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Who's Worth Remembering?:

American Modes of Memorialization and the Commemoration of the Civil Rights Movement

In American cities across the country, memorials and monuments are parts of the scenery; in the nation's capital alone there are more than 160 memorials to everything from the first president of the nation to the Japanese Americans interned during World War II.[1] As of August 2011, almost 50 years after the famous 1963 March on Washington, a memorial to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. became part of the National Mall landscape. In his dedication speech, President Barack Obama pointed to the significance of this memorial in making manifest the importance of the civil rights movement to American society,

> For this day, we celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s return to the National Mall. In this place, he will stand for all time, among monuments to those who fathered this nation and those who defended it […] And Dr. King would be the first to remind us that this memorial is not for him alone. The movement of which he was a part depended on an entire generation of leaders[2].

Judging from the solemn attitude of more the than 10,000 participants at the ceremony, primarily African Americans[3], there is no questioning the importance of the memorial and its location on the National Mall. But what is the cause of America's "memorial mania[4]"? And how has this trend influenced the way in which the civil rights struggles of the 1960s are represented to the public today?

Memorials really only took hold in the American landscape after the Civil War (1861-1865). According to Erika Doss, it was the post Civil War desire to create coherence and reestablish a sense of a national identity that paved the way for memorial culture. The

[1] Caitlin A. Johnson, *Too Many Memorials In D.C.?* Feb 11, 2009.
[2] Remarks by the President at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Dedication, Oct. 16, 2011.
[3] Anticipated numbers as well as my own observations at the dedication ceremony Oct. 16, 2011 in Washington D.C.
[4] Erika Doss. *Memorial Mania – Public Feeling in America*, 2010. Here "memorial mania" is defined as "an obsession with issues of memory and history and an urgent desire to express and claim those issues in visibly public contexts." (p. 2)

memorials erected in this period, usually statues of military personnel or public office holders, served to evoke feelings of loyalty, masculinity, militarism and patriotism, "that helped reimagine what Benedict Anderson terms "the affective bonds of nationalism." (Doss, 2010, p. 20) In effect, memorials symbolized an official attempt to create consensus and thereby reaffirm a national identity after the devastating effects of the Civil War, "these commemorative cultures aimed at evoking intimate, emotional, and authentic ties between different American publics and the United States, encouraging an affective allegiance to the nation that would be as strong and as sacred as that extended to family, region, religion and/or ethnic and racial group." (Doss, 2010, p. 26)

Historian John R. Gillis refers to the beginning of a memorial culture in the United States as the 'national period', noting that during this time memorials were erected for, not of, the people, to inspire commitment to national ideals. This line of thought is similar to that of French historian Pierre Nora, who defines the symbolism of lieux de memoire, 'memory places' such as memorials, as either *dominant* or *dominated*,

> The first, spectacular and triumphant, imposing and, generally imposed – either by a national authority or by an established interest, but always from above – characteristically have the coldness and solemnity of official ceremonies. One attends them rather than visits them. The second are places of refuge, sanctuaries of spontaneous devotion and silent pilgrimage, where one finds the living heart of memory. (Nora, 1989 p. 23)

Using Nora's definition, these early monuments often featuring military commanders on high pedestals or horses, would be categorized as dominant; they imposed a set of ideals on the communities. Several of the presidential memorials in Washington D.C. are built in this style, featuring the presidents as large imposing figures to be admired as they tower over the populace on pedestals or horses, including the statues of Garfield (1887), Lincoln (1920), Grant (1922) and Jefferson (1947).

However, along with all the other societal changes brought about by the social movements of the 1960s, memorial culture in America changed. Using the term social

movements, I am referring not only to the very essential civil rights movement, but also to other ethnic and religious minorities, homosexuals, women and counter-culture groups demanding acceptance and tolerance for their way of life. While these individual groups claimed their place in contemporary society during the 1960s, it became evident in the following decades that their newfound status as equal citizens would mean a change to the memorial landscape as well.

The social movement's effect on memorials was largely due to their focus on diversity and pluralism rather than homogeneity, which created an antipathy for the monolithic character of previous memorials, especially because "the traditional monument's invocation of a "unitary" mass may seem oppressive and exclusionary." (Doss, 2010, p. 39) These newly empowered groups wanted memorials that represented their collective history, their struggles and victories, to stand on equal terms with those celebrating narratives of 'official' American history. This relates to the arguments of Robert Bellah et al. who describe how all 'communities of memory', for example national, religious or ethnic communities, rely on narratives of the past to set ideals for the future, "in order not to forget [the] past, a community is involved in retelling its history, its constitutive narrative[…][5]" The groups involved in new social movements had, of course, had a constitutive narrative prior to the 1960s, however, with their new position in American society there was a natural sense of entitlement to public, official representation of this narrative in the form of memorials. In providing reasons for the 'current upsurge of memory' during the past 30 years, Nora also refers to this call for representation, relating it to the domestic decolonization of minority groups and the subsequent desire to publicly express and have recognized their group identity:

> Domestic decolonization, within traditional western societies, of sexual, social, religious and provincial minorities now being integrated with the mainstream and for whom reaffirming their "memory" – in actual fact their history – is a way of having their "particularism" recognized by a community that had previously refused tem that right, while at the same time cultivating their difference and their

[5] Robert Bellah, Richard, Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, 1985. Published in Jeffrey Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Daniel Levy (Eds.), *The Collective Memory Reader*, 2011: pp. 229-230.

attachment to an identity threatened with disintegration[6].

In addition to the arguments put forth by Doss, Bellah and others regarding the post-1960s impetus for equal representation among minorities, there is another dimension to be considered in the development of memorial culture during the past 50 years. Both Gillis and Nora refer to the effects of the rapid developments in technology, globalization as well as the 'acceleration of history'. Nora uses this term when discussing how expectations have changed, especially over the past 30 years. He describes how earlier generations had clear expectations that the past "[…] could be envisaged as a form of restoration of the past, a form of progress or a form of revolution." (Nora, 2002) However, with the many societal changes throughout the past century, this is no longer the case. Current generations cannot necessarily use lessons from the past, nor is it yet known what future generations will benefit from remembering. This has created a sense of uncertainty and 'mania' to preserve or memorialize anything that just might be of use in the future.

As the definition of who was worth remembering and entitled to representation in America's memorial landscape changed, new approaches to memorial designs emerged. Memorials increasingly took on a more subjective character and were no longer defined as statues on pedestals; examples of new, alternative designs include the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (1982), the Civil Rights Memorial (1989) and the Korean War Veterans Memorial (1995), which all refer to groups and individuals touched by historic events. In addition to the style of the memorials mentioned above, which were all carved in marble as earlier memorials, it also became commonplace to memorialize using other types of art, such as the sewing together of thousands of little quilts, all representing an individual who had died from AIDS, for the AIDS Memorial Quilt (begun in 1987). Instead of imposing values and ideals on visitors, all these memorials are meant to create an interactive experience inspiring reflection and evoking emotional responses, becoming the *dominated* lieux de memoire discussed by Nora.

[6] Pierre Nora. *Reasons for the Current Upsurge in Memory*, 2002 in Olick, pp 437 - 441.

So how has the civil rights movement been memorialized in contemporary society? I will examine the Civil Rights Memorial (1989) in Montgomery, AL and the newly dedicated Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial (2011) in Washington D.C. The Civil Rights Memorial (CRM) in Montgomery was commissioned by the Southern Poverty Law Center[7], and designed by Maya Lin, who was inspired by a passage in Martin Luther King Jr.'s " I Have a Dream" speech: "No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.[8]" The memorial consists of two elements; one a black granite wall featuring this quotation, and the other a black granite table. The table is inscribed with the names of some of the martyrs of the civil rights movement as well as key events in the struggle for black equality. The inscriptions on the table, covering the years from the ground-breaking *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (1954) to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. (1968), as well as the granite wall inscribed with King's statement, are symbolically flowing with water. This feature allows for visitors to touch and to 'disturb' the surface of the memorial, creating the sense of connection to and interaction with history characteristic of post-1960s memorials.

Those commemorated on the table are "[…] victims who fit at least one of three criteria: they were murdered because they were active in the movement; they were killed as acts of terror aimed at intimidating blacks and civil rights activists; or, their deaths […] helped galvanize the movement by demonstrating the brutality faced by African Americans in the South.[9]" Victims such as Emmett Till, a 14-year-old boy from Chicago, who was killed in Mississippi in 1955. Moreover, in 2005, the Civil Rights Memorial Center was added to further memorialize the struggles of the civil rights era and inspire a continual fight for this cause. Included herein is a digital "Wall of Tolerance" featuring the names of more than half a million people, who have pledged to fight discrimination. While the memorial itself is intended to make visitors reflect on the past, the Wall of Tolerance is a tool for the future, both for the

[7] "The Southern Poverty Law Center is a nonprofit civil rights organization dedicated to fighting hate and bigotry, and to seeking justice for the most vulnerable members of society." Southern Poverty Law Center website, 'who we are'.
[8] Martin Luther King Jr. *I Have a Dream* speech, http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2007/apr/28/greatspeeches
[9] Southern Poverty Law Center website, 'history of the Civil Rights Memorial'.

African American "community of memory" and the nation in general,

> The communities of memory that tie us to the past also turn us toward *the future as communities of hope*. They carry a context of meaning that can allow us to connect our aspirations for ourselves and those closest to us with the aspirations of a larger whole andsee our own efforts as being, in part, *contributions to a common good*. (Bellah et al., 1985 p. 229)

Thus in its effort to commemorate events and people essential to the civil rights movement, as well as focusing on the need for a continued struggle to end inequality, the African American "community of memory" establishes its constitutive narrative on a public stage for the whole nation to observe and reflect.

While the CRM is placed on the Southern Poverty Law Center's[10] privately owned grounds, the Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial (MLKM) has joined the presidential memorials on the National Mall in Washington D.C. The memorial's location in the company of some of the most influential leaders of the nation clearly underlines King's important role in representing and leading the African American community to national recognition. In their mission statement, the Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial Foundation emphasizes DR. King's role in establishing the focus on diversity and minorities' right to representation in American society:

> Dr. King championed a movement that draws fully from the deep well of America's potential for freedom, opportunity, and justice. His *vision of America* is captured in his message of hope and possibility for a future anchored in dignity, sensitivity, and mutual respect; a message that challenges each of us to recognize that America's true strength lies in its diversity of talents[11].

[10] "The Southern Poverty Law Center is a nonprofit civil rights organization dedicated to fighting hate and bigotry, and to seeking justice for the most vulnerable members of society." Southern Poverty Law Center website, 'who we are'.

[11] Martin Luther King National Memorial Foundation website, 'mission and vision'.

In many ways the memorial's design contributes to establishing the importance not only of King himself, but of the general message of justice and equality carried forward by the civil rights movement. While King is carved into a large stone wedge, a rather 'traditional' way of representing an individual, the rest of the memorial takes a more modern approach. The Inscription Wall, a granite wall featuring fourteen of King's most memorable quotations, is labeled "the element of the memorial which truly captures Dr. King's legacy,[12]" and invites visitors to take a more reflective and contemplative approach to the memorial. The quotations on the memorial, for example a 1955 use of "until justice runs down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream,[13]" serve as references to the past as well as guidelines for the future. In his speech at the dedication ceremony, civil rights activist Reverend Al Sharpton made it very clear that the memorial should not only be seen as a celebration of Dr. King, but as a national commitment to keep fighting for the causes championed by King and other civil rights activists in the future,

> We are here today to dedicate this memorial. But let us not be confused, this is not a monument of those times passed, this is not a memorial to someone who has passed in the history, and that is dead. This is a marker for the fight for justice today and a projection for the fight for justice in the future, because we will not stop until we get the equal justice Dr. King fought for[14].

Moreover it became clear at the dedication ceremony that the presence of the memorial should also serve as a testament to the many others, who struggled for their rights in the 1960s. In his dedication speech, President Obama referred to all those people, who took part in the civil rights struggle, "all those men and women who through countless acts of quiet heroism helped bring about changes few thought were even possible.[15]" The MLKM thus stands in the middle of the country's capital as a symbol of the African American "community of memory", making it impossible for the nation as a whole to forget the transformational effects of the civil rights movement on American society.

[12] Martin Luther King National Memorial Foundation website, 'design elements'.
[13] The sentence is a biblical allusion to Amos 5:24.
[14] Transcript taken from video of speech on Washington Post website Oct. 31, 2011: http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/specialreports/MLKmemorial
[15] Remarks by the President at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Dedication, Oct. 16, 2011.

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Memorials have an essential role in American life; in the early days of the republic statues served to communicate the need for loyalty to the union, emphasizing patriotism, militarism and masculinity. However, as America became a country characterized by ethnic, religious and geographic diversity, the nature and meaning of memorials changed, signifying the beginning of “memorial mania”. In post-1960s America, the many memorials now established represent this diversity, not in an effort to divide the country, but rather to emphasize a ‘self-evident truth’ established by the founders of the nation that if “all men are created equal”, they are entitled to equal representation in the national landscape.

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