

Calculating success: teaching movement legacies

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Abstract

The official memorializing of social movements, often shaped by governments and media, generally assigns clear-cut labels of success or failure given the circumstances and perceived results of the struggle. As scholars and activists, we work to bend, oftentimes rewrite, narratives toward more nuanced assessments that include the voices and opinions of the minority in appraisals of their efforts. Sanctioned narratives of one of the most famous social movements, the mass civil rights movement in the U.S., still persist with the theme of overwhelming success for both African Americans and the nation as a whole. Using the case study of Clarksdale, a small city in the Mississippi Delta, this article aims to accomplish two goals: to rethink the mass movement's legacies in concrete ways beyond rhetoric and legal doctrine, and in doing so demonstrate how we need to challenge the dominant narratives and teach more complex histories and legacies to students and activists that cannot be neatly categorized. This essay, through a historical lens, forces a reconsideration of present racial conditions in the United States when on the one hand, the killing of black youth continues unpunished, and some would argue encouraged by prejudicial laws, yet on the other, an African American man won two national presidential elections.

Introduction

In light of decades of "colorblind" rhetoric and the apparent resurgence of overt policies and politicians determined to restore America to long held dominant (racist) values, teaching the U.S. black freedom struggle on college campuses is fraught with tensions. Here I define black freedom movement or struggle as the long-term and continuing campaign for citizenship rights, equality, and anti-racism that began at the moment of enslavement. The mass civil rights movement is the period most often defined as post-World War II through the 1970s in many places, and while this truncated definition glosses over the many nuances and variances that make periodizing impossible, it gives loose temporal markers that define specific historical moments. We expose our students to the multiple examples of courage and high morals in the grassroots uprisings against Jim Crow, involving young people exactly their age who made decisions to dedicate (and sacrifice) their lives to causes greater than themselves. We list and discuss the many federal laws and court cases that chipped away at legal segregation and discrimination, and mourn the dead.

The dilemma by the end of the semester involves *how* to end. While we can quarrel about when the mass movement really ended, how do we attend to the legacies? Ending with the election of President Obama, a historic result and clearly a legacy of work done forty and fifty years earlier to register voters in the

South, this view perpetuates what I often call the "kumbayah" phenomenon. The country has come so far, look! A black president! On the other hand, ending with the engorged/engorging prison industrial complex leads down the path of abject declension and defeat. The reality lies somewhere in the middle and many social scientists have worked to quantify success more abstractly (Gamson 2003). This essay creates a space to begin the discussion about how to calculate success when thinking more concretely and less abstractly about the mass movement for black liberation.¹

Why is it important to question (and define) success? What happens to the collective memory of the mass movement when we think about the long-term changes? Calculating degrees of success is dependent on a movement's goal. For example, there are those who will argue that steps to address legal standards of equal citizenship denote racial advancement, thus the mass movement succeeded. Their opponents will counter that if the premise of the movement was to establish basic rights from which African Americans could work towards political power and economic opportunity, then success rests on shaky foundations. I argue that the myth of the mass movement, the genuflection to a golden age where brave and noble (black and white) men, women and children stood shoulder-to-shoulder against Jim Crow, uses the legal successes of the 1950s and 1960s in the Supreme Court and federal legislative policies as proof of an improved society.

As we teach our students and our children the lessons of the past, we need to teach them how to unpack the myth and rethink definitions and evaluations of success and failure, forcing them to dissolve this very dichotomy that prevents the understanding of nuance. Using local history as a lens allows for a deeper look at the implications of law, policy, and sentiments in people's real lives, while also highlighting how some of those people found and created opportunities for change. It also shows the limitations of and the constant battle to sustain success. As much as it is about race, class plays a key role in the analysis, and a local study using real peoples' experiences complicates the often-held homogeneous vision of black communities, both past and present. Furthermore, in this essay, I use a more doctrinal understanding of law, that is, the enactment of judicial rulings and legislation, and how the authorities have enforced and interpreted legal doctrine (Sarat 2004). In places I couple this with how grassroots activists have used the law for change and sought to create new doctrine. By the end, it is clear that the raced and classed dimensions of law continues to function as a form of social control, and activists' liberation work persists in attempts to dismantle oppressive structures and then struggle against the refashioned and renamed constructions of legal control.²

¹ The author would like to thank the two anonymous readers for their insightful comments and suggestions.

² This is a narrower definition than one that acknowledges and foregrounds rights and how rights mobilize groups in ways that fuel social movements. The larger definition requires another layer of analysis not possible in an article length essay.

The study

My case study focuses on Clarksdale, Mississippi, which is not a unique place. Eighty miles south of Memphis, Tennessee, in 1950, 16,539 people lived in Clarksdale, rising to 21,105 in 1960 (53.5% were counted as “non-white”). In the 2010 census, 17,962 people resided within the city limits: 19.46% (3,496) white, 78.97% (14,184) African American. The city’s population numbers remained steady, but people left the rural county and never returned. In 1950, 49,361 lived there, dropping to 46,212 in 1960 and 40,447 in 1970. By 2010, the number had plummeted to 26,151 (22.90% white and 75.53% black).³ Most of the Mississippi Delta reflects these declining numbers. Clarksdale’s claim to fame, however, is as the home of the Blues. Celebrated musical legends, from Muddy Waters and W.C. Handy to Sam Cooke and Ike Turner, came from or gathered to hone their talents in the juke joints, churches and homes. The famous landmark, the Crossroads (of highways 61 and 49) depicts where Robert Johnson purportedly bargained with the devil: his soul for musical mastery (Palmer 1981; Weeks 1982; Gioia 2008). The Blues, an expression of hard life, pain, and challenges, found fertile home in Clarksdale, and performances on stage occurred alongside the civil rights protest performances on the streets, courtrooms, and classrooms.

The mass movement began to form in Clarksdale after 1951 when two young black women accused a white man of rape. Such attacks on black women’s bodies were commonplace in the South, testimonies and histories have documented how white men abused them with impunity. This time, however, circumstances transpired to create a climate for change. A few black citizens made the decision to fight for justice on behalf of the young women. They complained until the police arrested Greenwood truck driver E. L. Roach and took him to trial. Although he walked free soon thereafter, not a shocking outcome for crimes of this kind, as scholars like Dorothy Roberts, Crystal Feimster, and Danielle McGuire point out, the experience set in motion events that created the infrastructure for movement activity in the black community for decades (Henry 2000; Hamlin 2012).

By 1953 the small group of citizens, led by World War II veteran and pharmacist, Aaron Henry, had chartered Clarksdale/Coahoma County’s branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The rape case had convinced them that they needed more resources to amplify the impact of any future complaints. Many members of that NAACP branch

³ “General and Statistical Information” October 1965, Carnegie Library, Clarksdale; 1994 County and City Data Book, Population, Total and by Race for Clarksdale, Mississippi; Census 2000 analyzed by the Social Science Data Analysis Network (SSDAN) at <http://www.censuscope.org/us/s28/c27/chart_popl.html>; <http://www.censuscope.org/us/s28/c27/print_chart_race.html>; “Population of Counties by Decennial Census: 1900 to 1990” by Richard L. Forstall, U.S. Bureau of the Census: <<http://www.census.gov/population/cencounts/ms190090.txt>>. The Coahoma County numbers includes the population of Clarksdale in the calculation. 2010 census information from: <<http://censusviewer.com/county/MS/Coahoma> and <<http://censusviewer.com/city/MS/Clarksdale>> (accessed 10 March 2013).

would be a driving force in the mass civil rights movement in Mississippi. Vera Pigeo became the branch secretary in 1955, also organizing the youth council and advising the youth councils throughout the state during an era where adults had taught their young how to stay alive by dampening rebellious youthful spirits. They did not need to look far for examples why; months before Pigeo took on her NAACP role, she had been part of the network who tried to find and then protect witnesses following the murder of fourteen year old Emmett Till in neighboring Tallahatchie County for little more than an alleged whistle (Metress 2002; Till-Mobley 2004). Under Pigeo's leadership, youth organized in their towns with the adult branches long before the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and other groups entered the state in the 1960s. In Clarksdale the NAACP branch remained strong and active, and Henry would become the Mississippi NAACP state conference president by the end of the 1950s and would enjoy a state-wide presence.

Clarksdale's particular mass movement had its fair share of the highs of successes and the valleys of defeats that characterize all struggles. Mass direct action statewide in Mississippi, that began soon after President John Kennedy's 1961 inauguration, slowly dismantled legal segregation in public spaces and illuminated police and judicial injustice at a national level. Clarksdale's movement leaders had a principal role in establishing COFO, the Council of Federated Organizations, a state-wide coalition of the major civil rights organizations created in 1961 to cloak the NAACP in the presence of Governor Ross Barnett (who would not meet the established organization). COFO would go on to coordinate most of the state's direct action and mass protest campaigns including Freedom Summer in 1964 (Dittmer 1995; Payne 1995; Hamlin 2012). In Clarksdale, a lawsuit and several swells of mass protest, from the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in the mid-1950s through the 1960s, brought about the court-ordered desegregation of the public schools in 1970 (Bolton 2005; Keady 1988).⁴ One direct result of strong movement and organizing leadership enabled Coahoma County to become a rural test site for President Johnson's War on Poverty, with Coahoma Opportunities, Incorporated (COI) granted millions of federal dollars in the late sixties to increase the participation of the poor in their own uplift through a multi-program anti-poverty agency.⁵

⁴ The Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) coordinated the recruiting and training of black and white college students from around the country to come to Mississippi for Freedom Summer (1964), also called the Summer Project. During that time the student volunteers lived with local communities and sought to assist movement activities through projects like voter registration drives, community centers, Freedom Schools and literacy classes. Organizers used the rationale that national attention would focus on the plight of African Americans in the state only when young (mostly white) students were put in harm's way. Ten years earlier in 1954, the landmark Supreme Court case, *Brown v. Board of Education* (347 U.S. 483), declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional.

⁵ See "The Clarksdale Story," n.d. (but estimated at the end of September 1963), Aaron Henry Papers, Box 66, IVE Folder 1142, Tougaloo College Archives, Jackson, MS. Note that these papers are currently under re-processing at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History; *Rebecca E. Henry, et. al. v. Clarksdale Municipal Separate School District, et. al. (DC 6428 and DC 6428-K); Henry v. Clarksdale Municipal Separate School District 409F. 2d. 682*

Fast forward to the end of the century. In July 1999 Clarksdale was one of five stops on President Bill Clinton's New Markets tour of impoverished cities. During his five and a half hours in town he visited one of the few stores struggling to stay open on Issaquena Avenue, once the most vibrant street for black commerce in the county. Clinton listened intently to the testimonies of many black Clarksdalians unable to find work. During the years when the nation flourished, unemployment in Coahoma County ran at ten percent, six percent higher than the state average. The state had chosen Coahoma County to be an enterprise zone in 1984 as one of the poorest counties with the unemployment rate then around fourteen percent. State tax deductions used as bait, to attract new industry to take advantage of the stagnant labor force, had not worked. Clinton's visit brought national exposure to Clarksdale once more as he announced his New Markets Initiative that again tried to tempt business and industry to relocate to the Delta with tax breaks, incentives, and the promise of cheap labor. He committed \$15 million dollars in community development grants for the Mississippi Delta, part of a \$46.5 million funding package attached to his initiative, and hoped to improve the startling forty percent-below-the-poverty-line statistic.⁶

To read about the mass movement of African Americans for justice and equality between the traditional temporal boundaries, from *Brown* to the late 1960s, change and progress seemed to take shape in the Delta town as it did elsewhere, despite the battles. Most public spaces desegregated and African Americans seemed to hold some power in the local decision-making as federal demands for interracial participation in the Community Action Programs brought in much needed resources. Yet in 1999 a President comes to advertise what was, in effect, a bail out, investing in corporations and businesses (rather than the residents this time). Here we see the bi-polarity of movement memory versus reality, and the questions of success itself –the history empowers many, yet present day reality reflects deepening struggles. The mass civil rights movement, therefore, was a calculated success based on careful and well-timed political moves.

Economic justice for whom?

Coahoma County's complicated story has much to tell us about the meaning of improvement and its costs, particularly if success is grounded in beliefs of improved race relations symbolized by a level playing field in the economy, housing, education, services, and social interactions. Rigorous campaigns for economic justice never received the same attention as the social and political

(*Clarksdale I*), Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, New Orleans; Donald C. Mosley and D.C. Williams, Jr., "An Analysis and Evaluation of A Community Action Anti-Poverty Program in the Mississippi Delta," July 1967, RG 381, OEO Community Services Administration Office of Operations, Migrant Division, Box 50, Grant Files 1966-1971, National Archives.

⁶ "Clinton Visit Leaves City Optimistic," *Clarksdale Press Register*, 7 July 1999; *Commercial Appeal*, 24 May 1984; 28 September 1984; Chamber of Commerce, Vertical File, Carnegie Public Library, Clarksdale, MS.

battles so plentifully publicized. Recent scholarship is changing that bias (Orleck 2011; Carter 2007; Saunders 2011). Civil rights workers had recognized the dire need to correct the economic disparity in the Delta. Desegregating stores, restaurants and motels was important in principle, but most could not afford to spend money there. Desegregating schools became moot without sufficient nutrition and clothing for children. The black middle class in the Delta, people like Aaron Henry and Vera Pigeo, comprised a tiny percentage of the population, and their position is relative to their region and segregated status. Forcing apart segregation exposed the underbelly of the American Dream, and Johnson's War on Poverty was as controversial as it was innovative and brilliant.

The War on Poverty had an active front in Clarksdale. Johnson's Office of Equal Opportunity (OEO), under Sargent Shriver, wanted Coahoma Opportunities Incorporated (COI) as their test-site for rural community action programs. In September 1965, COI received over \$300,000 in federal grants, with promises of more money and resources, but not before intense political struggle between civil rights activists who had applied for the Community Action Program (CAP) in the first place, and local segregationists who saw the funding train leave the station without them on board. This was after a summer of intense activity and competition over Project Head Start programs that served hundreds of preschoolers across the county. COI was one of the concrete successes of the local movement. The programs in Coahoma County created spaces for local black agency, interracial cooperation and tangible aid for the poor of all ages (Lemann 1991, 314; Williams 2004).⁷

COI was successful because it did what it promised. It provided training and employment for many beholden to the plantation system or white patronage. Whether as secretaries, cooks or teachers' aides, women in particular found a degree of autonomy from the local economy as federal employees in Washington signed their paychecks. Project Head Start, the cornerstone of the War on Poverty, continued to serve hundreds of young children in the county, not only enhancing their education, but providing nutritious meals and basic health care. Furthermore, COI directly connected the poor to federal programs, bypassing state and local agencies, empowering a larger population of African Americans than the direct action civil rights protests ever had.

⁷ Mosley and Williams, "An Analysis and Evaluation"; Bennie Gooden interviewed by Homer Hill, 15 March 1994 <<http://www.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/gooden.htm>>; Andrew Carr interviewed by Homer Hill, 14 March 1994 <<http://anna.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/ohcarrab.html>>; Andrew Carr interviewed by author, 22 September 2010, Clarksdale, Mississippi; "'Anti-Poverty' Goals Outlined In City Today," *Clarksdale Press Register*, 18 May, 1965; "OEO Official Gives Details of Aid Plan," *Clarksdale Press Register*, 4 June, 1964; "'Head Start' Projects To Begin Here Monday," *Clarksdale Press Register*, 18 June, 1965; Clarksdale Board of Trustees Minutes, Book X, 13 May, 1965, 28 June, 1965, 415-6, 435; William Drayton and Eric Gold, "Structure for Action and Communities: An Analysis of Community Action Agencies," sometimes called the "Drayton Report" (1965), RG381 Community Services Administration, OEO, Community Action Program Office: Records of the Director, Subject Files, 1965-1969, Box 27, 1966, National Archives.

In the county, subtle shifts in race relations embodied the most valuable contribution of COI. Coalition-building and focused determinism, mirrored at the federal level (at least in the Johnson administration), won out against the forces that had traditionally succeeded with ease. Activist Vernon Keys announced, “It was a peaceful revolution” as economic independence coaxed begrudging respect. Federal funds created hundreds of jobs free from local economic control, encouraging self-sufficiency, jobs with titles, real salaries and benefits. Black patrons were courteously addressed, a stunning change for a population (regardless of class) continuously and contemptuously addressed by first names (and worse) by white men, women and children alike. Now, as white businesses sought a piece of the federal pie, they had to conform to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibiting discrimination. In addition, businesses wanted to attract the increase in black consumers with a little more cash in their pockets.⁸

Many found a self-confidence to step out in new ways. While black Clarksdalians struggled for basic civil rights, in the more dangerous years of the mass movement, internal class divisions did not visibly polarize the community. However, once courts established and secured judicial orders and federal accountability for those rights, the local black community shifted its focus. Teachers in particular, those who chose not to participate in mass movement activities in order to preserve their livelihoods, now stepped forward to claim leadership positions in newly created federally funded programs and organizations. Their ascension created a more robust black middle class, one more secure than mere years before.

With all the positives that COI brought to the region, many queries about the long-term effects of community action plagued the War on Poverty legacy as a whole. Were revolutionary and activist voices silenced through their cooption into the poverty programs? Many critics of the War on Poverty like social scientist Michael Katz (1989) questioned the federal motivation to fight poverty, seeing it as a device to cement black loyalty to the Democratic party when mounting black protests in the South and in the urban North by the mid to late 1960s threatened to shake that foundation. Were the poverty programs, like Head Start, merely pacifiers? Critical scholarship about Project Head Start has mirrored Katz's assertions. No solid evidence existed that Head Start pulled families out of poverty, but that it was much easier to care for “innocent” children (rendering the program non-political) than tackle the roots of poverty directly, roots embedded in national social and economic foundations.

Yet despite more social relations between the races, black and white societies continued in parallel. Andrew Carr was one of the architects of COI who worked with Aaron Henry and other black leaders to make sure that the agency's board was interracial – a vital component for grant eligibility. In an interview with the wealthy white planter from Coahoma County, who had served in World War II and had a social consciousness that many of his rank did not, Carr considered

⁸ Vernon Keys interviewed by Homer Hill, March 19, 1994.
<<http://digilib.usm.edu/cdm/ref/collection/coh/id/4233>>. Accessed 12 July 2012.

himself a conservative even though his association with local black leaders led to his ostracization from the greater white community in Clarksdale. He adamantly insisted, however, that he did not socialize with African Americans stating that he did not have to, only two were members of the country club and his social and religious circles remained all white.⁹ Indeed, outside of the workplace, racial groups largely have largely maintained *de facto* segregation in churches and social spheres, a phenomenon more or less reflected nationwide.

Furthermore, federal funds to the War on Poverty dwindled dramatically after Johnson's presidency. COI had to cut back many of its programs created during the height of its development in the late sixties, and then deal with the reality of extensive fundraising, a skill and expertise not sought within the initial staffing structure of the organization. Maintaining the programming without solely federal funds required grant-writing skills and creativity, and most of the CAPS were ill-equipped in this regard.¹⁰ We should not blame the leaders for lack of foresight. Intense political agitation had secured COI in 1965 in the face of intense opposition and community leaders faced constant challenges that made it difficult to prioritize passing on the tools to successfully procure grants in order to sustain COI, and the programs offered by OEO long-term. As COI continued to face political opposition mirrored at the federal level when President Nixon dismantled OEO, and later when President Reagan shifted the funding structure to block grants, personnel became more professionalized, bowing to pressure that pulled the agency further and further from the grassroots and activists, and more towards federal bureaucrats (Lemann 1991, 164; Trattner 1999, 370; Clark 2002, 166).¹¹

COI and multi-program anti-poverty organizations like it had responded to the shift in the workforce from agricultural industries into other sectors. Many of their adult education classes sought to reeducate a mostly agrarian population. Yet employment did not materialize, even for those with advanced skills. As agriculture became less profitable in the Delta in the last decades of the century, landowners and businessmen developed lucrative money-making opportunities that perpetuated systems akin to the plantations. Consider three: casinos, tourism and prisons.

⁹ Andrew Carr interviewed by author, Clarksdale, MS, 22 September 2010.

¹⁰ Mayo Wilson interviewed by author, 9 November 2004, Clarksdale, MS; Troy Catchings interviewed by Homer Hill, 15 March 1994
<<http://digilib.usm.edu/cdm/ref/collection/coh/id/718>> (accessed 12 February 2013).

¹¹ OEO General Correspondence, 1967-69, RG381, Community Service Administration, OEO, Executive Secretariat, Box 13; "History of OEO During the Nixon Administration, 1973" by Kenneth Munden, RG 381, Records of the Community Service Administration, OEO, Records of the Office of Planning Research and Evaluation, Box 107; "Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents 9:9:196-211 (March 5, 1973) also in Box 107, all in National Archives.

The "New Jim Crow" expanded

The casinos and tourist industry in the Delta, touted as an economic boost, maintains what the late scholar Clyde Woods (1998) described as the reality of the plantation legacy, with African Americans working for low wages in white-owned businesses. The tourist industry flourishing in the Delta echoes the white slumming that black Harlem attracted in the 1920s where white patrons frequented clubs and dance halls to consume black culture, while those who performed profited little from the business (for a recent study see Kelley 2010). Clarksdale's Delta Blues Museum resides in the former Illinois-Central passenger terminal that three black teenagers tried to desegregate in the early sixties (Pigee 1975, 48).¹² National and international visitors marvel at the rich Blues legacy in the area, but after the brief sojourn, many turn around on Highway 61 to return north to Memphis or the casinos. A cultural tourism based on "ethnic supremacy" presents a carefully packaged Delta history. The Shack-Up Inn, on the Hopson Plantation just outside Clarksdale, offers tourists the opportunity to experience sharecroppers' shacks – with amenities, of course. Earlier tourism centred on monuments to white supremacy – antebellum homes, reenactments, battlefields, plantations, and antebellum collectibles. Today's tourist trails follow Blues history and now civil rights tours based in Memphis or Jackson are fashionable. Such forays into local "folk" areas are planned and coordinated, and Hollywood actor Morgan Freeman's upscale blues establishment, "Ground Zero," housed in the former cotton weighing station next to the defunct train tracks and terminal, allows tourists to hear the blues with their Delta farm-raised catfish. Local African American experience remains censored and curtailed, and their employment in this industry restricted mainly to service.

Economic incentives attracted the gaming industry as casinos docked on the banks of the Mississippi River and in the Gulf Coast to cash in on regional markets. Tunica County, just north of Coahoma and a stone's throw south of Memphis, hosts a bevy of casinos that competes with Atlantic City and Las Vegas in size and attraction (Baruffalo 2000, 16). Isle of Capri (formerly Lady Luck) Casino stands alone at the foot of the Helena-Arkansas Bridge in rural Coahoma County, the closest river crossing to Clarksdale, twenty miles north, and two miles from Helena. The county vote for the casino was contentious. In the summer of 1993, unofficial results counted 4,501 votes in favor, 3,121 opposed (fifty-nine to forty-one percent) with a forty-five percent voter turnout. Six hundred jobs, tax breaks for the county, and a cut of the revenue convinced

¹² "Negro Youths Charged Here," *Clarksdale Press Register*, 24 August 1961, 1; Jack Young to Robert Carter, 13 September 1961, NAACP Microfilm, Part 22, Reel 6, Group V, Series B; Gloster Current to Henry Moon, NAACP Public Relations Director, memorandum, 24 August 1961, III E9, NAACP Papers, LOC; Aaron Henry to Gloster Current, 28 August 1961, III C75, NAACP Papers, LOC; *Mary Jane Pigee, et al. v. State of Mississippi*, brief for appellants on appeal from the County Court of Coahoma County, September 1961; Tom Scarbrough report, 5 September 1961, Sovereignty Commission Papers, Mississippi Department of Archives and History; Monthly report from Julie Wright, SE Regional Field Youth Secretary, 6 September 1961, Reports 61-2, III E55, NAACP Papers, LOC.

voters. In the end, the *Clarksdale Press Register* reported, “The pocketbook proved mightier than the pulpit” in the orchestrated battle between morality and economics (Baruffalo 2000; Nash & Taggart 2006).¹³

The casinos in the Delta are a mixed blessing. While they provided much-needed jobs to local Mississippians, the local revenue generated by their presence did not necessarily improve conditions in the surrounding counties. Wealthy landowners increased their profits by leasing or selling land to these industries and the attendant array of hotels and retail outlets, while local politicians controlled the influx of local money. New school buildings now exist to educate the relocated families and ease the overcrowding of the former structures. Yet new jobs for African Americans pool at the bottom of the pay grades and black people rarely hold managerial posts. A 2001 U.S. Civil Rights Commission report noted that the Mississippi gaming commission was not required to maintain data on salaries by race and gender, but found that whites constituted 72.9% of the casino officials and managers whereas 71.2% of the laborers were black. Only 0.8% of the gross revenues actually went to cities and counties. More often than not, African Americans are consumers, frequenting the bargain buffets and gambling precious resources at the penny slot machines, with very few other leisure outlets available elsewhere in the region.

The other burgeoning industries in the Delta are the prisons, filling rapidly with young black men and women who become permanently politically and economically shackled. The construction of private prisons has proliferated as corporations approach regions with more land, a cheaper workforce, and a poor local economy eager for any injection of funds. In 1995, a huge construction program ensued to house the 6,500 prisoners registered in Parchman, the state penitentiary – a triple jump in incarceration figures, from between 1,800 and 2,500 inmates, in the first seventy years of the century. The incarceration rate of black men nationally has increased over five hundred percent in the two decades since the eighties to where more African American males were held in prisons than are enrolled in higher education institutions (Oshinsky 1996; Shaw 2000; Williams 2003).¹⁴ In the hard-fought 2003 gubernatorial elections, the majority of Mississippians who voted did not agree with Democratic Governor Ronnie Musgrove’s opposition to privatizing the prisons, and Republican Haley Barbour won with a pledge for “Safer Communities.” He opened the door for more private prisons, extending the use of private and regional jails to relieve pressure on Parchman, but maintaining the eighty-five percent law (that all convicts serve eighty-five percent of their sentences before going up for parole)

¹³ “Coahoma County Casino Still A Best Bet For Wins,” *Starkville Daily News*, July 16, 1995; *Clarion-Ledger*, August 25, 1993. In June 1993, the unemployment rate was 12.8%, double the state average; *Clarksdale Press Register*, August 25, 1993.

¹⁴ <<http://www.naacp.org/pages/criminal-justice-fact-sheet>>; Grassroots Leadership Press Release, Monday May 20, 2002 at <http://www.grassrootsleadership.org/press_rels/Final_MS_Edu_Incarc.html>. The report is online <http://www.grassrootsleadership.org/downloads/Miss_3.pdf>.

keeping all available beds full. Barbour made provisions to loosen the law in 2008 with little effect.¹⁵

The private prison growth has occurred primarily in poor counties with the promise of local revitalization, but like the gaming industry, precious little of the money trickles into the local coffers. As Jim Crow lined the pockets of planters and industrialists in need of cheap controlled labor, prison industries provide new avenues for revenue profiting the same population. As legal scholar Michelle Alexander (2012) succinctly articulated, the prison industry has reconceived Jim Crow, as the effects of poverty have become criminalized and black bodies are quite literally controlled and fettered. Sentencing disproportionately punishes the petty thief or drug pusher with harsher sentences than well-heeled white-collar thieves embezzling millions from pension funds or the wealthy kingpins controlling the drug trade. The organizing group Grassroots Leadership questioned the connection between private prison companies and campaign financing, noting that the figures have linked millions of dollars to political campaigns promoting the construction of private prisons. The number of incarcerated black women has also dramatically increased in the past years. In 1996, 807 inmates were housed at the state's only women's prison, Central Mississippi Correctional Facility in Rankin County in the Delta. In 2001, the number was 1,455 in a facility built in 1987 to hold only one thousand. With these numbers, the state's response has been to build another jail or convert a facility for male inmates to house the women (Williams 2002; Marable 2000). This struggle is ongoing and current activism includes reinstating voting rights for felons as well as fighting against the racialization of crime, racial profiling on the streets, excessively long sentences and the lack of inmate rehabilitation, and reforming the entire prison economy (USCRC Report 95; Alexander 2012).

Reassessing voting rights and education

Disfranchisement occurred elsewhere as well. White local and state leaders found loopholes to circumvent the 1965 Voting Rights Act, but sometimes the courts helped them gain some lost ground. On February 18, 1971, Justice Orma Smith (U.S. District Court Judge) ordered the adoption of a redistricting plan to bring counties in line with federal law. As a result, he ordered re-registration. This meant that all the work undertaken in the sixties to register people had to be redone. Twenty counties, including Coahoma, purged their voting registers after the 1970 census. From 1965-1970 black registered voters numbering anywhere from 28,000 to 280,000 had to be re-registered for the 1971 elections. In an effort to recoup their losses, student volunteers again came to Clarksdale in April to help the re-registration campaign, just as they had come in the early

¹⁵ For more details about Mississippi's prisons see <<http://www.governing.com/topics/public-justice-safety/courts-corrections/mississippi-correction-reform.html>> and <<http://www.desototimes.com/articles/2012/05/23/opinion/editorials/doc4fbd3253c1b3b659782775.txt>>(accessed 12 July 2012).

sixties in campaigns that included the 1963 Freedom Vote and the 1964 Freedom Summer. State and local gerrymandering and redistricting attempts, such as changing electoral procedures from single to at-large voting systems, purposefully hindered black participation and electoral victory further by diluting black majorities (Foster 1983; Dittmer 1995; Payne 1995; Hamlin 2012).¹⁶

In 1975, 22,202 made up the voting age population in Coahoma County. Whites consisted of forty-three percent at 9,626 and fifty-seven percent were blacks or 12,576. In 1971 in a total of 17,030, forty-four percent were white and fifty-six percent were black. Additionally, behind-the-scenes harassment and improper procedures took place to hinder black participation. In 1983, over 200,000 eligible voters did not register in Mississippi, in part because of the voter registration laws requiring registration at the county courthouse and in the municipality to vote in city elections. Abused by misinformation or no information given before election-day, voter registration has declined due to pure frustration. The U.S. Justice Department's investigation was nothing more than window-dressing. They did not notify community organizations that registrars were in the Delta. In fact several authors cite the Justice Department's unwillingness to enforce the Voting Rights Act as a major problem. Once a friend, the department became a foe, a legacy from Ronald Reagan's administration (Nixon 1999).

Despite these persistent voting problems, the numbers of black elected officials rose steeply from the late 1960s with federal intervention and judicial rulings in the state. There are many social critics who maintain, like Clyde Woods, that this rise is "severely overstated." Very little fundamental change for African Americans has occurred as a result of more black elected officials. They occupied predominantly local or county, not statewide, positions, and were elected primarily from black constituencies. Nevertheless, black people fought for the right and exercised their newfound electoral muscle immediately and to great effect. Clyde Woods noted that Robert Clarke was elected in 1967 to the House of Representatives, the first black since Reconstruction. He was joined twelve years later by Clarksdale's Aaron Henry. Henry Espy became the first African American mayor of Clarksdale in 1989, and has become the longest serving mayor, announcing his intentions in 2012 not to run for re-election (Woods 1998, 215; Salamon 1973, 624-625; Rodgers 1981, 67; Bennett 1979, 196; Lane 2012).

As civil rights legislation passed and judicial rulings supported change, civil rights organizations lost their creative momentum and their *raison d'être*. The Council of Federated Organizations crumbled after the interracial Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party attempt to unseat the regular all-white Democrat

¹⁶ At-large voting systems requires the election of candidates to represent the whole membership of the body (like a city, or county, county, state, or nation) as opposed to just a single electoral district. *Clarksdale Press Register*, March 9, 1971; Mississippi State Democratic Committee, memorandum, April 18, 1971, Minor Papers, Box 1, "Black Mississippians."

delegation in Atlantic City in 1964. Splintered by difference of opinions within the ranks, and differing philosophies exacerbated by competition for membership and donations, the four groups that gathered under the COFO umbrella went their separate ways. Once the summer of 1964 ended, top officials in the NAACP head office guarded their position and had little to do with the other three organizations: the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Congress of Racial Equality and SNCC.¹⁷ Martin Luther King Jr., working on campaigns in Alabama and Georgia and then in Chicago, came to Mississippi less, and subsequently SCLC lost some footing there. He journeyed to the Delta in 1968 on his last trip, to initiate the Poor People's Campaign to go to Washington, D.C., but Clarksdale reporter Curtis Wilkie (2001) noted that he was not as well received as before. Wilkie poignantly wrote, "Like a debilitating virus, the rivalry among civil rights groups sapped energy from the movement just at the time their followers were finally reaching the gates of city halls and courthouses across the South" (173).

Like economics and politics, education was and is a major battleground in the black freedom struggle, and assessing success in this field is also mixed. President Johnson once proclaimed that "education is the only valid passport from poverty" (Patterson 2001, 138). After a six year legal battle that began in 1964, the schools in Clarksdale desegregated through a District Court order in the spring of 1970 (*Alexander v. Holmes County Board of Education*). That year the promise of *Brown* (decided a generation earlier) reached its peak and could only be enforced through the courts. The results were unsatisfactory to most students, parents and teachers, black and white. Federal law and court orders that desegregated schools did little to alter many white Mississippians' racial attitudes. For example, in 1956 Senator John Stennis (D-MS) bemoaned integration forced by outsiders. Evoking Civil War rhetoric, "carpet baggers and do-gooders" caused the deterioration of race relations, he fumed in a Washington, D.C. radio interview.¹⁸ "I have never heard any responsible leaders of the colored or white race in the South say that the ultimate goal of their social relations or their race relations was to have integration educationally, socially or otherwise," he continued.¹⁹ By the late 1970s, Robert Patterson, architect of the Citizens' Councils in 1954 in Indianola, Mississippi, mirrored little change in

¹⁷ Gloster Current to Roy Wilkins and Bishop Stephen G. Spottswood and the Members of the Board, memorandum, 29 December 1964, NAACP microfilm, Part 22, Reel 11, Group V, Series B, Box 14 and Current to Wilkins, memorandum, 9 November 1964, III A200, COFO, NAACP Papers, LOC.

¹⁸ "Stennis Says Integration Efforts In Dixie Doomed," *Clarksdale Press Register*, March 27, 1956.

¹⁹ Stennis did not exaggerate. Retired teacher Joyce Kendricks, raised in Durant, Mississippi, reinforced how imbedded segregation and race relations were in the fifties. She remembered, "there was no animosity... we went to the movie, they sat in the balcony and we sat downstairs, that's the way it was.... I never heard a cross word said between blacks and whites, I never heard an ugly word uttered about either one in my presence and it was like I said, I guess we were just ignorant... they seemed to be comfortable with it and we were comfortable with it" (Kendricks interviewed by author, February 13, 1999, Oxford, MS).

white sentiments, “That’s not social integration, that’s *forced* integration under the might of the federal government... To be subjected to integration is one thing, but to submit to it is something else entirely. We are being subjected to integration; we are not submitting to it.” He reinforced his claim, “you’ll find that the white people do not frequent places where there are a whole lot of Negroes through choice. And I think gradually... things will resegregate themselves.” (Raines 1977, 300).²⁰

The newly desegregated schools kept the white principals, and the former black school principals became assistant principals. Most black teachers were demoted. Interactions within classrooms and schools caused problems, conflicts, and more court dates.²¹ These patterns existed throughout the nation. In Clarksdale, white children transferred to the new Lee Academy, creating a private white institution beyond the court’s reach. Across the South, these segregated academies have drained resources from the public system. Public schools, therefore, suffered from the lack of investment in facilities, teachers and students, both financially and emotionally. It also re-segregated public education (Bolton 2005).

Robert Patterson’s predictions proved correct, in part because of sustained conservative campaigns and policymaking that chipped away at desegregation legislation. Integration in schools lasted barely a generation. In the mid- to late-eighties, the courts permitted a partial return to the neighborhood school plan so vehemently fought against twenty years earlier. All parties agreed on the change, with some conditions. Scholar Gary Orfield, who ran a Harvard study on school desegregation noted, “Expanding segregation is a mark of a polarizing society without effective policies for building multiracial institutions.” (Orfield 1997; Keady 1988, 108). Orfield maintained that since 1974, a mere four years after court-ordered desegregation in Clarksdale and in many Delta school districts, almost all policy changes were negative, while numbers of nonwhite school age children dramatically increased (Orfield 1997, 6; Hawkins 2000).²²

²⁰ The Citizens' Councils were created as a direct response to the *Brown* ruling that spring. With a membership led by prominent white locals (from police chiefs, judges, mayors, bankers and the like), this group used economic "persuasion" to thwart civil rights activities in their area.

²¹ Court record of *Jonathan Harris, et al versus The Board of Trustees of the Clarksdale Municipal Separate School District et al.* (DC-73-29-K) in Donell Harrell Papers (in author’s possession); Clarksdale Board of Trustees Minutes (CBTM), Book XVI, 1 March 1973 (special meeting); Hearing before Judge Keady, U.S. District Court, *Henry* case, Monday 25 September 1972, 31; CBTM, Book XV, 3 August 1972, 370. Also see *Rebecca E. Henry, et. al. v. Clarksdale Municipal Separate School District, et. al.* (DC 6428-K) 10 November 1975, 9; CBTM, Book XV, 22 June 1972, 349; "A Report on the Black History Week Episode, Clarksdale High School Officials and Black Student Confrontation, February and March 1973," 27 March 1973 by Aaron Henry in his capacity as Mississippi State Conference President, Aaron Henry Papers, Box 67, IVE folder 1157, Tougaloo College Archives; Sara Cannon interviewed by author, 9 March 1999, Clarksdale, MS.

²² Ronald Reagan’s administration actively worked against progressive school desegregation. The Justice Department reversed policy on many pending cases. In *Board of Education Oklahoma City v. Dowell* (198 U.S. 237 [1991]), the Supreme Court ruled that school districts

Interviews in Clarksdale's black neighborhoods reveal strong opinions that the decimation of black schools also injured the sense of community. For many who experienced segregated black institutions, or for those who have studied the period, the victory of desegregation remains bittersweet. No longer did the village raise the child in the same way as before (to coopt the sage African proverb). Many of the teachers interviewed in Clarksdale, who had worked in the segregated system, longed for the old days of discipline and community pride. With integration, most historic black institutions could not survive. Vera Harrell, who taught in the school system, preferred working in the segregated system, "I now wish we had stayed over there.... I think integration did more harm to the black children... When we first went over to the Clarksdale High School, the white children embraced, kissed everything, smoked, they drank beer... and they all had cars. You let a black child go out and drink... By the time they got home they were sober because they knew what their parents were going to do to them." She continued distastefully, "When they went over there and saw what the white children were doing and got just like [them]. They wanted cars knowing that their parents couldn't afford a car... I didn't know about dope when I went to Tougaloo [College], I found out about dope when I went to Clarksdale High School." Brenda Luckett attended the city's desegregated schools in the 1970s. A teacher herself in the 1990s, she noted that the prevailing attitude remained that white was better because, "[the black students] are not taught anything about black history, they're not taught anything about white people, they don't deal with white people."²³

The costs of climbing the ladder

A growing middle class of African Americans, a conventional marker of success, nevertheless displaced older, traditional social statuses within the black community, leaving people who felt ousted by newly empowered teachers and educated professionals. The transformation of the leadership devalued those who lacked the formal education but had been at the forefront to secure the very same initiatives that created the new opportunities. The personal costs for the older leaders, those on the frontlines of the mass movement in the fifties and early sixties, are often overlooked in the gilded memory of the movement. In

could return to segregated neighborhood schools, and that white flight was voluntary by private individuals and was not the school boards' doing. *Freeman v Pitts* (1992) in DeKalb County near Atlanta, reinforced that decision (see Patterson, 2001, 196-198; Orfield, 1997, 7). President Clinton did little to stop resegregation trends. Clyde Woods noted that in September 1990, the Fifth Circuit court of Appeals found that Mississippi's higher education policy was race-neutral which began an attack on historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the state and the resegregation of predominantly white institutions (Woods, 1998, 229). The Supreme Court continues to deal with cases around diversity and education, having just ruled in *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin* <http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/12pdf/11-345_l5gm.pdf> (accessed 24 July 2013).

²³ Vera Harrell interviewed by the author, 23 August, 1999, Clarksdale, Mississippi; Brenda Luckett interviewed by the author, March 8, 1999, Clarksdale, Mississippi.

Clarksdale, the activist work of Vera Pigeo best illustrates the friction that “success” wrought on leadership generations. Her exquisite passion buoyed her in the darkest years from the early fifties when very few risked everything to lead movement activity. Economically independent from the plantation system as a beauty shop owner, and utilizing her place and business to quietly communicate to, shelter, and teach young people in the NAACP Youth Councils and adults in citizenship classes, Pigeo’s light shone bright in the state. At the core of Clarksdale’s mass movement, serving as secretary of the NAACP branch, Pigeo had risked life and limb for the cause, withstanding physical attacks on her body and home. For years she kept the hole, from the bullet that had punctured her home, unfixed as a reminder of her sacrifice and why she continued her work.

As more civil rights organizations, particularly through COFO, pried open spaces in the closed society, they also dislodged Pigeo’s authority and status, creating new places and ways to protest louder and with more national impact. Pigeo complained bitterly about how the earlier struggles were easily forgotten as paychecks fattened, and African Americans began to eagerly climb the rungs of the economic ladder. As a long-time veteran, over fifteen years on the frontlines by the time COI altered the landscape, she watched formally educated newcomers elbow their way into leadership positions. The poverty programs, particularly COI, provided jobs, respectability and opportunity for a whole cadre of people who had not participated in the movement previously. Pigeo did not mince her words, labeling them “Johnny-Come-Latelys,” where title and rank now made a difference. Black and whites worked together, but salaries were set on a sliding scale rendering her on the lower rungs, despite her years of experience and community influence. Vera Pigeo wrote and self-published her two-part autobiography, *Struggle of Struggles*, in order to re-insert herself into the local history that had erased her, even by 1975.

Her story of rejection and erasure are more complicated than a bruised ego and hurt feelings. The poverty programs assisted in establishing a strong educated black middle class in the Delta, one more aligned to white mainstream norms. Yet this newfound prosperity widened stratifications in the black community. The new class structure in black America elevated (but did not remove) the glass ceiling, and so the ladder to the top lengthened allowing the black elite to climb. There is a disruption of community and the sense of linked fate that once bound black people together. The conditions that perpetuated the need for the bond transformed. No longer does the rhetoric of group uplift direct the path for many middle-class African Americans. With individual opportunity came individual advancement, tenets of American ideology and philosophy. No longer linked solely by the fate of their blackness, those able to improve their lives and those of their families did so with flourish and without delay. With fewer obvious legal restrictions, and more legislation in place encouraging African Americans to strive for social mobility, the fact that some can and do achieve *are* signs of success. The American Dream became theirs as they entered the American economic and political realm as more equal citizens. On the other hand, of course, this must be judged against new oppressive legal measures that

fill the prisons, stunt personal freedoms on the street (by expanding police control on black bodies), and give financial institutions more freedom to discriminate without citing race, thus maintaining a false colorblind innocence. The list goes on. A changing community needs to adapt their tools for more to climb the ladder.

Conclusions

How can we make sense of all the complexities involved in even thinking about success given the many pitfalls and setbacks since the mass movement? One of these larger conversations revolves around the nature and extent of change. The late writer and activist Audre Lorde theorized, “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (Lorde 1984, 112). Embedded in her words is the historical understanding that only alternative forms of protest can transform the status quo in the long-term, rather than the aspiration to utilize only mainstream methods. Here I have focused on activists who were radical for their time and place, even revolutionary in some circles, but not militant or proponents of black nationalist rhetoric as articulated more audibly in the late 1960s. Including those who would completely shun the “master’s house” in the first place adds yet another layer of complexity to discussions about success. The narrower parameters, however, capture a debate that dominates black activism across the long trajectory of the black freedom struggle and continually comes to the fore in Clarksdale during the latter half of the twentieth century, and particularly now in the re-evaluation of racial politics against this recent past.

For the local people in Clarksdale, much was at stake. They needed access to the “master’s house” – whether the institutions of democratic government, like the House of Representatives; the seat of local landowning as in the “big house” of plantation owners; or simply that common civic sphere of small town life – to claim the rights and privileges of full citizenship. Yet once they attained it, once-outsiders (due to racial segregation), now insiders (whether elected officials or federal/state employees), lost much of their revolutionary edge as their class status elevated, and either could not resist mainstream pressure to bolster the status quo, or were stymied for their efforts. Those elevated became part of the structures of domination, and used, in theorist bell hooks’ words, “power in ways that reinforce rather than challenge or change” (hooks 1989, 36). The black freedom activists, broadly defined and within the parameters of the mass movement era, have both utilized the master’s tools to exact change from the system, through the legal and legislative processes, *and* rejected the tools in favor of civil disobedience through marches, boycotts and other public acts of resistance. In order for the continuing black freedom struggle to be effective, it needs to evolve – to rethink its strategies, its constituency and its goals. Times have changed, but so must the tools with which the continuing battle is fought.

The search for these tools has become even more urgent. There is a full tilt assault on civil rights that applies pressure from the voting booths to the Supreme Court. The 2012 national election that re-elected President Obama shone spotlights on the extent to which certain groups attempted to thwart democratic demonstrations of citizenship at the polls. With increased media coverage, enabled by wireless devices and cameras, such interventions backfired in many cases, yet state legislatures continue to push through restrictive voter identification requirements under the guise of preventing voter fraud. In 2013 the Supreme Court, currently occupied by more conservative justices, gutted most of the protections provided by the 1965 Voting Rights Act, continuing the steady undermining of that law since its inception.²⁴ The new problems activists face as they retool include finding innovative ways to dismantle legalized oppression. If doctrinal law, a great source of conflict and oppression, had yielded only partial successes (success for those higher on the economic ladder), what are the alternatives? Knowing the past enables us to see where we have come, where we are, and where we need to go. Clarksdale's story, like many other communities, has not finished by any means, just as the black freedom struggle continues.

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²⁴ <www.brennancenter.org> (accessed 6 April 2013); <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/26/us/supreme-court-ruling.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0> (accessed 24 July 2013).

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