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# Re-Remembering a Segregated Past

## *Race in American Memory*

KENNETH J. BINDAS

Utilizing comparative oral histories from the American south and north, the article explores how different groups of African American and white Americans frame their personal and, by association, collective histories and how these narratives can help guide the development of a new trope concerning race relations in the United States. Even as the groups were separated by region, era, class and context, a surprising unity in the responses regarding race emerged, and the respondents' use of language, silence and local color helped to illuminate the past in order to construct meaning that transcends the traditional historical narrative. Oral history has the ability, through the process of allowing people the space to tell their stories, to assist society in better understanding a shared past and enables a more nuanced collective memory.

In a 1989 interview, Lakecia Denson asks Ella Gibson, age 74, about her life in rural Georgia during the early 1930s. Gibson tells the freshman interviewer that as a young girl, around Lakecia's age, she worked from dawn to dusk in the cotton fields around Lee City, Georgia. When Denson follows up and asks about school and her education, Gibson pauses and responds, not with graduation dates and favorite classes because working prevented her from attending, but with a confession of sorts: "well now, ya'll blessed, ya'll really blessed. But you know what it is ya'll livin' on? People's prayers from back then up until now." When sophomore Cyndi Martin asks Norman Smith about his experiences as a young man during the 1950s in Warren, Ohio, like Gibson he chooses not to answer the asked question and instead admonishes today's African American young people because they "don't realize the price we paid for [their] freedom."<sup>1</sup>

These two comments underscore the discursive nature of the oral history interview and the structure of collective memory that frames the African American experience in the United States. This essay will use a series of oral history interviews to explore how different groups of African American and white Americans frame their personal and, by association, collective histories and how these narratives can help guide the development of a new trope concerning race relations in the United States.

Beginning in 1990 and continuing through 2004, my students and I collected over 600 oral history interviews from rural Georgians and urban-ites from northeast Ohio. The first project began while I was teaching at the University of West Georgia (then West Georgia College) during the early 1990s. Located in Carrollton, a small town west of Atlanta near the Alabama border, the student population was predominantly white and residential, with most students coming from the surrounding counties and the Atlanta area. I used an oral history assignment in my modern United States history courses to show the students how history is made personal and also so that I could gain a better understanding of the people of the region. The questions dealt with how ordinary people felt, thought and acted during the Depression era. I encouraged the students to interview a family member or close friend to allow for greater openness since, given the time frame, many relatives from this period were still alive. Other students went to local assisted living homes to talk with those residents. The issues of race and identity were not the central core of the interview, but oftentimes these issues surfaced and the students were encouraged to listen for these verbal cues and follow up with more direct questions. Many did, but a larger number did not, instead quickly moving on to the next topic or question. Since the great plurality of those interviewed were white, perhaps the students did not feel comfortable asking questions about race given the period under investigation, their relative's general attitude in this regard and how this might be perceived by their northern professor.

The second group of interviews came from a series of courses during the early part of this century I taught at a regional campus of Kent State University outside Warren, Ohio. These students were commuters and many were first-generation college bound, working in part-time or full-time jobs and, in many cases, raising a family. They mostly came from the surrounding urban areas hard-hit by the steel mill closings of the 1970s and 1980s. The oral history questions for these courses were designed

specifically to probe the nature of race relations in the region during the 1950s and 1960s through the description of getting a living, home life, food ways and cultural/social activities. My goal was to encourage the students to hear how history is made personal and what can be learned through listening about the past.

Comparing the two, I noticed that even though separated by region, era, class and context, a surprising unity in the responses regarding race emerged. Through their stories I heard how the use of language, silence and local color helped to illuminate the past, allowing one to draw from their stories a meaning that transcends the traditional historical narrative. Within these interviews, African American respondents found new space to discuss their daily struggles with racism and present their journey within the larger context of liberation, even within the construct of the dominant culture and its narrative. For white respondents, the discussion of race relations brought discomfort and a refusal to accept responsibility or complicity for the past injustices. For one group the interviews presented the opportunity to come out from the shadows; while for the other, it allowed for a nostalgic look back to a time when apparently everyone got along in their separate spheres.

#### INTENTION AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Much of what will be explored concerns the concept of collective memory and its relationship to the creation of public and private history.<sup>2</sup> The negotiation between society and the individual with regard to collective memory is replayed in the oral history interview, where the interviewer and interviewee negotiate on the basis of what each brings to the process. The informants frame their responses and make themselves both the subject and object of the interview, infusing the directed conversation with more power via an emotional and personal connection that transcends a historical episode. This speaks to the methodological approach of oral history, where both the interviewer and informant come to the experience with an *intention*, a desire to get something out of the interview. For the informants, the oral history interview presents a variety of intentions, including the opportunity to validate their lives and experiences, to tell stories that position their individual past within the collective identity, to

satisfy the interviewer, to get attention or to see themselves as historical actors. For the interviewers, the intentions are slightly different, but generally, their desire is to attain a better view into the past through the individual experience, to unearth new information, or to find an amazing story that might better focus the larger context. Since both enter the oral history moment with specific intentions, the interview itself is an active negotiation in the form of a directed conversation.

This exchange is evident throughout the interviews, as interviewer and interviewee work to fulfill their individual intentions. This intentionality displays symbolic and literal meaning through word choice, slang, diction, pace, form, enunciation, facial expressions and a whole series of verbal and nonverbal cues and helps to place the individual into the collective recall of a group through his/her legitimation. Historian Susan Crane posits the “task of representation” as fundamental to understanding both the value of the collective memory and the historian’s role in its meaning. By validating the individual within the collective, historians can better “focus on the way individuals experience themselves as historical entities” so that their “lived experience ... becomes part of collective memory.”<sup>3</sup> Sociologist Reuben A. Buford May details how tavern conversations among African American men in Chicago create and define a collective memory concerning race relations and how these conversations validate their personal histories. May argues that the men’s sense of liberty to vent their feelings within the safety of the bar allows them the space to place their experiences within the larger framework of the city and the nation, creating a socially constructed historical memory.<sup>4</sup>

Each generation of Americans since the Civil War has had to deal with the structural and generational memory of slavery, Jim Crow and its corresponding historical paradigm of subordination, which helps to construct a collective memory. For African Americans, this process reminds them that for their historical cohort slavery was a lived, real situation that produced distinctive social and political systems, culture and folkways. For white Americans, slavery and its aftermath have a different collective memory, one that reflects their political, moral and economic dilemmas. This gap between what the dominant (white) culture identifies as collective memory—slavery as a moral, political or economic wrong righted by the Civil War and a century of activism that followed—and the African American collective countermemory concerning the daily subjugation and

secondary citizen status is where the present negotiation concerning race in America is taking place.<sup>5</sup>

The years following the Civil War laid the foundation for the division in the narrative. The war initially raised the hope that citizenship might replace race as the sole basis for American identity, but the realities of Reconstruction and its aftermath forced African Americans to redefine their collective history, according to Ron Eyeran, by “transforming tragedy into triumph with the uncovering of new strategies in the struggle for collective recognition, in the face of the threat of marginalization.”<sup>6</sup> This memory of hope and sacrifice was given credence and promoted in the latter part of the nineteenth century through black-owned newspapers and black ministers, who reminded their audiences of the experiences and hopes of the past in connection with the struggles of the present. The journey, so filled with false promises and unrealized dreams, suggested greater rewards. The outline of this collective memory carried over into the twentieth century via slave narratives, autobiographies and adventure literature catering to the rising literacy rate for African Americans.<sup>7</sup> Muriel Robinson follows the countertrope nearly a century later when talking about the 1950s in Warren, Ohio. In the interview, she pauses when asked to discuss what it was like as a black woman during that time and looks directly into the camera, saying how difficult it is to discuss this time period, but those struggles made her “aware of who [she] was through the racism and prejudice ... [helping her to become] a wise [and] knowledgeable person.”<sup>8</sup> Robinson’s comments reveal how the incorporation of the narrative patterns begun with the failures of Reconstruction are organized into both her personal memory and the collective identity of African Americans. Through the digital video oral history process, she passes it to the next generation, allowing her some reflective modification to fit the existing historical context.<sup>9</sup>

#### ORAL TESTIMONY AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

How does the collective come to represent the past, given the limitations of who can speak, the choice of artifacts used to convey meaning and the difficulty of making the past visible? Oral history can play a central role in the transmission of collective memory. Telling stories to others reveals

the personal in the historical experience, as the teller uses the interview to weave personal memories into the larger historical context and place them into the moment. In the Georgia project, the students tended to interview members of their families or friends and the conversation often flowed in a warm and personal manner. This was generally positive, in that the familiarity brought out interesting stories of family life and struggle, but it also limited their ability to discuss difficult topics like divorce, death, alcoholism, race and other topics sensitive to the family memory. One hears this in the pauses, silence or the general nostalgic dismissal of anything negative about the past. For the Warren project, since those who interviewed African Americans were not family, the interviewees had no need to hide memories and felt very comfortable discussing the difficulties of the past. Those who interviewed white Warrenites tended to choose family members, which resulted in the same tendencies that affected the Georgia group. In both projects, the questions were designed to allow the informants to talk about their lives free from a presumption or personal agenda.

The methodology and questions gave the informant the space to talk about their lives. As a result, the information that came forth helps identify a collective and generational understanding of race that reflects both their personal and representative experiences. Their oral testimony places their memory within the historical context and illuminates the larger social consciousness of the era under discussion. By legitimizing their experiences within the larger historical framework, the interviews help oral historians and students see how and why people acted or did not act during a historical episode and help to outline the collective consciousness and use it to better describe and contextualize the moment. That segregation existed and had political, social and economic effects on both the black and white populations is fact; but what these oral testimonies reveal is that the informants also have power. The *feeling* with which the informants talk about their experiences comes through because the oral interview process is not usually rehearsed.<sup>10</sup>

Take for example when Frederick Harris talks about coming of age in Warren during the late 1950s. The interviewer asks for specific episodes where race played a central role in his life and Harris chooses to place his response in a larger context: “we thought this is the way it was everywhere—this is the way it works.” In order to reinforce what he

means and what it meant, he follows with a story about his mother using the bathroom in the basement of the local courthouse because she was black: “She was my mother—there was nothing wrong with my mother!” Beula Youngblood, in trying to impress upon her young interviewer the daily dehumanizing tendencies of racism in 1930s rural Georgia, begins by stating she “knew something was wrong, [because her family] went to church” and the doctrine of racism seemed contradictory to the message she heard there. She relates how she had to “quit answering to [her] name” and take on a new one because the white landowner’s daughter was also named Beula. Both stories reveal the informants’ intention of talking beyond racism and connecting their experiences to the universal ideals of motherhood and identity. The stories cross generational, regional, class and gender lines to convey the larger meaning of racism so that the interviewer would get some sense of how it *felt*.<sup>11</sup>

What Youngblood, Harris and the other African American informants recall reveals their connection to a collective identity. In thinking about their experiences and then framing them within the context of their social group, the act of telling their stories conveys both their personal and collective understanding and allows the interviewer to see beyond the individual story to the larger collective one. Sociologist Jeffery Alexander takes this collective idea one step further and introduces cultural trauma into the discussion. This is “when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group’s consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.” The focus of their memories is less on the morality and more on what and how the trauma operates within the larger society. Within this, he argues, “it is the meanings that provide the sense of shock and fear, not the events themselves.”<sup>12</sup> Harris understands his oral testimony is part of this transmission process, as he tells his interviewer that when his generation dies off, “our children, our grandchildren” will have “no idea what we went through” unless he and others talk about their experiences.<sup>13</sup> As his recall runs counter to that of the dominant society, he understands that by passing down memories generationally, he is working to convince a wider audience of this narrative.

The dominant narrative reduces race to a series of events and problems that have been overcome, without having to understand the larger and more detailed individual and collective trauma that underscored the



process. In order to modify this narrative, individuals, like Harris, must go beyond the foundational aspects of the civil rights movement and create an understanding of its meaning, or how it made those experiencing the trauma feel and its effects on the larger society. Muriel Robinson says she finds it incredible that during the 1960s the American people could watch television scenes of authorities using police dogs and fire hoses to prevent African Americans from securing the right to vote without being outraged. "Because they wanna vote?" she says incredulously into the camera, "we're the only segment of the community that was ever done to." She understands that by invoking the symbolic patriotic gesture of voting and the subsequent denial of that right and privilege for no other reason than race, she is imparting to her young, white interviewer the larger meaning of racism and the perseverance of those struggling for equality, thereby challenging the existing narrative.<sup>14</sup>

#### CHALLENGING THE NARRATIVE?

Central to broadening the narrative is assigning and accepting responsibility. Interviews with white participants reveal their acceptance of the dominant narrative and an understanding that racism and segregation were wrong, but they fall short of accepting responsibility. This unwillingness to assign responsibility is part of the re-remembering of the past that Kenneth Thompson labels the "spiral of signification," where stories and their meanings are reduced to the commonplace and routine, which allows for the development of commemorations and memorials to honor and recall events or people instrumental in the historical episode without assigning responsibility.<sup>15</sup> This is true of the civil rights struggle, as over forty-five films and television programs were aired dramatizing the movement since the latter part of the 1960s, and over 730 communities renamed roads to honor Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>16</sup> The overall effect, argues historian Edward P. Morgan, creates a selective and sanitized version of that period that reinforces America's "special nation" status. In other words, "once [segregation] was brought to the nation's attention, this wrong was righted, albeit at considerable cost to individuals involved." But all is well now.<sup>17</sup>

The creation of public space that challenges the dominant paradigm and narrative can be traced back to well before the civil rights era. Kathleen

Ann Clark convincingly argues how African American public commemorations were a staple of the postwar American south, full with parades, speeches and other activities, which lasted well into the twentieth century. These reveal “one facet of a vital and dynamic African American public culture” that developed in the south after the war. It also suggests the maintenance of a shared memory, particularly as new generations sought an understanding of the collective past. In this way, the public commemorations serve both as a lesson and as a reminder.<sup>18</sup> In another example, Scott Sandage describes the transformation of the Lincoln Memorial from a place of national reconciliation—its original intent when commissioned and constructed between 1912 and 1921—to a “kind of Trojan horse [of civil rights] evoking the specter of militancy in the capital through peaceful gatherings that celebrated national values even as they strove to change them.” Beginning with Marian Anderson’s 1939 concert through the 1963 March on Washington, he argues, African American activists used the national and even sacred space of the Lincoln Memorial to “refine the politics of memory” through mass ritual and nonviolence.<sup>19</sup>

The historical sites created to commemorate and celebrate the battles for equality, while suitable and reasonable as places of remembrance, also have the effect of limiting the ability of adopting a new narrative. The erection of civil rights memorials serves to legitimize the idea that the political system has corrected inequality and as a result, as Nikhil Pal Singh argues, encourages an atmosphere of limited critical analysis and forgetfulness. Beginning shortly after the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, he notes, many Americans—including presidential administrations from Richard Nixon to George W. Bush—questioned the necessity of continued political activism and so the meaning of race underwent a change. “Basing resistance to black calls for social justice on a defense of market individualism and national unity,” Singh argues, “conservatives changed the debate about race from an argument about how best to redress the economic and political injuries of racism to one that equates ending racism with eliminating racial reference within juridical discourse and public policy.” The memorial sites serve as social and political reminders that the struggle—while valiant—is over and that the issues of the past have been corrected.<sup>20</sup> This color blindness is reinforced by the white informants’ willingness to accept the narrative that the struggle is over and view race as no longer the point of contention. They are witness to the memorial-

ization of the movement, the street names, television specials, books and movies, all of which reinforce, as Leigh Raiford and Renee Romano suggest, the country's vested interest in using the "memory of the movement as a tool of nation-building and of fostering and fomenting hegemony through consensus."<sup>21</sup>

#### CONTESTED MEMORIES

When listening to how the African American informants frame their recall of events during the 1950s and 1960s in the north, one hears how they challenge the dominant narrative through their awareness that the personal stories they are sharing are part of an emerging social discourse. The African American informants use the interviews as an opportunity to frame their personal experiences within the collective memory of their community in much the same way as historian Michael Honey's study of working-class African Americans in Memphis suggests that their contribution to the civil rights movement meant the daily struggle for survival, in that their activism meant putting food on the table, paying the bills and "hoping for an opportunity to right the many wrongs of segregation."<sup>22</sup> Both the Warren group and Honey's Memphis group resisted open rebellion or protest but expressed a pride in their hard work and their ability to survive and carve out a decent existence in light of society's many obstacles. Sacrifice was central to their struggle, and through their job performance they brought down the barriers between white and black workers, often working through the union as a means to ensure a better future.

The individual empowerment the African American interviewees find in telling their stories to the overwhelmingly young, white interviewers, with limited understanding of the pervasiveness of segregation or how racism personally affected individuals, is evident in the confidence with which they relate their stories and its impact on these student interviewers. As interviewer Holly Davis says, "the community I come from, we don't have any African Americans. We had three and they were all from the same family." For her, and many of the other students, the oral history assignment became their introduction to another aspect of American life.<sup>23</sup>

The African American interviewees' focus on the sacrifices necessary to challenge the segregation suggested that their daily, even mundane

experiences became seeds for change. They recall with tremendous detail the ways in which Warren and surrounding areas tried to make sure African Americans stayed in their place and how they challenged these barriers. Frederick Harris recalls his high school years in Warren when he had to switch busses in downtown during the winter. The students congregated in the vestibule of a local department store, but, he recalls, “we weren’t allowed to stand in there and the white kids would laugh at us because we’d have to stand like this [grabs his arms like he’s shivering] in the cold waiting on the bus and they would stand there in the warm.” JoAnn Turner recalls the time she and her husband spent looking for a house to buy in Warren in the early 1960s. The realtor only showed them houses in substandard areas so she switched to another realtor who said up front that he would take them to the “nicest that I have that *you* can buy.” “White girls that didn’t go to college went to the factories” (which didn’t hire black girls), while “black girls went to the hotels and housecleaning [because] that’s the only thing that we could get,” recalls Bertha Barber when discussing employment opportunities after high school. The idea that education somehow led to advancement lost its meaning to her and many within her cohort. Muriel Robinson recounts how after graduation she couldn’t even get an interview when a new bank opened. The white girls hired had graduated with her with lower grades. “Packard Electric,” a large General Motors subsidiary that employed thousands of workers in the Warren area, “only hired people from the black community to clean bathrooms and things. They didn’t work in production,” recalls James Johnson. Isnell Rumph, the appointed Clerk of the City Council in the late 1950s, which made her a visible leader within the African American community, tells her interviewer how when candidate John Kennedy visited Warren in 1960, she was photographed with him and city dignitaries. Yet, when the photo ran the next day in the local paper, she was mysteriously “blocked out.” She sighs, pauses and says she “held [her] head up and prayed and kept on.”<sup>24</sup>

The Warren respondents told their interviewers that they knew the racial boundaries and the de facto segregation of the city. Morris Hill, who in 1966 became one of the few black police officers in Warren, relates that “they tried to keep the segregation out of the eye of the public, but you could feel it and you could see it” if you were black. Olive Reese tells of the three movie theaters in downtown Warren where blacks could only

“sit upstairs.” “No restaurants would let blacks in” to eat, Bertha Barber recalls, yet they did “wash dishes, wait tables, or work downstairs in the laundry with the linen.” Lou Tabor also remembers how he “could not go to restaurants and be served.” This changed when the 1964 Civil Rights Act passed and many restaurants had to serve the African American population, but new tactics of exclusion emerged. White interviewee Rosalie Price recalls that eateries “would not let them [blacks] sit with the white people,” instead creating special seating areas for them. Anne Marie Graziosi, who worked in a Warren restaurant at the time, recalls when the “first black person came in” to eat, the staff did not know what to do. After talking with the manager, they served him dinner but afterwards were afraid that “if he came in other whites wouldn’t.” Olive Reese remembers an episode that occurred after he had eaten at a local restaurant that had previously barred black patrons—the servers broke their dirty dishes “instead of ... washing them.”<sup>25</sup>

When the southern African American informants discussed their past, they did so with a framing that recognized the power of the existing narrative but at the same time gave them room to be critical. Since they lived in the rural south during the 1930s, the reality of segregation and exclusion was more overt. William Gordon did not go to school because “in them days the white man wanted you to go to the fields and work.” Schooling was not needed, Addie Baynard and Ossie Barlow tell their interviewer, because blacks did fieldwork while “white folks had the factory jobs.” For them, education meant little, for black girls were not even allowed to “go into the bank” let alone get a job working there, “no matter how [much] education” they had. The idea of opportunity outside of fieldwork was inconceivable, for they either did “what [the white people] told you to do ... [or] you got beat up,” remembers Georgia Mae Calloway. William Gordon says that in order to survive he “had to work for the white folk” and could not “stand on the street corners” without being “run off.” Beula Youngblood puts a more contemporary slant on it for her young interviewer, saying that if they tried to talk “out like the young do now somebody was gone get hung [or] drowned in the river.” “We had to depend on the white man because [we] didn’t have anything,” recalls Monroe, Georgia, native Billy Patrick. We “accepted it because [we] had too.”<sup>26</sup>

## SILENCE AND SHAME

It is the silences of the black respondents however, that convey powerful meanings. Most of the respondents in the southern study did not want to discuss the racial past, perhaps because they still lived in the communities under discussion and retained some of the fear of retribution that was part of their collective memory, or because they knew that the assignment was being taped and made part of the public record. While the modern historical matrix seemingly allowed them space to discuss more freely their feelings about how racism affected their daily lives, they seem very aware, as were Michael Honey's subjects, of their collective past regarding the worst of Jim Crow. In this way, they conform to the racial etiquette of their generational memory, balancing humility with resistance. Even as society opened space for a conversational narrative closed for many years, they still felt uncomfortable bringing up the topic, and when raised, spoke briefly and without acrimony.<sup>27</sup>

The development and acceptance of a narrative that validates the experiences of one group oftentimes comes, as Edward Said reminds us, at the expense of the collective memory of the other and is often rife with conflict.<sup>28</sup> For the white respondents from these same regions, the way they frame the past is now more complicated, for an open discussion of the racism of the not-so-distant past borders on an admission of complicity and acceptance of responsibility that prove difficult for most of the white respondents. Instead they choose to frame the situation by explaining that generally everyone got along as long as they stayed in their place, a sort of "out of sight out of mind" take on race relations. When Elizabeth Jelin and Susana Kaufman investigated the meaning of memory in Argentina, where victims of the violence and repression by the government demanded commemoration, they confronted a greater number of people they labeled as "bystanders of horror" who insisted they did not know or see anything. Their refusal to accept the reality did not diminish its existence; it just brought into question how to frame the meaning of the past. Certainly, the same held true of those in former Nazi-controlled areas during World War II who had to confront their complicity in the labor and death camps.<sup>29</sup>

For the white informants to discuss the racism of their past with interviewers born well after the activism and demonstrations of the 1960s

and the social changes that came afterward meant revealing a less-than-flattering side of their collective past. Seeing themselves as mere bystanders, they chose instead to view the matter as a “silent event,” which James Pennebaker and Becky Banasik define as an event or memory that people “actively avoid talking about” for various reasons including its being “guilt worthy or shameful.” Even though people might choose not to discuss the event openly, they continue to reflect on the memory.<sup>30</sup> The white Warren group framed their understanding of the past with words and phrases that suggested segregation and even violence without allowing the totality of the racism to come through. Phrases like “that’s the way things were,” or “everyone got along and stayed in their place,” suggest the division between the lived experience and the recalled experience. Betty Sloan, for example, says she could not “remember ever seeing any black men down in Warren,” while Ruth Johnson simply believes no blacks worked on the railroad because “black people [didn’t want] to work for the railroad.” There was no segregation in Warren, Emma Buckner tells her interviewer, but something more akin to people belonging to different “social clubs.”<sup>31</sup>

The Warren group saw themselves as bystanders to the larger racial problems, which conforms to the “common trope in civil rights memory,” according to historian Renee Romano. Her study of the Birmingham church bombing trials argues that such cases serve as symbols of the nation’s attitude regarding civil rights and how “whites’ racial attitudes have changed dramatically from the 1960s.” Over the last fifteen years, these trials have led to the conviction and imprisonment of those responsible for church bombings in Birmingham and the murders of Medgar Evers, Emmett Till and of Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman and James Chaney. But, to suggest that these trials absolve the greater guilt is misleading, as they allow the white majority to see themselves against the backdrop of “individual evil racists ... [who were] personally responsible for the racial hatred ... while ignoring the larger culture of racism of the time.”<sup>32</sup>

For the white people living in Warren, their blindness to the city’s de facto segregation made them feel different from their southern counterparts, and in many ways better. Yet, they trap themselves in the paradox of their personal and collective memory. Alice Surrena recalls how some people in Warren refused to drink out of the same water fountain as blacks; yet, in addressing the same question, points out that in the south

blacks would have to “step off the sidewalk to let a white person pass.” Paul Starnes follows the same contradictory path, pointing out that down south “they wouldn’t [allow blacks to] eat in the same restaurants”; yet, he couldn’t “recall ever seeing a black person” in Warren’s diners. Mary Homlitas became uncomfortable with the whole line of questioning and finally snaps at her son saying, “we did what we were told to do, lived according to the law. That was it.”<sup>33</sup>

White southerners recalling rural Georgia during the 1930s are also trapped by this paradox. Some mention the normalcy of segregation, but for most the issue of segregation or institutionalized racism is absent from their recall, as if they didn’t see it. “Whites and colored people lived in their own separate communities, and the whites went their way and the blacks went theirs,” remembers Maybell Loftin. Geneva Ariail says she did not remember “ever seeing a black person” during the 1930s in Commerce, Georgia. Several minutes later, she relates how her grandfather had several black tenant farmers on his land (where she also lived). Ruth Smith’s family could barely make ends meet on their small farm outside Villa Rica, Georgia, and had little to do with racial issues, she tells her interviewer. However, when addressing later questions, she tells of the black tenant farmers working their land for her father where he “got all the crops” and that her family had a black maid who cooked and cleaned for them. They paid her a dollar a week, she says, and “of course we fed her too!” Most informants would agree with Woodrow Maffet, who saw the racial past as a benign reality where color “didn’t matter back in them days [because] they stayed in their place and we stayed in ours.” When his interviewer suggests this sounds like segregation, Maffet snaps, “the colored didn’t try to go in with the whites [as] they knew where they could go.” The interviewer pushes further, wondering what prevented blacks from going where they were not wanted. Maffet simply says, “they got stopped.” Cornelia Presley describes what happened to those who strayed from the racial divides—they were taken “out to the barn and whip[ped].”<sup>34</sup>

The reluctance and unease of the white respondents from both areas when discussing race should come as little surprise. Luisa Passerini discusses a similar tactic regarding the recall of Italians discussing the era of Mussolini, where they focused their memories on “jobs, marriage, and children, narrating their daily life apparently indifferent to fascism.”<sup>35</sup> This also applies to southerners, because as Larry Griffin argues, regional



memory operates in a fashion similar to generational identity. Since the south, according to the accepted narrative, is where most of the civil rights activity and violence took place, many of the white respondents have a personal connection through either ignorance or activism and oftentimes their physical space is contiguous and therefore harder to confront. They choose then to misremember.<sup>36</sup> The “selective omission of disagreeable facts ... is probably the most obvious way to distort collective memory,” according to a study done by sociologists Roy Baumeister and Stephen Hastings. They investigated how the distortion of collective memory occurs and conclude that most individuals try to “maintain a positive image of self” and use a variety of self-deceptive techniques to obviate an uncomfortable memory.<sup>37</sup> In other words, when discussing a positive memory, the connection to the larger historical memory is very strong, but when the memory is less than positive, the connection is tenuous and a variety of strategies are employed to justify the explanations.

#### AN EMERGING NARRATIVE

In examining the oral histories that constitute this study, one is struck by the profound unity in the responses. For the African American group remembering brings empowerment and an opportunity to inject a more personal story into the existing narrative of the struggle for civil rights in America. For the white group, remembering forces a reevaluation of the accepted narrative and encourages them to consider their personal role in the process. For both, talking about racial issues is unsettling, as one speaks to the reality of the past and the other to the unwillingness to accept responsibility. This division between the meaning of their memories and the accepted narrative provides an insight into the ways in which race operates in the United States. The dialogue between the two (black and white; memory and history) opens new spaces for discourse and illuminates the meaning and significance of seminal historical epochs. The need for empirical explanations of the similarities of their memories suggests the common institutions within each community, like religion, education, politics, language, or the family. These structural and post-structural explanations describe in a reasonable way the bridge between memory and history.

However, when trying to discuss or understand race and its effects in the United States, one is not limited to place or time. The recall of the above informants—black and white—transcends any single event or even era. Their conception of race is informed and defined by their subjective memory, the recorded history and the modernist influence of the media. The awareness of race and its meaning goes beyond the physical demarcation of color to include smell, language, clothing, class, living space and other constructed situations that transcend an era. Shane White and Graham White suggest that “differences in the ways in which the blacks had clothed their bodies” and their speech, body movement and manners are as much a part of defining race as “skin pigment.” Mark Smith’s recent exploration into sensory history indicates that the social construction of race transcends color and has to include the “hearing, smell, touch, and taste ... [to] profile ordinarily hidden dimensions of racial thought.”<sup>38</sup>

The recollections of the African Americans from the north and south all reveal their understanding that segregation, racism and limiting a person’s ability because of the perception of color is wrong. They use their oral histories to augment the accepted narrative to include a more personal meaning to race and racism in the United States. This dialogue reflects against a historical backdrop where the dominant white culture played an active role in justifying, legitimizing and supporting racism, whether through religion, politics, economics, culture or the media. And, while the white respondents do not fully accept their complicity, their unease in answering the questions and even their refusal to comment seems to suggest they too are aware that the existing narrative is undergoing revision to come more in line with the counternarrative that has existed within the African American collective memory.

These oral history interviews suggest that a new narrative seems to be emerging, or is at least being allowed to be heard. Challenging centuries of empirical evidence justifying and legitimizing racism, the discourse is empowering new voices, ones long silenced or marginalized. Oral history has the ability, through the process of allowing people the space to tell their stories, to assist society in better understanding their shared past and allows for a more nuanced collective memory. History is dialogue, and by listening, historians and students can add new meaning and awareness to African American and United States history. That the people are aware of the past is the first step to recognizing this collective consciousness.

"I wish it were possible," Bertha Barber ends her interview in a fatigued voice, "we could all live in God's love, equally and together. Because I don't want what you have. If you just give me a chance to work, to have equal to what you have, I think we can get along."<sup>39</sup>

## NOTES

1. Ella Gibson, interviewed by Lakecia Denson, November 2, 1989, Bindas Oral History Project, Kent State University Archives, Kent, Ohio (hereafter BOHP), 2; Norman Smith, interviewed by Cindy Martin, October 28, 2002, *Documentary Justice* DVD, produced by Molly Merryman and Kenneth J. Bindas, 2002 (hereafter *DJ*).

2. See Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); James W. Pennebaker, Dario Paez and Bernard Rimé, eds., *Collective Memory of Social Events: Social Psychological Perspectives* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997), especially Dario Paez, Nekane Basabe and Jose Luis Gonzalez, "Social Processes and Collective Memory: A Cross-Cultural Approach to Remembering Political Events," 147–74; Jaclyn Jeffrey and Glendace Edwall, eds., *Memory and History: Essays on Recalling and Interpreting Experience* (New York: University Press of America, 1994), especially Paul Thompson, "Believe It or Not: Rethinking the Historical Interpretation of Memory," 1–16; James V. Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), particularly chap. 3, 30–66.

3. Susan A. Crane, "Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory," *American Historical Review* 102, no. 5 (December 1997): 1374, 1375, 1381.

4. Rueben A. Buford May, "Race Talk and Local Collective Memory among African American Men in a Neighborhood Tavern," *Qualitative Sociology* 23, no. 2 (June 2000): 201–14.

5. See David W. Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory and the American Civil War* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002).

6. Ron Eyerman, "Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity," in Jeffrey C. Alexander et al., eds., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 80.

7. Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919–1950* (New York: Norton, 2008); Adam Fairclough, "State of the Art: Historians and the Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of American Studies* 24, no. 3 (December 1990): 387–98; Kathryn L. Nasstrom, "Beginnings and Endings: Life

Stories and the Periodization of the Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of American History* 86, no. 2 (September 1999): 700–11.

8. Muriel Robinson, interviewed by Paula Johnson, October 25, 2002, *DJ*.

9. See Eyerman, “Cultural Trauma,” 60, 61, 67.

10. See Alessandro Portelli, “History Telling and Time: An Example From Kentucky,” in Genevieve Fabre and Robert O’Meally, eds., *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 164–67; Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis, “Black Women’s Life Stories: Reclaiming Self in Narrative Texts,” in Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 43–57; Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 15–28; Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 1–223; 220–45; 309–23.

11. Frederick Harris, interviewed by Teresa Davis, October 2002, *DJ*; Beula Youngblood, interviewed by Bryant Ellington, May 22, 1990, BOHP, 8. See also Leigh Raiford and Renee C. Romano, “Introduction: The Struggle over Memory,” in Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford, eds., *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), xvi–xvii.

12. Jeffery C. Alexander, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma,” in Alexander et al., eds., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, 1.

13. Frederick Harris, interviewed by Teresa Davis, October 2002, *DJ*.

14. Muriel Robinson, interviewed by Paula Johnson, October 25, 2002, *DJ*. Recent scholarship has attempted to modify this trope by adding more individual and/or radical voices. See Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting ’Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006); Paul Alkebulan, *Survival Pending Revolution: The History of the Black Panther Party* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007); Cedric Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

15. Thompson quoted in Alexander, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma,” 13.

16. For a discussion on how the creation of memorials, art and holidays influences collective social memory, see Diane Barthel, *Historic Preservation: Collective Memory and Historical Identity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996); Michael Frisch, “American History and the Structures of Collective Memory: A Modest Exercise in Empirical Iconography,” *Journal of American History* 75, no. 4 (March 1989), 1130–55. For collective memory and race, see Romano and Raiford, eds., *The Civil Rights Movement*, in particular Jennifer Fuller “Debating the Present through the Past: Representations of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1990s,” 167–96, and Derek H. Alderman “Street Names as Memorial Arenas:

The Reputational Politics of Commemorating Martin Luther King Jr. in a Georgia County,” 67–95.

17. Edward P. Morgan, “The Good, the Bad, and the Forgotten: Media Culture and Public Memory of the Civil Rights Movement,” in Romano and Raiford, eds., *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, 158.

18. Kathleen Ann Clark, *Defining Moments: African American Commemoration and Political Culture in the South, 1863–1913* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 2.

19. Scott A. Sandage, “A Marble House Divided: The Lincoln Memorial, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Politics of Memory, 1939–1963,” in Charles M. Payne and Adam Green, eds., *Time Longer Than Rope: A Century of African American Activism, 1850–1950* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 519, 494. See also Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” in Fabre and O’Meally, eds., *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, 284–301. This book is a result of a seminar dedicated to discussing and challenging the structure of Nora’s “lieux de mémoire,” or sites of memory, in relation to African-American historical memory. Nora provides the contemporary foundation for understanding how modern societies’ need for a usable past is often in conflict with history and inevitably makes it subservient to the needs of the group it seeks to serve. These sites of memory, with their increased democratization, sense of duty and discontinuous vision of the past and future, challenge the organization of the past because memory is not subject to objective analysis or criticism. While valuable to the individual or group that creates and commemorates it, because of its personal and organic relationship and meaning, memory serves to either legitimize the dominant historical narrative or becomes overwhelmed by it.

20. Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 10.

21. Raiford and Romano, “Introduction,” xvii.

22. Michael Honey, “The Power of Remembering: Black Factory Workers and Union Organizing in the Jim Crow Era,” in Payne and Green, eds., *Time Longer Than Rope*, 327. See also Michael Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King’s Last Campaign* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007).

23. Holly Davis, interviewed by Mike Ciferno, October 31, 2002, *DJ*. On the specific oral histories relating to the civil rights movement and some of its activists, see Bret Eynon, “Cast Upon the Shore: Oral History and New Scholarship on the Movements of the 1960s,” *Journal of American History* 83, no. 2 (September 1996): 560–70; Nasstrom, “Beginnings and Endings,” 700–11. See also the excellent collection, William Chafe et al., eds., *Remembering Jim Crow: African*

*Americans Tell about Life in the Segregated South* (New York: New Press, 2001); and Jennifer Rittenhouse, *Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Children Learned Race* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), especially chap. 3, "I Knew Then Who I Was," 108–42, which focuses on identity.

24. Frederick Harris, interviewed by Molly Merryman, November, 2002, *DJ*; JoAnn Turner, interviewed by Kristy Rider, May 3, 2002, Community History Project, 2003, Special Collections, Kent State University (hereafter CHP); Bertha Barber, interviewed by Renee Pisan, October 30, 2002, *DJ*; Muriel Robinson, interviewed by Paula Johnson, October 25, 2002, *DJ*; James Johnson, interviewed by Michael Ciferno, *DJ*; Isnell Rumph, interviewed by Dino Haidaris, April 16, 2002, CHP, n.p.

25. Morris Hill, interviewed by Holly Davis, November 1, 2002, *DJ*; Olive Reese, interviewed by Sherry Bacon-Graves, *DJ*; Bertha Barber, interviewed by Renee Pisan, October 30, 2002, *DJ*; Lou Tabor, interviewed by Bob Crisp, April 12, 2002, CHP, n.p.; Rosalie Price, interviewed by Ashley Lanning, March 26, 2003, CHP, n.p.; Anne Marie Graziano., interviewed by Jennifer Grabaskas, April 3, 2003, CHP, n.p.; Olive Reese, interviewed by Sherry Bacon-Graves, *DJ*.

26. William Gordon, interviewed by Joe Steele, March 4, 1990, BOHP, 2; Addie Baynard, interviewed by Sharmon Colbert, February 27, 1991, BOHP, n.p.; Ossie Barlow, interviewed by Sharmon Colbert, February 27, 1991, BOHP, n.p.; Georgia Mae Calloway, interviewed by Celena Sims, BOHP, February 28, 1992, n.p.; Billy Patrick, interviewed by Brad Batchelor, October 23, 1990, BOHP, 5.

27. See Ronald Grele, *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History* (Chicago: Precedent, 1975), 127–54; Honey, "The Power of Remembering," 302–35.

28. Edward W. Said, "Invention, Memory, and Place," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 2 (Winter 2000): 175–92.

29. Jelin and Kaufman quoted in Alexander, "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma," 8; Luisa Passerini, "Work Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism," in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 53–62.

30. James W. Pennebaker and Becky L. Banasik, "On the Creation and Maintenance of Collective Memories: History as Social Psychology," in Pennebaker, Paez and Rimé, eds., *Collective Memory of Political Events*, 10–11.

31. Betty Sloan, interviewed by Joshua Sloan, March 28, 2003, CHP, n.p.; Ruth Johnson, interviewed by Laurie Tonn, April 8, 2003, CHP, 8; Emma Buckner, interviewed by Trisha Buckner, April 7, 2003, CHP, n.p.

32. Renee C. Romano, "Narrative of Redemption: The Birmingham Church Bombing Trials and the Construction of Civil Rights Memory," in Romano and Raiford, eds., *The Civil Rights Movement*, 99.

33. Alice Surrena, interviewed by Sarah Surrena, March 17, 2003, CHP, 9; Paul Starnes, interviewed by Danielle Wojnarski, April 6, 2003, CHP, 12; Mary Homlitas, interviewed by Scot Homlitas, March 9, 2003, CHP, n.p.

34. Maybell Loftin, interviewed by Heather Marbus, May 25, 1992, BOHP, n.p.; Geneva Ariail, interviewed by Amanda Ariail, March 5, 1992, BOHP, 6; Ruth Smith, interviewed by B. Blount, February 17, 1991, BOHP, n.p.; Woodrow Maffet, interviewed by unknown, BOHP, n.p.; Cornelia Presley, interviewed by Brad Batchelor, October 23, 1990, BOHP, 6–7.

35. Passerini, “Work Ideology and Consensus,” 60.

36. Larry J. Griffin, “‘Generations and Collective Memory’ Revisited: Race, Region, and the Memory of Civil Rights,” *American Sociological Review* 69, no. 4 (August 2004): 544–57.

37. Roy F. Baumeister and Stephen Hastings, “Distortions of Collective Memory: How Groups Flatter and Deceive Themselves,” in Pennebaker, Paez and Rimé, eds., *Collective Memory of Political Events*, 280, 277.

38. Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin’: African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 2; Mark M. Smith, *How Race is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 3.

39. Bertha Barber, interviewed by Renee Pisan, October 30, 2002, *DJ*.