence of a social movement and is, therefore, not nearly as visible or dramatic as diffusion after a social movement has caught the public eye. As my research points out, however, the transition from submerged to dramatic diffusion is neither linear nor automatic. Consequently, the final section deals with the contingent and dynamic relationship between submerged and dramatic diffusion. Submerged diffusion does not necessarily lead to movement mobilization and dramatic diffusion, while dramatic diffusion requires a solid submerged basis to endure.