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Introduction

ON A humid day in late August 2010, right-wing Tea Party activist and Fox News television host Glenn Beck held a rally to “restore honor” at the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. It was the forty-seventh anniversary of the Civil Rights March on Washington, and Beck stood on the steps where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous “I have a dream” speech nearly five decades prior. In the months leading up to the rally, Beck used his television show to drive home the undeniable connection between the historic backdrop of the rally and the Tea Party’s mission to safeguard American values, threatened by minority claims to “special rights.” In this view, White Americans were the new victims under the Obama presidency, an idea Beck repeatedly espoused as when he warned viewers, “This president [Obama] I think has exposed himself as a guy, over and over and over again, who has a deep-seated hatred for White people and the White culture . . . this guy is, I believe, a *racist*.”¹

Earlier that spring Beck had proclaimed to his viewers, “We are the people of the civil rights movement. We are the ones that must stand for civil and equal rights. Equal rights. Justice. Equal justice. Not special justice, not social justice, but equal justice. We are the inheritors and the protectors of the civil rights movement.”² Several days later, Beck warned viewers that King’s vision had been “perverted,” but he assured his audience that he planned to “pick up Martin Luther King’s dream” and to “restore it and to finish it.” He went on to declare, “We are on the right side of history. We are on the side of individual freedoms and liberties and damn it, we will reclaim the civil rights movement. We will take that movement because we were the people that did it in the first place.”³

Beck’s appropriation of the memory of the civil rights movement for the Tea Party’s cause did not go unnoticed. Publics erupted in protest. Jon Stewart called the Beck rally “I have a scheme,” satirizing its strategic connection to the “I have a dream” speech. Robert Greenwald, an activist and filmmaker protesting Beck’s rally, created a website and video titled “Glenn Beck Is Not

Martin Luther King Jr.” In the video, Greenwald juxtaposed “shock jock”-style sound bites from Beck with Dr. King’s spiritual oratory in his “dream” speech, highlighting the absurdity of Beck’s claim to Dr. King’s legacy. At its conclusion, a message read, “Don’t let Beck distort Martin Luther King Jr.’s legacy. Sign your name to virtually stand with Dr. King’s vision on August 28th.”⁴ That petition received more than thirty thousand signatures. Civil rights activist Reverend Al Sharpton called Beck’s event an “outright attempt to flip the imagery of Dr. King.”⁵ The day before the rally, political commentator Chris Matthews said on his MSNBC show, *Hardball with Chris Matthews*:

Can we imagine if King were physically here tomorrow . . . were he to reappear tomorrow on the very steps of the Lincoln Memorial? I have a nightmare that one day a right-wing talk show host will come to this spot, his people’s lips dripping with the words “interposition” and “nullification.” Little right-wing boys and little right-wing girls joining hands and singing their praise for Glenn Beck and Sarah Palin. I have a nightmare.⁶

Still, on August 28 Beck stood, as had King, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and gave an impassioned speech to a crowd of over eighty thousand Tea Party supporters, declaring their work had “everything to do with God . . . turning our faith back to the values and the principles that made us great.” He went on to describe an America at a crossroads, not unlike the country Lincoln faced during the Civil War. Referring to the Tea Party’s struggle, he said, “It’s the same story throughout history, all of mankind’s history. Man finds himself in slavery and then someone appears to wake America up.”⁷ Through religious and historical imagery, Beck emphasized the power of American individualism in the face of oppression that he described as a sort of “slavery,” driving home the analogy between conservative Americans’ plight under multicultural democracy and Black Americans’ past enslavement.

Further down the National Mall, Al Sharpton and Dr. King’s eldest son, Martin Luther King III, were leading a rival rally at the planned site for the Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial: the “Reclaim the Dream” commemorative march. Avis Jones DeWeever, executive director of the National Council of Negro Women, pleaded with the audience, “Don’t let anyone tell you that they have the right to take their country back. It’s our country, too. We will reclaim the dream. It was ours from the beginning.”⁸ With Dr. King’s son in tow as a living symbol, a gatekeeper of collective memory, the Tea Party’s claims to King’s legacy appeared illegitimate.

Yet the Tea Party organizers had prepared for this dilemma. Glenn Beck had arranged for another symbolic figure to speak. Alveda King, Martin Luther King Jr.’s niece and an outspoken right-wing activist, proceeded to



FIGURE 1.1. Civil rights protester counters Tea Party’s claim to Dr. King in 2011 “Rally to Restore Honor” in Washington, D.C. David Coleman/HaveCameraWillTravel/Alamy Stock Photo.

take the stage at the “Rally to Restore Honor.” Alveda King called on the audience to:

focus not on elections or on political causes but on honor, on character . . . not the color of our skin. Yes, I too have a dream. . . . That America will pray and God will forgive us our sins and revive us our land. . . . My daddy, Reverend A. D. King, my granddaddy, Martin Luther King, Senior—we are a family of faith, hope, and love. And that’s why I’m here today. Glenn says there is one human race; I agree with him. We are not here to divide. I’m about unity. That’s why I’m here, and I want to honor my uncle today.⁹

Here was another living inheritor of Dr. King, of the civil rights movement, lending credence to the Tea Party vision of color-blind individualism, where the acknowledgment of race, of racism, of racial inequality, could be named anti-White reverse racism.

From beyond the audience of the rally’s conservative followers, there were vocal critics who worked to discredit the Tea Party’s misuses of Dr. King. Yet Beck and the skilled Tea Party organizers had looked back on the political battles of the decades prior and had anticipated opposition. In the months leading up to the rally, they had worked tirelessly to thwart progressive activists’

critiques by using Dr. King's own language, the imagery of the historic setting, and, now with Alveda King, the living progeny of the symbolic figure.

Historian Eric Hobsbawm wrote that social movements "[back] their innovations by reference to a 'people's past,' . . . to traditions of revolution . . . and to [their] own heroes and martyrs."¹⁰ Yet Dr. King was not always a "hero and martyr" for conservatives. Just thirty years earlier, there were spirited congressional battles around whether to designate Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday as a national holiday. Conservatives denounced King as a "communist traitor" and made public his alleged extramarital affairs to sully his reputation and question his morality. They declared King an unworthy figure for national celebration and commemoration. Although President Reagan signed the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. national holiday into existence in 1983, statewide battles over the King holiday lasted into the 1990s. In many states like Alabama and Mississippi, the concession toward the King holiday came only with an agreement to merge the holiday with observances of Confederate "heroes" like Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, and Stonewall Jackson. South Carolina was the last state to approve a paid King holiday, in the year 2000. Yet just ten years later, Glenn Beck, a brazenly radical conservative, would stand on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to "reclaim" King's dream for the Tea Party. The next month, Tea Party activists swept the primary elections, and over the next few years they moved the Republican Party irrevocably to the right.

How did the collective memory of the civil rights movement, of Dr. King, become a ready-made political strategy for mobilization by groups with divergent, even antithetical aims? More importantly, what are the consequences of these (mis)uses of collective memory? How does misremembering the past matter for contemporary politics, and how does it shape the direction of our collective future? These are the questions this book explores.

At first glance, perhaps the Tea Party movement's invocations of Dr. King do not seem all that surprising. After all, scholars have shown that since the civil rights era of the 1960s, all sorts of groups including women, Latinos, Asians, the disabled, and LGBTQ coalitions have used memories of the civil rights movement to make claims to inclusion and equality. This period of widespread collective action by minoritized groups has been coined "the minority rights revolution,"¹¹ the "movement of movements,"¹² and the rise of the "civil rights society."¹³ For historically excluded groups, strategic invocations of the civil rights movement seem like a natural mobilization strategy with a ready-made set of what social movement scholars call "repertoires of contention": the tactics, frames, and actions for mobilization against injustice.¹⁴ More generally, the memory of Black Americans joining with kindhearted White Americans, mobilizing for and achieving legal recognition, has become

central to the story of “who we are” as Americans, a shining beacon of the promise of American democracy. Dr. King is mythologized as the moral compass of American identity, reminding us of an unrelenting march forward, where “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”¹⁵

However, increasingly since the 1980s, right-wing, majority-White social movements from the gun rights and family values coalitions to nativist, White supremacist movements have reshaped and deployed the collective memory of the civil rights movement to claim that *they* are the new minorities fighting for their rights. In these invocations, gun rights activists are the new Rosa Parks, anti-abortion activists are freedom riders, and anti-gay groups are protecting Dr. King’s Christian vision. These misuses of the past are not merely rhetorical; these strategies have powerful effects. This book will show that as mobilizing groups remake a collective memory toward competing political ends, they generate new interpretations of the past that take on a life of their own. The proliferation of these interpretations of history, over time, changes the collective memory itself, shaping the way we make sense of the present and the way we direct action toward the future.

As social historians have shown, the domesticated memory of the civil rights movement has transformed into a vacated, sanitized collective memory celebrating color-blindness and individualism, as if racism is a figment of the past.¹⁶ In the popular imagination, Dr. King was a widely beloved moral leader, preaching peace and nonviolence at all costs, invested in the dream of American exceptionalism. Rosa Parks was an accidental activist, a tired woman who did not want to give up her seat on a bus after a long day of work. These “Whitewashed” memories are not only bound up in the national holiday we celebrate once a year. They are also narrativized in children’s textbooks, Oscar-winning films, political speeches, and popular media. Such memories amplify selective representations of particular figures—Dr. King, Rosa Parks, John Lewis—rendering other pivotal civil rights activists and their rich stories, struggles, and power invisible.¹⁷ These flattened, “defanged”¹⁸ memories are commemorated by rosy images of Black and White Americans joining, arms linked, in a quest for racial justice, through a particular conception of racism and violence as existing specifically in the South and—notably—in the distant past.¹⁹ They are juxtaposed against memories of “radical,” “threatening” activists like Malcolm X and the Black Panthers as “divisive” separatists, “a disruptive force to a beloved community.”²⁰ These meanings are bound in commemorative structures and remain at the heart of American collective memory.

Why does it matter that the collective memory of the civil rights movement is remembered in this selective way? After all, collective memories generate a shared identity and connect us in a common narrative of our collective past. Why shouldn’t the civil rights movement be remembered through ideals of

unity, peace, and color-blindness? The danger of a sanitized reading of the past is that this selective memory evades social reality and enables the maintenance of White supremacy. While the story of racial progress can be a palatable one, the evidence tells a different story. The vestiges of a nation founded on the genocide of Native Americans and the violent enslavement of Black people live on in our institutions and our culture through systemic racism,²¹ what Joe Feagin describes as the “complex array of white anti-other (e.g., anti-black) practices, the unjustly gained economic/political power of whites, the continuing economic and other resource inequalities along racial lines (unjust enrichment/unjust impoverishment), and the racial framing created by whites to rationalize privilege and power.”²²

For example, while one-quarter of White households have a net worth greater than one million dollars, this is true for only 4 percent of Black households. Even poor White people in the bottom 20 percent of the income distribution have a higher median net worth than all Black people. Working-class Whites have two to three times the median wealth of professional-managerial Black people.²³ These racial gaps are evident in every realm of social life at all stages of the life course; the inequalities across intersections of race, class, and gender are unending. They are reflected in, for example, infant mortality rates;²⁴ access to health care, food, housing, financial institutions,²⁵ and education;²⁶ hiring practices; wages and labor force participation;²⁷ incarceration rates; and violent encounters with law enforcement.²⁸ The system is deeply unequal, more so than it was in the hopeful years after the civil rights movement.

The Making of Societal Ignorance

Social change has not been linear, and scholars like Jennifer Richeson, Ivuoma Onyeador, Louise Seamster, and Victor Ray have argued that we must rethink our conceptions of racial progress as an undeviating movement forward.²⁹ The impulse to see racism and racial inequality as part of a bygone past, to see the legal gains of the civil rights movement as a final chapter in the story of racism, to see Dr. King’s work as beginning and ending with the civil rights movement, is to ignore the complexity and regenerative character of social processes. When we evade social reality, we do not act in meaningful ways that change the unequal system. Worse yet, ignoring social reality means we reproduce the unequal system and then are shocked and confused when the system produces “unimaginable” violence. Scholars like Charles W. Mills and Jennifer Mueller describe the cognitive processes that make this thinking possible as an epistemology of ignorance that understands ignorance not in the traditional sense of “innocently unaware” or “unlearned.” Instead, White ignorance is built willfully; it is created to preserve a way of thinking about the world around us and

a way of life. Mills describes how the racial contract of White supremacy is characterized by this inverted epistemology of ignorance, which ironically means “whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made.”³⁰

The Pew Research Foundation’s 2019 survey “Race in America” revealed just how divergent Americans are in their perceptions of social reality, largely along racial lines but also along partisan lines. When asked whether being White helps one’s ability to get ahead, White Democrats were twice as likely as White Republicans and conservative-leaning moderates to say being White helps people get ahead (78 percent compared to 38 percent). More notably, 22 percent of White Republicans (compared to 3 percent of White Democrats) reported feeling that being White *hurts* one’s ability to get ahead. Almost 30 percent of White Republicans (compared to 8 percent of White Democrats) said being Black *helps* one’s ability get ahead.³¹ This segmented perception of reality, that White Americans are the victims of minority “special rights” in the post–civil rights era, has been well-documented in studies of White resentment and White backlash, which helps explain the rise of Trumpism and the actions of emboldened White nationalists who stormed the Capitol on January 6, 2021.

Yet even among those who agreed that being Black hurts one’s ability to succeed, perceptions diverged by race. While 84 percent of Black respondents attributed this to racial discrimination, only 54 percent of White respondents acknowledged racism as a cause. Almost 80 percent of Black respondents said the United States has not gone far enough in granting equal rights to Black Americans, compared to 37 percent of White respondents. Almost 20 percent of White respondents reported the country has gone *too* far in granting equal rights to Black Americans. Furthermore, of respondents reporting that the country had not gone far enough, half of the Black respondents said it was not likely the country would ever achieve racial equality. Of the White respondents who acknowledged that the country still has work to do, 80 percent said it was likely Black Americans will achieve equal rights.

These results demonstrate that Americans know that inequality exists. Popular media ensures a steady stream of representations of single welfare moms with a fleet of fatherless children, snaggle-toothed backwoods yokels, and gun-toting Black men in impoverished neighborhoods. Yet these representations rarely explain how these characters arrived here beyond their individual choices. It is the story of the inequality that matters for how we see it and what we do (or do not do) about it. As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva explains in his theory of color-blind racism, the post–civil rights era moved the explicit racism of the Jim Crow era beneath the surface. No longer was it legally acceptable—at least on paper—to discriminate on the basis of race. More

importantly for everyday people, no longer was it culturally acceptable to express outright hostility and violence toward Black Americans. Instead, racism took on a new form through color-blindness. Under color-blind ideology, to acknowledge racial difference was to perpetuate the “race problem,” as if racism could be out of sight, out of mind. Social reality would be constructed by a White power elite across institutions from the economy to the media,³² making sense of the world through what Joe Feagin describes as a “white racial frame.”³³ Through this frame, Martin Luther King Jr.’s words about a dream of a world where his children would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character would be lifted out of its context and deployed time and time again to counter the ongoing realities of systemic racism.

Nowhere is the making of ignorance more evident than in the American educational system. Even before the contemporary battles over teaching critical race theory in schools, legacies of settler colonialism and slavery were intentionally evaded in curricula. A 2018 report by the Southern Poverty Law Center identified disturbing trends in youth knowledge of American history, specifically the racial past. Only 8 percent of high school seniors could identify slavery as a central cause of the Civil War. Many did not know slavery ended with an amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Less than half understood that slavery was legal in every colony during the American Revolution. Understanding racism as a blip in an otherwise fair system, an inconvenience quelled through the civil rights movement, is part of the construction of this willful ignorance that enables claims of innocence in matters of racial inequality and violence.

The story we tell ourselves as a society about how we arrived at this moment matters deeply. Our collective memories hold power for either justifying or challenging the way we collectively continue to go about the business of maintaining a society. It is the story that racism is a figment of the past that justified the repealed provision of the Voting Rights Act in 2013’s *Shelby County v. Holder* decision. In that ruling, Justice Scalia called the provision protecting minority voting rights a “racial entitlement” standing in the way of the political process. The repealed provision had required jurisdictions with a history of race-based voter discrimination to “preclear” changes to their election rules with the federal government before implementing revisions. The provision had protected Black and Brown voters for decades, ensuring their democratic right to vote. Immediately after the 5–4 ruling, the floodgates opened with a swell of jurisdictions, particularly throughout the South, implementing stringent voting regulations, from strict voter ID laws to eliminating policies proven to expand voting rights, such as same-day registration. A 2018 study by the Brennan Center found that states previously covered by the Voting Rights Act provision purged voters from their rolls and disenfranchised voters at a significantly higher rate than jurisdictions that had not been

covered by the provision.³⁴ In other words, the provision had served as a protective function as it was intended. Racialized disenfranchisement of voters was not a product of the past. The rollback of democracy has been enabled through a revisionist history that willfully evades the reality of racism, that understands the protection of minoritized voters as its own racism against White Americans. The stakes of confronting social reality are not only the strength of our social fabric and the viability of our democracy. The stakes are also our collective survival.

The Challenge of Reckonings

In late May 2020, just months into a global pandemic, waves of multiracial protesters left the safety of their homes and filled the streets to protest for the sanctity of Black lives. George Floyd had been suffocated under the knee of a White police officer in Minneapolis, his murder captured on a teenager's cell phone video. However, unlike so many prior similarly horrific moments, this one had the rapt attention of widespread publics. Though the Black Lives Matter movement had been active for seven years, for many Americans this was the first time the movement's name, message, and urgency had resonated. The phrase "systemic racism" moved to the mainstream, no longer a "radical" theory but for many an explicit reality. Even presidential candidate Joe Biden, who was known to cater to White moderates, posted on his social media, "We are having an important racial reckoning. This is our moment to address systemic racism, because it's clear our country has failed the Black community too many times. Black lives matter. But matter is the minimum."

Perhaps this was the moment when things would truly change. One long-time organizer, Fania Davis, director of the nonprofit Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth, was hopeful, noting, "In all of my 72 years, almost all of which I've been working as an activist, I've never seen anything like this." She said, "We are beginning to disrupt centuries of denial of our collective biography during this time. Whenever you have such an intense crisis, it also presents an opportunity for significant or revolutionary change."³⁵ In June 2020, an incredible 67 percent of Americans supported Black Lives Matter. Many progressives were hopeful through the summer of 2020, as books about racism flew off the shelves. White women's book clubs were discussing Robin D'Angelo's *White Fragility*, school administrators were assigning their teachers Ibram X. Kendi's *How to Be an Anti-Racist*, and in workplaces, there was a significant spike in formal Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs and a sudden demand for hiring in-house DEI coordinators.

But as summer faded to fall, the burgeoning sea change ebbed and the fervor for systemic change seemed like a distant dream. As Hakeem Jefferson and

Victor Ray wrote of the so-called racial reckoning, “For a reckoning to occur, there has to be more than just an acknowledgement of injustice. There has to be action. Reckoning implied a reprieve for the Black Lives Matter activists who had spent the years since Trayvon Martin’s killing protesting police violence. Reckoning implied transforming public safety. Reckoning implied support for policies to intervene in the yawning racial wealth gap, the perpetual employment gap, and the growing life expectancy gap. In short, a reckoning suggested the country was on the cusp of lasting change.”³⁶ Of course, these changes, the acknowledgment of injustice, did not come to pass, just as the major wins of the civil rights era were never true societal reckonings. The significant legal gains of the civil rights movement were never coupled with honest societal reflection, acknowledgment of the deep roots of racism, its embeddedness in American social life, and its continued harms. The politics of appeasement had ensured no admission of systemic harm.

By September 2020, support for Black Lives Matter had decreased to 55 percent. More tellingly, *opposition* to the movement for racial justice had increased to 44 percent. Among Republicans, support for Black Lives Matter was even lower than it was before George Floyd’s killing. The backlash was brewing, just as it had during the civil rights movement. Though the collective memory of the civil rights movement is characterized by unity, love, and a wide commitment to racial progress by morally apprehensive publics, there was powerful opposition to civil rights in its heyday. In 1963, 60 percent of White people had an unfavorable view of the March on Washington. In 1965, 68 percent thought civil rights were being implemented too quickly, and 58 percent believed that Black activists’ strategies hurt their own cause. By 1968, the year he was assassinated, 75 percent of White people disapproved of Dr. King, up 25 percent from 1963. As the civil rights movement gained momentum, the White backlash was swift and violent. Jefferson and Ray have noted that racial backlash is its own racial reckoning.

Through *The Struggle for the People’s King*, we will see how these dynamics take shape. In each chapter we will analyze rival social movements’ strategic uses and misuses of the memory of the civil rights movement. In these battles to shape the direction of the societal future, the long trajectories of these reckonings and counterreckonings become apparent. Only by examining the deep and gnarled branches of these reckonings and the way they are mired in collective memory can we understand how we arrived at this moment and where we might go next.

These larger processes help us understand that the misuses of the past are not mere rhetorical blunders. This book shows that as invocations of the collective memory of the civil rights movement evolved into a political strategy, collective memory would be invoked to discredit movements’ calls for social

justice time and again. For example, when Black Lives Matter activists filled the streets to protest police violence, Republican presidential contender Mike Huckabee took to the twenty-four-hour news cycle to argue that Dr. King would disagree with their message and tactics. He said, “When I hear people scream, ‘Black lives matter,’ I think, ‘Of course they do.’ But all lives matter. It’s not that any life matters more than another. That’s the whole message that Dr. King tried to present, and I think he’d be appalled by the notion that we’re elevating some lives above others.”³⁷

At the same time, grassroots activists have actively worked to counter the misappropriations of the civil rights movement, drawing on historical evidence and calling on its gatekeepers to correct the record, from Dr. King’s daughter Bernice King to congressman and civil rights leader John Lewis. After Huckabee’s invocation of King, sixty-six former civil rights movement activists from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) issued a powerful statement in support of Black Lives Matter to emphasize the movement’s continuation of the long struggle for Black freedom: “Fortunately, today, as in the past, the protesters who have taken to the streets against police violence will not be intimidated by slander or mischaracterization as ‘racist’ or ‘terrorist sympathizers’ born of the fear, ignorance and malice of their would-be critics. . . . We, the still-active radicals who were SNCC, salute today’s Movement for Black Lives for taking hold of the torch to continue to light this flame of truth for a knowingly forgetful world.”³⁸

These oppositional forces, competing ideas of America’s pasts and imagined futures, did not form in the civil rights era. Historians have shown that ideas about what the United States aspires to be, who “counts” as American, and whose voices ought to be heard have been contested since the founding. Moreover, as a country built on the institution of slavery and enduring through a system of racial capitalism, the meanings of race are embedded in the American project. As Dr. King himself said, “Our nation was born in genocide when it embraced the doctrine that the original American, the Indian, was an inferior race. Even before there were large numbers of Negroes on our shores, the scar of racial hatred had already disfigured colonial society.”³⁹ While this book begins its analysis in the 1980s, acknowledging this longer history is critical for making sense of the deeper roots, and stakes, of the questions I explore here. The misuses of Dr. King and of the civil rights movement are part of a larger process. Examining the misuses of the racial past reveals how groups continually manipulate memory to challenge, or preserve, systems of power.

To take on these lofty questions, *The Struggle for the People’s King* investigates the political career of the collective memory of the civil rights movement as it becomes bound into a symbolic cultural structure and is taken up, remade, and deployed by a range of political actors. These analyses help us

make sense of our current social crises, the revisionist memories that divide us, and the seemingly eradicable roots of White supremacy. The chapters that follow will show how distortions of collective memory obscure the roots of our present-day systems of inequality, reproducing the very systems of inequality that many activists seek to dismantle.⁴⁰

Key Concepts

Throughout this book, a number of key theoretical concepts undergird my larger arguments. First, I frequently refer to contentious politics, described by Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow as the conflictual processes generated by mobilizing groups that extend beyond formal social movements and trained activists. Contentious politics encapsulates the mechanisms that connect different actors—whether formal organizers or everyday people—engaged in different forms of resistance and conflict, contending with other groups, institutions, and culture.⁴¹

I also frequently refer to the concept of culture—as a set of meanings that constitute everything from identity to discursive frames, as a context, and as a set of symbolic resources. I draw on a broad definition of culture that understands the processes of meaning-making as mechanisms of power. As Stuart Hall explains, culture is a space of interpretative struggle where the hegemonic, or dominant, webs of meaning that shape society are created through ideologies, “the mental frameworks—the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the representation—which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works.”⁴² We are socialized into these cultural frameworks for making sense of the world around us through institutions from family to church, schools to media. Yet on a more basic level, culture is made and transmitted through discourse, where power shapes accepted forms of knowledge, of identifying and naming and interpreting the world around us, schemas that we come to see as truth.⁴³ Through this lens, I conceptualize the cultural meanings assigned to the past through a second key concept: collective memory.

What does it mean to examine the civil rights movement as a “collective memory” as opposed to a historical event or even an individual memory? Put simply, collective memory is a socially constructed story about the past that emerges through a set of political and cultural practices. Collective memories tell groups “who we are,”⁴⁴ so American collective memories help constitute a collective national identity, shaping the symbolic boundaries between an imagined “us” as Americans and an imagined “them” as everyone else.⁴⁵ As Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár describe, these symbolic boundaries are

the conceptual distinctions that create classification systems, assigning meaning and value to different entities, whether objects or groups, places or times.⁴⁶ Though they are “only” conceptual, symbolic boundaries are consequential for social life, patterning the unequal distribution of power, resources, and status.

Symbolic boundaries are continually contested and reshaped. This means that collective memories are never a fixed thing, but some have more rigid boundaries than others, depending on how they are institutionalized and what role they play in the national story of itself. The more central a collective memory for national identity, the more power it holds in shaping the trajectory of the future. As a result, these collective memories become prized cultural resources that are all the more vulnerable to misappropriation. Collective memories are dynamic as different groups work to remake them for present-day purposes. At times, social change that shifts culture and how we think about social issues can also alter how we make sense of long-taken-for-granted collective memories. For example, the contemporary movements to remove Confederate statues emerged out of a larger cultural shift in understanding the continued commemoration of White supremacists as a social problem, as a symbolic means of maintaining White dominance through a sanitized memory of the past.⁴⁷ Sometimes marginalized groups mobilize specifically around forgotten, invisibilized, partial, or misrepresented memories, understanding the reclaiming of the past as a critical step in repairing deep harms that shape their present.⁴⁸ However, right-wing backlash to social progress can also set in motion memory-work centered on historical revisionism, alt-facts and histories used in the service of authoritarianism, social control, and violence that threaten democracy.⁴⁹ Such was the alt-history propagated by more than a dozen White extremist groups including the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, and Three Percenters that shaped the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the Capitol.

The collective memories that result from these political efforts are powerful cultural structures that help legitimize “how things are,” explaining why particular groups may have greater power or stature in society and why things ought to stay that way. It follows, then, that groups will use collective memories as political tools, legitimizing their political claims by connecting them to collective memory. However, mobilizing groups express different conceptions of “who we are” to make claims about “who we ought to be,” using collective memory in competing ways to garner public support. Some of these uses of memory are effective; they resonate among multiple publics, generate broad-based coalitions, and drive mass political support—as we will see when Dr. King’s wife and civil rights activist in her own right, Coretta Scott King, linked the memory of the civil rights movement to the LGBTQ movement

to fight for gay rights. Other uses of memory are widely denounced and discredited—as when the animal rights group PETA compared animal slaughter to the lynching of African Americans to call for civil rights for animals. The uses of collective memory are bound up in a larger system of power that shapes not only the collective memory but also the groups who seek to use it.

The Study

This book uses a wide range of data and mixed methods to examine the strategic uses of the collective memory of the civil rights movement. Unlike historiographical works, this book does not delve into the extensive political, economic, and social contexts of each case study. I briefly summarize each movement's historical trajectory to situate the cases, but the particularities of the past are not the focus of this book. Instead, my goal is to take a series of past events and analyze them for generalizable patterns, for the social processes and the meanings that emerge and tell us something about how movements use memory and why it matters. To this end, to analyze the evolving uses of collective memory from 1980 to 2020 I use methods of historical sociology that examine events in a processual manner to develop explanations that transcend the particularities of each historical moment.⁵⁰ This method is particularly useful for examining social change and transformation.

For the historical analysis in chapter 2, I draw on a unique data set of mobilizations using the memory of the civil rights movement in the post-civil rights era (1980–2020). This data set was developed by drawing on archival data from extensive primary and secondary sources to analyze trajectories of mobilization, including thousands of newspaper articles, organizational web pages and reports, blog posts, film and television transcripts, and press releases. I describe this data and methodology in depth in the methodological appendix. Having drawn out the eagle-eye view of the evolving branches of memory, the next three chapters analyze how these branches take shape on the ground. I examine case studies of three paired social movements (LGBTQ and family values; immigrant rights and nativist; Muslim rights and anti-Muslim), which were selected to represent a range of social positions (table I.1).

In pairing rival movements, I also included cases to represent other progressive and conservative movements, as well as old and new movements. From these dimensions of difference, I selected cases on one shared dimension:⁵¹ movement strategy, specifically the strategic invocation of the collective memory of the civil rights movement. By holding the strategy constant but varying the social locations of the groups, I isolated the extent to which the messenger of collective memory mattered. Did the strategic uses of memory play out

TABLE I.1. Paired social movements comparisons

	Master Identity Group	Political Ideology	Strategic Use of Collective Memory of Civil Rights Movement
LGBTQ Movement	Sexual Orientation	Progressive	Yes
Family Values Movement	Religious	Conservative	Yes
Immigrant Rights Movement	Ethnoracial/ Nativity Status	Progressive	Yes
Nativist Movement	Race/Nationality	Conservative	Yes
Muslim Rights Movement	Ethnoracial-religious	Progressive	Yes
Islamophobia Movement	Religious/Nationality	Conservative	Yes

in comparable ways, no matter the group claiming the memory? Or were there varied dynamics and consequences for different groups that deployed the same memory? Could these dynamics be patterned, and could they tell us something about how power operates through culture? With the larger data set, I identified representative cases of major events from each of these six movements, from which I developed events databases to draw out the order of actions and counteractions. Using narrative analysis that centralizes meaning, sequence, and contingency, I examined how these interactions between movements shaped uses of memory on the ground and the patterns these dynamics unearthed.⁵²

While chapters 3 and 4 use a comparative method to examine two events across two political contexts, chapter 5 takes a more holistic, long view from 1980 to 2020 through qualitative analysis of the retrospectives of interviews and focus groups with Muslim community members,⁵³ triangulated against a historical analysis of major events. Together, these data present detailed stories documenting the evolving interactions between activists, their rivals, and key stakeholders as they strategize to remake the past to attain their political goals in the present.

One of the most difficult negotiations of this book was accepting that I could not include every pivotal historical event, every contextual detail, and all the innovative and at times appalling invocations of civil rights memory. You may find yourself asking, “What about . . . ?” Despite the sheer breadth of

data I collected and analyzed and the vast historical accounts I read, I could not include everything. For the patterns that emerged from the analysis, I aimed to include the most descriptive examples, but the work presented here is a conservative presentation of a much more significant phenomenon. Moreover, by bringing together a wide range of vast theoretical traditions, I found myself lamenting that I could not even scratch the surface on the breadth of interdisciplinary studies that guide this sociological study, from ethnic studies to Black studies and cultural studies. Though I could not include them all, I am indebted to the long traditions of critical thought that shape my own intellectual trajectory and that of this book.

Finally, despite its title, this is not a book *about* Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., nor is it a book about the history of the civil rights movement, although they both lend insight into various historical events picked up by activists. Work by scholars like Carol Anderson, Kenneth Andrews, Keisha Blain, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, Elizabeth Hinton, Martha Jones, Aldon Morris, Barbara Ransby, and Belinda Robnett, among many others, offers meticulous historical research and a valuable corrective to sanitized histories of the Black freedom struggle. Particularly complementary to this book is *A More Beautiful and Terrible History* by Jeanne Theoharis, who deftly debunks the “Whitewashed” historical myths of the civil rights movement. Her book in many ways offers a valuable rationale for *The Struggle for the People’s King* by showing that history has been remade in consequential ways. Yet rather than examining the past itself, this book focuses on how and why contemporary groups use interpretations of the racial past as a political tool and why it matters for our societal future.

Overview of the Book

This book has three goals: (1) to explore the trajectories of the collective memory of the civil rights movement as a political strategy among all sorts of groups over time; (2) to compare how groups with a range of collective identities across the political spectrum reshape the memory of the civil rights movement to make and contest political claims; and (3) to analyze the multilevel consequences of these (mis)uses of memory for political culture and the societal future. Across these chapters, I draw from theories of social movements, race and ethnicity, cultural sociology, collective memory studies, migration studies, the sociology of knowledge, and social psychology to build a critical theory of the strategic uses of collective memory in contentious politics. A critical perspective helps us understand three interconnected ways in which memory matters in contentious politics: the uses of memory unfold relationally and negotiate multiple and competing temporalities; they are perceptual; and these dynamics are embedded in and are themselves mechanisms of power.

In chapter 1, I examine how the collective memory of the civil rights movement was institutionalized in American memory through the Martin Luther King Jr. national holiday. I show that the congressional and public debates over the King holiday built the contentious groundwork for oppositional interpretations of the memory of the civil rights movement through ideological fractures. In one fracture signed into law by President Reagan, a dominant branch of memory remembered that King's dream of racial progress had been achieved, at a cost to White Americans, but the path forward required a commitment to neoliberalism and color-blind individualism. From a grassroots fracture, a branch of memory remembered a radical King murdered for his resistance to systemic racism, leaving a dream of racial justice unrealized. These intertwined branches of memory provided the foundations on which rival groups would draw, building on and expanding what would become the gnarled branches of collective memory.

To explore how these gnarled branches take shape and grow over time, chapter 2 takes an eagle-eye view of the strategic uses of the civil rights movement between 1980 and 2020. I explain how a critical theory of memory in contentious politics helps us understand how temporalities matter for movements and how they shape the pathways of collective action. Taking four decades of data on the strategic uses of civil rights memory, I describe the branches of memory that grew from the initial fractures of the King holiday. From a conservative branch of color-blind individualism grew the boughs of White victimhood, White nationalism, and eventually White rage. From the color-blind idealism of multicultural unity grew a commitment to minority rights and immigrant inclusion, challenged by the growing branches of White victimhood. A resurgent preservation of King's radical legacy brought anti-imperialist movements committed to global solidarities and transformational politics. By 2016, the gnarled branches of collective memory split into oppositional and deeply polarized social realities.

The next three chapters are close case studies that examine just how these dynamics take shape on the ground. By examining these battles between rival movements, we see the systems of power that enable and constrain how groups can use collective memory through moral, national, and racial boundaries. These chapters show how groups grapple with these symbolic boundaries and remake them, as well as the multilevel consequences of their memory work, cultural impacts that bear out at the individual, group, and societal levels. Chapter 3 examines the moral boundaries that emerge through mobilizations of collective memory, centering on battles between the LGBTQ rights movement and the family values movement. This chapter traces how the uses of memory evolved in battles over an anti-discrimination ordinance and an anti-gay amendment between the George W. Bush and Obama eras.

In these contests, the cultural attribution of morality became central to how groups claimed collective memory for themselves and discredited their opposition. Conservative groups' uses of Dr. King's legacy to claim moral authority became powerful tools for discrediting LGBTQ groups' claims to civil rights. Meanwhile, LGBTQ groups grappled with reclaiming the memory of civil rights while contending with internal recognitions of racism and classism.

Chapter 4 asks how these dynamics unfold when the mobilizing group is perceived as lying beyond the limits of American identity and examines the national boundaries of memory. This chapter analyzes how the dilemmas of cultural ownership—the widely held perception of who “owns” collective memory—shape a movement's claims to societal inclusion by focusing on the immigrant rights and nativist movements. The chapter also compares cases across two political contexts—the Bush and Obama presidencies—to illustrate an evolution of collective memory. By showing how the national boundaries of memory are activated in these battles, this chapter offers insight into collective memory as an unequally distributed cultural resource. As immigrant groups mobilize memory to make claims to American identity, latent perceptions of cultural ownership—to whom a memory belongs and is readily available—become the very grounds on which rival nativist movements seek to legitimize their exclusion. As immigrant activists witnessed the rise of emboldened nativism during the Obama presidency, they reimagined the boundaries of national inclusion and evolved their strategies to celebrate their multiracial and multicultural differences rather than to mute them.

Both chapters 3 and 4 reveal the moral and national boundaries of memory and their consequences. But why do groups use memory at some times but not others, in some ways but not others? Chapter 5 takes on an unusual puzzle. Although most minority rights movements deploy the memory of the civil rights movement to demonstrate that they are analogous to Black Americans and make claims to civil rights, the immigrant Muslim rights movement delayed their use of civil rights memory for three decades. What led Muslim activists to mobilize the memory of civil rights? This chapter examines the racial boundaries of collective memory and the trade-offs of claiming a racialized stake in American identity. In the wake of post-9/11 backlash, Muslim immigrants increasingly understood the impermeable boundaries around White American identity and created new ways “in” to American identity. However, in doing so, they had to confront the anti-Blackness within their immigrant communities while also battling a powerful anti-Muslim movement that framed them as dangerous threats to homeland security. Through the racial boundaries of memory, this chapter shows that “who we are” shifts drastically from one branch of memory to another: Muslim activists contended

with failed memory invocations as color-blind, White Americans and shifted instead to memory deployments as racialized minorities “like” Black Americans. The result is innovated branches of memory that recognize Dr. King’s “inescapable network of mutuality” between groups.

These chapters show how the moral, national, and racial boundaries of culture play out through different movements’ battles for their imagined America. They also show the consequences they hold for individual perceptions of identity, group conceptions of collective identity, and societal understandings of collective memory and social reality. But is society doomed to repeat these reckonings and counterreckonings ad nauseam in an endless loop? Is this deep contention all there is? In chapter 6, I show what happens when groups work to overcome a fractured past by examining two groups that are less rivals than parallel and intersecting forces in a larger quest for women’s rights: Black and White feminists who mobilized in the wake of Black Lives Matter and Me Too. I show how, with the leadership of Black women, White feminists increasingly understood that shared power and an intersectional future required restoration of the past—namely, recognizing the pivotal role of Black women in the history of civil rights for all.

In the conclusion, I examine the consequences of these strategic uses of the racial past, showing how they have generated divergent social realities, for example, in the contemporary moral panic over critical race theory and the conservative movement to limit childhood education in America’s history of slavery and settler colonialism. In summarizing the previous chapters, I demonstrate that movements from the far right have grown branches of civil rights memory that weaponize memory against itself, targeting and discrediting movements for racial and social justice. Through this new landscape, conservatives can argue that minoritized groups receive special treatment and that White Christian conservatives are the new oppressed minorities under multicultural democracy. These misuses of memory have wider consequences because they obscure public understandings of racial inequality and its roots through their evasion, their denial, of the past. This willful historical amnesia threatens and erodes American democracy. Still, glimmers of hope remain. I end by illuminating a burgeoning movement of visionaries arising from the gnarled branches of memory, reimagining societal futures, and embarking on a new emancipatory politics that could very well save us all if we would let it.

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