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**THE CIVIL
RIGHTS
MOVEMENT
IN AMERICAN
MEMORY**

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Such a juxtaposition is necessary to “forge the hegemony of late capitalist consumer culture.” What such binary memory forgets is the radical democratic vision that guided the civil rights movement in its moment.

Jennifer Fuller’s essay continues this interrogation of the kinds of narratives the mass media produces and perpetuates about civil rights by turning her lens specifically to films and television of the 1990s. In a decade fraught with the racial tensions engendered by the Los Angeles uprising and the O. J. Simpson trial, the mainstream media sought to make sense of the “failures” of the civil rights movement amid this wave of national fracture along racial lines. Many of these texts, like the film *The Long Walk Home* and the television show *Any Day Now*, turned to the civil rights movement as “a barometer of racial progress.” For contemporary viewers, the civil rights movement is thus produced as a site of nostalgia for a “simpler” heteronormative, black/white racial political landscape confined to the borders of the United States. Moreover, civil rights dramas of the 1990s function as enactments of racial reconciliation. Significantly, Fuller urges us to consider the gendering of this reconciliation, astutely observing that many of these texts place the burden of racial and national healing on the interpersonal relationships between black and white women.

The final two essays in this section attempt to trouble the boundaries of consensus civil rights memory by asking how memory narratives of the civil rights movement change when they are juxtaposed with memorializations of the Black Power movement. Tim Libretti carefully considers independent filmmaker John Sayles’s 2002 film, *Sunshine State*, while Leigh Raiford offers an analysis of the various restagings of Black Panther photography from blaxploitation film to *Vibe* magazine. Both authors consider the Black Power and anticolonial struggles of the late 1960s to be an integral part of the long civil rights movement. However, in consensus memory, as Morgan points out, these movements are set in opposition to one another. Libretti’s reading of *Sunshine State* suggests that the somewhat uneasy tensions between the two divergent ideologies are resolved in the ways contemporary activists choose to recall them. But for contemporary commodity culture, which attempts to maintain the dichotomy, Raiford argues that Black Power presents a more confounding though no less consumable memory than the civil rights movement.

EDWARD P. MORGAN

The Good, the Bad, and the Forgotten

Media Culture and Public Memory of the Civil Rights Movement

As millions of American moviegoers know, the beguiling morality tale of *Forrest Gump* is set against a backdrop of familiar 1960s sounds, images, and stories. Early in the film, a young Gump innocently ventures, with the aid of computer enhancement, into the grainy black-and-white footage of George Wallace resisting the tide of desegregation on the steps of the University of Alabama. Several years later, after his improbable service in Vietnam, Gump encounters his best friend, Jenny, amid a secretive gathering of sixties revolutionaries—most notably a threatening assembly of black leather-jacketed, Afroed, and gun-toting Black Panthers who defiantly spit their manifesto against white America in Gump’s face.

Gump’s popular representation of this bygone era dichotomizes the past into a “good” and a “bad” sixties—the triumphant southern civil rights movement and a hopeful young president on the one hand; on the other, a stereotyped Black Panther, a war in which Americans suffer at the hands of invisible Vietnamese, an abusive Students for a Democratic Society leader who denounces Gump as a “baby-killer,” and an excessively self-indulgent counterculture that deteriorates into hard drugs and eventually, in the case of Jenny, death from AIDS. Coinciding as it did with the 1994 Republican party “contract with America,” the film’s dichotomy complements the prevailing ideological revisionism occurring in American politics at the time.¹

The racial imagery in *Gump* is telling because it reflects broader treatment of 1960s racial liberation movements throughout mainstream, mass media culture.² As with the 1960s generally, public memory of the civil rights struggle has been the site of contested interpretations of the meaning and lessons of the past. Whereas the study of history has traditionally been understood as an empirical and rational undertaking and memory a more subjective phenomenon, increasing interest in terms like *public history*, *collective memory*, and *public memory* suggests that the distinction between history and memory may no longer be so clear. In her study of the construction of the Pearl Harbor attack in "American memory," Emily Rosenberg has argued that "especially in the media nation of post-World War II America . . . memory and history are blurred forms of representation whose politics need to be analyzed . . . as interactive forms."³ Rosenberg suggests that the media plays a crucial role in the construction of this recent past, since they "provide the matrix that collects and circulates diverse memories in America, shaping them in various ways and keeping some alive while burying others." As she puts it, "Forgetting is the condition of media death (no matter how 'alive' certain memories may be within individuals)." In America, "there is increasingly no effective memory or history outside of media, broadly defined."⁴

I suggest, however, that there is a significant, qualitative difference between what I call the *public memory* of the civil rights movement retained within the market-driven mass media culture and what I would call a *democratic exchange* about the past that respects evidence and tries to understand the subjective dimension of interpretation. Mass media's construction of the past is governed first and foremost by the imperative of maximizing audiences and readers. Their selective memory, then, invariably reflects fundamental economic, organizational, and ideological forces at work within a capitalist economy. As such, the mass media plays a crucial role in creating the foundations of *common*, or near universal, public discourse and public memory within a culture.

Counterpoints to the prevailing themes in mass media culture persist in historical books or documentaries like *Eyes on the Prize*, critical independent media, conferences, university courses, public lectures, and the like. Here, too, the civil rights struggle and the 1960s are contested, with,

however, one crucial difference. One can find in these realms an identifiable interpretation of the past—or more accurately, an exchange among various interpretations—that has vanished from mass media culture. Or, to use Emily Rosenberg's term, it is a perspective that has suffered mass media death.

Public memory of the civil rights movement, then, is qualitatively different from the process of assembling collective history of the movement. First, instead of being an investigative undertaking that examines the relationship between evidence and historical interpretation, mass media's public memory draws heavily on the very stories, events, and personalities that prevailed in past media accounts. Subject to intervening influences, the frames of public memory resemble those that permeated media interpretation *during* the civil rights and other 1960s social movements.⁵ Moreover, the *form* in which the past is typically preserved in mass media reflects the market-driven imperatives of mass enterprise. The mass media engages its viewers by playing on emotion rather than engaging in a dialogue that interacts with viewers' experiences. With a function of entertaining rather than educating its viewers to a broader understanding of themselves and their world, the mass media simplifies the past in a way that is inherently ideological, even though it seeks impartial balance between competing viewpoints, typically presented as two sides of a conflict. It gives serious consideration to credible voices, while helping to delegitimize "newsworthy" manifestations of systemic criticism or outsider opposition. While there is no media conspiracy to silence radical critiques of the American system, the media routinely reduces radical ideas to barely credible conspiracy theories. By reinforcing the ideological boundaries of conventional public discourse and turning public affairs into consumable entertainment, the mass media thereby helps to forge and sustain the hegemony of late capitalist consumer culture.⁶ In the process, the mass media culture undermines the very possibility of the kind of democratic community envisaged by civil rights activists in the past.

The effort of a social movement like civil rights to contest the hegemony of dominant elites and their ideology required that movement activists utilize the mass media to get their message across to a wider, sup-

portive audience. Of all the 1960s movements, the civil rights movement was probably the most successful in using the media to mobilize sympathetic national support for its cause. This success, however, reveals the distinctive way in which the cultural institutions of capitalism deal with contested hegemony. The mass media attended to new voices, at least when they were deemed newsworthy. Outsider challenges could be seen. But the grievances that were alive in the movements' free spaces found their way into mainstream discourse only in terms that were compatible with the ideological foundations of that culture. Outsider critics were, in effect, absorbed into the culture, absent their threatening criticism.

To discern mass media themes about the civil rights struggle of the 1960s, I have reviewed weekly news magazine and some newspaper accounts of major civil rights anniversaries. The public memory that emerges elevates some aspects of the struggle to the level of iconic myth, attributes others to demonic forces that seem beyond comprehension, and obscures portions of the civil rights struggle that challenge hallowed beliefs about American traditions of tolerance and equality. The iconic figure of Martin Luther King Jr. towers over this public memory. I reflect on the origins of this public memory in news magazine accounts of civil rights events during the 1960s. I then examine the way the boundaries of mass media discourse are sustained through other media, such as popular films, news media coverage of urban riots, and television's treatment of America's racial divide.⁷

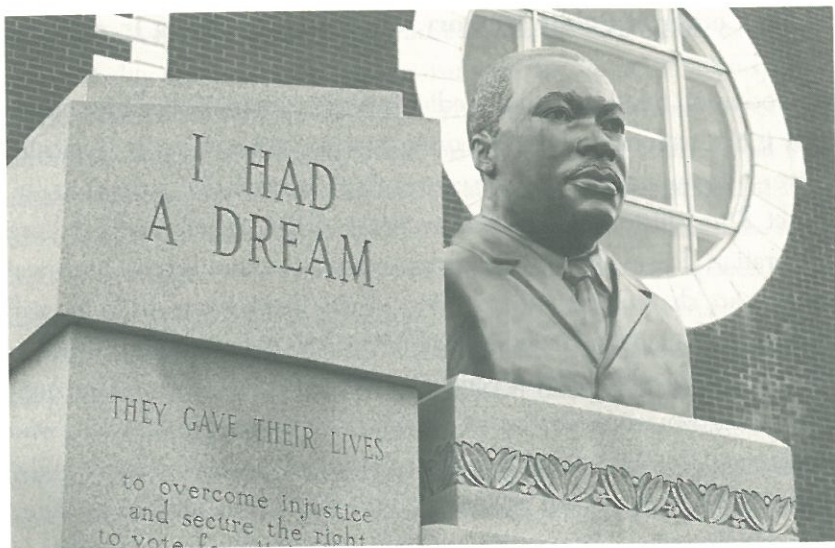
Three recurring themes characterize mass media culture's public memory of civil rights. First, the "good" civil rights text retells the story of a regional struggle in the South in ways that legitimize rather than challenge national traditions and institutions. Second, persistent national issues like racial inequality are interpreted through a bounded discourse in which critics of national institutions are either rendered invisible or are relegated to a status of illegitimate Other. Third, the civil rights story, like the contemporary media discourse on race, reduces the public to spectators identifying with or cheering for one or another public representation of conflicting sides. Both the content and form of media discourse, then, contradict the powerful democratic assertiveness that lay at the heart of the civil rights struggle.

At the Center of Public Memory: Martin Luther King Jr. as Icon

One occasion that brings the media torrent's content critics into public view is the national holiday honoring Martin Luther King Jr. Typically, university campuses around the country host lectures that purport to resurrect King's historical legacy, in contrast to the typical media culture celebration. It is a day in which private memories and serious historical analysis are shared with wider audiences. On these occasions, some will hear of the King who lauded Malcolm X on the occasion of his death in 1965, the King who took his campaign to Chicago in 1966 and encountered in his own words the "worst racism" of his experience, the King who condemned the United States as the "greatest purveyor of violence in the world" when he spoke out against the Vietnam War in 1967, or the King who criticized capitalism as the root of the inequality he confronted in the Poor People's Campaign of 1968.

These are representations of a political King who has virtually disappeared from mainstream mass media accounts. Public memory's Martin Luther King Jr. has been ideologically sanitized, detached from his own politics and their more radical, or system-critical, implications. The elevation of King to iconic representation of the civil rights movement has obscured a movement built on the courageous and determined efforts of thousands upon thousands of everyday people—a revision of the past that removes the struggle for justice, and its potential continuity with today's world, from the realm of what "the people" can do. As Fred Powledge has observed, "In the minds of untold numbers of Americans, for example, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. *was* the civil rights movement. Thought it up, led it, produced its victories, became its sole martyr. Schoolchildren—including Black schoolchildren—are taught this."⁸

Like anniversaries of the civil rights leader's assassination or other momentous events from that era, the King holiday is an occasion that prompts mass media culture to revisit and make sense of the past. Typically the media revisits King's "I Have a Dream" speech and asks how far America has come in realizing King's powerful oratorical challenge of 1963. So pervasive is the 1963 image of King addressing the March on Washington that it led Vincent Harding to bemoan, "Brother Martin



This memorial, which sits in front of the Selma, Alabama, church that served as headquarters for the Selma-Montgomery marches of 1965, literally freezes Martin Luther King's famous dream speech in stone. The inscription on the bust transforms King's oft-quoted line into the past tense, which could suggest either the fulfillment of King's ideals or the lost opportunity to realize King's dream. (© Owaki/Kulla/Corbis)

spent a fair amount of time in jail, but his worst imprisonment may be how his own nation has frozen him in that moment in 1963.⁹ This is the Martin Luther King Jr. whose place in public history has been cemented as America's conscience.

For example, on the twentieth anniversary of the March on Washington, a feature-length *U.S. News and World Report* article examined "King's Dream: How It Stands Twenty Years Later."¹⁰ Similarly, *Newsweek* chose the twentieth anniversary of King's death to assess the state of "Black and White in America." After reviewing the balance sheet of gains and losses in racial equality, the magazine observed that "there are signs of a revival of interest in the unfinished civil-rights revolution." The magazine noted further, "Television, newspapers, and magazines are observing the twentieth anniversary of King's death with a fresh look at the problems of blacks," suggesting the self-referential way the media confuses the virtual reality of media discourse with the everyday life of the citizenry.¹¹

In between these accounts, the inaugural celebration of the King holiday led *Time* to salute "Justice's Drum Major" with references to the "prominent visitors" to King's hometown and their recollections of King. In a manner that typifies its retrospective accounts of the 1960s generally, *Time* placed the celebration in "historical" context by recalling a brief collage of civil rights-era imagery: "The ceremonies became occasions to recall one of the most painful and dramatic eras of American history. Segregated schools, lunch counters and bathrooms. Freedom riders. Churches bombed and civil rights workers murdered. Helmeted police wading into demonstrators with attack dogs, tear gas, hoses, guns and bayonets. Then the fight to win passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act."¹² Some civil rights veterans took the occasion to observe that President Reagan had initially opposed creation of the King holiday along with civil rights legislation in the 1960s. With the detached journalistic "balance" typical of mass market media, *Time* then cited comments by Reagan's attorney general, Edwin Meese, to the effect that the administration's opposition to affirmative action policies was "very consistent with what Dr. King had in mind" when speaking of a "color-blind society." Without checking this claim for historical validity, the article concluded with reference to King's "true legacy," tracing the "distance the United States has traveled toward an integrated society."¹³

Three years later, a *U.S. News* column opined that, in contrast to his "prime" when King was "perceived as a threat by practically all segments of society," his reputation had revived to the point that "people of all persuasions now have a sense that he challenges them to be at their best and that he's articulating principles they believe in that are larger than race."¹⁴ *U.S. News* happened to be the national news weekly most prone to viewing King as threatening in the 1960s.¹⁵ By 1989, however, King had been sufficiently domesticated to the point that racial conflict was subsumed in the broader dream of national harmony—something that can presumably be achieved if we are all "at our best." With King's own political actions removed from the *U.S. News* record, "our best" would not seem to include going to jail in the cause of confronting oppressive or unjust government policy.

If these news media accounts weren't enough to indicate King's safe, sanctified status, a second indicator can be found in ways in which asso-

ciation with the King image has itself become a marketing phenomenon. In 1999, with approval of the Atlanta-based King Center, Apple computer featured King in magazine and billboard ads as part of its "think different" campaign, in effect translating determined political opposition into creative entrepreneurship. In 2001, against an image of King speaking (to an empty mall) from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, a television voice-over suggested to viewers, "Before you can inspire, before you can touch, you must first connect. And the company that connects more of the world is Alcatel, a leader in communication networks." Without Alcatel's communications technology, presumably, even King's powerful oratory would fail to reach today's audiences.¹⁶

So vapid is the sanitized King that it has drawn the occasional content critic into the mainstream media. One of the more assertive voices has been that of Michael Eric Dyson, who in 2000 penned an editorial column in *Newsweek* decrying the King who had become "frozen in myth." Dyson argued that "America has forgotten King's radical legacy. We have banished him to blandness, turning his fountain of rage against injustice into a faucet of polite protest."¹⁷ By the late 1990s, in fact, the news weeklies were taking note of a public contest over King's legacy. Their responses to this contest are instructive, for they illustrate the way meanings of the past *are* hotly contested within mass media, yet this contestation takes place within a discourse that omits more system-challenging perspectives. The more consistently King-friendly *Newsweek* addressed "The War over King's Legacy" in 1998. The occasion was the thirtieth anniversary of King's assassination, which occurred at a time when, according to *Newsweek*, King's "Dream was turning dark. Worried about poverty and Vietnam, he was growing more radical." Noting that King's "popular beatification" began with his death, *Newsweek* juxtaposed this King legend against an "assault" from "King's own family and many of his aging lieutenants." However, the counterpoint to the beatified King, it turns out, was a conspiracy theory on a par with Oliver Stone's account in *JFK*—namely, that King was killed because of his effort to "build an interracial coalition to end the war in Vietnam and force major economic reforms." Thus the effort to rehumanize King and assert his radical politics was subsumed within dubious assertions of massive conspiracy leading to King's assassination.¹⁸

Apparently it did not occur to *Newsweek's* writers that the radical King may have been more effectively contained by the media culture's sanctification than his politics could have been by an alleged conspiracy to kill him. Belying its "balance," the magazine repeatedly weighed in with open skepticism toward the antibeatification critics, once again finding America's intransigent racial divide at its heart. In the magazine's glib generalization, blacks, it seems, view King differently from whites. Asking "who was the real Martin Luther King, Jr.—the integrationist preacher or the leftist activist of the spring of 1968," the article suggests that "many whites want King to be a warm civic memory, an example of the triumph of good over evil," whereas for many African Americans the "sanitizing of King's legacy, and suspicions about a plot to kill him" resonate with the "larger forces" that "hijack their history and conspire against them." Once again drawing on another popular "reality" of media culture, the article asserts that ultimately the war over King's legacy mirrors the biracial reading of the O. J. Simpson trial. The article concluded by speculating about the King who would have grown older had he lived. Noting that King's "I Have a Dream" speech would not resonate with the "Malcolm X-saturated hip-hop generation," *Newsweek* concluded that King would have "stood by liberalism" and remained a hero for the "upwardly-mobile, assimilated black youth," a perspective that, as King chronicler Taylor Branch points out, obscures the fact that, at the end of his life, "King was not in the company of white presidents or black elites, but marching with the garbagemen of Memphis."¹⁹ The radical King's removal from history receives *Newsweek's* blessing.

Time also inquired into the legacy of a contested King, observing that King "is still regarded mainly as the black leader of a movement for black equality," a characterization that *Time* rejected as "far too restrictive." Instead of considering the more radical King, who criticized the economic inequality built into capitalism, however, the article observed that "for all King did to free blacks from the yoke of segregation, whites may owe him the greatest debt, for liberating them from the burden of America's centuries-old hypocrisy about race." As a result, the United States "can claim to be the leader of the 'free world' without inviting smirks of disdain and disbelief."²⁰ The movement that King led swept away all traces of the oppressive Jim Crow system in the South. This was its defining "victory."

For *Time*, the contest over King's legacy arose because his "most-quoted line" from 1963, when he dreamed of a nation where black children would "not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character," was "kidnapped" by the opponents of affirmative action. The contested King, in other words, is, for *Time*, a safely contained, integrationist King versus a right-wing version linked to efforts to roll back the liberal legacy of 1960s public policy. Such are the boundaries of mass media discourse.

In short, *Time* substitutes its kidnapping of King's legacy for the right-wing's claim. For *Time*, King's radicalism lay not in his political viewpoint but in his "sense of urgency" in confronting racial inequality; his victory should be appreciated by whites because it legitimized the United States dominion over much of the world, dominion that the more radical King challenged in 1967. *Time's* framing echoes earlier characterizations of King's contribution emanating from the Reagan and Bush administrations. In 1988, as civil rights veterans gathered to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the March on Washington, President Reagan issued a statement praising the progress that had been made toward "fully achieving Dr. King's dream of a color-blind society" and observing that the United States "is an even more brilliant beacon of freedom and hope" as a result.²¹ Less than a year after the first Persian Gulf War, Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger invoked King's "message to the world" to "make real the promise of democracy."²² The iconic King is thus claimed to support just about any cause justifiable within the boundaries of mainstream ideological assumptions.

Media Culture and Coverage of King in the 1960s

Both the safely domesticated King and the heroic figure eclipsing much of the civil rights struggle echo ways the mass media covered the civil rights struggle at the time it was occurring.²³ These were, and are, grounded in three defining characteristics of mass media culture as it was evolving through the sixties spectacle into its current form. First, the mass media embraced a market-driven emphasis on personality as a key signifier of political meaning. Second, the media followed market-driven codes

and biases with respect to protest activity, violence, drama, and dichotomous conflict. Finally, the mass media turned to an ideologically bound discourse for interpreting or explaining the meaning of events, one that Stuart Hall and others have referred to as the media's common discourse, or that Noam Chomsky has termed the "bounds of the expressible" or the "bounds of thinkable thought."²⁴

The heroic icon reflects not only Martin Luther King Jr.'s significant leadership role and his power as a public figure but also mass media's tendency to personalize news stories as a way of reducing the complexity of events and attracting audience notice. The market-driven push to maximize profit margins has a great deal to do with the elevation of public figures to celebrity status. The violent death of significant figures such as King only compounded this media tendency. The elevation of leaders into larger-than-life celebrities has left the rest of us, in effect, waiting for a new King.

Violence, dramatic action, personalized or partisan conflict, and evocative imagery are common features in the news media's packaging of events to maximize audience size or readership.²⁵ All featured prominently in mass media's coverage of the civil rights struggle during the 1960s.²⁶ The emergence of television, combined with powerful imagery of civil rights struggle and the telegenic young president and the emotional power of his assassination, helped to launch the public-affairs-aspectacle phenomenon that prevails today. The events that evoked most powerfully the "great moral dramas" of civil rights, in Richard Lentz's phrase—Birmingham's police dogs and fire hoses, the March on Washington, and Selma's "Bloody Sunday"—have themselves become icons of the historical struggle, revisited by mass media on significant anniversaries.

Even more crucial, perhaps, is the mass media's tendency to frame the news in system-reinforcing ways. Reflecting the journalistic credo of balance and impartiality, reporters are supposed to let their subjects speak, balancing one speaker against another in order to avoid taking sides. The meaning of events is thereby reduced by the media's inclination to present social and political issues as conflicts between two—and usually no more than two—concrete interests or perspectives. Throughout the civil rights movement, protest coverage and media attention accorded

to King were persistently juxtaposed against some competing interest or voice in the struggle. The selection of these voices or actors reveals the media's sympathies toward or against King, as well as the crucial boundaries of legitimate discourse about the public meaning of events.

In the cases that have become the signal stories of public memory, King and the movement were juxtaposed against violent white racists in the South. These were the straightforward good-versus-evil stories that readily lent themselves to binary media simplification. Thus, when the national media lenses captured nonviolent activists under violent attack by police dogs and fire hoses in Birmingham, or mounted, billy club-wielding police in Selma, a sympathetic national audience was instantly mobilized. In many respects, this response echoed that of northern journalists sent south to cover civil rights, reporters who, in ABC reporter Paul Good's words, received "invaluable on-the-job training on the subject of racism."²⁷ Sympathetic media coverage also helped to spread the contagion of sit-ins in 1960 and proved a boon to recruitment of new activists.

Civil rights activists themselves came to recognize the enormous importance of this media spotlight, for it reinforced the principle of effective protest politics: making one's audience feel psychologically closer to the protester than to the target of the protest. From the activists' perspective, media coverage of early sit-ins and the violence of Bull Connor's police in Birmingham taught powerful lessons about the importance of mass media and its dichotomous treatment of "good" and "evil." As the white Birmingham lawyer David Vann reflected on the Birmingham experience, "It was a masterpiece [in] the use of the media to explain a cause to the general public."²⁸ National media planning became an increasingly significant part of civil rights and other protests. In Staughton Lynd's account of the planning sessions for the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer, a great deal of attention was given to the strategic advantage of inviting northern white students to participate because, as the notes of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) worker Mendy Samstein recounted, "it was clear from the nature of the publicity derived from the Freedom Vote campaign that the press would respond to the beating of a Yale student as it simply would not do to the beating of a local Negro."²⁹

As a consequence, media coverage of protest activities invariably involved (and involves) an interaction between protesters efforts to "get

their message across" and the imperatives and systemic predispositions of mass media. As protesters' grievances shifted from the blatant racism of the South to national institutions steeped in legitimizing ideology, their grievances invariably were minimized, typically replaced by a pejorative focus on the protesters themselves. This interaction helped to set in motion a dynamic that effectively *widened* the psychological distance between protesters and broader national audiences.³⁰

When Martin Luther King Jr. emerged as a civil rights leader in the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955–56, both *Time* and *Newsweek* found him to be an intriguing new voice of patient persistence and promise. In fact, *Time* placed King on its cover for the first time in February 1957. In both the 1963 Birmingham and the 1965 Selma protests, however, the national news magazine's response was more varied. In the early days of each campaign, both magazines expressed considerable skepticism about King's (and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's) timing, echoing sentiments expressed by the *New York Times* and officials in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. In Birmingham both magazines juxtaposed King and the SCLC against the voices of white moderates in the community. Similarly, in early 1964, *Time's* coverage of its "Man of the Year" included excerpts from King's letter from the Birmingham jail—minus the segment in which King wrote of his great disappointment with "white moderates" who preferred a "negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice."³¹ In the case of Selma, the magazines decried the "unnecessary confrontation" caused by the leader who was "determined to create a crisis" that might rankle the sympathetic Johnson administration.

However, as Richard Lentz has observed, King "got his crises, when the dogs were loosed in Birmingham, when the mounted possemen thundered down on the marchers at the Edmund Pettus Bridge," and as a result "*Time* and *Newsweek* were forced to reinterpret King," this time placing him on the side of good against the savage racist attack led by Birmingham's Bull Connor and Selma's Jim Clark.³² In the aftermath of King's leadership in the Birmingham struggle and his stirring oratory at the March on Washington, *Time* crowned King "Man of the Year." By the end of 1964, King's leadership earned him the Nobel Peace Prize. Shortly after Selma's aptly named "Bloody Sunday," however, both mag-

azines once again began to distance themselves from King, criticizing his insistent efforts to remobilize the march to Montgomery while speaking sympathetically of Selma's public safety director, Wilson Baker, who was "desperately trying to keep the peace in the strife-stricken town."³³

The mass-market magazines also contained innumerable examples of a "good" King juxtaposed against civil rights activists whom the national media deemed unsavory. Younger, more rhetorically militant civil rights activists, like those of SNCC, repeatedly fared poorly in comparison to King. When the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was offered what it considered a patronizing compromise at the Democratic National Convention of 1964, King joined with a variety of Johnson loyalists to urge the MFDP to accept the offer of two at-large votes. The liberal *Newsweek* embraced the position of "black moderates" like King while distancing from the powerful oratory of Mississippi activists like Fannie Lou Hamer. In an account that may have also reflected class and gender biases, *Newsweek* reported that, according to civil rights leaders, "Fannie Lou Hamer, the Freedom Democrat's leading mouthpiece, is showing disturbing demagogic tendencies—attacking middle-class Negroes and whites, American policy in Vietnam, and Martin Luther King."³⁴ A year later, in the aftermath of the Selma march, even the normally skeptical *U.S. News* saluted the moderate King while denigrating the angry responses of SNCC director James Forman.

Perhaps the starkest contrast came in news magazine accounts that juxtaposed King against Malcolm X. In 1964, *Newsweek* compared a moderate King to Malcolm ("a man with a menacing word for every occasion") and King's followers, who believed in a "middle way," to Malcolm's followers, who were drawn to him because of "little more than the anger in their hearts."³⁵ On the occasion of Malcolm's murder, *Time* dismissed Malcolm as a former "pimp, cocaine addict, and thief" who had been transformed into an "unashamed demagogue" who preached hatred and violence. The magazine criticized King not only because he failed to denounce Malcolm as a radical but also because he had "sanctified" him as a "brilliant" leader who had "moderated" his extremist views.³⁶

Finally, the mainstream mass media treated King himself in a dichotomous manner, in effect pitting a good King against an undesirable

King. The latter was the civil rights leader who ventured outside the boundaries of conventional ideological consensus to attack national institutions and policies such as white racism in the North, the war in Vietnam, and capitalism's link to class and poverty. This "bad" King is, of course, the invisible King in today's public memory. The dichotomous coverage of the two Kings reveals ideological biases that inform mass media and limit the range of acceptable meanings.

The national news magazines, for example, were openly skeptical about King's activism in Chicago. The SCLC campaign in Chicago focused on educating the public about the appalling conditions of ghetto life in northern cities, organizing tenants to make demands on absentee landlords, and eradicating segregated housing in the North. *Time* viewed urban segregation largely as a function of "free choice" in the real estate market and thus the magazine was skeptical about the contribution a southern integrationist preacher like King could offer the urban North. When two riots marred the early days of the Chicago operation, one in the Puerto Rican district, the other in the black ghetto, *U.S. News* blamed them on King's aggressive, unsettling message. *Time* and *Newsweek*, on the other hand, criticized the Chicago police and an unresponsive Richard Daley administration. As the campaign evolved, however, both magazines began to characterize open-housing marches as ineffectual because they triggered a violent response, a dramatic departure from their take on Selma a year earlier. In the end, *Newsweek* applauded the campaign's gains but distanced itself from King's tactic of "provocation."³⁷

Media skepticism toward King's participation in northern cities also reflected the fact that ghetto life was depicted within the narrowed ideological framing of mass media: ghetto problems were a function of the presence or absence of government supports and the quality of interaction between city governments and inner-city minority populations. King's exploration of a broader economic framework for understanding ghetto life remained obscured by the media's prevailing image of King as the southern integrationist.

When King raised his voice to challenge the Vietnam War, the national media responded emphatically and in unison. King's advocacy of a moderate "bombing halt" in 1965 was attacked by all three news maga-

zines. *Newsweek* tried to rescue King from the “peaceniks” and the “hypermilitant” SNCC by urging him to stick to “his issue” and fight “one war at a time.” These commentaries, however, paled in comparison to the national media’s response to King’s 1967 Riverside Church speech against the war. The *Washington Post* editorial of April 6 typified the media’s condemnation: “Dr. King has done a grave injury to those who are his natural allies in a great struggle to remove ancient abuses from our public life; and he has done an even graver injury to himself. Many who have listened to him with respect will never again accord him the same confidence. He has diminished his usefulness to his cause, to his country, and to his people.”³⁸ Similarly, the *New York Times* decried King’s “disastrous” attempt to link “his personal opposition to the war . . . with the cause of Negro equality,” noting this would “lead not to solutions but to deeper confusion.”³⁹

In August 1967, in the aftermath of the massively destructive Newark and Detroit riots, King announced his most radical campaign, the Poor People’s Movement, which was designed to unite the poor of all races in a campaign of disruption, school boycotts, factory sit-ins, and a massive march on Washington by the unemployed. In effect, the Poor People’s Movement represented a frontal attack on an economy that King had been criticizing privately as the root of the inequalities plaguing Americans. The now unsympathetic news magazines dismissed King’s plans as a desperate effort to take the initiative away from militant extremists like SNCC. In Richard Lentz’s analysis, both *Time* and *Newsweek* “wanted King back in the South.” As Lentz put it, “*Time*, no less than *Newsweek*, needed to demonstrate that the System was working.”⁴⁰ After he was killed in the midst of the struggling Poor People’s Campaign, all three magazines froze King in the role of the great leader of the southern movement.

Public Memory of Civil Rights: Preserving the Boundaries of Discourse

As it has with Martin Luther King Jr., mass media’s public memory of the broader era of civil rights struggle reinforces the boundaries of pub-

lic discourse by legitimizing national institutions and stigmatizing voices critical of those institutions. The end result, a kind of self-contained media “reality” designed for mass consumption, reinforces the hegemony of consumer capitalism. Several themes seem to dominate this consumable past. Civil rights struggle, to the degree that it is depicted, involved the effort to erase a regional deviation from the national ideal in which all are “created equal.” The horrors of racial oppression occurred in the South. They were erased when civil rights activists appealed to the national conscience and the government to override the peculiar institutions of Jim Crow. The federal government played the crucial role in righting these wrongs, thus removing America’s great hypocrisy, at least in its most blatant form.

This does not mean that racial inequality and racial polarization have disappeared. It means they are *national* phenomena and are therefore treated quite differently by national media. The national creed is grounded in equal rights, legitimizes the national government as a potential instrument for righting social wrongs, and embraces the market economy as an important foundation for individual freedom and social mobility. Consequently, approaches to the “unfinished agenda” of civil rights are limited to the familiar “liberal” and “conservative” polarities of mainstream political discourse.

One crucial characteristic of this discourse is that voices from “outside” this spectrum are, quite simply, not part of the discourse. Expressions of “outside” perspective are often seen in the frightening visual representations of outsiders like Malcolm X or the Black Panthers, but their meaning is interpreted through the assumptions of mainstream discourse. They become part of the spectacle, for the most part harmlessly consumed by mass audiences. A few examples, drawn from different media, can illustrate the boundaries of this discourse.

Popular entertainment film, as opposed to historical documentary, is one medium that contains public discourse even as it dramatizes the past and engages viewers with personalities who may, in fact, have been radical critics of mainstream institutions. Hollywood’s depiction of the civil rights era seems to “bring history to life.” Yet while providing an opening for counterhegemonic expression, the net effect of civil rights at the

movies—like that of *Forrest Gump*—is to reinforce the framing of media culture's discourse and to set that discourse in the context of consumption and spectatorship.

One cannot, of course, expect an authentic political portrayal of an explosively divisive issue from Hollywood studios seeking to maximize their mass appeal. But with respect to media culture, that's exactly the point. Where *mass* appeal counts—that is, in any medium competing for a mass market—the media produce entertainment that teaches a safe political lesson. Mass media are the media of *common* discourse, as distinct from the largely invisible islands of subcultural criticism and subjective response. In this case, our common history is reduced to a commodity to be consumed. Potential activists in the audience are turned into spectators watching a movie that provides them with no call to action other than, perhaps, imitation.

Because other chapters in this volume concentrate on civil rights films, I will only comment on two popular film representations of the civil rights era, *Malcolm X* and *Panther*, both films that sought to center the lesser-known stories of 1960s black radicals. Spike Lee's 1992 film *Malcolm X* drew heavily on Malcolm's *Autobiography* in a conscious effort to provide an authentic portrayal of the powerful leader whose voice was widely demonized in mass media culture during and since the 1960s. Yet the mass-market film reflected a tension between a "constant quest for legitimacy and the need to quell and displace fears at the same time that it calls them forth."⁴¹ Lee's Malcolm seemingly appealed to two kinds of audiences: those who sought to redress mass media stereotypes, including the mass media's reduction of Malcolm to racist demagogue, and those in inner-city audiences who could heed Malcolm's life lessons about self-assertion through self-reflection, study, and hard work. The appealing, fleshed-out Malcolm helped to redress stereotypical treatments, yet the apply-yourself lesson he seemed to teach left Lee open to critics who argued that his Malcolm was an overly conventional, commercially acceptable figure befitting the Hollywood market.⁴² Not surprisingly, one by-product of the film was a renewed burst of "Malcolm-mania" already occurring in rap music, the widespread commodification of Malcolm X's image on sweatshirts, jackets, refrigerator magnets, and the like,

along with the ubiquitous X-marked baseball caps. *Malcolm's* 1992 inner-city audience could hardly be blamed for latching onto commodities that seemed to express some of their alienation, thereby conforming to the media culture's prevailing mode of discourse: a politics-of-expression that leaves political structures intact.

A similar fate seemed to befall Mario Van Peebles's film *Panther*, a 1995 effort to tell a partially fictionalized but essentially authentic story of another iconic outsider group from the 1960s. While the film's historical accuracy has been criticized on several fronts, *Panther* accurately corrected mass media distortions about the Black Panther Party's historical origins, its community service dimension, and the government's effort to eradicate the group. However, the film introduced the seemingly ubiquitous conspiracy dimension to the latter, suggesting an improbable collaboration between organized crime and the federal government to introduce hard drugs into the inner city to pacify inner-city youth and eradicate the Panther element. While the influx of heroin and later crack cocaine into the inner cities from the late 1960s on clearly had a deleterious effect on inner-city youth, and the question of federal intent has never been fully invalidated, it is notable that the only plausible way systemic forces can be explained in the individualistic language of mass media is through conspiracy. It is precisely this collaboration that seems most improbable and thus readily dismissible by mainstream media critics. The film, not surprisingly, ends with a shoot-out.

While trying to counter the media culture's longtime condemnation of the Panthers with a corrective narrative, Peebles was, in a way, imprisoned by the very dramatic symbolism used by the historical Panthers—the guns, the black berets and leather garb, the battles with police—symbolism that was also the focal point of 1960s media distortion and political attack. Thus it is not surprising that several years before the release of *Panther* a group calling themselves the "New Black Panthers" expropriated the symbolism of the original group to preach a black nationalist, anti-Zionist message filled with references to "white devils" and "bloodsucking Jews." Nor is it surprising that, as former Panther Bobby Seale has charged, the New Black Panthers don't "understand our history."⁴³ Thus it is that *Panther's* reliance on Black Panther Party symbol-

ism spoke loudly to audiences of inner-city youth, while it was precisely the film's efforts to expand the meaning of the symbols that provoked a new round of public condemnation.⁴⁴ On the one hand, once youthful audiences have consumed the heavily symbolic *Panther*, they are left with no course of *action* except imitation. On the other, the effort to convey the meaning of that symbolism is widely denounced in the mass media.

Media coverage of the 1992 riot in Los Angeles also demonstrates the boundaries of media discourse. For many Americans, one of the more frightening phenomena of 1960s racial struggle were the so-called "long, hot summers" from 1964 to 1968 in which ghetto residents from Rochester and Harlem to Watts, Cleveland, Chicago, Newark, Detroit, Washington, D.C., and many others exploded in violent insurrection. The early riots, as they were commonly called, helped to trigger parts of the Johnson administration's "War on Poverty." More generally, however, the riots were widely viewed as a "revolution of rising expectations" aroused, and disappointed, by a combination of the awakening of civil rights struggle in the South, fury at the racist attacks on the nonviolent civil rights activists, and long-simmering frustration at the apparent political invisibility of inner-city hopelessness.⁴⁵ More concretely, riots were sparked by acts of police brutality against a backdrop of heightened aggravation caused when the more radically empowering Community Action Program fell far short of its promises.

In 1992, young Americans had a chance to experience feelings of horror and fascination comparable to their counterparts in the 1960s when South Central Los Angeles exploded in fury that matched the scale and intensity of the worst of the 1960s riots. In its efforts to make sense of this violence by some inner-city racial minorities, media coverage of the 1992 conflagration resembled media coverage of the earlier era, with the exception that, in 1992, the media had to ask why the violence occurred after years of public policy that allegedly, in one way or another, had responded to the sixties riots and dealt with inner-city poverty.

The explanation of the South Central riots immediately devolved into a debate between the Reagan-Bush approaches to urban policy and those of the Johnson administration's Great Society. Bush administration offi-

cials were quick to seize on the riot as evidence of "failed" federal policies that created massive dependency and stagnation among poverty-stricken inner-city residents. Liberal defenders of past government policy countered by claiming that the riots reflected the years of "benign neglect" toward racial minorities in particular and the inner-city poor generally, from the Nixon administration through the Reagan and Bush administrations. The meaning of the 1992 riot, in other words, was framed in classic liberal-conservative terms.

The policy debate over the inner-city revolt was notable for what it left out, namely any reference to the history of the Community Action Program or any other grassroots organizing efforts that occurred in the 1960s. While powerlessness and empowerment were deemed relevant in some way to the explosion of inner-city rage, these terms were defined in ways entirely compatible with prevailing political and economic institutions. Liberals spoke of the need for a new resurgence in government programs designed to improve deteriorating public schools, counter drug dependency, and train the unemployed, which would presumably help to "empower" those stuck in inner-city hopelessness. Conservatives criticized the way in which government "handouts" created a dependency on government largesse among a victimized population, arguing instead for renewed "enterprise zones" that would presumably encourage job creation, thereby "empowering" the poor to take action to improve their personal livelihood.

It is noteworthy that neither of these positions paid the slightest attention to efforts to involve the inner-city community in its own collective empowerment during the civil rights era. A LexisNexis search of all newspaper accounts of the 1992 riots revealed but a single mention of the Community Action Program (simply listed as one of the poverty programs). Yet as originally conceived, the Community Action component of the War on Poverty provided federal funds directly to community action agencies and mandated that at least 50 percent of the agency members had to be the indigenous poor themselves. Funds could be used for purposes articulated by these communities in grant applications, and they were widely used to organize inner-city residents to tackle the issues that were most salient to them, such as horrible housing conditions caused by

negligent absentee landlords, a lack of jobs and job training, and brutal oppression by an unaccountable and largely white police force.

Needless to say, these efforts brought the inner-city poor into volatile conflict with city officials and social service providers. After about a year of varying levels of conflict in the nation's cities, the mostly Democratic mayors appealed to the Johnson administration to remedy the Community Action Program so it would work in a manner more typical of American big city politics. The membership of Community Action agencies, like those of the successor Model Cities program, were subsequently appointed by city hall, thereby augmenting rather than detracting from the power of urban mayors. In the case of Newark, at least, the growing frustrations over city hall intransigence in the face of Community Action demands helped to fuel the explosion of 1967, yet this perspective on empowerment was entirely absent from mass media accounts of the 1992 revolt.

Civil Rights and the Rise of Spectator Democracy

The prevailing message of the media culture's reflective civil rights treatment reinforces the view that there is a national consensus about civil rights grounded in ideals about racial tolerance and opportunity. The old southern apartheid system violated this national consensus, so once it was brought to the nation's attention, this wrong was righted, albeit at considerable cost to individuals involved. This very history reinforces national beliefs about the United States as a "special" nation. It has been claimed as such by the very forces that resisted these advances. Icons from this era remain to remind us what the nation went through during that turbulent time. Figures like Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and other notables in King's entourage still figure prominently in the media during Black History Month and on anniversaries of notable civil rights events. Media spectacles from the 1960s like the Birmingham fire hoses and police dogs, the March on Washington, and the Selma march are reminders of the violence of the white South, the nonviolence of civil rights petitioners, and the benign response of the federal government. Americans are encouraged to revisit this past in our cultural museums—notably the

very bus in which Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat in Montgomery and the Smithsonian exhibit of the Greensboro, North Carolina, Woolworth lunch counter where four students sparked the sit-in movement that spread across the South. Much of this revival of the past legitimately conveys good feelings about being American.

As a result of the media culture's public memory, national myths are strengthened, and the popular base of southern civil rights activism largely disappears. At most, critical films seem to invite expressive emulation from audiences for whom they resonate emotionally, rather than suggesting context-relevant forms of political action. They certainly don't invite critical reflection about the media culture's role among the many who lack personal memory or book knowledge of sixties events. Like much of the rest of this culture, they invite us to sit back and *feel* the various emotions they exploit. While arguably more entertaining than most media accounts of 1960s relics, they become part of the overwhelming media torrent that renders the past turbulent but ideologically safe, and seemingly impenetrable. Instead of active, discursive democracy, we get spectator democracy. And we get the illusion that spectator democracy—which offers something for everyone—is democracy. One way this is manifested is in the apparently easy integration of multiracial, mostly middle-class faces and voices into the media culture itself. However, what it took to get them there—the living, breathing history of civil rights—is obscured by the very media that offers us these integrated faces.

To some degree, the *success* of civil rights struggles reflected their ultimate compatibility with capitalism's marketplace. After all, racial integration incorporated formerly excluded Americans into the mainstream culture and added potential consumers and competitors for available jobs, and there's nothing anticapitalist about that. However, these victories didn't occur because capital *welcomes* change; they came about because capital was threatened with economic loss via boycotts, or disruptive direct confrontation. In effect, capitalism prefers what Martin Luther King Jr. called "negative peace," or the absence of struggle and confrontation that can produce embarrassment and loss of revenue.⁴⁶ Thus it is hardly surprising in the era of neoliberalism to find both Republican and Democratic presidents endorsing a revitalization of volunteerism, capitalism's

compatible substitution for the confrontational political action of an earlier era. On the King holiday in 2001, the *Boston Globe* ran a full-page ad that satirized, yet epitomized, the era of spectator democracy. The page was divided into two columns, one featuring "Martin Luther King Jr.," the other "Most People." On the King side, the paper published the famous "I Have a Dream" speech. On the other side, it listed the dreams "most people" apparently have: dreams of winning the lottery, owning a nice home and car, and becoming a movie star. The now legendary character of King had not only eclipsed the courageous efforts of everyday people engaged in the civil rights struggle but it had apparently become inconceivable by 2001 that most people could share in his dream of a just world. Instead, the *Globe* ad suggests, the most we can hope for is to take time from our pursuit of material dreams to consume the inspiring message of this heroic figure.

And yet, America's racial dilemma remains intransigent, as media references to an "unfinished revolution" attest. Thus mass media accounts triggered by the King holiday or civil rights anniversaries struggle to make sense of this unfinished revolution in conventional terms. Every year, the media produces statistical updates on segregation or black-white income gaps near Martin Luther King Day, yet they continue to puzzle over the lack of public will to complete King's dream. Incidents of racial hostility erupt into public view as white communities beat back invading outsiders or police engage in excessive brutality. In the wake of the long-running O. J. Simpson court saga, the media was transfixed by the inexplicable polarization between black and white responses to the verdict.

When the members of the media themselves zero in on the continuing problems associated with race and racism, however, they become part of the problem. In one rare, notable case, NBC broadcast a ninety-minute documentary on America's racial problem in 1981, entitled *America—Black and White*. In his review essay, television critic Mark Crispin Miller observed that, despite the program's serious intent to uncover the problem of racism, it embodied all the landmarks of television: "strong contrasts, lots of pathos, easy distinctions between weak (good) and strong (bad)." Miller's essay examined the program's variety of "contrived dramatic situations" representing the variety of problems faced by black

Americans and found a repeated "dual caricature in which all whites were equally devious, heartless, and remote, united in their groundless 'prejudice.'" African Americans, on the other hand, were "time and again" reduced to a "single pitiable figure—the Black, an eternal victim who suffers beautifully." Miller concluded that the program "told us little about racism in our society" but "revealed a lot more about the subtle sort of racism that pervades television news" that "usually belittles blacks in the very act of taking their side, while dismissing whites entirely."⁴⁷

Television's reductionist dichotomy between racist whites and victimized blacks was an exact echo of the mass media's most sympathetic accounts of the civil rights struggle during the 1960s. Once again, the media employed its typical binary approach to interpreting the meaning of events.⁴⁸ Of course, in other dichotomized media representations, black voices angrily denouncing white racism are typically dismissed as too militant or impatient. The crucial disempowering impact of this presentation is, in Miller's view, the "guiding assumption" of the NBC show: "If *you* would *feel* the problem, then *we* would not *have* a problem as a *race!*" Not only is this formula naïve, implying that one's emotional response can overcome political and cultural realities; but it is profoundly slavish. It suggests that blacks are obsessed by whites, the weak waiting angrily for the strong to do something; and so it bespeaks the surrender of all responsibility in an outburst of blame and self-pity: 'All my problems are your fault.'⁴⁹

Ultimately, the media culture revolves around *how we feel* in response to the media stories we encounter, for those feelings have a great deal to do with the size of corporate media's audience. Whether we are moved by a retrospective tribute to great moments in civil rights history, visit the cinema complex to view *Malcolm X*, or watch NBC's serious documentary, we are encouraged to react emotionally to one side or the other. Yet rarely do we get a glimpse of the ways in which ordinary people took it upon themselves to rise up and challenge the racial oppression that surrounded them, nor are we likely to hear arguments that suggest the applicability of similar acts of collective self-empowerment in this day and age, an era, like that of the pre-civil rights South, when many find the prospect of significant transformation inconceivable. Instead spectator democracy

systematically erodes a common conversation among citizens where we can come to an understanding of the varieties of ways in which racism, and other wounding forms of domination, oppression, or exclusion, affect us all. Instead, the media culture "torrent" pushes the civic task of understanding, debating, and using our history off into privatized enclaves.⁵⁰

It's hard to tell which characteristic of this media culture is more damaging to critical public discourse about civil rights: the exclusion or marginalization of critical voices that address systemic problems or the systematic ways in which the form of media culture itself erodes public conversation, balkanizes the population in think-alike enclaves, and undermines political action. The fact that the media culture does both reveals the troubled condition of today's democracy.

Notes

1. See Edward P. Morgan, "Who Controls the Past? Propaganda and the Demonised Sixties," *Irish Journal of American Studies* 5 (December 1996): 33–57. More generally, this dichotomy so completely reflects postsixties media discourse about the 1960s that *Gump's* director, Robert Zemeckis, maintained that he chose the familiar sixties imagery to give *Gump's* story "realism." See Edward P. Morgan, "Democracy in Eclipse? Media Culture and the Postmodern 'Sixties,'" *New Political Science* 40 (Summer 1997): 5–31.

2. Douglas Kellner has written of a commercial media culture in which "images, sounds, and spectacles help to produce the fabric of everyday life, dominating leisure time, shaping political views and social behavior, and providing the materials out of which people forge their very identities." Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics between the Modern and the Postmodern* (London: Routledge, 1995), 1.

3. Emily S. Rosenberg, *A Date Which Will Live: Pearl Harbor in American Memory* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 5.

4. *Ibid.*, 4.

5. See especially Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), chap. 14.

6. By hegemony, I refer to ways in which elites are able to dominate mass publics through their *consent* rather than through force—a phenomenon first explored in the prison writings of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. See Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, eds., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

7. While each of these media represents a distinct form of expression with a distinct purpose, audience appeal, and use of communication conventions, my emphasis in this chapter is on the *common* themes across these diverse media. The weekly news magazines are a particularly fertile source for investigations like this because, as Richard Lentz has observed, "Making sense of the world is something all journalistic media must do, but it is the *raison d'être* of the news weeklies. . . . That readers of *Time* (and its competitors) got their news first from the fleeting images of television or the jumbled patterns of a newspaper page mattered little; what mattered a great deal to the news magazines was to impose order on what they reported." Richard Lentz, *Symbols, the News Magazines, and Martin Luther King* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 4.

8. Fred Powledge, *Free at Last* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), xiv.

9. Vincent Harding, "The Road to Redemption," *Other Side*, January/February 2003, 12.

10. *U.S. News and World Report*, August 29, 1983, 47–48.

11. David Gelman, et al., "Black and White in America," *Newsweek*, March 7, 1988, 18–23.

12. Jacob V. Lamar, "Honoring Justice's Drum Major," *Time*, January 27, 1986, 24–25.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Alvin P. Sanoff, "The Greening of a Martyr," *U.S. News and World Report*, January 23, 1989, 22.

15. During this entire period, except when King was being compared to more militant (i.e., "radical") black leaders, *U.S. News* maintained a consistently skeptical stance toward King. In fact, in Richard Lentz's account, *U.S. News* "consistently damned King and his cause." Lentz, *Symbols*, 339.

16. In its effort to make King's legacy publicly accessible, even the King family has been drawn into the market's cultural commodification, producing a King "autobiography" and an animated video about King and offering to sell the King Center, his home, and hundreds of memorabilia to the National Park Service.

17. Michael Eric Dyson, "The Truth about Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Newsweek*, January 24, 2000, 57. See also, Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Free Press, 2000).

18. Vern E. Smith, et al., "The War over King's Legacy," *Newsweek*, April 6, 1998, 42–47. My point is not to dispute the possibility of wider involvement in King's assassination but to note how the news weekly treats his radical politics. In effect, absent the institutional framework of analysis that lies outside the boundaries of conventional ideology, the mass media are only able to represent

“radicalism” in one of two ways: either as conspiracy theory, or as a form of militant extremism.

19. Ibid.; Taylor Branch, “Uneasy Holiday: How Should We Honor a Man We Still Don’t Know?” *New Republic*, February 3, 1986, 22–24.

20. Jack E. White, “Martin Luther King” in “Time 100: Leaders and Revolutionaries of the Twentieth Century,” *Time*, April 13, 1998, 160.

21. *New York Times*, August 28, 1988, 20.

22. *U.S. Department of State Dispatch* 3, no. 8 (February 24, 1992): 137.

23. One telling instance of this treatment was *Newsweek’s* use of King as the focal point for much of its coverage of the student-generated sit-ins of 1960. *Time* was initially more inclined to focus on the compelling morality play in the struggle between the idealistic young and the “familiar flotsam” [the “duck-tailed, sideburned swaggerers, the rednecked hatemongers, the Ku Klux Klan”] who attacked them. See Lentz, *Symbols*, 42–51.

24. Chomsky uses these terms in *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies* (Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1989) and “The Bounds of Thinkable Thought,” *Progressive*, October 1985, 28–31.

25. See W. Lance Bennett, *News: The Politics of Illusion*, 3rd ed. (White Plains, N.Y.: Longman, 1983), 48–52.

26. ABC reporter Paul Good’s account of his years of reporting on the southern civil rights movement documents ways in which the network’s interest in covering the movement revolved around the presence or absence of action and violence (or potential violence). See Paul Good, *The Trouble I’ve Seen: White Journalist/Black Movement* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1975).

27. Ibid., 4.

28. Quoted in Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years, 1954–1965* (New York: Viking/Penguin, 1987), 191. In effect, this interaction with national media was a kind of learning experience for both parties.

29. See Lynd’s second chapter, entitled “Freedom Summer: A Tragedy, Not a Melodrama,” in Staughton Lynd, *Living Inside Our Hope: A Steadfast Radical’s Thoughts on Rebuilding the Movement* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997). Samstein is quoted on 29.

30. For documentation of this effect with respect to media and the antiwar movement of the sixties era, see Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), and Edward P. Morgan, “From Virtual Community to Virtual History: Mass Media and the American Antiwar Movement of the 1960s,” *Radical History Review* 78 (Fall 2000): 85–122.

31. Lentz, *Symbols*, 116–18.

32. Ibid., 340.

33. Ibid., 146.

34. “Waving the Red Flag,” *Newsweek*, April 12, 1965, 28. ABC reporter Paul Good contended that the northern media generally treated the MFDP challenge in a patronizing and inaccurate manner—a tendency he attributed in part to their arrogance and in part to a “subjective identification with the White House Establishment.” See Good, *Trouble I’ve Seen*, 206, and Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 399.

35. “Calculated Risk,” *Newsweek*, July 13, 1964, 28–29.

36. Lentz, *Symbols*, 147–48.

37. Ibid., 225–33.

38. *Washington Post*, April 6, 1967, sec. A, 20.

39. *New York Times*, April 7, 1967, 34.

40. Lentz, *Symbols*, 239, 245.

41. Herman Gray, “Television, Black Americans and the American Dream,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 6 (1986): 376–86.

42. See for example, J. Emmett Winn, “Challenges and Compromises in Spike Lee’s Malcolm X,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18 (December 2001): 452–65; Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 3rd ed. (New York: Continuum, 1996); Michael Eric Dyson, *Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

43. Among other things, according to a 2002 *New York Times* report, the New Black Panther Party is listed by the Southern Poverty Law Center as an active “hate group.” Dean E. Murphy, “Graying Black Panthers Fight Would-Be Heirs,” *New York Times*, October 8, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/08/ANT.html?pagewanted=print&position=top>.

44. While even some former Panthers criticized the accuracy of Peebles’s rendition, it was the relatively authentic features that stirred up “a chorus of discontent” that branded the film as “lopsided, revisionist history” in a *Boston Globe* account. *Time* suggested that offering “the Panthers as idealists and as objects of veneration to today’s youth” was “criminal naiveté,” while the right-wing Center for the Study of Popular Culture attacked the film as a “two hour lie.” See Richard Corliss, “Power to the Peephole,” *Time*, May 15, 1995, 73.

45. See, for example, the *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (New York: Bantam, 1968), widely known as the “Kerner Commission” report.

46. In one telling account of the struggle to break down rigid segregation in the deep South, Steven Classen describes the efforts by black students at Tougaloo College to enlist the cooperation of popular culture figures like the stars of television’s *Bonanza*, the cast of *Hootenanny*, and the popular trumpet player

Al Hirt to withdraw from booked appearances at segregated facilities in Jackson, Mississippi. In effect, the cultural celebrities were employed as leverage to force the integration of these facilities. When celebrities demurred, however, the students threatened to sit-in during their appearances, thereby creating a potentially embarrassing confrontation. These threats "forced" figures like *Hootenanny's* Glenn Yarborough and Hirt to withdraw. Steven Classen, "Southern Discomforts: The Racial Struggle over Popular TV," in *The Revolution Wasn't Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin (New York: Routledge, 1997), 305–26.

47. Mark Crispin Miller, "Black and White," in Miller, *Boxed-In: The Culture of TV* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 135–49.

48. For example, Paul Good maintained that most of the journalists traveling to Mississippi to cover Freedom Summer were seeking stories of "violence, police brutality, volunteer heroism, Negro suffering." Good, *The Trouble I've Seen*, 255. More generally, see the discussion of the construction of meaning through "The Spectacle of the 'Other,'" in Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997), chap. 4.

49. Miller, "Black and White," 143 (emphasis in original).

50. In one compelling account of this balkanized culture, Cass Sunstein documents ways in which the Internet-driven culture creates a phenomenon he calls the "daily me," in which citizens are increasingly able to screen out interaction with all issues, ideologies, and groups that differ from their own. See Cass Sunstein, *republic.com* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

JENNIFER FULLER

Debating the Present through the Past

Representations of the Civil Rights

Movement in the 1990s

There are currently more than forty-five films and television programs that dramatize the civil rights movement, and more of them were released in the 1990s than in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s combined. In the 1990s, fears of racial fracture and desires for racial reconciliation converged in ways that made the civil rights movement a site of intense ideological struggle. As a major turning point in American race relations, the movement was constantly used as a reference point for judging the state of contemporary race relations and for defining what constituted racial progress. Civil rights drama became an arena to explore these issues and to articulate competing political ideologies. This chapter looks at political, academic, and popular discourse about race in the 1990s.¹ Using examples from civil rights dramas, coverage of the fortieth anniversary of the Central High crisis, and other examples from popular culture, it argues that the racial context of the nineties made media representations important sites of struggle over meanings of the civil rights movement.²

Television scholar Herman Gray has argued that representations of the civil rights movement convey "contemporary political and cultural hopes and longings," in particular, the belief that America has transcended racism.³ This chapter focuses on how representations of the civil rights movement were vital at a time when racial conflict jeopardized this