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WHITES RECALL THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN BIRMINGHAM

We Didn't Know it was History until after it Happened

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Cultural Sociology

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Whites Recall the Civil Rights Movement in Birmingham

We Didn't Know it was History until after it Happened

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Series Editor's Preface

With the theory of cultural trauma as her guiding frame of reference, Sandra Gill makes a significant contribution to memory studies with this penetrating study of recollecting a difficult past. She accepts the challenge put forward by C. Wright Mills to reveal the intersection of biography and history as she represents through extended interviews how her own white high school classmates, the Birmingham Alabama Phillips High School class of 1965, recollect the tragic events that occurred in their city in 1963. These events include the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, one to the most memorable and horrific incidents of the Civil Rights struggle in the USA. More personally and directly, they also include the murder of a black youth by two of her classmates on the same day. Gill reveals how memory and forgetting are intertwined and how selective individual and group memory can be. In the process, she reveals how the collected memory of individuals differs from the now-established collective memory of the nation. While her classmates have vague recollection of these events, Birmingham 1963 and the horrific murder of 'four little girls' are now seared into the heroic story of the struggle for civil rights in the USA. With the aid of cultural trauma theory, Gill examines this 'loss of memory' exhibited by her schoolmates to uncover the wider social forces that contributed to it. These include the attempts by local authorities and mass media to control the emerging events through decontextualizing them and by placing the blame on 'outsiders'. This is an important addition not only to memory studies but also to an emerging discussion of perpetrator trauma.

Ron Eyerman

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract This chapter tells the story of the day of the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. It was a confrontation over school integration that brought out the rage of many whites in Birmingham and emboldened Ku Klux Klansmen to bomb a church and kill four little girls in Sunday school. After the bombing, whites and blacks confronted one another in the streets. Whites shot two black boys. Virgil Ware was killed by classmates of the twenty men and women Gill interviews. Police killed Johnny Robinson two blocks from their school. For the interviewees, it is the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church by strangers and not the killing of a black boy by classmates that stands out in memory.

Keywords School desegregation · Racial violence · Sixteenth Street Baptist Church

On September 15, 1963, four little girls were killed in a church by a dynamite bomb. A wide array of Americans associate this event with the horrors of segregation in the sixties; some would be able to place the event in Birmingham, Alabama. As the congregation was finishing Sunday school at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church or waiting in the sanctuary for services to begin, twenty sticks of dynamite exploded killing Addie Mae Collins, Carole Roberton, Cynthia Wesley, and Denise McNair. Addie Mae, Carole, and Cynthia were fourteen, Denise eleven. The death of

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these girls has become a part of collective memory in the USA. Few recall that two black boys were killed by whites later the same day. Johnny Robinson was shot and killed by police two blocks from my school. Virgil Ware, a boy on a bicycle, was killed by two of my classmates at Phillips High School.

In this book, I explore how my classmates and I have reconstructed our memories of our own pasts. This book is about memory and how individuals use culture to reformulate autobiographical recollections as readings of the collective past shift. It is also about shifts in whites' understandings of race. It is about one city, Birmingham, Alabama, and the transformations that led white Southerners in that city to redeem their selves and join the nation in a set of understandings about the meaning of race.

My classmates and I were in the midst of central events in the history of Civil Rights as we attended Phillips High School from 1961 to 1965. Outside our windows, the activists of the Civil Rights Movement stood up to the forces of segregation and accomplished amazing feats that changed the way Americans think about race. Many in my cohort would agree that we were on the wrong side during a very important time in American history. Within six or eight blocks of the school, Birmingham Police and Firefighters turned dogs and fire hoses on children and adults peacefully protesting against segregation, Ku Klux Klansmen beat Freedom Riders at the Trailways station, and hundreds of protestors were arrested as they marched toward the Court House and downtown stores. Yet my classmates remember few of these events. As one of my classmates, Helen, says. "I didn't think deeply about anything. I really didn't understand the Civil Rights Movement. . . . It is amazing that this big part of history was taking place and I was doing my makeup."

Interrogating my personal memories of the Civil Rights Movement is not pleasant. As a college professor, I have included readings and videos about the Civil Rights Movement in many of my classes, urging students to recognize that ordinary people can change history through collective action. Yet, until I began this research project, I did not discuss my personal recollections of events in Birmingham during the sixties. I came to realize my silence when Rachel Hanson, a student in one of my classes at Gettysburg College, asked to interview me. She conducted an oral history for a course on the "Sixties." I imagine she was expecting a discussion of dress codes and dorm hours for women, which I had mentioned in class. As I detailed my memories of the early sixties in Birmingham, I realized that I had not discussed many of my recollections of desegregation, even with close friends.

Motivated by this self-reflection, I have interviewed twenty of my classmates at Phillips High School. In these interviews, I encouraged my classmates to discuss their recollections of the process of desegregation in the Birmingham area. I learned that many of my classmates center their recollections of the Civil Rights era on the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. This suggests an alignment of collective memory with autobiographical memory around this event. Many other events have slipped from memory. My classmates do not recall other moments prominent in the collective memory of the Civil Rights era, even though they took place within a few blocks of our school. Even the killing of a child by our classmates was typically a vague or inaccessible recollection. I seek to understand why it is the recollection of the Sixteenth Street Church bombing that stands out while other memories have been lost.

In the fall of 1963, all eyes were on the white youth of Birmingham as schools were desegregated. Just a few months earlier, all eyes were on black youth who stood up to fire hoses and police dogs a few blocks from our school. The heroic actions of black activists received international attention yet almost nothing changed in Birmingham. Virtually no facilities were integrated. Birmingham schools became the focus of white resistance. School desegregation ignited white anger and fear and sparked the killing of six black children.

As schools opened, allowing a few black students to enroll, roving bands of boycotting white students and segregationist adults sped in motorcades from school to school in the Birmingham area. Their goal was to get students to leave school and force the closing of public education. Off and on during these days demonstrators disrupted our classes. One morning, segregationists gathered in a large rally in the park across from our school. At other times they drove around and around the school in cars painted with racist slogans blaring "Dixie" from their loud speakers and shouting "2-4-6-8 we don't want to integrate." Voices urged us to jump out of windows and join the protest (Sitton 1963b:14). As many as 200 Phillips students skipped school or left school to join the segregationists (*Birmingham News* 9.15.1963:1). These segregationist demonstrations left us confused, aroused, and wondering what would happen next.

On Sunday, September 15, families both black and white dressed in their finest and went to their congregations to worship. At 10:22 AM twenty sticks of dynamite exploded at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church (Anderson 2008:478). The blast was so strong that it overturned cars parked on the street and left a "gaping hole" in the side of the brick

building (*Birmingham News* 9.16.1963:1). Many in the congregation were injured; stained glass littered the street. Addie Mae, Carole, Cynthia, and Denise were found under the rubble in the basement, their bodies so mutilated that their families had trouble identifying them.[1]

Even after the bombing, it was school desegregation that was foremost on white minds. A few hours after the bombing, a rally protesting school desegregation attracted about two thousand whites. This rally featured orations against integration and a hanging in effigy of a figure labeled "Kennedy" (Thames 1963:6).

I had heard many other bombs in "Bombingham" where an estimated fifty dynamite attacks and fire bombings enforced segregation (Rumore 2014:41). This was different. After this bombing, outraged blacks poured from their homes. After the segregationist rally, whites cruised the streets, their cars ornamented with confederate battle flags and slogans protesting school desegregation. Angry white and black youth were in the street exchanging taunts and throwing rocks, bricks, and bottles. Johnny Robinson and Virgil Ware were shot and killed.

That afternoon, police shot Johnny in the back; he was sixteen. Johnny was with a group of black boys two blocks from our school. White teenagers adamant in their opposition to school desegregation drove by. At least one account says that they were throwing soda bottles (Johnson 2010). Seven white youth, from several high schools including Phillips, were packed into a convertible flying a confederate battle flag. Written on the car in shoe polish were slogans against school integration and the words "Negro go back to Africa."[2] There was some "hollering" back and forth between the white and black youths (Birmingham Public Library Archives: police file 1125.9.10). The white youth alleged that some of the black boys had thrown rocks. A police car with four officers pulled up; the black boys ran. Officer Jack Parker fired a shotgun, hitting Johnny in the back.

There was disagreement, even among the police officers present, as to why Parker fired. The police file suggests that only white witnesses were interviewed. Johnny was not from an affluent family. His father had been killed a few years earlier; his mother had sent his younger siblings to live with relatives (Johnson 2010). Neither local prosecutors nor the Grand Jury thought they could convince a white jury that the shooting was unwarranted. As the *Birmingham News* (9.21.1963:2) states, "Officer Parker fired while performing his duties as a patrolman for the City of Birmingham." Parker was not reprimanded; no one talked with the family about Johnny's death. There were no apologies from the Police Department, no condolences from the

mayor (Johnson 2010). The minister who preached Johnny's funeral said he "hoped the boy's death would inspire someone to do something about police brutality" in Birmingham (*Birmingham News* 9.23.63:8). No one did. Southern Poverty Law (2012) includes on its "Memorial to Civil Rights Martyrs" the other five youth killed in Birmingham that day. Even they have forgotten Johnny Robinson.

The final child killed in Birmingham on September 15, 1963, was Virgil Ware. The thirteen-year old was riding the handlebars of his brother James's bicycle. The black boys approached my classmates who were on a motorcycle on a remote road outside Birmingham. The white boys had been to the rally against school integration, had stopped by the offices of the National States Rights Party, and were flying a confederate battle flag (Padgett and Sikora 2003). Mike handed Joe a gun. Joe said he had never fired a gun before and thought he was shooting at the ground. He fired two shots; both hit Virgil. Virgil fell from the handlebars. James went to him and told him to get up. Virgil said, "I can't, I'm shot." It took his brother a few seconds to realize that Virgil was not joking; in a moment he was dead (Herbers 1963:6).

The Ware brothers had spent the afternoon in search of a bicycle for Virgil in their uncle's scrap yard; they had not heard of the Church bombing (Padgett and Sikora 2003). The brothers were from a family of eight; their father was an unemployed mine worker, their mother worked cleaning a school. Virgil needed a bicycle so the brothers could share a newspaper route. Virgil was an A student; his siblings thought he would be the first in the family to go to college (Padgett and Sikora 2003).

My classmates, Larry Joe Sims and Michael Farley, were arrested after school the next day and charged with murder. The sheriff's detective who questioned them said they were "inspired" by "remarks made at the rally" against school desegregation (*Birmingham News* 9.17.1963:1).

For me, learning that Joe Sims had shot and killed a child was very painful. Joe was among the most respected boys in our class. Joe Sims was someone who could answer my questions about homework. Maybe, I asked him questions just to get a chance to talk with him. At sixteen, I imagine my eyes followed him around the room every time he moved. While none of my classmates spoke up to defend Mike Farley, every classmate who remembered Joe Sims had only positive things to say. Interviewees said he was "an honor student," "from a nice family," an "outstanding athlete," a "church-goer," and an Eagle Scout. As one of his friends said, "He had a big heart."

I remember going to the Grand Jury hearing for Joe and Mike at the Court House a few blocks from school. Joe's attorney had sent word that he wanted reputable teens to show up to demonstrate that our classmate was not a "hoodlum." I recall a silence among the students in the room. I could only look at the floor, for I was unable to look my classmates in the eye. This was, perhaps, the beginning of my silence about my personal experiences in Birmingham.

This is only a part of my difficult past. Growing up in Birmingham, my classmates and I were immersed in culture that supported segregation to maintain white privilege. Whites in Birmingham perpetuated a caste-like system that denied resources and respect to blacks. When men and women face their failure to act humanely, individual and collective identity is radically undermined. As Giesen (2004:114) states, "[I]f a community has to recognize that its own members, instead of being heroes, have been perpetrators who violated the cultural premises of their own identity, the reference is indeed traumatic."

For my classmates, it is the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church by strangers, not the killing of Virgil Ware by our classmates, that stands out in memory. To understand how the killing of the four girls became embedded in the recollections of my classmates, I rely on the sociological theory of cultural trauma. This theoretical frame explains why some moments of violence and suffering are remembered and others are essentially forgotten. Through this lens we can begin to see how white youth in Birmingham ceased to identify with segregation. It provides a key to explaining the reception side of memory theories. When carrier groups construct dramatic stories of good and evil that prompt an audience to feel others' suffering and empathize with those who are wronged, hearts and minds can change and major transformations in social structures are possible.

In this work I will address the development of the narrative around the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church that defined this event as an act of racist terrorism and a shared trauma across races; I examine how the story of the girls' deaths developed into a dramatic story of good and evil. I will argue that, over time, a cultural narrative of trauma developed surrounding the bombing; this narrative opened the possibility for whites in Birmingham to think about their pasts in new ways. The deaths of the boys who were killed the same day were normalized. Only with the public outcry following the deaths of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown do we begin to see a narrative developing that constructs the killing of black boys by the police and those who fear them as a shared trauma of culture in the USA.

Here I will examine collective memory. I approach cultural influences on recollections in an innovative way. Most frequently, contemporary scholars study how cultures commemorate "difficult pasts"—pasts that are horrific, embarrassing, or divisive. Such studies examine the construction, negotiation, and objectification of the past in texts, memorials, and commemorative events. With their focus on 'macro-narratives' they do not problematize how individuals and groups use and interpret these symbols. When sociologists do study the recollections of individuals, it is almost always to see what events from the past actors think are important. A central finding of these studies is that individuals find salient those events that happened in their youth or when they were young adults.

I seek to move toward a new framework for thinking about memory in sociology. I bring together these two lines of sociological inquiry. I look at the autobiographical recollections of young people who would be expected to have strong memories. I examine how they reconstruct their own difficult pasts as youth in Birmingham, Alabama. It is my classmates at Phillips High School and myself that I study. My classmates and I are among many white Southerners of our generation who were both objects and subjects in a process of rapid transformation in attitudes and behaviors around race in the late sixties and early seventies.

In 1961, when my classmates and I entered Phillips High School, every possible aspect of life in Birmingham was dichotomized by race with blacks assigned inferior facilities or simply not allowed access. Blacks worked only in the most menial of service jobs, the most dangerous industrial jobs, or in positions where all their clients were black. There were no black police or fire fighters. Stores gladly accepted blacks' dollars but would not allow them to use fitting rooms or sit at lunch counters. Most theatres and amusement parks were for whites only. There was a hospital for blacks and others for whites; ambulance services were segregated. The public facilities that whites and blacks shared in Birmingham were the water and sewer systems but even these had the illusion of separation, water fountains were clearly labeled 'colored' or 'white,' as were bathrooms. Eight years later when I returned to Birmingham after college to teach in a previously all black school, integrated facilities seemed to be taken for granted. I explore this process of change.

In the early sixties, "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever" (Carter 2000:11) was the rallying cry of whites in Alabama. While blacks and whites are still starkly unequal, openly using race to

discriminate is taboo. I seek to move toward a deeper understanding of how white Southerners have used culture in shaping their identities in light of this seismic shift.

Change has been dramatic and, at the same time, little has changed. The Freedom Movement led to major transformations in the way that racial ideology is deployed. Whiteness conveys privilege but in different ways than it did in Birmingham in 1960.

Today privilege is hidden behind a color-blind narrative that obscures the advantages of whiteness. Mass incarceration (Alexander 2010), arrest quotas and high-tech surveillance in poor neighborhoods (Goffman 2014), increasing income inequality (US Census 2014—Table hO2AR), the loss of stable working-class jobs (Wilson 1996), and the resegregation of schools (Clotfelter 2004) lead one to wonder if the situation for poor blacks is any better in most parts of the USA than it was in Birmingham in 1963. These forces have criminalized the lives of poor blacks, while allowing whites to believe that we are in a post-racial society.

While we may wish that change had gone deeper, I posit that it is important to examine the changes in the bases of racial narratives that have occurred in the South and how it is related to memory. The South went from a caste system of strict separation of the races to a system in which most whites seem to believe that they accept others regardless of race. As I will show in my interviews, my classmates who were raised in a strictly segregated society now believe that they never were "really" segregationists. This is one way that whites have been able to find a usable self and come to embrace the immorality of segregation.

I demonstrate ways that autobiographical memory is a construction rather than an act of memory retrieval. My work responds to many calls to go beyond the assumption that individuals passively accept the versions of the past that are presented in media and commemorative events (Schwartz and Schuman 2005; Irwin-Zarecka 1994:4; Kansteiner 2002; Griffin and Hargis 2008:45). I examine how social actors use cultural narratives to shape memories and to construct a usable identity in light of an embarrassing and painful past.

In the second chapter, I first briefly consider how sociology has problematized recalling the past and the importance of the past for individual identity and collective identity. I present a cursory overview of the "individualistic" and "collectivist" (Olick 1999:336) strategies prominent in sociological studies of memory. By studying the recollections of individuals who experienced a difficult past as teens, I bring together these two discrete

lines of study. I discuss the applicability of cultural theory to the study of memory and social transformations.

In the third chapter I point to ways that growing up in Birmingham was unusual. I give the reader a glimpse of the world that surrounded white teens in a city notorious for resistance to desegregation during our high school years. I overview the strategies and methods I have used to develop this analysis.

The fourth chapter concerns the representation of the events in Birmingham in 1963 and how they were received in Birmingham at the time. I briefly review sociological accounts of the events of May that galvanized support for the Movement in the North. I then discuss the counter narrative that officials and media used in Birmingham to frame these events for local audiences. Relying on interviews with my classmates, I show that events so important in Northern minds had little impact on my interviewees. I provide details from interviews establishing that it is the murder of the four girls at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church that is key to the recollections of many of my interviewees. I discuss a conversion narrative centering on the Church bombing that develops for whites in and around Birmingham.

The fifth chapter relies on the sociological theory of cultural trauma to understand the importance of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing to collective memory. After this event, whites in Birmingham began to lose a sense of meaning. Local media and officials could not support collective identity with traditional narratives. This chapter develops an analysis to explain why the 'four little girls' have become a part of the nations' collective memory while the two boys killed the same day have been largely forgotten. I discuss the representation of the perpetrators at the trial of the first bomber. Finally the chapter discusses the process of individualizing and commemorating the victims of the bombing.

The sixth chapter considers why many individual memories of the events of the Civil Rights Movement have been lost. I illustrate this loss of memory by considering how interviewees recalled the killing of Virgil Ware by our classmates. The 'coalition of silence' among whites in Birmingham surrounding events of the Civil Rights Movement helps explain the loss of memory. The chapter considers the rise of the student movement in Alabama among this generation. Stimulated by the Freedom Movement, a generation of youth began to question segregation and change sides, bringing a critique of racism home to the white people of the Birmingham area.

The seventh chapter discusses the new post-racial narrative. Interviewees used a set of themes that seemed carefully constructed to disassociate themselves from the racism of the past and claim a post-racial identity. My classmates maintain that they accept others regardless of skin color; yet, the new narrative allows one to switch to the disparagement of black men and women who do not conform to white middle-class culture.

The eighth chapter identifies three narratives that interviewees rely upon to structure their autobiographical memories of the process of integration: 'regretted acts'; 'risky confrontations'; and 'defiant deeds.' I then analyze my own recollections based on the transcript of an interview conducted with me before I began this project. From this interview and new information about my actions acquired during an interview with a classmate, I am able to provide an example of how autobiographical memories can be reconstructed. I learn that an act I had remembered as a 'defiant deed' in support of integration was instead an embarrassing act of racism.

I conclude with a discussion of how this work is relevant to social issues we face today. Many conflicts are conflicts of memory. Recalling a difficult past requires self-reflection and a receptive community of memory.

This project is based primarily on interviews with a small group of whites of a particular generation in Birmingham, Alabama. This is but a step toward developing a line of research that can link the wealth of work on the construction of memory at the level of culture with real people's recollections of their own pasts.

Notes

1. For detailed accounts and some analysis of the lives and deaths of the four girls see McKinstry and George (2013), Lee (2000), Romano (2006), McWhorter (2001), and Davis (1993).
2. The signs I saw at the time lead me to suspect that the word on the car was not 'Negro'; however, that is what is recorded in the police file.

CHAPTER 2

Collective Recollections: Approaches to Memory in Sociology

Abstract This chapter introduces the reader to the literature on collective memory, focusing on the study of difficult pasts. The chapter discusses the two lines of sociological analysis. The first emphasizes the role of memory entrepreneurs in designing memorials and commemorations that shape the recollections of the public. The second focuses on what individuals remember from that past and finds that events occurring in one's youth are typically most memorable. The chapter proposes to bring together these two prominent lines of inquiry and to address how white youth on in the midst of Civil Rights activities in Birmingham reconstructed their autobiographical memories in light of a difficult past. The chapter overviews important strategies for this analysis including Halbwachs' work on memory, recent literature on commemorations, Swidler's conceptualization of culture, and the cultural theory of trauma.

Keyword Collective memory · Autobiographical memory · Collected memory · Cultural sociology · Reception of memory

In recent years, writers and readers have become fascinated with how the past is used in the present. Sociologists who study collective memory have developed two very different lines of analysis. One examines the processes through which symbolic interpretations of the past are constructed, negotiated, and objectified in texts, memorials, and commemorative events,

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typically considering representation of a difficult past. The other relies on surveys that ask individuals to identify memorialized events they find meaningful from the past, often finding that events occurring in one's youth are deemed most important. Few consider how individuals think about their own past in light of symbolic interpretations of the past. I seek to bring together these two prominent lines of inquiry in the sociology of memory and address how individuals reconstruct their autobiographical memories in light of a difficult past. I examine whites' recollections of their difficult pasts as youth in Birmingham, Alabama. I rely on Halbwachs' work on memory, recent analyses of memory work, Swidler's conceptualization of culture, and the cultural theory of trauma to guide my work.

The past is always a part of the present, yet how it is remembered changes as new needs arise. Studies of social memory explore the ways that groups and individuals use the past to support actions in the present and propose visions of the future. Social actors fit their own lives into narratives that align with collective memories. By collective memory, I mean the ideas and narratives about the past that are shared within a social milieu and provide a context for interpreting the present and imagining the future. Collective memory is a cornerstone for collective and individual identity. As Nerone (1989:91) states, "[E]veryone constructs a picture of society that extends backwards in time, and includes a place for oneself."

Classical Sociology and Memory

Collective memory studies arose from sociologist Emile Durkheim's (2008) work on the importance of shared rituals in reaffirming the common beliefs and sentiments of groups to maintain social solidarity. Weber (1978:903) went so far as to say that one's identification with and loyalty to the nation state arose from shared "communities of memories." Shared narratives about the past are the essential glue that constructs peoplehood (Smith 2003) and holds cultures together.

But, what is it to remember? When we remember, we have only fragmentary images that we bring to mind from the past. We piece together bits and moments from our recollections and, through internal dialogue, choose and review recollections. We bring our recollections into conversations with others and often fill in images with their recollections. Through this process, we are soon unable to distinguish between the remembered event and later re-remembering of the event. It is the self in the present that filters and assembles moments from the past and brings to mind images that support

current identity. In the simplest terms, this is how the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1980, 1992) explains the individual's memory.

Following Halbwachs, I attend to the ways that collective memory is grounded in the recollections of individual men and women. While Halbwachs is widely cited in works on collective memory, few recognize his interest in how individuals remember. As Schwartz and Schuman (2005:184) say, Halbwachs "would have trouble recognizing the current of research that his name now adorns." For Halbwachs, memory is "a flexible, articulated set of social segments consisting of live individuals who sustain their common interests by their own selective and highly partial view of history" (Douglas 1980:14). As a student of Durkheim, Halbwachs accepts that the unity of a group or society arises from shared memory; however, he problematizes the process through which this is achieved.

Collectivist Approach to Memory

The most prevalent approach to memory in sociology is "collectivist," focusing on "commemorative activities and productions . . . publically available symbols objectified in society" (Olick 1999:336). These studies typically rely on hermeneutic analysis of texts such as memorials, laws, records, holidays, and files. They rarely question how individuals interpret or use these artifacts (Schwartz and Schuman 2005). The focus is upon elites such as government officials, filmmakers, curators, historians, journalists, and leaders of activist groups who shape the cultural symbols available to the public. These, often impersonal, actors who shape the way that the past is remembered may be called "moral entrepreneurs" (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991), "reputational entrepreneurs" (Fine 1996), "symbolic entrepreneurs" (Armstrong and Crage 2006), "memory brokers" (Holyfield and Beacham 2011), or "agents of social memory" (Schudson 1992). These terms imply that collective memory is structured by elites and seems to discount the importance of the reception of these interpretations of the past by individuals.

While classical sociology was concerned with the sharing of ritual experiences in shaping solidarity, today we are more concerned with how societies maintain cohesion in light of divisive pasts. With some exceptions (e.g. Schwartz 1987; Spillman and Conway 2007) these 'collectivist' works examine how groups remember and commemorate difficult pasts. A difficult past is a past that is "less than glorious and whose memory induces controversy instead of consensus" (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991:376); it is a past that creates "an inherent moral trauma" (Teeger and Vinitzky-Seroussi 2007:58).

A difficult past arouses tensions, conflicts, and disputes (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002:31). As we examine difficult pasts, we confront the differing memories of victims and perpetrators, of those who applaud or those who regret military exploits, of those who want to forget harmful actions undertaken in their names and those who want to remember in order to avoid future atrocities.

Sociologist have examined commemoration of a wide array of difficult pasts including political assassinations (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002; Debs 2013); social injustice (Polletta 1998), genocides (Giesen 2004; Olick and Levy 1997; Rivera 2008; Alexander 2002), lost wars (Sturken 1997; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991; Hashimoto 2011), atomic warfare (Saito 2006; Zolberg 1998), massacres (Bartmanski and Eyerson 2011), presidential misconduct (Schudson 1992), lynching (Markovitz 2004), slavery (Eyerman 2001), contested school integration (Roy 1999; Debs 2011), and terrorist attacks (Tota 2004; Smelser 2004). Yet, as Griffin (2004:556) notes, surprisingly little research examines white Southerners' recollections of their difficult pasts.

Most scholarly attention to collective memory has focused on the process of meaning making in which agents of memory propose symbolic interpretations of the past seeking to embed their message in the hearts and minds of individuals and groups; however, "it is only individuals who remember" (Olick and Robbins 1998:111). While memory is produced and managed by individuals, their recollections, even of their own lives, are socially constructed.

Recalling a Difficult Past

When living individuals have witnessed and engaged in controversial events and carry them in their autobiographical memory, representation of the past is likely to create conflict (Zolberg 1998). Memory of white resistance to the Civil Rights Movement is a controversial past. In the Southern states, white and black Americans confronted one another in the cities and villages throughout the region. Griffin (2004:546) notes, white Southerners "exhausted every method of resistance to racial justice." Whites were on the losing side of history; their resistance is regarded as immoral in today's world. Struggles in Birmingham were especially vicious. As society changed, resistance to the Freedom Movement polluted white identity in this city.

For individuals and cultures, denial is an almost ubiquitous strategy for handing embarrassing or painful events from the past. Sometimes this is conscious and intentional, as actors deny an action of which they are fully aware. However Cohen (2001:5) points to a more common form of denial that arises as dominant groups "seem uncannily able to shut out or ignore the

injustice and suffering around them." When called to account for a difficult past, Cohen (2001) identifies a series of overlapping strategies that perpetrators and complicitous bystanders use. They may claim 'lack of knowledge' or 'deny responsibility' saying they were not aware or were unable to act differently. They may 'deny injury' or 'deny victims' claiming the aggrieved weren't really hurt or got what they deserved. They may turn the tables on those who question their actions and 'condemn the condemner,' or they may simply 'show moral indifference,' thinking that unconscionable actions were 'no big deal' (Cohen 2001). All of these strategies of denial allow individuals and groups to avoid accountability for their part of a difficult past.

Memorializing a Difficult Past

Groundbreaking sociological literature has focused on the ways that painful pasts are memorialized. These studies bear consideration in examining Birmingham efforts to control representation and repair collective identity. These works suggest several kinds of memory work that may be employed to handle a painful past. With difficult pasts, the first reaction often is to try to ignore or normalize embarrassing or horrific events in the hope that they will be forgotten. Agents of memory may invest considerable effort in "impression management" and "covering and cultural reframing" of the past (Rivera 2008:614). Covering may be successful initially. Often, however, outsiders, advocates for victims, or a new generation of group members will not allow a difficult past to be covered over (Giesen 2004; Tsutsui 2009; Saito 2006).

When a divisive past will not be covered, agents of memory often turn to a 'multivocal' strategy that allows individuals and groups with different interpretations of the past to join together in commemoration (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991). This strategy requires that the past be remembered in a way that obscures the context of the discord (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002). The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC is the iconic example of this strategy. By honoring the dead without considering the war itself, individuals and groups with different interpretations of this difficult past may join together in commemoration. When commemorations can revere the dead without delving into the social situation that led to their deaths, solidarity may be established without common beliefs (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991).

In addition, memorialization may be designed to "enact and create consensus" (Teeger and Vinitzky-Seroussi 2007:59). Strategies such as avoiding blame, emphasizing a consensual hero, separating the past and

the present, and constructing the past as left behind provide a context in which actors can put the past behind and celebrate reconciliation.

Covering the past, honoring the dead, and orchestrating consensus memories are strategies that groups use to manage a difficult past. These studies that focus on sites and symbolic structures give us insight into the forms of public memory available to the individual. These studies do not interrogate how individuals read these texts. They do, however, provide a basis for understanding strategies that cultural agents used to manage Birmingham's past.

Linking Memory to People

The ways that the past is remembered changes over time due to the active work of agents of memory. When problems arise in the present, memory activists use the past to develop new narratives to motivate and inspire actions in the present. For example, Martin Luther King Jr. reinterpreted biblical narratives such as the Exodus story to inspire the Freedom Movement (Shelby 2008). Olick and Levy (1997) emphasize that new narratives are never completely new; they build on and reshape old narratives to legitimate actions in the present. New narratives are "simultaneously strategic and constitutive" (Olick and Levy 1997:922). Politicians, curators, and activist leaders draw on past narrative to address dilemmas faced in the present; their work is 'path dependent.' New narratives are constrained by the symbolic structures arising from previous problem solving (Olick and Levy 1997; Haydu 1998:358).

Studies that delve into the circumstances that precipitate and allow the development of new narratives point to the importance of generational change (Giesen 2004; Greenburg 2005) in political regimes (Alexander and Gao 2011; Zubrzycki 2006; Saito 2006) and the power of agents of memory (Armstrong and Crage 2006) as key factors. Over time, there seems to be a general movement toward a consensus memory (Conway 2009; Blight 2001). Yet none of these works suggest that structural conditions alone bring about a change in narratives. Each shows the key to making a successful claim is the ability to convince a broader collectivity.

Official versions of the past are reiterated through texts and memorials. The past may be written in stone, yet, it is contested. In traditional societies, commemorations, religious services, stories, and memorials may convey a taken-for-granted, consensus memory to people. In a diverse and changing society, individuals make choices in the holidays they commemorate, the gods they revere, the media they receive, and the sites of memory they visit. Informal interactions reinforce some narratives and undermine others.

In Japan, Hashimoto (2011) shows that multiple memory genres recall the nation's wrongdoing and defeat in World War II. Heroic narratives, victim narratives, and perpetrator narratives serve "different and even contradictory ends" (Hashimoto 2011:46). One individual may pick up or put down each of these narratives depending on the social context.

Many possible representations of the past are available to the public. Individuals and groups sift through the available images to find those that speak to them. As Irwin-Zarecka (1994:4) succinctly states, "Individuals are perfectly capable of ignoring even the best told stories, of injecting their own subversive meanings into even the most rhetorically accomplished 'texts'—and of attending to only those ways of making sense of the past that fit their own." In this work, I focus on how individuals fit culture's interpretations of the past into their own autobiographical memories.

Research on Individual Memory

The second sociological approach to memory is less voluminous and relies on surveys, primarily of the general public. In these works that Olick refers to as studies of "collected memory" (1999), respondents identify the events in history they consider most important. These studies show us that an individual's social characteristics such as race, class, and gender shape the way that individuals remember the past. Overwhelmingly this research concludes that individuals are most likely to recall and think important events that occurred when they were adolescents or young adults (Schuman and Scott 1989; Schuman and Rieger 1992; Schuman and Rogers 2004; Schuman and Corning 2000; Griffin 2004; Schwartz et al. 2005). This finding is interpreted in light of Mannheim's (1952) theoretical work on the importance of generations. In their youth, individuals begin to experience the world for themselves and make their own decisions. These 'fresh contacts' develop deep impressions that shape the individual's approach to reality.

In these memory genera, Griffin (2004) specifically addresses the memories of white Southerners. Among those who recall the Civil Rights Movement as important, he finds a generational effect. In 1965, in comparison to other age groups, white Southerners between fourteen and thirty-six were more likely to view the Movement as important. Griffin (2004:556) concludes that "region, along with race, gender, age, and other social factors, matters in the construction of collective memories." Yet he

recognizes that such survey data leaves many questions unanswered. Specifically he notes that "what people actually do with memories in time present is left unaddressed" (Griffin 2004:556).

Sociology has pursued two divergent currents in the sociology of collective recollections. Neither approach deeply interrogates what people do with memories and how the symbolic structures of cultural memory are internalized into the identities of men and women.

Thinking about Culture

In considering why sociological works on collective memory are bifurcated, Olick (1999:336) sees an ontological difference in the perception of culture. In the individualistic case, culture is viewed as "a subjective category of meanings contained in people's minds," whereas the collectivist approach "sees culture as patterns of publicly available symbols objectified in society." Culture is both of these and more.

As Swidler (2001:12) argues, using the term "culture" to incorporate only publically available symbolic forms that are shared by a people "leaves us very much at a loss when it comes to studying how culture is actually put to use by social actors." As social actors, we draw on and use cultural resources to make sense of our experiences, but we do not use culture blindly. In a modern, diverse society individuals must do "the demanding work of dismissing, criticizing, or filtering the culture with which we come in contact" (Swidler 2001:15). Culture provides individuals with a set of tools or scripts, but we must select among these tools and scripts as we attempt to build a life (Swidler 1986, 2001). Culture makes available to social actors a set of attitudes, habits, and skills as well as sense of the worth or stigma attached to each. People discriminately use culture as a basis for constructing identity and to accomplish their goals.

Elites develop structures to embed moments from the past in collective memory; however, it is the individual who filters through the cultural visions of the past to find those that are useful in their own lives. Culture provides the context in which individuals experience their memories. In our pluralistic societies we are not "automaton following an internalized collective will" (Fentress and Wickham 1992:ix). Instead, we use culture for our own purposes. We draw on cultural resources to make sense of our own experiences (Swidler 2001).

In one of the few studies to address this schism, Schwartz and Schuman (2005:183) begin to move collective memory studies in a new direction

that links individual memory to collective memory. They seek to go beyond the traditional emphasis on "sites of memory and their cultural meaning" and "bring people back in" to collective memory studies. Relying on surveys of Americans in 1945 and 2001, they find that textual portrayals of Lincoln and survey attitudes about Lincoln change together. They believe that the emergence of the 'minority rights movements' shifted Lincoln's image, honing in on his role in the emancipation of slaves. They conclude that the beliefs of men and women are "both a source and product of" collective representations and that both are responsive to themes that are relevant in the present (2005:198). This suggests that studies of collective memory need to go beyond studying texts alone and examine how individuals represent the past.

Identity, Memory, and Meaning

My approach to the linking of collective and individual memory is different. I seek to develop understanding of difficult pasts by studying a group that might be expected to have strong autobiographical memories. Research suggests that individuals are likely to remember events that occur in their youth or when they are young adults and when events are emotionally charged and lead to long-term social change (Pennebaker and Gonzales 2008; Griffin 2004:546). I explore the recollections of a group who, as teenagers, experienced emotionally charged events that changed the way that race is enacted in the USA. I examine how they use cultural narratives and collective memories to shape autobiographical memory. My work examines how one's recollections of one's own past shift as society changes. I explore how individuals use collective memory to construct usable autobiographical memories.

Olick and Robbins (1998:111) define autobiographical memory as "memory of those events that we ourselves experience," while collective memory "is the active past that forms our identities." Yet this distinction is fluid as social actors actively use the past to form identity by selectively recalling events from their own pasts to support identity in the present. Our memories of what we ourselves experienced are actively shaped by our identities and the collective memory of our society. As Halbwachs (1992:182) states,

> The individual calls recollections to mind by relying on the frameworks of social memory. In other words, the various groups that compose society are capable at every moment of reconstructing their past. But . . . they most frequently distort the past in the act of reconstructing it.

This is a key point in understanding the intersection between collective memory and recollections of subjective experience. Even when recalling our own pasts, what we think we remember may not be what happened to us.

It was oral historians who first began to realize that individuals who had lived through difficult pasts often reconstruct their pasts. Their work suggests that these reconstructions may help us better understand how men and women use collective memory, yet, they have not deeply developed the theoretical implications of their observations. Individuals may narrativize their life histories to tell a story that follows a script reflecting media images and official interpretations of the past (Thomson 1994; Green 2004; Sturken 1997). Individuals who have experienced a difficult past often do not discuss that part of the past (Margalit 2010) or they may delay for months or years because there is not yet a "memory milieu" (Stein 2014:91) in which to speak of their past (Alexander 2002; Saito 2006). Passerini (1998:59) studies Italians' recollections of life under Mussolini and finds a "self-censorship"; entire years in life during this difficult period seem to have slipped from memory. Even when those with a difficult past confide in intimate others, those others tend to renarrativize the stories to be acceptable in the present (Welzer 2005).

Cultural Sociology

To understand individual memory we must interrogate meanings and how they are constructed at the level of groups. This is the province of cultural sociology (Alexander 2003; Alexander and Smith 2002). Men and women's observations and judgments of right and wrong arise from the meanings their groups impart. Identity and collective identity hinge on cultural interpretations of the value of actions. Men and women seek to be "emotionally engaged and to be coherent in a moral sense" (Alexander and Gao 2011:995).

The work of cultural sociologists provides powerful tools for understanding collective recollections and social change. Sociologists from this perspective have interrogated the question of why some painful pasts are remembered and commemorated while other painful events seem to have slipped from social memory (Heins and Langenohl 2011; Alexander and Gao 2011; Debs 2013; Greenberg 2005). Works from this perspective are compelling in explaining the process by which difficult events may motivate large-scale change (Alexander 2002; Saito 2006).

Especially relevant is the concept of 'cultural trauma.' A cultural trauma occurs "when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a

horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander 2004a:1). Trauma narratives disrupt common-sense understanding of the world; they rip apart meanings and identities (Eyerman 2004:61). Individuals seek new legitimations for their behavior; groups seek new bases for collective identity. Thus the cultural approach provides a way to link difficult pasts with the emergence of new narratives and the development of a new sense of self. It provides a basis for understanding how recollections of difficult pasts come to be shared even by those who find them painful and embarrassing. Rather than focus only on the actions of 'memory entrepreneurs,' trauma theory examines how narratives that are proposed by agents of memory gain resonance with 'carrier groups.'

Here, I apply the insights of cultural sociology to better understanding how members of a generation of white Southerners have re-remembered their pasts in Birmingham, Alabama. I seek to bring together two disparate lines of analysis in the sociology of memory by studying the interrelationship between memorialized events and individuals' memories of a difficult past. I seek to understand how a difficult past has been incorporated into autobiographical memory. I seek a deeper understanding of how white Southerners have used the past to come to grips with changes in enactment of racial difference.

CHAPTER 3

Our Town—Our School—My Research

Abstract The third chapter introduces the climate in Birmingham as the Civil Rights Movement developed and white resistance to desegregation intensified. Gill discusses her in-depth interviews with classmates. As youth, the twenty men and women she interviews were near the center of events that have become key to collective memory of the Movement in the USA.

Keywords Phillips High School · Birmingham · Alabama · In-depth interviews

Years before my class entered Phillips High School, our school was the site of a bloody battle over segregation. In September of 1957, Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, Birmingham's bold and charismatic Civil Rights leader, attempted to enroll two of his daughters and two black boys in Phillips. When he arrived at the school, he was attacked by a mob. Whites wielding clubs, chains, and brass knuckles beat him to the ground. As one of my interviewees, Matthew, recalled, "I was still [in elementary school] in 1957 when Shuttlesworth was chained in front of the school. People beat him with tire chains." White men smashed the windows of the car and tried to pull the passengers out. They stabbed his wife in the hip, and slammed the door on

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the ankle of one of his daughters. Shuttlesworth was able to stumble back to the car. This was only one of the brutal attacks he would face in challenging segregation in Birmingham (*New York Times* 9/10/1957:1).

While Martin Luther King Jr. (1964:36) called Birmingham the most segregated city in America, it was really the vehemence with which segregation was enforced that distinguished Birmingham from other large Southern cities. Shuttleworth's courage in facing the forces of white repression should be legendary. The organization that Shuttlesworth built in Birmingham and the strategies he helped develop to fight segregation were crucial in the decision of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to bring the national movement to Birmingham (Manis 1999:331). His tactics and bravery attracted the trust of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in ways that King could not (Forman 1997:148). Many attributed his courage to the first of multiple bombings of his home. On Christmas night in 1956 a dynamite bomb propelled him from bed. Somehow, the mattress fell over him keeping the fallen walls and beam of his bedroom from crushing him. He was virtually unharmed and was emboldened rather than intimidated. He immediately attributed his survival to God and his role in the Freedom Movement saying, "I knew in a second, [a] split second, that the only reason God saved me was to lead the fight" (Manis 1999:109).

The attack on Shuttlesworth at our high school in 1957 is one example of the collusion between police and vigilantes. Law enforcement on the city, county, state, and even federal level turned a blind eye to Ku Klux Klan violence. Shuttlesworth had informed the Board of Education and the police department of his plans to enroll black students at Phillips and held a press conference announcing his intention (Eskew 1997:140). The *Birmingham News* predicted that there would be violence if he tried to enroll black children at the school (Manis 1999:150, 151), yet only one police car was dispatched (*New York Times* 1957:1). After Shuttlesworth had been severely beaten, police did arrest three vigilantes, but the arresting officers would not identify the men at the Grand Jury hearing and thus all charges were dropped (Nunnelly 1991:74).

When Shuttlesworth's battered body was rushed to the emergency room after the attack at Phillips, doctors were surprised that despite the many blows he had taken he did not have a fractured skull or broken bones. Shuttlesworth quipped, "Well, doctor, the Lord knew I lived in a hard town, so he gave me a hard head" (Mannis 1999:153).

Poverty, lack of educational opportunity, and unemployment made Birmingham a fertile ground for white extremism.

Birmingham

Birmingham was a new city, an industrial city that arose after the Civil War. The ideology of gentility celebrated in much of the old South was never deeply ingrained, but adherence to white superiority was evident everywhere. Birmingham was a city of epidemic unemployment and extreme inequality. Northern corporations controlled power, transportation, and heavy industry (Leighton 1939:132). They exported profits and reinvested little in the city. The political and economic elite of Alabama were colloquially referred to as the 'big mules.'[1] Northern corporate managers, local industrialists, and the plantation owners of South-Central Alabama allied themselves to keep taxes low and spending on social services and education minimal in the state. Employers found racism a useful tool to avoid unions and keep wages low (Letwin 1998).

Birmingham's police and firefighters were commanded by Eugene "Bull" Connor, the notorious Commissioner of Public Safety who in the spring of 1963 ordered mass arrests of Civil Rights demonstrators and turned dogs and hoses upon them. He has been cast as the iconic redneck racist, yet Connor was the handpicked face of the big mules. Connor's demeanor as a blustering yokel veiled his deep attachment to Alabama's power elite. Jim Simpson, spokesman and attorney for Birmingham's major industrial interests and offspring of one of Alabama's most elite families, was Connor's closest advisor. Connor listened to Simpson. Some say Connor consulted with Simpson "every day of his life" (Nunnelley 1991:29).

To comprehend the ideology that allowed whites in Birmingham to so vehemently resist integration, an understanding of the Lost Cause narrative is helpful. In the liminal period following the Civil War, memory activists created a mythical past to manage the humiliation of defeat (Pollard 1866). Rather than accepting that the Southern states had chosen to secede to protect slavery, states' rights became the rallying cry.[2] The Lost Cause constructed the North as the immoral villain and Confederate leaders as faultless and heroic (Blight 2001:257). In the idealized past of the Lost Cause, noble white plantation owners paternalistically cared for carefree blacks; faithful slaves wanted nothing other than to minister to their benevolent masters.

It is the Lost Cause narrative that formed a template that underlay the violent resistance to integration in the South in the 1960s. In Birmingham,

the Confederate battle flag was the ubiquitous symbol of segregationist groups. The ideology of states' rights was used to justify exclusion of blacks from jobs, schools, restaurants, bus seating, and bathrooms. Whites in Birmingham seemed to believe that most blacks were happy in their subjugated positions; protests were attributed to "outside agitators" (McWhorter 2001). Southerners displayed an almost god-like devotion to leaders such as George Wallace. Segregation rather than slavery assured white supremacy, and it seemed unquestionable in Birmingham in the early sixties.

Phillips High School

My classmates and I attended high school in the heart of Birmingham. Phillips High School was a majestic building, occupying a full city block just three blocks from the Court House and a few blocks from downtown stores. The school was built in the 1920s. By the time my class arrived, it had seen better days. The affluent in Birmingham had moved 'over the mountain,' avoiding the pollution and acid rain created by the coal fired iron and steel furnaces that were the industrial base of the city. Phillips was across the street from Central City, Birmingham's public housing project for whites. Yet the high school's academic program was stronger than many rural high schools and attracted motivated students from areas north of Birmingham. Most students who attended Phillips were from working-class or lower middle-class families. Typically fathers were blue-collar workers, salesmen, or small businessmen; some struggled as single-parent families. Phillips was one of the roughest of the white schools in Birmingham. In college, I hated to admit that I went to Phillips because it marked me as being from the poor side of town.

My Research

To learn more about autobiographical memories of those with a difficult past, I have interviewed twenty classmates who attended Phillips High School from 1961 to 1965. As white teens, we were constantly moving through areas where the widely memorialized events of the Movement took place. Our school was a few blocks from many of the events that are now infamous in memory. We frequently shopped in downtown stores about eight blocks from our school. These stores were picketed and boycotted by blacks during our freshman and sophomore years. There were no school buses in Birmingham. Many of us rode public buses and were likely to witness sit-ins. We were either in school or demonstrating against school integration in the fall of 1963.

Our high school was a few blocks from three events that are recalled by many Americans when they think of the Civil Rights Movement. The 'Freedom Riders' were brutally beaten by the Ku Klux Klan on Mothers' Day, 1961, at the Trailways station six blocks from school. High-power fire hoses and police dogs were turned on black children and adults at Kelley Ingram Park in the spring of 1963 eight blocks from school. The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church that was bombed on September 15, 1963, was also eight blocks from our school.

The Phillips High School class of 1965 offers a compelling opportunity to explore Southern white identity and the ways that individuals handle recollections of a dark past. The late teen years are especially important in the construction of autobiographical memory. Karl Mannheim teaches us that youth is a particularly important time for the formation of new lifeways, because youth begin to make their own decisions without a clear framework of interpretation from past experience. He states that at "about the age of 17, sometimes a little earlier and sometimes a little later" (1952:300), young people create "personally acquired" memories that "stick" and mold the construction of their worldview (Mannheim 1952:296).

Schools were among the first institutions to be desegregated in the South. As Sokol (2006:114) points out, while most white Southerners "watched idly" as integration progressed, *Brown v. Board of Education* meant "those of school age found themselves thrust to the fore." Social psychological research suggests that if events are emotionally charged, widely discussed, and bring about long-term changes in people's lives, they will be seared into autobiographical memory (Griffin 2004:546). We should expect strong autobiographical memories among these interviewees for they were sixteen or seventeen years old at the height of Civil Rights activities in Birmingham and were deeply entwined in a poignant conflict that brought important changes to American lives.

I conducted interviews with my classmates between 2005 and 2007. I have limited the sample to life-long Southerners living in Birmingham or surrounding cities at the time of the interview. This takes into account the importance of the mnemonic community. Recollections are not only personal, they develop within a social milieu (Zerubavel 1996). To find my interviewees, I relied primarily on a booklet of class members developed for the fortieth class reunion, but I also searched Classmates.com. I purposively tried to select individuals from a variety of occupations and to include a reasonable proportion of women and men. I was more effective in recruiting

women from a variety of occupations.[3] Considering education and most recent occupation, five women interviewees held clerical positions, five were in professional occupations, and three were administrators. Of my male interviewees, four held professional occupations and three managerial. Of the professionals, men were likely to be in prestigious professions while the women were more likely to be in education or social work. Among my white classmates, only two women declined to meet with me for face-to-face interviews. I repeatedly called six men, and eventually left a message giving my name, my number, and the reason for my call. Only one called back. Perhaps these are refusals. My interviewees included close childhood friends as well as individuals that I do not recall having known. At the time of the interview, my only contact with any of my interviewees in the past thirty-five years was at the fortieth class reunion.

The high school memories I shared with my classmates facilitated rapport. My knowledge of local culture and events at our school allowed me to develop probes and follow-up questions to penetrate beneath accepted discourse. Some interviewees were hesitant to talk of this period in their lives; others were surprised by their lack of memory. I had only vague autobiographical memories of many of the events I report and often sincerely asked interviewees to tell me more. Occasionally, I experienced awkward moments when I raised an issue an interviewee did not want to discuss; however, overall, the interviews were a cooperative exploration of memories. I am grateful to friends and acquaintances from my past who were willing to share their recollections with me.

In my semi-structured interviews, I first asked an open-ended question about my interviewee's personal memories of our high school. Then I asked about memories of events of the Civil Rights Movement and integration, emphasizing that I was interested in things that they actually saw and remembered from that era. I followed this question with probes about incidents they could remember from bus rides, downtown protests, and demonstrations that were going on around our school in the fall of 1963. After the interviewees exhausted their spontaneous memories of the Civil Rights Movement and had responded to these probes, I asked if they remembered Larry Joe Sims or Mike Farley, the two students who killed Virgil Ware. I did not specifically ask about the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church or other memorialized events of the Birmingham Civil Rights Movement that happened close to our school. I concluded by asking the interviewees to discuss their perceptions of the successes and failures of integration.

Some either said or implied by their responses that they did not care to think about the Civil Rights Movement. This is best illustrated by two classmates who would not meet with me for full interviews. Both agreed to answer questions over the phone but did not feel it was worth their time to discuss the issue in person. Both argued that race was no longer a problem. One said that she did not want to be a part of anything that brought up racial discord that may have existed in the past. She was among several individuals who said that Birmingham's racial problems were 'blown out of proportion' by those who wrote about them.

I tried to interview one other class member who was unwilling to talk with me about her difficult past. Neither of the black girls who joined our class in the fall of 1964 was listed in the fortieth reunion booklet. In fact they seemed to have been erased from any memorabilia of the class. I was able to find the address of one of the girls I will call Wanda Jean.[4] I sent her a letter telling her that I would like to interview her and gave her my phone number. When I arrived for the interview, I knocked on the door and was asked to come in before anyone realized I was not a neighbor or a relative. Wanda Jean's sister kept saying Wanda Jean had not been my classmate. I believe I recognized Wanda Jean as a classmate. As you will see in Chapter 7, the students at Phillips were quite cruel to our first black classmates.

At the time, I found it difficult to understand this refusal. After considering the issue of traumatic memories, I think I understand. Wanda Jean was shunned, taunted, and harassed by the white students at Phillips. The nine months she spent at Phillips surely left her with traumatic memories. Her sister wished to protect her from those recollections. I wish that I had taken the opportunity to apologize to her for my classmates and me.

Notes

1. In the 1930s, the 'big mules' got their name when populist Governor Bib Graves said Alabama's power elite "brought to mind a wagon heavily loaded with corn pulled by a small mule. As the small mule strained to pull the load, a big mule hitched behind the wagon ate the corn" (Connerly 2005:291).
2. Maintaining and expanding slavery had been key to the Constitution of the briefly lived Confederate States of America (Yale Law Library 2008a). In the Declarations of Secession, the primary legitimation of secession was that "non-slaveholding states . . . have deliberately refused, for years past, to fulfill their constitutional obligations" and have not "delivered up" slaves who had escaped to the North (Yale Law Library 2008b).

3. I had a larger circle of female friends in high school than males. I was challenged to get through call screenings with men who did not remember me.
4. I have used a pseudonym because Wanda Jean refused to discuss her recollections of our school with me. I want to be cautious in not violating her privacy.

CHAPTER 4

Narrating Recollections

Abstract This chapter contrasts the way that media in Birmingham represented Civil Rights Movement events with the national media's image of Birmingham. It reviews sociological accounts of the May 1963 demonstrations and the importance of events such as the "Children's March" to galvanizing support for the Movement in the North. Relying on interviews with twenty classmates, Gill shows that the event so important in Northern minds had little impact on interviewees. The chapter shows that many interviewees center their recollections on the killing of the four girls in the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. She discusses a conversion narrative that has developed among white Southerners centering on the church bombing.

Keywords Selection effects in news · Birmingham · Alabama

Most studies of collective memory focus on the creation of cultural narratives about the past. Few problematize how narratives are received and used by individuals. To delve into the question of how men and women use culture to assuage a difficult past, I rely on interviews with whites who were youth in Birmingham during the Civil Rights Movement. I examine the narratives my classmates use to speak about desegregation in that city in order to better understand the reception side of memory. In this chapter, I first point to the importance of Birmingham in shaping the racial contours

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of the nation. I then show that the events that have been so important in national memory are not salient memories for white youth who were on the ground there. I then address this question: why are the events of the spring of 1963 not remembered by my classmates?

As I have discussed, Birmingham stands as an iconic example of the evils of segregation. Many Americans associate Birmingham with the brutal attacks on blacks in the early sixties. Few recall that the events in Birmingham were crucial in changing America's views of racial inequality. The events in Birmingham in the spring of 1963 represent a watershed moment in the tolerance of racial discrimination in America. Jeffrey Alexander (2006) and Aldon Morris (1984, 1993) discuss the events of the spring in Birmingham as a turning point in US history that moved the USA away from segregation toward a new model for deploying race. While these events may have been crucial for the nation, my interviews show that it is the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in the fall of 1963 upon which these whites focus their recollections. The events of the spring seem not to be relevant to them in thinking about their pasts.

Birmingham: A Turning Point for the Nation

As historians and sociologists explain it, the Birmingham campaign, organized by the SCLC, was a fundamental moment in the reorganization of race relations in the USA. In the spring of 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. and the SCLC centered operations in Birmingham, joining local activists who had developed a resilient and effective campaign to confront segregation. The spring events in Birmingham were a critical impetus leading the Kennedy administration to take a stand against segregation and enforce federal laws and court decisions. Events in Birmingham galvanized support for the Civil Rights Movement throughout the nation and made the March on Washington feasible (King 1986:320). Yet the events of the spring of 1963 did little to change the everyday reality of blacks in Birmingham and intensified the right-wing terrorist efforts to maintain segregation.

The events of May 1963 have been the focus of most analyses of how Birmingham overcame segregation (Bains 1989; Garrow 1988; Eskew 1989, 1997; Alexander 2006; Morris 1984, 1993). These events were monumental in shaping Northern images of segregation; yet they tell us little of how Southerners changed. External pressures are important but do not explain the shift in the deep structures of belief and sentiments about the morality of segregation among Southern whites. Given the

recalcitrance of state and local officials to allow blacks to vote or share public facilities and the reluctance of the Federal government to station troops in Birmingham, it seems naïve to think that Birmingham would change merely because of outside pressures. Here I ask, how did those in Birmingham come to morally reject segregation as unjust?

The civil rights of African Americans was a marginal issue before the events in Birmingham in 1963. This changed in the span of a few months. In early 1963, the issues of African American voting rights and desegregation were barely on the public agenda or on the minds of most Americans. Indeed, the Movement seemed in peril. Efforts to end segregation in Albany, Georgia, in 1962 had ended in a dismal failure for the SCLC. In March of 1963 the Gallop Poll found 4 percent of Americans considered Civil Rights the most important problem facing the nation. The next poll, in September, found salience of this issue had increased dramatically; 48 percent of Americans saw Civil Rights as the most important of the nation's problems (Smith 1985).

Two prominent sociologists offer divergent explanations for the success of the Movement in Birmingham; both focus on the events in the spring of 1963. Aldon Morris (1984) is concerned with how the SCLC mobilized resources and developed tactics to force local businessmen to yield power and come to the table to bargain with them. Recognizing the importance of presenting the USA as a beacon of democracy during the Cold War, the Movement sought to force the Kennedy administration to intervene (Morris 1993:625). Under the leadership of Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR) developed a strong network of local activists willing to stand up to violence, jail, bombs, and beatings (Morris 2007:623). Morris (1993:624) argues that the Movement aimed to "generate a crisis" and a "breakdown of social order in Birmingham." Movement demands were limited, focusing on consumer rights and hiring in the downtown retail stores. Through music, testimonies, uplifting meetings, and charismatic clergy, the Movement generated mass support that disrupted commerce, undermined the operations of retail stores, and confounded industrial interest in the city. Innovative tactics, such as allowing school children to march, brought business to a standstill. Key business and industrial leaders were forced to meet. This group was officially named the 'Senior Citizens Council,' but colloquially called the 'big mules.' On May 10, 1963, they acceded to an agreement that promised to fulfill a portion of the Movement's demands.

In another explanation of Birmingham's transformative power, Jeffrey Alexander (2006:327) examines how the Movement, in Birmingham, created a dramatic story of good and evil that transformed the meaning of segregation in Northern eyes. Birmingham's status as the most racially divided and violent city in the South provided the opportunity to demonstrate to Northern audiences the anguish and injustice of segregation. Local officials graphically illustrated the violent repression of blacks. They met the Movement's peaceful protests with arrogant, indolent police actions. Northern news reporters translated the story, conveying to their readers these events as an affront to the basic principles of civil society. Through this communicative success, the Movement actions were able to initiate change in the institutional framework of the country and the "deep structures of public opinion" (Alexander 2006:347). The 'Children's March' which began on May 3, 1963, was particularly effective in sharpening the contrast between the sincerity and innocence of the movement and the callous use of power by Birmingham police (Alexander 2006:353). The publication of photos of boys being bitten by police dogs and children pummeled down the street by firefighters evoked civil outrage. Through the daily press coverage of Birmingham, Northern audiences began to identify with Southern blacks seeing their treatment as a violation of the essential principles of American democratic ideals.

Alexander's analysis deeply interrogates the representation of Birmingham in Northern media to expose the impact on the "deep structures of public opinion" (Alexander 2006:327). Yet, representation in Birmingham was quite different.

Autobiographical Memories of Birmingham

Both Morris and Alexander end their sociological analyses of the importance of Birmingham in May or early June. Neither interrogates the process of change in the city itself. As I will now show, the events of the spring had little impact on my interviewees. Even though the whites I interviewed had come of age in the midst of some of the most significant and violent events of the Civil Rights Movement, few reported personal memories of the Movement and the segregationist resistance from this time. For example, Dana says,

> I don't remember, and I've racked my brain, because I think this was a very important period in our time, why can't I remember more? For instance, when they had the dogs out and the fire hoses and all that. I don't remember

> all that. (Of buses) I don't remember them sitting in the back. I never saw that. . . . I don't remember the separate water fountains.

Several women reported that their parents kept them close for fear of violence but they do not recall details of the events that induced fear. Claire alone recalled her feeling of fear especially when she walked, almost daily, near the Trailways station. Remembering news reports of the beatings of 'Freedom Riders' there, she said that she walked fast and "hoped no bus was coming in." Claire considers the uncertainty of the situation in Birmingham saying, "I didn't know what would happen." She alone provided concrete details that reflected an understanding of the context in Birmingham in the years leading up to school integration and the bombing of the church. While other interviewees recalled numerous concrete details about teachers, friends, and social life while in high school, memories of the Movement were absent or unstructured.

The events of April and May were crucial in gaining the empathy of the nation for the plight of Southern Blacks. These events had almost no impact on my interviewees. When asked about demonstrations at downtown department stores where many of us shopped, only one interviewee had any personal memory of the lunch counter sit-ins and boycotts that rocked downtown Birmingham in April of 1963 and that led to the arrest of Martin Luther King and the "Letter from the Birmingham Jail." Helen recalled that while she was shopping downtown she was surprised to see a black woman lying on the floor of a department store. She saw police carry the woman from the store. When she got home, she discounted the national news reports of Birmingham demonstrations as overblown. At the time she thought that the woman's actions in the store were "just . . . very unladylike behavior." Ladylike behavior was a context established by family and friends to interpret meaning, black activism was not.

Rebecca's recollections also demonstrate the lack of context and understanding of events so important in shaping Northerners' understanding of civil rights. Rebecca says,

> Did the fire hose stuff happen on a Saturday morning? . . . I can remember stopping for a light . . . and here come all these people running. I am assuming that that was something going on at Kelly Ingram Park. But I didn't go home and validate it.

None of my classmates seem to have found the events of the spring salient in their autobiographical memories. Nine mention either 'dogs' or the

'hoses.' Dana mentions them to say she does not remember them. In Rebecca's case, her recollection is of people running but she is unsure of the context. The other seven interviewees who use them in their narrative make cursory reference to something they have seen on TV recently. In five of these cases it was a complaint about the misrepresentation of Birmingham. Faith says, "It's been forty years and they will still refer to Bull Connor and his dogs on TV." Kevin says, "[O]n TV they show the dogs and they show Kelly Ingram Park . . . with all the riots and stuff. It has hurt Birmingham." Yet, even those who do not mention dogs or fire hoses specifically may be saying something. For example Samuel says, "The thing that really irritates me, they have to have something about black rights every single night on the news . . . they have to say something about . . . Civil Rights or what we did to the blacks."

We were only blocks away from emotionally intense events that transformed the way that Americans think about race. We were at the age when strong memories are predicted to be formed. Yet my classmates have few autobiographical recollections of the events of the spring of 1963. This suggests that without a narrative frame to contextualize what one sees, one does not record events in memory. Friends, family, and texts give structures to define the moments one takes into consciousness and remembers.

Representation in Birmingham

Northern journalists interpreted and presented the events in Birmingham in a dramatic narrative that created indignation in Northern audiences (Alexander 2006:347–358). Southern white journalists ignored the Movement as much as possible. When mainstream news in Birmingham could not ignore local events, they represented the events as routine lawlessness. The images that caused moral outrage in the North were not published in local papers; instead, local papers portrayed the Civil Rights Movement as outsiders and agitators who were refusing to obey the principles of civil society. If Movement events were published at all, they were trivialized and hidden amongst the ads; whereas the calls for 'law and order' from Alabama officials were front-page news.

One man, Vincent Townsend, actively controlled the news that reached the people of Birmingham. He was a city power broker. According to McWhorter (2001:183), Townsend "had unchallenged rule" of the *Birmingham News*, WAPI television, and WAPI radio. The *Birmingham News* was the most widely read newspaper in Alabama, WAPI TV was the

local affiliate of NBC and CBS, and WAPI radio was the most powerful station in Alabama.

In the *Birmingham News*, throughout the events of the spring, Movement activists were portrayed as violating the principles of civil society. When the SCLC joined local activists in Birmingham, they were greeted with an editorial characterizing them as "strangers who have moved about the country creating strife and discord" (*Birmingham News* 4.5.1963:11). Again and again Movement activists are referred to as "agitators" and "law breakers" (e.g. *Birmingham News* 4.4.1963:7, 4.5.1963:2, 5.7.1963:2; Hanson 1963).

As the events of May gained widespread national press coverage, Alabama's elected officials and local media struggled to reassert control of representation. When water cannons and police dogs were turned on youth marching from the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church to protest segregation, the event was the lead story in the *New York Times* (1963a:1). This national paper of record published front-page photographs of an officer directing a police dog to bite a boy and a firefighter pummeling demonstrators with a high-pressure hose. Photos of children being attacked by police dogs or demonstrators propelled down the street by water canons were not published in Birmingham. Instead, local white papers used words and pictures to try to normalize these events. Thrice the *Birmingham News* defended the use of police dogs. Dog use for crowd control was "widespread" and "accepted practice" (Morin 1963:2; Cole 1963:14). Dogs were used because citizens were "entitled to law and order" (*Birmingham News* 5.10.63:2). Local stories trivialized the use of dogs, for example developing a story of their use in "New England" to control college students seeking "girls' panties" (*Birmingham News* 5.10.63:2).

In a battle over representation, the white power structure intensified their efforts to paint the Movement as violating established standards of morality. Editorials in the local news condemned demonstrations and called for a return to the "rule of law," and "respect for the law" (Hanson 1963:1). Immediately following the May agreement, the all-white Alabama legislature unanimously passed a resolution targeting the Movement by establishing a commission to "interrogate" and "investigate . . . persons, groups, and organizations" engaged in "unlawful activities" that threaten the "peace and dignity of the state of Alabama" (*Birmingham News* 5.8.1963:4).

Northern audiences viewed the agreement between the SCLC and the Senior Citizens Committee, made up of the city's power elite on May 10, 1963, as a victory. The success of the agreement was far from assured. Bull Connor offered an alternative explanation of why the demonstrations had ended. In his view, whites had prevailed. The city had forced King to

acquiesce and call off demonstrations so that he could save face and "get out of town" (*Birmingham News* 5.11.1963:2).

Of course, in Alabama, we had access to national television news but our observations of the world seemed structured by our everyday reality. Helen, who had observed a black woman being carried from a downtown store, watched national news and discounted it saying, "I just didn't understand what was going on, and I minimized tremendously." When Claire watched the news, she had to listen to her father's protests of how Birmingham was being portrayed. She said her reception of the televised national news was accompanied by listening to "Dad scream and holler . . . because he was so mad about the whole thing." Without a context to interpret the national news and with the widespread criticism, many in Birmingham rejected 'Yankee' reporters' interpretation of the events.

Birmingham's traditional media and most Southern newspapers disparaged or failed to cover Civil Rights activities on their doorsteps. Some have apologized. In what many would consider an understatement, in 1988, the *Birmingham News* admitted that its "coverage of race relations in the 1960s" was "marked at times by mistakes and embarrassment" (Wright 2006:A1). Differences between Northern and Southern news demonstrate that news is always written from some point of view. News stories shape what people see. Men and women use media to organize their experiences. The presentation of news is just one way that those with power shape the subjective experiences of individuals.

Absence of Change in Birmingham

In May and June 1963, Birmingham's press was quite clear that everything might go back to 'normal' after the agreement with SCLC was signed and the national movement had left town. Whites in Birmingham were waiting for national attention to shift and expected segregation to continue. Kennedy sent advisors to Birmingham and called for sweeping legislation, but Northern advisors typically were ignored and Federal laws were only selectively enforced in the South. The national press is fickle and news stories are soon forgotten. A key agreement between the 'big mules' and the SCLC was the downtown merchants' promise to take down 'colored' and 'white' signs in department stores. Merchants had made similar promises the previous year to quiet demonstrations; once the demonstrations ended, merchants put the signs up again (Eskew 1997:198).

When King called off the demonstrations, Shuttlesworth and many local activists were furious that he had based the decision on a few vague promises (Manis 1999:381–388). Movement demands had been modest to begin with and only two of the four Movement demands were addressed by the agreement. The agreement promised to allow blacks to use restrooms and dressing rooms in downtown stores. It also promised that blacks would be served at lunch counters in department stores; however, other eating facilities were excluded. Some merchants simply closed their lunch counters to avoid integration (Gordon 1963). Merchants agreed to hire one black sales person at one of the downtown stores within sixty days; negotiators noted that quickly firing that worker was at the merchant's discretion (*Birmingham News* 6.14.1963:1). The agreement established a biracial committee to discuss the problems in Birmingham. Notably, this biracial committee was segregated with no blacks on the steering committee. Even the press conference to announce the agreement was segregated (Manis 1999:387). City officials did not endorse the agreement; segregation laws remained in effect and parks and playgrounds remained closed to avoid integration (Sitton 1963a:1; Eskew 1997:313). The big mules had agreed to very little, and even this enraged Alabama's white media and public officials.

Writing in January 1964, Martin Luther King (1964:114, 115) was not optimistic about change in Birmingham. He notes that there had been only a few token breaches in segregation. He considers the possibility that "Birmingham had become the Waterloo of nonviolent direct action."

The agreement between the Senior Citizens and the SCLC had little immediate impact in Birmingham. The demonstrations that precipitated the agreement were hardly memorable to my classmates. Further it provoked the vigilante resistance to segregation. Four days after the agreement, the Ku Klux Klan held a large rally near Birmingham. In a continuation of right-wing vigilante attacks on those who sought integration, two dynamite bombs were strategically exploded after the rally. One bomb exploded at the Gaston Motel, beneath the room in which Martin Luther King usually stayed, an obvious assassination attempt. The other exploded at the home of King's brother, Rev. A. D. King who lived a mile or so away. Rioting broke out. Civil Rights activists tried to control the crowd. The anger of black masses could not be easily contained. Over the summer, Arthur Shore's house was bombed twice. As an attorney, Shores had orchestrated cases to desegregate schools. After the second bombing, rioting again broke out.

When three schools were finally desegregated on September 10, whites conducted unruly demonstrations and boycotts. On the following

Sunday, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was bombed, killing four girls. This bombing has become the event around which whites seem to have organized their recollections of the Civil Rights Movement in Birmingham. Blacks in Birmingham recall the Freedom Movement quite differently.

Blacks Remember Birmingham

While I have not focused my interviews on how blacks in Birmingham recall the events of the Freedom Movement, it is important to see that a very different local memory exists. The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute has recorded many oral histories that I have reviewed. In addition several volumes have been published recounting the recollections of Birmingham's 'foot soldiers' (Patterson 2014; Huntley and McKerley 2009; McKinstry 2013). Autobiographical recollections reported by blacks in Birmingham paint a deep, rich picture of the events in Birmingham.

This is a heroic narrative of overcoming oppression with collective action, faith, and persistence. Accounts of the years of mass meetings and sit-ins that led up to the demonstrations in 1963 show the resolve of these activists. They report the humiliations of black life in Birmingham and their steadfastness in the face of the hostility and brutality. Foot soldiers give detailed accounts of the events of the spring of 1963. Even those who were not present speak of demonstrations and of pummeling by firemen with high-powered hoses and attacks by police and their dogs. They recall the men, women, and children who spent days in jail and the cruelty of jailers.

Foot soldiers speak of their sense of accomplishment as they recognize that actions in Birmingham changed history and even the image of the USA abroad. Carolyn Walker Williams realized that as a collective, blacks in Birmingham could "turn things around" (Patterson 2014:88). Clifton Casey speaks of his surprise when he visited Germany and found the accomplishments of the Movement in Birmingham highlighted in a museum (Patterson 2014:97). Annie Cunningham Sewell remembers participating in demonstrations and going to jail as "the most significant thing" she has done in life (Patterson 2014:105). Through the Movement, Blacks in Birmingham came to see that their actions mattered (Huntley and McKerley 2009:203). Many recall that their lives were transformed as they gained "a feeling of self-esteem" through their participation in the Movement (Patterson 2014:195).

The girls killed at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church were friends or acquaintances of many foot soldiers. After the bombing, they felt hurt, afraid, withdrawn (Patterson 2014:159), but this is not an event that is central to their narratives. Mention of the church bombing serves to remind of the danger that even the mildest association with activism could arouse.

Carolyn McKinstry (2013:ix), who knew each of the girls and was in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church when it was bombed, says that she was encouraged to forget. She says, "For twenty years after these experiences, I tried hard to forget the senseless deaths, the inhumane injustices, the vicious German shepherds, and children getting arrested.... In fact, we were encouraged by our parents, other church members, and our black community to forget what had happened." McKinstry (2013:187) says that her brother Kirk was one of the students who integrated Phillips (I assume he was the boy in the junior class at our high school). She says she has never talked with him about his experiences at Phillips. Thus it appears that there may have been a coalition of silence among both blacks and whites about Birmingham's difficult past.

For Birmingham blacks, Patterson (2014:71) suggests the distortion of memory is that some have "fabricated memories of participating in the Movement." This is hardly surprising, for bystanders in heroic events are likely to "tell a communal story that they had assumed as their own" (James 1997:1407). White bystanders in Birmingham also report recollections that enhance self-esteem. Birmingham whites seem to have lost memory of their complicity with segregation. They fail to recall specific events in the spring of 1963 when support for segregation was ubiquitous among whites in Birmingham. Instead, the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church has come to be the focal point of the recollections of many whites who were youth in Birmingham during the Movement.

Whites' Autobiographical Recollections of the Bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church

For many of my classmates, the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church seems to have become central to their recollections of the racial violence and unrest that characterized Birmingham. Twelve of my twenty interviewees spontaneously mention the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church as a salient memory from the era. Several used the terms 'bombing' or 'church bombing' as a time referent.

Even though no mention had been made of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in our interview, Helen said,

> Maybe it was at the time of the bombing. Daddy told all of us to stay home. [He thought it] was not safe to go downtown.

Many of the interviewees structured their memory of the events of the Civil Rights Movement around media images of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing. Inez states, "When I see the stuff they have on TV now about the bombing of that church, it breaks my heart to see that those people had to suffer like that." Nora remembers her family was in church when the bombing happened. She says she remembers thinking, "How could anyone do that to little girls, and they were in church . . . how could anyone be so mean?"

Two interviewees report that they actually heard the bomb at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Julia recalls that she felt foreboding on hearing a loud explosion when she was in Sunday school a few blocks from the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. When her father picked her up, she learned that a black church was bombed. She said, "It still hurts, it does. It still hurts. It was so wrong."

Pamela, the second woman who reports that she heard the bombing said, "I heard the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. . . . I went to church later that day and they called on me to pray. . . . I definitely remember praying for the families of the girls that were killed." I followed up on her statement by asking, "Can you remember any more about that day?" She responded, "I didn't know what it was. It was a loud noise. I had never heard a bomb in my life."

But bombs had been used in Birmingham since 1947 to maintain segregation (Nunnelley 1991:3). Long before the deaths at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, Birmingham had come to be known as "Bombingham" because of the frequency with which dynamite was used to maintain segregation (Nunnelley 1991:3). Many of these bombings were in an area where blacks were moving into a previously white neighborhood that came to be known as 'dynamite hill' (Eskew 1997). This area was just a few blocks from Pamela's home. Yet, she recalls only the widely memorialized bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church.

Not only was the bombing called into memory as an opportunity to express personal empathy and embarrassment about a difficult past, it also formed the basis of a conversion narrative for interviewees and other whites of this generation from the Birmingham area. Two interviewees presented

their transition from a childhood immersed in segregationist beliefs to an adulthood that accepted or championed racial equality as a personal transformation or conversion. Both men are politically liberal, hold high-status professional jobs, and travel outside the South. Both centered their accounts of their own personal transformation on the church bombing. Andrew says,

> I can remember watching the news and seeing the intensity of the grief of the people, of the families, of the people of the church. That was an epiphany for me. I then began to believe more deeply that these are people with real feelings, deep feelings, just like we have. That was the beginning of my transformation from being raised as a conservative, segregationist. [It was a] transformation in my own thinking, in my own heart.

It is also the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church that Luke sees as the beginning of his moral transformation. Of that bombing he says,

> To me, on a right–wrong scale it was pretty clear where to put this, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong. We are now killing little girls over this. Watching it on television and seeing what we were doing . . . I came to feel stronger and stronger that what we were doing was wrong.

Both of these men developed a life story in which the church bombing marks a transition. Each presents the killing of the four girls as the moment at which he began to empathize with blacks and the moment at which he began to recognize the immorality of white's actions in resisting integration.

Both the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and the 'dogs and fire hoses' of the spring are now frequently represented in media and commemoration in Birmingham. The bombing is the focus of my interviewees' recollections. My interviews suggest that the bombing formed a basis for whites in Birmingham to begin to demarcate their selves from Birmingham's segregationist past. By expressing moral indignation at the bombing and empathy for the girls, whites in Birmingham are able to express their redeemed identity.

Conversion Narrative

This conversion narrative centering on the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church is not unique to my classmates. It seems to be shared by several prominent Alabamians in this generation. Many whites

who were youth or young adults during the highpoints of the Movement seem to speak of the bombing as a key moment that facilitated a transformation to an identity that renounces segregation.

Howell Raines, who served as editor of the *New York Times*, grew up in Birmingham and was attending Birmingham Southern College at the time of the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. He presents a narrative similar to that of my classmates. Mentioning only the four girls killed on September 15, 1963, he states the "deaths of the children galvanized the consciences of many Southern whites and forced them to admit segregation was immoral." Yet he acknowledges that this was not an immediate effect, saying that few whites in Birmingham acknowledged the "sacrificial suffering of the children" in 1963 (Raines 1983:12).

Sena Jetter Naslund, author of the best-selling novel *Ahab's Wife*, attended Phillips at the time that Shuttlesworth was beaten there. She also attended Birmingham Southern at the time of the bombing. In an interview on public radio she says, "When the church was bombed in 1963, it seemed to me, that it was a wake up call . . . (to seek) a better atmosphere rather than the atmosphere that would support the racial hatred that planted that bomb at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church" (Iowa Digital Library 2003).

Bill Baxley, the Alabama Attorney General who brought the first of the bombers to trial in 1977, was in law school at the University of Alabama at the time of the bombing. He says that as soon as he heard of the bombing he promised, "[O]ne day I am going to do something about it" (Sikora 1991:43).

Morris Dees, a founder of the Southern Poverty Law Center and a prominent adjudicator of Civil Rights cases, was a recent graduate of University of Alabama Law School at the time of the bombing. He says the bombing motivated his concern with "civil rights and justice" (Dees and Fiffer 1991:89). His wife says the killing of the four girls "was the beginning" that changed their lives, leading Dees to give up a successful business career and take up Civil Rights law (Dees and Fiffer 1991:88).

This conversion narrative seems to have originated with the eulogy that Martin Luther King Jr. gave at the funerals of Cynthia Wesley, Denise McNair, and Addie Mae Collins.[1] King (1986:221, 222) stated,

> The innocent blood of these little girls may well serve as the redemptive force that will bring new light to this dark city. . . . The spilt blood of these innocent girls may cause the whole citizenry of Birmingham to transform the negative extremes of a dark past into the positive extremes of a bright

> future. Indeed, this tragic event may cause the white South to come to terms with its conscience.

How this narrative circulated and was adopted by whites in Alabama is not clear. Yet several prominent white men and women from this generation rely on this redemptive narrative to testify to the immorality of segregation and proclaim an identity divorced from Alabama's segregationist past.

The bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church has become central to the recollections of many whites who were youth in Birmingham during this era of desegregation. On the surface, this seems to confirm the assumptions of those who study the cultural construction of memory, as the memorialization of this event would seem to explain why it is remembered. Yet, my interviewees seem not to have been deeply affected by the events of the spring in Birmingham that have been widely represented in media and were so important in establishing the immorality of segregation for Northern audiences. They seem not the recall the events that are so important in the heroic narrative of local blacks. In part, I explain this as a result of local press and public officials covering and reframing those events as law-breaking actions of outsiders as they were happening. Without a context for seeing the Movement actions as historically important, they were not remembered.

Yet, the loss of memory of the spring events among whites, in contrast to its importance among blacks, suggests that the self in the present is selective in bringing to mind recollections that support current identity. My white classmates who mentioned the 'dogs and fire hoses' minimized, dismissed, and criticized the representation of the spring events. They distanced themselves from these negative images of the city. Swidler (2001:15) reminds us that people do not simply accept culture. They often dismiss and criticize the representations that they encounter.

Many whites from the Birmingham area seem to have adopted the narrative of the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church to assert a new self. They identify with the black girls who were murdered and distance themselves from the segregationist of Birmingham's past. This implies that individuals are selective in their use of culture and in the narratives that they take to heart.

Note

1. Carole Robertson's parents chose to have a separate funeral for their daughter.

CHAPTER 5

Constructing a Cultural Trauma

Abstract This chapter charts the development of a trauma narrative around the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Using the sociological theory of cultural trauma, Gill explains why the Church bombing has become key to collective memory of the Civil Rights Movement. After the bombing and subsequent riots, traditional narratives grounded in the myth of the Lost Cause could no longer support white identity. Gill discusses representation of the 'four little girls,' and how innocence, gender, class, and the sacred location of the bombing informed the development of collective memory. She discusses the impact of the trials of the church bombers beginning in 1987 on representation. The trials developed the nature of the perpetrators and individualized the 'four little girls.'

Keywords Cultural trauma · Cultural sociology · Sixteenth street Baptist Church

The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing has become a part of collective memory in the USA. It is one of the recollections of the collective past that competent individuals are expected to share. The way that we think of the bombing today is summed up by US Attorney General Janet Reno (1997):

> It was here in this church thirty-four years ago that an ugly, horrible racist attack took the innocent lives of four young girls who were getting ready to

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> participate in their first adult service . . . Death is not an end for these girls. They are living still in our memory and their power still moves us.

This church bombing is a recollection of the past that shapes how people act in the present and how they imagine the future. A people are held together by their common remembrances of the past. This event in Birmingham is a shared memory of the evil of racist hate. In this chapter, I rely on the cultural theory of trauma (Alexander et al. 2004) to develop an explanation for the importance of the 'four little girls' in white memory of the events in Birmingham.

Much has been published about the church bombing for both academic and popular audiences (e.g. McKinstry and George 2011; Lee 2000; Romano 2006; McWhorter 2001; Davis 1993; Sikora 1991; Anderson 2008; Cobbs and Smith 1994). No one has examined how, over time, this event developed and became central to the recollections of individuals. Here I seek to establish how this event helped whites in Birmingham with personal memories of a segregationist past to find a usable identity and move beyond their embarrassing pasts.

Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, and Denise McNair were murdered while attending Sunday services at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, on September 15, 1963. I have shown that this dynamite bombing came in the midst of efforts to integrate schools in Birmingham and only months after demonstrations in this city had brought the nation's attention to Civil Rights. In this chapter, I examine the events surrounding this bombing with an eye to explaining why this event has become so central to memory of the Civil Rights Movement. I consider why this bombing has become a nexus around which whites in Birmingham distance themselves from their segregationist pasts.

Birmingham had seen a lot of racial violence but it had been mostly in black neighborhoods. On September 15, whites experienced fear in their own neighborhoods. After the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was bombed, riots erupted around the city. While the Movement was committed to nonviolence, activists were but a small part of the black community in Birmingham. Since May, bombings directed at Movement leadership had increasingly been met with insurgences. As the *New York Times* (Sitton 1963c:1) reports, the church bombing "brought hundreds of angry Negroes pouring into the streets." Segregationists, incited by the large afternoon rally against school desegregation, roamed the streets

packed into cars emblazoned with racist slogans. It was a volatile mix. During that afternoon, whites shot and killed two black boys: Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson.

Fear and confusion swept the city. The mayor went on the radio to urge residents to stay in their homes. I remember the feelings of apprehension and uncertainty. I am not easily frightened, but, on that afternoon, I was not going out of the house. I carried my transistor radio around listening to the developing details of this fatal bombing and of the riots as I peered out of the upstairs windows. Suddenly the racial problems that the city had long denied became real for whites.

The *Birmingham News* (9.18.1963:1) reports that after the bombing "a vast majority of Birmingham residents of both races were in a state of near shock." The deaths and riots left those in Birmingham feeling "nearly empty, physically spent, mentally exhausted." Whites and blacks in Birmingham were in a "state of near trauma."

We were, as Victor Turner (1967) would say, in a state of liminality, "betwixt and between." It seemed that the past no longer offered clear guidelines for behavior; yet, it was impossible to imagine what the future would hold. In situations that challenge everyday definitions of reality, individuals are likely to experience a "dramatic loss of identity and meaning" (Eyerman 2004:61).

Blacks and whites alike were unsure of how to respond to the crisis. Whites began to see that Bull Connor and vigilante violence had not been able to maintain segregation and instead had led to an uprising of angry blacks and the killing of innocent children. Whites were unsure whether the all-white police force and Wallace's State Troopers could provide safety and security.

For blacks, the situation was dire in a different way. Blacks had long known that Alabama police would not protect them. Alabama law enforcement had turned a blind eye to many other acts of violence against blacks. Not a single one of the previous bombings in Birmingham had been solved. Blacks feared for their own lives and those of their children.

In an attempt to regain control of the situation, the City Council turned to Governor Wallace for help. Wallace sent in Al Lingo and the Alabama State Troopers. These are the men known for their violent suppression of protestors, the men who would crack John Lewis's skull and send sixteen other protestors to the hospital in eighteen months in Selma. Black leaders were horrified. Lucius Pitts, president of Miles College, said, "[W]hen the City Council asked Lingo and that group of

mobsters to come in that's like spitting in your face" (Sitton 1963d:26). More than 150 black leaders called on the president to occupy Birmingham with Army regulars to stop racial violence and enforce desegregation. King telegrammed the president requesting Federal intervention; he feared there would be "in Birmingham and Alabama the worst racial holocaust this nation has ever seen" (*New York Times* 1963b). Kennedy sent two advisors.

At Phillips, we faced the realization that our classmates were charged with first-degree murder for the killing of a black child. We had been told that beating, killings, and bombings of blacks were not by the 'good people' of Alabama but the acts of a few hoodlums and ruffians. Yet, here was a highly respected and well-mannered member of our class who admitted to a racial killing.[1]

Times with such confusion and loss of meaning often precipitate a collective silence, yet in such times individuals seek new representations. Alternative voices struggle to find new narratives to ground individual and collective identity and provide meaning. People struggle to find narratives to "reconstitute or reconfigure a collective identity" (Eyerman 2004:63). Individuals reexamine their pasts. They seek moments that allow them to see themselves positively in light of the crisis.

Representing September 15, 1963

In the immediate aftermath of the bombing, Virgil and Johnny's deaths were considered an important part of the story of 'Birmingham Sunday.' The headlines of the *New York Times* on September 16, 1963, read "Birmingham Bomb Kills 4 Negro Girls in Church; Riots Flare; Two Boys Slain" (Sitton 1963c:1). Author James Baldwin was among the speakers at a memorial service held in the New York the following weekend 'for the six children slain in Birmingham.' During church and synagogue services the next week in New York, "Protestants, Catholics and Jews" commemorated the "six children" (Dugan 1963:24). In Washington, carrying signs that said "No More Birminghams," 10,000 marched protesting the deaths of "six Negro children" (*Washington Post* 1963). However, the boy's deaths were soon overshadowed by the deaths of the 'four little girls.'

The struggle for communicative control to interpret events in Birmingham raged between national and local media. Both pointed to defiance of the law as crucial in triggering the bombing. President Kennedy implicated Governor Wallace in his statement, "[P]ublic

disparagement of law and order has encouraged violence which has fallen on the innocent" (Wicker 1963). In Birmingham, officials still clung to the old narrative that Birmingham's problems were a result of the Movement's protests. The *Birmingham News* (9.16.1963:15) pointed to "law violating street demonstrations" as a source of the problems in Birmingham. Connor suggested that it was the Supreme Court's fault and that "King's crowd" might have bombed the Church (*New York Times* 1963d:17). Wallace blamed Birmingham's favorite scapegoats, "Communists" and outside agitators saying they were the cause of the "explosive troubles" (Pearson 1963:1).

Birmingham's white news sources said little about the victims of the bombing. On the day after the mass funeral for three of the girls, their pictures were published but hidden away in the "race section" of the paper (*Birmingham News* 9.18.1963:13). The girls were not personalized, their families were not interviewed, their characters not developed. Instead in almost daily updates, the front page of the *Birmingham News* (9.17.1963:1, 9.18.1963:1, 9.20.1963:1, 9.22.1963:1) discussed the status and family hardship of a white boy who had been injured by a brick in the rioting following the bombing.

Mayor Boutwell attempted to vindicate the city and its white leadership stating, "All of us are victims, and most of us are innocent victims" (*Birmingham News* 9.16.1963:2). Yet this narrative seemed unable to stand in the face of the shocking tragedies.

The world we had grown up in seemed to be falling apart. Andrew said he lay awake at night engaged in an "internal struggle," and thought, "what is going on, what is happening to our little comfortable world?" Claire says of this time period, "It just seemed that the whole world as I knew it was bizarre all of a sudden."

Blaming the uncivil behavior on blacks seemed no longer to ring true. Yet no one was able to construct a new narrative that resonated with the white audience and provided whites in Birmingham a meaningful sense of personal and collective identity.

Triumphs and tragedies are the essential elements of collective identity and of collective memory. They represent the "unique founding moment" for new patterns of behavior (Giesen 2004:113). Many voices come forward to shape triumphs into stories that reflect on the identity of the group. Tragedies are often much harder to adopt into the story of a people, at least by those who are implicated in the horrors. At the moment they occur they seem unspeakable, as individuals have not found a way to

fit events into existing narratives that do not undermine collective identity. Around the world and even in other Southern states (*Birmingham News* 9.22.63:8), voices condemned whites in Birmingham, attributing the children's deaths to white resistance to integration. In Birmingham, these words were unspeakable, as Charles Morgan quickly learned.

Charles Morgan, a young, white attorney in Birmingham, dared to speak of the responsibility that whites in Birmingham bore for the events of September 15. In an address to the Young Businessman's Club on the evening of September 16, he attributed the violence to "Every last one of us" who "has contributed . . . to the popularity of hatred . . . Every Governor who shouted for lawlessness" and the ministers who "do not admit Negroes into their ranks at the chapel" (*New York Times* 1963b:24). His speech was reprinted in national newspapers and magazines, but, in Alabama, no one ever spoke of his potential for political office again. Wallace called him a "sissy breeches . . . who helped bring about the trouble with his agitation and asinine statements" (Carter 2000:182).

As a result of this speech, Morgan repeatedly received harassing notes and phone calls threatening to kill him, his wife, and son. Morgan and his family left Birmingham; Morgan felt they had no choice (Morgan 1964; Salisbury 1964).

The Trauma Process

Crises have the potential for disrupting the continuity between past and present, but not all crises enter collective memory, nor do they bring about new social patterns. We all experience traumatic moments; most are soon forgotten. Yet there are moments that lead to a rupture with the past and transformation in collective identity. Alexander et al. (2004) develop the cultural theory of trauma to provide an understanding of how crises lead to social transformations. This requires the development of a new framework that employs memory to tell a story that is sufficiently compelling to persuade a wider audience that they share the trauma of the victims (Alexander 2004a:12).

Cultural trauma narratives are dramatic stories of good and evil that have emotional, cognitive, and moral dimensions (Alexander 2004b:201). When representation of a crisis arouses an audience to empathize with victims who are violated by evil perpetrators, shifts in culture may occur. Narratives of cultural trauma are powerful in shaping collective memory as similar elements are evoked in the minds of the audience. Both develop dramatic,

simplified versions of the past that have moral dimensions and characterize actors as villainous or virtuous. Collective memory and narratives of cultural trauma are developed around moral victims and evil perpetrators.

Eyerman (2011:146) sees a cultural trauma as "a form of identity crisis, in which a collectivity loses a secure sense of itself... the effects can be located in collective memory as well as in altered social practice." Cultural traumas can lead to the creation of new "master narratives," but this requires the construction of a framework that employs memory to construct a new story that moves emotions and is so compelling that it persuades a wider audience that they share the trauma of the victims. We must all place ourselves within the collective past. This is difficult for those who are on the losing side of history. Individuals struggle to find a valued identity and seek to evade seeing themselves or their loved ones as evildoers (Giesen 2004; Welzer 2005).

The symbolic representation of victim and perpetrator are critical in determining the power of an event to change history. When audiences come to see the victims as pure and blameless and as experiencing a horrible fate that cannot be justified by their own actions, we have the beginning of a cultural trauma narrative. However, for a narrative to develop into a true 'trauma drama,' the evil, malicious intent of the perpetrator must be cast. In the trauma drama, we can see ourselves in the innocence of the victims and in the maliciousness of the perpetrators (Alexander 2002:31); however, we can also project the evil we know is deep inside us onto a malefactor.

The Six Children

In order for a group of individuals to adopt another's suffering as a shared trauma, the status of the victim is paramount. Rather than see the victim as an unfortunate object, individuals need to take on the victims' suffering as their own. In many 'trauma dramas' the audience comes to identify with the sufferer and imagine that "it could have been me" (Tota 2005:275; Eyerman 2011). Thus the moral status of the victim is critical.

Sacred Space

Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Denise McNair were killed in a church, a 'sanctuary,' a sacred space. Sacred spaces have a different essence than places in the everyday world (Durkheim 2008). While

violence or hatred may mark the profane world, an attack on a sacred thing mobilizes a set of feelings that are quite different from those arising from the defamation of a profane space.

Religion matters in Alabama. Only Mississippi has a larger percent of the population affiliated with a religious group (PEW 2008:100). Because the girls were killed in a church, it brought to white minds the narratives of Christian fellowship and compassion, especially toward children. In my white Baptist Sunday School and Vacation Bible School, we sang over and over a song that had the lines,

> Jesus loves the little children
> All the children of the world
> Red and yellow, black and white
> They are precious in His sight (Woolston 1913)

Here were four of these 'precious children' killed in church. As Edward says, in explaining why the church bombing was meaningful to him, "What was going on was inconsistent with the concepts that I perceived composed Christianity. It was inconsistent." Legitimating the morality of murdering children in church was challenging even for some who had not previously questioned segregation. Morris Dees, for example, says that he struggled after the bombing to "square" what had happened "with what I had been brought up to believe in church" (Dees and Fiffer 1991:89).

Birmingham papers published images of the outside of the wrecked church; images from the violated sanctuary were not published in Birmingham. However, the cover of *Time* magazine on September 27th graphically displayed the stained glass window from the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church that had literally been defaced. The body of Christ, the Shepherd, was virtually intact except His white face was blown away. Many whites were themselves worshiping in their own sanctuaries when the bombing occurred, heightening the identification as fear of racial violence intensified.

Innocence, Gender, and Class

A basic element of developing empathy for those who experience a tragedy is that the audience does not hold the victims responsible for their plight. From the beginning, the innocence of the girls killed at the church was central to the discussion of the bombing. It was immediately established

and thoroughly documented that none of the girls had been among the young people who demonstrated in early May (*Birmingham News* 9.16.63:6). Beginning on September 16, media and political leaders in Birmingham and around the world referred to the girls as "innocent" children (*Birmingham News* 9.16.63:1, 3; Wicker 1963:1). Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Denise McNair were characterized as 'four little girls,' even though three were teenagers. Romano (2006:101–102) notes that this represents them as passive victims and downplays black agency. This "takes attention away from the black activism and leadership that was at the center of the Civil Rights Movement." This image of the girls as passive innocent victims appeals to whites and is "particularly attractive to the media" (Romano 2006:102).

Violence against girls seems more likely to touch the public and motivate them to action than similar attacks on boys. In the USA, deaths of girls have led to public outrage and new practices such as "Amber Alerts" and the "Cleary Act." The kidnapping of schoolgirls in Nigeria by Boko Haram led to calls from around the world to "Bring Home our Girls." This terrorist group had been killing schoolboys for months. It was only when they kidnapped girls that an international audience began to heed their actions (Nossiter 2014a, b). Gender images are especially powerful when whites think of black youth in their preteen and teen years.

Patricia Hill Collins speaks of the "controlling images" of black women. The first image she discusses arises from whites' images of black women as devoted house servant. Whites often imagine that black women and girls willingly providing faithful service to them. This image sees black women and girls as "loving, nurturing, and caring" towards whites, representing the ideal black female response to elite whites (Collins 2000:72).

On the other hand, US culture has a long history of fear of black men and violence against them. Black boys and men who questioned segregation by organizing a protest, organizing blacks to vote, or expressing attraction to white women were regularly killed in many parts of the South. Southern juries almost never convicted whites for killing black men in such circumstances.

In addition to Virgil, *Southern Poverty Law* (2012) lists twenty-five black men and boys who were martyrs of the Civil Rights Movement. In most cases, no one was charged with the killings. When whites were brought to trial for killing a black activist they were almost always freed in jury trials. In 1967, seven white men were sent to prison for the murder of James Earl Chaney; however, the murder charge included two white

Civil Rights workers (Bell 2004). Medgar Evers' assassin was not convicted and imprisoned until 1994. Beyond the girls killed at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church *Southern Poverty Law* lists only one other black female as martyred.

Immediately after the bombing, some "hard-core" segregationists (Carter 2000:182) tried to maintain the narrative of blaming the Movement for the violence, but the hegemonic narrative that had led to whites' taken-for-granted support of segregation began to break down. Voices in the white community started to demonize the bombers. The innocence of the four girls killed at the church was prominent in accounts of the bombing; but, in local news, the girls' pictures and details of their personalities were strikingly absent.

Soon, the very mention of the bombing seemed to disappear. After November, I could find no reference in the *Birmingham News* or *Post Herald* to the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church or the children killed on that day for almost five years. On the fifth anniversary the *Birmingham News* (9.15.1968) included a short editorial saying, "It's not pleasant to recall that terrible day but it is impossible not to." The editorial credits the deaths of the "four children" with birthing for Birmingham "a bright future . . . against the backdrop of its darkest day." On the seventh anniversary, local news again reminded Birmingham of the bombing. The Sunday magazine, *In Dixieland*, included an interview with the parents of Carole Robertson, one of the bombing victims, and gave a few details of her life (Nunnelley and Tarver 1970:5, 6).

Identifying the perpetrators of the bombings and personalizing the victims secured the narrative that Birmingham whites needed to be able to think about the past and feel redeemed. As these two elements of trauma construction developed, Birmingham began to redeem its collective identity.

The Perpetrators

After the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, the way that white media in Birmingham characterized the anonymous villains who had bombed and beaten those who challenged segregation shifted. Birmingham news sources had typically described them as 'ruffians' or 'hoodlums.' A few days after the bombing, the *Birmingham News* published two letters to the editor that did more than superficially criticize the bombings. These letters analogized the situation in Birmingham with that

in Nazi Germany, saying this was how "Hitler began" and pointing to whites' failure to speak out as similar to the failure of Germans to speak out against "Nazi excesses" (*Birmingham News* 9.22.63:15).

Birmingham was not yet ready to bring the men who had carried out the bombing to trial. It was fourteen years after the bombing, in 1977, that the first Klansmen, Robert Chambliss, known by his friends as 'Dynamite Bob,' was convicted for the church bombing. Almost forty years after the bombing, two more Klansmen, Thomas Blanton and Bobby Cherry, were convicted in 2001 and 2002.

Prosecuting Perpetrators

In 1977, Robert Chambliss was put on trial for the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. That trial helped develop a narrative that allowed Birmingham a new way to think about the past. I have shown that in the early sixties, media and elites in Birmingham saw the city itself as the victim of 'outside agitators' of the Civil Rights Movement who refused to obey legal authority. It was only with the deaths of Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, Denise McNair, and Addie Mae Collins in the church bombing that whites began to perceive blacks as victims in Birmingham. These girls were represented as innocents. Yet in white media, they remained undifferentiated victims. Their characters were not developed. Their pictures were published only once on the day of the mass funeral of three of the girls. Those images were hidden away among the ads in the inner pages of the paper (*Birmingham News* 9.19.1963:13). As Angela Davis, who had been friends with Carole and Cynthia, says, they remained "innocent, nameless black girls" (Davis 1993:94). This began to change with the trial of Chambliss.

After Robert Chambliss was indicted in 1977, Birmingham's civil rights legacy was resurrected but in a new form. Details of the girls' lives and deaths were more widely distributed. The focus in the trial on individual criminal guilt allowed responsibility for the bombing to be securely fixed on particular evil men. Agents of memory began to reshape images of the past and memorialize the events in Birmingham.

Chambliss' indictment forced Birmingham to recall painful experiences but provided a focus for Birmingham to begin to renarrativize its past. The trial ritual allowed whites in Birmingham the opportunity to clearly separate themselves from the criminals of the Ku Klux Klan. As Giesen (2004) points out, as individual perpetrators are demonized and expelled, a group can assert

a sharp demarcation between themselves and the evil done in their name. The focus of a trial narrative on the acts of monstrous individuals allows those who were complicitous to take on a neutral third-party role. Sitting in judgment of the few allows the many to ignore collective responsibility.

The trial narrative develops around a heroic white protagonist, Bill Baxley, who brought the first bomber to trial in 1976. This young Alabama Attorney General reopened the case others considered hopeless or too hot to handle. Baxley was attending the University of Alabama Law School at the time of the bombing. The heroic narrative that developed around him contends that soon after the bombing he wrote down the names of each of the girls and swore that someday he would bring those responsible to justice (Mitchell 1978:313; Sikora 1991).

When Baxley took the case to trial, few thought he had the evidence to convict. Elizabeth Cobbs, the niece of Robert Chambliss who had been twenty-three at the time of the bombing, came forward to provide crucial testimony. She testified to incriminating statements her uncle had made before and after the bombing. Cobbs reported that Chambliss had said, "You just wait until after Sunday morning and they will beg us to let them segregate" (Sikora 1991:143). Perhaps more importantly, in her time on the witness stand, she painted a picture of an uncouth man that constantly used profanity and had little regard for his wife. Also crucial to the testimony that Elizabeth gave was the ugly, derogatory language her uncle used to refer to blacks (Sikora 1991).

Romano (2006:111–114) examines the transcripts and news coverage from the trial showing how the bombers were painted as iconic "old-time racists," and "lone rednecks." The testimony in the cases focused on the defendants' language, the derogatory terms they used to describe blacks, and their support of segregation. The pervasive racism and widespread endorsement of segregation of whites in Birmingham at the time were ignored. With little attention paid to the cultural context that buttressed these men acting in horrific ways, it was easy to forget that segregation had once been a way of life and the 'hateful names' the defendants used to refer to blacks were not uncommon.

Commemoration

As Chambliss is brought to justice, we begin to see Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, Denise McNair, and Addie Mae Collins personalized for a white audience. Almost immediately after their deaths, a photomontage

and details about the girls and their families were published in *Jet* (1963:24), a magazine marketed toward African American readers. On the day after the mass funeral the *Birmingham News* (9.19.1963:8) did publish the girls' photos but it was relegated to the "race section" on page eight and there were no details about the girls or their families. I could find no newspapers or magazines oriented to white audiences that published the montage of pictures of the four girls until 1977 when the *Chicago Tribune* published their pictures to accompany a story about the arrest of Chambliss (McNulty 1977:26). The montage of photographs of the four girls has since become iconic.

Filmmaker Spike Lee contributes another important element in the development of the memory of Birmingham's church bombing. His documentary *4 Little Girls* brings the girls' lives more deeply into the consciousness of the American public. The movie was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Documentary in 1997, assuring wide distribution. Lee develops the personality and activities of each girl and moves the viewer to grieve their loss. Interviews with their families and friends develop the lost promise of each girl. We meet Denise's parents who speak of the devastating death of their child. Carole's sister tells us Carole took dance and played in the school band. Cynthia's sister begins to cry as she tells of fixing her sister's slip on the dreadful day. Addie Mae's sister tells of the game of toss they played on the way to church. In the documentary, Lee uses Joan Baez's evocative song "Birmingham Sunday." Baez individually names and laments each of the four girls and returns to the refrain, "And the choir kept singing of Freedom."

During the years following the first trial, several sites have been established in Birmingham to remember the accomplishments of the Civil Rights Movement. Each promotes memory and empathy with the girls killed at the church. The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church continues to serve its congregation, but also has become a site of memory that thousands of visitors come to each year to recall the tragic deaths of these girls. Across the street from the church, city leaders have built an impressive new memory site, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute (BCRI). This memorial site situates Birmingham's past in the context of the national movement. In Kelly Ingram Park, adjacent to these two sites, sculptures commemorate key events in the movement including a large sculpture of the girls called 'Four Spirits' unveiled at the fiftieth anniversary. Memorializing Birmingham's past has been controversial; however, whites and blacks in the city administration and the local business community

have worked together to develop these sites to shape memory and leave the past behind.

In 1978, David Vann, the white mayor suggested the building of a site in Birmingham to commemorate the Civil Rights Movement. Odessa Woolfolk, founding co-chair of the BCRI, explains that many in Birmingham thought commemorating the movement would only "encourage the Yankee press to paint us as those folks of the 1950s and 1960" (Woolfolk 2012). When whites argued against memorializing their difficult pasts, Vann responded, "[T]he best way to put your bad images to rest is to declare them history and put them in a museum" (Romano 2014:84). Support for the project came from surprising places. George Wallace, back in the governor's seat, "was trying to demonstrate he was a changed man" (Fine 2013:1325). He secured funding for Alabama Civil Rights memory sites to encourage tourism (Eskew 2006:29).

The BCRI shapes memory and promotes reconciliation. Visitors navigate through a maze of dark galleries that use artifacts and media to situate segregation in the long-ago past. Antiquated school desks from the 1950s illustrate inequality in educational resources. Banks of televisions from the 1950s present black-and-white newsreels of Birmingham. The visitors emerge from this dark past with the agreements of May of 1963. The room becomes even brighter with the commemoration of the March on Washington. Visitors come into the full light of day from large windows overlooking Kelly Ingram Park, the site where black children and adults stood up to white men wielding fire hoses and police dogs. One is then reminded of the day of the bombing with photographs of the damaged church along with portraits of the six children killed on the day of the church bombing. The BCRI is one of the few places where the boys are commemorated along with the girls. Next, visitors are encouraged to focus on the individual criminal guilt of the evil perpetrators with details of the trials. A gallery of photographs including Birmingham's first black mayor, police officers, and business executives encourage visitors to celebrate the 'new Birmingham.'

The BCRI, like the Apartheid Museum studied by Teeger and Vinitzky-Seroussi (2007), builds a consensus memory. It avoids blaming ordinary whites by focusing blame on a few evil Klansmen. It separates the past and the present, and constructs the past as left behind; encouraging visitors to celebrate reconciliation. Touring the museum invites visitors to identify with the heroic foot soldiers and morally reject the horrors of the past, thus guiding individuals in negotiating their own identities in light of the difficult past.

The memorialization of the deaths of Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, Denise McNair, and Addie Mae Collins has kept their memory alive. Their memory has shaped and been shaped by Birmingham's needs to create a usable past; a past that allows whites and blacks to feel that the city's difficult past is in the long ago.

Focusing memory of the Civil Rights Movement on the innocent victims of the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church allows whites in Birmingham to maintain solidarity with the consensus memory of the nation. Vinitzky-Seroussi (2002) distinguishes three elements of remembrance—the victim(s), the event, and the context of the event. By framing a difficult past to omit context, acknowledging only victims and the event, groups increase solidarity and minimize conflict over the past. Adding the context may "evoke the same conflict that constituted that painful past in the first place" (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002:35).

Remembering the girls killed in the church bombing is consistent with a "progressive vision" (Alexander and Sztompka 1990); it supports a vision of the USA as moving toward a better world in which bombings and racism are a thing of the past. The killing of Johnny Robinson reminds us of the failings of the USA in assuring racial justice. It brings awareness to the many unarmed black boys who are killed by police every year with little consequence. Recalling Virgil's killing is even more frightening; we must recognize that good people can do evil things. His killing by an honor student and Eagle Scout could lead white Southerners to identify not just with the victim but to consider the possibility that the perpetrator 'could have been me.'

For white Southerners, recognizing themselves in the perpetrators of atrocities has been carefully avoided. Part of the appeal of trauma narratives is the stark contrast they offer between good and evil. The narrative of the four little girls allows whites to identify with the pure and innocent and scorn the cruel and crude racist. In this narrative, the majority of whites in Birmingham can see themselves as clearly separate from the monstrous men who killed the girls. Whites avoid the recognition that the climate of racial hatred they shaped, supported, or tolerated moved a seemingly decent boy to commit an atrocious act.

Remembering Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Denise McNair allows whites to feel an emotional connection to the past. By identifying with these girls, whites in Birmingham can feel that they are in control of the transformation that the nation required of them. Identifying

with the girls allows those in Birmingham to present themselves as autonomous individuals who chose to change (Swidler 2001:148). Remembering their deaths provides a path from the 'wrong side of history' to the right. It took the courageous efforts by thousands of black foot soldiers, presidential initiatives, Supreme Court decisions, and Congressional action to motivate desegregation in Birmingham. Empathizing with the four little girls allows whites in Birmingham to feel personal integrity in the face of this change.

Note

1. Like others whites who have killed blacks they imagined dangerous, our classmates were soon released. An all-white jury convicted Joe of second-degree manslaughter; Mike pleaded the same. They transferred to other high schools and served two years of probation (NYT 3/10/1964:30).

CHAPTER 6

Silence, Youth, and Change

Abstract This chapter considers why white Southern interviewees seem to have lost autobiographical recollections of many events of the Civil Rights Movement. Gill shows that most interviewees have only vague memories of Virgil Ware's shooting. Even though Virgil was killed by a respected classmate, he is not central to memories. Whites in Birmingham maintain a 'coalition of silence' about the Civil Rights Movement that allows forgetting. They also claim new collective identities. Gill argues that Alabama whites who came of age in the 1960s, began to change sides. Inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, influential whites allied with black youth organizations to seek their own freedoms. The student movement at the University of Alabama demonstrates a new identity that emerged in this generation.

Keywords Autobiographical memory · Coalition of silence · Student movement

Memory is selective. My classmates are discerning in their recollections of Civil Rights Movement. Memorialized events such as the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church that killed Addie Mae Collins, Carole Roberton, Cynthia Wesley, and Denise McNair are socially shared and promoted by media and memorials. They are easily accessible to individuals as tools for constructing a personal story to place themselves in the

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past. Events that are not memorialized, such as the deaths on the same day of Johnny Robinson and Virgil Ware, may soon slip from memory. But there is a deeper story behind the selective recollections I explore. Part of the story is the search for a new identity among white Southern youth who came to see their identity as stained by their region's past. In this chapter I consider my classmates' loss of recollections of the deaths of Johnny Robinson and Virgil Ware. Further, I explore the emergence of a new identity among white Southern youth as they were inspired by the Civil Rights Movement to change sides and work toward their own freedoms.

Karl Mannheim's work grounds key findings in sociological works on individuals' memories. Researchers find individuals are likely to recall and think important events that occurred when they were adolescents or young adults (e.g. Schuman and Scott 1989; Griffin 2004). My classmates, who were youth at the highpoint of Civil Rights activism in Birmingham, have limited, selective recollections of the events that were going on around them. This would seem to contradict Mannheim's assertion that it is in youth that one develops memories that 'stick.' Yet, Mannheim's work is not primarily concerned with memory; he is concerned with how youth are crucial in bringing about social change. It is youth's influence on social change that I now explore. I seek to better understand the internal force that led the South to desegregate.

My analysis casts new light on the significance of Mannheim's "Problem of Generations." The essential problem that Mannheim addresses in this widely cited article is why societies do not stagnate. Mannheim surmised that as members of a new generation come of age, they encounter a set of experiences that are different from previous generations that lead them to see the world in a new way. Their collective experiences can produce dramatic changes in consciousness and lead them to seek social change. As Mannheim ([1928] 1952:294) says, the "fresh contacts" of a new generation "facilitates reevaluation of our inventory and teaches us both to forget that which is no longer useful and to covet that which has yet to be won." His analysis sees youth as key to social change but clearly has a place for forgetting. If cultures are to change, forgetting the past may be key to that transformation.

For white Southerners, the forgetting of autobiographical memories has been aided by a coalition of silence about the era of desegregation. Lasting memories develop when we think events over, discuss them with our friends, and imagine others responses (Halbwachs 1992). Silence about events is often observed with difficult pasts. Here I use my interviews to

demonstrate the depth of Southerners' silence about their difficult past. The coalition of silence has allowed individuals to lose or renarrativize threatening memories from the past. Those who study silence about difficult pasts tend to see them as methods for avoiding embarrassment and maintaining groups' solidarity (Zerubavel 2006; Stein 2009). I emphasize that silence allows a forgetting and rewriting of the past.

I end this chapter by considering how my interviewees' generation of white Alabamians was influential in bringing the Movement home to the families of Alabama. I posit that exposure to the Civil Rights Movement galvanized a cadre of white youth of Alabama to reject the segregation embraced by their parents. The Movement's actions demonstrated the immorality of segregation and created an effervescence that led many white youth in Alabama to change sides and fight against segregation.

I begin the chapter by considering a key example of selectivity in memory. I examine the vagueness of my classmates' recollections of the deaths of Johnny Robinson and Virgil Ware, the two boys who were killed on the day of the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church.

Remembering the Two Little Boys

Most of my classmates recall the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Many build their recollections of the era of the Civil Rights Movement around this dramatic event. Among the twenty classmates I interviewed, no one mentioned Johnny Robinson, the boy who was killed by police two blocks from our school. Indeed, only after I completed interviews and read police files did I learn he was killed at the bus stop I frequented. I must have known it at the time but lost the memory. The killing of Virgil Ware by our classmates is more memorable but not at the center of the memories of any of my interviewees. The shooting of this boy who was riding the handlebars of his brother's bicycle was typically forgotten or remembered only after I prompted interviewees with our classmates' names.

Julia recalls hearing the bomb that killed the four girls. Her eyes filled with tears as she said that memory of the girls' death "still hurts." The killing of Virgil Ware has less impact. After she recounted all her salient memories of the Civil Rights activities in Birmingham, I asked Julia if she remembered Joe Sims and Mike Farley. She says, "I knew Larry Joe," and remembers feeling "glad he didn't go to prison but he really should have."

Pamela also reports hearing the church bombing. She recalls being called on to pray in church later that day. In these public prayers, she remembers

"praying for the families of the girls." I then asked Pamela if she remembered Joe Sims and Mike Farley. She replied, "Yes, yes both of them. Thank you. I never in a million years would have thought to bring that up. They were our schoolmates and they were arrested for shooting a young black child."

For Andrew, recognizing the pain and suffering of the families of the four girls led to a moral epiphany. Andrew said that he recalled seeing the police come to school to take one of his classmates away for the killing of Virgil Ware[1] but attributes his own transformation to the church bombing.

In recalling the Civil Rights Movement, Luke immediately mentioned by name our classmates who shot "the young child on the bicycle." But for him the moment of moral transformation came from the church bombing that led him to recognize that "what we were doing was wrong."

Even though Joe Sims was among the most respected boys in our class, even though the event made national headlines, few students seemed to assign weight to this killing. Spontaneous memories of our classmates who killed Virgil Ware were rare in comparison to spontaneous memories of the killing of the 'little girls.' Twelve of my interviewees spontaneously recalled the church bombing as a salient memory from the Civil Rights era. In comparison, only seven spontaneously recalled the shooting of Virgil Ware by our classmates on the same day. However, most interviewees did remember the killing of Virgil Ware when prompted with the names or our classmates who shot him. Yet, for a few, even this memory had been lost.

After Olivia detailed her recollection of the Civil Rights Movement era, I asked if she remembered Joe Sims and Mike Farley. She gave a vivid description of each of these boys but said she could not think of any way that they would be connected with the Civil Rights Movement. When I told her of the killing, she said, "but that was after we were out of high school." After I assured her that it happened at the beginning of our junior year, she said, "I don't remember that at all. And that bothers me. I must have really buried that deep in my subconscious." The tragedy of a respected classmate killing a black child seems less salient than the more memorialized deaths attributed to strangers.

Coalition of Silence

White Southerners may have talked a great deal about resisting integration but, as the Civil Rights Movement began to succeed, they "tried their best to ignore" or "disregard" it (Sokol 2006:326).

When faced with events that disrupt meanings and identities, one may attempt to ignore the event and focus on the things in life that seem more 'normal.' My interviews suggest that white young people who were surrounded by the now legendary events of the Civil Rights Movement did not question the meaning of these events and maintained a silence about them. They centered their lives on 'normal' activities for high school students such as schoolwork, family, or social life. They don't remember being interested in the Civil Rights activities that were going on all around them.

Eviatar Zerubavel (2006) discusses coalitions of silence in which individuals implicitly agree to avoid discussion of an issue that is obvious to everyone in order to maintain group solidarity and prevent embarrassment. This silence has implications for memory. When events are not discussed, they are likely to slip from one's recollections.

Many classmates noted that they could not remember discussing the Movement events that were going on around us while we were in high school. Olivia said,

> I don't ever remember a teacher talking about it. Not the way we do at school now. We talk about 9/11. When I look back I think, why didn't some teacher say, "lets talk about this." . . . We never talked about what was going on in our city.

Gregg says that he never remembers any classmates discussing the demonstrations downtown. He continues,

> I don't know that I was ever told, "there is going to be a demonstration today, don't go down there." . . . It would be something you would think that teenagers would be inquisitive about. I don't remember being inquisitive about it . . . It was almost like we weren't interested at all.

Perhaps the clearest analysis of the lack of talk was from Edward who attributed personal problems to the violence and structural change he experienced. He said,

> It was a tumultuous time, a lot of change. I internalized my feelings. I believe that some of the trauma and inhibitions that I experienced throughout my life were caused by that. When you experience trauma and don't know how to handle it [long pause]. We didn't receive any counseling

> or anything. Nobody talked to me about it, my parents didn't. And at the church they were talking about what they were going to do [if blacks tried to come to church], the deacons were going to be armed.

Ideas that easily could be spoken in the present were not speakable in the past. Dana told me that she was not brought up to think that whites were better than blacks. When I asked if she could have said that at Phillips at the time, she was taken aback and paused for a few seconds. I waited as she vocalized an inner debate, first saying she could have made such a statement and then realizing that she would not have. Finally Dana said, "That's something that you don't bring up. That's not something you sit down and discuss with people in high school."

In one interview I learned by happenstance that Gregg's wife had been enrolled in the first elementary school integrated in Birmingham. I was surprised when she sat down with her husband for the interview but gave her a consent form. She began to tell me about her experiences. Her parents had kept her in public school while many of her classmates "were going down the street where they had taken a house and turned it into a school." Her husband looked at her in surprise and said, "I didn't know they did that." This suggests that a silence around the topic of integration structures even the marital conversation among white Southerners. Though the wife had seen a number of her classmates disappear during integration, evidently, she had never mentioned details of her experiences with her husband.

Generational Change

Mannheim's ([1928] 1952:293) work suggests that youth are in a unique position to develop "visible and striking transformation of the consciousness." This raises the question of whether those who came of age during the Civil Rights era experienced a change of consciousness in comparison to older generations. Quantitative studies provide evidence for a cohort effect, seeing those who came of age during or after the accomplishments of the Civil Rights Movement as more progressive in racial attitude (e.g. Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo 1985). Kristen Lavelle's (2015) qualitative work offers insight into the dynamics of this change.

About the same time I was interviewing in Birmingham, Lavelle interviewed an 'elder' generation of white Southerners in Greensboro, North

Carolina.[2] While my interviewees were in their late fifties at the time of the interview, Lavelle's were primarily in their seventies and eighties.

Her fascinating work, designed to identify ways that racial ideologies and structures are maintained, provides a deeper understanding of many of the patterns I found among my generation of white Southerners. Yet, there are a number of crucial differences. My interviewees often report concrete relationships with blacks and empathy for the plight of blacks. About one half of my interviewees spoke of long-term positive work relationships with black coworkers, fulfilling civic work across race, or years of working or living in a predominantly black environment. Lavelle's elder interviewees seem only to speak of racial progress in the abstract. Lavelle (2015:16) finds that few express sympathy for the plight of blacks. Many of my interviewees spoke of their empathy for the horrible treatment of the black girls who desegregated our class. Some spoke of their regret for their own racist behavior in the past. Most of my interviewees expressed sympathy or empathy in discussing the girls killed in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing.

White Southerner Youth and Change

As a senior in high school, I had my first social experience with blacks who were my age in a Girl Scout training. When I saw one of the other trainees on the street, I tried to ignore her for I did not think it appropriate to speak to her in public. After I graduated from Phillips, I attended Auburn University, a large institution in a rural area. I loved sociology because it helped me understand my experiences. I also majored in education because my advisor insisted. In my senior year, before my college classes began, I was expected to observe in a high school for two weeks. I showed up at the black high school close to my parents' house in Birmingham. I was surprised to be sent to the Board of Education to get permission, for no other whites were in the building. Why had I changed?

Romano's (2006) analysis of the trials of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombers is brilliant in demonstrating the role the trials played in obscuring the city's dark past. The focus on individual evil men hides the reliance of their terror campaign on a "much larger system of organized white supremacy" that included the city police, elected officials, and the FBI (Romano 2006:100). Yet her analysis of the transcripts of the trials implies that the conviction of the bombers was based on their representation as "old-time racists" and their use of "hateful" names (Romano

2006:111–114). My question is this: how had Birmingham become a place where 'hateful' names and 'old-time racism' defined one as an outlaw?

Rebecca, a progressive and advocate of women's rights, tells of learning something of her own past:

> My ex-husband used the n-word all the time. [My daughter] found some letters that I wrote to him when he was in college. [In those letters] I used the N word. She said "mother, you sounded pretty bad." That's not the way I remembered it.

In the fourteen years between the time of the bombing and the trial of the first of the bombers, whites in Birmingham had begun to lose memory of their segregationist past. I have shown that empathizing with the girls killed in the bombing and attributing their murder to evil men of the Ku Klux Klan provided the opportunity for whites in Birmingham to separate their sense of self from segregation. Also essential to this argument is the question of how openly using race to discriminate became taboo.

My own experience is that during my college years, from 1965 to 1969, college campuses became more open to narratives that valorized the actions of the Movement. The Movement inspired students to see the possibility of change in their own lives. While considerable literature is available telling of Northern white student contributions to racial justice (e.g. McAdam 1988; Watson 2011), the contributions of Southern white students has only begun to be explored. Many Southern youth were inspired by the Movement and took on activist identities. As members of a generation of white Southerners began to make their own decisions, members of this generation began to reject the segregationist values of their elders. I suggest that it was often those who were in close contact with the actions of the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama who were on the forefront of efforts to organize white students to support Civil Rights.

A number of works have examined the impact of national legislation on Southern culture (Graham 1995; Goldfield 1990; Minchin 2011; Sokol 2006). Others have looked at changes in media that impacted the South (Martin and Segrave 1988; McDonald 1992). I will not repeat their arguments here. We know from Andrews' (2004) work, activism by the Freedom Movement made a difference in bringing about social justice in the South. Here, I focus on the activism of white Southern young people

and how some came to reject the culture of segregation and bring racially progressive ideas home to the families of Alabama.

Movement of Culture

In most studies of difficult pasts, groups begin to come to grips with their difficult pasts when outsiders or a generation of group members untainted by the past begin to raise troubling questions and advocate for victims (Tsutsui 2009; Giesen 2004). I will argue that in Alabama it was not a new generation but members of a generation raised in segregation who began to challenge segregationist ideology. I will examine the possibility that the youth movements of the sixties helped develop a pathway for white Southerners to take on a post-racial identity. Young whites in Alabama were motivated by the movements of the sixties and unwilling to bear the stigma of complicity with segregation. It was the Freedom Movement that stimulated the changes as they sought alliance with white youth and encouraged a generation of youth to reject the culture of segregation of their childhoods.

Southern White Student Movements

Most representations of Southern white students in the Civil Rights era are of those who harassed or attacked black students. Indeed this may characterize white youths' responses to the early Movement, but as the Movement developed, a vanguard of white students began to grasp the excitement and the possibilities for change that the Movement inspired. It was in Montgomery that the modern Civil Rights Movement made its first significant accomplishments.[3] It is not surprising that in that city, a few years after the success of the bus boycott, white students began to want to be a part of the action.

In 1961, Bob Zellner and four friends at all-white Huntington College in Montgomery contacted local black student activists as part of an assignment to find solutions to racial problems for a sociology course. Their professor warned them to stop. Instead the boys began attending Movement meetings in black churches and joined a workshop on organizing held by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The Klan burned a cross on the edge of the Huntington campus and threatened to come after the boys. Angry college administrators confronted the students. Zellner was called into the office of the Alabama Attorney General and quizzed about his associations with 'Communists.'

(Zellner and Curry 2009). After graduation, Zellner became the first white Southern field secretary for SNCC. His charge was to enlist white Southern students into the Movement. The proposal creating this position observed that "wherever white students . . . have access to information" about the Movement, they "catch the great moral spirit that permeates the movement" (Michel 2004:15).

The second white Southern field secretary for SNCC, Sam Shirah, had grown up near Montgomery in Clanton, Alabama, with George Wallace as his Sunday school teacher (Michel 2004:12). Shirah organized white students in ways sensitive to Southern culture and around the issues important to white youth; he found a "growing receptivity of young whites to calls for racial reform" (Michel 2004:13).

An important organizational form that brought white students into the Movement was the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC), developed by white students in Nashville in 1964. Nashville had been a forerunner among Southern cities in desegregation.[4] Again, after a few years to reorient their identities, white students began to organize in support of the Civil Right Movement. Predominantly white Nashville students successfully organized a campaign to integrate a restaurant near campus (Turner 2013). This gave them the base to contact other campuses and organize SSOC. Their goal was to bring the Movement to predominantly white institutions in the South (Michels 2004:35). Many of SSOC's early members had experience working with SNCC. SNCC provided funds to help the group get off the ground (Carson 1995:103). SSOC embraced Southern heritage, building on the tradition of the Grimke sisters and Southern anti-racist populist (Michels 2004).

During the early days of the Movement very few whites in Alabama of this generation had the courage to stand up to the sanctions upholding segregation. Probably the first Alabama whites who organized as a group to support the Civil Rights Movement were the members of the Concerned White Citizens of Alabama. The day before 'bloody Sunday' in 1965, seventy-two whites, mostly from Alabama, marched in support of the voting rights drive in Selma. I spoke with David Walbert, who showed me his membership card in the group. He was in the class of 1965, like my classmates, but attended a suburban Birmingham high school in an affluent neighborhood. He and his family's support for Civil Rights led him to be ostracized. Fellow students accused him of being a communist and called on the FBI to investigate him. Newspaper articles appeared across the state frightening parents with stories of communist activity at a local high school

(Huntley 1999). A cross was burned in his family's yard and they received threatening calls (Baer 1975).

These were the mildest of sanctions that upheld segregation in Alabama. Anyone, black or white who took steps toward desegregation or offered assistance to the Movement faced vigilante violence and police harassment. Penalties might move on to killing family pets, expelling students, firing their parents, or bombing their houses. Police investigations, arrests, jailing, or even jailhouse beatings were common. From 1963 to 1965 three whites supporting the Civil Rights Movement were murdered in Alabama: William Moore, James Reeb, and Viola Liuzzo. They were all Northerners; whites in Alabama understood the sanctions that upheld segregation. Yet, as the complicity between the FBI and the Birmingham Police lessened, and the bombings and murders became less common, more white youth began to challenge the rigid rules of segregation.

The Civil Rights Movement reshaped Southern culture. Movements move culture by "serving as major catalysts for wider cultural change" (Isaac 2008:56). Successful movements create an excitement, a desire to be part of something larger than the self. Durkheim spoke of periods in history in which men and women come together creating a "general effervescence that supports a revolutionary creative epoch"; women and "men become different" (Durkheim 2008:132). People begin to reimagine their world and get together with like-minded individuals to challenge "structured definitions and institutionalized routines" (Eyerman and Jamison 1991:149).

The Civil Rights Movement created this effervescence that brought individuals together to "create new kinds of social identities" it provided a "breeding ground for innovations in thought as well as in the social organization" (Eyerman and Jamison 1991:3). It was, in many cases, men and women who had been active in the Civil Rights Movement who gained the oppositional habitus that they applied in the Free Speech Movement (McAdam 1988), women's liberation movement, (Evans 1980) and antiwar movement (Freeman 2004).

University of Alabama—Spring 1970

Across the USA, college students were seeking free speech, women's rights, and an end to the war in Vietnam. Alabama was no exception. The University of Alabama offers the most dramatic example of student

organizing. It was a graduate of Phillips from the class of 1963, Jack Drake, who was a key figure in organizing students through the Democratic Student Organization (DSO), a group affiliated with the SSOC. In 1968, Drake, as a law student and chair of the DSO speakers committee, led a challenge of restrictions on speech. Five years earlier he had, like my classmates, been in the midst of civil rights activities in Birmingham.

In the fall of 1968, to challenge restrictions on ideas allowed on campus, University students presented the administration with a list of speakers they sought to bring to campus—Black Panther, Eldridge Cleaver; Communist, Herbert Aptheker; SDS founder, Tom Hayden; and Yippie, Jerry Rubin (Tilford 2014:150). The University administration quickly rejected all the speakers (*Birmingham News* 10.15.68:8). To protest these limits on the right to assembly and free speech, students held a silent demonstration cosponsored by SNCC, SSOC, and SDS (Tilford 2014:160). Simultaneously women students were organizing to end dress and dorm restrictions. While few African Americans had been allowed admission to the University, those students were calling for greater respect in the classroom, more black faculty, and an end to the exclusion of blacks from the University's athletic teams. Students started to build an alternative student culture, for example organizing music venues to support their new generational identities. The administration worked to stop such events. A wide range of students at the University of Alabama began to identify with the spirit and goals of developing movements. While the administration and press presented the activists on campus as a "tiny radical student group" (*Birmingham News* 10.15.68:11), Drake carried 20 percent of the student vote for President in a Student Government election in the spring of 1969. He would have carried more had he been more careful in his "choice of words" in interviews (Tilford 2014:167).

In the spring of 1970, George Wallace was in the midst of a bid for a new term as governor and plotting another run for US president. Yet he was heckled off the stage at the University of Alabama. Students had invited the radical 'Yippie' Abbie Hoffman to speak. The administration 'uninvited' him, and George Wallace took his place. Alabama students, accustomed to shouting, 'We're number one,' at football games turned the chant around. They shouted Wallace off the stage with chants of "We're number fifty" to represent the state's position in areas such as job growth, education, and infant survival (Cohen 2013:13).

Six weeks later, Nixon announced the bombing of Cambodia. This expansion of the Vietnam War rocked campuses around the USA; the University of Alabama was no exception. After graduation, I had taken a job in Birmingham teaching at a black elementary school. When news of the escalation of the war broke, I was sitting on the porch of a large communal house outside Tuscaloosa with an assortment of friends—University law students, graduate students, and dropouts. We were incredulous. Did not Nixon know that college campuses around the country would erupt in demonstrations? The University of Alabama was never the same.

The University of Alabama seems an unlikely place for a vibrant student movement to emerge and transform campus culture. Only after George Wallace "stood in the schoolhouse door" in 1963 did the school allow blacks to attend, thus making Alabama the last state to desegregate higher education (Clark 1993:xviii).

To honor students killed in demonstrations at Kent State and black students killed earlier at Orangeburg, South Carolina, the Tuscaloosa Women' Liberation Movement organized a lunchtime rally and a candle light vigil on May 6, 1970 (Tilford 2014:192). After the vigil, protestors took over the College Union Building and distributed free ice cream. Students developed a hodgepodge of demands including the right to hear radical speakers, an end to campus restrictions on women, and adherence to black students' demands (Sprayberry 2013:161).

I used my 'sick days' to go to Tuscaloosa to join my friends in the demonstrations. The campus was placed under a curfew. The University president brought to campus Alabama State Troopers, infamous for brutally assaulting Civil Rights demonstrators. But it was the Tuscaloosa Police who came in to 'restore order' that caused the greatest problems. Tuscaloosa police taped over their badge numbers and removed their identification tags before coming to campus (Drake 2014:xii). They seemed to relish the opportunity to attack students.

Demonstrating was dangerous, and that seemed to make it more exciting. I was in a group of protestors, as the police charged toward us. We ran, but I was not a fast runner. After falling behind, I ran in the front door of a fraternity house, through a dinner party, and out the back door to escape the billy clubs. On May 13, Tuscaloosa Police indiscriminately attacked demonstrators, bystanders, and reporters. The campus was in turmoil, demonstrations could not be put down. Hundreds of students

were arrested. Many were injured who were simply standing on the lawn of their residences (Tilford 2014).

The children of Alabama's elite experienced for a few days the repression that blacks had long endured. The administration made final exams optional to get students to go home. When students returned in the fall, the domination of sororities and fraternities seemed to crumble; rigid definitions of what was normal and acceptable began to break down. Terry Points, a black senior from Birmingham, was elected homecoming queen in 1973 (University of Alabama 1974:213); the 'Marching Vegetable Band' played discordant jazz in the homecoming parade; Communist professor Angela Davis spoke on campus (Sprayberry 2013).

The administration at Alabama did not ignore the students' demands to increase black enrollment. By the fall of 1974, on the Tuscaloosa campus, 6.4 percent of students were black, the largest percent of any major Southern state university (Minchin and Salmond 2011:154). The University of Alabama had gone from being the last major Southern university to integrate to being the most integrated of major Southern universities. This supports Andrews (2004) finding that activism makes a difference.

At one of the demonstrations at the University of Alabama I realized that the man standing beside me had been a classmate from Phillips. I had not seen him in the five years since we graduated. He is the interviewee I refer to as Gregg. He does not mention the demonstrations at the University in our interview but he did say that he graduated from Alabama with "all these liberal ideas." He presents these ideas as the basis of his commitment to work for twenty years in the black community.

Luke, who I don't recall having spoken with before the interview, more specifically mentions the impact of this period in his life. Luke, who was at the University of Alabama during the time of the demonstrations, says,

> People don't understand that period of time. It was for me a total radicalization because of the war and Dr. King. I became so much more aware of what was going on . . . so much more aware of the gross inequities . . . After graduation, I returned to Birmingham. I became very proactive with the black students and the black teachers. I got involved.

Jack Drake, the 1963 Phillips graduate who had been a key organizer of the student movement at the University, was soon involved in voter registration drives and in undermining white control in Alabama's black

belt. He used his law degree to provide key legal advice for a black takeover of elected positions in Greene county (Sokol 2006:262; *New York Times* 11.5.1970:28). He then worked on a series of voting rights projects in south Alabama and helped bring legal actions to desegregate juries (Drake 2007).

The Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Congress of Racial Equality, and many everyday men and women who served as foot soldiers worked to accomplish a significant transformation in the way that race is enacted in the USA. The Movement inspired members of a youth generation of whites in Alabama. These young people organized to protest the Vietnam War, promote free speech, and remove racial and gender barriers. As they did, they transformed their own identities. They returned to their white families and communities with a new sense of self and new sense of social justice.

My analysis and the emerging literature on multiracial student movements in the South suggest that white youth provided an internal force to bring change to Alabama whites. Their actions facilitated the incorporation of legislative change and other external pressures applied to the South. In the late sixties and early seventies, a cadre of young whites, raised in segregation but inspired by black activism, brought the movement home to whites in Birmingham. While most of the sociological literature on individual memory focuses on the importance of youth in constructing lasting memories, my work suggests that youth is important in creating social change. The generational experience of coming of age in an era when the Civil Rights Movement was proving that change was possible inspired many Alabama youth. The immorality of segregation was graphically demonstrated by the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. As the Civil Rights Movement and the movements it birthed demonstrated that there were alternatives, white Southern youth began to question segregationist culture. Given this new sense of self, they did not wish to call forth memories that linked them to segregation.

Recollections are selective. Men and women choose moments to include in their autobiographical stories of the past. Recollections that threaten identity in the present are unlikely to be called to mind. Coalitions of silence keep them out of polite conversation. Recalling that a respected classmate killed a black child requires one to recognize that it was not just malicious rednecks who supported segregation. It leads to recognition of the wide spread structural and popular support for

segregation among whites. It leads us to see the potential for evil within. Even memories from youth are likely to be lost if they threaten identity in the present.

Mannheim's work on generations provides a basis for understanding memories of desegregation. In Mannheim's ([1928] 1952) words, many white youth in the sixties began a 'reevaluation' of their support of segregation and began to 'covet' a more egalitarian society. Specific threatening memories may not be easily called to mind but the effervescence of the movement and the possibilities it offered for change 'stuck' with them and impacted their lives.

Notes

1. The *Birmingham News* (1963:A3) reports that Sims and Farley were arrested in their homes.
2. Like Birmingham, Greensboro was a site where the Movement encountered resistance and made important innovations in strategy. It was in Greensboro that four black college men started the sit–in movement that swept the USA in 1960.
3. Scholars distinguish between the 'long Civil Rights Movement' and the 'short Civil Rights Movement,' and place the origins of the short Civil Rights Movement in the Montgomery Bus Boycott that began in 1955.
4. By 1960 busses, schools, and the police force in Nashville were integrated; black students, with some white support, organized sit-ins at lunch counters in 1960–1961. In fall 1963, over 100 white students conducted months of picking which finally resulted in the desegregation of the 'Campus Grill.'

CHAPTER 7

Fine Families and a Forgotten Past: The New Narrative

Abstract This chapter analyzes the new post-racial narrative among interviewees. Interviewees voiced a set of themes that seemed carefully constructed to disassociate themselves from the racism of Birmingham's past. Many expressed sympathy and regret for the treatment of the black girls who desegregated their class in their senior year. Others spoke positively of black neighbors. These white Southerners maintain that they accept others regardless of skin color. Yet many felt free to switch narratives and disparage blacks who do not conform to white middle-class culture.

Keywords Racial attitudes · Color-blind narrative · Whiteness

In qualitative research, one of our first obligations is to seek the meanings our interviewees attach to their words. I was struck by interviewee's desires to present a self that was far different from the racist identity that had characterized most whites in Birmingham in the early sixties. Over and over, in each interview, often from early in the interview, my classmates returned to a set of themes that seemed to be a part of a carefully constructed discourse to disassociate themselves from the racism of the past. Only two of my interviewees reported a conversion to a post-racial identity. Most of my classmates seemed to have forgotten any time when they had endorsed segregationist views; yet, they clearly recall that they acquiesced.

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We Were Nice People

My classmates deployed a series of narratives to represent themselves as different from other Southerners who might have been racists. Several spoke of mothers who taught them that everyone should be treated with respect. Claire remembers finding her father's racism objectionable. Dana said her parents were not your typical Southerners and had never taught her that races should be treated differently. Rebecca said that she did not support segregation at the "deepest gut level" but remained quiet for she feared that if she expressed her beliefs she would not "be popular." While most recognized that the world in which they were raised was dominated by segregationist beliefs, all interviewees attempted to separate themselves from that worldview.

There was considerable variability in the depth of the support my interviewees provided to demonstrate that they treated everyone equally. Inez reported the satisfaction she got from others' stares when she went into a diner with black coworkers. Others had more substantive examples of actions they had taken to promote racial understanding. Luke spoke of organizing an event at *Birmingham Civil Rights Institute* and Andrew spoke of helping found a large, ongoing nonprofit program for inner city residents. Yet there were common examples that were used in the narratives over and over again. Interviewees spoke of their respect for black coworkers, they spoke of their children's friends of other races who were frequently in their homes; they spoke of black families who were their 'best' neighbors.

A key responsibility in qualitative research is to induce the meaning that interviewees attempt to convey with their words (Weiss 1994; Emerson, Fritz and Shaw 2011). Each of my interviewees presented at least two examples of how race did not matter in their choice of friends or relationships with coworkers and neighbors. Some interviewees devoted ten to fifteen minutes to these examples. The frequency and the repetition of words from interview to interview and the emphasis that each invested in speaking of their support for racial inclusion leads me to believe there is a meaning that they are trying to convey. They wished to present themselves as having a post-racial identity, free of the segregationist identity that had once characterized whites in Birmingham.

One way my classmates demonstrated their post-racial identity was in the way they recalled the two black girls who joined our class in the fall of 1964. Wanda Jean Fuller and Yvonne Young[1] were among the 313

graduates of Phillips in May 1965 (Mirror 5.21.65:1). When I asked my white classmates to recall integration of our high school, most did not accurately recall when we were desegregated and how many students joined our class. Yet, most recalled that we had black girls in our class; eleven spoke of specific events or memories of the classmates and five called one or both by first and last names. Classmates said they wished they had the 'courage' or had 'been brave enough' to speak to the girls or stop others from harassing them. Key to this narrative is remembering feeling sympathy for the girls. As I discuss in the next chapter, Luke reports that he stood up to one of their harassers. However there is a surprising similarity in the regrets that many other white classmates express. Edward reflects on a common theme of regret for their treatment.

> When 'Wanda Jean Fuller' was in the typing class, ... and the teacher wasn't there, there was a barrage of spit balls that were thrown and hit her. I didn't participate in that. I thought it was [pause], I thought it was wrong, obviously. I remember being empathetic.

Samuel says, "Even though they were black, I felt so sorry for them." Julia says, "I wished that I had had the courage to reach out to them." Claire says, that she did not "have the courage" to speak to the black girl in her math class but she remembers, "thinking at the time what an awful position that must have been for her."

These black students were treated horribly, yet, no one remembers that they harassed our classmates. In the present, many project their emotions into the past saying they felt sorry for our black classmates. It is the self in the present that recalls. I suspect that this memory is painful enough to be renarrativized and that the feelings that the self has in the present were projected back into the past.

Beyond the regrets that many expressed for the way we treated our black classmates, all my interviewees provided at least two examples of a post-racial identity; they spoke of socializing with blacks, enjoying working with black colleagues, or welcoming their children's black friends into their homes. However this was only one of two prominent narratives of race in my interviews. The narratives show that being post racial can exist alongside a denigration of underclass black culture.

Fine Families or Junk Cars

Many of the themes that my interviewees brought up in discussing the successes and failures of integration are hardly surprising given the literature on whites' views of race (Wellman 1997; Ditomaso et al. 2003; Lewis 2004; Bonilla-Silva 2003; Lavelle 2015). Those expecting a detailed analysis of contemporary Southern white racial attitudes will be disappointed. While this topic is important, it does not lie at the center of this book.

Griffin (2004:556) suggests that white Southerners may think of the changes that the Movement created in three ways—they may be resentful thinking blacks are getting more than whites, they may think that equal opportunity has been achieved and nothing more needs to be done, or they may think that the Movement is important in bringing racial reconciliation giving them an opportunity to repent. Indeed I found each of these frames in my interviews, often existing side by side in the discussions that men and women offered. Yet this was not the essential dynamic that I found in the interviews.

I have argued that my white interviewees see themselves as having a post-racial identity. It seems they have left behind the self that supported segregation and with it many memories of their past beliefs and actions that supported segregation. I am not arguing that this is the only way that they may present the self.

A few interviewees reported a deep relationship with a black individual or family often arising from a relationship at work. Such interviews reported satisfaction from moments when they felt accepted in black culture. However, most of my interviewees reported only casual or superficial relations with blacks.

My interviewees see themselves as having gone beyond categorizing people based on race; however this does not mean they think they have gone beyond categorizing people based on culture. In Olivia's words, "Social class is the issue . . . black kids are accepted if they are from fine families." Not a single informant complained about a neighbor who was black. Instead, the narrative form of discussion of black neighbors was to characterize them as their 'best neighbor.' Matthew considered the couple who moved into his affluent neighborhood "the best neighbors I have ever had." He goes on to say, "If they can afford to pay for that house, I don't care. I don't want to see any junk cars." The subtext distances his affluent neighbor from underclass black culture. Over and over again, several of the interviewees shifted between narratives. These interviewees

maintained that they were accepting of blacks who adhered to their values but relied on an alternative narrative to speak of underclass blacks. These interviewees were not hesitant to blame the problems of inner city blacks on black culture.

Brenda speaks of close working relationships with blacks and says her black neighbors "are the best neighbors we have ever had." Their son is "polite," they "fix their house up." Later she shifts into a narrative about single mothers and irresponsible fathers in "many areas of Birmingham." She says, "It's just laziness. Every opportunity is there." I ask her what she thinks about the Birmingham Public Schools. She pauses and looks down. When she looks up she says, "You are right about the schools. The opportunity should be there . . . I for one would love to jump in there and try to help."

Edward seems at first to applaud the success of the Movement saying that during the seventies race relations improved and "things seemed to be pretty good." He goes on to say, "The black middle class began to develop but at the same time the lower class of blacks is just expanding exponentially. The woman has never married, she has three, four, five, six kids and all kinds of abuse and neglect and she is pregnant again."

Thus for several of my interviewees, the narrative of a post-racial identity frequently shifted into a diatribe on the problems of violence and a lack of work ethic among the underclass.

The interplay of these alternative narratives demonstrates how white Southerners perform one cultural narrative at one moment and another at another. As Swidler (2001:14) says, people "may pick up or put down . . . the kind of self they inhabit." White Southerners use the narratives of culture as tools in self-presentation. Yet, I argue that we need to attend to the efforts that they made to convey a post-racial self.

I want to be clear that I am not saying that whites treat middle-class blacks in a color-blind manner. We have long known that what people say about race may not be related to their actual behavior (LaPiere 1934). There is voluminous sociological literature that speaks to the privileges of whiteness (e.g. Elise 2004; Feagin 1991; Feagin and Sikes 1994; Moss and Tilly 2001). Like Nagel (2013), my findings suggest that acceptance of blacks in Southern, predominantly white suburbs depends upon their adherence to white middle-class standards of propriety. DuBois' concept of double consciousness can help us reflect on the acceptance of black neighbors in white Southern suburbs. DuBois (1989:3) argues that blacks must always look at their self, not just through the eyes of the black community but with a recognition of how whites stereotype them.

Maintaining a perfect yard and making sure one's children are polite avoids white stereotypes. Unlike whites, blacks in white suburbs may feel they do not have the option of being rude or not mowing their yard.

Duster (2001:114) notes that race appears to be "both structural and embedded yet superficial, arbitrary, and whimsical—shifting with times and circumstances." It is this shifting with times and circumstances that I examine. My interviews suggest that whites believe they are accepting of blacks who are able and willing to adopt middle-class values and lifestyles. They focus racial resentment on the black underclass. While this reflects a change from the narrative of "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever," the new narrative offers little to blacks who are not middle class.

My goal is not to assess the degree to which individual interviewees have become racial progressives (Bonilla-Silva 2003; McDermott and Sampson 2005). Instead, I argue that they devote considerable effort into presenting an identity that is free of the taint of the South's racist past. I argue that the meaning interviewees convey in their narratives is that they have reconstructed their identities and this has implications for memory. Forgetting aspects of the self that are no longer valorized in society is key to the flexibility required by a constantly changing society.

Note

1. I have used pseudonyms because Wanda Jean refused to discuss her recollections of our school with me. I want to be cautious in not violating her privacy.

CHAPTER 8

Techniques of Memory

Abstract The eighth chapter considers three narratives that interviewees rely upon to structure their autobiographical memories of the process of integration: "regretted acts," "risky confrontations," and "defiant deeds." Gill traces the origins of these narratives in popular culture. She analyzes her own recollections based on the transcript of an interview she gave about integration before she began this project. From this interview and new information acquired during an interview, she provides an example of how autobiographical memories can be reconstructed.

Keywords Autobiographical memory · Narratives

It is through memory that we come to know who we are. In internal dialogue and conversations with others we highlight, negotiate, and contest events to develop stories that organize our lives (Fivush 2008:51). Individuals define themselves by organizing events of their lives into stories that engage evaluative frameworks. Difficult pasts present particular challenges to individuals. In this chapter, I explore the stories that my classmates tell about the process of integration. Several cultural narratives structure memories of the segregated past. These narratives allow my interviewees to organize recollections in ways that do not threaten identity in the present. I interrogate my own recollections and find that I too had used these narratives to construct a usable self.

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The development of a trauma narrative and commemoration of the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church has supported autobiographical recollections that allow whites to attribute the past to evil others and disassociate themselves from their segregationist past. Memories of other commemorated events have faded. Personal recollections of a time interviewees accepted segregationist ideology were rare. Only a few recalled a time when they had acted to defend segregation, and those attributed their actions to the influences of others. But there are other narrative that allow my interviewees to organize a difficult past.

Narratives

My interviews demonstrate some of the reasons that historians are skeptical of memory. As others have shown, inaccuracies and gaps in individual memory often arise for those with a difficult past (Passerini 1998:59; Coser 1992:21–22). Several scholars have found that individual memory yields to the narratives prominent in a culture. For example, Sturken (1997:6) concludes that for World War II veterans, Hollywood "movies have subsumed their individual memories into a general script." In this section, I delve into the narratives that my classmates and I have used to make sense of our difficult pasts. I examine the ways that we fit our narratives into the stories that are acceptable in our culture. I explore how my interviewees use the mythical structures of culture including movies, stories, and sermons to fill in gaps and develop the story of who they are.

I asked my classmates to tell me of their recollections from desegregation and used a series of probes to trigger their memories. I said that I was particularly interested in things they personally observed. After multiple readings and coding transcripts of my interviews, I identify three types of cultural narratives that provide a basis for autobiographical recollections of this difficult past. Beyond the recollections of the deaths on September 15, 1963, the stories my classmates told of the process of integration in Birmingham center around three types of narratives: (1) 'regretted acts'—recollections of personal actions that enforced segregation; (2) 'risky confrontations'—recollections of personal risks that challenged integration; (3) 'defiant deeds'—recollections of youth who defied authority.

Regretted Acts

In Chapter 7 I presented evidence that my interviewees made concerted efforts to present themselves as not racists. Most presented themselves as never being involved in anything considered intolerant. Many mentioned egregious acts they had seen others commit. Few were willing or able to recall anything they had personally done to actively support segregation. Most recognized that the world they once lived in was dominated by a segregationist worldview: all interviewees attempted to separate themselves from this worldview. Few of my interviewees seemed able to recall a moment in which they themselves believed in or acted on segregationist ideology.

Yet, there were three interviewees who, when asked of their memories of integration, spoke of incidents in which they participated in acts of discrimination or harassment of blacks which they now regret. Nora told of an incident in a college dining hall in which a black student joined a table of white girls. One by one all the white students took their trays and left. Nora reported that she was one of the last to leave. She states, "Ever since that happened I have always felt bad about that." Samuel speaks of an all-white bus he rode home from Phillips in which students would throw bottles at black people along the route. He ends the recollection by stating, "I really regret things I did like that in the past." Julia remembers a bus incident in which she and a friend sat next to a young black woman and, as she remembers it, intended to push her off the seat. She tearfully states, "I have been so ashamed of that all these years."

It is likely that my interviewees participated in other acts of discrimination or harassment of blacks that they do not recall or chose not to mention. In almost every interview a classmate mentioned, often by name, another classmate who spoke at a segregationist assembly, harassed a black student, or took pronounced actions to avoid interacting with a black classmate. In two cases, I was able to interview the student named by another; neither voluntarily admitted the event disclosed by their classmate.[1] Essentially it seems that my interviewees could remember that others may have believed in segregationist ideology and acted on it, but few could remember their own beliefs and actions.

Risky Confrontations

In a second type of narrative, interviewees told of personal risks they had taken to confront racial intolerance. Luke told of seeing a white student spit on a black student in the hall. He recalls, "I walked over there and

confronted him. I was immediately called a 'nigger lover,'" and barely avoided a fight. Andrew remembers confrontations and disagreements with his family over Civil Rights. He recalls, "I heard this relative say to another, 'I am so upset, Andrew is for the niggers.' That was like a knife in the heart." Gregg told of allowing a black boy to play on a Little League team he was coaching in the early 1970s. He says:

> I was in serious trouble . . . I had to go through the "nigger lover" thing and all the things that people who try to do the right thing have to go through.

Thus these classmates remember actions that they took to confront racial bigotry. Moments from recollections are shaped into a heroic act that provides a self that can be valued in the present.

Defiant Deeds

In the third type of narrative that emerged from my interviews, adventurous young people are remembered defying authority during the Civil Rights Movement. Recollections of individuals who flouted the rules are among the salient memories of several of my interviewees. Claire recalls:

> I remember in our Junior or Senior year, the march to Selma because [names two classmates] were activated . . . They came back telling wild tales.[2]

Kevin recalled that when the principal called the names of our black classmates at graduation, boys who had graduated a year before threw "tomatoes or eggs" onto the stage. The principal almost "had a fit." Gregg remembered his teacher confronting a classmate who stayed out of school to participate in the segregationist demonstrations.

> I remember so well . . . [The teacher] said, "why were you absent yesterday?" He said, "I was sick." [The teacher] said, "No you were not. I saw you on the six o'clock news standing on top of the mayor's desk waving a confederate flag." Which she did, because I saw it too.[3]

None of these accounts of actions of students at the high school were told by any two of the twenty students I interviewed. These events may have been topics of discussion at the time, but they are clear links to a

segregationist past. Classmates were unlikely to speak of these events as desegregation progressed.

The one story that is clearly a part of the social memory of the class has similar elements but is different in that it has nothing to do with race. Even though I asked no questions specifically related to the topic, seven of the twenty interviewees spontaneously mentioned an incident in which a boy in a math class jumped from a window three stories above the ground. Olivia reports on the day:

> He said if I fail this test I am going to jump out the window. He got that paper and he had failed it and he was out the window . . . He just wasn't going to back down.

At our fortieth class reunion, I noticed classmates gathering around the man who had jumped. The event had become legendary; classmates had told the story and now wanted to introduce their spouse to the guy who had jumped from the math class window. My point here is that defiance of authority by young people underlay a number of the recollections of integration, but only a narrative unrelated to race became a class legend.

Interpretation

Each of these genres of stories has roots in scripts prominent in US culture. Three classmates reported 'regretted acts,' saying they participated in acts of discrimination or harassment but each carefully notes feelings of remorse for the egregious action. Interestingly, each of these three interviewees presented Christianity as a central element in their identity and central in their current community of friends.[4] It is possible that the Christian cultural tradition of confessing and being forgiven for ones' past iniquities provided a script allowing these individuals to recall their difficult pasts.

The second type of narrative I identify is 'risky confrontations.' Taking risks to assist blacks falls into a narrative prominent in many fictionalized accounts popular among whites since the Civil Rights era. In books and films such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Ghosts of Mississippi*, and *The Help*, we see Southern white protagonists who face danger and violence to further the rights of blacks. This is a poignant narrative that supports the recollections of several of my classmates.

The third type of recollection of the era of integration I call 'defiant deeds.' Here classmates report incidents in which teens tested the commonly assumed rules of social order, defying adult definitions of appropriate behavior. Such narratives are often central to the plot of coming-of-age books and teen movies such as *Catcher in the Rye, Farris Bueller's Day Off*, and *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*.

This analysis supports the importance of culture in shaping how the past is recalled. Cultural templates provide a framework within which the individual shapes and articulates his or her own past. Individuals organize their memories to place themselves within the social world. Over time, individuals use popular narratives of the past to compose a story of their past that they can live with (Thomson 1994:208). Those who have experienced a difficult past use the storylines prominent in their culture to construct and reconstruct recollections. Culture provides men and women with a set of tools that they adapt to their own purposes (Swidler 2001:17). We reappropriate cultural material in ways that are useful to our own lives and situations (Swidler 2001:18).

My Memories of Birmingham

In the Introduction, I mentioned that I was surprised by my own lack of memory of the events of the Civil Rights Movement. Fortunately, I have documented evidence of my own memories before I began this project. A Gettysburg College student, Rachel Hanson, conducted an oral history interview with me in 2000 as part of a history course, "American in the 1960s." At the time of that interview I had read little about the Civil Rights Movement in Birmingham and carefully avoided discussing my personal experiences from that era. Indeed this interview helped me to recognize my own silence about personal memories from this period in my past. Only after completing the analysis of my interviews with classmates did I reread the transcript of Hanson's interview. I now see that, like my classmates, I accurately recalled few of the concrete events that are now memorialized in American history.

Like most of my classmates, I did not accurately recall the number of black students in our class or my year in school at the time of the segregationist demonstrations. I spoke of my classmate who fired the shot that killed Virgil Ware. I mentioned a few other events that occurred in the spring and fall of 1963. I was not able to place these events in time.

The interview demonstrates that I, like my classmates, worked to present myself as a racial progressive. I say of my high school years, "I definitely was not a racist." What stands out in my interview is my attempt to explain my own inaction by emphasizing the violence that was going on around me. Again and again I refer to the violence saying, "Birmingham was a very, very violent place," "I didn't want to get killed," "it was dangerous," "it was like being in a war zone." I used the violence as an excuse for my silence and inaction. This demonstrates that we are able to reimagine the past in explaining the self to someone who was not there.

I mentioned earlier that some classmates reported other classmates had been involved in acts of discrimination or harassment; but, when I was able to interview the accused classmate, they did not mention the act. Now I see that I am among those who did not own up to an act of harassment. I spoke of my interview with Julia who reported a bus incident in which she and a friend sat next to a black in order to push her off the seat. I was the friend. I was shocked by my classmate's recollections of this event; that is not how I had remembered our actions.

In order to better understand the mechanisms through which memory operates to produce recollections that are acceptable in the present, I explore three memories of this bus incident. I use my 2000 account as reported in the interview with Hanson; I examine Julia's recollections as reported in the interview I conducted; and I consider the recollections of the event by my mother. During a trip to interview in Birmingham, in 2007, I was talking with my mother about my research. I spontaneously asked her to tell me her memories of integration in Birmingham.[5] Her first story was about this bus incident. Relying on these three accounts I explore how my own memories had been reorganized to create a usable past.

As I recalled the event in 2000, my classmate and I were on a city bus during a sit-in. A young black man and woman sat at the front of the bus, across from each other on long bench seats. There were few riders on the bus. My classmate and I got up from our seats and moved to the front. I sat next to the young black woman while my classmate set beside me on the bench. My recollection was that my friend and I thought:

> This is really ridiculous how [white] people are treating them and we're going to show them that it just doesn't matter . . . I wouldn't say that it was clearly an act of, "We stand against racism." It was more like, "Why does this matter and who really cares who you sit next to?" So we got up and sat next to them.

I had purposely sought to interview my companion on the bus ride to hear her account. After discussing her spontaneous memories of high school and integration, I asked her if she remembered any incidents from the integration of busses. Her eyes filled with tears, she said, "Do you remember you and me sitting on a bus? . . . I have been so ashamed of that all these years." As she recalls the event,

> We decided that she didn't deserve to be there and that we were going to try to push her out of the seat.

At the moment that she said that, I remembered a long forgotten fragment of our conversation and knew she was right. My classmate said, "I said I am not going to sit next to her, you'll have to."

Again I was instantly taken back to the past. I sat next to the young black woman and pushed my hips against her, at least for a few seconds, until I realized the foolishness of my action. I would like to believe that I realized my actions were foolish because I was questioning racism; it is more likely that I realized that I could never push her off the seat.

In listening to the tape of the interview with this classmate I can hear the defensiveness in my voice when she told me her account of the events. This is not what I had wanted to hear. I told her my version of the incident.

> My thinking of it was that, "they think they are going to upset this bus, and what difference does it make. We don't care who is on this bus. She is not going to upset me. I'm going to sit right by her and show her it doesn't matter" . . . It was probably just rebelliousness on our part.

I asked if she remembered that we had gotten off several blocks from our school in order to protect our identities. She confirmed that memory. I then told her what I had not told her at the time of the bus incident. My family had received a threatening phone call because of this incident.

My mother's recollection of the event is that a woman telephoned and said she had seen her daughter sitting next to someone who was black on the bus. My mother said the woman told her "white people don't allow that. Your daughter is going to be harmed if she doesn't follow the rules." In looking back on this incident, my mother recalls her indignation that someone at the school had identified me. I assume that the caller described me and that the school secretary had told the caller my name and my

parents' names. My mother recalls going to the school and demanding to see the principal to complain that someone at the school had had so little discretion in revealing this information. In Rachel Hanson's (2000:10) interview with me I say,

> They called the principal and found out my name and so I got threatened . . . calls that said, "Someone's going to burn a cross at your house" . . . This experience taught me not to say what I thought.

Silence had been maintained about these events. I did not tell my classmate that I had been threatened; mother and I had not discussed the event since the day after the harasser called. My classmate, my mother, and I each remembered the event in a way that minimized our own complicity with racism. While Julia clearly feels regret about the incident, she does not see herself as the instigator of the action. In the Hanson interview, I assert that my mother had told me, "We don't want anybody burning a cross in front of our house, you can't do this" (Hanson 2000:10). I presented myself as helping my family by not getting involved in other incidents. My mother saw the threat of punishment as falling on me, not the family. She places herself in the heroic position by confronting the principal for giving the caller my name. In remembering the threatening phone call rather than my attempt to push the black woman from her seat, I was able to reconstruct my past in a way that erased my complicity in maintaining segregation. In the Hanson interview, I repeatedly use the threat I received from this incident and the violence around me in Birmingham as an excuse for my silence and inaction in confronting racism. An equally plausible explanation for my silence and inaction was that I had not yet questioned segregation.

Julia saw the bus incident as a 'regretted act,' recognizing that she had been a party to an act of discrimination or harassment of blacks and had felt ashamed. I, on the other hand, had reinterpreted the event. I had reconstructed my past. In the Hanson interview, I presented the event as a 'risky confrontation,' thinking I had taken a risk to stand against racial intolerance. My discussion with Julia led me to recall more details of the event. I tried to legitimate my actions as a 'defiant deed,' seeing myself as rebellious and defiant of authority. In presenting my past, I relied on the same cultural templates that my classmates had used.

It is the self in the present that calls forth memories from the past. Each time that one recalls, there is an opportunity to omit tiny details of

memory. Over time recollections may be brought into line with the self one wishes to project in the present. By failing to bring to mind details of my thoughts and actions from my past, I was able to forget the self that had been enmeshed in a segregationist world.

Some question whether white Southerners actually forget or merely "claim to forget—their own beliefs" (Fine 2013:1329). In my own case, the memory was lost until my conversation with my classmate brought it forward in my memory. I had told the story of the bus incident as an example of my own lack of adherence to the rules of segregation with no recollection that I had had any other motivation. I would not have taken on this research had I thought that I would 'out' my former self as a racist.

Interpretation

Most of my classmates have few recollections of the historic events of the Civil Rights Movement that were transpiring around us. One explanation of this is that these events did not seem relevant to the social groups in which we participated, so we simply did not notice. This supports Halbwachs' idea that the observations we make arise from the frameworks of meaning established by our collectivities, as teenagers we had other interests and did not notice many of the history-making events that were going on around us.

Autobiographical memories of the process of integration in this group of white Southerners seem to be organized around three cultural templates. The first narrative, 'regretted acts,' reflects the Christian tradition of confessing and repenting one's sins. The second, 'risky confrontations,' represents a heroic narrative in which white people take personal risks to stand up to racists. The third, 'defiant deeds,' centers on challenging authority, a prominent storyline in coming-of-age narratives. These interviews show that recalling the past is not simply an act of retrieval; instead it is a creative process of construction and reconstruction. The patterning of recollections from the Civil Rights era suggests that the men and women I interviewed used templates prominent in American culture to fashion a past that conforms to accepted narratives and avoids the taint of perpetuating segregation.

The cultural context that had supported white resistance to segregation shifted as we matured; our segregationist pasts became problematic. We remembered elements of the past that supported our identities in the present. To maintain a usable self, we reorganized recollections around

accepted cultural themes. These interviews support Halbwachs' theories of individual memory. There are moments from the past that we "know" but "many . . . details remain obscure" (Halbwachs 1980:22). As I demonstrate in my own recovery of memory, it is dialogue that enables us to fill in fleeting images from the past. Interaction with others and internal reflections are crucial to maintaining memory. Over time the memories that the individual is likely to recall are those that have been confirmed and reconfirmed through discussion with others. As culture changes, individuals tend to forget or renarrativize memories in order to present a self that is appropriate within the new social milieu.

Notes

1. I did not directly confront the named student with the allegation of their classmate. I feared this would compromise confidentiality.
2. The tales were about tricks they played on the marchers.
3. The *Birmingham News* (9.13.1963:1) reports that students protesting school integration occupied the mayor's office at lunchtime and "one climbed on the mayor's desk and waved a confederate flag."
4. Among my twenty interviewees, four brought up their current religious faith and activities in our interviews in ways that presented Christianity as a core part of their identities. For example, when I contacted one man to set up an interview, he told me on the phone that he was now a Christian. In our interview he twice grounded his own racial views by saying that God saw all as equal and spoke of a number of close relationships he had formed through his church. Another mentioned several times the importance of her church activities and her love for the community developed through her church.
5. While the interviews with my classmates were recorded and transcribed, I did not tape record the discussion with my mother, but typed notes immediately after our discussion.

CHAPTER 9

Conclusion

Abstract The book concludes by considering how conscious denial, unconscious repression, and forgetting associated with a new identity work together to promote silence about the past and construct a sanitized community of memory. The refusal to admit that race matters is at the heart of the many conflicts the USA faces today. This chapter ends by suggesting that achieving greater racial justice requires a return to memory. Addressing the racial past on individual and collective levels could open new possibilities for the future. Coming to terms with a painful past requires a community of memory willing to engage in self-reflection and self-criticism.

Keywords Autobiographical memory · Collective memory · Racial justice

This book examines the reception side of memory, analyzing the recollections of men and women with a difficult past. Interviewees were white teens in the midst of resistance to desegregation during a critical period of American history. Most works on collective memory focus on how memory entrepreneurs shape the ways the past is recalled. This work shows that men and women do not passively receive the versions of the past proposed by memory elites. This analysis demonstrates that individuals choose among dramatic and emotional events from the past. It explores how people use culture as a tool to handle a difficult past.

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The analysis is based on in-depth interviews with a small sample of white men and women who attended high school near the center of Civil Rights Movement activities in Birmingham. It builds on news and archival sources, autobiographies, and examination of commemoration.

It has been over fifty years since the dramatic events in Birmingham, Alabama forced the USA to confront the evils of segregation. For whites in Birmingham, recalling their city's resistance to integration is still painful. While many cities throughout the USA have resisted the equal inclusion of blacks in education, employment, and public affairs, Birmingham became an iconic symbol of resistance to racial integration. Whites in Birmingham seldom wish to recall this difficult past.

Recalling and Forgetting

My research suggests an alignment of collective memory with autobiographical memory around the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. My classmates rarely recalled other commemorated events from the Movement's past in Birmingham. Few recalled attacks on Freedom Riders at the Trailways bus terminal near our school. Most said nothing of the events of the spring of 1963. No one mentioned the jailing of Martin Luther King or the "Letter from the Birmingham Jail." My classmates who mentioned the police dogs or the high-powered hoses turned on demonstrators in Birmingham discounted them.

The bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church has become a focal point of memory for many. For my classmates, recollection of the church bombing that killed 'four little girls,' Addie Mae Collins, Carole Roberton, Cynthia Wesley, and Denise McNair, is a salient memory. Recollections of Virgil Ware are more peripheral in memory, even though this boy was killed by two of our classmates on the day of the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Even though Johnny Robinson was killed by police only two blocks from our school, he has been all but forgotten.

One might expect these interviewees to have strong memories of this era. They were about sixteen at the height of the Civil Rights Movement and were in the midst of emotionally charged events that led to important social changes. Yet it is only the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church that stands out in memory. These findings suggest that regardless of age, the emotional intensity of events, or the long-term importance of

the actions, individuals on the 'wrong side of history' are likely to obscure or be unable to recall threatening moments from a difficult past.

It is widely accepted that memory elites reframe and rework the past to create a usable national and cultural identity. C. Wright Mills (1959:6) contends, "No social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history and of their intersections within society has completed its intellectual journey." This work takes on that challenge. It begins to link the work that memory entrepreneurs do in constructing historical interpretations of the past with the memory work individuals do in constructing their own biographies. My analysis shows that individuals actively select among cultural narratives to create a usable past.

Explaining Lost Memories

Institutional forces helped shape the loss of memory surrounding events of the spring in Birmingham. As I have shown, the local white press and officials tried to control representation of the Civil Rights Movement, leaving many whites in Birmingham without a sense of the context and importance of the emerging events. This demonstrates the selection effect in news. An individual's understanding of events arises from the framing of news reports. Even at the time of the history-making events, most of my classmates say they do not recall discussions in their families, school, or churches about the significance of Movement events. As Halbwachs (1980:23) reminds us, it is through our groups that we learn what to observe; we can only remember those things to which we attend.

But failure to recall the events of the spring reflects deeper processes of individual memory. Traumatic memories provide the theorist with new perspectives on cultural life. As Eyerman (2011:21) says, "Trauma opens up another world to the observer, and thus, in a tragic sense, creates an opportunity to see what would otherwise have remained deeply hidden." Traumatic events give insight into how memory is shaped.

Literature suggests at least three overlapping explanations for the lack of memory in the class of 1965 at Phillips. First, individuals may deny things that they know to be true. Second, individuals may repress difficult memories. Third, the loss of memory may arise from a transformation in the individual's sense of self.

Cohen (2001:4) reminds that when called to account for embarrassing past actions, denial may be "deliberate, intentional and conscious." There

were a few moments when a classmate rapidly changed the subject or abruptly cut off a narrative suggesting he or she had something to hide. However, most interviewees, most of the time, seemed to deeply interrogate their recollections. Some surprised themselves with what they said.

Changing the subject or abruptly cutting off a narrative is also an indicator of repression. Traumatic memories seem more fragmented than other memories. In interviews with Italians who had lived under Fascism, Passerini (1998:59) was surprised by silences and "irrelevant" answers to her questions. She concludes that such "self-censorship is evidence of a scar, a violent annihilation of many years in human lives, a profound wound in daily experience." As developed by psychoanalytic theories, repression assumes that traumatic recollections are inaccessible to consciousness. The traumatic memory stays with the individual in the unconscious, leading to a repetitive acting out of the past (Freud 1991). To begin to free the self of defenses and avoid repetition, one must 'work through' recollections of the past and 'allow memory to come.' As LaCapra (1994:210) says, "[W]orking-through implies the possibility of judgment that is not apodictic or ad hominem but argumentative, self-questioning, and related in mediated ways to action."

Connerton (2008:62) suggests a third explanation for loss of memory. He asks, "[C]ould not forgetting be a gain?," for forgetting may be "constitutive of the formation of a new identity." As groups of individuals develop new collective identities, new sets of memories develop and "tacitly shared silences" prevail. Connerton seems to applaud those who are able to "discard memories that serve no practicable purpose in the management of one's current identity."

It is the self in the present that brings to mind moments from the past. Through internal dialogue and conversations with others, we seek moments from memory that support the self we wish to be in the present. In recalling these moments we buttress them. Our current self gathers and assembles fragments from the past in a manner that helps us to maintain consistency with current groups and contemporary worldviews. Those fragments of memory that represent our current self are the moments we will recall again and again, perhaps in a form moderated by others' recollections. Those are the moments that become embedded in memory. Recollections are constantly reworked as we think about the past and converse with others.

Forgetting aspects of the self that are no longer valorized in society is key to the flexibility required by a constantly changing society. George Herbert

Mead (1913:378) speaks of the "reconstruction" of the self. By reflecting on our actions through the eyes of others, the individual can reconstruct his or her self. When the actions of segregationists are represented in the media, one realizes that this is not a person one wants to be. Through this recognition, individuals are able to construct "different and enlarged . . . personalities" (Mead 1913:379). Forgetting can be an important part of this reconstruction because it allows a consistent self-narrative over time.

Conscious denial of memory, unconscious repression, and forgetting associated with a new identity work together to promote silence about the past and construct a sanitized community of memory. Those who deny the past, those who have repressed the past, and those who want to forget the past to maintain a new identity have a common interest in silence. Outsiders are likely to quickly learn the rules of discourse. As Goffman (1959:13–14) notes, "defensive practices" and "tact" are constantly employed in everyday interaction to avoid "embarrassments" and "discrediting occurrences."

Many have observed that a coalition of silence may arise out of a difficult past. It may take weeks, months, or years for those with autobiographical memories of a difficult past to begin to discuss their experiences. Some may never expose their past. Whether Holocaust survivors (Stein 2007), war victims (Saito 2006), or witnesses to atrocities (Giesen 2004), silence about a difficult past is a familiar pattern. Zerubavel (2006) discusses the importance of such coalitions of silence in avoiding embarrassment and maintaining group solidarity. Each time a memory is called to mind, it is solidified. By not speaking of a difficult past, painful events may slip from active memory.

I have demonstrated how I reconstructed my own recollections. I had transmuted an act of racism into a heroic deed supporting integration. Only by speaking of this event with another who was present was I able to retrieve the memory. Coalitions of silence protect us from memory and allow us to live in a sanitized past.

This silence is at the core of contemporary racial antagonism. Whites' failures to recall the evils done to blacks in the past undergird the racial ideology that attributes current inequality to black deficiencies (Bonilla-Silva 2003). Legal segregation was a horrible institution. Whites may wish to see it in simplistic terms of 'colored' and 'white' drinking fountains. It went much deeper. Thompson-Miller et al. (2015) report oral histories that show the deep wounds that segregation created among men and women living today. It is no wonder that whites wish to avoid thinking about their part in this past.

Adorno (1986:115) notes that those complicit in difficult pasts wish to "turn the page" and, if possible, wipe the past from memory. He cautions that breaking the spell of the past requires a "serious working through." Victims, perpetrators, and bystanders each face challenges in coming to speak of the past in a way that does not reignite controversies. Victims require a community that is prepared to hear their stories (Stein 2014). These stories may lead those who were on the wrong side of history to become resentful. Adorno (1986:115) notes, it serves no purpose to "replay guilt and violence again and again." For everyone, appropriately speaking of a painful past requires self-reflection and self-criticism. As Arlene Stein (2014:182) says, working through a difficult past requires that individuals bring "to light the repressed or forgotten while sustaining a critical and questioning attitude toward the past and working to alleviate suffering in the present." This is the challenge that all Americans face in confronting past racism and the racial divide in the present.

Understanding the Importance of the 'Four Little Girls'

The cultural theory of trauma helps us to explain why the girls killed at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church have become so important in the social memory. Rather than focus analysis on memory elites, this sociological approach highlights the role of carrier groups in understanding the versions of the past that prevail. People seek versions of the past that support their individual and collective identities. Carrier groups have "particular material and ideal interests" (Alexander 2002:73). Through discourse and silence, groups selectively engage the past to support their interests in the present. Whites in Birmingham seek narratives that provide them with a usable self and a way to rise above a difficult past.

For whites, this bombing and the riots that followed disrupted the Lost Cause narratives that developed after the Civil War and upheld segregation. Events in Birmingham undermined belief in the virtue and competence of white leadership and shattered the belief that local blacks were satisfied with their situation. Southern culture seemed tainted rather than superior. Trying to reconcile this act of violence with Southern traditions of chivalry, religiosity, and hospitality led whites into a confusing search for a new way to affirm individual and collective identity.

Yet, individuals and groups were not able immediately to develop a new narrative to allow whites a usable past. The innocence of the girls and the sacred location of their murder established a basis for a new narrative. This narrative developed more fully as the evil nature of the perpetrators was constructed and the girls were personalized for white audiences. Beginning in 1976 and continuing in 2001 and 2002, press coverage of trials of the bombers developed the individual characters of Denise McNair, Addie Mae Collins, Carole Roberton, and Cynthia Wesley. Their representation as virtuous girls who adhered to white middle-class values aroused whites' empathy. In the trials, attorneys represented the three Klansmen convicted of the murders as personifying traits scorned in mainstream culture. They were uncouth, uneducated, old-time rednecks.

By empathizing with the four girls killed in this tragic event and attributing their horrific deaths to evil perpetrators, whites were able to separate themselves from the evil done in their name. This memory has become particularly salient as sympathy for the girls provides a way to distinguish their self from the polluted image of the segregationist. The cultural narrative of trauma that developed around the church bombing provided whites with an opportunity to reconstruct individual identity and disassociate their selves from a past that is stigmatized in collective memory. For many whites in Birmingham, the church bombing represents a 'cultural fault line' separating their selves in the era of segregation from their redeemed, post-racial self.

For blacks in Birmingham, the focus of recollections centers on spring demonstrations. Birmingham represents a heroic narrative of overcoming oppression through courageous collective action. Foot soldiers recall the years of resisting intimidation and the developing realization that they could make change that impacted the nation and the world. They recall their perseverance in enduring arrests, harassment, and fear. They recall the elation of success as they stood-down police, dogs, and firefighters. The deaths of the six children created fear and nightmares but also inspired courage. For blacks, the spring demonstrations form a cultural fault line demarcating the dark past from the brighter future.

Yet, both blacks and whites can join together in remembering Addie Mae Collins, Carole Roberton, Cynthia Wesley, and Denise McNair. One way to handle memory of controversial events is to avoid the context and focus memorialization on honoring the dead. Remembering these girls allows whites and blacks to join together in a community of memory. Representation of the victims of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church

bombing has built upon their innocence, the sacred location of their murder, their gender, and condemnation of the men who killed them. Movement activists as well as those who struggled to maintain segregation can join together in honoring four innocent girls murdered in church by Ku Klux Klansmen. Remembering the four little girls provides a narrative of reconciliation.

Ava DuVernay's (2014) film *Selma*[1] shows how important the four girls have become in collective memory. Near the beginning of the film, we see four girls dressed in frilly pastel dresses and gloves walking down church stairs. The viewer begins to identify with these girls as they chat about hair and fashion. In mid-sentence the church explodes; plaster and bodies fly across the screen. The film builds the need for voting rights around their deaths. In the next scene, King tells the president that voting rights are necessary, "because there have been thousands of racially motivated murders in the South including those four girls." These words, written for the film by Paul Webb, strike me as quite different from King's actual words.[2] In his writings about this time, King (1998: 270–289) promotes voting rights as a moral issue, a necessity for human dignity, and as a basic right of citizenship. He uses memory of the girls' deaths in a different way. He says, "[B]eating and killing of our clergy and young people will not stop us." DuVernay's reinterpretation is one example of how the past is reconstructed to meet the needs of the present. King used their memory to inspire bravery among the men, women, and children of the Movement. Today memory of the girls' deaths is used as an iconic example of racist hate that urges white Americans toward identification with racial justice.

Placing One's Self in the Past

Culture provides tools that men and women use to make sense of their recollections and to place themselves in the past. Commemorated events are not adopted blindly. Instead, men and women select from available narratives to construct a usable past. Individuals selectively use the past to give themselves a place in history.

Commemorated events are but one tool that individuals use to develop a usable past. In the stories that my classmates tell of their pasts, three scenarios are prominent that guide the narrating of memories of the process of integration. Beyond recollections of events of the day of the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, the narratives that my classmates and I relied upon to recall our difficult past centered on 'regretted acts,' 'risky

confrontations,' and 'defiant deeds.' Only in the case of 'regretted acts' did classmates own up to personal action to maintain segregation; yet, they attributed their actions to the influences of others. I have shown how each of these narratives is grounded in stories prominent in US culture. Whites in Birmingham have been selective in recollections. Individuals do not blindly internalize the messages of texts and commemorations. Instead, people use culture to construct a usable past. Memories of one's own past are fitted into available narratives with a great deal of selectivity, allowing difficult memories to be normalized.

Generations and Memory

My interviews and the developing literature on Southern student activism cast Alabama's white youth in a new light. Overwhelmingly they resisted or resented desegregation in the early sixties. But, as the sixties developed, many were inspired by the effervescence of the Freedom Movement to seek their own freedoms through collective action.

Legislation including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 applied external pressures on the Southern states to undermine segregation. Yet, most of my interviewees do not see their acceptance of desegregation as motivated by these external forces. I have suggested that internal pressures to change supported these external pressures. I have shown that a few years after key Movement activities a number of white Southern youth in Alabama changed sides. As they changed sides, new memories replaced the old. Their reconstruction of identity was accompanied by a reconstruction of memory.

As Alabama white youth gained personal knowledge of the Movement, many slowly came to see that segregation was morally wrong and polluted their identities. I argue that white youth in Alabama were an important internal force working for change. Their memories of events in which they were aligned with segregation may have slipped from conscious memory; however, that does not mean that those events had no binding power.

This finding is in many ways consistent with Mannheim's work on generations. Mannheim (1952:295) uses the word 'memory,' to discuss both 'conscious' and 'unconscious' processes. Normally men and women use culture unconsciously, tailoring traditional material to fit a new situation. When a behavior pattern becomes "problematic as a result of a change" men and women begin to consciously reflect. Once new patterns are established, the experiences that motivated change can "sink back" and

be highly significant but remain "implicitly, virtually" present. My work suggests that the events of the spring of 1963 are not a part of conscious memory for my interviewees, as whites in Birmingham were able to fit the events into traditional narratives of race. The bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church undermined traditional narratives and forced many young whites to begin to see racial issues as problematic. As the white youth of Alabama changed sides, I suggest that they lost memories of the self that had opposed integration.

White youth began to protest the Vietnam War, challenge limits on free speech, and seek greater equality of race and gender. Many transformed their own identities and returned to their white communities with a new sense of self and new sense of social justice.

Erasing Black Male Lives

The four girls killed on September 15, 1963, are widely remembered; the two boys killed on the same day go unheeded, their deaths essentially erased from collective memory. This illustrates the lack of concern and empathy for the lives of black men and boys that is still a grave challenge to racial justice today. Johnny Robinson, like thousands of other black boys killed by the police under questionable circumstances, has been all but forgotten. Many of my classmates were moved by the deaths of the four girls. In speaking of the killing of Virgil Ware, my classmates spoke only of their sympathy for our classmates. The deaths of Virgil and Johnny illustrate one moment in the social erasure of black males from civic life.

The challenge to assure that 'black lives matter' is salient today. In the USA, we see blacks and whites, young and old organizing to demand an end to the senseless killing of black boys and men. Collective actions in the streets of the USA seek to protect black lives and hold accountable police or vigilantes who kill unarmed blacks. Fifty years after Virgil and Johnny's deaths, America has begun to call to account those who kill black boys.

Using the Past to Shape the Future

The way that we recall the past establishes the context we use to understand the present and imagine the future (Gill 2012:30). Our concern for racial justice in the present can build upon willingness to accept collective and individual responsibility for our past.

Legal segregation ended, but there is so much more to do to bring about racial equality. The period of change in the South was short. In Birmingham, whites may work in the city but most live in the predominantly white suburban communities surrounding the city. While many neighborhoods in the city of Birmingham desegregated in the late sixties, the change was short-lived. During the seventies residential segregation increased (Fly and Reinhart 1980). Predominantly white suburbs around the central city have established their own municipalities and school districts. In the suburbs, a quality education is available to children from families who can afford to live there. Birmingham city schools are underfunded. They are 99 percent black (Frankenberg 2009:890). For black children in the city of Birmingham today, life may be as segregated as it was in 1963.

In the 1970s, the social movements for racial and economic justice were undermined and lost much of their power. Pressures from the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial branches of the Federal government weakened. In the deep South, whites have largely shifted to the Republican Party that has appealed to them with color-blind language that protects race and class privilege (Crespino 2007). Today, in both the South and the North, whites may work alongside blacks and attend schools or live in neighborhoods with a few blacks, but whites and blacks still live largely segregated social lives (Bonilla-Silva and Embrick 2007) and most blacks remain disadvantaged as a result of past discrimination (Oliver and Shapiro 1995). While progress was made in the past, there is tremendous work yet to be done to bring about racial justice in the USA.

While we may lament that change toward racial justice seems to have stagnated or even reversed, the period from about 1955 to 1975 in Alabama teaches us that major changes can happen in a short period of time. Members of the very generation that stood on one side of the barricades keeping blacks out changed sides and, within a few years, were trying to bring blacks in. I suggest that the challenges to identity brought on by this difficult past were key to this change even if the actual events are not in active memory.

I have examined a key transition point in the meaning of whiteness at a most contested location. It was the actions of black men, women, and children that instigated the changes that ended segregation and changed how race is interpreted in the USA. The actions of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Congress for Racial Equality, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the foot soldiers of the Movement created

changes in social structure to end segregation and bring about greater racial equality in the USA. I outline some of the ways that black activism inspired white youth to change. It is hard to imagine life in the USA today had the Civil Rights Movement not sparked the Free Speech Movement, the Women's Movement, and the Gay Liberation Movement. Whites today seem not to recognize their indebtedness to blacks for inspiring these changes.

Recalling America's difficult racial past is not easy but is crucial in healing the bitter racial divide in our nation. Whites seem to think that admitting that race matters and accepting responsibility for past racism will damage their reputation and privilege. Fine (2013) reminds us that even George Wallace and Strom Thurmond, who built their political careers on racism, maintained their reputations through apology and redress. After desegregation, the Southern states experienced dynamic growth benefiting both blacks and whites (Wright 2008). It was only after Germany began to confront its difficult past that it experienced economic growth that was widely shared (Dustmann et al. 2014). Clearly there are many other issues that contributed to economic dynamism during these time periods, but it is important to remember that accepting responsibility for the past need not undermine the present.

After the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, a racially diverse crowd of 10,000 marched in Washington 'for the six children.' They carried signs saying, "No More Birminghams" (*Washington Post* 1963:A1). Fifty years later we still confront murders of worshipers in church and the slaughter of black youth on the street.

I have shown that memory elites are not alone in shaping collective recollections of the past. Individuals choose versions of the past and share them through communities of memory. We rely on the past to select actions in the present and possibilities in the future. The refusal to admit that race matters is at the heart of many contemporary conflicts in the USA. Addressing this racial past on individual and collective levels could open a new set of possibilities for the future. Addressing this painful past requires a community of memory willing to engage in self-reflection and self-criticism.

Notes

1. This film was nominated for the Academy Award for 'Best Picture' in 2015.
2. Webb wrote all King's speeches for the film. DuVernay did not have copyright permission from King's family to use his actual words.

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