ABSTRACT

SITES OF STRUGGLE: CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORIALIZATION

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This thesis explores the politics of commemoration surrounding three sites of struggle related to the civil rights movement. By contrasting the accepted civil rights narrative with the counter-memory of the these contentious spaces, I illustrate how and why the Black Panther Party headquarters in Chicago, the birthplace of the Ku Klux Klan in Pulaski, Tennessee and various sites related to Emmett Till in both Chicago and Mississippi fail to fit into the official narrative and memory of the civil rights movement. Using each site as a case study, I challenge the traditional assumption that civil rights memorials are thorough and complete by exposing significant spaces that are actively neglected in the collective memory. Through analysis and interpretation of these contentious landscapes, I demonstrate the ways in which these sites serve as both literal and symbolic battlegrounds for not only civil rights, but also the constant struggle for representation and commemoration.
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Introduction

“Rosa sat down, Martin stood up, and the white kids came down and saved the day.” -Julian Bond

National Narrative of Civil Rights

For many Americans, the events surrounding the civil rights movement symbolize conflict, revolution, and finally progress. The collective civil rights narrative reflects the accepted national narrative which glorifies the victories of the civil rights movement by memorializing sites where activists and protesters emerged triumphant. Voter registration drives and desegregation campaigns saturate the historical narrative and represent moments of interracial collaboration and success. Emphasis on sites in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma, create the appearance that civil rights workers achieved this success without tribulation. The current historical memory links the civil rights movement to a larger national story which glorifies the United States’ legacy of democracy. In the established national narrative, Americans celebrate their unique ability to confront injustice, create a revolution, and demand a more just democratic republic. Just as revolutionary colonists overcame the tyrannical British government, civil rights activists acted on the promises of democracy, overcame racist politicians and police forces, as well as system related inequalities and injustices, and achieved freedom and equality.

Sites of Struggle

Despite numerous celebrated civil rights memorials throughout the South, there are countless spaces in the American landscape that challenge the United States’ inspirational ideal of freedom. Sites of struggle are characterized by their departure from the national narrative,

1 Julian Bond, founding member of SNCC and former chairman of the NAACP, describes the way in which most Americans perceive of the civil rights movement. Wesley C. Hogan, Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC’s Dream for a New America, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 418.

2 See, Christopher Metress, “Making Civil Rights Harder: Literature, Memory, and the Black Freedom Struggle,” Southern Literary Journal v. XL no. 2: Spring 2008 and, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” The Journal of American History March 2005. Dowd Hall argues that American memory has effectively diluted the narrative of the civil rights movement by constraining it to the 1960’s, while ignoring changes beginning in the 1930s and lasting throughout the late 20th century. Metress expands on Dowd Hall’s argument by using literary sources to argue that the traditional narrative and memory of the civil rights movement is too narrow and uncomplicated.
focusing on more complicated aspects of the movement such as violence, hatred, apathy, and structural inequalities within the American system of government. The accepted national narrative describes American activism and revolution in a precise and carefully constructed manner. Rather than focusing on violent and ineffective rebellions, the accepted public history emphasizes instances in which Americans democratically enacted change. The national narrative of civil rights centers on fundamental themes that bolster and support the American system of constitutional democracy. The accepted history emphasizes events and individuals that represent instances of successful, democratic legal change and progress provoked by non-violent activism.

Sites of struggle challenge and complicate the established civil rights narrative by revealing inherent contradictions and inconsistencies within the national history. In addition, these sites expose unresolved complexities concerning the collective memory of key civil rights events and individuals. Representing places where activists and protestors failed to enact change or were met with state sanctioned violence, sites of struggle are ignored in the national memory as they disrupt America’s progressive victory narrative.

**Historical Background**

For the past fifty years, the historical narrative has privileged the stories of “acceptable” or mainstream civil rights sites such as Kelly Ingram Park in Birmingham. In 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. and SCLC launched a campaign in Birmingham aimed at desegregating local businesses and instituting fair hiring practices. During several of the nonviolent marches organized by King and SCLC, police used fire hoses and dogs to disperse demonstrators and children gathered at Kelly Ingram Park. Newspapers like the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* produced images that both outraged the nation and highlighted the necessity of effective civil rights legislation. In 1992, the city created a memorial at the park, bringing some closure to those involved in and affected by the demonstrations and protests.

Today, Kelly Ingram Park is heralded as “A Place of Revolution and Reconciliation,” displaying several expressive sculptures which depict the harsh realities of the civil rights movement from the eyes of a nonviolent protester. Visitors to the memorial walk on a circular path, first entering a jail cell with a young girl and boy from the children’s march who proudly declare, “I ain’t afraid of no jail.” Visitors then experience the terror and inhumanity of facing
snarling police dogs as they lunge through two parallel walls of a walk-through sculpture. The freedom walk continues with a depiction of a young female demonstrator pinned to a wall by the immense pressure of fire hoses. The memorial tour is concluded with a towering sculpture of Martin Luther King Jr. that overlooks 16th Street and the eminent Civil Rights Institute. For historians, the memorial at Kelly Ingram Park is paradoxical; it is emotionally engaging yet perpetuates the notion that the civil rights movement ended in the 1960s with victories over segregation and other forms of legal discrimination such as Jim Crow.

While memorials like that at Kelly Ingram Park mark progress in the United States’ attempt to face its legacy of legalized racism, there is undeniably a current trend of selectivity in the memorial making process. Most memorials focus on some aspect of Martin Luther King Jr. and the nonviolent strategy he utilized in the South. This complexity is even present at Kelly Ingram Park, as the large statue honoring King is situated at the park’s entrance, while a much smaller statue honoring Fred Shuttlesworth, one of the original organizers of Project “C”, is relegated to a less traveled space in front of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. As evidenced through the memorial at Kelly Ingram Park, public interpretations of history, like memorials, often have a tendency to streamline historical events into a singular, palpable story line, void of confusing intricacies.

Sites that are complex, contentious, or focus too heavily on the culpability of mainstream, white Americans do not fit into the acceptable civil rights narrative of progress and reconciliation. The civil rights movement is marked by instances of Klan violence, state-sanctioned brutality, and an overall lack of federal control, yet current memorials fail to engage these contentious issues. Complex spaces representing struggle and violence undermine the integrity of the national victory narrative, challenge the idealistic promises of American democracy and are thus effectively erased from the collective memory. Historian Robert Weyeneth argues that “the difficulty in presenting controversial history is rooted in the challenges of assessing the civil rights movement after 1965: when the heroes, victims, and villains become harder to define; when violence seems to take on some utility; when we as a society lose consensus about the meaning of the movement and what the future should hold.”

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While Weyeneth asserts that civil rights history becomes more difficult to define after 1965, I argue that contradictions and challenges have always existed within the movement. Dissent and division amongst civil rights organizations led to a struggle for control within the movement. This internal struggle paired with external forms of opposition such as the Ku Klux Klan, combative law enforcement officials, and a complacent American political system, made it difficult to define the official strategies and goals of the civil rights movement. The national media prioritized coverage of straightforward civil rights objectives like desegregation and equal voting rights while failing to engage in more challenging aspects of the struggle such as white resistance and subsequent black militancy. Left to negotiate the complexities and constitutionality of the current political structure, many Americans simply bought into the carefully constructed portrayal of the movement presented to them through media outlets.

Newspapers and magazines focused heavily on Martin Luther King Jr., his strategy of passive resistance, and struggles in southern states, missing essential opportunities to engage with other dimensions of the movement such as the political and economic system’s antagonistic reactions to black advancement. The current national narrative is largely reflective of the media coverage in the 1950s and 1960s; King and his triumphs are privileged, while more complicated individuals, groups and issues like the Black Panther Party and state involvement in civil rights movement suppression are repudiated. In spite of recent scholarship which details King’s personal faults and ideological struggles, the national narrative continues to remember MLK as a relatively uncomplicated leader. The complexity of the civil rights movement will remain immeasurable until the national memory includes a more diverse collection of civil rights sites, including places that complicate and challenge the accepted and venerated narrative of American history.

**Historiography**

The works of David Thelen, Edward Linenthal, David Blight, John Bodnar and Nathan Huggins are foundational to this study as these intellectuals were among the first to introduce aspects of memory theory to the field of American history. In his book *Sacred Grounds: Americans and their Battlefields*, historian Edward Linenthal examines the struggles associated with collective memory and narrative history at American military memorials and commemorative sites. Throughout the 20th century, the battlefields at The Alamo, The Little
Bighorn and Pearl Harbor have ignored the stories of the racial and ethnic minorities that were involved while highlighting the memories of the primarily Caucasian mainstream. By casting minorities as “others” in the story, the traditional narrative or “collective memory” has successfully excluded every group that presents a challenge to its narrow, ethnocentric history. Groups and individuals who appointed themselves as “guardians” and “legitimate owners” of the historic memory were responsible for shaping the narrative associated with these battlefields. Historically speaking, these groups often shared a desire to maintain symbolic dominance of the space by promoting an “Anglo-American ideology.”4 Through control of the collective memory, white Americans maintained a symbolic dominance over the battlefields for almost a century. A shift occurred during the 1970s, when groups like the American Indian Movement challenged the authenticity and accuracy of these ethnocentric narratives. Memorials created in the nineteenth century were placed under close scrutiny as minorities and those cast as “others” began to question the limited scope of the collective memory and demand a more inclusive narrative.

In his analysis of each battlefield, Linenthal integrates commemorative ephemera and photographs with letters and speeches to uncover issues surrounding collective memory, commemoration, and the official narrative of a specific site. By expanding upon theory related to memory and history, Linenthal provides cultural historians with a new framework for understanding contested spaces. Specifically, his approach demonstrates the various ways in which organizations can create and manipulate memorials in order to serve and affect the collective memory. In terms of contested spaces, control over the memorialization process ensures lasting dominion over the collective memory.

In his book Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century, John Bodnar thoughtfully assesses the role of official culture, vernacular culture, and patriotism in the creation public memory. According to Bodnar, official and vernacular cultural expressions are at odds with one another, as the vernacular threatens the official by suggesting alternatives to time honored traditions and narratives. The official culture seeks to maintain the status quo by protecting state sponsored ideologies and institutions, while the vernacular attempts to portray “real” experiences by incorporating memories from a wide

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array of individuals. Bodnar argues that “public memory emerges from the intersection of official and vernacular cultural expressions.” The idea and language of patriotism makes this intersection possible by embracing both vernacular and official ideals. “Patriotism itself embodies both official and vernacular interests, although most patriotic expressions tend to emphasize the dominance of the former over the latter.” Official cultural expressions draw from vernacular symbols and expressions in an attempt to create widespread patriotic sentiments.

Bodnar’s argument about the intersection of the official and vernacular is demonstrated through the lionization of Martin Luther King Jr. in the public memory. King was originally a leader and symbol of the vernacular, yet as other dynamic civil rights leaders like Malcolm X emerged, the official culture sought to create a specific meaning and interpretation of the movement for the rest of the nation. The official culture privileged the role of King, as he promoted a nonviolent, collaborative approach in contrast to Malcolm X’s racially disparate, militant strategy. By using King as a patriotic symbol in the battle for equality, the official culture adopted a symbol of the vernacular. In the public memory, King became the most prominent figure of the civil rights movement, while groups and individuals with different strategies like the Black Panther Party and Malcolm X, were essentially relegated to a marginal role in the patriotic public memory. In this instance, both the official and vernacular merged to create the public memory, but as Bodnar indicates, the official cultural expression dominated and directed the process of memory creation.

In his analysis of the creation of collective memories, David Blight develops Linenthal’s idea of contested space and Thelen’s discussion of constructed memory. Blight describes collective memory as “the ways in which groups, peoples, or nations remember, how they construct versions of the past and employ them for self-understanding and to win power and place in an ever-changing present.” Key to Blight’s definition is the idea that a group must maintain power and control in the present in order to control the collective memory and national story of the past. Memorials, which serve as “formal interpretations of history,” are deeply

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6 Bodnar, 18.
7 David W. Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory & the American Civil War* (University of Massachusetts Press: Amherst, 2002), 1.
embedded in this power struggle as they reinforce the official collective memory. Aware of the power of myth and memory, Blight argues that key Americans, namely Frederick Douglass, worked to influence the collective memory of the past in an attempt to legitimize their situations in the present.

Blight analyzes Frederick Douglass’ orations and rhetoric which served as attempts to expel the myth of the Lost Cause in hopes of replacing it with a more accurate and representative memory of the pre-war South. Following the end of the Civil War, Frederick Douglass tried to “preserve the memory of the Civil War” so that former slaves’ “freedom, citizenship, suffrage and dignity” would not be lost. Douglass’ preferred memory of the war was neither simplistic nor subdued; he promoted a memory that included both the atrocities of slavery and the righteousness of emancipation. Douglass feared that white Americans would forget about the rights won by blacks during the Civil War, rendering former slaves powerless and essentially ineffective in their new societies.

Douglass’s attempts to control the collective memory were in the pivotal years following emancipation. Concerned that emancipation and equality under the law would be lost for blacks, Douglass worked to create a mythic memory of the Civil War. “Douglass’s intention was to forge enduring historical myths that could help win battles in the present.” It was necessary for Douglass to instill mythic qualities of blacks as equals in the collective memory, in order to achieve actual racial equality in the present.

Douglass faced great opposition in his efforts to keep story of the Civil War alive; other Americans accused him of “living in the past.” In an attempt to “capture Yankee readers” and “vindicate the Confederacy,” the myth of the Lost Cause was born. Writers who utilized the myth of the Lost Cause romanticized life in the South, portraying slaves as happy, and masters and plantation owners as laid back gentlemen. An example is Margaret Mitchell’s bestselling book Gone with the Wind which exemplifies the mythic qualities of the “Lost Cause.” The “Lost Cause” continued to gain popularity in post-war American minds, as both Northerners and

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8 Blight, 2.
9 Blight, 94-95.
10 Blight, 97.
11 Blight, 103.
Southerners alike preferred to remember the glorious days of yesteryear, rather than struggle to fit blacks into the contested American narrative.

When thinking about the outcomes of the Civil War, Douglass was fully aware of the fact that both memory and history mattered. The process of revitalization and redefinition was the most important for Douglass and his cause. “Historical memory, he had come to realize, was not merely an entity altered by the passage of time; it was the prize in a struggle between rival versions of the past, a question of will, or power, of persuasion.”12 By furthering his memory of the Civil War, a memory that included the mistreatment and subsequent emancipation of black slaves, Douglass hoped to give blacks a significant place in the collective memory of the nation.

Historian Nathan Huggins sheds light on the underlying factors that prevented individuals like Douglass from including issues of race and slavery into the predetermined American narrative. In his book *Revelations: American History, American Myths*, Huggins examines the myth of American freedom and the subsequent avoidance of what he has labeled “the deforming mirror of truth.” Huggins points to America’s founding fathers as the source of the national freedom myth which celebrates the American system of government. By ignoring the blatant contradiction of allowing the institution of slavery to exist in a supposedly “free” society, the founding fathers “encouraged the belief that American history- its institutions, its values, its people- was one thing and racial slavery and oppression were a different story.”13 By choosing to exclude discussions of institutionalized slavery in the national structure, the founders ensured that race would remain detached from the overall American freedom narrative.

Huggins critiques historians for participating in the lie or myth of American freedom. According to Huggins, “American historians have conspired with the Founding Fathers to create a national history, teleologically bound to the Founders’ ideals rather than their reality.”14 While Huggins research focuses on the ways in which academics perpetuate the freedom myth, this

12 Blight, 96.
14 “Like the framers of the Constitutions, they [American Historians] have treated racial slavery and oppression as curious abnormalities-aberrations- historical accidents to be corrected in the progressive upward reach of the nation’s destiny.” Huggins concludes his analysis of the deforming mirror of truth by calling for a new, revised national narrative. Huggins argues that slavery and persistent race issues could move to the center of American History and memory if historians merely reshaped the story of oppressed people into an “inspirational” narrative. Huggins, *Revelations*, 253, 2783.
thesis will examine the role public historians take in preserving the romanticized historical narrative. Through carefully memorializing and developing exhibitions around events, sites, and individuals that uphold the American freedom narrative, public historians actively engage in the dissemination of the myth of universal American freedom.

The collective memory of the civil rights movement reflects the current power struggle between the national, or state-sanctioned narrative, and the untold or unappreciated narratives of a disenfranchised group of people. Current civil rights memorials illustrate the collective memory of the movement which is inordinately upbeat and positive. Thus, sites of struggle which challenge the collective memory are left out of the process of memorialization.

While many historians have addressed the fact that there are glaring holes in the collective memory surrounding civil rights sites, scholars have yet to offer a case by case analysis of specific contested sites. In “Historic Preservation and the Civil Rights Movement,” featured in Cultural Resource Management, historian Robert R. Weyeneth discusses the desired outcome of his two-year study on historic preservation and the civil rights movement: “to encourage the identification, preservation, and interpretation of civil rights sites.”15 Weyeneth’s research centers on civil rights memorials and commemorative sites as indicators of the nation’s collective memory.

“The report identifies three problems of selectivity that suggest some of the challenges of commemorating chapters of history that are locally important, recent, and controversial. At the moment, these seem to be chapters of the African-American freedom struggle that are too difficult or too dangerous to commemorate.”16 Weyeneth singles out black power as an aspect of the movement that lacks any significant commemoration. This disparity exists because “the subject of black power raises the related issue of white resistance.”17 Although disturbing and complicated, white resistance is an inescapable aspect of the movement, most vividly exposed through the ideology of Malcolm X and the black power movement. Rather than critically assessing the challenges presented at these sites, they are simply ignored, forgotten or demolished, as little to no efforts are made by the state or private heritage groups to preserve them. Because state agencies prioritize civil rights sites according to their perceived significance

15 Weyeneth, 1.
16 Weyeneth, 2.
17 Weyeneth, 2.
and relation to the movement, spaces related to King and his nonviolent, Christian method garner the most attention, while complex sites requiring thoughtful analysis, interpretation, and acceptance are either mired in ongoing battles over representation, or simply left to deteriorate.

Weyeneth’s research serves as a useful starting point, as he indicates that state agencies and private organizations intentionally neglect civil rights sights related to black power and white resistance. The report does not specifically mention sites of struggle, yet issues of black power and white resistance are undeniably linked to the idea of struggle within the movement. White resistance is most famously connected to the Ku Klux Klan and violence, while black power challenges the complacency of white Americans in the fight for civil rights. By expanding on Weyeneth’s initial findings, this thesis addresses the extenuating circumstances that factor into the decision to omit certain significant sites from the collective memory and the process of memorialization. Specifically, this is revealed through determinations in funding, proclivity of influential figures, and public backlash that leads state organizations to either promote or ignore these spaces.

Organization

This thesis identifies and addresses three sites that are imbued with a rich heritage linked to the civil rights movement, yet neglected due to their contested or complex nature. Each chapter serves as a lens for understanding the multifaceted ways in which sites of struggle work to complicate and challenge the accepted public history and memory of the civil rights movement.

The first chapter addresses the former Black Panther Party (BPP) headquarters in Chicago, Illinois as an example of a site that calls into question civil rights ideals such as integration and equality under the law. The Black Panther Party site complicates the practicality of enacting democratic legal change within a rigid socio-economic structure. The former Black Panther Party building in Chicago presents distinct challenges to the national narrative as several individuals and groups are continuously working to preserve the legacy and history of the site, while the Chicago Police department is actively trying to erase all meaning and significance related to the revolutionary organization. Analysis and interpretation of the space is intricate as
the struggle for representation and commemoration has continuously evolved over the past forty-two years.

The second chapter of this thesis examines the birthplace of the Ku Klux Klan in Pulaski, Tennessee, as a site which challenges the notion of progress in achieving American ideals. In Pulaski, local residents grapple with both internal and external critiques surrounding both the birthplace of the Ku Klux Klan and the consequent memorialization of the space as endorsed by the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Envisioning Pulaski as its birthplace, the current Klan gathers and rallies in the small town several times a year as a way to pay homage to their roots. Pulaskians have attempted to combat the current Klan’s claims to legitimacy by reshaping the collective memory of the original Klan in a manner that celebrates its founders while denouncing its current incarnation. According to residents of the town, the Klan of the 1960’s, and the current Klan, neither uphold the values of, nor represent the original Klan of Pulaski. By imaging the original Klan as chivalrous group of gentlemen dedicated to the betterment of society, Pulaskian’s attempt to simultaneously justify the existence of a commemorative plaque honoring the founders of the Klan while eschewing association with the present-day organization.

The third and final chapter focuses on sites related to the lynching and legacy of Emmett Till, a fourteen year Chicagoan who was killed in 1955 in Mississippi for offending a white woman. Till’s violent murder complicates the traditional American civil rights narrative which tends to characterize the 1950s and 60s as an era of passivism and non-violence. As a result, current memorialization of Emmett Till is disjointed and sporadic; the brutal nature of Till’s death combined with extraneous geographic complexities have worked to hinder and delay efforts to commemorate the young Chicagoan.

The birthplace of the Ku Klux Klan in Pulaski, Tennessee, the former Black Panther Party Headquarters in Chicago, Illinois, and sites linked to the lynching of Emmett Till in both Mississippi and Illinois serve as spaces representing both literal and symbolic struggle during the civil rights movement. All three sites embody the complex nature of the movement by highlighting internal and external division and conflict amongst both movement leaders and their adversaries. While the Klan site in Pulaski is not explicitly linked to the civil rights movement, it is significant and relevant as it represents the underlying counter narrative of white resistance. With each of these sites, I explore the power dynamics behind the process of memorialization.
and commemoration. Specifically, I consider issues related to the creation of a national narrative, challenges presented by competing collective memories, and the politics of preserving and remembering contentious spaces.
Exposing the Politics of Commemoration: The Chicago Police Department and Fred Hampton

2337 West Monroe St., Chicago, Illinois. Taken out of context, few would recognize this address as a historically significant place. The unornamented building at this site blends into the urban landscape, making it easy for onlookers to pass by without noticing the sign that reads “No Trespassing, No Soliciting, No Loitering.” Yet, the austere sign on this building is not directed at traveling salesmen or rowdy teenagers, but rather, those interested in revealing the building’s dark, unsettled history.

This plain, seemingly mundane space is not only an apartment building but also the setting of a deeply contested historical event, symbolic of how Chicagoans reconcile the images and actions of the Black Panther Party with the larger history of the civil rights movement. On December 4, 1969, Chicago Police officers entered 2337 W. Monroe to conduct a search and seizure of illegal weapons. Unharmed, the police emerged from the apartment minutes later, Chicago Black Panther Chairman Fred Hampton and Panther member Mark Clark lay dead inside. Existing as a contentious site of struggle, 2337 W. Monroe is left out of the traditional, celebratory process of memorialization as Americans are unable, and perhaps unwilling to merge the militancy of the Black Panther Party with the traditional, American civil rights narrative. The way in which Chicagoans remember, or choose to forget Fred Hampton at the 2337 W. Monroe reveals issues of power, race, and socio-economic status within the city, and also the United States.

Historical Background

In the mid-1960s, ideological shifts among various civil rights organizations worked to increase internal conflict amongst civil rights leaders.\(^\text{18}\) Conservative civil rights groups like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) disagreed with the more militant strategies of the Black Panther Party.

\(^{18}\) Malcolm X arrived on the scene as a civil rights leader whose beliefs were in opposition to that of Martin Luther King Jr. and SCLC. Malcolm X was not a proponent of non-violand; instead he proclaimed “I don’t go along with any kind of nonviolence unless everybody is going to be nonviolent. If they make the Ku Klux Klan nonviolent, I’ll be nonviolent…” Herb Boyd, *We Shall Overcome*, (Sourcebooks Inc.: Naperville, 2004), 192.
organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The accepted terminology of the civil rights movement changed as SNCC moved away from the “Freedom Now” slogan of SCLC and King, and towards “Black Power.”

Former SNCC Chairman Stokely Carmichael recalls a transformation in the movement with the creation and implementation of the Lowndes Project. After President Johnson passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, SNCC sought to educate residents of Lowndes County, Alabama though workshops and meetings centered on political education. This program established an interest in third-party politics in Lowndes County. The representatives of this party were not elite politicians but normal people from the area that truly represented the poor, working class region.

By focusing on ordinary people, the Lowndes Project challenged established hierarchies within civil rights organizations. Carmichael pointed out that organizations in which decisions were made from the top down failed to be radical. Only an organization that turned this hierarchy on its head and gave more power and decision-making responsibilities to all the people could claim to be truly radical. It was one of the newly established third-party organizations, The Lowndes Country Freedom Organization, that first used the black panther as a symbol on their ballots. The symbol caught the eye of African American groups across the country.

Shifting national attention westward in 1966, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale established the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in Oakland, California. At this point, the Black Panther

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19 According to historian Peniel E. Joseph, “Reporters enthusiastically played up the generational differences between the men, with the 24-year-old Carmichael cast as the 37-year-old King’s latest foil. King professed unwavering commitment to nonviolence while Carmichael casually proclaimed his tactical rather than philosophical support.” Peniel E. Joseph. The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era (Routledge: New York, 2006), 2.


21 According to civil rights activist Stokley Carmichael, “A lot of folks from Mississippi had become frustrated with the sphere of uncertainty within the organization. So they began to look at Lowndes Country and saw that we were disciplined and had a clear program that could use their talent. In a time of transition, it seemed like one of the few viable programs with a clear focus that SNCC had.” Carmichael quotation found in Jeffries, Bloody Lowndes, 149.

22 Jeffries, Bloody Lowndes, 149.

23 Historian Hasan Kwame Jeffries comments on the Black Panther Party shift from Alabama to California. “Like countless others, Black Panther Party cofounders Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale secured exclusive use of the Black Panther name in California by compelling competing groups to change their names. By 1970, the organization stood at the vanguard of the Black Power movement. As a result the black panther emblem became more closely associated with the BPP than with the rural residents of Lowndes County.” Jeffries, Bloody Lowndes, 153.
Party sought to promote ideals of both Black Nationalism and socialism. In an attempt to alleviate the social injustices of capitalism, the Black Panthers established free breakfast programs and encouraged greater autonomy and self-determination for African Americans. The Black Panthers gained notoriety in national media as they promoted black militancy by endeavoring to thwart, by any means necessary, white oppression and resistance, specifically in the form of armed police action.

Since its emergence in the late 1960s, the Black Panther Party has worked to promote the ideals of Black Power and raise awareness of racial and economic inequalities perpetuated by the American system of capitalism. The Black Panther ideology is based on socialist principles as outlined in the party’s ten-point platform and program. According to former Black Panther Chairman Bobby Seale, “The [ten-point] program was an outline of the basic political desire and needs that went back into the history of Black people suffering under the exploitative oppression by the greedy, vicious, capitalistic ruling class of America.” Calling attention to the inherent racist qualities of capitalism, Seale critiques not only the limited economic system, but also traditional American culture which relies heavily on the flawed, discriminatory structure. Despite Seale’s clear description and explanation of Panther philosophies, the underlying ideologies of the party are often blurred and indistinct in the eyes of the general public.

Over the course of the civil rights movement, the media focused on images of violence and hatred, on the part of white politicians and police officers, as well as black activists; all the while neglecting to explain the reasons why the protests or demonstrations occurred. This lack of information left constituents across the country confused with the emergence of Black Power and the Black Panther Party. As Americans struggled to understand their mission and ideology, the


27 According to political scientist Stephanie Larson, “The national press had ‘difficulty differentiating between rhetorical threats of violence and real actions; between what the Panthers meant to the nation symbolically and any
Black Panther Party gained popularity in urban centers with large African American populations such as Oakland and Chicago. In 1968, Fred Hampton founded a chapter of the Black Panther Party in Chicago. Using fervent rhetoric to critique the structural system of America, Hampton quickly gained enthusiastic supporters, along with a significant number of dissenters across the nation.

The National Civil Rights Narrative and Sites of Struggle

For most Americans, the Black Panther Party is synonymous with radical militancy and violence. Few are aware of the Panther’s larger commitments and contributions to their local communities. Because the current historical narrative is uneven, many Americans are unaware that in the 1960s, the Black Panthers developed community programs that addressed system-related inequalities and aimed at alleviating the hardships of poverty. Including the Panthers in the historical narrative would force Americans to redefine and reshape the way in which they remember the civil rights movement as a whole.

More powerful than any singular event, individual or organization, control of the national the historical narrative is paramount. The Panthers and the Chicago Police have been deeply engaged in the struggle for ownership over the narrative, as it has the ability to shape the public or collective memory of the event. Public memory continually attaches itself to historic sites


David Thelen makes thoughtful connections between memory and identity studies, arguing that “the same questions about the construction of memory can illuminate how individuals, ethnic groups, political parties, and
which *best* reflect prominent American ideals and values such as progress, equality and freedom for all. In the United States, the narrative and memorials depicting the civil rights movement serve as tools for shaping and promoting the preferred collective memory. Memorials enrich the collective memory by providing visual reminders of the civil rights events that have been deemed most important and prominent in American history.\footnote{30}

The current established narrative of civil rights begins with Brown v. Board of Education’s triumph in the courtroom, moves through Martin Luther King Jr.’s successive victories in Birmingham, Selma, and Montgomery, and culminates with the civil rights legislation of the 1960s. Privileging a history in which hard work, determination and interracial collaboration are the keys to success, the national narrative is precise and narrowly focused, leaving no place for sites of struggle. Martin Luther King Jr., his integrationist philosophy of non-violence, and his triumphs over segregation and racial injustice are celebrated, while more ideologically challenging individuals, groups and issues like the Black Panther Party and state suppression of civil rights are swept aside.

Current civil rights memorials such as the Freedom Walk at Kelly Ingram Park in Birmingham, the James Meredith Memorial in Oxford, Mississippi and the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial on the National Mall illustrate the current collective memory of the movement which is inordinately upbeat and positive.\footnote{31} By placing emphasis on memorials that promote narratives of victory and progress, Americans are able to minimize the significance of current racial tensions while celebrating core American principles like freedom, equality and

\footnote{30} Geographer Owen Dwyer addresses the problem of accurate representation that is currently affecting civil rights memorials. Dwyer writes, “Unlike the majority of representations of American history displayed in public space, the civil rights memorial landscape presents an explicitly antiracist rendering of the past.” Owen Dwyer. “Interpreting the Civil Rights Movement: Place, Memory and Conflict” *Professional Geographer* vol. 52 no.4, November 2000; 661.

\footnote{31} At Kelly Ingram Park visitors walk through sculptures depicting the harsh realities of the Birmingham Campaign such as jailed children, high pressure water hoses and snarling dogs. The freedom walk ends with a towering statue of Martin Luther King Jr. which is engaged with a quotation. The James Meredith Memorial, located on the campus of the University of Mississippi portrays a life sized Meredith walking through a doorway marked “courage.” The Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial on the national mall depicts stern faced, King, standing, or rather towering over visitors with his arms crossed. A quotation from King is engraved on the side. For more on civil rights memorials see: Owen J. Dwyer and Derek H. Alderman. *Civil Rights Memorials and the Geography of Memory*. (Chicago: Center for American Places at Columbia College Chicago, 2008).
democracy.\textsuperscript{32} In contrast, sites of \textit{struggle} are marked by contested memorialization and competing public memories as they illustrate controversial events surrounded by unresolved complexities such as violence, systemic inequalities and ongoing institutional racism.

The former Black Panther Party headquarters on 2337 West Monroe St. offer a prime example of a site of struggle which challenges the collective memory of the civil rights movement. Though it remains a site of ongoing conflict, the former Black Panther Party headquarters are minimized in the celebratory collective memory of civil rights and thus left out of the process of civil rights memorialization. The complex power struggle over commemoration of Fred Hampton at 2337 West Monroe St. reveals an innate component of most sites of struggle. Though they are places where significant historical events related to the civil rights movement took place, sites of struggle are marked by their lack of a clear and definitive resolution. Failing to negotiate the unresolved complexities that plague these spaces, the national narrative relegates sites of struggle to the periphery of American historical consciousness.

While the national memory of civil rights is precise, focusing on King and instances of activism in the South, the public memory of civil rights in Chicago is less resolved. Persistent debates over memory threaten attempts on the part of both the Black Panther Party and the Chicago Police Department to establish fixed meaning and interpretation in connection with the national civil rights movement.

Stuart Halls’ “Representations and the Media” is useful in examining the multifaceted ways in which organizations like the Black Panther Party and the Chicago Police Department attempt to control ideology by creating fixed historical representations in connection with specific events and groups. In his analysis, Hall argues that meaning is continually attached to images depicting a person or event. While groups or individuals may create an image or representation for a particular purpose, its meaning is flexible and ever changing depending on

\textsuperscript{32} Journalist Kim Severson expresses similar concerns in her discussion of what new civil rights museums mean for both academic scholarship and the collective memory or current national narrative. “For some, however, there is concern that the movement to isolate the era in bigger and better museums helps people avoid meaningful conversations about racism that still expresses itself in everything from interactions at a grocery store to the presidential election. All of these efforts are important, but we still have not addressed the issue of race in America, and until we do, that hydra is going to keep raising its ugly head,” said Ayisha Cisse-Jeffries, vice president for global affairs and international policy at the African American Islamic Institute.” Kim Severson “Civil Rights Museums are Increasing.” \textit{NYTimes.com}, February 19, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/20/us/african-american-museums-rising-to-recognize-civil-rights.html
the viewer. Power is inherent in the creation of meaning as it determines who has the ability to both assign and “circulate” meaning. According to Hall, specific ideologies attempt to assign fixed meanings to representations. Hall discusses the ways in which ideology works to create meaning and thus, control representation. Hall argues that by assigning specific, fixed meaning, ideology and power attempt “to close language, to close meaning, to stop the flow.”

Hall’s analysis provides insight on the struggle for representation of Fred Hampton and the Black Panther Party. Adhering to their own distinct ideologies, both the Chicago Police Department and the Black Panthers are unyielding in their quest to assign a fixed meaning to Hampton’s death. Hall argues, “If you want to begin to change the relationship of the viewer to the image, you have to intervene in exactly that powerful exchange between the image and its psychic meaning… in order to expose and deconstruct the work of representation which the stereotypes are doing.” Both the Chicago Police and the Black Panther Party rely on negative stereotypes to propel their own ideologies. According to both groups, their opposition is comprised of ruthless murderers. By perpetuating negative stereotypes and creating fixed meaning for representations, the Black Panthers and the Chicago Police promote their own distinct ideologies.

A historical narrative controlled by the Black Panthers would allow for a more nuanced perspective of the organization, rather than the current memory and history, which tends to concentrate heavily on the group’s militant confrontations with the police. In contrast, control over the narrative allows the Police to justify their actions on the evening of December 4, 1969. By depicting the Black Panther’s as a violent, murderous gang, the Chicago Police Department attempts to exonerate the men who orchestrated the raid, while diminishing the need for further

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33 And the means of circulating those meanings become very widespread because, of course, the question of the circulation of meaning almost immediately involves the question of power. Who has the power, in what channels, to circulate which meanings to whom? Which is why the issue of power can never be bracketed out from the question of representation. Stuart Hall, and Sut Jhally. *Representation & the Media*. Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 1997

34 That is what we used to call “ideology” tries to do. It aims to fix the one true meaning and the only hope you have about power in representations is that it’s not going to be true and that tomorrow it is, in some way, going to make a slightly different sense of it, meaning is going to come out of the fixing and begin to loosen and fray. Hall and Jhally. *Representation & the Media*.

35 Hall and Jhally. *Representation & the Media*.

36 For the CRP, Hampton’s death symbolized a victory against a violent revolutionary. For the Panthers, Hampton’s death was a planned political assassination carried out by official representatives of the state.

37 Hall and Jhally. *Representation & the Media*.
public scrutiny. The stakes are high in the battle for control of representation, as the present-day reputations of both organizations depend on their respective historical narratives. 38

**Struggle for Power and Control of December 4, 1969 Narrative**

In the late 1960s, 2337 West Monroe was home to Fred Hampton, the radical deputy chairman of the Black Panther Party in Illinois. In the early morning hours of December 4, 1969, members of the Chicago Police Department raided the apartment and shot and killed both Fred Hampton and Black Panther Party member Mark Clark. 39

In their official report of the raid, the police claimed that the Panthers opened fire after several officers entered the front of the apartment. 40 A few of the officers reportedly ordered the Panthers to cease fire, only to be met with a response of “shoot it out” followed by a barrage of bullets. 41 After nearly fifteen minutes of continual shooting, the police surveyed the damage; two officers were injured, one having been shot, the other sustaining injuries from broken glass, four members of the Black Panther Party suffered gunshot wounds and Mark Clark and Fred Hampton lay dead. 42

Immediately following the event, questions surrounding the purpose and outcomes of the raid emerged. Was this a seizure of illegal weapons gone wrong, or was that simply a cover story? Were the police merely defending themselves against the militant Black Panthers or was...
this raid actually a planned assassination of Fred Hampton? For the past forty-two years, the Chicago Police Department and the surviving members of the Black Panther Party have fought one another for control over the historical narrative associated with the morning of December 4th, 1969.

The battle for control over narrative and memory culminates at 2337 W. Monroe, the building in which Black Panther members Fred Hampton and Mark Clark died. Immediately following the police raid, surviving members of the Chicago Black Panther Party offered tours of the desecrated apartment, highlighting bullet holes created by police firearms and also, the mattress on which Fred Hampton was shot and killed. Brian Boyer, a journalist for the Chicago Sun-Times described his experience after taking a Panther-led tour of the apartment:

The Panthers who guide you are courteous and matter-of-fact as they point to the bullet holes in and through walls that they say belie the official position that state’s attorney’s police fired in response to a Panther attack. The walls of the bedroom are filled with bullet holes. So is the bedroom door. You cannot walk into Hampton’s bedroom without stepping into the large pool of blood.

The Panthers asserted that the bloodstained mattress proved that Hampton was in bed and unconscious at the time of the raid, and thus unable to defend himself, let alone launch a counter attack on the Chicago Police Department. According to Hampton’s pregnant fiancée, Deborah Johnson, “The mattress was just going; you could feel the bullets just going into it. I knew we were dead, everybody in there. When he looked up, he looked up, he didn’t say a word. He never said a word; he never got out of the bed.” Using this physical evidence to support their claims, the Panthers sought to demonstrate that the foundational framework upon which the police built their narrative, was at best flawed, and at worst, completely artificial.

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44 This battle for representation continually plays itself out in the local press. The Chicago Tribune, Chicago Sun-Times and Chicago Defender are the most prominent sources linked to this controversy although, other newspapers, including the national press, occasionally engaged in the conversation.
45 Details of the Black Panther tours first appeared in The Chicago Sun-Times, as they were more sympathetic to the Panthers than their competitor, the Chicago Tribune. For article describing tours see: Brian D. Boyer, “Panthers Show Visitors Through Apartment of Death” Chicago Sun-Times December 5, 1969.
46 Boyer, “Panthers Show.”
By leading and narrating tours of the apartment, the Black Panthers set three significant precedents. First, by immediately taking control of the space, the Panthers attempted to assert dominance over not only the building, but also the historical narrative. Second, they challenged the Chicago Police Department’s official narrative, arguing it was not only inaccurate, but completely fabricated. Finally, as they led “newsmen, students, public officials, and neighborhood residents” through the space in which the two men were killed, the Panthers essentially began their own form of commemoration for Fred Hampton and Mark Clark. The guided tours worked to ensure that the memory of the two men would not be forgotten or worse, erased. 48

Just as the Panthers sought to make public their version of events, so too did the Chicago Police. The initial battle over the narrative was highly publicized, playing itself out in the local media. 49 Following the infamous raid in 1969, the local media flocked to the apartment building capturing striking photographs of not only the interior, but also, equally powerful images of smiling police officers carrying Hampton’s corpse out of the building. State’s Attorney Edward Hanrahan publically supported the actions of the Chicago Police while deploring the Black Panthers as incendiary militants. Harahan told local press, “We wholeheartedly commend the police officers for their bravery, their remarkable restraint and their discipline in the face of this vicious Black Panther attack and we expect every decent citizen of our community to do likewise.” 50

The media’s intense engagement with and investigation of Hampton’s death was not unusual as local newspapers reported on class and racial tensions existing in both Chicago and the State of Illinois for the better part of the 20th century. In their articles covering the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s, the Chicago Tribune was largely unsympathetic to southern activists and demonstrators. 51 As the civil rights movement advanced to include issues beyond


51 Journalists Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff discuss the Tribune’s coverage of the Birmingham Campaign of 1963. “The Tribune’s coverage represented blacks as relatively more dangerous and antagonistic, and the Birmingham authorities’ use of force as justified and even restrained.” The Tribune was also known for using militaristic language in its text with headlines reading “explosions”, “wild clashes” and phrases such as “police battled negroes”, giving demonstrators the appearance of being at fault as opposed to the segregation itself. For more
southern segregation, Chicago area newspapers scrambled to accurately portray the evolving struggle.\(^{52}\)

By the mid-1960s Martin Luther King Jr. expanded civil rights beyond the South to address inequalities and issues of poverty in the North. King focused his attention on Chicago as the city’s history of race riots combined with issues of extreme poverty made it an ideal battleground for the next civil rights struggle.\(^{53}\) As the city served as a new center for civil rights activism, media outlets in Chicago established distinct reporting styles; the *Sun-Times* attempted to provide balanced coverage while the *Tribune* remained largely unsympathetic to revolutionary activity. By Hampton’s death in 1969, not only were the Chicago Police Department and the Panthers embattled, but also the more mainstream *Tribune* and the *Sun Times* were engaged in the struggle for accurate representation of the events that occurred at 2337 W. Monroe.

**Contested Narratives in the Media**

On December 5, 1969, headlines in the *Chicago Tribune* characterized the raid as a “Panthers Gun Fight,” offering a description of the battle from the perspective of the lead officers.\(^{54}\) In an exclusive interview with the *Tribune*, Sergeant Daniel Groth described a chaotic gun battle, initiated by the Panthers. “I repeated the knock, then forced the door open with my shoulder. As we entered the apartment, we were met with a shotgun volley fired by a woman who was on a bed in the living room. I returned the fire with my revolver.” According to the *Tribune*, “Groth said that the other occupants of the apartment, in two bedrooms off the living room, then opened fire at the police. Groth said he again asked the occupants to surrender but they continued to shoot.”\(^{55}\) Aiding the police in their efforts, State’s Attorney Edward Hanrahan pointed to bullet holes in the wall as proof that the Panthers fired upon the officers with the intent

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\(^{52}\) As the movement transformed to focus on issues like poverty, class alliances, and a refocus on equality beyond the Southern regions, newspapers and the media became distracted by the more radical representations of black militancy and black power.

\(^{53}\) For more on King’s activity in Chicago see: Taylor Branch. *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-68*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006.)

\(^{54}\) Koziol and Lee “Attempted Murder Charges.”

\(^{55}\) Koziol and Lee “Attempted Murder Charges.”
to kill. “Our officers used the means necessary to affect the search and to prevent themselves from being killed after they were fired upon.”

Shortly after the Chicago Tribune released the “official” version of events as told by the police, members of the local press, led by the Chicago Sun-Times, questioned State’s Attorney Edward Hanrahan about the veracity of the article. When compared to the Panther’s version of events, which were successfully corroborated through the apartment tours, Hanrahan’s version appeared to be full of inaccuracies. Responding to questions surrounding blatant contradictions in the police department’s version of events, Hanrahan responded “The account that we gave of the events is the truth.” A cantankerous Hanrahan stood by the description printed in the Tribune, in spite of the fact that he had not actually visited the apartment after the raid.

In response to the Tribune’s exclusive story and Hanrahan’s combative press conference, the Chicago Sun-Times released a groundbreaking article challenging much of the narrative presented by the police. After taking a Panther led tour of the apartment, the Sun-Times reported their startling findings on the front page of their Friday edition. A close investigation of the apartment by reporters from the Sun-Times exposed significant contradictions and inaccuracies in the both the police narrative and official photographs. The Tribune images allegedly depicted bullet holes created by Panther weapons. “Sun-Times newsmen toured the apartment at 2337 W. Monroe on Thursday and found that the marks circled in the photograph were broad-headed nails, not bullet holes.” The supposed bullet holes were actually nail heads used to secure the doorframe to the wall.

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56 Footage of Hanrahan interview can be found in: National Archives and Records Administration. Death of a Black Panther.

57 A debate surrounding what the CPD and the Tribune labeled as bullet holes emerges soon after the raid. With the help of surviving Panther members, the Sun-Times reveals that they are merely nail heads. Other discrepancies concerning various Panther members’ roles in the raid continually emerge.

58 Footage of Hanrahan interview can be found in: National Archives and Records Administration. Death of a Black Panther.

59 Edward Hanrahan admits to never actually visiting the apartment following the raid and subsequent deaths of Hampton and Clark. Hanrahan interview footage found in: National Archives and Records Administration. Death of a Black Panther.

60 At this time, the Chicago Sun-Times coverage of the event stood in direct opposition with that of the Chicago Tribune. The Tribune later scaled back their reporting offering articles that were less sympathetic towards the CPD and the scandal grew in size and notoriety. For initial Sun-Times article referenced above see: Joseph Reilly, “Those ‘Bullet Holes’ Aren’t” Chicago Sun-Times December 12, 1969.

61 Reilly, “Those ‘Bullet Holes’.”
Reporters for the *Sun-Times* not only challenged the accuracy of the *Tribune’s* account but used the incident to discuss the ever-sensitive issues of race and class within the city. Editors at the paper called for honesty and candor from all parties involved.

An open and meticulously impartial public airing of the circumstances in which two Black Panther Party leaders were killed Dec. 5 must be held without delay. The controversy is dangerously dividing this community, undermining respect for law enforcement officials and inciting racial emotions.\(^62\)

The Chicago Police Department explored other avenues for gaining public support and trust after their failed attempt to convince *Tribune* readers of their incontrovertible innocence.\(^63\) Under the direction and guidance of Edward Hanrahan, selected Chicago police officers reenacted the apartment raid for local WBBM-TV.\(^64\) During the reenactment, officers who had been involved in the raid pantomimed their actions, while describing the role they played. In addition, each officer provided commentary that speculated on the motivations and actions of the Panthers during the supposed shoot-out.

One of the officers recalled the careful consideration he took in order to ensure that minimal injuries were inflicted upon the Panthers. “We realized that there were still some people remaining in the front bedroom, we don’t know whether they are injured or not, so I plead. I begged them to come out, ‘please come out with your hands up, throw off your weapons.’”\(^65\) By offering Chicagoans a visual representation of the raid and alleged gun battle, the police were able to bolster the claims of self-defense that they initially made in the *Chicago Tribune*.\(^66\)

Citing ballistics evidence, attorney for the Black Panthers James Montgomery challenged the police narrative by highlighting prominent inaccuracies within their testimony. “The bullet which was in fact recovered from Mr. Hampton’s body was a bullet fired out of a carbine by

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\(^{63}\) The *Tribune* received many letters and printed several public editorials focusing on both the persistent struggle between the Panthers and the CPD, along with the *Tribune*’s pro-police stance on the issue of the raid. “Voice of the People: Black Panthers” Snodgrass, Lionel; Duncan, Maurice H; Walter Olesky Mullan, H E; et al. *Chicago Tribune* December 13 1969: n12.; “The Black Panthers and the Law” *Chicago Tribune* December 10, 1969: 20; “A Needed Inquiry” *Chicago Tribune* December 19, 1969, 24.

\(^{64}\) “Reenactment.” WBBM-TV Chicago, a CBS affiliate. December 11, 1969. Historical and contextual information regarding this source is scarce. While several other histories and newspaper articles make mention of this program, the actual film footage appears to be currently unavailable for viewing. Short clips from “Reenactment” are included in the documentary *Death of a Black Panther*.

\(^{65}\) Police officer qtd in National Archives and Records Administration. *Death of a Black Panther*.

\(^{66}\) Lee and Wiedrich. "Exclusive."
Officer Davis. That indicates that Officer Davis may well have walked in that back bedroom contrary to his testimony and fired a shot into the body of Fred Hampton.67

The Grand Jury assigned to the case also challenged the authenticity of the police narrative, as they concluded “that the re-enactment was carefully staged and rehearsed.”68 The Grand Jury found that the Chicago Police fired almost one hundred shots into the apartment, while only one shot came out of the apartment from a Panther weapon.69 Skip Andrew, another attorney representing the Panthers, passionately reiterated the contradictions in the narrative put forth by Hanrahan and the police.

By their own testimony they admit that for 12 minutes, for 12 solid minutes in those early morning hours, there was gun firing [sic] in that apartment. And yet the Federal Grand Jury concludes that only one possible shot could have come from a panther weapon, and that shot, could have come through the door from a man who had just been shot in the heart.70

In 1970, the Federal Grand Jury published their official report, which was valuable to the Panthers, as it disproved much of the narrative created by Hanrahan and the police. However, the report was alarmingly ineffective, declaring that the physical evidence gathered was “insufficient to establish probable cause and charge the officers with a willful violation of the occupants civil rights.”71 State’s Attorney Edward Hanrahan was later indicted, then acquitted on charges of conspiracy and obstructing justice, but not before his reputation and political career were fatally damaged.72

The mid 1970s marked the end of the first phase in the struggle for accurate representation at 2337 W. Monroe. Conflicting news reports, interviews, and the 1970 Grand Jury investigation worked to complicate rather than resolve the narrative surrounding Hampton,

67 The footage of James Montgomery appears in the documentary created about one year after Hampton’s death. While he appears to be outside a courtroom, it is unclear when or where Attorney James Montgomery was when he made this comment. See: National Archives and Records Administration. *Death of a Black Panther.*  
69 Additionally cited throughout the local press this claim is based on evidence found in “Report of the January 1970 Grand Jury.”  
70 National Archives and Records Administration. *Death of a Black Panther: The Fred Hampton Story.*  
72 Jeffery Haas, attorney for the Panthers and Hampton’s family discusses the political impact of Hampton’s death. “In fact, as many recognize the killing of Fred Hampton led not only to the demise of the political career of Hanrahan, Mayor Richard J. Daley’s heir apparent, but also to the formation of the Black coalition which ultimately resulted in the election of Harold Washington as mayor.” Jeffery Haas. “Why There Should Be A Fred Hampton Way.” *Chicago Defender* April 24, 2006, 9.
the Panthers and the Chicago Police. Because their ideologies were oppositional, the Black Panthers and the Chicago Police were unable to agree upon an accurate representation of the notorious police raid which resulted in Hampton’s death. Consequently, Hampton was never fully exonerated in public memory, and the police maintained their contradictory narrative.

As Chicagoans moved into the late 1970s and 1980s, public debate in the press fizzled out and seemingly ended. Edward Hanrahan went into private practice after failing to win reelection, and news coverage of the Panthers virtually disappeared as the nation’s attention shifted to focus on domestic unrest in response to Vietnam. During this twenty year span, the ideological battle between the police and Panthers lost its immediacy, disappearing from both television and print headlines. In reality, the debate over Hampton’s legacy was far from over, as both the Panther’s and the State of Illinois considered how to best remember, or forget for that matter, the death of Fred Hampton.

**Memory and Legacy of Fred Hampton in Chicago**

In 1984 questions of Hampton’s significance within the larger African American community emerged quietly, yet not publically, as the state sponsored Tourism Council developed their first heritage tours. By offering heritage tours, the Illinois Tourism Council joined the popular movement which encouraged African Americas to visit historically significant sites related to slavery, the great migration, and civil rights.  

Members of the Illinois Tourism Council considered the former Black Panther Party apartment on West Monroe St. as a potential stop on the tours, yet ultimately decided to exclude the site as board members felt that it may ignite another political battle within the city of Chicago.  

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73 Heritage tourism emerged at the end of the 20th century, providing tourists with an opportunity to honor their heritage by returning to their “roots.” Predominately a Southern trend, Northern cities with large African-American communities such as New York and Chicago, also offer heritage tours. Typical heritage tours highlight sites related to people and places that had a significant impact or influence on culture and society. An example includes heritage tours of Harlem which focus sites related to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s. For more on heritage tourism see: Charles E. Cobb On the Road to Freedom: A Guided Tour of the Civil Rights Trail. (Chapel Hill, N.C: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2008); Rojek, Chris, and John Urry. Touring Cultures: Transformations of Travel and Theory. (London: Routledge, 1997); Craig Barton. “Invisibility on the Land: A Perspective on African American Culture,” Your Town: Mississippi Delta. (Washington D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2002),

74 In a journal article published in 2000, geographer Owen Dwyer reports, “An early edition of the official Illinois African-American heritage guide noted the site at which Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, members of the Black Panther Party, were assassinated by the Chicago Police and FBI in 1969. Upon review, however, reference to the
officials chose to ignore unresolved racial tensions in order to present an inaccurate, yet more resolved narrative of Black history to the larger public. The implications of this contradictory decision are clear; by failing to engage in relevant issues of enduring and system-based racism, the State of Illinois attempted to erase from its history this particular complex and contentious event.

Providing tourists with a more complete and resolved version of African American history, the “Soul of Illinois” website sponsored by the Illinois Bureau of Tourism, directs visitors to various “cultural attractions” such as the DuSable Museum of African American History, the Robert S. Abbott (founder of the Chicago Defender) Home, and the African American Hall of Fame Museum. Efforts to memorialize and honor prominent African Americans through heritage tours seem paltry when considered in relation to the state’s attempt to ignore the controversy surrounding Fred Hampton and the Chicago Police Department.

Despite these shortcomings, Illinois is not unique in their approach to heritage tourism. State sponsored heritage tours throughout the nation adhere to the mainstream civil rights narrative and focus on well-known sites; visitors simply travel from one eminent museum or memorial to the next. For instance, tourists participating in the Alabama Music and Heritage Tour begin their trip in Atlanta visiting a Martin Luther King Jr. “historical site” and the former site was omitted from the guide because it was deemed ‘too controversial’ from the perspective of those who would not accept the role of the state in supporting white supremacy.” Dwyer cites an article written by Robert Weyeneth concerning civil rights memorialization practices “Historic Preservation and the Civil Rights Movement.” In his article, Weyeneth mentions the Black Panther site, but does not provide details about the Illinois Tourism Council. Readers are referred to Weyeneth’s comprehensive study of civil rights sites. While Weyeneth’s study provides a comprehensive list of un-memorialized sites related to the civil rights movement, no mention is made of the Tourism Council’s initial plans to visit Hampton’s apartment. Presently it is unclear where exactly Dwyer found his information regarding the proposed Illinois heritage tour. Dwyer, “Interpreting the Civil Rights Movement,” 660-671.


76 The State of Mississippi offers heritage tours that visit sites such as the Farish Street Historic District, Medgar Evers Library, the Natchez Museum of African American History and Culture, a memorial to James Chaney, the Center for the Study of Southern Culture on the campus of the University of Mississippi. “African American Heritage Tour”, http://www.visitmississippi.org/the-african-american-heritage-tour.aspx. The city of Birmingham in Alabama offers suggestions for places to visit related to “African American Heritage” such as the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, Kelly Ingram Park, and the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. http://www.birminghamal.org/ttd-aframheritage.html
home of Margaret Mitchell. The tour then heads north to the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Tennessee. The remaining days of the tour are spent back in Alabama, visiting various recording studios, music festivals and sites of general historic interest. The Alabama Music and Heritage Tour concludes in New Orleans where participants have the opportunity to visit the National World War II museum and Mardi Gras World before heading home.

In the instance concerning Hampton’s memory in Chicago, the decision made by the Illinois Tourism Council was in line with contemporary trends as no other tourism bureau, publically or privately funded highlights the contentious site of Fred Hampton’s former apartment in West Chicago. In fact, the only organization to include any places related to the Black Panthers is blackpanther.org which focuses on sites related to the organizations former national headquarters in Oakland, California.

While the Illinois state officials successfully avoided potential problems in the 1980’s by removing Hampton’s apartment from the list of acceptable sites for the state sponsored heritage tours, more struggles awaited. In 1990, the state faced another significant challenge when Chicago City Council members were asked to vote on a resolution that would honor the slain Black Panther by designating December 4th “Fred Hampton Day.” Several Aldermen reconsidered their votes of approval, after learning more about the man the resolution was attempting to honor. Provoked by expressions of outrage and disgust on part of the Fraternal Order of Police, 16 white Alderman chose to withdraw their support of the resolution and in turn, started an impassioned feud over the historical narrative amongst prominent members of Chicago’s City Council.

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78 The Black Panther tour in Oakland is sponsored by the Black Panther Party, not the state of California or any of its affiliates. Informational descriptions of the tours are provided on the homepage of Blackpanther.org. The site proclaims “Here is your opportunity to visit the historical sites of the Black Panther Party. Visit the scene where Lil' Bobby Hutton was killed on April 6, 1968 and the location of the first free breakfast program.” A virtual tour is available at http://www.blackpanthernews.com/tour.html.
79 “The city's aldermen are feuding about a resolution that would honor Fred Hampton, a leader of the Black Panther Party who was shot to death in a police raid in 1969. Since then, 16 white aldermen have withdrawn their support for the resolution.” Dirk Johnson, “Chicago Journal; Seeking New Harmony, But Finding a Racial Rift” The New York Times, November 25, 1990.
Alderman Bobby Rush, a former Black Panther leader himself, was infuriated by the reversal of votes. An impassioned Rush called the 16 Aldermen “sniveling cowards who are shaking in their boots.” Responding to Alderman Rush’s indignation and offering a fairly facetious explanation for the behavior of the 16, Alderman Ed Burke quipped “I think some of the Alderman thought it was a resolution honoring Dan Hampton” who at the time, was a defensive tackle for the NFL’s Chicago Bears. It is unclear whether or not Alderman Burke was intentionally flippant, yet his comment could be viewed as a representation of public sentiment regarding racial tensions in Chicago. Based on Alderman Burke’s comments, it seems that it was easier to joke about issues of misidentification and memory than engage in thoughtful discourse concerning Hampton’s contested legacy as related to larger issues of persistent racism within and by the city.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the debate arose as Mayor Richard Daly refused to allow a reversal of the decision. Although many suspected that his support was politically motivated, Daly stood by the resolution which formally declared December 4, 1990 “Fred Hampton Day.” Defending his position Daly stated: “The resolution was passed. No one is ever perfect in their entire life. Basically the aldermen are saying that there were some good things that he [Hampton] accomplished—some of the day-care and other programs that he ran on the West Side.”

In this instance, Mayor Richard Daly’s support was the key to keeping the political battle within the confines of City Council. While the Fraternal Order of Police and supporters of the Black Panther Party expressed their opinions, the feud over “Fred Hampton Day” failed to gain the attention of members of the general public. News of the debate was published in the local press, yet Chicagoans who did not have a clear stake in the outcome remained relatively neutral or apathetic. For the remainder of the 1990’s and continuing throughout the first half of the new millennium, discussion of Fred Hampton stayed out of both the Chicago City Council and the local press.

80 Johnson, “Chicago Journal.”
82 Neutrality on part of the public is evidenced by a lack of editorials and public letters. Letters to the press were more abundant in other controversies surrounding Hampton case (i.e. immediate coverage of event, street sign debate), thus demonstrating that the public failed to engage in this particular battle. See: Johnson, “Chicago Journal.”
Contemporary Challenges Concerning Memory and Narrative

In spite of the apparent lull that existed throughout the nineties, the New York Times asserts that present day Chicagoans are still trapped in the struggle for accurate representation. “What has not changed over four decades, even with the blurring and fading of memories, is the size of this city's division over what happened the day the elder Mr. Hampton was killed, who he was and what his legacy should be.” Despite the emergence of new government officials, police chiefs and political ideologies, Chicagoans have failed to resolve the contentious historical narrative surrounding Fred Hampton’s death.

Nearly forty years after the initial incident, the struggle for control over the historical narrative reigned with the honorary street sign debate of February 2006. Fulfilling a request from Fred Hampton Jr., Chicago Alderman Madeline Haithcock submitted a proposal to rename a small section of Monroe Street “Chairman Fred Hampton Way”. The City Council approved her proposal, and effectively started another battle in the political war over historical representation.

Since 1984, the Chicago City Council has granted honorary street sign designations to over 1,300 individuals. Chicago Aldermen commonly use the honorary street signs to gain favor among their constituents and create a sense of community within their districts. Bearing this in mind, the city’s Aldermen rarely consider the possibility of public outrage over an honorary street sign designation. However, there are always exceptions to the rule, as proponents of “Hugh Hefner Way” also faced significant backlash after initially attaining City Council’s stamp of approval.

After learning that City Council approved the honorary sign for Chairman Fred Hampton, the Fraternal Order of Police expressed their outrage and disgust. “‘It’s a dark day when we

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honor someone who advocated killing policemen and who took great advantage of the communities he claimed to have been serving,’ said Fraternal Order of the Police President Mark Donahue.”

Several Aldermen reconsidered their votes after realizing who exactly the street would be honoring. “Rules Committee Chairman Richard Mell likened it to naming a Chicago street "David Duke Way" after the founder of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan and the National Association for the Advancement of White People.”

In order for their version of the historical narrative to work, the Chicago Police Department needed to portray Hampton as a ruthless criminal who targeted innocent police officers. By comparing Hampton to gang leaders and white supremacists, adversaries of the Black Panther Party successfully restated their narrative in a way that allowed greater accessibility for present day Chicagoans. Instead of focusing on the economic and racial problems that Hampton and the Panthers were responding to, the Chicago Police Department obsessed over Hampton’s threatening orations. At this point in time, it was easier for the Fraternal Order of Police to justify the actions of their officers if the general community perceived Fred Hampton to have been a volatile revolutionary.

The inflammatory language used by Mark Donahue speaks to so-called law-abiding residents of Chicago who may be unaware of the circumstances surrounding Hampton’s death. According to Sam Muwakkil, senior editor of the In These Times, “white Chicagoans with little knowledge of historical context are supporting the side of those who seemingly got away with cold-blooded murder.” By denouncing Hampton in the local press, the Fraternal Order of the Police opened up the street debate to the general public, and thus, expanded the battle for representation to include all residents of Chicago.

Alderman Haithcock and supporters of the honorary street sign responded to the Fraternal Order of Police’s incendiary remarks by refusing to withdraw their proposal. “‘We're engaged in battle now,’ said [Congressman] Bobby Rush, a former Black Panther defense minister. ‘I didn't

88 Fran Spielman. “Street Name: Fiasco or Tribute?” Chicago Sun-Times, March 1, 2006.
seek this fight, I didn't go looking for this fight. But I am determined to fight for this street designation until the bitter end.’” Haithcock argued that the debate centered on a biased representation of Hampton. She claimed, “If you read the history of Fred Hampton, you won't see anything that bad about him. All he said is he was going to defend himself against policemen. And evidently he didn't because they murdered him.”

As is evidenced through countless interviews and public statements, the Black Panthers and their supporters continually remind Chicagoans that Fred Hampton never actually killed any police officers. While Hampton often used provocative, even threatening language when dealing with police officers, he was not the one-dimensional criminal that Mark Donahue and supporters of the CPD allege he was. Concerned primarily with the negative effects of capitalism, such as extreme poverty, Hampton created the BPP free breakfast program. Hampton’s neighborhood recognized him as a community organizer who sought to provide for the underprivileged and impoverished. Unfortunately, Hampton’s opposition focuses solely on his militancy, sweeping away his redeeming qualities in sea of impassioned rhetoric.

Despite the Panthers best efforts to honor Hampton’s legacy through the creation of an honorary street, Alderman Haithcock withdrew her proposal before the requisite second round of voting. Alleging that the debate within City Council was growing too intense, Haithcock

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93 According to Congressman Danny Davis (D-7th) “Fred Hampton spoke out against law enforcement officers who misused and abused their authority.” David stated, ”Fred Hampton preached violence. He, more than on one occasion, preached kill the policemen, kill the pigs. I've heard people say police abused him, but I am not aware of it. Fred Hampton was part of a violent organization. He lived his life violently and he died violently. I don't care what good the Black Panthers might have done, you can't erase the violent aspect of his life.” Davis quoted in: Demetrius Patterson. “Blacks, Police at Odds Over Naming of Street for Black Panther Leader Slain by Chicago Police.” Chicago Defender, March 1, 2006, 3.
94 “On the 2300 block of Monroe Street, new, upscale townhouses and condos sit side by side with scenes of blinding poverty. Next door to Droughts actorne, a handmade sign hanging from a chain-link fence reads: ‘Food for thought: Fred Hampton fed the kids. Question: Who is feeding them now?’” Although FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover called the Panthers a menace, many West Side residents revered them for starting food banks and health clinics.” Ron Grossman and Oscar Avila. “On West Monroe, Hampton’s Name Still Resonates.” Chicago Tribune, March 3, 2006, 1.
95 While Hampton’s denouncers focus most frequently on his militant language, one cannot ignore the fact that he was arrested and charged with assault and robbery following an incident with an ice cream truck driver on July 10, 1968 in Maywood, Illinois. Hampton was not a member of the Black Panther Party at the time of this incident.
promised to find an appropriate way to commemorate Hampton. "I will put the sign up in some kind of way. I will honor him in some manner. If it's not the sign, it'll be something."  

By halting the battle over representation, the Aldermen did not save Chicago from an unpleasant conflict, but rather sidestepped larger, persistent problems of racism throughout the city. Members of the Chicago City Council made a conscious decision to ignore the debate over historical representation as this allowed them to avoid present day complexities related to race and class. Refusing to ignore the contemporary implications of the conflict, Bobby Rush asserts that Chicago “is still the most segregated city in America. What has happened with this sign is you can see there are still deep pockets of absolute racism in the city of Chicago.” The debate over the historical narrative did not vanish or resolve itself when it left City Council, rather it shifted to the periphery of public consciousness, where it will remain stagnant until another battle erupts.

Interestingly enough, in Fred Hampton’s hometown of Maywood, Illinois, there is seemingly no controversy over the slain leader’s memory and legacy. The suburb of Chicago honored Chairman Fred Hampton by naming both a street and an aquatic center in his honor. Rev Al. Sampson spoke at the celebration saying, “There ought to be some footprints in the sand in relation to this man. Fred Hampton represents part of the tradition of liberation freedom fighters.”

The Politics of Memorialization

Today, the original Black Panther Party headquarters no longer exists. For several years, all that remained of the building was a vacant lot that represented a missed opportunity for

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97 Monica Davey “Debate Rages Over Plan to Honor Black Panther; Some in Chicago Say Fred Hampton was a Courageous Leader, Others Say He was Dangerous” The Houston Chronicle, March 5, 2006.
98 Maywood village council unanimously decided to memorialize Hampton in his hometown by naming a street in his honor. The council finalized their decision in 2007; one year after the street sign debate of February 2006 caused such controversy in Chicago. Monifa Thomas, “Maywood Street, Statue Honor Slain Panther Leader Hampton”, The Chicago- Sun Times, September 9, 2007.
99 “Property Search: 2337 W. Monroe St.” Cook County Assessor’s Office, http://www.cookcountyassessor.com/Property_Search/Property_Details.aspx?pin=17181050110000. The historic property record indicates that 2337 W. Monroe is currently owned by the city of Chicago, yet further investigation at City Hall revealed that portions of the record from the late 1960’s are missing. It is clear that the property was
reconciliation and memorialization. Without the original apartment building, the photographs that appeared in the press following Hampton’s death lose their connection to a physical landscape in the present, thus weakening their overall impact on contemporary audiences.\(^{100}\)

Recently, the city built a new, updated apartment building in the space where the BPP headquarters once stood. By removing and rebuilding the apartment, the city attempted to reconfigure the space and its history yet, in one respect, they failed. Rather than blending seamlessly into the landscape, the new building stands in stark contrast to those around it; the modern structure is out of place amongst the rows of 20\(^{th}\) century townhouses. In a sense, the apartment has retained its distinctive qualities as the present-day streamlined structure demands attention, just as the original apartment was singled out for its ostensibly dark history. Yet, by changing the built environment, the state of Illinois has begun the process of erasing the event and organization from the collective memory.

In spite of the state’s efforts and attempts to minimize the history of the site, members of the Black Panther Party and their children like Fred Hampton Jr., continually seek to preserve its legacy and meaning within the larger community. Experiencing constant backlash from the Chicago Police Department, Fred Hampton Jr., has worked tirelessly to obtain permission to create some kind of memorial at the site.\(^{101}\) Failing to receive any support from the either the state of Illinois or the city of Chicago, Hampton has organized an annual memorial service at the site.\(^{102}\)

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privately owned in 1967, but there is no information regarding the sale or seizure of the property by the city. As the property record is incomplete, there is not a clear indication of the time frame in which the apartment was rebuilt.\(^{100}\) The photographs mentioned above appear in Chicago area newspapers following the police raid of December 4, 1969. It does not appear that the photos have been republished or exhibited in recent years, making it difficult for contemporary audiences to imagine the space in which Hampton died.\(^{100}\)

In 2007, after failing to receive official permission from the City of Chicago, Hampton Jr. erected his own street sign on West Monroe. “In a brazen move Saturday, the son of slain Black Panther Party leader Chairman Fred Hampton erected a street sign honoring his father on the corner of Monroe and Western after the initial request was shot down by City Council last year. During the celebration...supporters chanted ‘Long live Chairman Fred’ as Hampton made his way up the pole to erect the street sign.” Kathy Chaney. ” Street Sign Dedication: Chairman Fred Hampton” Chicago Defender August 27, 2007: 3.\(^{101}\)

Information regarding this year’s memorial service is available on Fred Hampton Jr.’s current blog. The event was scheduled for December 4, 2011. A silent vigil at 2337 W. Monroe was scheduled for noon, with guest speakers to follow at 5pm. Prisoners of Conscience Committee (POCC/BPPC) Friday, November 25, 2011. http://www.chairmanfredjr.blogspot.com/search?updated-max=2012-01-09T07:27:00-06:00&max-results=7&start=7&by-date=false.\(^{102}\)
Fred Hampton Jr. asserts that his memorialization efforts are part of a larger effort to not only honor, but also safeguard the memory and history of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party. Equating the fear, horror and assault experienced by the Black Panthers on December 4th, 1969, with the terror of September 11, 2001, Fred Hampton Jr. asserts that 2337 W. Monroe is a symbolically significant space for supporters of the Black Panther Party. "This is one of the ground zeroes in our community, a place where brutal acts of terrorism occurred." According to Hampton Jr., “The way they assassinated Chairman Fred and Defense Captain Mark Clark was done in a strategic type of way to send a message of terror to their present generation and future generation.”

By equating his father’s death with 21st century terrorist attacks, Hampton Jr. attempts to reframe the historic narrative associated with December 4, 1969 to allow greater accessibility and understanding for contemporary Americans. Yet, as the current lack of memorialization suggests, most Americans do not associate Fred Hampton’s death with either present day terrorist attacks or the civil rights movement of the 1960s. In fact, most Americans have no idea who Fred Hampton was or any of the details surrounding his death.

Before the Panthers can fit into the mainstream narrative of the civil rights movement, they must redefine and rearticulate the legacy of prominent members like Chairman Fred Hampton. According to Congressman Bobby Rush, “Fred Hampton did not preach hatred or violence. Fred Hampton stood for feeding hungry children, providing free medical care for the poor and oppressed and organized people for political empowerment.” Influenced by Marxism, Hampton believed in equal distribution of wealth and power. The language he used in his speeches is representative of his socialist leanings. “Power to the people. White Power to white people, Brown Power to brown people, Yellow power to yellow people, Black Power to black people, X power to those we left out.”

103 Fred Hampton Jr. is currently the Chairman of the Prisoners of Conscience Committee which he founded while in jail.
104 This quote serves as an example of an instance in which Hampton Jr. is attempting to create a fixed meaning for a representation (2337 W. Monroe.) Using Prisoners of Conscience Committee ideology, Hampton Jr. is labeling 2337 W. Monroe as a “ground zero” in the struggle for black rights. Davey, “Debate Rages.”
The ideologies of Fred Hampton and the Black Panther Party expanded beyond inequalities perpetuated by the American system of capitalism. Hampton’s rhetoric also focused heavily on the importance and necessity of increased militarization in response to unjust treatment of African Americans. Even today, most white Americans have a difficult time conceiving of the Black Panthers actions as a response to white resistance. In a speech given shortly before his death, Hampton defended and explained the motivation behind his militancy. “But what this country has done to nonviolent leaders like Martin Luther King—I think that objectively says there’s going to have to be an armed struggle. People have to be armed to have power, you see.”

Even if Hampton Jr. and the Black Panther Party win the struggle for representation within the city of Chicago, they still face the more daunting challenge of reframing representations of the civil rights movement and fitting their story into the larger national narrative of the 1960s. For the Panthers, there remains an unspoken and perhaps unrealized component of the battle for representation. As the national memory of the civil rights movement has cast the Black Panther Party as a militant, extremist organization, present day Americans fail to recognize and appreciate the ideology and purpose of the group; they simply do not fit in to the larger national narrative or ideology surrounding the meaning and memorization of the civil rights movement. By portraying Hampton as a superficial radical, Americans can ignore the accepted, yet discriminatory power structure that the Black Panthers attempted to thwart. In contemporary memory, the Black Panthers represent an ideological conflict with the ideals of freedom, equality, and democracy as celebrated by the official civil rights narrative.

Sites depicting struggle, like 2337 W. Monroe, contest the shared national narrative as they undermine the notion that leaders of the civil rights movement were entirely triumphant in achieving their goals. By neglecting these sites, Americans can control the history of the civil rights movement, making it appear less complicated and severe, and more successful and resolved. Historical representation of Fred Hampton will remain impenetrable until the national memory and ideology expand to include a wider array of civil rights sites, including places that are particularly unpleasant, painful and controversial.

108 Fred Hampton qtd in Johnson, “Chicago Journal.”
Reconciling History and Collective Memory: Pulaski, TN and the Ku Klux Klan

As I walked out of the Giles County Historical Society, I noticed a distinct and dramatic change in the atmosphere of what seemed to be a quaint Tennessee village. The town square, hours before bustling with local residents and a farmers’ market, was transformed by a horde of impassioned men and women. Dressed in white robes and army fatigues, a frenzied group screamed “White Power!” at bystanders and proudly waved rebel flags high above the crowd. When I queried, one of the myriad police officers sighed and rolled his eyes, saying, “The Klan has returned to Pulaski.”

Pulaski, Tennessee: birthplace of the Ku Klux Klan. Downtown Pulaski is home to a small memorial plaque in honor of the men who founded the Klan in 1865. Shortly after the second resurrection of the Klan, the Daughters of the Confederacy placed a commemorative plaque on the building in which the Klan was founded. The plaque read:

“KU KLUX KLAN ORGANIZED IN THIS, THE LAW OFFICE OF JUDGE THOMAS M. JONES, DECEMBER 24TH, 1865. NAMES OF ORIGINAL ORGANIZERS CALVIN E. JONES. JOHN B. KENNEDY. FRANK O. MCCORD. JOHN C. LESTER. RICHARD R. REED. JAMES R. CROWE.”

In an attempt to make a powerful statement about the town’s burdensome heritage and legacy, the current owner of the building has reversed the once celebrated plaque, effectively hiding its text. Despite Pulaskian’s best efforts to downplay their connection to the notorious group, it is impossible to ignore the present day implications of the town’s contested history as the Klan continually holds rallies in Pulaski to honor and celebrate their history and legacy.

The current public memory of the Ku Klux Klan is negative, connecting the group to violence and hatred as a result of the organization’s white supremacist ideology. For residents of Pulaski, the public memory of the Klan often challenges their own, which remembers the group’s founding members as chivalrous gentlemen. The building in which the Klan was founded in Pulaski, Tennessee serves as a site of struggle, as contested memories surrounding the purpose and legacy of the original Klan prevent contemporary Americans from reaching an agreement about the significance and meaning attached to the space.

The work of historians Maurice Halbwachs, David Thelen, and David W. Blight is useful in understanding larger historical trends in connection with memory, group identity and constructed narratives. By adapting and reinterpreting definitions of memory and history, these historians have developed a better sense of the way in which people “create” meaning for themselves. In the case of the Pulaski Tennessee, residents have constructed a distinct public of the Klan which allows local community members to celebrate rather than denounce the founding members of the notorious organization.

**History of the Ku Klux Klan**

On December 24, 1865, six Confederate veterans met at a law office in Pulaski, Tennessee to form a social organization aimed at alleviating the pressures of civilian life in the post-war years.\(^{110}\) The young Confederate veterans were well respected in their local community; many of the original six were college educated men. The six men called their club the Ku Klux Klan, short from “kyklos”, which in Greek means circle of brothers. Originally established as a social club, the Klan quickly spread to neighboring communities and evolved into an organization dedicated to upholding the “virtues” of white supremacy.\(^{111}\)

Founding member John Lester co-wrote a book with D.L. Wilson, in which he reflected on the origins, mission, and vision of the original Pulaski chapter of the Klan. Quoting a fellow founder Lester writes, “In regard to the founding of the Pulaski Circle, Major James R. Crow Says: ‘The origin of the order had no political significance. It was at first purely social and for our amusement.'”\(^{112}\) Rather than an organization dedicated to vigilante justice and terrorism, the original Klan in its earliest days, appeared to be purely a social club; a fraternal organization


aimed at easing the boredom and monotony spurred by the routine nature of life following the Civil War.

Based on the Masonic model, the Ku Klux Klan is representative of the post-war trend of fraternalism as marked by the creation of all-male social societies.

Beginning in the 19th century America saw an increase in both local and national fraternal organizations. The Klan adopted many of the traditional characteristics of 19th century fraternal orders; the original Klan was an exclusively male organization which established secretive rituals and customs as a means to unite members. According to historian Mary A. Clawson, 19th century fraternal organizations commonly used rituals “to create solidarity, to articulate group identity, and to address concerns about class, gender and other kinds of social difference.”

Established by young professionals who settled in Pulaski after serving in Confederate army, the Klan fit the traditional fraternal structure as the founding members were of a similar social class, and perhaps even shared common concerns about the political and social structure of Reconstruction.

Following another custom of 19th century fraternal organizations, the original Klan members developed a uniform, or costume rather. Klan regalia consisted of white sheets and linens which were to be worn over clothing, and a matching white hood which covered the head entirely in order to mask the identity of members. The shroud of mystery that accompanied all Klan rituals, gatherings, activities and pranks both excited and intrigued residents of Pulaski. After a mere few weeks of the Pulaski Klan’s covert meetings and subsequent mischievous

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113 In her examination of 19th century fraternal organizations, historian Mary A. Clawson describes the Masonic model which differs from fraternal organizations developed “around the workplace.” “In contrast were organizations existing within the Masonic model. In practical terms, they differed from trade associations in the purpose, which was primarily social, and in their character as regional or national organizations with expansionary tendencies.” Mary A. Clawson. Constructing Brotherhood: Class, Gender, and Fraternalism. (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1989), 111.

114 Clawson, Constructing Brotherhood, 18.

115 Not even the Klans eventual racist ideology was unique to the system of fraternal organizations, as many other societies and orders excluded minorities or segregated members among differing chapters. “Policies toward race were much more consistent; indeed, racial exclusion was a hallmark of mainstream American fraternalism throughout its history.” “If racism is a social system…then it must be produced and reproduced. From this perspective, fraternal orders may be seen as an active, albeit relatively small, part of a social structure organized to construct and maintain racial separation and inequality.” Clawson, Constructing Brotherhood, 131-133.
deeds, young men from neighboring communities inquired about forming their own den, or circle of the Klan.\textsuperscript{116}

As the Klan grew and spread throughout Tennessee and Alabama, initial undertones of racial superiority turned into an outright platform based on the ideology of white supremacy.\textsuperscript{117}

Realizing the many African Americans mistook the costumed Klansmen for ghosts of Confederate soldiers, Klan members capitalized on these fears by using intimidation as a tactic to subordinate the newly freed blacks in the South.\textsuperscript{118} Targeting both criminals and emancipated African Americans, Klans throughout the South charged themselves with the mission and right of enacting vigilante justice as members saw fit. Justifying their activities as a way to control lawlessness in the Reconstruction ridden South, many Klan chapters were comprised of violent marauders who focused their aggressions on vulnerable African Americans as well as political opponents who challenged traditional, pre-war, Southern customs and values.\textsuperscript{119}

In a matter of months after its founding, the Ku Klux Klan spread throughout much of the rest of the South. While the original chapters were very loosely organized and connected, they continually looked to Pulaski as the central, authoritative branch of the organization.\textsuperscript{120} In 1867, the Pulaski chapter of the Klan planned a meeting in Nashville, Tennessee in order to develop a...

\textsuperscript{116} While specific details concerning the “mischievous deeds” and actions of the Klan are vague, sources reveal that early Klan activity was relatively harmless in the organization’s earliest days. According to historian David Chalmers, “They met in secret places, put on disguises, and had great fun galloping about town after dark. They engaged in much horseplay, for which purpose the secret initiation was the focal point of their activities.” Chalmers, \textit{Hooded Americanism}, 9.

\textsuperscript{117} According to Klan historian Wyn Craig Wade, “Reconstruction Klansmen were first and foremost white supremacists, opposing all rights and liberties conferred upon blacks that elevated them above menial servitude.” Wyn Craig Wade. \textit{The Fiery Cross: The Ku Klux Klan in America} (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 62.

\textsuperscript{118} Frank Parker Stockbridge, David M. Chalmers and Wyn Craig Wade all comment on this case of mistaken identity in their histories of the organization. In reference to their “absurd ritual and strange uniform”... “it was soon discovered by the members that ‘the fear of it had a great influence over the lawless but superstitious blacks.” Frank Parker Stockbridge. “Ku Klux Klan Revival” \textit{Current History Magazine, New York Times.} 14: 19-25. April, 1921; Found in Julia E. Johnsen. \textit{Ku Klux Klan: The Reference Shelf.} (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1923), 20. “According to an original Klansman, the ‘impression sought to be made upon’ the freedmen ‘was that these white-robed night prowlers were the ghosts of the Confederate dead, who had arisen from the graves in order to wreak vengeance on an undesirable class’ of people.” Wade, \textit{The Fiery Cross}, 35. “They soon discovered that their nocturnal appearances had an unexpected effect and they capitalized upon it. Ghastly, ghastly figured who claimed they had not had a drink of water since the battle of Shiloh and who lived in hell had ridden twice around the world since suppertime, frightened the initially credulous Negroes.” Chalmers, \textit{Hooded Americanism}, 9.

\textsuperscript{119} For more than four years it [the Ku Klux Klan] whipped, shot, hanged, robbed, raped, and otherwise outragedNegroes and Republicans across the South in the name of preserving white civilization.” Allen W. Trelease. \textit{White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction} (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), xi.

\textsuperscript{120} “During the entire period of the Klan’s organized existence, Pulaski continued to be its central seat of authority. Some of its highest officers resided there.” Lester and Wilson, \textit{Ku Klux Klan}, 51.
hierarchical structure for the club which was spreading throughout the South at unanticipated rates. Although the Klan attempted to establish a more centralized organization by choosing a President, or Grand Wizard, most chapters continued to act autonomously, largely ignoring the structure set in place at the Nashville conference.\(^1\)

The Pulaski chapter’s attempts to regain control over unwieldy factions were largely futile, leaving the newly elected Klan officials unsure of how to effectively govern. As the national officers unsuccessfully attempted to assert their authority, Klan chapters throughout the South continued to gather, parade, and forcefully restore “justice” in the name of white supremacy.\(^2\) Rather than maintaining law and order through intimidation, rural Klans emerged as an excuse to commit violent, even murderous acts against those who posed as any type of threat to members.\(^3\)

The new Klan chapters took out their frustrations with Reconstruction by targeting political opponents, newly freed African Americans and generally anyone who supported the newly established legal system in the South. Upset at what the Klan had devolved into, a founding member wrote into the local newspaper expressing his disgust and disapproval. Asking the press to keep his identity anonymous, the founder wrote,

> It is to be lamented that the simple object of the original Ku-Kluxes should be so perverted as to become a political and pernicious in its demonstrations. …If it has become a regular organization, with guerilla and ‘lynch-law’ attributes, then better the Ku Klux had never been heard of, and the sooner such organization is dissolved the better for the country at large-especially for the South.\(^4\)

The concerns expressed by the founding member in the *Pulaski Citizen* were not unfounded, for in 1871, five short years after the organization was established, the Ku Klux Klan officially disbanded.\(^5\) Calling the Klan a “terrorist organization”, the federal government issued

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\(^1\) Lewis and Wilson, *Ku Klux Klan*, 83-91.
\(^2\) “The overriding purpose of the Ku Klux movement, no matter how decentralized, was the maintenance of restoration of white supremacy in every walk of life.” T relese, *White Terror*, xlvi.
\(^3\) According to historian David Lowe, “The character of the Klan changed. From warning and threats, Klan units proceeded to violent acts-floggings, tar and featherings, mutilations, and murders. The better members dropped out; their placed often were taken by those for whom violence became a cause in itself.” David Lowe. *Ku Klux Klan: The Invisible Empire* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1967), 11.
\(^5\) Referring proclamation issued by Grand Wizard Nathaniel Bedford Forrest declaring: “Whether it was obeyed or not, this proclamation terminated the Klan’s organized existence as decisively and completely as General Lee’s last
the Civil Rights Acts of 1870 and 1871, and effectively forced the organization to terminate all activities and operations. While the Ku Klux Klan formally ceased to exist, many members continued to uphold and honor Klan traditions and ideology in their daily lives.

In 1915, forty-four years after the original Klan publically disbanded, William J. Simmons founded the second Ku Klux Klan during an elaborate ceremony atop Stone Mountain in Georgia. Thirty-five years old and discontented with the current state of his social and profession life, Simmons sought to create an organization that mirrored the one in which his father was a member during Reconstruction. Simmons’ Klan emerged just as D.W. Griffith’s film The Birth of a Nation, premiered in Atlanta. Based on Thomas Dixon’s book entitled The Clansman, The Birth of a Nation depicted a sensationalized version of life during Reconstruction in which the Klan valiantly protected Southern belles and honorable gentlemen from murder, robbery and rape at the hands of Northern carpetbaggers and newly freed blacks.

Capitalizing on the success of The Birth of a Nation, Simmons connected his new Klan to romanticized ideals glorifying and venerating the pre-war South. Although he was initially unclear about the specific goals and purpose of the organization, Simmons promoted the Klan as a patriotic, nativist, Christian society. In its early days, Simmons’ Klan served as a fraternal organization, which stressed the ideals of pure “Americanism” and upheld the notion of

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127 Writing at the height of the second Klan resurgence, sociologist John Moffatt Mecklin asserts that the Klan spirit continued to live on in the South despite the fact that it lost all official sanction and rights as an organization. “The continuity of the old and new Klans is further evinced by the fact that the old Ku Klux Klan traditions have never died out, especially in the South.” John Moffatt Mecklin. The Ku Klux Klan: A Study of the American Mind (New York: Russell & Russell Inc., 1963), 130.

128 Then, on Thanksgiving night, they met atop Stone Mountain, an imposing several-hundred-foot-high granite butte just outside of Atlanta. With a flag fluttering in the wind beside them, a Bible open to the twelfth chapter of Romans, and a flaming cross to light the night sky above, Simmons and his disciples proclaimed the new Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.” Nancy MacLean. Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 5.

129 Simmons had worked as a farmer and preacher before working as an “organizer for the Woodman of the World.” During this time, Simmons romanticized the Reconstruction Klan, of which his father had been an officer. MacLean, Behind the Mask of Chivalry, 4-5.

130 For a more complete description of the founding of the second Klan see: Lowe, The Invisible Empire, 12-16.

131 “Their passion for ceremony was not matched by a talent for organizing, however, unclear about exactly what their message was, Simmons and his partners floundered over how to spread it.” MacLean, 5.
Caucasian supremacy. As the Klan grew in numbers, it like its predecessor established in Pulaski, evolved into a dangerous terrorist organization, primarily targeting blacks, Catholics, and immigrants. Simmons’ Klan increased in popularity as America’s entry into World War I in 1917 created a clear enemy for the Klan to protect against. As American soldiers battled enemy forces in Europe, the Klan promised to protect against impure, malevolent immigrants from foreign nations.

According to sociologist John Moffatt Mecklin, who was writing in 1924 at the height of the second resurgence, several correlations and commonalties existed between the original Klan from Reconstruction, and the second, or “modern” Klan. “In all the official utterance of the modern Klan a continuity of tradition is assumed to exist between it and the Klan of Reconstruction days.” In fact, the Constitution of the order, adopted in September of 1916, makes direct reference to the original Klan from Reconstruction. While the documents make no direct reference to the town of Pulaski, the Klan Constitution of 1916 claims that the newly reestablished Klan is simply an extension of the original, rather than a new, divergent organization. Through their Constitution, Klan members of the early 20th century asserted,

We solemnly declare to all mankind that the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, incorporated, is the original, genuine Ku Klux Klan organized in the 1866, and active during the Reconstruction period of American history; and by and under its new corporate name is revived, reconstructed, remodeled, refined, and expanded into a fraternal, patriotic, ritualistic society of national scope.

Imagining themselves as direct descendants of the original Ku Klux Klan founded in Pulaski, the new order gained widespread membership across the United States. Simmons’ Georgia-based Klan was arguably much more powerful than the original as it affected and

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132 For more on early activities on the 2nd Klan see: Chalmers, Hooded Americanism, 28-35.
133 Historian Nancy MacLean describes the ideology of the Klan after its reemergence in 1915. “Declaiming against organized blacks, Catholics, and Jews, along with the insidious encroachments of Bolshevism, the order put itself forward as the country’s most militant defender of ‘pure Americanism.’” MacLean, Behind the Mask of Chivalry, 5.
134 For more on WWI as impetus for Klan growth see: Chalmers, Hooded Americanism, 31.
135 Mecklin, The Ku Klux Klan, 67.
136 Taken from the Constitution of the Order officially adopted September 29, 1916. Referenced in Johnsen, Ku Klux Klan, 46. The document again makes reference to original Klan declaring one purpose and objective of the new Klan is “To create and maintain an institution by and through which the present and succeeding generations shall commemorate and memorialize the great sacrifice, chivalric service and patriotic service of our original Society --- the Ku Klux Klan of the reconstruction period of American history.” Taken “The Invisible Empire Knights of the Ku Klux Klan (Incorporated): Objects and Purposes”. Referenced in Johnsen. Ku Klux Klan, 45.
influenced a much broader audience in terms of geography.\textsuperscript{137} As Klan membership grew to unprecedented numbers in the 1920s, journalists and historians attempted to find connections and correlations between the original, and the “modern” Klan of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. In his chapter entitled “Shadow of the Past” sociologist Mecklin elaborated on his aforementioned comparison of the Reconstruction Klan to the contemporary Klan of 1924. According to Mecklin, “The continuity of the old and new Klans is further evinced by the fact that the old Ku Klux Klan traditions have never died out, especially in the South.”\textsuperscript{138}

While academics worked to ascertain the similarities and differences between the two secretive organizations, Southerners carefully constructed an almost mythic narrative surrounding the creation and purpose of the first Ku Klux Klan. Working in the 1920’s to assess the original Klan, historian Frank Parker Stockbridge writes, “To the average southern white man of today the name of the Ku Klux Klan, after the lapse of half a century, typifies all that was best and finest in the chivalry of the old south.”\textsuperscript{139} Stockbridge’s observation is valuable as it is demonstrative of the divide that emerged in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century in terms the memory and narrative surrounding the mission of the original Klan of 1865. By including the title of “knight” in their official name, the 20th century Klan emphasized the idea that their members were not only chivalrous but noble men. This seemingly small inclusion worked to reinforce the Southern public memory of the Klan by suggesting that the original and reconstructed Klan were comprised of men with similar values and ideals.

Popular sentiment concerning the Klan was not all positive, as many failed to connect with the organization’s strict, purist, ideology. Americans living in northern states lacking local klaverns vehemently shunned the Klan as a violent, southern organization.\textsuperscript{140} Yet, it is important to note that the Klan was not a Southern phenomenon, rather it was a national crusade, as Midwestern states like Indiana had among the highest membership rates in the entire nation.

\textsuperscript{137} In her concluding chapter, historian Nancy MacLean analyzes the rise and fall of Simmons’ Klan in wider perspective. It is clear from this chapter, that the resurgent Klan of the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century reached a more geographically diverse grouping than the original Klan. See: MacLean, Behind the Mask of Chivalry, 177-189.

\textsuperscript{138} Mecklin, The Ku Klux Klan, 88.

\textsuperscript{139} Stockbridge, “Ku Klux Klan Revival” Found in Johnsen, The Ku Klux Klan, 19.

\textsuperscript{140} While states in New England lacked significant Klan activity, not all Northern states shunned the Klan. Midwestern states like Indiana had large Klan following during this time. For more on this see: Leonard J. Moore. Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921-1928. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Kathleen M. Blee. Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).
Southern rhetoric regarding the purpose and mission of the original Klan was inordinately affirmative, glorifying the founding members as valiant, heroic men. Describing the men of the original Klan, Pulaski native Mrs. S.E.F. Rose writes, “No nobler or grander men ever gathered on this earth than those assembled in the meeting places of the Klan. No human hearts were ever moved with nobler impulse of higher aims of purpose.” As a former resident of Pulaski, Mrs. Rose’s perceptions of the Klan are representative of those of her contemporaries living in the small Tennessee town. By describing the founders of the Klan in an inordinately positive light, Mrs. Rose effectively shaped the public memory in a manner that allowed residents of Pulaski to take pride in the actions of their ancestors.

While Stockbridge documents Southern reverence for the Klan in the 1920s, journalist William B. Shepard attempts to correct what he believes to be historical inaccuracies surrounding the original Ku Klux Klan. Writing for Leslie’s Illustrated Weekly in 1921, Shepherd describes the founding members of the Klan in a sympathetic, forgiving manner. “The real Klansmen had sought only to subjugate, by superstition, the restless and unruly myriads of negroes who had been set free by Lincoln’s proclamation.”

Implicit in Shepherd’s statement are several key ideas that worked to bolster the mythic narrative surrounding the original Klan. First, Shepherd asserts that original Klan members never resorted to violence in their subjugation techniques and tactics. Second, he suggests that all freed slaves were restless, unruly, and in need of discipline and direction. A problem, Shepherd stresses, that was caused by President Lincoln, a Northerner, when he issued the emancipation proclamation. As conflicting narratives and memories surrounding the original Klan competed for prominence in the public memory, Shepherd worked to portray the Reconstruction Klan as an organization comprised of honorable, chivalrous gentlemen. By romanticizing and justifying the purpose of the original Klan, Shepard provides legitimacy for the public memory in Pulaski, which characterized the Klan as a noble and upright organization.

141 Mrs. S.E.F. Rose. The Ku Klux Klan or Invisible Empire (New Orleans: L. Graham Co., Ltd., 1914), 73.
142 The sensational film “Birth of a Nation” contributed to the positive sentiment toward the Klan. Americans flocked to theaters to see the first film shown in the White House as introduced by President Woodrow Wilson. This celebratory memorialization won out in the 1920s, contributing significantly to national Klan membership rates. For more on the success and impact of “Birth of a Nation,” see: Melvyn. D. Stokes, W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation: A History of “the Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
Popular and scholarly thought blended as historians and their contemporaries living in the 1920’s envisioned and remembered the first Klan as one that was dedicated to upholding white supremacy, while Southerners reminisced about a gentleman’s organization, created for the express purpose of defending Southern sensibilities threatened by the perils of Reconstruction.\(^{144}\)

Beginning in the post-War period, many Southerners envisioned Reconstruction as the antithesis of the Old South. Challenging southern culture and politics, Reconstruction attempted to enfranchise freed slaves while creating a new southern political structure. While these varied perspectives appear to be disparate and contradictory, they may actually complement one another. After all, many Southerners living in the post-War period would argue that living alongside freed slaves was one of the most “threatening perils” of Reconstruction.\(^{145}\) By creating a narrative in which the original Klan opposed the cultural and political challenges caused by Reconstruction, Southerners could in effect, imagine Klansmen as gentlemen fighting for the noblest cause, Southern traditions and values.

The Klan faded away in the 1930s due to several sex and alcohol related scandals involving high ranking members.\(^{146}\) It was not until the 1950s, in reaction to new legislation which threatened established patterns of white supremacy, such as Brown v. Board that membership rates increased primarily in southern states of Alabama and Mississippi.\(^{147}\) As emerging activists and organizations such as Martin Luther King Jr. (SCLC), James Farmer

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\(^{144}\) In his description of the Klan, historian Frank Parker Stockbridge writes that the original Klan “began during the winter… with the avowed intention of uniting native-born white Christians for concerted action in the preservation of American institutions and the supremacy of the white race.” Found in Johnsen, The Ku Klux Klan, 17.

\(^{145}\) According to Mrs. S.E.F. Rose, member of the UDC and author of The Ku Klux Klan, “‘So the Confederate soldiers, as member of the Ku Klux Klan, and fully equal to any emergency, came again to the rescue and delivered the South from a bondage worse than death.’” Rose, The Ku Klux Klan, 17.


\(^{147}\) Historian Numan V. Bartley discusses Brown v. Board as an impetus in the creation of white resistance organizations like the Klan. “Fitting the climate of the time, the movement effectively filled a void felt by many white Southerners who were often inclined to blame the NAACP (and probably communist) organizational superiority for Negro gains and thus tended to view a white man’s organization to counter the threat and reestablish “southern” values as the obvious solution to the race problem. Numerous segregationist groups sprang up throughout the South. An estimated fifty such organizations emerged in the years immediately following Brown v. Board of Education. Numan V. Bartley. The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the South During the 1950’s. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 83. See also, Pete Daniel and Eric Foner. Standing at the Crossroads: Southern Life Since 1900. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986).
(CORE), and Roy Wilkins (NAACP) developed their own non-violent direct action tactics to challenge segregation and Jim Crow, the Ku Klux Klan endeavored to protect southern state’s rights by using terror and vigilante justice to destroy all oppositional forces aimed at supporting civil rights.  

Serving as one of the most violent and vocal organizations dedicated to upholding the virtues of white supremacy, the revived Klan made it their personal mission to discourage and terminate the civil rights movement through whatever means necessary. Over the course of the movement, Klan membership rates in Southern states increased significantly as its members and “klaverns” (local clubs) initiated some of the most violent and ruthless attacks on civil rights activists, leaders, and organizations.  

In 1961, Klan members from Alabama met the Freedom Riders in Anniston (AL) as the group of college aged students traveled into the South on integrated buses in an effort to test interstate travel laws. In Anniston, Klan members assaulted several of the Freedom Riders and even burnt down one of the two buses they traveled in. Following the Freedom Rider incident, Klan activity in Alabama became more destructive and also covert. Klan members in Birmingham favored the use of strategically placed bombs. Perhaps the most publicized incident involving a Klan-made bomb occurred in Birmingham in 1963, when four young girls attending

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148 Initially propelled by a passive, non-violent style of activism, King later changed his focus from issues of desegregation to more complex ideas that allowed the movement to take on system related forms of inequality. See Taylor Branch. *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years 1963-65* (Simon & Schuster: New York, 1998). Roy Wilkins and the NAACP worked to achieve equality by fighting unjust laws in a legal setting. “The Klan revival in the early 1960’s centered in Georgia and Alabama, the homeland of the twentieth-century Klan. In Alabama it became a Klan-style resistance movement that threatened to sweep the new Civil Rights movement off the streets of the South.” David M. Chalmers. *Backfire: How the Ku Klux Klan Helped the Civil Rights Movement* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 27.  
149 Historian David Mark Chalmers argues that the Ku Klux Klan’s resistance to the civil rights movement actually hindered the organizations desired outcomes, as violence and brutality perpetuated by the Klan eventually led to the federal civil rights legislation of the 1960s. “The story of the 1960s was one of how Klan clubs, bombs, and bullets made a major unintended contribution to the civil rights revolution at an eventually increasingly costly price to Klans and individual Klansmen.” Chalmers, *Backfire*, 3.  
150 “Violence swelled Klan ranks. There was also a wider pool of supporters who saw the Klan as the only organization that did anything to counter the black push into their lives.” “At their peak in 1964, Bowers’s White Knights and Shelton’s United Klans had each numbered approximately 6,000 members in Mississippi.” Chalmers, *Backfire*, 88, 93-94.  
Sunday school at the 16th Baptist Church died after a bomb detonated near the restroom they were using.\textsuperscript{152}

While Alabama gained notoriety as a dangerous state controlled by white supremacists, Klan members in Mississippi planned for the summer of 1964. The summer months promised to be contentious, as northern civil rights activists arranged to travel south to take part in voter registration drives and the creation of Freedom schools.\textsuperscript{153} As participants in SNCC’s Freedom Summer campaign, Michael Schwerner, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman journeyed to Mississippi in June of 1964. On their first evening in Mississippi, the three men failed to report to their predetermined destination, causing Freedom Summer organizers to fear the worst.\textsuperscript{154} The men remained missing for the duration of the summer until August, when the FBI recovered their mangled bodies from an earthen dam in Neshoba County, Mississippi. While the FBI was able to link the murders to the local Klan, they were unable to legally charge the guilty parties as murder is a state, not a federal offense.\textsuperscript{155}

National attention focused once again on Alabama following the Selma-to-Montgomery March of April 1965. Infuriated by the eventual success of the march, Klan members chased down and shot Viola Liuzzo, a white activist from Detroit, as she was driving on an Alabama highway after participating in the march.\textsuperscript{156} Liuzzo’s death served as one of the final instances in which the national media covered Klan violence as related to the civil rights movement.\textsuperscript{157}

\textsuperscript{152} For more on the 16th St. Baptist Church bombing see: Diane McWhorter. \textit{Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama, the Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution}. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001); Branch, \textit{Pillar of Fire}.


\textsuperscript{154} “Whatever the reason, Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney were taken to jail in the little Delta town of Philadelphia late that afternoon, June 21, 1964. They were released that evening. And no one ever saw them alive again.” John Lewis and Michael D’Orso. \textit{Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement} (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1998) 255-290.

\textsuperscript{155} The Klan members involved in the murders, including Sheriff Lawrence Rainey and Deputy Sherriff Cecil Price, were never charged for their crimes. See: Branch, \textit{Pillar of Fire}, 341-511.

\textsuperscript{156} For more on the murder of Viola Liuzzo see Branch, Taylor. \textit{At Canaan’s Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-68}. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 171-193.

\textsuperscript{157} Four Klansmen were eventually arrested, tried, and, not surprisingly, found ‘not guilty’ of Mrs. Liuzzo’s murder.” Lewis and D’Orso, \textit{Walking with the Wind}, 347.
national public memory surrounding the Ku Klux Klan solidified over the course of the 1950s and 60s as Klan members actively attempted to suppress civil rights. Characterizing the Klan as a violent, terrorist organization the national memory of the late 1960s failed to retain any vestiges of the memory constructed by early 20th century Pulaskians. Rather than envisioning the Klan as a noble and chivalrous gentleman’s club, mid-20th century Americans associated the organization with racism and violence in the Deep South.

The movement’s eventual shift away from King’s non-violent strategy and towards a more militaristic approach, along with a new focus on system-related forms of inequality in the North, led to decreased media attention concerning the southern Klan. While there was a marked decrease in national attention, Klan membership remained prevalent in the South throughout the 1960s and into the early 1970s. Despite a decline in membership rates beginning in the 1970s, the Klan survived as members of the organization continued to rally, parade, and commit violent, even murderous acts in the name of white supremacy.

In 1981 in Mobile Alabama, nineteen year-old Michael Donald was abducted, beaten, and lynched by two members of the Ku Klux Klan. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, which was involved in the subsequent legal trail, Donald had committed no crime or injustice against the Klansmen; rather the two members of the Klan singled out Donald simply for his skin color. “Angry that an interracial jury had failed to convict another black man for killing a white police officer in Birmingham, the Klansmen selected Michael Donald at random and lynched him to intimidate and threaten other blacks.” Shortly after the FBI began their

158 John Lewis cites Selma and the Voting Rights Act as the end of the non-violent approach to civil rights activism. Referring initially to the Voting Rights Act of 1965 Lewis writes “It was certainly the last act for the movement as I knew it. Something was born in Selma during the course of that year, but something died there, too. The road of nonviolence had essentially run out. Selma was the last act.” Lewis and D’Orso, Walking with the Wind, 347.

159 For more specific information regarding membership rates see: The Ku Klux Klan: Legacy of Hate, “The Decline of the United Klans of America”, http://www.adl.org/issue_combating_hate/uka/decline.asp


investigation, United Klans of America members Henry Hays and James Knowles admitted to lynching Donald “in order to show Klan strength in Alabama.”

After criminal proceedings, at which the state of Alabama convicted and charged Hays and Knowles for their crimes, Beulah Mae Donald, the victim’s mother, attacked the heart of the Ku Klux Klan by filing a civil suit against the organization. In 1984, The Southern Poverty Law Center, representing Beulah Mae Donald, sued the United Klans of America for the wrongful death of Michael Donald. In 1987, The Southern Poverty Law Center won their case, which included a seven million dollar settlement to be paid by the United Klans of America to Donald. Unable to pay this large sum, the UKA was forced to turn over their headquarters in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, which were valued at $225,000.

After the trial, Donald sold the building for $52,000 and used the money to purchase her first home where she lived until her death in September of 1988. National newspapers heralded Beulah Mae Donald as “the woman who beat the Klan.” Legal matters pertaining to the Donald case officially ended in 1997 when the state of Alabama executed Henry Hays for his role in Donald’s death. Hay’s sentence was extremely significant, as it was the first time in eighty-four years in which the state executed an individual for a“white-on-black” crime. In their coverage of the trial, the national press was entirely negative and unsympathetic in regard to the Klan, suggesting that the adverse national memory from the civil rights era had remained throughout the end of the 20th century.

While Beulah Mae Donald successfully bankrupted the United Klans of America centered in Alabama, numerous other Klan groups continue to exist. According the Anti-Defamation League, the present-day Ku Klux Klan is most active in the Midwest and the South,

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163 The UKA headquarters are not related to the building in which the Klan was founded in Pulaski. Rather the United Klans of America (UKA) was one of many Klan organizations throughout the United States. As UKA membership was widespread in Alabama, its headquarters were located just north of Tuscaloosa.
and still exists in small factions across the rest of the United States.\textsuperscript{166} While still devoted to the tenants of white supremacy, the current group differs from all earlier Klans in several noteworthy ways. To start, some current Klan groups have unofficially merged with Neo-Nazis, creating a hybrid hate group.\textsuperscript{167} In addition, the Klan is taking advantage of the recent increase in immigration to America by calling for a return to a “pure” America, that is, one devoid of the “impurities” of other (non-white) cultures and ethnicities.\textsuperscript{168}

While the Ku Klux Klan has changed and evolved over the past one hundred and forty-seven years, each revival serves as an example of White resistance during periods of rising Black empowerment. Current historiography links each of the distinct resurgences back to the original Klan, as ideals of racial superiority that were present, though perhaps veiled, in the Pulaski Klan have endured throughout the years.\textsuperscript{169} While academics argue for a contiguous history of the Klan, residents of Pulaski have failed to reach a consensus concerning the memory of the Klan within their community. The collective memory of the Klan within the town of Pulaski has changed and evolved over the past century as the implications of being associated with the organization have become increasingly negative.

**Collective Memory and the Historical Narrative**

Shifting attitudes toward the Klan and its history in Pulaski, Tennessee shed light on the intricacies associated with collective memories. In his chapters entitled “Individual Memory and Collective Memory”, and “Historical Memory and Collective Memory,” historian Maurice Halbwachs makes clear distinctions between individual, collective and historical memories.

\textsuperscript{166}Along with the Southern Poverty Law Center, the Anti-Defamation League serves as the most current source on domestic terrorist organizations. “There are over a hundred different Klan chapters around the country, with a combined strength of members and associates that may total around 5,000.” “Extremism in America: About the Ku Klux Klan.” *Anti-Defamation League*, 2012.

\textsuperscript{167}Klan groups also increased cooperation with neo-Nazi groups and occasionally even merged with them. As a result, today a Klansman might just as easily resemble a racist skinhead in dress and appearance as he might the traditional hooded and robed figure that most people associate with the Klan.” “Extremism in America: About the Ku Klux Klan.” *Anti-Defamation League*, 2012.

\textsuperscript{168}“A single-issue movement opposing immigration has helped create fear and anxiety about immigration in the minds of many Americans. Many Ku Klux Klan groups have attempted to take advantage of that fear and uncertainty, using anti-immigration sentiments for recruitment and propaganda purposes, and to attract publicity.” *Anti-Defamation League*

\textsuperscript{169}Historian David Chalmers asserts, “The Ku Klux Klan has been a loosely connected succession of racial terrorist societies in the United States from the post-Civil War Reconstruction era to the present” Chalmers, *Backfire*, 1. For more texts connecting the current, civil rights era and 1920s era Klans back to the original Klan see: Wayne Greenhaw. *Fighting the Devil in Dixie: How Civil Rights Activists Took on the Ku Klux Klan in Alabama.* (Chicago, Ill: Lawrence Hill Books, 2011); Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 31.
Halbwachs begins his discussion by arguing that memory is fundamentally social. All memories, even individual memories, are dependent on social environments and interactions with others. Collective memories are remembered and formed through collaboration with individuals who share a similar memory. “While the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals as group members who remember.” Each individual has a slightly different perspective, allowing aspects of the collective memory to “vary in intensity” for each individual within the group.

While collective memories are typically continuous, focusing on everyday experiences and people, Halbwachs argues that historical memories are dynamic, concerned primarily with large scale, momentous events. History attempts to be universal, encompassing all groups and their collective memories in order to create a “total record” of the past. Historical memories are associated with a specific, constructed narrative of the past, which allows individuals to recall memories of an event that they did not actually witness or experience. Thus, historical memories have the ability to outlive their participants and create meaning for successive generations.

Historian David Thelen draws on Halbwach’s theory in his book Memory and American History. Thelen begins with an in-depth analysis of the difficulties and benefits associated with using memory as a source of history. Thelen makes thoughtful connections between memory and identity studies, arguing that “the same questions about the construction of memory can illuminate how individuals, ethnic groups, political parties, and cultures shape and reshape their identities— as known to themselves and to others.” The way in which a particular group uses memory to create their identity is an indicator of the group’s priorities and value system. In choosing to privilege some memories while omitting others, the group shapes their identity around the values and ideas that they want to embody, not necessarily the qualities that they actually represent. According to Thelen, “The struggle for possession and interpretation of memory is rooted in the conflict and interplay among social, political, and cultural interests and values in the present.” In the United States, the public memory commonly attaches itself to

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170 Halbwachs, 48.
171 History is not interested in these intervals when nothing apparently happens, when life is content with repetition in a somewhat different, but essentially unaltered, form without rupture of upheaval.” Halbwachs, 85.
172 David Thelen, Memory and American History (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1990), viii.
173 Thelen, Memory and American History, xvii.
historic sites which best reflect prominent American ideals and values such as progress, equality and freedom for all.

In his analysis of the creation of collective memories, historian David Blight defines collective memory as “the ways in which groups, peoples, or nations remember, how they construct versions of the past and employ them for self-understanding and to win power and place in an ever-changing present.”174 Inspired by Foucault’s theory of governmentality which considers the state to be in supreme command of power, Blight argues that memory itself can be used “an instrument of power” through the creation and dissemination of “myths, traditions, stories rituals, and formal interpretations of history.”175

The way in which residents of Pulaski, Tennessee have shaped the collective memory of the Klan is representative of the larger historical themes and trends discussed by Blight, Thelen and Halbwachs. Constructing a celebratory collective memory of the Klan allows Pulaskians to not only vindicate the original Klan, but also fit their small, town into the larger romanticized Southern narrative and memory which glories customs and traditions of the antebellum period.

**Memory of the Klan in Pulaski, Tennessee: 20\textsuperscript{th} Century**

Uniting Southern women under the shared goal of preserving the “political, social, and cultural traditions of the former Confederacy,” the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) was officially established on September 10, 1894.176 Committed to “Confederate Motherhood”, the United Daughters of the Confederacy established the following five qualities as central to their official objectives: “memorial, benevolent, historical, educational and social [sic].”177 The UDC established educational scholarships, cared for veterans, and published history textbooks in the name of the Confederacy yet, the most memorable, and perhaps significant accomplishment of the UDC was the creation of memorial statues and plaques across the former Confederate

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175 Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield*, 2.
177 In official references the five objectives of the UDC most frequently appear as this list of adjectives. Karen Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters*, 2-3.
States of America. Since its founding in 1894, the United Daughters of the Confederacy have attempted to honor and maintain the virtuous qualities of the Confederacy through the creation and often extravagant dedication of memorials. The UDC created memorials at the local, state, and national level; notable examples of UDC sponsored memorials include the Jefferson Davis Monument in Richmond, Virginia as well as monuments to Confederate soldiers at both Arlington and Shiloh.

Memorials created by the UDC aided in the construction a specific, collective memory which glorified the ideals and traditions that the Confederacy fought to protect. Using the memorials statues and plaques as tools for promoting the preferred collective memory, the UDC endeavored to honor any and all organizations that represented the virtues of the Antebellum South. In 1917, shortly after the second resurrection of the Klan, the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) installed a commemorative plaque on the building in Pulaski, Tennessee in which six Confederate veterans established the Ku Klux Klan. Grace Meredith Newbill published a short piece in the Confederate Veteran detailing the unveiling and dedication ceremony in Pulaski. Noting high attendance rates and grandiose decorations, Newbill describes the ceremony as a momentous event in the small town. Newbill recounts the excitement of those in attendance when during his ceremonial address Mr. McCord suggested increased memorialization of the Klan in Pulaski. “Mr. McCord proposed that the town rechristen old

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178 In reference to the objectives of the UDC: “They translated into building monuments, caring for indigent Confederate veterans and widows, promoting and publishing pro-southern textbooks, and forming chapters of the Children of the Confederacy.” “For nearly twenty years, the Daughters successfully campaigned to build monuments in almost every city, town, and state of the former Confederacy.” Cox, Dixie’s Daughters, 3, 49.
179 “Monuments were central to the UDC’s campaign to vindicate Confederate men, just as they were part of an overall effort to preserve the values still revered by white southerners.” “Confederate monuments were not simply about honoring the past; they had come to serve as symbols of the present, helping to ensure a continuity of values held by the generation that had instituted Jim Crow.” Cox, Dixie’s Daughters, 49, 53, 67.
180 The UDC established and created numerous memorials in the South honoring both the Confederacy and the virtues of the pre-War South. For more on the UDC creation of Memorials for the Confederacy see: Cox, Dixie’s Daughters.
181 “The unveiling…was witnessed by about one thousand people, including the student body of Martin College and of the Pulaski High School. The office was beautifully decorated with red and white bunting and Confederate and United States flags. The Sam Davis monument on the public square was also decorated in the Confederate colors and evergreen wreaths.” Grace Meredith Newbill, “Birthplace of the Ku-Klux Klan.” Confederate Veteran, v25 i7, 1917, 335-336.
Madison Street as ‘Ku-Klux Avenue.’ When put to a vote every hand in the large concourse of citizens went up and ‘Ku Klux Avenue’ it is.”182

Departing from the extravagant tone used to describe the setting and speakers, Newbill solemnly concludes her article with the inclusion of the “prayer offered by Dr. Kennedy at the unveiling of the tablet.” Filled with passion and excessively fervent at times, Dr. Kennedy’s oration is significant as it represents the way in which residents of Pulaski remembered the original Klan, a half-century later. Dr. Kennedy proclaims “that which at first was frightful in amusement later became gruesome in resisting oppression and restraining lawlessness for the defense of our home….Thus out of innocent amusement grew a discovered power of restraint and unforeseen deliverance, an army of defense, a safeguard of virtue, and a victory for the right.”183 It is important to note that at this point, Dr. Kennedy implicitly acknowledges that the Klan’s tactics were often “gruesome”, though this type of behavior was apparently acceptable, so long as their actions were directed at newly emancipated African Americans. Finally, by proclaiming Pulaski as “the one, the real, the only birthplace of the Ku-Klux Klan,”184 Dr. Kennedy bridges the gap between the original Klan and that founded by Simmons at Stone Mountain, two years prior.

As is evidenced through the grand ceremony surrounding the installation of the plaque commemorating the founders of the Ku Klux Klan, Pulaski memory of the original Klan supplemented the larger southern narrative concerning the objectives and outcomes of the Civil War. In the mid-1920s, after buying into the myth of the Lost Cause, several citizens of Pulaski wrote short histories of the town as well as the birth of the Ku Klux Klan. Writing in hopes of vindicating their grandparent’s and parent’s generations, the authors published articles and books that were excessively sympathetic, describing the Klan as a group of noble, chivalrous gentlemen dedicated to upholding Southern virtue.

Serving as the historian of the Mississippi branch of the United Daughter of the Confederacy, Mrs. S.E.F. Rose penned a book entitled The Ku Klux Klan or Invisible Empire. As a native of Pulaski, Mrs. Rose (née Martin) had access to invaluable sources, including the two

182 While residents of the town seemingly supported Mr. McCord’s proposal there is no evidence to suggest that Madison St. was ever renamed “Ku-Klux Avenue.” Newbill, “Birthplace of the Ku-Klux Klan,” 335.
surviving founders of the Pulaski Klan. In a letter describing his involvement in the creation of the Klan, James R. Crowe, asserts “The younger generation will never fully realize the risk we ran, and the sacrifices we made to free our beloved Southland from the hated rule of the ‘Carpet-bagger,’ the worse negro and the home Yankee.”\(^{185}\) The inclusion of this letter, along with the remaining content of Mrs. Rose’s book indicates that she felt it was necessary to vindicate the original Klan. Mrs. Rose calls on readers to “think, then; of the Ku Klux Klan as a great circle of light, illuminated with deeds of love and patriotism, and holding within its protecting and shining circle, the very life and welfare of our beloved Southland.”\(^{186}\)

Although she never explicitly addresses the popular memory (in 1914) of the Klan, textual evidence suggests that Mrs. Rose felt the Klan was characterized in a negative manner by her contemporaries. Defending the original Klan, Mrs. Rose writes, “Too long have we of the South remained silent, and perhaps our silence has been construed as an acknowledgement of shame of being connected with the Ku Klux Klan and its history, whereas it should be our proudest boast, as it was organized and kept up by our best and noblest men.”\(^{187}\) Given the defensive tone of Mrs. Rose’s history, it is curious to think that early 20\(^{th}\) century residents of Pulaski could not fathom that the Klan would ever garner a negative reputation. Yet the books and articles authored by several residents suggest that many believed that the town’s connection to the original Klan would instill pride in the hearts of successive generations. As Pulaski, Tennessee was neither a cultural center nor the site of a major Civil War battle, the founding of the Klan allowed Pulaskians to connect themselves to the virtuous qualities that the Confederacy endeavored to protect.

Early 20\(^{th}\) century Pulaskians latched onto the Southern memory of the Klan as a way to connect their small and otherwise unremarkable town to the mythic memory of the Old South. According to a Mr. and Mrs. W.B. Romine whose work *A Story of the Original Ku Klux Klan* was published by the local press, the *Pulaski Citizen*, “the memory of its [the Klan’s] men, their exalted purposed and dauntless spirit, and the principle for which it stood, will live as long as civilization endures, and chivalrous men protect defenseless women.”\(^{188}\) W.T. Richardson,

\(^{186}\) Rose, *The Ku Klux Klan*, 77.
\(^{187}\) Rose, *The Ku Klux Klan*, 75.
\(^{188}\) Mr. and Mrs. W.B. Romine. *A Story of the Original Ku Klux Klan*. (Pulaski, TN: The Pulaski Citizen, 1924), 29.
author of *Historic Pulaski*, writes “The original Klan was organized to protect the home and the liberties of the South. White, the symbol of purity, was the most appropriate color of their uniforms.”

By calling attention to the color of their uniforms, Richardson connects the original Klan to a pure, virtuous cause. Richardson’s blatant attempt to purify the original Klan suggests that public memory at this time connected the Klan to violence and corruption rather than nobility and virtue. As Simmons’ resurgent Klan fought to regain public acceptance after several scandals, Pulaskians worked to promote a local collective memory which lauded the virtuous qualities of the original Klan. Pulaski authors during early 20th century dedicated large portions of their texts to exonerating and venerating the original, Reconstruction Klan while passing judgment about the misdeeds of later, unsanctioned, imposter Klan organizations.

As the resurgent Klan of the early 20th century gained national notoriety, it became necessary for Pulaskians to either create a distinct divide between the original and reestablished Klans, or to shun the town’s heritage by denouncing the Klan altogether. Fearing the consequences of a negative association with the original Klan, Pulaskian’s living during the second Klan resurgence sought to distance the virtues of “their” Klan from any negative behavior associated with the revival Klan. Rather than abdicate their claim to the original Klan, Pulaskians reframed the memory of the Reconstruction Klan in a positive and celebratory manner. Providing support for Pulaski’s claims to “Southern-ness,” the new, sanitized memory of the Klan allowed local residents to fit the history of their otherwise obscure town into the larger romanticized narrative of the Old South.

**Memory of the Klan in Pulaski, Tennessee: 21st Century**

Beginning with the UDC commemoration in 1917 and lasting throughout most of the 20th century, the Klan had a special significance for those living in Pulaski, Tennessee. For

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189 W.T. Richardson. *Historic Pulaski: Birthplace of the Ku Klux Klan, Scene of Execution of Sam Davis* (W.T. Richardson, 1917), 38. Located at Giles Historical Society, Pulaski, TN.
190 For more on scandals related to Simmons’ Klan see historian Nancy MacLean chapter entitled “‘Cleaning Up’ Morality: The Politics of Sex and Age” in MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 98.
191 “Drawing on the post-Reconstruction myth of the “lost cause” of the Confederacy, Pulaskians have long celebrated the Klan in their town’s history, remembering it as a noble and chivalrous group that saved the South from the ravages of Reconstruction.” Michael Lewis and Jacqueline Serbu, “Kommemorating the Ku Klux Klan” *The Sociological Quarterly* v.40:1999, 1.
decades, the plaque remained as a powerful reminder of both the function, and significance of the Klan in this small Tennessee town. However, in the mid-1980s, Pulaski attracted unwanted attention in the form of the national media as the Klan returned to march in protest of the first Martin Luther King Day.\textsuperscript{192} The media reported on both the march and the existence of the plaque celebrating the Klan, resulting in what Pulaskians perceived to be negative publicity for the town. Faced with criticism from the rest of the nation, the owner of the building decided to turn the plaque around, placing its commemorative text against the wall and out of sight.\textsuperscript{193}

According to contemporary sociologists Michael Lewis and Jacqueline Serbu, “Pulaskians claim this turning of the plaque illustrates both their town’s continued allegiance to the Reconstruction Klan and their rejection of the current Klan’s racism.”\textsuperscript{194} Serving as a way for Pulaskians to remember the role their town played in the creation of the Klan, the turned plaque attracts the attention of only those who have prior knowledge of its existence. By turning and not removing the plaque, the owners of the building are acknowledging that the space is historically significant, while attempting to protect against new celebratory forms of commemoration. At the most basic level, the turning of the plaque represents an attempt on the part of a local resident to maintain control of the history and meaning of the Klan in Pulaski. In turn, this assertion of control suggests that local residents are concerned about the ways in which outsiders remember the Klan, and more importantly, connect it to the small Tennessee town in which it originated.\textsuperscript{195}

\textsuperscript{192} Information found through Associated Press. “A Klan march is planned for Saturday in Pulaski, protesting the first national observance of Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday.” Mark Humphrey. \textit{Associated Press}, January 14, 1986.

\textsuperscript{193} The building in which the Klan was founded is currently a Law Office. Neither attorney owns the building rather, it belongs to a couple living east of Nashville. It was the decision of this couple to turn the plaque. I have been unable to reach this couple for comment at present.

\textsuperscript{194} Lewis and Serbu, “Kommemorating the Ku Klux Klan,” 1.

\textsuperscript{195} Pulaskian's contrived efforts to honor the original Klan, while simultaneously divorcing themselves from the contemporary organization, suggest local insecurity stemming from implied association with Southern low culture. Pete Daniel analyzes the class tensions spurred by the rise of Southern "low culture" following the end of World War II. Rejecting all things associated with low culture, “The white middle-class and elite aspired to more polished behavior and habits, attended less fundamentalist churches, often sent their children to college, and sneered at country music, stock-car racing, wrestling and other enthusiasms of the vulgus. Each community constructed a cautionary "white trash" class at the bottom of the social spectrum. While few would raise their hands to claim membership in the lowest class, everyone knew someone else who qualified, someone a little farther down the road.” For Pulaskians, the contemporary Klan represents Southern low culture and thus threatens to erode the town's association with the celebrated, refined qualities of the Old South. For more on Southern low culture see: Pete Daniel. \textit{Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s.} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C, 2000), 92.
Throughout 20th century and into the 21st, much has remained the same in terms of Pulaskian’s memory of the original Ku Klux Klan. Like their predecessors of the early 20th century, contemporary Pulaskians maintain that the original Klan was an innocuous social club, comprised of men who exemplified the virtues of Southern gentry. While the memory has remained largely the same, what has changed is the presence of the present-day Klan in the small Tennessee town. Continuing the tradition that began in 1986, various factions of the present-day Klan return to and rally at the birthplace of the KKK each year.

Many contemporary Pulaskians reject this proclaimed heritage of the present-day Klan, asserting that the only thing the original Klan and the current Klan share is a name. As local residents attempt to control the collective memory, Pulaski reveals itself as a site of struggle. Existing amidst unresolved complexities surrounding the history and legacy of the Klan in the United States, Pulaski, Tennessee represents a site of varied meaning and significance. Pulaski is central to the group identity of local residents attempting to connect their town to the larger narrative surrounding the mythic “Old South” and Klan members who imagine the village to be their birthplace of their notorious organization. According to residents, the original Klan was comprised of gentlemen attempting to restore the South to its pre-War order after Reconstruction left the South ravaged and essentially lawless. In contrast, the current Klan is dedicated to promoting the values of white supremacy by ostracizing everyone and anyone that they deem to be an “other.”

Because the Klan insists on returning to Pulaski each year, residents of the small town are faced with the challenge of promoting a memory that divorces the values and ideals of the present-day Klan with those of the original organization. In 21st century Pulaski, local residents continually grapple with both internal and external pressures and critiques surrounding the Ku Klux Klan site. Framing the original Klan in a positive light allows Pulaskians to distance themselves from the complexities and challenges of the subsequent Klans which publically voiced their opposition to civil rights and racial equality. Thus, by adhering to a narrative which glorifies the virtuous qualities of the original Klan, Pulaskians are able to reconcile and justify

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196 Based on author’s conversations with several residents of Pulaski on June 25, 2011 in Pulaski, Tennessee.
197 Pulaskians face internal pressure as they try to reconcile the existence of the commemorative plaque with the current negative sentiment towards the Klan. The town faces outside pressure as they media reports on both the plaque and the Klan rallies that occur around the plaque several times each year.
the existence of a commemorative plaque to the original Klan, while simultaneously condemning the philosophy of the current Klan.

Though successful in denouncing the contemporary Klan, the local memory of the original organization is complicated. In their attempts celebrate the town’s history, Pulaskians have ignored historiography and reshaped the local memory in a manner that does not allow for recognition of the fact that the original Klan’s unifying cause quickly evolved from entertainment to white supremacy.\textsuperscript{198} According to residents of the town, the Klan of the 1960’s, and the current Klan, neither uphold the values of, nor represent the original Klan of Pulaski.\textsuperscript{199} Yet interestingly enough, the current Klan envisions Pulaski as its birthplace; members gather and rally in the small town several times a year, paying homage to their roots.

**Klan Memory of Pulaski as Historic Birthplace**

Presently there are two dozen known organizations dedicated to affirming traditional Klan ideology while using some variation of the original Ku Klux Klan name.\textsuperscript{200} It is unclear exactly how many of these present-day Klan factions link themselves to the original Pulaski Klan as many of the organizations continue to uphold the Klan traditions of mystery and secrecy and thus, refuse to publically discuss any detailed information related to their individual klaverns. In spite of this general lack of data, at least three separate groups have acknowledged the Pulaski Klan of the 1860s as their forbearer.

The Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, founded by David Duke in 1975, sponsors an annual “Heritage Festival” in Pulaski, Tennessee. The first “festival” occurred in 1986 in protest of the

\textsuperscript{198} Both primary and secondary sources concerning the original Klan discuss its evolution into an organization which upheld the ideals of white supremacy. According to founding Klan member James R. Crowe, “The record of the Ku Klux Klan teaches forcibly three lessons, which are so plain that he who runs may read. First the inevitability of Anglo-Saxon Supremacy; when harassed by bands of outlaws, thugs, and carpet-baggers, and guerillas, turned loose on the South and upheld by political machinery, during the Reconstruction period, the sturdy white men of the South, against all odds, maintained white supremacy and secured Caucasian civilization, when its very foundation were threatened within and without.” Letter to Mrs. Rose from James R. Crowe, October 25, 1908, Sheffield, AL. “Beginning as a social fraternity devoted to playing pranks, it [the Ku Klux Klan] was soon transformed into a terrorist organization aiming at the preservation of white supremacy.” Trelease, *White Terror*, xi.

\textsuperscript{199} Based on author’s conversations with several residents of Pulaski on June 25, 2011 in Pulaski, Tennessee.

\textsuperscript{200} Information gathered from Southern Poverty Law Center listing of “Active Ku Klux Klan Groups.” [http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-files/ideology/ku-klux-klan/active_hate_groups](http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-files/ideology/ku-klux-klan/active_hate_groups); “Today, the Center estimates that there are between 5,000 and 8,000 Klan members, split among dozens of different - and often warring - organizations that use the Klan name.” From “Intelligence Files: Ku Klux Klan” *Southern Poverty Law Center.* [http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-files/ideology/ku-klux-klan](http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-files/ideology/ku-klux-klan).
first national observance of Martin Luther King Day; the festival has since been moved to October. What first originated as protest against Martin Luther King Day has overtime, evolved into the European Heritage Festival. Offering Klan members an opportunity to gather in Pulaski, the 26th annual European Heritage Festival is planned for October 2012. According to the official website created for the event, “The whole purpose of the festival is to inspire people to look into and renew their love and appreciation for their European American heritage.” On their official website, The Knights of the Ku Klux Klan provide their rationale for visiting Pulaski while simultaneously addressing the symbolic “turning” of the commemorative plaque. According the Knight’s Party,

Today, the owner of the building has turned the plaque around because he doesn’t like the KKK or the idea of white Christian America. However, Thomas Robb, the director of The Knights started a holiday …to honor the KKK and the brave members who formed this wonderful group.

Established in 1996 by Dale Fox in Prospect Heights, Illinois, the Brotherhood of Klans (BOK) annually holds its White Unity Day March and Rally in Pulaski. The group’s pilgrimages to the town are not surprising considering that Fox originally intended for the Brotherhood to be centered in Pulaski. Both the Brotherhood of Klans and the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan rally in Pulaski annually, yet other Klan factions occasionally organized rallies and marches in Pulaski for various celebrations. In 2009, the Fraternal Knights of the Klan organized an event in Pulaski in celebration of Nathaniel Bedford Forrest’s birthday. Despite Pulaskians efforts to discourage the present-day Klan by closing local businesses in the

201 Date is confirmed by information found through Associated Press. “A Klan march is planned for Saturday in Pulaski, protesting the first national observance of Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday.” Humphrey, Associated Press. 202 “Exhibits” European American Heritage Festival. http://www.europeanamericanheritagefestival.com/exhibits.html. 203 “What is the KKK?” The Knight’s Party. http://kkk.bz/main/?page_id=410. 204 In reference to the first Unity Day organized by BOK “Such a gathering occurred in August 2006. This represented a break from the past, in which the BOK organized few events and was not very active. The BOK also expanded considerably in size, establishing new chapters in many different parts of the country.” “Ku Klux Klan-Recent Developments” Anti-Defamation League, http://www.adl.org/learn/ext_us/kkk/changes.asp?LEARN_Cat=Extremism&LEARN_SubCat=Extremism_in_America&xpicked=4&item=kkk. 205 “The Brotherhood of Klans was founded in 1996 by Dale Fox, an old-school Southern Klansman who vowed to bring the Klan back to its original birthplace in Pulaski, Tenn. The closest Fox got to that goal was establishing a BOK chapter in Finger, Tenn., more than 100 miles west of Pulaski.” 206 It is unclear why the Traditional Klans chose Pulaski for the site of this celebration as Bedford Forrest was neither a founding member of the Pulaski Klan nor a resident of the town. While the event was “invitation only” discussion of details surrounding the march can be found on the Klan forum at Stormfront.org. http://www.stormfront.org/forum/t563674/.
downtown district during Klan visits, the organization returns each year to their birthplace chanting, “Yesterday, Today, Forever, Since Eighteen Hundred and Sixty-Six, the KU KLUX KLAN has been riding and will continue to do so as long as the WHITE MAN LIVETH.”

Conclusion

In terms of Halbwach’s theory, the collective and historical memories of Pulaski currently oppose one another. The collective memory of Pulaskian’s remembers the Klan to be virtuous and honorable, while the historical memory as remembered by most Americans, recognizes the Klan as a violent, terrorist organization dedicated to ideals of white supremacy. This is further complicated by the fact that Pulaskians have separate memories of the present-day Ku Klux Klan, and the original Klan. When the current Klan returned to Pulaski, referring to it as it their birthplace, they challenged the collective memory shared by residents of the small town. As various Klan groups return to Pulaski each year, proclaiming it as their birthplace, they consequently force residents to assert that the present-day Klan and the Pulaski Klan share no common history, but rather only a name. Pulaski Mayor Daniel Speer expressed his thoughts about the town’s long standing association with the Klan, “It’s frustrating, [we’re associated with] the Klan. It’s a stigma. Unfortunately, I just don’t see it going away.”

Working together to construct the current collective memory, residents of the small town choose to remember the original Klan as a chivalrous, noble, and most importantly, non-violent organization. The historical memory of Pulaski and the Klan is much different, labeling the small town as a breeding ground for violent white supremacists. Pulaskians attempt to fight this reputation by arguing that their association with the any form of the Ku Klux Klan ended in 1870.

207 In 1989, The Los Angeles Times reported on Pulaskians efforts to discourage Klan visits. “More than 180 businesses, virtually every one in Pulaski, agreed to close Saturday. Residents were asked to stay home, and churches planned activities to keep teen-agers occupied. ‘There’s not a soul out anywhere,’” Police Chief Stanley Newton said Saturday morning, a few hours before the supremacists arrived. “You’d think it was a ghost town.” Found in Times Wire Services, “Town Closes Shops to Protest Neo-Nazi March” Los Angeles Times, October 8, 1989, http://articles.latimes.com/1989-10-08/news/mn-357_1_aryan-nations; According to Pulaski Mayor Daniel Speer, “So many Klan events were held in the 1980s that local businesses, large and small, closed their doors in disgust during a 1989 rally as a way of silently protesting, Speer said. At times, folks in Pulaski hoped that if they ignored the Klan and other white supremacist groups when they came to Pulaski, they would lose interest in the town and permanently leave, Speer says. But they didn’t, and over the years the groups’ events have brought people ranging from satirist Stephen Colbert to reporters from as far away as Russia and Italy.” Daniel Speer qtd in Larry Keller. “Little Pulaski, Tenn., to Suffer Through Another Racist Event.” Hatewatch, September 3, 2010. http://www.splcenter.org/blog/2010/09/03/little-pulaski-tenn-to-suffer-through-another-racist-event/.

208 Klan chant found in Chalmers, Hooded Americanism, 438.

with the first official disbandment of the group. As Pulaski Mayor Daniel Speer recently said, “There’s never been a local person involved in these marches or rallies.”

Present-day residents of Pulaski are concerned with preserving their “allegiance to the Reconstruction of the Klan,” while simultaneously rejecting “the current Klan’s racism.” At this point it appears that this level of neutrality is not actually possible. Despite this, Pulaskians attempt to hold onto their collective memory as a way to combat the national narrative and memory, which inextricably associates the Ku Klux Klan with civil rights era violence and hatred. As Thelen’s theory suggests, residents of Pulaski employ the collective memory to create a distinct identity as a community with significant ties to what residents perceive to be the most virtuous qualities characterizing the Old South. Historian David Blight argues that control over collective memory is part of a larger struggle for power. Thus, by turning the commemorative plaque and choosing to effectively close local business when the Klan arrives, Pulaskians assert their own form of power and dominance over the racist ideology of the present-day Klan.

By maintaining their preferred memory, residents of Pulaski are shaping the collective memory to reflect the aspirational ideals that were most prominent in the South during Reconstruction. By remembering the founders of the Klan as men who exemplified the qualities of chivalry, bravery, and valor, Pulaskians attempt to distant themselves from the negative qualities of the every resurgent Klan beginning with Simmons’ Klan of 1915, while connecting themselves and their town to the mythic narratives surrounding the “Lost Cause” and the Old South.

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210 Keller, “Little Pulaski, Tenn.,” *Hatewatch.*
211 From turning the commemorative plaque to closing town, residents of Pulaski continually try to discourage visits from the Klan. The current strategy of Pulaskians is to just ignore the Klan members in hopes that they will quit rallying. “So many Klan events were held in the 1980s that local businesses, large and small, closed their doors in disgust during a 1989 rally as a way of silently protesting, Speer said. At times, folks in Pulaski hoped that if they ignored the Klan and other white supremacist groups when they came to Pulaski, they would lose interest in the town and permanently leave, Speer says.” Larry Keller, “Little Pulaski, Tenn.,” *Hatewatch.*
Cultural Memory and the Legacy of Emmett Till

“August 28, 2011, the 48th anniversary of the groundbreaking March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom witnessed the dedication of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial. It is fitting that on this date, reminiscent of the defining moment in Dr. King’s leadership in the Civil Rights movement; in the form of solid granite, his legacy is further cemented in the tapestry of the American experience.”

August 28, 2011 was originally designated as the dedication date of the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial on the national mall in Washington D.C. On this day, Americans would collectively honor the memory and legacy of America’s civil rights hero, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in a national setting. The creators of the memorial specially chose this date because of its profound historical significance. August 28th, 1963: The March on Washington. It was on that day, within the confines of the national mall, that Martin Luther King Jr. captivated a global audience and solidified his prominence as a leader of the African American civil rights movement by proclaiming “I have a dream.”

By choosing to officially memorialize and honor Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on August 28th, the creators of the memorial effectively prioritized one historical event related to the civil rights movement over another. For while August 28th was the date of King’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech, it was also the day that Emmett Till, a fourteen year old African American boy was ripped from his bed by two white men, tortured, and brutally murdered for his crime of insulting the sensibilities of white woman in Money, Mississippi.

For many activists, the lynching of Emmett Till served as a watershed event of the civil rights movement. Till’s death propelled civil rights into mainstream American consciousness by gaining widespread national attention for the cause, while simultaneously evolving into a rallying cry for movement organizers. Despite national familiarity with the notorious lynching,


213 The official dedication ceremony was rescheduled for October 16, 2011 due to flooding, wind damage, and severe weather caused by Hurricane Irene.

spaces connected to Emmett Till serve as sites of struggle, as complexities surrounding Till’s
death, the trial of his murderers and his overarching memory and legacy remain largely
unresolved. Efforts to memorialize Till have proved difficult and incomplete as Americans
struggle to find an appropriate and meaningful space in which to honor the young boy.

Sites related to Emmett Till problematize the national civil rights narrative which focuses
heavily on triumphs over segregation in connection to King’s strategy of non-violent, passive
resistance. Rather than supporting the notion that Americans were successful in achieving
equality, places related to Emmett Till remind Americans of the brutal consequences of violating
strict southern racial codes in the mid-20th century. The lynching of Emmett Till is thus
relegated to the margins of national memory, as acknowledging the contentious spaces linked to
his death would force Americans to recognize the larger national power structure which allowed
violent, race motivated crimes to flourish along with innate flaws in the narrative surrounding the
United States’ fragmented attempts to overcome racism.

Emmett Till and the Historical Narrative of the Civil Rights Movement

Considering the historic prominence of Emmett Till’s lynching, it is surprisingly
underplayed in the current national narrative and memory of the civil rights movement.215
Mentioning several other pivotal events related to the civil rights movement, such as, Brown v.
Board, Freedom Summer, and Watts Riots, the official “History of the Martin Luther King Jr.
Memorial” makes no mention of Emmett Till or his legacy.216 By privileging the memory of
Martin Luther King Jr., the leadership responsible for designing and creating the memorial
effectively glossed over both Till’s lynching and the subsequent impact it had on an entire
generation of Americans. By choosing to honor Dr. King on this date, the creators of the Martin
Luther King Jr. National Memorial missed an opportunity to expand the national civil rights
narrative and instead, used the progressive, freedom and victory narrative surrounding King and
his accomplishments to mask the memory and narrative of one of the movement’s most violent,

215 Voter registration drives and desegregation campaigns saturate the historical narrative and represent moments of
interacial collaboration and success. Emphasis on sites in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma, create the
appearance that civil rights workers achieved this success without tribulation. The current national narrative begins
with triumph in the courtroom at Brown v. Board, moves through each of King’s successive victories, and
culminates with the civil rights legislation of the 1960s.

216 For more on the timeline of events mentioned as part of the “History” of the new King Memorial, see: “The
notorious struggles. The new memorial’s prioritization of a victory narrative and consequent erasure of a narrative involving struggle is startling, but not without precedent.217

In his famous speech at the March on Washington, Dr. King himself neglected to note the significance and connection of Emmett Till’s death to the date of the historic civil rights rally. Unbeknownst to many Americans, when King delivered his address at the March on Washington, he reused rhetoric and language that appeared in one of his previous speeches. Just two months before his most famous oration in the Washington D.C., King delivered a speech at the Great March to Freedom in Detroit on June 23, 1963. Addressing approximately 150,000 individuals at Cobo Hall, King spoke about segregation and the plague of racial injustice that was spreading across the nation. Calling segregation a “national problem,” King warned that segregation existed in the North “in the area of employment discrimination, in the area of housing discrimination, and in the area of de facto segregation in the public schools.”218 King continued his speech by issuing a call to action; in order to fully eradicate racial intolerance, Northerners must join the struggle for civil rights by first addressing racism occurring in their own cities and towns.219

At this march in the heart of the Midwest, King rallied civil rights activists with his description of his dream for a better America. Referring to a young boy from Chicago who was brutally murdered while visiting family in Money, Mississippi, King declared, “I have a dream this afternoon that there will be a day that we will no longer face the atrocities that Emmett Till had to face or Medgar Evers had to face, that all men can live with dignity.”220 By referring to Emmett Till and Medgar Evers at the speech in Detroit, King made a powerful statement about the trajectory of the civil rights movement. “Before the victory is won, some… may have to face physical death. But if physical death is the price that some must pay to free their children and their white brothers from an eternal psychological death, then nothing can be more
redemptive.” As both Till and Evers faced particularly violent deaths at the hands of aggressors propelled by extreme racial intolerance, King suggests that the two men serve as redemptive, sacrificial icons of the larger civil rights movement.

By the end of his speech in Detroit, King articulated a precise and focused narrative of the African-American civil rights movement. Diverging from the established history and memory of civil rights, King’s history of the struggle highlighted white violence against blacks, positioned those who suffered from this violence as martyrs to the cause, and acknowledged the centrality of white resistance to African American passive, non-violent activism.

Those present undoubtedly understood King’s reference and were familiar with the lynching of Emmett Till, as the boy’s death served as one of the landmark events responsible for directing national attention to the racial injustices occurring daily in the South. Despite his previous mention of the Chicago teen, King made no mention of Till in the revised version of his speech in Washington. King’s omission is telling, as the captivating leader was presumably aware that the date of the march, August 28th 1963, was also the 8th anniversary of Till’s lynching in Mississippi.

While his exact rationale for the omission may never be clear, it is likely that King feared that the Emmett Till reference would fail to resonate with the Washington audience the way it did in Detroit. It is possible that rather than chancing the possibility of losing or confusing audience members, King chose to err on the side of caution and limit his southern references to general remarks about the injustice present in Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia. Regardless

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221 King, “Speech at the Great March on Detroit.”
222 This comparison between Till and Evers has been made on several occasions, as the media and civil rights activists alike portrayed both as sacrificial characters. In his book Parting the Waters, Taylor Branch connects the two men, arguing that Evers death reignited national attention in a manner that was unprecedented since Till’s death. According to Branch, “this [Evers’ death] was a mythical event of race, the first national one since Emmett Till’s death trip into the Tallahatchie River.” Branch, Parting the Waters, 827.
223 While King did deviate from his originally planned speech at the March on Washington, it is unclear why he left out the Till reference, as he added a large portion of the original ‘dream sequence’. Historian Taylor Branch contends that King, always aware of who he was addressing, held back from his normal free flowing oration style. “Mindful of his audience, he held himself to a far more deliberate pace than in Detroit, or in Chicago the week before. Here he did not shout or smile, and there was no chance to build upon cascading rhythms of response.” Branch, Parting the Waters, 882; Attorney Drew D. Hansen suggests that rather than mention specific crimes and individuals, King tied them all into one. “King recounted all the injustices in Mississippi with the image ‘sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression.’” Drew D. Hansen. The Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Speech that Inspired a Nation (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 158-159.
of intent, King’s decision to omit the Till and Evers reference worked to recast the public, accepted history of civil rights. At the March on Washington, King effectively created a basic framework for what is now the established and accepted public history of civil rights. By omitting his previous discussion of white resistance and violence, King in turn, minimized the impact and accessibility of the more complex civil rights history that he originally presented in Detroit. Though most 20th century Americans are vaguely familiar with Till’s story, his position of relative ambiguity in the national narrative merits a close examination of the events leading up to, and surrounding the notorious murder the young, black Chicagoan.

**Background: Emmett Till’s Visit to Mississippi**

During the summer of 1955, fourteen year-old Emmett Till of Chicago traveled to Mississippi for a summer long visit with his cousins and uncle, Moses Wright. Wright worked as a sharecropper in Mississippi, and his children worked alongside their father in the summer months. Emmett joined his cousins and their friends after they worked in the fields all day and sought refreshment at Bryant’s Grocery and Meat Market, owned by Roy Bryant and his wife Carolyn. On August 24th, the boys entered the market a few at a time, purchasing candy and other small food items while inside. Unaware, or perhaps doubtful of the severe level of racial intolerance in the South, Till allegedly made inappropriate, flirtatious comments to Carolyn Bryant while in the store. Upon exiting the grocery, young Emmett allegedly defied strict, southern racial standards by letting out a “wolf whistle” directed at Carolyn Bryant.

Terrified of the possible ramifications of Till’s actions, the boys decided to keep a low profile and not inform their uncle Moses Wright of the episode. Three days later after returning to town, Roy Bryant heard about the incident and set out to find young Emmett Till. Arriving at the home where Till was staying at 2:30am, Bryant threatened the residents of the house before abducting the boy. Aided by his stepbrother J.W. Milam, Roy Brant reportedly tortured and beat the boy for hours before shooting him in the head. Till’s body was found in a river three days later.

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226 There still remains uncertainty concerning the actual conversation between Carolyn Bryant and Emmett Till. The complexities surrounding this debate are discussed in detail later in this chapter.
later, weighed down by a seventy-five pound cotton gin which has been tied around his neck. “The boy was so badly beaten that” his family and friends “could identify Emmett only by his father's ring.”

Considering his “crime,” Till’s fate was not usual in the South. The combined factors of his young age and geographic origins as a northerner made his case particularly startling to Americans living outside of Mississippi. Till’s story received widespread attention as the 1950s marked the beginning of an era in which civil rights issues, specifically race relations in the South, emerged as national political issue. Alfred Duckett, journalist for the Chicago Defender describes why the murder of Emmett Till was so successful in captivating a broad national audience.

The youth of the victim helped bring the horror home with more impact to many white as well as Negro parents and other persons humane enough to believe a youngster enjoys a certain amount of immunity even for misdeeds. The news significance lay in the age of the victim contrasted to the brutality of the crime.

Amidst the contentious debate surrounding the events leading up to Till’s murder, Mamie Till Mobley, Till’s mother, attempted to assert control over Emmett's memory by carefully framing and shaping both the visitation and funeral services. Through the use of these initial memorialization efforts, Mamie was able to create a narrative in which Emmett took on the role of a young martyr in the struggle for racial equality.

According to Mamie Till, “We learned from Uncle Crosby that they were trying to bury Bo in Mississippi and I told him to stop the burial at any cost and to bring my baby- what was

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228 This point is evidenced through national news coverage of Till case. “In his death, Emmett Till not only brought Negro reporters into the heart of the white man’s kingdom-the courtroom- but he brought white reporters into the Deep South in unprecedented numbers to cover a racial story.” Gene Roberts and Hank Kilbanoff. The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation. (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 86.
230 In an interview with John Hockenberry for “CBS News Nightwatch”, Mamie Till described her initial thoughts and emotions after first seeing Emmett’s mutilated corpse. “Instead of fainting, I realized that here’s a job that I got to do now and I don’t have time to faint; I don’t have time to cry. I’ve got to make a decision and my decision was that there is no way I can tell the world what I see. The world is going to have to look at this. They’re going to have to help me tell the story.” As told to John Hockenberry on “CBS News Nightwatch”, also appearing in “Emmett Till’s Mother remembers Her Son on His 50th Birthday” JET vol. 80, no. 17, August 12, 1991, 6.

231 Southern law enforcement begrudgingly returned Emmett’s body to Illinois, yet an agreement between the Sheriff in Mississippi and the Funeral Director in Chicago threatened the closure that Mamie and many others desperately needed. Mamie Till demanded the funeral director allow her to view the mangled corpse of her only son and thus forgo any agreement he may have made to keep the casket sealed.

232 Mamie Till asserts that the Funeral Director at A.A. Rayner & Sons funeral home, where Emmett’s body was prepared, agreed to honor Mississippi law enforcements stern requests to keep the casket sealed and forgo any type of physical display of the corpse. American Experience, “The Murder of Emmett Till.”

233 In choosing to show her son’s corpse publically, Mamie Till effectively began the process of meaning making and memorialization surrounding Emmett and the nature of his death. Rather than characterizing Emmett as a helpless victim of Southern insensibility, Mamie portrayed her son as a martyr, a sacrifice in the larger struggle for civil rights. “Mamie's decision would make her son's death a touchstone for a generation: At a church on the South Side of Chicago, Emmett Till's mutilated body would be on display for all to see.”

234 Tens of thousands individuals visited Roberts Temple Church of God in Chicago on September 3, 1955 to view Till’s mutilated corpse. “Officials of the funeral home where the angry, the awed and the curious filed in to view the remains of the boy…declared they had never seen anything like it.” The predominantly African American crowd believed that everyone who wished should view the body; parents brought their young children as a way to teach them


about the severe implications of racial injustice. News of Till’s crowded funeral services spread across the nation as news sources such as the Associated Press and the New York Times provided coverage of the significant event.

Contested Narratives

Historically, much of the debate over Till’s memory and legacy centers around the narrative of events leading up to Till’s murder. To this day, the specific language used in the conversation between Emmett Till and Carolyn Bryant while inside the grocery store remains a mystery. In recent years, allegations that Till whistled at Bryant as he departed from the store have been corroborated by the testimony of Emmett’s cousin, Simeon Wright, who was waiting just outside the market.

In interviews following her son’s death, Mamie Till-Bradley constantly assured reporters that she warned her son of the dangers associated with being black in the South. “I emphasized over and over again to him that it was not the same as Argo or Chicago and he had to be extra careful to avoid getting in trouble with white people.” Mamie Till contends that her son knew better than to provoke a white woman, but further evidence exists to suggest that young Emmett Till had a bold attitude that was sure to be problematic amidst the rigid social structures which

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237 Henry Caise a mortician at the funeral home where Till’s body was shown describes the funeral and visitation services for Emmett Till. “Well they brought the children with them because Emmett was fourteen years old and they wanted the younger kids to see what happened to Emmett. They were mad, they were angry.” American Experience, “The Murder of Emmett Till.”

238 While there are reports of television reporters covering the Milam/ Bryant Trial, it appears that print media such as newspapers and magazines were most successful in reaching a broad national audience.

239 In an obscure interview with David A. Shostak, Crosby Smith, brother-in-law of Moses Wright and lifelong resident of Money, Mississippi speaks out about his memory of the Till murder. Offering a new version of the conversation that transpired between Till and Carolyn Bryant as learned through Moses Wright’s son who was present, Smith asserts that Till never made any inappropriate remarks to Mrs. Bryant. According to Smith, Wright’s son told him that “Emmett went into Bryant’s store and bought two pieces of Double-Bubble Gum. Now, this woman goes and gets his gum, and when she hands it to him, he used these words, he said, ‘Gee, You look like a movie star.’” For full interview and story see: David A. Shostak. “Crosby Smith: Forgotten Witness to a Mississippi Nightmare.” Negro History Bulletin, 38:1 (1974:Dec.-1975:Jan.) p.320

240 We had been outside the store only a few second when Mrs. Bryant came out behind us, heading straight to her car. As she walked, Bobo whistled at her. It was a loud wolf whistle, a big city ‘whee wheeeeee!’” in Simeon Wright with Herb Boyd, Simeon’s Story: An Eyewitness Account of the Kidnapping of Emmett Till. (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2010), 51.

241 Mamie Bradley as told to Ethel Payne, “Mamie Bradley’s Untold Story: Installment VI” Chicago Defender. March 6, 1956, pg. 8.
determined racially acceptable behavior in the South.\textsuperscript{242} In addition, Till reached physical maturation sooner than most of his peers; at fourteen he weighed approximately 160lbs and stood a relatively short five feet tall.\textsuperscript{243} Till’s overconfidence, combined with his large physical stature was cause for concern among his more perceptive family members. According to his cousin, Simeon Wright, “he just didn’t know the Mississippi rules.”\textsuperscript{244} Despite Till’s youthful naivety, Wright argues “While I was in the store, Bobo did nothing inappropriate. He didn’t grab Mrs. Bryant, nor did he put his arms around her- that was the story she later told in court.”\textsuperscript{245}

During Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam’s trial, the prosecutors were relatively uninterested in Carolyn Bryant’s testimony regarding her interactions with Emmett Till.\textsuperscript{246} Nevertheless, the account Carolyn provided depicted Till as a lustful man who posed a threat to Southern womanhood. According to Carolyn Bryant, Emmett entered the grocery store, approached the counter and said “‘How about a date baby?’” Carolyn testified that Emmett acted in a crude, inappropriate manner. “He caught me at the cash register and put both hands on my waist. He said ‘What’s the matter baby, can’t you take it? You needn't be afraid of me! I’ve been with white women before.’”\textsuperscript{247} According to Mrs. Bryant, Till left the store shortly after making these statements, but not before letting out a loud “wolf whistle” in her direction.

For Southerners living in Mississippi, Carolyn Bryant’s testimony in court served as sufficient justification for the actions of Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam. Yet, it was not until the following year in 1956, that the rest of America really honed in on the specifics of the initial Till/Bryant encounter. Presenting their story to journalist William Bradford Huie for \textit{LOOK}

\textsuperscript{242} According to Till’s cousin, Wheeler Parker, “The concern for Emmett was that he could be, with his fun-loving, free-spirited way of living, he could get in trouble, could have a lot of problems.” American Experience, “The Murder of Emmett Till.”


\textsuperscript{244} Wright and Boyd, \textit{Simeon’s Story}, 50.

\textsuperscript{245} Wright and Boyd, \textit{Simeon’s Story}, 50.

\textsuperscript{246} The jurors were required to leave the courtroom during Carolyn’s testimony as the judge feared “prosecutors wanted her entire testimony excluded because they were aware that a Mississippi jury could well find cause for murder if a Southern woman was accosted by a black male. As a precaution, Judge Swango ordered the jury removed during testimony and reserved decision on the matter.” Mark Gado, “Carolyn” \textit{Mississippi Madness: The Story of Emmett Till}, Court TV Crime Library (online).

\textsuperscript{247} Testimony of Carolyn Bryant as reported in Gado, “Carolyn.” See also: Wright Boyd, \textit{Simeon’s Story}, 77.
Magazine, both Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam admitted to not only kidnapping, but also murdering Emmett Till. Immune from further legal punishment by laws protecting against double jeopardy, Bryant and Milam spoke candidly about why and how, they executed the Chicago teen.

According to the Library of Congress which serves as the current repository for LOOK magazine’s extensive photograph collection, journalists and editors at LOOK intended for the magazine to be all encompassing; extolling the virtues of middle-class suburban life while also covering the hardships that “less-fortunate” Americans faced. “From the mid-1960s onward, LOOK staff made a concerted effort not only to acknowledge the poverty in which some African Americans lived but also to highlight African Americans' inclusion in American society, with an emphasis on integrated schools and workplaces.” While LOOK attempted to offer a somewhat balanced perspective of American life, the publication was also known for presenting sensationalized stories to the American public.

The publication of the article in the national magazine was controversial; William Bradford Huie paid the two Mississippians $4,000 to recount their personal versions of the lynching of Emmett Till. In an attempt to justify their actions, the two men focused on Till’s allegedly brazen, disrespectful demeanor and conduct. In the interview, Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam had no trouble describing Till’s audacious comments toward Carolyn Bryant, despite the fact that neither were actually present at the grocery store on the afternoon of August 24th. According to Bryant and Milam, “He [Till] squeezed her hand and said: "How about a date, 

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248 In his interview with LOOK magazine, Milam recounted the moment he decided to kill Till. I stood there in that shed and listened to that nigger throw that poison at me, and I just made up my mind. 'Chicago boy,' I said, 'I'm tired of 'em sending your kind down here to stir up trouble. Goddam you, I'm going to make an example of you -- just so everybody can know how me and my folks stand.'” Huie provides an account of the murder of Till based on his interview with Milam and Bryant. “That big .45 jumped in Big Milam's hand. The youth turned to catch that big, expanding bullet at his right ear. He dropped. They barb-wired the gin fan to his neck, rolled him into 20 feet of water.” William Bradford Huie “The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi” LOOK. January 24, 1956. 249 LOOK was among the first national magazines to chronicle gradually rising racial tensions in the South….Perhaps the most controversial story we ever published was in our January 24, 1956 issue. Entitled 'The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi,' by William Bradford Huie, it gave a graphically detailed account of the murder of a young black boy named Emmett "Bobo" Till by two white men. Huie quoted them directly telling how and why they had committed the crime.” Gardner Cowles. Mike Looks Back: the Memoirs of Gardner Cowles, Founder of Look Magazine (New York: G. Cowles, 1985), 190-191; “Look Magazine Photograph Collection” The Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division. http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/awhtml/awpnnp6/look_coll.html

250 For a discussion of problems faced by Huie see: Roberts and Klibanoff, The Race Beat.
baby? At the break between counters, Bobo jumped in front of her, perhaps caught her at the waist, and said: ‘You needn't be afraid o' me, Baby. I been with white girls before.’”

Roy Bryant learned of the incident after returning from a truck-driving venture. Aided by his half-brother Milam, Bryant kidnapped Till in the middle of the night.252 According to their testimony in LOOK, “Their intention was to ‘just whip him... and scare some sense into him.’”253 Failing to break Till’s spirit after pistol whipping him for a few hours, the men decided to make an example out the young boy by killing him.254 “When we got to that gin, it was daylight, and I was worried for the first time. Somebody might see us and accuse us of stealing the fan.” 255 According to their own testimony, the two men seemed to be more fearful of violating Mississippi property rights than facing the legal consequences of murdering a Black teenager. According to William Bradford Huie, the journalist who secured the notorious interview of Bryant and Milam for LOOK: “The majority -- by no means all, but the majority -- of the white people in Mississippi 1) either approve Big Milam's action or else 2) they don't disapprove enough to risk giving their "enemies" the satisfaction of a conviction.”

Published exclusively in LOOK magazine, Huie’s article reached a broad national audience and thus had the ability and opportunity to shape public perception in a manner unparalleled by regional presses. Securing the testimony of Bryant and Milam was a notable feat, yet Huie’s expose was problematic as it offered a limited perspective of the events leading up to Till’s murder. In their account of the event, Bryant and Milam describe Till as licentious teen who threatened innocent white women.257 The portrayal of Till that appeared in LOOK stood in striking contrast to the description offered by Mamie Till of Emmett as an excitable adolescent who traveled to the South to visit family and help with the summer labor.258 Despite its inherent

251 Huie “The Shocking Story.”
252 Huie “The Shocking Story.”; Wright Boyd, Simeon’s Story.
253 Huie “The Shocking Story.”
255 Huie “The Shocking Story.”
256 Huie “The Shocking Story.”
257 Based on testimony of J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant published in exclusive Look Magazine interview. Huie “The Shocking Story.”
258 Mamie Till described the last moments she spent with her son. “He was running up the steps to try to make it to the train and I said, "Emmett, or Beau" -- I called him Beau, I said. "Where are you going? You haven't kissed me good-bye…He pulled his watch off and gave it to me. He said, 'I won't need this where I'm going.' I said, ‘What
weaknesses, Huie’s article functioned as the foundational narrative upon which many white Americans based their attitudes and beliefs surrounding Till’s death. In fact, until recently, Huie’s article served as the only source of information from the perspectives of the admitted murderers.\footnote{In fact, it was essential for Huie to establish himself as a credible source as the transcripts from the court proceedings seemingly disappeared after the trial, and Bryant and Milam refused to retell their story for any other journalist or media outlet.}

While the \textit{LOOK} article served as the only viable source of information detailing Milam and Bryant’s motivations and actions, it in no way exonerated the two men in the public eye. It is apparent that in 1956, the American public failed to agree on significant aspects related to the murder of Till as reactions to the \textit{LOOK} article varied from disgust to praise. Letters to the editor of \textit{LOOK} offer valuable insight into mainstream public sentiment concerning both Till and his murderers.

Many \textit{LOOK} readers were appalled by the blatant racism of Milam and Bryant and the subsequent failure of the American system of justice. Yet, not all readers were disturbed by the information presented in the article. Several readers expressed disappointment in \textit{LOOK} for publishing what they perceived to be “dishonest articles.” Others went to so far as to commend Milam and Bryant for their course of actions claiming “to take any other course would have been unrealistic, cowardly and not in the best interest of their family or country.”\footnote{Richard Lauchil “Letter to the Editor” \textit{LOOK}. Information found PBS American Experience website detailing the lynching of Emmett Till.} Rather than gaining unconditional support for either Till or his admitted murderers, Huie’s article in \textit{LOOK} exposed significant divisions in the national consciousness which led to America’s inability to reconcile and include Till’s story in the national narrative.

Carefully constructing her personal narrative surrounding Emmett’s death, Mamie Till Mobley used specific, deliberate language that effectively determined the way in which civil rights activists and sympathizers would remember and honor her son.\footnote{According to Moses Wright’s brother in law, Crosby Smith the murder of Emmett Till had a powerful impact on the African American community. “‘What we saw in the death of Emmett Till was a signal from Goad that things would never be the same again in Mississippi.’ Crosby Smith quoted in Shostak. “Crosby Smith,” 324.} Offering an alternative to the \textit{LOOK} article, Till Mobley presented her narrative to the local press. In an interview with
the *Chicago Defender*, Mamie described the rationale behind her decision to publically discuss the details of her son’s murder. “I think that the large class of decent people in this county are guilty of the sins of omission when they fail to speak out for the right and take a stand against injustice. These are the people I am appealing to.”

By allowing photographers to publish images of Emmett’s desecrated and disfigured body in *Jet Magazine*, Mamie expanded her memorialization efforts and ensured that all Americans, not just those living in Chicago, would have the opportunity to view the extreme effects of Southern racial intolerance. Created in 1951 and based in Chicago, *Jet Magazine* appealed to a predominately African American audience and commonly reported on the emerging struggle for civil rights. It is unlikely that many white Americans subscribed to or read *Jet Magazine* in the 1950s, yet the images of Till’s mangled body had an extraordinary impact on the African American community.

The ways in which Mamie Till presented and displayed the corpse of her son and spoke about the larger meaning surrounding his “sacrificial” death ensured that members of the African American community, and also civil rights activists, would remember and revere Emmett Till as “the sacrificial lamb” of the civil rights movement. Following his murder in 1955, Till’s mother recounted her entire experience for *The Chicago Defender*.

Describing the trauma and shock she experienced after hearing the fate of Emmett, Mamie Till likened her son’s death to that of a Christian martyr. “I was angry with God that He had let Bo be kidnapped and slain so brutally and aloud I demanded ‘Why did you do this. What

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262 Mamie Bradley as told to Ethel Payne, “Mamie Bradley’s Untold Story: Installment VIII” *Chicago Defender*. March 8, 1956, pg. 8.
263 Jet magazine originally published the pictures of Till in his casket in their issue published on September 15, 1955. “Nation Horrified by Murder” *Jet*, vol. 8 no.19, September 15, 1955: 6-9; Speaking at Mamie Till Mobley’s funeral Reverend Jesse Jackson reminded mourners of the significant contributions Till Mobley made in connection to her son’s murder. “In many ways, the killers saw (Till’s death) as a hole, but Mamie saw an earthquake, and she used the aftershocks of the earthquake to wake up and shake up a nation.” West, “Mamie Till- Mobley,” *Jet*.
265 Historian Cleora Hudson- Weems argues that the impetus of the modern Civil Rights Movement was Emmett Till’s death, not the Montgomery Bus Boycott which began about three months later. Hudson-Weems asserts that “the impetus that Till’s murder gave to African-American activists clearly places him, with others, at the head of the Civil Rights Movement, not in the background” For more interviews and testimonies related to Till’s impact on civil rights activists see: Hudson- Weems, *Emmett Till*, 6.
are You so cruel that You would let this happen? Why do you allow this kind of persecution?”

It was at this point in her distress and mourning that Mamie claims a presence came into the room and began to speak with her about the deeper meaning surrounding Emmett’s murder. “The presence said to me ‘Mamie, it was ordained from the beginning of time that Emmett Louis Till would die a violent death. You should be grateful to be the mother of a boy who died blameless like Christ. Bo Till will never be forgotten.’”

As mentioned earlier, Till’s lynching motivated many prominent individuals such as Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. to speak out against the evils and injustices of Jim Crow. Specifically, Till’s lynching had a profound impact on civil rights leaders and activists, and the way in which they shaped and presented the purpose and goals of the movement to the general American public. For instance, when asked why she remained in her seat in a move that effectively began the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Rosa Parks replied “I thought about Emmett Till, and I could not go back.” Like Rosa Parks, other civil rights leaders such as Medgar Evers, Fred Shuttlesworth and Martin Luther King utilized the memory of the young boy in order to garner support for the cause. According to Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth of Birmingham, the lynching of Till was the force responsible for propelling the civil rights movement into the national spotlight. “And the fact that Emmett Till, a young black man, could be found floating down the river in Mississippi, as, indeed, many had been done over the years, this set in concrete the determination of people to move forward.”

While it is clear that the memory of Emmett Till’s horrific murder influenced those involved in the civil rights movement, it is difficult to determine if Till’s murder altered or shaped the perceptions of the general public in the 1950s. While national newspapers, such as the

266 Mamie Bradley as told to Ethel Payne, “Mamie Bradley’s Untold Story: Installment VIII” Chicago Defender. March 8, 1956, pg. 8.
268 In a letter read at Mamie Till Mobley’s 2003 funeral, Rosa Parks wrote the following: “The heinous crime which murdered your boy, your baby at 14 years of age shall never be forgotten. The news of the crime caused many people to participate in the cry for justice and equal rights including myself.” West, “Mamie Till- Mobley,” Jet.
New York Times printed Till’s story, it was relegated to the middle sections of the copy; making headline news only once in the four months following Till’s death.\(^{271}\)

White Americans that were not connected in any tangible way to the inner workings of the civil rights movement, failed to connect with the news of Till’s lynching in the way that their African-American counterparts did.\(^{272}\) Perhaps because Till does not actually fit the description of a true martyr (one who dies fighting for a specific cause or purpose) or possibly for a variety of other reasons, the image of Till as a martyr failed to resonate with Americans on a broad national level. This is not to suggest that a large majority of Americans living in the North were not appalled and horrified by the lynching of Till. Rather, it proposes that the image of Till as a martyr for the civil rights movement failed to garner the national support needed to honor and memorialize the child in any significant or meaningful manner. The national memory of Till as a helpless victim rather than martyr for the cause also reflects the fact that civil rights, although appearing in the national news, was not yet in 1955, part of the national consciousness as a significant news event.

**Memory of Emmett Till**

Despite general agreement surrounding the horrific circumstances and racially motivated lynching of Till, Americans remain divided on how to remember and honor, or ignore and erase, the memory and legacy of the young Chicagoan. Presently, the debate over Till’s memory revolves around cultural issues involving the construction and dissemination of meaning or legacy related to Till’s death.\(^{273}\) Was the lynching of Emmett Till the touchstone moment responsible for igniting the civil rights movement?\(^{274}\)

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\(^{271}\) In 1955, mention of Till appeared in the *New York Times* only a few occasions. The *Times* initially used only Associated Press articles before assigning staff writer John N. Popham to the Bryant/ Milam trial starting on September 18, 1955. News related to Till’s death appeared on the front page of the Times only once on September 24, 1855 with the headline “Mississippi Jury Acquits 2 Accused in Youths Killing.”

\(^{272}\) Journalist Brian Thornton analyzes national media coverage surrounding Emmett Till and the trail of J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant to suggest that, mainstream national media did not engage in a significant way with Till’s case. This is turn limited viable source material for white Americans to learn about Emmett Till, his death and the subsequent trial of Milam and Bryant. “In reality the widely read national magazines offered at most a few brief bursts of light regarding racial injustice and the Till murder, more like a firefly illuminating a small patch of ground brilliantly but only for a second” Brian Thornton, “The murder of Emmett Till: Myth, Memory and National Magazine Response” *Journalism History* 3:6 (Summer 2010), 102.

\(^{273}\) Mamie Till sought to create meaning out of her son’s death by portraying him as a young martyr for civil rights. Milam, Bryant and their sympathizers living in the South attempted to create meaning by arguing that the entire
Till’s story was not the first civil rights event to make national headlines. One year prior, in Brown v. Board of Education (1954) the Supreme Court ruled that “separate is not equal” and in turn, made the landmark decision that segregated schools were unconstitutional. In spite of its later appearance in the chronology, the lynching of Emmett Till was more compelling than past civil rights stories as it revealed the violent repercussions of challenging the South’s strict social and racial codes. The brutality and murderous behavior, which served as consequences to even minor infractions of the racial code, required more immediate solutions than the task of school desegregation. The particularly brutal and graphic details of the young Chicagoan’s murder, accompanied by a sense of urgency, allowed Emmett Till’s story to resonate with a wider, more diverse public than Brown v. Board.

If because of its violent nature, Emmett Till’s death served as a “touchstone moment” for the burgeoning civil rights movement, which sites related to the event should be preserved in his memory? Are some spaces more significant than others? More importantly, which geographic region is responsible for honoring Till: the North where he lived, or the South where he died? In contrast, should both of these geographic locations be bypassed in favor of a larger, national

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274 Speaking at Mamie Till Mobley’s funeral, Reverend Jesse L. Jackson summarizes the significance of Till’s murder. “The movement to end Jim Crow didn’t start in Montgomery. The 1954 Supreme Court decision made Jim Crow illegal. It meant a lot, but it did not translate to mass action. But when Emmett Till was lynched, there was no struggle for definition. His lynching touched our bone marrow.” As reported by Malcolm R. West. “Mamie Till-Mobley, Civil Rights Heroine, Eulogized in Chicago” Jet. January 27, 2003 vol. 103 no. 5, 17; Journalist Rose Jourdain, expresses her thoughts about why Emmett Till’s story gained widespread attention. “I think black peoples’ reaction was so visceral. And I think it was probably more than anything else, in terms of the mass civil rights movement, the spark that, that launched it. Everybody knew we were under attack and that attack was symbolized by the attack on a 14-year-old boy. American Experience, “The Murder of Emmett Till.”

275 In addition, Till’s lynching was one of the first nationally publicized violent act of the post-WWII civil rights era. According to former Mississippi Governor William Winter (1980-1984), “The Till Case held the whole system up for inspection by the rest of the country and by the rest of the world. It was the beginning of the focusing on the problems between the races in the Deep South that culminated in the ultimate Civil Rights battles of the, of the rest of the 50’s and, and, and into the 60’s.” American Experience, “The Murder of Emmett Till.”

276 It was not until Brown v. Board of Education that the mainstream media began to report on issues of Civil Rights, moving toward a particular focus on the South. In a preface to The Press and Race, David R. Davies notes that “before the Supreme Court transformed desegregation into a national imperative, black Americans had long been virtually invisible in the pages of the nation’s daily press.” The Supreme Court ruling that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” had a major effect on the entire nation. According to journalist and cultural historian Rodger Streitmatter, “The Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka decision prompted blacks to challenge unjust laws and discriminatory practices, spawning the Civil Rights Movement.” But more importantly, it put the black community on the front pages of newspapers where they had not been before. See: David. R. Davies, The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement (University Press of Mississippi: Jackson, 2001), 5. Rodger Streitmatter, Mightier than the Sword: How the News Media Have Shaped American History, (Westview Press: Boulder, 2008), 174.
memorial site? Memorials honoring the young Emmett Till will remain lackluster and incomplete as long as historic and persistent issues surrounding race and power continue to prevent an accurate and balanced portrayal of Till’s story.

Spaces related to Emmett Till continue to exist as sites of struggle, as Till’s place in the larger public narrative surrounding the civil rights movement remains uncertain. The 1955 lynching of the young Chicagoan complicates and challenges contemporary understandings of the trajectory of civil rights during the 20th century. The established national narrative adheres to the notion that Americans made significant progress in their attempts to eliminate racial injustice and achieve equality for all citizens. Yet, the fact that two white Mississippians lynched a black child and suffered no legal ramifications seems to defy the infallible nature of the American system as upheld by ideals of justice, progress and equality. Competing narratives concerning the events leading up to Till’s death, work to further complicate the national narrative, making it difficult for Americans to negotiate the complexities surrounding Till’s lynching with the accepted history of a successful, complete civil rights movement.

Memorialization Efforts

The memory and narrative associated with Emmett Till continued to invoke powerful graphic imagery throughout the civil rights movement, yet neither Chicago nor Mississippi memorialized the boy until the end of the 20th century. In 1991, after gaining the requisite support of prominent elected officials, the city of Chicago commemorated Till with an honorary street sign designation. The presentation and installation ceremony of the honorary street sign was a momentous event in itself as prominent figures such as Mamie Till, Rosa Parks and Mayor

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277 The editors of Jet reprinted the images of Till’s mutilated body in several issues of their magazine over the past fifty-seven years.
278 The first and only memorial statue depicting Emmett Till was erected in Denver, Colorado in 1976. The statue was recently moved to Pueblo, CO, and situated outside of the Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday Commission and Cultural Center. In this memorial statue, Till is standing with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who appears to be guiding the young boy by placing his hand on Till’s shoulder. According to Ruth Steel, the executive director at the King Center, “It features a likeness of a robed Dr. King with his arm around Till, ‘stepping out in faith after they’ve fought the good fight and finished their course.’” Quote featured in: Margena A. Christian. “Emmett Till’s Legacy 50 Years Later” Jet vol. 108 no.12 September 19, 2005, 22-23.
Richard Daly attended and spoke about the significance of the sign as the first tangible tribute to Till in Chicago. 279

The specific language used at the street renaming ceremony supports the notion that Till’s death had different meanings for African Americans and white Americans. Mobley spoke about her son’s death as a “call for freedom that was heard around the world.” She implicitly characterizes Emmett as a martyr by suggesting that he died for a specific cause. Mobley declared, “I know that what my son died for is about to be realized.” 280 Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley offered a different perspective as he described Emmett Till as a “victim of racial hatred.” 281 Mayor Daley’s characterization of Till as “victim” suggests that he viewed Till’s death as an aberration in a traditionally freedom-loving society; Till’s lynching was an unfortunate southern, not national problem.

The words that both Mobley and Daley used to describe Till are significant as their varying portrayals are representative of Till’s continually disputed place in the national narrative. For both Mayor Daley and a large percentage his contemporaries, Till’s victimization represented an individual case of racial violence in Mississippi; it did not serve as a national critique of the beloved American system. Though an unspoken, and perhaps unrealized, disagreement existed surrounding Till’s role in the civil rights movement, the street renaming ceremony in Chicago was significant as it served as the first instance of memorialization for Till in either Illinois or Mississippi.

Fifteen years passed before the creation of a second memorial for Till, this one appearing not in his hometown, but rather the state in which he died. In September of 2006, the Emmett Till Historic Intrepid Center opened in Glendora, Mississippi. 282 The center is located at the former Glendora cotton gin; the site from which Bryant and Milam stole the cotton gin that was later found around Till’s neck. “The National Conference of Black Mayors commissioned the

279 Speaking at the unveiling ceremony, Mamie Till Mobley said “I feel if I had the voice of 10,000 angles, I could not express what this day means to me personally, for the city of Chicago and for the world...This is a culmination of a lifetime of dreams. This day is a recognition of civil rights, Emmett and what must be done. His untimely death was the call for freedom that was heard around the world.” “Chicago’s 71st Street is Renamed for Emmett Till” Jet. vol. 80, no. 17, August 12, 1991, 4-5.
280 Jet, “Chicago’s 71st Street,” 4-5.
Till Center as a model of economic revitalization for other struggling towns.”283 The first floor of the center is comprised of exhibition space dedicated to Emmett Till and historic racial tensions, while the second floor houses the Glendora Adult and Continuing Education Training and Technology Center. Briefly closed for renovations, the museum reopened on September 24, 2011, on the anniversary of the day in which an all-white jury notoriously found Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam “not guilty” of the murder of Emmett Till.

In addition to serving as the first memorial for Till, the Historic Intrepid Center in Glendora marked the first instance in which a local government included a site related to Emmett Till in the growing trend of state sponsored heritage tourism.284 Beginning in the 1980s, several states, predominantly in the South, began offering heritage tours aimed at preserving and remembering the African American experience.285 Often heralded in dilapidated towns for their ability to increase economic growth, heritage tours commonly focus on sites of cultural interest and historic significance.286 In recent years, Mississippi has joined other states in promoting noteworthy landscapes related to both positive features of their history, such as the state’s connection to blues music and prominent literary figures, and also less virtuous aspects of the past like slavery and violence related to the civil rights movement. According to the village of Glendora’s official website, “A core component of Glendora’s model is the recognition and celebration of African American cultural heritage, as well as valued lessons learned from the ongoing struggle for human rights and justice throughout the Mississippi Delta.”287

284 City planners in Glendora hope that increased heritage tourism will garner support for a proposed AMTRAK station in the village.
285 Architect Craig Barton explains the impetus behind the growing trend of African American heritage tourism. “In the mid-20th century we found that African American communities...began to break apart, making it even more important, more critical now, to find a way to leverage the resources that are embed into the landscape as a means to narrate the presence and importance of African American history in the Delta, in Virginia, in New England, and across the nation.” Craig Barton. “Invisibility on the Land: A Perspective on African American Culture”, Your Town: Mississippi Delta. (Washington D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2002), 8.
286 The State of Mississippi offers heritage tours that visit sites such as the Farish Street Historic District, Medgar Evers Library, the Natchez Museum of African American History and Culture, a memorial to James Chaney, the Center for the Study of Southern Culture on the campus of the University of Mississippi. “African American Heritage Tour”, http://www.visitmississippi.org/the-african-american-heritage-tour.aspx. The city of Birmingham in Alabama offers suggestions for places to visit related to “African American Heritage” such as the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, Kelly Ingram Park, and the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. http://www.birminghamal.org/ttd-aframheritage.html
Following the creation and dedication of the Emmett Till Historic Intrepid Center in Glendora, other Mississippi communities gained momentum in their own efforts to memorialize Till. In 2007, Tallahatchie County, Mississippi created the Emmett Till Memorial Commission (ETMC) in an attempt to both promote and preserve historic sites associated with Till’s murder and the subsequent trial of Till’s alleged killers, J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant. The Emmett Till Memorial Commission presents itself as an organization dedicated to the honoring the memory and legacy of Emmett Till, yet their main objective is to secure funding for the restoration of the former Tallahatchie County Courthouse. According to the Commission’s website,

The Emmett Till Memorial Commission was established by the Tallahatchie County Board of Supervisors for the purpose of fostering racial harmony and reconciliation; to seek federal, state, and private funds and grants to initially restore the Tallahatchie County Courthouse in Sumner, Mississippi; to explore the restoration of other buildings and sites of historical value; and to promote educational tours of the courthouse and other sites in Tallahatchie County, Mississippi.288

In this respect, the objectives of the Memorial Commission suggest mixed motives as the organization seems more intent on rebuilding a cherished county landmark than honoring the memory of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till. The commission is comprised of nineteen voting members who serve as the Board of Directors. Although the Board of Directors has assumed the charge of appropriating donations made in Till’s honor, the board chose to restore of the courthouse instead of other significant landmarks related to Till’s case. The board’s decision is reflective of their belief that restoration of the courthouse presently offers the best opportunity for economic revitalization through heritage tourism.

On their website, the Emmett Till Memorial Commission explains that they wish to “restore the courthouse to the near-exact state it was in during the 1955 trial so that it will serve as an interpretive site for the historical significance of the murder of Emmett Till and subsequent miscarriage of justice.”289 While the Board’s intentions for the courthouse are clear, an unanswered question remains. Why is it essential to preserve a location that represents a complete and utter failure on part of the justice system of Mississippi?

As one of their first, and only official acts, the Emmett Till Memorial Commission created the Tallahatchie Civil Rights Driving Tour which features twelve sites associated with Till’s murder and the State’s failure to punish his assailants. The first two pages of the driving tour brochure describe the nature of Till’s death and the rationale which prompted the creation of the tour. Created by the ETMC Board of Directors, the tone of the driving tour pamphlet is remorseful and apologetic stating,

We the citizens of Tallahatchie County recognize that the Emmett Till case was a terrible miscarriage of justice. We call on the state of Mississippi- all of its citizens in every county- to begin an honest investigation into our history. While it will be painful, it is necessary to nurture reconciliation and ensure justice for all.

The ETMC offers an upbeat, hopeful attitude concerning the present and future state of race relations, yet it is unclear exactly how the driving tour along with the restoration of the courthouse will in effect restore “justice for all.” The objectives of the memorial tour and restoration project speak to the larger national narrative by adhering to the notion that justice and freedom are truly accessible for all Americans, not just the elite white citizenry. Though it is unlikely that the tour and restoration will meet the more lofty goal of mending tensions caused by historic racial injustice, the restoration will perhaps best serve the community by spurring economic growth linked to increased tourism.

As part of the Civil Rights Driving Tour, the Emmett Till Memorial Commission has begun to install memorial signs at each landmark that summarize the historic significance of each site on the tour. Although most of these signs are less than five years old, the Memorial Commission has already replaced several as apparent dissidents have vandalized or destroyed them. Nevertheless, the Board of Trustees that controls the Memorial Commission is

committed to maintaining the integrity of the tour by replacing the signs each time that they are defaced. "We’re not going to tolerate them tearing down anything that’s marking Emmett Till’s murder,” Board of Supervisors President Jerome G. Little said Monday. ‘I want to send a message: Every time they take it down, we’re going to put it back up.’” To date, the ETMC has replaced at least three memorial signs on separate occasions.294

As the ETMC struggles to combat subverted opposition to their commemorative markers, others hoping to memorialize Till in Money, Mississippi face the daunting challenge of preserving a significant site that is threatened by decay and corrosion. Many African Americans and civil rights proponents remember the murder of Emmett Till as one of the key events of the Civil Rights Movement.295 Those who have heard the story of Emmett Till are certainly familiar with the image of his mangled body, yet not all could pinpoint the location of the grocery store in which Till committed his supposed “crime”.

Over the past fifty years, Bryant’s Grocery and Meat Market has slowly deteriorated. In 2005, the Mississippi Heritage Trust placed Bryant’s Grocery store on their list of the “10 Most Endangered Historic Places” in the state. According to the Mississippi Heritage Trust, the store is in terrible condition. “The roof and second floor have collapsed into the building and the remnants of the porch are hanging precariously on the front of the building.”296 Those interested in beginning the process of memorialization at Bryant’s Grocery and Meat Market find themselves at a standstill as the Tribble family refuses to either sell the building for a reasonable price or start the restoration process themselves.

Several groups and individuals affiliated with the Civil Rights Movement have remarked on the importance of restoring the building to its original condition.297 Attempting to connect the

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295 As discussed previously in this chapter, Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks and Medgar Evers among others, spoke about Till’s lynching as pivotal event in the civil rights movement.
site to the larger national narrative surrounding the civil rights movement, Mississippi State Senator David Jordan remarked that Bryant’s Grocery is “significant historically not only to African Americans, but to white Americans.”

While the current owner of the building, Harold Ray Tribble, claims to be interested in preserving the historic site, he refuses to sell the building for a fair price. “Leflore County Tax Assessor Leroy Ware says the store isn't worth a penny on the county's books — but that didn't stop the crumbling store's owners from initially asking local officials last year for $40 million. They later reduced their asking price to $4 million.” In spite of their over-inflated asking price which suggests otherwise, Harold Ray Tribble maintains that he and his family wish to convert the decrepit grocery store into a museum honoring Emmett Till. “We want to restore it,” Tribble says. “It's a part of history, and it's about to fall down. We've got all the signs, the cash registers, the shelves.”

Despite his self-proclaimed allegiance to historic preservation, it is important to note that Tribble has a unique personal connection to the Till case; his father served on the jury of men that acquitted Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam of Tills’ murder in 1955. In 1995, journalist Richard Rubin conducted interviews with the surviving jurors for a piece entitled “The Ghosts of Emmett Till” which was published in the New York Times Magazine. During his interview Rubin confronted Ray Tribble Sr., asking him why he voted to acquit Milam and Bryant.

He explained, quite simply, that he had concurred with the defense team's core argument: that the body fished out of the Tallahatchie River was not that of Emmett Till -- who was, they claimed, still very much alive and hiding out in Chicago or Detroit or somewhere else up North -- but someone else's, a corpse planted there by the N.A.A.C.P. for the express purpose of stirring up a racial tornado that would tear through Sumner, and through all of Mississippi, and through the rest of the South, for that matter.

Ray Howard Tribble Jr. has made no attempt to justify or explain his own desire to preserve the building with his father’s association with the case. Rather, when questioned about his family’s connection, he stated that “The only remark his father ever made to him about

299 Mitchell, “‘Symbol of the Movement’ Sits in Ruin.”
serving on the jury was the prosecution had failed to prove the body was Till's.”301 It appears that Ray Howard Tribble Jr. and his family would rather allow the building to slip into further disarray and disappear from public memory as they have failed to either sell the building or begin the process of restoration themselves.

In 2009, the Mississippi Heritage Trust provided updates on several of their past “endangered places.” Falling into complete disarray, the condition of Bryant’s Grocery steadily declined. According the Trust report of 2009, “The Bryant Store is still in very bad repair. A majority of the second floor walls have collapsed jeopardizing the structural integrity.”302 While local efforts to preserve Bryant’s Meat and Grocery have proved to be unsuccessful, recent state sponsored support offers a renewed opportunity for memorialization and possibly even restoration of the space.

In May of 2011, the Mississippi Development Authority announced plans to create the “Mississippi Freedom Trail.”303 The proposed trail represents an increase in overall memorialization efforts as it is the first time that the Mississippi state government has officially sponsored a tour commemorating civil rights sites. On May 18, 2011, the state held a dedication ceremony at the first stop on the tour: Bryant’s Grocery and Meat Market.304 Although the Mississippi Development Authority (MDA) has plans to commemorate a total of thirty sites, the planning committee “pre-selected” five additional sites to unveil throughout May 2011 as part of the 50th anniversary reunion of the Freedom Riders. In addition to the sign at Bryant’s Grocery, the MDA dedicated memorial markers at the homes of Medgar Evers and Fannie Lou Hamer, along with the Greyhound Bus Station in Jackson, and the Mississippi State Penitentiary.305

One week after the dedication of the memorial sign at Bryant’s Grocery, veterans of the 1960’s Freedom Rides gathered in the South to commemorate the 40th anniversary of their courageous attempt to integrate interstate travel. Recreating their original journey, approximately one hundred veterans from the movement traveled as a group to the very locations in which they

301 Mitchell, “‘Symbol of the Movement’ Sits in Ruin.”
http://www.mississippiheritage.com/list05.html#Bryant.
304 “MDA Tourism Announces Mississippi Freedom Trail.”
305 “MDA Tourism Announces Mississippi Freedom Trail.”
were beaten and arrested 40 years prior. On this trip which took place in May 2011, the Freedom Riders expanded upon their original route to include locations and sites that were noteworthy and influential in the progression of the civil rights movement. Stopping at Bryant’s Grocery & Meat in Money, Mississippi, the veteran Freedom Riders had the opportunity to reflect on the significance of the space. According to Mississippi State Senator David Jordan “The store epitomized the beginning of the civil rights movement. All of a sudden we were not afraid.”

In connection with Senator Jordan’s comments, the Freedom Riders visit to Money, Mississippi is significant as it demonstrates the integral role that Till’s lynching plays in civil rights activists’ memory and narrative of the movement. Presently, there is a distinct correlation between groups and individuals who envision Till as a larger part of America’s civil rights story, and those trying to preserve and commemorate sites of struggle related to his narrative. For this group, the challenge of memorializing Till comes not only from deteriorating buildings and local vandalism, but also from the more indiscernible challenge of fitting Till into the national, victory narrative of civil rights. Though Bryant’s Grocery is essential in the overarching narrative surrounding Till, it is problematic as it challenges the national freedom narrative by serving as a representation of moral and ideological decline rather than progress, a symbol of the evils caused by the unjust American power structure.

As the state of Mississippi continues to grapple with the issue of commemorating and memorializing Till in the South, Illinois faces persistent problems surrounding their own attempts to remember and honor the native Chicagoan. Following his preeminent showing and subsequent funeral in 1955, Emmett Till was buried at Burr Oak Cemetery in the south-central region of Chicago, IL. In 2005, Till’s body was exhumed by the FBI as new evidence led to a reinvestigation of the historic case. At this time, Till’s corpse was removed from his original casket and placed in a new casket for reburial. Surviving members of Till’s family entrusted the casket in which Emmett was originally shown and buried in 1955, to Carolyn Towns, director of Burr Oak Cemetery. In exchange for the famous casket, Towns vowed to raise money to create an Emmett Till Museum in order to display the casket and pay homage to the local icon. The Till

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306 Mitchell, “‘Symbol of the Movement’ Sits in Ruin.”
family and supporters of the civil rights movement cherished the idea of the proposed museum as the city of Chicago lacked any significant form of tribute for the “so-called” martyr.  

Just as the residents of Chicago were finally moving forward with plans to honor Till, Carolyn Towns was indicted on charges related to criminal activities she engaged in while serving as director of Burr Oak Cemetery. In a scandal that made national headlines, Towns allegedly dug up corpses and resold the burial plots for a profit. As Black Entertainment Television reported, “Carolyn Towns, the former director of Burr Oak, the historic Black cemetery south of Chicago, was convicted and sentenced to 12 years in prison for her role in stealing more than $100,000 in a scheme involving digging up bodies and reselling plots.”  

Till’s body was not included in the list of those unlawfully exhumed by Towns, yet investigators discovered that Towns and her associates had seemingly discarded his casket in an abandoned shed. A family of possums had taken up residence in Till’s casket during the years in which Towns was responsible for its preservation.  

Till’s family soon realized that Towns’ conviction meant another missed opportunity to memorialize the slain youth in his hometown of Chicago. Simeon Wright, Till’s cousin from Mississippi, criticized the city of Chicago for allowing fifty-six years to pass without creating a memorial or a museum for Emmett. “It is a sad commentary that this is his hometown. Even in the place that he was killed, they’re building a memorial to him.”  

While there are undoubtedly many groups and organizations that would support the initiative, it is presently unclear why Chicago has failed to prioritize the creation of a memorial for Emmett Till. Perhaps the delay stems from a lack of funding and clear leadership, yet the problem is also related to the difficulty involved in portraying and connecting Till’s story and significance to the larger community of Chicago. Further complicating memorialization efforts is the national notion that Till’s narrative is a southern issue that should be remembered the way it

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309 “Proposed Emmett Till Museum Lost in Burr Oak Scandal.”
occurred, removed from Chicago, deep in the southern landscape of Mississippi. For while many civil rights activists and members of the African American community find value and meaning in Till’s story, the lack of momentum in the memorialization project suggests that many Chicagoans either fail to envision the commemoration of Emmett Till as a national collective priority.

Following the Burr Oak Cemetery scandal, Till’s surviving family members chose to donate his original casket to the Smithsonian Institution. The casket will be part of a civil rights exhibit at the National Museum of African American History and Culture which is set to open in 2015. By donating the casket to the new national museum, Till’s family has attempted pull his story from its relatively inaccessible position in regional peripheries, and reinsert it into the center of the larger national narrative surrounding the African American experience.

Officially established by an Act of Congress in 2003, the National Museum of African American History and Culture will create exhibits celebrating African-American history, culture, and community. The creation of a separate African American museum raises questions concerning the purpose and mission of the National Museum of American History (NMAH) and the place of civil rights history in this museum. Some argue that African American history should be included within the realm of American History and thus, exhibited in the existing National Museum of American History. Currently, NMAH offers visitors a chance to explore a nuanced version of civil rights history through their exhibition containing the Woolworth’s lunch counter from the Student Sit-In Movement of the early 1960s. The sit in movement began

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312 New York Times writer Katie Taylor questions the purpose of two separate museums dedicated to the American Experience. According to Taylor, “The goal is “to make sure people see this is not an ancillary story, but it’s really the central story of the American experience,” Mr. Bunch said. (The fact that it will be a separate museum, next door to the National Museum of American History, might seem to complicate that message, but Mr. Bunch doesn’t seem bothered by that.)” Taylor, “The Thorny Patch.”
in Greensboro, North Carolina, when students utilized the strategy of passive resistance in an attempt to desegregate local lunch counters. While undoubtedly a significant object, the Greensboro Lunch Counter is representative of a victory of civil rights as student protestors were eventually successful in achieving their goal of desegregation.

While the national museum of American History will continue to exist and interpret culturally significant objects, the Smithsonian has also chosen to create an entirely new museum dedicated to African American History and Culture. Faced with the challenge of interpreting varied perspectives and narratives, it may prove difficult for Americans to reconcile the two histories when they are physically separated in the nation’s capital. The current staff does not perceive the separation to be a problem, but rather an opportunity to showcase an underrepresented facet of American History. According to acting NMAAHC Director, Lonnie Bunch,

This is not a museum that celebrates black history solely for black Americans. Rather we see this history as America's history. NMAAHC will use African American history and culture as a lens into what it means to be an American. If one wants to explore the changing definitions of American citizenship, liberty, and equality, where better than through the black experience? Bunch argues that through the use of objects and documents that the museum is now actively acquiring, the museum will act a “lens for American culture.” Unlike other Smithsonian museums on the mall, the NMAAHC will work to heal cultural wounds caused by America’s deeply rooted history and legacy of racism. According to Bunch, “This museum seeks to help all Americans remember, and by remembering, this institution will stimulate a dialogue about race and help to foster a spirit of reconciliation and healing.”

In a recent interview, Bunch spoke about his interpretation and vision of Till’s legacy. "Part of the responsibility of a national museum is to help people to remember, and through this donation we will ensure that future generations will remember how the death of a child, a

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314 “The National Museum of African American History and Culture is busy creating its foundational collections. Our purpose is to collect and preserve artifacts, documents, and art that reflect the history and development of the African American experience in its many aspects. Subjects will include the era of slavery, the period of Reconstruction, the Harlem Renaissance, and the civil rights movement.” Information gathered from, “NMAAHC Collections” http://www.nmaahc.si.edu/Collections.
mother's courage, helped to transform America.” As the Smithsonian exhibit will serve as the first opportunity to present Till’s story and honor his memory in a truly national setting, it is essential that the curators and historians working at the museum think carefully about the meaning they will assign to Till’s casket through their interpretation of the horrific event.

As Till’s memory resonates on various levels determined by geographic, generational and cultural boundaries, those working at the Smithsonian will face the daunting challenge of accurately capturing the historic significance and impact of Till’s lynching on the American nation as a whole. While there is presently no indication of how the casket will be exhibited, the NMAAHC could potentially use the casket to reshape the public memory of civil rights. Those responsible for the exhibit will face the challenge of deciding to either adhere to the current national narrative or rather, expand upon the collective memory by providing a more complex interpretation of Till’s lynching and the overall effect it had on the movement.

Conclusion

Fifty-six years have passed since the lynching of Emmett Till captured the nation’s attention and effectively propelled the civil rights movement into a position of prominence within the American media. Memorials and museums exist honoring civil rights icons such as Medgar Evers and Martin Luther King Jr. who suffered similar fates as Till, yet problems of historic significance and interpretation still hinder the process of honoring and remembering Emmett Till. While there are currently efforts to acknowledge Till, significant commemoration progress is lacking.

The disjointed process of memorialization is reflective of the current memory of Emmett Till which varies significantly amongst different cultural and generational groups. Till’s story challenges the established national narrative of civil rights as it represents a jarring failure on part of the American justice system. Rather than supporting the idea that Americans achieved progress in attaining equality for all, Till’s death serves as a reminder of racial injustice spurred by white resistance to equality.

As the established national narrative has failed to negotiate the unresolved complexities surrounding Till’s case, spaces related to both his lynching and legacy continue to exist as sites of struggle. Sites of struggle related to civil rights will probably never be embraced by Americans, though this does not mean that they should be denied historical interpretation. While places related to Emmett Till are often contested and neglected, the creation of new memorials and museums offers renewed opportunity to expand the national narrative.

The prospect of renewed interpretation at memorials and museums is auspicious, yet sites of struggle will likely never gain full public acceptance as they problematize the process of traditional memorialization by revealing inherent weaknesses and flaws in America’s progressive victory narrative. Sites of struggle represent not only debated historical events but also contentious individuals and organizations that are frequently positioned as the antithesis of American ideals of progress, equality, and democracy.

In the specific case of the civil rights movement, the process of recognizing sites of struggle is further complicated by shifting historical interpretations concerning the broader timeframe of the movement. While many recognize the years between Brown v. Board and King’s assassination as the epitome of the movement, historians have started to reframe the general timeline to include a more comprehensive analysis of the “long civil rights” struggle that lasted throughout the entire 20th century.317 By expanding the historical narrative to include events, sites, and individuals that were not previously associated with civil rights, historians have challenged Americans to reconsider the national memory of the movement.

As Americans try to reconcile an expanding civil rights timeline with the intricate ideologies of disparate civil rights leaders and organizations, sites of struggle encourage flexible interpretation concerning the goals and overall legacy of the movement. Rather than attempting to fit all sites of struggle into the established civil rights narrative, Americans could benefit from simply acknowledging that the national understanding and memory of civil rights is just as complex and challenging as the movement itself.

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