

The Usability of the Civil Rights Movement:
Meanings of the Past in the Minds of Individuals¹

BY

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Introduction

In the article, “Collective Memory and the Nineteenth Amendment”, Reva Siegel examines how the “‘collective memory’ of gender relations has shaped and been shaped by the practices of interpretation through which we give meaning to the Nineteenth and Fourteenth Amendments.”² Women have used the social memory of the Nineteenth Amendment to serve as their own advocates, especially on issues of sex discrimination. Women created a distinctive political identity around their memories of a past in which they protested for their right to vote, and united in the creation, preservation, and reconstruction of collective memory around such suffragists as Lucretia Mott and Susan B. Anthony in ways that have allowed them to advance their policy agendas and elect the representatives of their choice, making our institutions more democratic.

In thinking about the success women have had in holding onto and using the collective memory of their struggles for equality and voting rights, I wondered, “What about Blacks?”³ Have Blacks been able to create solidarity around memories of pressing for their own inclusion in American society, and to use that solidarity to defend and

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² Reva B. Siegel, “Collective Memory and the Nineteenth Amendment: Reasoning about ‘the Woman Question’ in the Discourse of Sex Discrimination,” in *History, Memory, and the Law*, Austin Sarat and Thomas R. Kearns, eds. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999): 133.

³ Judith N. Schklar, *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

advance their interests? Or, have they failed altogether to realize the utility of these memories? Mary McLeod Bethune called for Blacks to tell “the story [Black history] continually accruing detail from the cradle to the grave”⁴ and to use the memories of their past. Bethune writes:

From the mother’s knee and the fireside of the home, through the nursery the kindergarten and the grade school, high school, college and university,--through the technical journals and bulletins of the Association,--through the newspaper, storybook and picture, we must tell the thrilling story.

Although memories of slavery are part of our collective consciousness and used strategically by Blacks with calls for reparations and debates as to the meaning of particular cultural symbols of the past, I will focus on the utility of memories about the modern Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s to ask how people use these memories today. Are these memories useful and meaningful? Or, are they simply the stories of the past that we can pass on “from the cradle to the grave” but fail to give any meaning?

With the questions of use and meaning, I am interested in how and under what circumstances memories are recalled. Is there a particular utility of the memories in celebrating a past in which Blacks changed the face of American democracy? Does the past hold any particular meaning for our communal identity? Do we see ourselves as one America because of our collective struggles in the past to realize democracy? Or, is our collective identity wrapped around remembrance of a Black struggle against White oppression, thereby creating distinctive Black memories of liberation and White memories of shame in allowing the atrocities of segregation to occur? This paper will explore these concerns.

⁴ Mary McLeod Bethune, “Clarifying Our Vision with the Facts,” *Journal of Negro History* (1938): 12.

Literature Review

In *Frames of Remembrance*, sociologist Iwona Irwin-Zarecka explores collective memory as the “social sharing” and “social construction of the meaning” of memory that is bound in remembrance. She writes:

If collective memory is understood as we understand it here, not as a collection of individual memories or some magically constructed reservoir of ideas and images, but rather as a socially articulated and socially maintained “reality of the past,” then it also makes sense to look at the most basic and accessible means for memory articulation and maintenance—talk.⁵

Thus, for Irwin-Zarecka, there is a certain totality of memory that is developed in the active sharing of memories through mnemonic communities⁶, in which “the construction, reconstruction and repair”⁷ of memories create meaning and use of the past. In this way, our collective memories help to generate identities rooted in how we frame the past. She suggests, “Collective memory is a terrain especially prone to such overlaying of different frames, I would argue, because it is *filled with reused and reusable material*.”⁸ She applies this understanding to memories of the Holocaust, suggesting a certain kind of remembering. She contends:

Certain stories are judged as plausible, others as not. And certain ways of remembering (and forgetting) are seen as appropriate and others as not. A narrative of victimization can serve to bolster group identity or to support political claims, it cannot be the basis for joyous celebration. Yes, we do use the past to various ends, and yes, we often liberally mix facts and fiction, if not inventing altogether.⁹

As Irwin-Zarecka finds identity rooted in memories and particular uses of memories, I apply this reasoning to memories of the Civil Rights Movement. I propose

⁵ Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1994): 54

⁶ Eviatar Zerubavel, “Social Memories: Steps to a Sociology of the Past,” *Qualitative Sociology* (1996): 286-291.

⁷ Irwin-Zarecka, 55.

that these memories create collective identities rooted in narratives that couple victimhood in segregation with the liberation and victory of the movement. Such a frame of remembering constructs memory both within a celebration of the past that Mary McLeod Bethune advocated and also in an active remembering that Irwin-Zarecka suggests.

Barbie Zelizer, a scholar of communications, provides an understanding of both collective memory and the usability of memory. Zelizer writes:

By definition collective memory thereby presumes activities of sharing, discussion, negotiation, and, often, contestation. Remembering becomes implicated in a range of other activities having as much to do with identity formation, power and authority, cultural norms, and social interaction as with the simple act of recall.¹⁰

Because collective memory and individual memory by extension are usable, Zelizer presents three “functions of remembering”¹¹: the social, political, and cultural trajectories which meet the precise aims for which we use memories: the social in the shaping of “belonging, exclusivity, social order, and community;”¹² the political in affecting politics “at its broadest and narrowest levels, including those concerning identity, continuity, stability, repression, and political power;” and the cultural “as a meaning-making activity.”¹³

Eviatar Zerubavel provides a framework for thinking about how individual memories are created through the process of mnemonic socialization. Mnemonic socialization transmits memories following the trajectories introduced in Zelizer to create

⁸ Ibid., 7. Emphasis added.

⁹ Ibid., 18.

¹⁰ Barbie Zelizer, “Reading the Past Against the Grain: The Shape of Memory Studies,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* (1995): 214.

¹¹ Robin Wagner-Pacifici and Barry Schwartz, “The Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial: Commemorating a Difficult Past,” *American Journal of Sociology* (1991): 376-420.

¹² Zelizer, 227.

and reinforce memories from “mnemonic communities” of families, organizations, ethnic communities, and nations into the minds and consciousnesses of individuals,¹⁴ which Zerubavel conceptualizes as “sociobiographical memory.”¹⁵ Zerubavel explains:

Such *sociobiographical memory* also accounts for the sense of pride, pain, or shame we sometimes experience with regard to events that had happened to groups and communities to which we belong long before we joined them...Consider also the long tradition of pain and suffering carried by many present-day American descendants of nineteenth-century African slaves...Indeed, familiarizing new members with its past is an important part of a community’s effort to incorporate them.

However, as Zerubavel explores the concept of social memory, he makes a final critical contribution in his consideration of the sites of memories. He moves from thinking of memories strictly in the minds of individuals to seeing memories in our material culture.¹⁶ He continues:

The notion of collective memory implies a past that is not only commonly shared but also *jointly* remembered (that is “co-memorated”). By helping ensure that an entire mnemonic community will come to remember its past *together*, as a group, society affects not only what and who we remember but also when we remember it.¹⁷

The literature suggests that because of the nature of mnemonic socialization and the role of frames of remembrance, “talk” to borrow from Irwin-Zarecka is a great way to tap collective memories. Thus, I will interview individuals to tap the memories that are in their heads, as illustrated by John Bodnar’s focus on the connection between memory and oral history in the form of particular social discourse. Bodnar contends, “Individuals

¹³ Ibid., 228.

¹⁴ Zerubavel, 289

¹⁵ Ibid., 290.

¹⁶ Ibid., 292.

¹⁷ Ibid., 294.

did not remember alone; they discussed the events of their experience and formulated explanations of what had occurred in their lives with other people.”¹⁸

Paul Thompson, a leading scholar in the international oral history movement, argues that “the fundamental motivational force for doing oral history is still the wish to hear what people have to say and the belief in the value of their testimony.”¹⁹ However, as we focus on the memories in people’s heads, we must acknowledge that “memory contains both the facts and myths, and that both are meaning structures of consequence to the individual and to the listener.”²⁰ Because our focus in this work is to consider how the memories are used, we acknowledge the questions of reliability and validity in memories and oral history.²¹

Alice Hoffman, a longtime advocate for the use of oral history research, asks, “How do you know that your informants’ memories are accurate? How do you know that they are appropriate representations of the events they purport to describe?”²² These concerns of reliability and validity²³ suggest that we consider memory as a form of social discourse that is subject to fallibility. Thus, we must approach oral history and the memories of individuals with particular care.²⁴

¹⁸ John Bodnar, “Power and Memory in Oral History: Workers and Managers at Studebaker”, *Journal of American History* (1989): 1202.

¹⁹ Paul Thompson, “Believe It Or Not: Rethinking the Historical Interpretation of Memory,” in Jaclyn and Glenace Edwall, eds., *Memory and History: Essays on Recalling and Interpreting Experience*. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994): 3.

²⁰ Glenace E. Edwell, “Comment,” in Edwall and Edwall, eds., *Memory and History*. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994): 15.

²¹ Alice M. Hoffman and Howard S. Hoffman, “Reliability and Validity in Oral History: The Case for Memory,” in Edwall and Edwall, eds., *Memory and History*, 107-45.

²² *Ibid.*, 107.

²³ *Ibid.*, 109.

Methodological Approach

Reminiscent of the work of political scientist, Robert Lane²⁵, I will use in-depth interviews to tap the individual memories that people have and the collective memories that may exist. Just as Lane interviewed individuals to uncover their political values, I am interested here in their particular understandings of the past. Forty-five individuals were selected as potential respondents. These individuals were selected because they were known either as: (1) storytellers and “rememberers”, suggesting that they had a sense of the past and housed the memories of the past, in the ways of the African griots, keeping the past alive for individuals and communities; or (2) had particular life experiences related to the past.

The list of forty-five included: elected officials, political activists, political elites, retired educators, college students, historians, preachers, lawyers, homemakers, and a host of people in between. The majority of these individuals were Black Tennesseans, who ranged in age from 20 to 88 and covered the socioeconomic and political ideological spectrum. Each individual was, thus, well-placed with valuable insights. I included such a large number of Blacks because I am specifically interested in how Blacks use memories of a past that directly involved them as political agents of change. Thus, I argue that memories of the past have the potential to be heightened in their consciousness, as it is “their” past.

Letters and emails were sent to each of the forty-five describing this research project and requesting to interview them about the political culture of the 1960s and

²⁴ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988): 272.

²⁵ Robert Lane, *Political Ideology: Why the American Common Man Believes What He Does*. (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962).

today. I followed up each letter with a telephone call to begin setting up interviews. Some of the individuals declined to be interviewed because they felt that either they did not have anything of substance to contribute or they felt uncomfortable participating. Of this group, however, a few suggested other people whom they thought I could interview in their place. Others did not respond to the letter or several follow-up phone calls, and with still others, we could not find a convenient time to meet because of conflicting schedules. Thus, of the forty-five, I was able to set up interviews with twenty-eight of them.

In requesting the interviews, I felt that an hour would be sufficient time to explore their memories. Because the twenty-eight were willing to allow me to interview them, we met whenever and wherever it was most convenient for them. For some, we met in their offices. For others, we met at their homes, and with still others, we met at Starbucks, a convenient location for us to meet. The majority of the interviews lasted for one hour with most of the respondents willing to talk and share their memories. For the most part, the respondents had not given too much thought to their memories of the past. Thus, as we talked, the respondents seemed to tap into the past more and more and share their memories. On the whole, only one interview seemed scripted, in that the respondent shared memories which he had recently written down in a chapter for a book²⁶; for John Seigenthaler, his memories were especially alive and referred to often, since he played influential roles in the Nashville as a reporter and in Washington, D.C., as an assistant to Attorney General Robert Kennedy.

The tone of the interviews was very informal; in fact, I only tape-recorded three interviews: my first with the Craighheads, my second with Dwight Lewis, and another

with Shirlene Mercer. These were taped because I was trying to decide on a style of interviewing. In the end, I decided to take notes on all of my interviews because after reading political scientist, Richard Fenno's notes on participant observation²⁷, I hoped that this approach would allow the respondents to share their memories and their insights without feeling pressured with a tape-recorder running and getting down everything. Though I may have lost some information with my note taking, I hoped to better maintain the integrity of their insights. These notes were typed with the texts read over and over again, until I isolated the central theme of each interview, and then, organized all of the interviews into some broader schema of understanding.

Instead of questioning the respondents in a sequential manner of Question 1 to Questions 2, 3, and so on, I engaged each respondent in a conversation. We began with a general question of: "What are the first thoughts that come to your mind when you think of the Civil Rights Movement?" The conversation began with me asking the respondents to elaborate on particular points that they shared, and otherwise, letting them tell their stories their way. When the conversation got off track with respondents telling tangential stories that were not relevant to their memories of the Civil Rights Movement, I'd ask a question to get them back on course. Throughout these conversations, I had a list of thoughts that I was particularly interested in—for example, what meaning they attach to their memories of the Civil Rights Movement?—but rarely, did I ask them, instead I allowed the respondent to present these points on their own.

As we began our conversations about their individual and collective memories, one sentiment was dominant in all of their memories: the Civil Rights Movement was a

²⁶ John Seigenthaler, "Son of the South," forthcoming.

²⁷ Richard Fenno, *Home Style: House Members in Their District*. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1978): 249-295

singular moment in America that fundamentally changed the character of America. “Social change”, “drastic cultural change”, “challenging the status quo”, “struggle for equality”, and “revolutionary change” are phrases that came to mind, when these individuals heard the words “Civil Rights Movement”.

From the youngest respondent, Christina Leath, a college senior, images of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, the Montgomery bus boycott, sit-ins, hoses and dogs in Alabama, Little Rock, Angela Davis, Kathleen Cleaver, Afros, and fists fill her memories of the Civil Rights Movement.²⁸ From the oldest respondents, the Craigheads, a retired barber and principal, the Civil Rights Movement means Blacks “upholding themselves and backing Black people,”²⁹ Blacks accommodating to the system and making changes with self-controlled and restrained students following the nonviolence of Mahatma Gandhi and King.

However, as we move from general memories to the specific utility of these memories, the responses of utility fit into Zelizer’s model of usability based on the social, cultural, and political trajectories. These trajectories were the dominant sentiments from all of the respondents. For our purposes though, I have divided these usabilities into three categories—(1) the call to act; (2) pride in history, and (3) a reason to vote. Within each of these foci, we will see how memories are used directly in the lives of individuals to keep the past alive in their lives.

Memory Work: The Meaning of the Past

Whether from the active participants in the movement or individuals whose lives were drastically affected by the movement’s outcomes, the Civil Rights Movement meant

²⁸ Interview, Christina Leath, October 14, 2001.

²⁹ Interview, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Craighead, October 15, 2001.

a call to action. Memories of the movement are used to empower individuals to become change agents in their communities. From two interviews, memories of the past have directed them along the path of political and social change. Larry Woods is an attorney active in politics and civil rights whose memories are from the vantage point of a white man active in the movement. He fought the struggles of the past and is determined not let the past happen again. Explaining his work as a civil rights attorney and political activist, he says, “I remain focused on civil rights because I remember the heroes. I marched with King and Julian Bond. I knew Avon Williams [prominent civil rights lawyer in Nashville]. This has an impact on me.”³⁰ Thus, for Woods, because he was there, knew the leaders, and saw the struggle, his memories of the past are personal memories. Explaining these personal memories, Zerubavel writes:

At the same time, it is also quite clear that we each have our own autobiographical memories, made up of entirely personal experiences that we share with nobody else. Nevertheless, we also have certain memories which we share with some other people but not with others.³¹

As a professor at Tennessee State University, his memories are alive to him everyday in the classroom and shared with his students. Thus, for Woods, the memories “reverberate” because “I was there.” He continues, “Mississippi to me means not a backward state, but voter registration.” In his memories, Woods recalls the change, sees the progress, and is called constantly to direct his life to the cause of the movement—civil rights.

For Shirlene Mercer, a former teacher and a community activist in Jackson, Tennessee, her formative years were spent in the sit-in movement integrating the city’s

³⁰ Interview, Larry Woods, November 1, 2001.

³¹ Zerubavel, 284.

lunch counters. In October 1960, as a freshman at Lane College in Jackson, she and others sat-in at downtown lunch counters. Explaining her participation she says:

I think there was one week where I was arrested five straight days. If a Soviet Communist or a Red Chinese walked into Woolworth's and sat down at the lunch counter, they'd be welcome and I would not. That was about the craziest thing America could be doing to its own citizens. I resented it then and I resent any leftover portion of it now.³²

She says that she is “energized by the 1960s,”³³ and is now committed “never to allow what happened in the 1960s to happen again.” For Mercer, the indignities and injustices that she and others experienced can never occur again. She says:

I got self-satisfaction from seeing the walls fall. You cannot imagine what that feels like to know you are not welcome because of the color of your skin. The changes I saw happen early in my life led me to develop a certain amount of confidence in knowing that things can change if you keep plugging away at it.³⁴

Knowing that people died to make today possible serves as a call for her to act as a community activist in East Jackson, leading the community in a fight against crime and helping to make the goals of civil rights movement real for people who lives were to be effected by the movement but are not. She says, “Fighting crime is my life. African Americans are loading prisons, and this is my fight. Our people have been through too much to end up like this.”³⁵

Realizing the struggle that she and others went through to make sure that young Blacks would have opportunities to succeed in ways that Jim Crow never would have allowed her to and then to see Blacks not taking advantage of these opportunities is for Mercer a slap in the face. Shirlene Mercer attributes these failures of Blacks to seize the

³² Todd Kleffman, “The Four Freshman”, *The Jackson Sun*, http://www.jacksonsun.com/civilrights/sec5_4freshmen.shtml.

³³ Interview, Shirlene Mercer, October 19, 2001.

³⁴ Kleffman, “The Four Freshmen.”

³⁵ Interview, Shirlene Mercer.

opportunities based upon breakdown in Black communities. Reavis Mitchell, a historian at Fisk University, suggests that with all of the social progress that many Blacks have made in being the first Black to graduate from certain institutions that were closed off to them during the 1950s and being the first Black to succeed in particular industries and areas of life, Blacks have lost the cohesion of the Civil Rights Movement in which communities worked together, pulling all of its members up as it progress.³⁶ He explains:

In the mid-1960s and 1970s, we felt that African Americans should choose to become a part of the mainstream, integrating society and breaking down the barriers of race. We wanted to be a credit to the race, keeping the dream of the Civil Rights Movement alive. But as we moved into the mainstream, we lost the cohesion and lay misfortune being blamed on race.

Thus, for Dr. Mitchell, “in our movement into suburbia and our frustration with integration, we lost a large part of the dream,” suggesting that a part of the memories of the past are no longer useful and perhaps, the dreams have met the realities of America. It is here that our memories recall a glorious past of cohesion, and lament the change and dysfunction that has met some Black communities.

It is Shirlene Mercer’s understanding of a personal struggle against wrong and a collective Black struggle against the evil of segregation that keeps the memories of the past socially usable for her. The political usability of her memories is wrapped up in her understanding of politics. For her, Blacks “spent years developing the political process” and “paying their dues for getting into the political arena,” and therefore, must participate. She has used this call to campaign for candidates, get Blacks out to vote, and become influential in her own right in politics, as the Director of District Services for

³⁶ Interview, Dr. Reavis Mitchell, November 2, 2001.

Congressman John Tanner. Advancing Black concerns and bettering her community enliven her memories of the Civil Rights Movement.

In the memories of David Mills whose life was spent in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement, we find the call to act coming directly from memories commemorated in history books not in actual events as they occurred. Unlike Shirlene Mercer and Larry Woods whose memories are tied to their particular pasts, David Mills found his understanding of the past in learning about the movement as a student. The one personal memory that he had was from 1968, being nine-years-old in Newark, New Jersey, looking out the window to see the city ablaze with the riots. As a distant personal memory, Mills learned of the collective memory of the Civil Rights Movement by reading the works of Martin Luther King, Jr., while in college. With this, he began his “journey into the Civil Rights Movement”³⁷ and became connected to the movement, as a member of a particular, mnemonic community whose understandings of the past were shared to develop the consciousness of a community.

In Mills’s mnemonic community, the glue of communal memories was in the silences and absences of the past. Irwin-Zarecka explains:

An absence within collective memory may be psychologically motivated, of course, but it carries consequences well beyond individual mind and soul. An absence acts on people who may have nothing to forget individually as it makes parts of the past disappear altogether.³⁸

For Mills growing up in New Jersey and later California, his life was removed for the events of the movement. His father, a native of Knoxville, Tennessee, refused to talk about that past. He explains, “My father left home at 13, seeing no future in Knoxville

³⁷ Interview, David Mills, November 5, 2001.

³⁸ Irwin-Zarecka, 116.

for him as a Black man. He never talked about it.”³⁹ In conversations with his grandmother, who also did not talk about that past, he saw that “she carried that stuff with her.” He explains, “Her greatest dream was to be a nurse, but it wasn’t possible then. She could not realize her dream, but was determined that I would. I would go to school. I saw that gleam in her eye.”

Thus, for Mills, these silences caused him to search out the collective memory and find out about the past. He developed the consciousness of the community by researching the heroes of the movement and re-creating the past through historical documents. He became part of the mnemonic community by learning about the traumatic experiences of segregation and simultaneously embracing the experience of Black liberation and victory in the face of oppression. Irwin-Zarecka writes:

Collective identity does not have to rest on a narrative of victimization of course. The “glorious past,” when such exists, carries its own appeal. Yet history supplies us with some very convincing examples of the rallying power inherent in a shared memory of oppression, power not matched by that of success stories. Indeed, for remembrance of victories and progress to be meaningful at all, must contain its own “dark” reference points. A mixed narrative, then, is needed even under the best of circumstances.⁴⁰

Influenced by King’s sermons and the network of NAACP lawyers “single-handedly changing America,”⁴¹ Mills found his call to activism in the anti-apartheid movement, which became “his” Civil Rights Movement, that is, his fight against injustice and wrong. On the weekend of King’s birthday in 1980, Mills organized a sit-in protest to get the university he attended to divest of their interests in South Africa. Shutting down the university through nonviolent action reminiscent of the sit-in movements of the past, Mills became influential in bringing about change. He calls this moment, his

³⁹ Interview, David Mills.

⁴⁰ Irwin-Zarecka, 58.

“baptism in the Civil Rights Movement.” In his mind, his activism connected him to that past. Thus, his memories had political usability that encouraged him to continue the struggle for right in every arena where he finds wrong.

As he learned later of the importance of the city of Nashville in the Civil Rights Movement, he became more entrenched in the mnemonic community finding a more permanent place for him to draw on these memories. Whether in becoming the “student expert” on local issues of politics or becoming part of the wave in 1984 that sought to take “the Voting Rights Act to its conclusion” with the presidential candidacy of Jesse Jackson, Mills learned that “this is my call.” In many ways, his understandings and memories of the Civil Rights Movement pressed him to be proactive and “take charge of my destiny” and not to be a victim, as segregation sought to make of Black Southerners.

For Mills, his memories encompassed Black struggle to define themselves and to fight against the oppression, which had victimized them for centuries. By re-enacting the Civil Rights Movement in his participation in the anti-apartheid effort, he continued the legacy of past activists: refusing to become a victim of any inequality placed upon him and persevering to realize what is right. To be sure, he used and still uses the past to make real the work of King, Charles Houston, Mordecai Johnson, Thurgood Marshall, Avon Williams, and the countless others who “paid the price so that we could know where we came from” and be treated right.

While the memories of these three individuals are used to make them politically active in very visible ways, the memories for other individuals inspire them to keep the struggle for civil rights and equality alive in their lives. For some, memories inspire them

⁴¹ Interview, David Mills.

to contribute to society.⁴² For others though, the call to activism and the meaning of these memories have led them to see the world through the lens of equality, that is, as integrationists. Along with John Lewis and Mary Frances Berry, they use the struggles of the past to see everyone as equal and to push for true integration, devoting their lives to the uplift of people and the hopeful progress of democracy. For them, “integration” means realizing King’s dream of a culturally plural America in which an individual’s skin color and ethnicity matter less than their abilities and humanity. Within their use of memories, our integrationists draw on their memories of the past to see themselves as “living lives to bring about change” and moving beyond a “preoccupation with race” to focus on progress.⁴³

Yet, the utility of these memories have important implications for how they understand race. Specifically, they find individuals more willing to focus on race and to blame all of the problems Black Americans face on racism. There is a reality of continuing race, but according to historian Jimmie Franklin, “race demands that we constantly attack things”⁴⁴ in terms of color instead of focusing on the actual issues involved. Thus, the implication is instead of focusing on “what the White man is doing to us,” we must focus on the issues that affect us and think of ways to better serve Blacks. In some ways, race and memories of the past have become tools for promoting a Black nationalist agenda in which the preoccupation of race causes one to “misread history to say that things have not changed” and to deny the progress of the Civil Rights Movement.

⁴² Interview, Fred Haddox, October 26, 2001. Interview, Laquentin Cotton, November 8, 2001. Interview, Dr. McDonald and Dr. Jamye Williams, October 22, 2001.

⁴³ Interview, Golda Franklin, October 29, 2001.

⁴⁴ Interview, Dr. Jimmie Franklin, October 29, 2001.

Thus, we find cultural implications for how memories are used and what the past means. In this view, we defend memories of our civil rights struggles to focus on the progress that the movement made in terms of voting rights, public accommodations, writing Black equality into the law, and dismantling the public indignities heaped upon Blacks because they were Black. Moreover, we find hope in democracy and the power of human progress to resolve the problem of race.

The overwhelming utility of memories of the Civil Rights Movement is in terms of cultural making-meaning of the past. Many of the respondents had a sense of pride in their history, pride in the fact that Blacks had united for revolutionary change,⁴⁵ dismantled the system of legal inequality, and emerged as liberated people who demanded the recognition of their humanity. To be sure, the story of moving from victimhood to liberation becomes the dominant understanding of civil rights mnemonic communities in which individuals share their horror stories of being spit on because of their skin color and show their battle scars for participation in sit-ins. Irwin-Zarecka contends, “To secure remembrance, one must first be able to tell what happened. Experience must be named, words found to describe it in detail, metaphors perhaps added for further depth.”⁴⁶

Thus, within the cultural use of civil rights memories, individuals, such as John Lewis⁴⁷, Anne Moody⁴⁸, and Jo Ann Robinson⁴⁹, write their personal memories of the past into our collective understanding of the past. As individuals write down memories

⁴⁵ Irwin-Zarecka, 58.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 26.

⁴⁷ John Lewis with Michael D’Orso, *Walking in the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).

⁴⁸ Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. (New York: Dell, 1976).

⁴⁹ Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987).

for others to read, they tell their history and frame certain memories to have symbolic import in our cultural understanding of the past. Irwin-Zarecka continues:

Language is an universalizing tool; words we use immediately evoke experiences we can relate to. Describing what happened during the Holocaust means describing experiences we cannot—and ultimately ought not—relate to. This basic challenge may explain why “Auschwitz” has acquired such symbolic potency, for it is, for Westerners at least, an essentially untransferable term; what it speaks of is only the Holocaust.⁵⁰

For example, as John Lewis describes the march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge on Bloody Sunday, that place has meaning as the site of White brutal force against orderly marchers. More importantly, when the respondents mention Birmingham, Alabama, as part of the meaning of the Civil Rights Movement, this same symbolic import is involved. Christina Leath explains that Birmingham means hoses, dogs, and church bombings, the images of violence and White brutality that are wrapped around the Black nonviolent protest for equality.

For those individuals who participated in the movement or were consciousness of the movement as it unfolded, they use their memories particularly to say that “we [Black Southerners] righted the wrongs in our country.”⁵¹ For Agnes Haddox who participated in the lunch counter sit-ins in Summerville, Tennessee, her memories of the Civil Rights Movement meant the “struggles that Blacks encountered then and now.” She recalls, “When we sang, ‘We Shall Overcome’, when we were in jail, we truly believed that we would overcome the injustice and win.” That song became the protest song of the movement because as she recalls, “we can make a difference, if we continue to fight.” She continues, “I do remember my participation. It will always be a part of me. I wanted to make a difference because we knew that we were right.” This is the sense of pride and

⁵⁰ Irwin-Zarecka, 26.

accomplishment that her memories of the past have. She says, “I have memories of a sense of Blackness in the movement. Blacks were made to feel less than human, but Dr. King instilled pride in us, and I feel that pride today as I look back.”

However, for Agnes, the pride in her memories is tempered by the hatred that colors her past—the hatred of the white policemen who arrested her and her friends as they protested, the hatred of a white man at the lunch counter who refused to serve them, and the hatred of the white man who put a gun in their faces threatening to shot them if they did not leave. Having seen true hatred and experienced true evil, her memories remind her and her husband, who has experienced this past with her through her memories, of what it “means to be abused because of your color.”⁵² These memories suggest great pride in the progress of history because things have changed for the better.

For two retired public school teachers of Brentwood, Tennessee, they used their memories in very specific ways to focus on the progress that we have all made. Eleanor Bright and Mary Walker attended a dilapidated, one-room country school in Williamson County, which they describe as “the epitome of segregation.”⁵³ For them to see Black youth today attending state-of-the-art public schools with quality teachers in integrated classrooms is a sign of progress. Thus, they use their memories of the struggles against injustice to build pride in the past and to educate their students about the past.

Mary Walker used her memories of the past to lead the Black History Month effort at her school. Her memories had the specific utility of writing the history that had not been done in the history books—acknowledging the wrongs and celebrating the progress we have made. As she did this, she created a mnemonic community among her

⁵¹ Interview, Agnes Haddox, October 26, 2001.

⁵² Irwin-Zarecka, 58. Interview, Fred Haddox.

students by sharing her memories and helping them to create their own understandings and memories of the past. Eleanor Bright recalls how at Park Avenue Elementary, the teachers, students, and parents re-enacted the marches of the Civil Rights Movement during Black History Month. She recalls,

We had a march with banners, Pearl High Band, and everything. We did this every year, marching because we had to march then. We locked arms—teachers, students, and even some parents—singing “We Shall Overcome.”⁵⁴

Thus, for them, memories of the Civil Rights Movement are especially alive during Black History Month, when we are encouraged to celebrate the accomplishments of Blacks. By invoking these memories, the past becomes culturally useful, as we write Black history into our sense of American history, educating our youth to join a community who remembers the civil rights marches as well as Washington crossing the Delaware.

Although memories of this past inspire pride in many of the Black respondents, for two of the White respondents, John Seigenthaler and Leonard Bradley, their memories of the past are filled with shame and guilt of a past in which White Southerners denied Blacks their legal and social rights. Their memories recall particular understandings of the past that plagues the White South: a past of unresolved feelings about race, guilt about violence against Blacks, and uncertainty as to how to remember the past and use the memories of such trauma. John Seigenthaler begins his memories of the Civil Rights Movement by comparing the segregation of the American South to “any place in South Africa at the height of apartheid.”⁵⁵ Though he realizes the hypocrisy of segregation, he takes pride that the time of the Civil Rights Movement was the best time “to be a Southerner and of my generation” because we finally “confronted the bitter and

⁵³ Interview, Eleanor Bright, October 22, 2001. Interview, Mary Walker, October 22, 2001.

⁵⁴ Interview, Eleanor Bright.

ugly dichotomy that made the words of the Declaration and the Constitution a mockery.”

Yet, in the celebration of the progress that the Civil Rights Movement made in realizing American democracy, he acknowledges the passiveness and idleness of his family. He asks of them today, “Where were they?” He recalls a particular moment when a young John Seigenthaler, privileged son of the South, sat on the bus as “Mama Rosa Parks’ counterparts were told to move to the back or get off of the bus.” As he questions his family and himself in not taking a stand and doing the right and moral thing in fighting against segregation, he takes pride in the fact that as an adult, he redeemed himself by pressing aggressively for civil rights and equality. Whether as a reporter, an assistant to Attorney General Robert Kennedy, editor of *The Tennessean*, or in his personal politics, Seigenthaler recognizes that he corrected a personal wrong of the passiveness as a youth.

For Leonard Bradley, a college professor, he offers similar guilt, and yet more readily acknowledges the shame. He remembers going home every evening to find out what had happened on that day in the movement and always expecting some shocking and numbing event. Yet, he knew that the perpetrators of the immense violence against Blacks were always someone else. He recalls, “It was them, those White Southerners, those violent people. It was not me. My hands were clean.”⁵⁶ Looking back now, his memories are colored with personal shame and guilt in not doing what he knew was right in the fight against a wrong. He says:

I feel shame. I was not a part of it [the Civil Rights Movement]. It was going on around me, and I wasn’t doing anything. I told myself that I was too busy. It was

⁵⁵ Interview, John Seigenthaler, October 22, 2001.

⁵⁶ Interview, Leonard Bradley, October 18, 2001.

almost like I was passive. It was shocking what people [violent White Southerners] could be like. I wasn't to blame. My hands were clean. Today, I realize that it did involve me. I just wasn't responsive. I isolated myself, but you can't hide from the same of history on such an important social movement.

Bradley acknowledged that it was not until he read James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, that he confronted this past and understood his role in that historic development. He says:

My impression of those times was my way of isolating and insulating myself. I didn't lift a finger. I let other people straighten it out. I confront this in teaching my own students. It [talking about the past] allows me to come to terms with it.

Like Seigenthaler, Bradley has in his personal way sought to atone for being a passive observer of inequality and wrong. Whether in his voting choices or in the stances that he takes in his life, he tries to right a scarred past. He explains, "I would not have voted for a candidate not wanting to enforce civil rights. I feel obligated to vote, and I vote religiously."

In addition to inspiring political activism and encouraging a sense of pride in the past, memories of the Civil Rights Movement are used in ways which help to realize the goals set forth by the movement: having legal recognition of the voting rights of Blacks. Thus, memories of the past are used for strictly political purposes to motivate people to vote. We have seen in the previous section that memories are indeed useful for cultural reasons to celebrate the past, and here, we shall see how exactly memories are used for these particular political aims: voting. Two respondents used their memories in this way—one as a force motivating him and the other, using his memories to spark a commitment to vote in his son, thereby using a father's memories to create meaning for his son.

In 1957 while a student at Jackson State University, Jimmie Franklin knew that voting was a fundamental part of democracy. As a citizen of Mississippi, he also knew that “voting meant the opportunity to seek some control over your life.”⁵⁷ But, as a Black man, he knew that “something was being denied me” and was “offended by the absence of democracy.” Though he passed the literacy test and became a registered voter, he remembers the experience of a past when Blacks were prohibited from voting. More than his personal memory of his experience, Dr. Franklin also uses the memory of the Civil Rights Movement to further spark his dedication to vote. He recalls: “The demand for the vote was a radical demand. People killed people for making that demand. Chaney, Goodman, and Scherner were killed while talking about voting. Too many people bleed, and there was too much struggle for any Black person not to vote.”

For journalist Dwight Lewis, however, he moves beyond a personal memory impacting his one vote to getting his son to register and vote. He recalls that as soon as his son turned eighteen, “I took him to Howard School to register to vote because it is important to vote.”⁵⁸ When asked why he did this, he explains simply, “Too many people died, and were beaten; we can’t forget.” Thus, within this aspect of political usability, the memories of the Civil Rights Movement are alive, and used strategically during election times.

Although individual use of memories is significant, there is an additional dimension of memory usability that has a tremendous impact: collective memory. Because the Civil Rights Movement produced far-reaching changes throughout the South and America, communities have commemorated this past by etching individual memories

⁵⁷ Interview, Dr. Jimmie Franklin.

⁵⁸ Interview, Dwight Lewis, October 17, 2001.

of the Civil Rights Movement into our collective consciousness. Iwona Irwin-Zareck explains:

Collective memory, though, is not reducible to such immediacy of links with the past. Often, it is the telling itself, the ongoing articulation of the “reality of the past” that forms and informs a community. For that matter, the past so told need not be real at all to offer the basis for communal solidarity. All that is needed is active remembrance, communally shared and deemed important for the community’s self-definition.⁵⁹

From making Dr. King’s birthday a national holiday to the countless civil rights museums scattered throughout the country, including the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, our communities commemorate and remember the past, and in doing so, place certain moments of the past and certain leaders of the past into the collective consciousness of who we are as Americans. Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, comes to stand for a particular American identity found in individuals envisioning a better America and initiating change to realize that vision. However, in these commemorations, communities use the past in the same social, political, and cultural reasons that individuals do. In this section, we will focus on two specific instances of commemoration in Nashville and Jackson with both erecting plaques on or near the county courthouse.

In Nashville, the community commemorated the pivotal moment when the city changed and desegregation ended. On April 19, 1960, Mayor West “found himself saying ‘yes’ to the desegregation of downtown lunch counter.”⁶⁰ According to Dr. McDonald and Dr. Jamye Williams, retired professors at Tennessee State University who were active in the Nashville Movement, this is a moment of the past “seared into our memory.”⁶¹ They recall that moment when horrified by the bombing of Z. Alexander

⁵⁹ Irwin-Zarecka, 57.

⁶⁰ David Halberstam, *The Children*. (New York: Fawcett Books, 1998): 228-234.

⁶¹ Interview, Dr. McDonald and Dr. Jamye Williams.

Looby's home, the community united in a silent march to the courthouse. At the courthouse, Fisk student, Diane Nash, confronted the mayor who sent a strong signal of Whites declaring that segregation at lunch counters was wrong. Dr. Jamye Williams explains,

I remember this well because I was there. My daughter left Pearl High to be there. This was the first time that the movement involved high school students. When Diane Nash asked that question and the mayor admitted that this is wrong, we knew that we had won.

John Seigenthaler wanted to honor those students who were involved in the sit-in movement, and initiated the commemoration. He presented the idea to Mayor Phil Bredesen, who enthusiastically supported the idea, as did the city as a whole. According to Tam Gordon, a member of Mayor Bredesen's staff at the time of this commemoration, Mr. Seigenthaler selected this moment to commemorate because he wanted to capture "the first time that anyone admitted that segregation was not only wrong, but morally wrong."⁶²

The black plaque placed prominently at the entrance to the Courthouse reads:

April 19, 1960

"And the people shouted with a great shout, so that the wall fell down."

Joshua 6:20

On the 19th of April, 1960, Nashville proclaimed itself a beacon of civility, common sense and reconciliation.

Following months of civil rights sit-ins, the home of black City Councilman Z. Alexander Looby was bombed in the early hours of the morning and several thousand marchers walked to this courthouse in protest.

In the charged atmosphere of that afternoon, Mayor Ben West broke the impasse as he told the crowd that he believed it morally wrong for store owners to sell to blacks while denying them service at lunch counters. He made this statement in a public exchange with Fisk student Diane Nash.

And in Nashville, the walls of segregation crumbled.

⁶² Interview, Tam Gordon, December 4, 2001.

This memorial commemorates the civility of those demonstrators, Mayor Ben West, and our community on that day. May we continue to live together as one God fearing community forever.

Philip Bredesen

Mayor

April 19, 1995

When asked about the verbiage on the plaque, Gordon suggests that she and Mr. Seigenthaler took great care to capture that moment and to pay homage to the heroes of the movement whose commitment to civility along with the inevitability of the moment changed the city.

In his work, *The Children*, David Halberstam, former reporter for *The Tennessean*, documents the Nashville Civil Rights movement, setting into collective memory the story of what happened and the memories of the students and community leaders who led this revolutionary change. He describes the commemoration with the following:

Thirty-five years to the day after the great moment in April when Diane Nash had in the most personal way imaginable challenged Ben West in front of the courthouse to end racism at the lunch counters, a new young white mayor of Nashville named Phil Bredesen invited a group of the original activists back to Nashville to mark the occasion. The group that returned included, among others, Jim Lawson, John Lewis, and Diane Nash, and they were all to participate in a ceremony commemorating that historic day. At that spot Bredesen had erected a plaque and on the plaque he had inscribed the words from Joshua: “And the people shouted with a great shout; so that the wall fell down.”⁶³

In the minds of many Nashvillians⁶⁴, the commemoration of that moment and the marking of the courthouse was an appropriate act for such a seminal moment of the past, demonstrating the sense of history that the community has and “marking a spot to remember.” John Seigenthaler remarked, “Any student—Black or White—looking at the

⁶³ Halberstam, 719.

⁶⁴ Interview, John Seigenthaler. Interview, Dr. McDonald and Dr. Jamye Williams.

plaque will be provoked to find out what it's about. These great public, visible monuments don't often take place in a community."

However, as such a commemoration creates meaning and memory for a community, it also reinforces individual memory, "stirring up thought and recognition," and yet at such commemorations and moments of community remembering, Larry Woods reflects that, "the people who turn out are African Americans and old bleeding heart liberals; the majoritarian white community are not turning out, not meaning they're opposed but that they are not willing to put forth the effort. They just don't care, and that's dangerous."⁶⁵ In this case, we find different understandings of the past in which even with our public commemorations, memories of the past are still only used by those who are already plugged into these memories, but yet, the simple cultural use of memories for the community still has significant import.

In Jackson, the commemoration has occurred in two visible ways. First, the local newspaper, *The Jackson Sun*, commemorated the fortieth anniversary of the Civil Rights Movement in Jackson with a series entitled, "The Untold Story of Jackson's Civil Rights Movement". The paper sought to write that history and create "for school children and anyone else who seeks to learn from the past, a permanent record of the era."⁶⁶ Sharing the recollections of the regular folks who changed the city, the paper put a face on the local students and other citizens who made history. Moreover, the paper put this part of the city's history into the community's collective consciousness of itself.

In 2001, the city undertook to commemorate this history with a marker at the courthouse. Shirlene Mercer explains, "Public sentiment was against it, but as a kid of

⁶⁵ Interview, Larry Woods.

the Civil Rights movement, I think that if a confederate soldier can be commemorated on the square, so should we.” Thus, we find a contestation over which events of the past should be remembered and should be included in our collective memories, and which should be forgotten. In his work, *Race and Reunion* (2001), historian David Blight focuses on this contestation as he explores America’s collective memory over the Civil War. He writes:

In many ways, this is a story of how in American culture romance triumphed over reality, sentimental remembrance won over ideological memory. For Americans broadly, the Civil War has been a defining event upon which we have often imposed unity and continuity; as a culture, we have often preferred its music and pathos to its enduring challenges, the theme of reconciled conflict to resurgent, unresolved legacies...Over time, Americans have needed deflections from the deeper meanings of the Civil War. It haunts us still; we feel it, to borrow from Warren, but often do not face it.⁶⁷

Thus far, we have seen how individuals and communities use memories of the Civil Rights Movement. However, my curiosity in approaching this project was based on an idea that memories of this past are not used except on Dr. King’s birthday and Black History Month and during critical presidential elections where Black turnout is important. In my mind, memories of the Civil Rights Movement are not used by Blacks for any purpose and are being forgotten—that is, without purposeful meaning that motivates Blacks to act in ways similar to women.

Blacks have allowed their past to be only symbolically used, and effectively are forgetting that changes that their unity produced. We fight over creating majority Black congressional districts, for example, without realizing the political power that we have to affect policy by becoming politically astute and active in fighting for control over our

⁶⁶ Jimmy Hart, “Jackson’s Black Community Joins Forces With a Growing National Movement to Gain Their Rights,” http://www.jacksonsun.com/civilrights/sec1_mainbar.shtml.

lives and our communities. In this final section, we will briefly examine why the memories of the past are not useful to some people. Our interviews presented three frames for why memories are not used: apathy, needing to forget for survival, and preoccupation with one's day-to-day life.

Because the generation that is removed from the Civil Rights Movement has always known freedoms and equality, some cannot comprehend what life was like forty and fifty years ago under Jim Crow segregation. Thus, they see no use for memories of the past. For twenty-nine year old Laquentin Cotton, a distant relative of Martin Luther King, Jr., “a lot of people paid the price for us to enjoy the freedom of today” and “we have let them down by not pushing as hard as we should.”⁶⁸ Because they lack real understanding and connection to the past, Blacks are not using their memories to serve as their own advocates in their fight for equality and right. He continues:

There was a sense of call to act in the Black community in the past. Then, people were taught that one person could make a difference. Today, people are taught that one person cannot make a difference. Black people are not organizing and acting. We've become apathetic, letting our past go.

Dr. Jane Walters, former commissioner of education for the state, suggests that people should know their past, but may not use the memories of the past as part of survival. She says, “We forget things in order to continue.”⁶⁹ Thus, we get the sense that perhaps the memories of the Civil Rights Movement are not used because people are more concerned with their day-to-day existence. For some people, if asked about the Civil Rights Movement, they talk about segregation and Blacks staying in their place, suggesting that they understand the past. However, that past lacks meaning in their lives

⁶⁷ David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001): 4.

⁶⁸ Interview, Laquentin Cotton.

as they fail to use the memories. Twenty-eight year old Noval Mayes argues, “People are too busy trying to make their ends meet to use memories of the past to give them reason to vote, for example.”⁷⁰ Because the times are different and people can enjoy nicer homes, fancier cars, and more luxuries of life, the past may not mean much to them. Thus, perhaps, the further time moves us away from the past of the Civil Rights Movement, the less that past may mean to us and is useful to us.

Conclusion

From our twenty-eight interviews, we have gotten a sense that memories of the Civil Rights Movement matter in the minds of individuals and in the consciousness of communities. Memories are used in very specific ways to achieve social, political, and cultural goals. Memories create communities and identities that celebrate the past. Memories also inspire people to activism in following the models of the heroes of the past. In remembering the past, memories are used to realize the goals of the movement. However, whether used by individuals to create mnemonic communities around the past or by communities to commemorate the past, memories are used in ways different from the memories of women’s suffrage. Perhaps, it is because memories of the Civil Rights Movement have become a part of the fabric of American memories that their salience is not felt in the same way as the collective memories that Siegel examines. Regardless of this use, these memories show how far we have come, as we “stumble along toward progress,”⁷¹ and yet point to the progress that we must continue to make.

⁶⁹ Interview, Dr. Jane Walters, October 16, 2001.

⁷⁰ Interview, Noval Mayes, November 3, 2001.

⁷¹ Interview, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Craighead.