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History as Community-Based Research and the Pedagogy of Discovery: Teaching Racial Inequality, Documenting Local History, and Building Links Between Students and Communities in Mississippi and Tennessee

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**HISTORY AS COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH AND THE PEDAGOGY
OF DISCOVERY: TEACHING RACIAL INEQUALITY, DOCUMENTING
LOCAL HISTORY, AND BUILDING LINKS BETWEEN STUDENTS AND
COMMUNITIES IN MISSISSIPPI AND TENNESSEE***

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ABSTRACT

In this article we describe the process of implementing a community-based research project that linked student learning with documenting elements of local histories surrounding the civil rights movement in Mississippi and Tennessee. We show that developing a dialogue among community members, ourselves, and our students worked to democratize the research project, produce strong support among the community members, and contribute to an improved understanding of racial inequality for our students. We rely on our accounts of the process, student journals, and oral histories compiled during the research. Our findings show that there are considerable opportunities for community-based research around documenting and sharing key memories and that these can be realized even when the priorities between researchers and community members do not align. Our historically-oriented fieldwork, research, and findings serve to link service-learning to community-based research.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we discuss a community-based research project that linked students from Colorado College in Colorado Springs, Colorado, with community members in the Mississippi Delta through a community history focusing on civil rights movement participation and the building of communities in Mississippi and Tennessee. Our goal was to establish a rich dialogue between teaching race at a

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HISTORY AS COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH

33

highly-selective liberal arts college and conducting community-based research. This essay focuses on how historical and sociological research that allows and encourages local community members to articulate alternative historical narratives and practices helps generate a mutually beneficial dialogue among community members, students, and researchers. More specifically, we started our project with more “traditional” goals of service learning in mind, but we learned quickly that the construction, retelling, and preservation of local stories and memories were of crucial importance to community members and made strong contributions to service learning via community-based research.

In this paper, we first turn to a discussion of the challenges of teaching race at a highly-selective, largely white, and mostly middle and upper class liberal arts college; second, we outline our conceptual framework; third, we discuss the work we did in Mississippi and Tennessee, the learning goals and outcomes for students, and the ways in which our work affected the community we visited. We also summarize the shortfalls of our goals and expectations. Finally, in the conclusion, we suggest ways in which our community-based research project contributes to what we, following Boyte and Kari and others, call democratic local spaces (Boyte and Kari 1996; Fraser 1992; Havard 2001; and Stoecker et al. 2010).

THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING RACE AT A LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE

During the winter break of the 2005-2006 academic year, we took a multiracial group of students to the Mississippi Delta to see lesser-known sights of the civil rights movement; learn about persistent, racialized poverty; and develop an initial understanding of how to utilize basic field research techniques to conduct community-based research. During our week in the Delta together, we mostly drew on contacts made during one author’s dissertation research and stayed with host families while traveling from Memphis to Holmes County, to tour sites, interview residents, learn about local documents and records, and gain a deeper understanding of race and inequality in the United States. Our goal was to simultaneously try to expand our students’ understanding of racial inequality, teach them how to conduct field research, and engage the community in a mutually beneficial research project. Identifying a single spark for the idea that became this effort is difficult, whether it was our community contacts, our desire to engage in a new research project, or the challenges involved with teaching about social inequality. It was a combination of all three. However, given our appointments as visiting faculty in a liberal arts setting, we felt that the most promising manner to secure administrative support for most endeavors was to link them to teaching.

Teaching race and ethnicity, whether at a small liberal arts college or a larger, primarily research-oriented university, is often a difficult undertaking. First, our college was located in an overwhelmingly white area of the country, and while the administration had made significant progress toward making the student body more inclusive, the fact remained that the college demographics did not favor the kind of frank and open discussion about race and ethnicity that both of us value and consider to be an essential part of a liberal arts education. The student body was comprised largely of white, middle and upper class students, with little to no exposure to critical issues of race and ethnicity. Black students seemed isolated, typically stuck to themselves, and were often encouraged to participate in various committees or groups designed to promote “multicultural understanding.” This kind of committee work frequently contributed to further isolation and often distracted these good students from the more important tasks of academic excellence.

The second major issue is the abstract nature of the scholarly material covered in standard race and ethnicity classes. Students learn about race as a social construction, as an integral part, that is, of social structure; they study the history of the racial order in the United States, and are exposed to the evidence of continued residential segregation and isolation by race. Frequently, this material is presented in a comparative and global fashion to ensure that students grasp the socially-constructed character of race by seeing the various forms that racial formation takes around the world. We want our students to learn that race and ethnicity are global social concepts and must be studied as such. We want to make sure our students develop an ability to explain race and ethnicity *socially*, not merely as manifestations of bad individuals and their pernicious behavior. Moving beyond individualistic accounts of racism and racial inequality is generally a challenge for most students, although it is a major component of thinking sociologically. Even excellent scholarly books often fail to bring students to a full, sociological interpretation.

Scholarly works by Omi and Winant (1994), Dittmer (1995), Massey and Denton (1993), Morris (1984), Carson (1981), and Branch (1988) provide useful tools for learning and discussion, to be sure. One problem with learning about race and racial inequality primarily through reading, however, is that it remains largely remote and abstract. While scholarly texts addressing historical problems that are more recent than the civil rights movement will often resonate more strongly with students, they similarly do not adequately advance students away from overly-individualistic understandings. To put it another way, students often favor individual narratives of success, stories of people who “pulled themselves up by their

own boot straps,” and are reluctant to admit that these experiences might not be as generalizable as they think they are (Bates 1997; Brouillette 1985; Holtz-Eakin, Rosen, and Weathers 2000; Hundley 2008). The books that we typically assign are challenging and cover territories, geographical as well as intellectual spaces, that are unfamiliar to students and more importantly often contradict the benevolent, often patronizing, and deeply meritocratic attitudes that many students harbor. Students dutifully complete the reading, but struggle to apply the lessons and routinely slip back into the comfortably inaccurate world of meritocracy and individual attainment. Like us, they want to believe that aspirations and effort explain the differences in social status. However, they struggle to recognize that wanting it does not make it so.

This raises a third issue. Given the strong ideological orientation toward individualistic and meritocratic explanations of success and failure that students often bring to the college classroom, constructing assignments that facilitate preparation for advanced study and writing remains a difficult undertaking. Students can summarize the material, but have a much more difficult time comparing and contrasting different sociological approaches, and they frequently fail at the task of bringing empirical material to bear on the theories and concepts discussed in seminars. The result is that students frequently embark on the task of writing senior theses on racial and ethnic issues without having ever learned how to meaningfully integrate theoretical concepts with empirical evidence. Guided fieldwork is a strong tool, we argue, for facilitating this learning process among students.

In sum, the experiences of teaching racial inequality identified three problematic aspects: frank and open discussions about race, development of a *social* understanding of race, and development of the skills necessary to more thoroughly integrate theory with evidence. These specific shortcomings or problems then became the principal goals of our community-based research project. We want to suggest that one way to address the problematic aspects of teaching race and ethnicity in the kind of socioeconomic environment we described above is to provide a pedagogy of discovery. Through a pedagogy of discovery, the difficult tasks of teaching race become learning and research goals toward which students and faculty can strive. By this, we mean a process where students, guided by their instructors, learn through a combination of experience, reading, discussion, and writing. Furthermore, and toward this end, we initiated this effort with an eye toward facilitating this learning by connecting students with local community actors. We also, however, wanted to achieve something meaningful for our own

research, as well as for the members of the community. Like other community-based research projects, we struggled to synchronize our interests with those of the community.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: ALIGNING RESEARCHER AND COMMUNITY NEEDS

Our work with the community had several goals and, unsurprisingly, these goals shifted and developed throughout the project. On the one hand, we wanted to capture some stories we knew were relatively unknown yet significant to the Mississippi civil rights movement. On the other hand, we anticipated that this would not be sufficiently interesting to the community members themselves. We assumed that the community would need additional research activities directed toward their more immediate economic needs.

Put differently, we anticipated a tension between the immediate needs of the community and our needs as scholars and academics. The community was supportive of our historical research and service learning project but also made us aware that they prioritized their needs over the goals of our project. Still, a difference in priorities did not mean that the community members felt that our work was of no value to them. Quite the contrary, we received an enthusiastic response from all of the community contacts involved in the project. In fact, this nonalignment of our priorities with those of our research partners was a crucial component of our work. As we imagined approaching our community contacts about this project, we became simultaneously excited about the research and concerned that it was not significant enough to warrant much of their time and energy. In thinking about persistently poor rural communities, we knew there were important histories to tell and document, but we thought community members would redirect our interests to issues of poverty and social inequality.

In preparation, then, we identified several possible contributions that we could probably make and were prepared to discuss those, as well as community-generated ideas, as we established and maintained our dialogue around the project. For example, we anticipated collaborating toward a grant-writing initiative emphasizing historical preservation and the possibility of a memorial commemorating the activities of early civil rights leaders. These concrete goals did not develop. While general support for such efforts existed, the lack of a readily available funding source often diminished our collective interest. Put differently, we imagined our research as situated along two continua.

FIGURE 1. ANTICIPATED COMMUNITY PRIORITIZATION AND INTEREST LEVEL TOWARD DIFFERENT CONCEPTUAL AND HISTORICAL ORIENTATIONS OF RESEARCH PROJECTS.

Conceptual Orientation of Project	Applied	High Interest and Low Priority	High Interest and High Priority
	Abstract	Low Interest and Low Priority	Low Interest and Low Priority
		Past	Present
Historical Orientation of Project			

Figure 1 shows the various forms community engagement with outside researchers can take. The two continua, past to present along the horizontal axis and abstract to applied along the vertical axis, help to categorize types of research and explain likely levels of community interest and time investment. Overall, those projects that are more abstract and less applied may be supported by the community; however, they likely will not result in community members spending a great deal of time helping to orchestrate the project. This is especially so in poor communities with few resources. Similarly, those projects that are more concerned with events in the past are unlikely to be as highly prioritized as those addressing current issues. Thus, we can categorize the cells in the table from low priority and low interest to high priority and high interest. Scholars interested in community-based research need to be able to move their work from the low interest and low priority category into categories that evoke high interest and low priority or perhaps even high interest and high priority.

Although our project did not speak to the specific economic needs of the community we visited, we were still able to move our work toward the high interest and high priority side of the continuum. We arrived in the field willing to do the practical work of service learning and community-based research. We were concerned that the communities would have only slight interest in the kind of engagement our project entailed. We felt there were two reasons that would likely account for this lack of interest yet we were optimistic that their desire to share their history would help keep the community sufficiently committed. First, community members were largely lower-middle to middle-class and many had at least some college education. Thus, they had ample social and human capital to build and utilize the networks and coalitions necessary for securing community development grants and combating poverty. Second, these local solutions were already in place, and there was no immediate need for us to participate in these. Established and well-functioning local institutions already existed. Fortunately, and most important, the local communities we visited articulated a real interest in the preservation of the objects and narratives of their memories. Thus, the project quickly developed into a collaborative project of ensuring that what might be called “the collective and shared culture of remembering” will remain accessible and available to future generations. Arriving at a mutual understanding of this need was perhaps the most significant outcome of our trip. That outcome grew out of an emphasis on democratic process and was not exactly what we could have imagined on our own. We theorize that allowing for these kinds of shifts to happen during one’s research should not be an anomaly; they should be seen as a significant and constitutive feature of community-based research.

FIELDWORK AND PRESERVING MEMORIES: EXAMPLES, GOALS AND OUTCOMES

Having secured funding from a variety of piecemeal sources within the college, we took a multiracial group of six Colorado College students to the Mississippi Delta in January of 2006 to explore some lesser-known sites and historical events of the civil rights movement. Each student was selected in part based on their academic performance, familiarity to the professors, and expressed desire to learn more about the region and its history. We also wanted to be sure to include some variation in the ethnic and socioeconomic background of the students. We felt that a more homogenous group would defeat one goal of our trip, namely, to encourage dialogue across class, race, and ethnicity. Therefore, we tried to recruit students from different backgrounds. We ultimately ended with a mixture of African-

American, Native American, and white students. We prepared a reading list for the students to give them some necessary historical and sociological background information; we also asked them to write a journal, not only to chronicle their day-to-day experiences in the field but also to critically reflect on their own reactions to the history and narratives of race presented to them in our interviews.

Throughout the project we partnered with local contacts to develop research strategies, identify interview contacts, and develop relationships between our contacts and the group of students. The specific aims of this project were to initiate a new phase in an ongoing research project about the local history of the civil rights movement, teach students about various research strategies associated with the project, and link students of color with grassroots leaders of the civil rights movement. Moreover, in part because our project was collaborative and mutually respectful of the contributions being made by community residents, we experimented with and developed some field research methodologies that yielded new levels of access to personal documents while simultaneously being somewhat less invasive and considerably less extractive than is often the case. We also documented important and previously-unknown stories of civil rights movement involvement, provided preliminary training on field research methods, and developed relationships among generations of leaders. Community members partnered with us to help identify participants for the oral history interviews, recognizing the importance of having their stories documented and preserved.

Regarding the methodological training objective of the project, we wanted our students to become acquainted with the following specific research skills: conducting in-depth sociological interviews; examining and analyzing primary archival sources, for example, county real-estate records, but also more private collections such as photos, letters, and musical recordings; and, finally, using technology, such as audio and video recording, in the collection and analysis of data. Beyond those specific research skills, we wanted students to see the significant impact of experiencing matters of racial inequality through firsthand exposure to historic sites only possible through on-the-ground research.

Racial Readings of Historical Sites

Recent scholarship on place and memory has shown that historic sites are not objective markers of territory in “landscapes;” they must be seen as profoundly shaped by social narratives and social practices (Creswell 2004; Opp and Walsh 2010). Such sites need not be famous, either. In the project described in this paper, we visited a mixture of well-known and obscure sites, ranging from the Lorraine

Motel; to Money, Mississippi, where Emmett Till had his encounter with Carolyn Bryant; to community parks in Greenwood, Mississippi, and small rural churches in the Mississippi Delta.

By taking students to these sites, we allowed students to embark on an experiential learning process that focused on the concrete memories and local places of the civil rights movement in the Deep South. In short, a key goal of our visit was to show students the link between memory and place as constitutive features of the history and sociology of the civil rights movement. In what follows, we briefly describe three examples of the work in which the students engaged: a visit to Zion Christian Cemetery, interviews with local leaders, and explorations of local material culture.

To begin with, we describe a site we visited and the process we observed among our students as they came to experience this profoundly powerful location of racial inequality. We share quotes from students' diaries detailing their coming to terms with their impressions of the abandoned Zion Christian Cemetery that holds the bodies of more than 20,000 former slaves in Memphis, Tennessee. One student began to inquire about the failure to restore the cemetery. She wrote:

Zion Christian Cemetery: 1700's to 1920's, about 22,000 slaves and free blacks buried here. Gravestones knocked over and worn. The oldest gravestone I found was of a woman who was born in 1849 and lived to be 73 years old. She was also the one who lived the longest among those graves that I saw.

This is probably an indicator that in the later years they either used gravestones more often, or used gravestones that were more durable. The land was covered with thick weeds, tree branches, and vines. A sign was knocked over to the right of the entrance that discussed a cleanup crew from a few years back whose work was still visible in the front of the cemetery, but was minuscule compared with the work left to be done. The cleanup was obviously abandoned. Due to lack of funding? (Student One, Journal Entry).

Other students similarly commented on the disrepair but also began to identify their feelings about the site. Concluding with an exasperated bit of sarcasm, one student wrote:

At first glance, the cemetery appears small, but as you walk deeper inside, the cemetery extends far into the distance.

HISTORY AS COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH

41

With vines, dead leaves, and weeds hanging from the trees, the cemetery maintains a gloomy appearance; a place where life no longer has a purpose.

It is clear from the fallen sign, overgrown weeds, and condition of the tombstones this cemetery has not been maintained.

Hmm, a cemetery that has not been maintained...how disrespectful. I wonder if the fact that slaves are buried here has anything to do with it. (Student Two, Journal Entry).

Another simply said,

The cemetery is unfortunately unkempt which is disappointing. With the historical significance that it holds I felt that more should have been done to preserve the site. (Student Three, Journal Entry).

Our visit to this historic cemetery brought home an important lesson: the process of remembering and celebrating the legacy of the civil rights movement is not exempt from notions of power and social inequality. We wanted to show students the contrast between the long lines at the well-preserved Lorraine Motel where Martin Luther King was shot and the neglect that afflicts smaller and lesser-known sites of racial injustice. Such sites often present challenges to the dominant narratives of race and social change. This raised important questions for subsequent discussions. For instance, are some sites more important than others? Who gets to decide whose memories are worth preserving? In other words, race, racism, power, and social inequality are embedded in the geography of spaces, and these sites can be subjected to sociological readings. In our evening conversations we explored students' feelings about the sites and worked to link their observations to larger issues of structural inequality.

The interviews the students conducted with local leaders of the Mississippi civil rights movement provide a second example of how we attempted to link practical fieldwork and research methods to show the interdependence of race, objects, place, and memory. During our short visit, we interviewed or met with three current political officials and four key historical figures from the civil rights movement. Many of these interviews were conventional open-ended and semi-structured oral histories in which we met in the respondent's home and discussed their memories. Other interviews were conducted while touring local historical sites and learning about their significance. Still others were less formal but took place at the respondents' place of work. This mixture of historical and contemporary leaders in

their various settings helped students see more of the community elements at work. They also helped to demonstrate the shared ownership of their stories. To preserve these stories, and contribute to students' learning, we audio-recorded and videotaped the interviews.

Community Memories as Collective Ownership

Following Boyte and Kari (1996), we argue that the interviews we conducted helped students understand social movements as profoundly involved in the building of social memories. Students also began to understand that our interview partners were eager to assert collective ownership of the narrative of the civil rights movement. This sense of ownership manifested itself in two ways. First, community members enthusiastically shared stories and narratives about their participation in the local unfolding of the civil rights movement. They were particularly interested in highlighting the importance of organizing local resistance to state-sanctioned violence. Community members looked out for each other; protected each other during out-of-town trips; and, on occasion, took up arms to defend themselves (Wood and Samuel 2010).

For Boyte, these locations of public work are where "people discover their capacities to overcome deferential patterns of behavior, outgrow parochialisms of class, race, or sex, and form a broader conception of the common good" (Evans and Boyte 1992:188). That is, they are the sites of civil society and action in the public sphere (Boyte and Kari 1996; Calderon and Cadena 2007; Dick 2006; Finkelstein 2009; Hall 2010; Warren 2001). Our interview partners reinforced Boyte's important observations. While they did not deny the importance of big events, they demonstrated to the students and us the importance of their *community work*. That is, an understanding of these more local narratives provided rich insights into the structure of social solidarity that helped communities develop strategies of resistance on a local level. What happened in Memphis and other large cities during the civil rights movement often had little to do with the local and communal experiences that our interviewees wanted to share with us (for a more detailed discussion of this phenomenon see Wood and Samuel 2010).

The second way in which community members' sense of ownership manifested itself was through the stories they told us in relation to particular sites. Our local guides took our team to former community centers, churches, parks, and meeting places - all sites crucial in the formation of local resistance and community action. They were keenly aware of the neglect into which many of these local civil rights sites had fallen, and of how that neglect reflected continuing legacies of racism. Yet

these sites also reinforced community members' enthusiasm to share memories and helped students understand how social movements devoted to transformational change emerge out of particular locations and spaces (McAdam 1982). The stories shared by community members thus presented a more positive version of the lesson learned in the significantly more depressing surroundings of the slave cemetery in Memphis. Social movements need "rooms of their own," such as churches, buildings, and parks (see Fraser 1992). We can teach students this theoretical lesson, a standard lesson in every race and civil rights class, as a lived experience rather than as a chapter in a sociology textbook.

Material Culture as the Memorable Objects of Past Action

The third kind of fieldwork in which students participated was to examine the importance of physical objects for an understanding of the history of the civil rights movement in the Deep South. Community members shared pictures, newspaper clippings, magazines, and other cultural objects with us. Those objects represented for them a collective sense of being connected to events. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's (1999) definition of nations as imagined communities, we might say that cultural objects – preserved, handed down, and shared across generations – helped (and continue to help) black community members in Mississippi and Tennessee to imagine themselves connected to and sharing the larger goals of a social movement devoted to racial injustice. During our interviews and visits with local folks, it became clear to us that these objects were literally *preserved memories*. As such, they always triggered important stories. In other words, these are not the ephemeral by-products of a life lived but the significant anchors of shared experiences – shared among themselves for decades, but now also being shared with students and researchers.

To expose students to these important indicators of the shared experiences of community members, we experimented with new methods of researcher access and preservation. Specifically, we used digital photography and scanning to document key memorabilia. Students dug into memorabilia that included collections of photographs, newspaper clippings, magazine subscriptions, and flyers, discovering the truths of community members' lives. They then learned and practiced the basics of digital photography of delicate documents and various significant objects. Community members were excited to see such interest by students. The interaction among the students and community members was mediated through the artifacts of the community history. As students studied the material objects amid their immersion in the project, they *discovered* more about the realities of racial inequality

and the competing processes of racial formation that unfold over history through the actions of individuals and groups. Importantly, community members wanted us to participate in a joint effort to preserve these objects, by building local civil rights museums - repositories of objects and stories, housed within sites that represented collective struggles and achievements. This, perhaps more than anything else, was the real need, the real, unfulfilled goal most central to this community of veteran civil rights participants.

Goals and Outcomes

While the larger goal of developing a permanent tribute that commemorated the historic struggles around civil rights was beyond our capacity to achieve, we did make significant progress toward goals and outcomes that benefitted both the community residents and ourselves. In particular, we managed to achieve some progress toward each of the three goals we outlined in the second section: promoting and enhancing frank and open discussion about race and ethnicity; developing a more robust capacity to think about race as a social construction shaped by various social and economic factors; and more fully integrating theoretical discussions of racial concepts with the collection of evidence.

In the end, we feel we achieved these goals to some extent. Although we did not implement any method of measuring or evaluating the changes, we do think that students came away from the trip with a more nuanced understanding of race. If nothing else, they simply learned more about the local history of the civil rights movement in the South. They talked about race among themselves in a more stress-free environment. Free from the usual classroom dynamics, they were also able to talk about race with participants of the movement. Over shared meals and in the evenings, for example, we were all regularly engaged in discussions about the many things we were learning. Students had ample opportunities to ask our guides questions and discuss the days' happenings. In short, we had more immersive time spent discussing the nuances of racial inequality and the legacies of resistance and change.

Further, as we taught field research methods and conducted interviews, students developed a more nuanced understanding of the interconnected relationships among social actors and social institutions. As Omi and Winant (1994) might say, students could see the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic structures of racial formation at play in the lives of the people we visited. Such *racial formation projects* as building churches on black-owned land, engaging in armed self-defense, and living within a framework of racialized violence became real *discoveries* made by

students as we traveled through the Delta. From seeing the ruins of the country store in Money, Mississippi, where Emmett Till and Carolyn Bryant had their fateful encounter, to hearing from Reverend Burns how as a seventeen-year-old he was angry and prepared to defend his community as Till's aunt fled the region in fear, students saw the power that the material conditions of poverty, often embodied in access to land ownership, conveyed for actors in struggles around racial inequality throughout the South. That is, students experienced and discovered elements of racial inequality. Finally, by discussing interview strategies with students, teaching them how to handle actual evidence collected in archives, and teaching methods for inspecting key historic objects in the homes of interview respondents, we helped students understand how to use evidence in analyzing broader concepts. Overall, we believed that our students were now better prepared for class work, writing senior theses, and preparing for graduate work.

Students' learning also extended beyond the past. The lived experiences of the people we interviewed and visited became public, visible, and connected to the present through their interactions with students. Students *discovered* manifestations of the social construction of race when visiting Zion Christian Cemetery in the heart of Memphis. They felt the power of shared narrative as community leaders expressed both sophisticated understandings of social problems and the courage of action necessary for social change. Such narratives demonstrated how racial progress is dependent on institutional structures built in part through the past efforts of others. That is, whatever success "movement people" had, it was not just a matter of individual luck or talent, but instead came out of social interaction embodied in normal people coming together, organizing, protecting each other, and making movement demands. Importantly, interviewees did not really individualize the work they did, but rather they regularly framed their experiences in terms of how they were part of something else and even frequently downplayed their roles by saying that did not really do very much! That is, through participating in the activities, our interview respondents expressed precisely the sentiment of collective ownership of the shared memories of their historic efforts that Boyte and Kari considered an example of *public work*. In short, community residents benefitted from their engagement with the students by making their lives public and bridging the past with the future.

Although we were pleased with the successes we witnessed, we also reflected on several shortcomings in our project. First, while we were thrilled to raise the nearly \$10,000 necessary to take the students on a week-long trip and that we could leave a significant amount of that money in the local communities and among the

respondents we visited, the amount was dramatically short of what would be needed to implement this type of learning and community-based research on a larger scale. With so little money and not enough time, we could only provide an introduction to these issues. Further, institutionally, we were not in a secure status. As visiting faculty we were outside the more permanent circles that might be attractive for a larger investment from a potential donor. As contract faculty we had plenty of passion for teaching, but we knew full-well that we would not be staying at that particular institution. This meant that we did not have resources, or the time, to make a second trip. This makes an important point that with the expansion of non-tenure track faculty in academia, these trips (although they are vital for education) are likely to become harder to implement.

CONCLUSION

This essay has discussed a service-learning opportunity for students from a largely white, liberal arts college that linked them with community members from the Mississippi Delta through a community-based research project. We suggested that a more productive approach to the study of race can be found by exposing students to work in the field. We combined the task of teaching our students practical research skills, like collecting and examining historical evidence and conducting in-depth interviews, with the more traditional goal of service-learning, namely, to provide a benefit for local communities that utilize student work. We structured our work in the field around three key issues: the racialization of historical sites, the collective ownership of memory, and the significance of objects for an understanding of the narrative of the civil rights movement. First, students examined specific historical sites and reflected on the relationship between geography and race. Second, by conducting interviews with active participants in the local struggle for civil rights, our students learned the importance of collective and shared memories as a major parameter of the civil rights movement in the Mississippi Delta. Third, we introduced students to what we call the material culture of the civil rights movement as a mechanism to document the local action of community residents, but also as a key component of *discovery* for the students. Thus, what had begun as an attempt to enhance students' education and interface with organizations from a few communities turned into a collaborative project to ensure that the collective and shared culture of remembering will remain accessible and available to future generations. Arriving at a mutual understanding of this need was perhaps the most significant outcome of our trip, as it differed significantly from our initial goal offering more traditional forms of service-learning and

community-based research assistance. We argue that allowing for these kinds of shifts to happen during research should not be an “anomaly,” but a constitutive feature of seeing community-based service-learning and research projects as subject to the principles of open and mutual supportive collaboration between researchers and communities. Further, we suggest that even historical projects without obvious “pay offs” for the material well-being of community residents can be well-received and highly-prioritized.

For many sociologists, the purpose of community-based research projects, or public sociology, is to enable people to develop democracy-enhancing skills and institutions and to learn from their accomplishments simultaneously (Ansley and Gaventa 1997; Burawoy 2005; Gamson 2010; Gaventa 2009; Gilbert 2009; Goetz and Gaventa 2001; Tanaka and Mooney 2010). The subjects and partners of our project did not fit the common mold of the disenfranchised and powerless, because they were, largely, middle-class and had access to local resources. Thus, they did not need to be empowered through outside intervention. Instead, their desire to collectively construct, retell, and preserve community memories stands as a strong example of the type of public work Boyte has advocated. Moreover, in our project we found a community largely empowered and quite aware of how to navigate the public sphere. For them, sharing and engaging in their collective memory was far more important than other elements of the community-researcher relationship. That this happened in a way that involved young people helped lift the project in its priority for the community.

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