Oral History and the History of the Civil Rights Movement

Kim Lacy Rogers

Protest movements are difficult to incorporate into the narrative framework of our national history. They are disruptive: thousands of formerly quiescent people engage in protest. Ideological positions polarize as insurgents publicly challenge national beliefs and traditions. The shock of violence—of death and political assassination—punctuates their history. American historians and political leaders often settle for an elitist interpretation of social change—an understandable development, given the paucity of traditional historical records generated by the masses of insurgents and the centrality of electoral politics in the American tradition. Mass mobilization is attributed to great or charismatic leadership, and the leaders of movements are drafted into a sanitized pantheon of Great Men. The disruptions and subversive implications of the movements recede from historical vision as the progress produced by protest is memorialized by three-day weekends and commemorative coins.

In recent years, the national veneration of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., has followed this pattern and has perhaps distorted the image of the civil rights movement that brought him to prominence. As Clayborne Carson, James H. Cone, and Vincent Gordon Harding have asserted, the recent canonization of King ignores his evolving radicalism in the middle 1960s. It also obscures the local origins and strengths of the civil rights movement itself. By separating King’s radical critique of American society from parallel developments among the younger activists of the black struggle, and by overlooking the process of mobilization at local levels, the liberal interpreters of the King legend diminish the radical and populist origins of the civil rights movement. Such interpretations also obscure the movement’s real consequences—a transformed black political consciousness, the increased political efficacy of thousands of movement leaders and participants, and expanded opportunities and possibilities for all black Americans.1

Kim Lacy Rogers is assistant professor of history at Dickinson College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania. The author would like to thank the archivists who provided valuable assistance in the preparation of this article.

Oral history is a critical source for scholars attempting to understand the civil rights movement and social movements in general. In oral history sources, a researcher can find abundant evidence of the local genesis of the civil rights movement, the radicalism of the grass-roots rural base, and the changes in individual and collective consciousness that movement participation produced. Oral history can yield evidence rarely available in contemporary written records. For example, interviews often reveal the complexity of organizational decision making. The narratives of participants in negotiations, planning sessions, or face-to-face encounters can document the array of options that actors perceived as available and thus bring into focus the conflicts and difficulties of decision making in the movement.²

Of greatest importance is the contribution that oral history can make to our understanding of the genesis and sustenance of social movements. Oral history documents mass mobilization at an individual level. Narratives frequently reveal the changes of heart and mind that movement participation produces. Narrators describe the changing consciousness that accompanies movement activity as they recount their own journeys from alienation to resistance, from a passive anger or fatalism to political action. Often, they describe experiences that led them to reinterpret social reality in ways that affirmed their own histories and perceptions rather than those of the dominant political culture. Finally, interviews reveal the psychological growth in activists—a redefining of human possibilities and capacities. As Rudy Lombard, a leader in the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), asserted in 1988, the movement “gave us a vehicle for confronting the things we were supposedly to fear the most. And it has been a hallmark in my life. I don’t have many fears, and haven’t had any since the 1960s.” The process of growth gives activists an enhanced sense of political efficacy, as they critique the culture that has oppressed them and challenge it politically.³ Such personal and political developments generate and sustain mass movements at local and national levels. Thus oral history connects the individual to the collective experience of a social movement.

Like other historical documents, oral narratives require scrutiny and analysis. Researchers need to be aware of the place that movement participation often plays in the retrospective accounts of activists. Social movement memories, focusing on moments when people felt themselves participants in History itself, often evoke extraordinarily powerful narratives. Researchers need to be attuned to the propensity


³ Dr. Rudy Lombard, interview by Kim Lacy Rogers, June 6, 1988. This interview will be available to researchers in the Kim Lacy Rogers–Glenda B. Stevens Collection (Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, La.) by the fall of 1990. See Daniel A. Foss and Ralph Larkin, Beyond Revolution: A New Theory of Social Movements (South Hadley, 1986), 28–107; and Doug McAdam, Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970 (Chicago, 1982), 36–64.
of human memory to retain more vivid memories of dramatic events than of more mundane experiences. Actors also possess a tendency to move themselves to the center of a political event or conflict even when other individuals or a collectivity may have been more important in generating the event. Researchers need to be sensitive to the value of a multiplicity of perspectives when attempting to reconstruct events and decision-making processes.

Scholars also need to be aware of the function of the interview itself for the former activists. In recent years, writers have examined narratives as texts that reveal both social and individual change, and as psychological constructs that reconcile actors to the dailiness of postmovement life. Historians interested in the function of oral autobiography for narrators, and in the changing nature of retrospective accounts, can consult a growing literature in psychology, anthropology, and oral history.

Whether researchers are interested in the reconstruction of specific events or in individual and collective changes in political consciousness, oral histories in existing collections offer them a rich documentation of the civil rights movement. Oral histories provide dramatic retrospective accounts of activists' changing consciousness. The starting point was often anger. In a 1968 interview, Mississippi leader Unita Blackwell revealed the alienation of rural blacks in the segregated South. Recalling her experiences as an agricultural laborer in the Deep South, she stated that "you're always reminded ... that you was black and you just didn't have the privileges, you know, [of] the white people. And, I've just been mad a long, long time." Despite the risks of activism, she welcomed organizers from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) when they appeared in her community.

A sense of awakening possibility and growing personal strength emerges in many narratives. In a 1984 interview SNCC activist John O'Neal described the impact of the 1955–1956 Montgomery bus boycott as "galvanizing" to blacks like himself.

It was just POOM! You know. . . . It was an idea just plugged into where people were emotionally. It was just absolutely right. It was just poom, a shock all over — I'm sure it happened all over the country the same way, just wham! That's right, you know. Stand up.

O'Neal saw the boycott as electrifying because it offered an effective way to "do what is right." Blacks were liberated by the boycott because they could act morally and

---


A SNCC bumper sticker, 1965.

Courtesy John O'Neal Papers, Amistad Research Center at Tulane University.
effectively. "It was so simple. Don't get on the bus. Boom! You know? It was so right, and so brilliant in its simplicity."8

Similarly, SNCC activist Charles Sherrod described his decision to go to jail in Rock Hill, South Carolina, as a "turning point" in his life.

I had never experienced anything like that before. . . . I guess there was nothing else more radical for me to do than death . . . I came out with this theory, based on my philosophy, as, well, if I accept death, there is nothing that anybody can do to me. What else can they do besides—well, now there is a sense that there's a lot of things that people can do to you—to me—besides killing me. But that was my theory, anyway, then. If I could deal with death, the ever-present threat of death, then jail is just another house.9

Oral narratives also document the emergence of racial, class, and ideological divisions within the civil rights movement. Class divisions opened between middle-class black leaders, who were oriented toward national electoral politics, and rural and working-class activists, whose allegiances were to the movement's grass-roots base. In Mississippi, tensions between the state's National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) leadership and the rural masses surfaced during the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's (MFDP) challenge to the lily-white state delegation at the 1964 Democratic convention in Atlantic City. As Blackwell recalled it, the "big fish" of the movement urged the grass-roots activists to accept the convention's "compromise" offer of two at-large delegates instead of attempting to unseat the white Mississippi delegation. Blackwell's narrative illustrates her conviction that the middle-class black leaders were themselves being manipulated by the forces supporting Lyndon B. Johnson. The "big fish," she said, did not "seem to understand the trick they be put in, for them to come in and use their own people." Blackwell and her colleagues rejected the Democrats' offer because

we didn't have anything to compromise with, you know, nothing but our lives and so on. Folks been dying in Mississippi and everywhere else, you know. What is we got to compromise for?10

The danger and death that many activists faced changed their commitments to nonviolence; their radicalization is amply illustrated by oral history narratives. Dr. Rudy Lombard of CORE witnessed white terrorism and police attacks against blacks as he worked on projects in Louisiana and Mississippi. In 1979 he recalled that

in the year of the March on Washington, I thought that we were giving up too much; too many people were getting killed for what little we were getting. I felt very sensitive about being involved with something that risked so much. Too many people had gotten brutalized—and that was the way it was going to be. I didn't want to do that anymore.

9 Charles Sherrod interview by Bret Eynon, May 12, 1985, transcript, p. 41, *ibid*.
10 Blackwell interview, 16, 18.
... now with your hand, pull the lever down.

A 1965 Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party poster invokes three civil rights workers murdered the year before. *Courtesy John O'Neal Papers, Amistad Research Center at Tulane University.*

You lose your naiveté. You lose your innocence after awhile . . . You realize that you're not . . . you don't have what Martin Luther King wants you to have. You don't want to fight all the adversity and still love people. It's too much to ask.11

Finally, oral history narratives document the reinterpretation of social reality that evolved in the day-to-day struggles of the movement and reveal actors' enhanced sense of political efficacy. According to SNCC veteran Bernice Reagon, the movement, "being Black at the bottom, offered up the possibility of a thorough analysis of society." Collective action "gave participants a glaring analysis of who and where they were in society." Though activists often express a profound disappointment with the politics and culture of contemporary America, and a cynicism about political change that is at odds with the great hopefulness of the movement's early years,

11 Dr. Rudy Lombard interview by Rogers, May 9, 1979, transcript, pp. 8-9, Kim Lacy Rogers–Glenda B. Stevens Collection.
many credit the struggle for their identities as political actors, and their ongoing commitment to social change. For many individuals, political analysis and action did not end with the passage of federal legislation and the ending of legal segregation. Movement activists, said Reagon,

came away from their Civil Rights Movement experiences with a greater facility for seeing a wide range of questions. For many, there is no end nor rest. The Civil Rights Movement was only a beginning. Its dispersion continues to be manifested in ever-widening circles of evaluation of civil and human rights afforded by this society.\textsuperscript{12}

Both the local genesis of the civil rights movement and the impact of activism on the lives of movement participants are documented in oral history collections housed in archives and research institutions. Not all collections are transcribed; researchers can benefit from an exposure to the original tape recordings. The focuses of collections vary: some are nationally oriented and include interviews with participants from a variety of communities and political affiliations; others are more regionally and locally oriented. Other, more specialized archives are organized around the life or work of a specific individual or group. Yet others are focused on the role of a specific institution or group in generating social change. Some available materials cannot be easily found in existing finding aids. Allen Smith’s recent \textit{Directory of Oral History Collections} lists only five collections devoted to civil rights issues\textsuperscript{13} As historians do in searching for other kinds of documentary evidence, they must check available finding aids, use ingenuity in identifying repositories that might house collections containing oral history materials, and contact such institutions. The listing of collections in this essay is by no means complete.

Of the nationally oriented civil rights oral history collections, the largest and most diverse is the Civil Rights Documentation Project (also called the Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection) at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University in Washington, D.C. The collection contains some seven hundred interviews with movement participants from a variety of locations and ideological perspectives. Although the project is an active, ongoing concern, many of the interviews were taped between 1967 and 1971. Narrators include members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), SNCC, CORE, and the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF). Attorneys affiliated with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, the National Lawyers’ Guild, and the National Conference of Black Lawyers were interviewed, as well as movement veterans Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, and John Lewis, and such white southern activists as Anne Braden of SCEF, and Clifford and Virginia Durr.\textsuperscript{14}

The Howard collection and that generated by the staff of Blackside for the six-part

\textsuperscript{12} Dick Cluster, ed., \textit{They Should Have Served That Cup of Coffee} (Boston, 1979), 35–36.


\textsuperscript{14} For a partial listing of this collection, see Vincent J. Browne and Norma O. Leonard, eds., \textit{Bibliography of Holdings of the Civil Rights Documentation Project} (Washington, 1974).
television documentary "Eyes on the Prize," are oriented towards significant events in the civil rights movement, rather than the life histories of the activists. Such collections offer multiple perspectives on local and national events, but they are often thin in revealing the changes in individual lives that movement participation produced, and they offer only fragmentary documentation of specific community struggles. Tapes and transcripts of the 165 interviews conducted by the Blackside staff will be donated to an appropriate archive though they will remain under the jurisdiction of the Civil Rights Project. These materials should be available to researchers by 1990. Blackside is currently producing a second series on the civil rights movement through the mid-1970s. This projected eight-part series should bring the total number of interviews to 450, and like the first set of interviews, the second will eventually become available to researchers.15

The oral history collections of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta, Georgia contain a more specialized set of narratives. Some 500 interviews are related to the life and career of King himself, to SCLC associates, to SNCC campaigns in Mississippi in 1964 and 1965, and to the MFDP. The Martin Luther King, Jr., Oral History Collection contains more than 100 interviews with King's childhood and family friends, his colleagues in SCLC and other organizations, and King family members. The collection includes interviews with Yolanda and Coretta Scott King, NAACP leader and Montgomery activist E. D. Nixon, Dr. Benjamin Mays of Morehouse College, and the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth of SCLC. The Center's Civil Rights Oral History Collections include four other relevant collections. The Donald H. Smith Collection also contains interviews with King, with King family members, and with SCLC associates. The James Forman Collection contains 291 tapes that include interviews with members of SNCC and the MFDP. This collection is focused on events in the Mississippi summer campaigns of the mid-1960s and in the Selma-to-Montgomery march in 1965. Some of the tapes also document cultural activities and music from freedom schools and meetings. The Anne Romaine Oral History Collection contains interviews with MFDP organizers Baker, Hamer, Annie Devine, and others. Finally, the Hosea Williams Collection contains a diverse array of audio materials, including speeches, sermons, music, tapes of meetings, and radio interviews. While those collections offer a rich evidentiary base for scholars interested in King and the SCLC, and the SNCC and MFDP campaigns, they seem to offer a narrower view of the movement as a whole than the Howard and Blackside collections do.

A more regional collection is part of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The twenty-seven activists interviewed reflect the diversity of southern leaders. Some interviewees were affiliated with the Southern Regional Council (SRC), a liberal organization dedicated to improving race relations in the segregated and postmovement South, including Leslie Dunbar, Marion Wright, Alice Spearman Wright, Ruth Vick, and others. The collection also

15 Inquiries should be addressed to the Civil Rights Project, Inc., 486 Shawmut Avenue, Boston, MA 02118.
includes interviews with activists like Daisy Bates of Arkansas, and SNCC activists like former state Senator Julian Bond of Georgia, and SCLC activists like Mayor Andrew Young of Atlanta. The strength of this collection lies in the diversity of perspectives represented in the interviews; scholars interested in more localized evidence should consult more locally oriented collections.

Such projects as those at the Greensboro Public Library in Greensboro, North Carolina, and at the University of Alabama, Birmingham, offer researchers diverse perspectives on the civil rights movement in a single community. Greensboro's collection features seventy-three interviews with student activists, their parents, black religious leaders and their white counterparts, and many CORE leaders, including the Reverend Elton B. Cox, Gordon Carey, and Lewis A. Brandon. Also in the Greensboro collection are interviews with local educators and with white businessmen who were involved in negotiations with civil rights leaders in the 1960s. The University of Alabama, Birmingham's oral history collection includes interviews with eighteen individuals active in Alabama's civil rights struggle. The collection features material on the movement in Birmingham, the integration of the city's schools, and Alabama politics. The tapes include interviews with Virginia and Clifford Durr, businessman A. G. Gaston, the Reverend Abraham Woods, and attorney Charles Morgan, Jr. This collection is housed in the history department of the University of Alabama, Birmingham.

The Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, New Orleans, is strongest on locally oriented oral history materials. The Thomas C. Dent Papers contain interviews with some twenty-six civil rights leaders from Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas. The Dent Papers include interviews with Free Southern Theater veterans John O'Neal and Robert Costley, and Mississippi movement leaders Unita Blackwell, C. O. Chinn, and Annie Devine. The Kim Lacy Rogers—Glenda B. Stevens Collection contains interviews with forty-two civil rights activists and community leaders from New Orleans. Like the Greensboro collection—though it is not as extensive in scope—this collection includes interviews with leaders of the NAACP, Urban League, CORE, SCEF, and various ad hoc organizations. Smaller oral history collections are part of Amistad's holdings of the Committee on Civil Rights in Metropolitan New York, Inc., Papers and the Lula B. Reed Papers. In addition, Amistad has several large oral history collections oriented to black history and to the black experience under segregation.

A different, but equally relevant set of interviews is part of the student movement of the 1960s project at Columbia University's Oral History Collection. The project is focused on local and national leaders of the American student movement of the 1960s and features eighteen participants in the civil rights struggle among the more than sixty individuals interviewed. The narrators' political careers support Bernice Reagon's claim about the continuity of political effort in activists' lives. Many narrators have followed what is by now a familiar trajectory: from SNCC and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), they moved to women's liberation, draft resistance, or black power, and then to community organizing or radical scholarship. These in-
terviews take more of a life-history approach than do the interviews of Blackside or those in Howard University, and they reveal the narrators' later assessments of the effect of their early activism.16

Another source for oral histories of the civil rights movement are the projects of the presidential libraries of Lyndon B. Johnson at Austin, Texas, and John F. Kennedy in Boston, Massachusetts. Those collections contain interviews with administration officials who helped formulate policy responses to the civil rights movement and to white terrorism. The collections also include some interviews with black leaders who moved in national circles. The Kennedy collection includes interviews with former attorney general Robert F. Kennedy, with Harris Wofford, special assistant to the president for civil rights, and with Justice Thurgood Marshall of the Supreme Court. The Kennedy material also contains interviews with NAACP executive director Roy Wilkins, CORE national director James Farmer, and Gov. John Patterson of Alabama, Gov. Ross Barnett of Mississippi, and other southern officials.17

Oral history materials document the institutional, organizational, community, and psychological history of the civil rights movement. They provide a basis for interpreting the genesis of movement mobilization and the sustenance of often-dangerous political activity. They also reveal the fissures and conflicts that accompany social movement success and failure. Most important, perhaps, oral narratives document the changing consciousness of activists as they move from alienation to resistance to a sense of collective and individual political efficacy. If used with care and discrimination, oral narratives can restore the local, individual, and collective dimensions to our historical interpretations of the civil rights movement.

Oral narratives allow researchers to discover the individual actors of a mass movement, and to appreciate the vitality and strength of local institutions that provided the base for the national civil rights struggle. Interviews reveal the genesis of the black revolt and document the transformative impact of social movement activism. This record undermines the almost reflexive mythologizing of our political culture because the voice of protest speaks of the possibilities of human action that a social movement makes real. The oral history of the civil rights movement indicates that social change is not simply a matter of Great Men and legislation, but a far more complex process that engages ordinary individuals in a revolutionary transformation of their own lives.

17 National Archives and Records Administration, Historical Materials in the John F. Kennedy Library (Boston, 1986), 44-83.