

CARROLL C. ARNOLD DISTINGUISHED LECTURE 2016

DREAMS OF UNION, DAYS OF CONFLICT:

Communicating Social Justice and
Civil Rights Memory in the Age of Barack Obama



KIRT H. WILSON
PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY



ON OCTOBER 8, 1994, the Administrative Committee of the National Communication Association established the Carroll C. Arnold Distinguished Lecture. The Arnold Lecture is given in plenary session each year at the annual convention of the Association and features the most accomplished researchers in the field. The topic of the lecture changes annually so as to capture the wide range of research being conducted in the field and to demonstrate the relevance of that work to society at large.

The purpose of the Arnold Lecture is to inspire not by words but by intellectual deeds. Its goal is to make the members of the Association better informed by having one of its best professionals think aloud in their presence. Over the years, the Arnold lecture will serve as a scholarly stimulus for new ideas and new ways of approaching those ideas. The inaugural Lecture was given on November 17, 1995.

The Arnold Lecturer is chosen each year by the First Vice President. When choosing the Arnold Lecturer, the First Vice President is charged to select a long-standing member of NCA, a scholar of undisputed merit who has already been recognized as such, a person whose recent research is as vital and suggestive as his or her earlier work, and a researcher whose work meets or exceeds the scholarly standards of the academy generally.

The Lecture has been named for Carroll C. Arnold, the late Professor Emeritus of Pennsylvania State University. Trained under Professor A. Craig Baird at the University of Iowa, Arnold was the coauthor (with John Wilson) of *Public Speaking as a Liberal Art*, author of *Criticism of Oral Rhetoric* (among other works), and co-editor of *The Handbook of Rhetorical and Communication Theory*. Although primarily trained as a humanist, Arnold was nonetheless one of the most active participants in the New Orleans Conference of 1968 which helped put social scientific research in communication on solid footing. Thereafter, Arnold edited *Communication Monographs* because he was fascinated by empirical questions. As one of the three founders of the journal *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Arnold also helped move the field toward increased dialogue with the humanities in general. For these reasons and more, Arnold was dubbed "The Teacher of the Field" when he retired from Penn State in 1977. Dr. Arnold died in January of 1997.



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DREAMS OF UNION, DAYS OF CONFLICT:

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Following is a transcript of the 2016 Carroll C. Arnold Distinguished Lecture as delivered.



IN 1992, THE POLITICAL SCIENTIST ANDREW HACKER published a book titled *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal*. The title came from one of the most important texts of the civil rights movement, the 1968 report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. After successive summers of unrest, President Johnson had asked the Kerner Commission to discover why the nation's cities were exploding. The committee answered with a stark warning: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal."¹ Twenty-four years later, Andrew Hacker claimed that this warning had come true. White and black Americans did not enjoy the same civic privileges. He wrote, "when white people hear the cry, 'the police are coming!' for them it almost always means, 'help is on the way.' Black citizens cannot make the same assumption. ... If you are black and young and a man, the arrival of the police does not usually signify help, but something very different."² Because of differences in experience and perception, Hacker claimed that African Americans responded to the nation's civic calling with reservation. He said,

If you are black, you cannot easily join in the anthem's refrain, reciting the pledge, or affirming that your country is committed to equality. While you grant that the United States is 'your' country, you may define your citizenship as partial and qualified. It is not that you are 'disloyal,' ... Rather, you feel no compelling commitment to a republic that has always rebuffed you and your people.³

I begin my lecture with Hacker's book for two reasons.

First, *Two Nations* makes the traditional distinction between scholarship and civic action simultaneously useful and inadequate. Hacker heard a civic calling to redress social injustice, but his response was grounded in his research. The distinction between scholarship and civic action, as well as its Derridean erasure, is relevant for our conference.

Communication scholars often explain our work as an effort to understand human relations, but the theme of this year's conference goes further. It suggests that we are called upon to speak to matters of social inequity; knowledge creation is not enough.

No doubt many here applaud this conference theme, but others are deeply suspicious. Please know that although my lecture will highlight what is at stake in the callings of civil society, I will not presume to tell you what your response should be. If Audre Lorde were to address you this afternoon, she probably would say two things: First, your silence will not keep you safe; therefore, it is better to speak. Second, I cannot do your moral reasoning for you. You must perform it yourself. In addition, I want to acknowledge that there are many different civic callings. Professor Tom Benson told me recently that Carroll C. Arnold was the faculty advisor for the Young Republicans Club at Cornell University in the 1950s. He took that responsibility very seriously. At one point, Professor Arnold threatened to resign if the club followed through with its plan to invite Senator Joe McCarthy to campus. After the election of this past week, we might ask ourselves whether we are called to take a stand, if not in the streets then at least on our campuses.⁴

The second reason that I begin with Hacker's book is because it illustrates the topical concerns of my presentation. If we are going to hold a conference that investigates Communication's Civic Callings, then we must first understand the nature of the civil society to which we are called. The problems that Hacker explored in *Two Nations* have been a part of African American experience since the early Republic. They were the central theme of Frederick Douglass's famous Fifth of July oration. Embracing the subject position of a slave, Douglass declared:

I say it with a sad sense of the disparity between us. I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessing in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not be me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth [of] July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn.⁵

Today, we confront the incongruities of race and citizenship again, but in a new guise. Weeks before the close of the first black presidency, and only a month after the National Museum of African American History and Culture opened its doors, the splash page of that museum's web site proudly proclaims, "A People's Journey, A Nation's Story."⁶ Based on this evidence, it would seem that the story of black America is now the nation's narrative. But, at the same time, we have also re-entered a period of civil unrest, when citizens from Ferguson to Philadelphia declare that state-sanctioned violence against people of color is rampant. How and why does this incongruity exist?

Building from my current work in collective memory and the civil rights movement, I propose that we spend some time thinking together about what our civil society is and how it calls to us as scholars and human beings. Toward that end, I will examine two memories of the civil rights movement. The first memory is embedded in the rhetoric of President Barack Obama. In the coming moments, I will argue that the collective memory constructed by President Obama gives rise to a nationalist vision of civil society that builds cohesion, authorizes disruptive civic action, but ultimately restricts that action to the interests of nationhood. The second example stems from the 2014 film *Selma*. This film invites us to consider a feminist revision of Obama's memory and a different vision of civil society. This vision focuses on the integrity of lived experience and structural inequities prior to, and perhaps in place of, any commitment to nationhood.



SINCE THE EARLY 1990s, U.S. citizens have engaged in a widespread and accelerating process of memory creation about the civil rights movement. The communication through which we remember the movement takes multiple forms including, but not limited to, monuments, museums, annual celebrations, poetry, fiction, revised textbooks, television specials, film, re-enactments, and speeches. Lots and lots of speeches.⁷ Because of this memory work, a social movement that once divided the country has become an important part of the nation's symbolic and material economies. From Montgomery to Washington, DC, the spaces of political demonstration have become sites of commemoration. Simultaneously, these spaces have become important sites of tourism and economic development.⁸

Our collective civil rights memory affects how we discuss our civic and social interests in the present. For example, when the Supreme Court invalidated Section 4 of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, Chief Justice John Roberts explained the decision through a particular configuration of memory. He praised the 1965 law, but then he remembered it as a legacy of a successful and completed social movement. Because the movement had achieved its goals, federal oversight of state elections was unnecessary, even though, as he also admitted, voting discrimination was still a problem.⁹ In contrast, Justice Ginsburg's minority opinion offered a rival account of the civil rights movement. She affirmed that current discrimination proved that the civil rights movement was not yet complete. The Voting Rights Act was, therefore, still relevant and necessary. The conclusion that memory studies asks us to consider here is that Justice Ginsburg and Justice Roberts were *not* separated by different methods of historical analysis. Instead, each opinion participated in a different memory and, consequently, led to divergent obligations in the present. Memory is always partial and incomplete, but it is, nevertheless, consequential. It has real political and material effects.

Several rhetoric scholars are interested in these effects. Carole Blair, Victoria Gallagher, Kristen Hoerl, Vanessa Beasley, Davis Houck, David Tell, Sarah Jackson, and Kristan Poirot have published or are working currently on projects that interpret the complexity and contradictions of civil rights memory.¹⁰ Today, I want to focus on just one function of civil rights memory: its ability to define the nature of civil society and its callings. With respect to this function, President Barack Obama and the 1965 voting rights campaign in Selma, Alabama play a special role.



FROM JANUARY TO MARCH IN 1965, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the SCLC joined forces with SNCC and local activists to draw the nation's attention to the systemic violation of black voting rights in Alabama. The three-month campaign would become the catalyst for some of the most violent confrontations of the movement. At the same time, these events became the impetus that President Johnson and Congress needed to pass the 1965 Voting Rights Act. As President, Obama has mentioned the voting rights campaign on over 62 separate occasions. Sometimes he references Selma in passing, but at other times he constructs an elaborate memory of the campaign that redefines civil society and how we, as citizens, are called to serve it.

On March 7, 2015, President Obama stood in front of the Edmund Pettus bridge and addressed an audience gathered to commemorate a violent moment in U.S. history. Exactly 50 years before, black protestors had marched across the bridge to highlight the daily acts of intimidation and terror that had culminated in the murder of Jimmy Lee Jackson by an Alabama state trooper. As the protestors marched over the bridge, they were met by local and state authorities. When they refused to disperse, officers on horseback and on foot began beating them. The media broadcast the confrontation nationally, and the day became known as Bloody Sunday.

Obama's speech defines the events of March 7 as a living memory by initially focusing on the figure of John Lewis. Congressman Lewis had co-led the march in 1965, and he shared the stage with the President in 2015. The President begins his speech by narrating the sensations that Lewis and his colleagues must have felt that morning, noting that "the air was thick with doubt, anticipation, and fear."¹¹ Through this first-person narration, Obama prompts the audience to feel what the protestors felt and see what the protestors saw. Speaking in front of the Edmund Pettus bridge aids this collective remembrance, because the bridge acts as a mnemonic device that collapses the audience's present into John Lewis's past.

After framing Bloody Sunday as a memory, the President moves from the personal and local to the national. He compares Selma to other sites of memory—Concord and Lexington, Independence Hall, Gettysburg, Appomattox, Seneca Falls, and Cape Canaveral. Each of these places revealed the character of the nation, according to Obama. Selma is such a place; it is where the "nation's destiny" was decided. He then states:

In one afternoon 50 years ago, so much of our turbulent history—the stain of slavery and anguish of civil war, the yoke of segregation and tyranny of Jim Crow, the death of four little girls in Birmingham, and the dream of a Baptist preacher—all that history met on this bridge. It was not a clash of armies, but a clash of wills; a contest to determine the true meaning of America.¹²

Here, in the early moments of his address, we see how the memory that Obama is crafting is about more than just local commemoration. It is a particular construction of nationhood.

The racial progress that Obama so often lauds in his speeches results from a shift in which African and European Americans become collaborators in civil society. This association, for which Obama's own amazing success is an embodied proof, is also at the heart of his civil rights memory. In reference to how people responded after the violence of Bloody Sunday was broadcast nationally, the President states, "Black and White, young and old, Christian and Jew, waving the American flag, singing the same anthems full of faith and hope, they all came." And why did they come to Selma? He answers, "[They came] because they shared something—a faith in God, a faith in America, and, most importantly, a faith in the idea that America is not yet complete."¹³

This argument, more than any other, structures Obama's vision of nationhood and civil society. He defines the nation not as a geographic space or as a unique constitutional government, but as an experiment in democracy that requires the participation of concerned citizens. He explains:

What greater form of patriotism is there than the belief that America is not yet finished, that ... each successive generation can look upon our imperfections and decide that it is in our power to remake this Nation to more closely align with our highest ideals?... That's why [Selma is] not a museum or a static monument to behold from a distance. It is instead the manifestation of a creed written into our founding documents. ... "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."¹⁴

According to the President, the memory of Selma reveals the ideology and the obligations of civil society. American citizenship is bound to the Declaration of Independence and a belief in "the idea ... that America is a constant work in progress ... that loving this country requires more than singing its praises or avoiding uncomfortable truths. It requires the occasional disruption, the willingness to speak out for what is right, to shake up the status quo. That's America. That's what makes us unique."¹⁵

Before I continue, I want to draw your attention to three important consequences of Obama's civil rights memory. First, it makes room for a civic calling that includes the occasional disruption and social protest. The agitator becomes a crucial part of civil society in the President's vision. She is a patriot who reminds us that the country is never finished. In addition, she identifies which imperfections society must address next. Second, Obama's memory sutures civil society so closely to nationhood that it is difficult to see where one begins and the other ends. Indeed, the agitator is important within Obama's rhetorical vision because her commitment to America's first principles lead her to protest. This is an important rhetorical innovation. Through the power of his office, Obama injects the black jeremiadic tradition directly into our mythic narrative of America's divine mission to the world. The black jeremiad has been an important part of social protest from David Walker and Frederick Douglass in the 19th century to Mary McLeod Bethune and Martin Luther King, Jr. in the 20th century.¹⁶ In Obama's rhetoric, however, what was once a controversial demand that white America live up to its declared belief in freedom and equality becomes an affirmation that, in fact, the country is living up to those principles by remembering Selma as a site of national importance. Now, presumably, anyone can perform the rhetorical patterns of the black jeremiad, because these patterns are no longer informed by the experience of racism but by a belief in America's founding principles and a commitment to march toward "a more perfect Union."

But, third, even as Obama's memory makes agitation an essential part of nationhood, it also constrains the proper methods and ends of that protest. Social protest should look like the civil rights movement of the President's memory. It should be interracial. It should engage in non-violent action that is disruptive, but not threatening. It should reject cynicism and despair in favor of a democratic faith in the myth of American exceptionalism and its capacity for change. Finally, it should end in tradition politics, in new law. Obama explained,

There's nothing American can't handle if we actually look squarely at the problem. And this is work for all Americans, not just some. ... If we want to honor the courage of those who marched that day, then all of us are called to possess their moral imagination. All of us will need to feel as they did the fierce urgency of now. All of us need to recognize as they did that change depends on our actions, on our attitudes, the things we teach our children. And if we make such an effort, no matter how hard it may sometimes seem, laws can be passed and consciences can be stirred and consensus can be built.¹⁷

These are stirring words. They express a faith and inspiration that I desperately want to believe in, especially after Tuesday's election. But belief and faith and hope are not enough. They have never been enough, and Obama is right to say that "change depends on our actions." But before we march forward, we need to interrogate further the action that the President proposes.

Two events of this past Spring provide that opportunity. In April 2016, President Obama spoke to a young audience in London and offered his assessment of current protests in America. He said:

I think that what, for example, Black Lives Matter is doing now to bring attention to the problem of a criminal justice system that sometimes is not treating people fairly ... has been really effective. ... [But] one of the things I caution young people about ... is, once you've highlighted an issue ... and elected officials or people who are in a position to start bringing about change are ready to sit down with you, then you can't just keep yelling at them ... The value of social movements and activism is to get you at the table, get you in the room.¹⁸

In May, the President told the graduating class at Howard University something similar: "Democracy requires compromise, even when you are 100 percent right." "We remember Dr. King's soaring oratory, the power of his 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail,' the marches he led. But he also sat down with President Johnson in the Oval Office to try and get a Civil Rights Act and a Voting Rights Act passed. And those two seminal bills were not perfect ... But they made things better."¹⁹ Thus, to the President's stirring rendition of the black jeremiad he adds the political advice of Henry Clay. I'm ashamed to admit it, but I have never been a fan of Clay.

For Communication scholars who want to engage in civic action beyond the classroom, Obama's civil rights memory points the way. It begins with an inspired message and media attention and then transitions into the pragmatic politics of incremental change. Choose your leaders. Construct your demands. Grab the nation's attention. Get to the table. Work toward a compromise that makes things a little better. Repeat as necessary. These are tried and true modes of republican government, but let me ask a question. Is our civil society healthy enough to make this process successful? I'm not asking because of the election results of Tuesday. It is too easy for Democrats and Republicans alike to get pulled into despair or exultation after each election. What I'm asking is this: Do the past eight or 12 or 20 years give you confidence that the aim of protest should be to get inside, to get a seat at the table of power? If you asked individuals from the Black Lives Matter Movement, spokespeople like "Netta" Elzie, DeRay Mckesson or Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, they probably would respond with an emphatic No!

Members of Black Lives Matter do not see the civil rights movement as an unqualified success, and they have rebuffed the assistance of former civil rights leaders.²⁰ This, along with the fact that "the face of the Black Lives Matter movement is largely queer and female,"²¹ has led media pundits to the conclusion that today's protestors have rejected the movement.²² This assessment is wrong. Black Lives Matter has rejected modes of organization and action that constitute our limited *memory* of the civil rights movement. In addition, they resist the civic calling that most of our political leaders draw from that memory. Contemporary protestors are not motivated by a faith in American exceptionalism or the country's capacity for change. They acknowledge that the whiteness that once over-determined civil society has fractured, but they point to anti-black violence as evidence of its continued power. To understand contemporary protestors, we need to consider what Orlando Patterson and Saidiya Hartman define as the "social death" of slavery.²³

Critical theorists of race have offered a controversial reinterpretation of the condition we call slavery. They argue that slavery's most important features were never its legal or economic structures. The core elements of slavery were, instead, (a) the dehumanization of people of color, (b) a regime of terror, violence, and intimidation in which the slave was unable to protect his or her body, (c) the master's control of the social, civil, and even personal relations that existed between the slave and others. Defined in this way, current theorists contend that slavery is not confined to the past; these conditions can and do continue.

The term "social death" is conceptualized from this position. It is the transformation of human beings into objects that have no identity and, therefore, no social relationships apart from those that slavery creates for them. The slave can be a friend or an enemy, a lover or a beast, an economic partner or personal property. The slave can even be president of the United States, the fulfillment of Dr. King's "Dream," or he can be a socialist, Muslim charlatan born in Kenya. The contradictions of these representations and their corresponding relationships do not matter, because the slave has no inherent being. The slave is only what slavery needs it to be.

It is difficult to think through slavery in this mode, but consider the thoughts of someone who was intimately acquainted with slavery. When the Civil War and the Thirteenth Amendment prompted many abolitionists to conclude that their reform societies were no longer needed, Frederick Douglass warned that slavery might not be dead. He said, "[They] would not call it slavery, but some other name. Slavery has been fruitful in giving itself names ... and it will call itself by yet another name; and you and I and all of us had better wait and see what new form this old monster will assume, in what new skin this old snake will come forth next."²⁴

Contemporary protestors believe that in 2016, the snake of slavery is evident in our prison systems and across black urban communities like Ferguson and parts of Philadelphia. Slavery re-emerges in the present, when the unique experiences that comprise blackness are erased by a society that requires their abrogation in return for civic participation. Social death transpires when the particular interests of black lives are subsumed by the general interests of the nation. This is why protestors resist Obama's call to compromise. At the negotiation table, they will be forced to discuss the conditions under which the death of a young black man is an unfortunate accident and not a crime. Was Michael Brown a dangerous thief? Was Trayvon Martin a mortal threat? Did Keith Lamont Scott have a gun in his hand? These are all reasonable questions in a society governed by traditional principles of individual justice; nevertheless, they are also the very questions that allow our society to ignore the degree to which blackness is still sutured to criminality even before any individual act has transpired.²⁵ A hoodie on a colored body is often all that it takes.

To be clear, Obama supports the message that black lives matter; nevertheless, the civil society of his civil rights memory leads to a moment when black being must enter into a contract with national being. Charles Mills would surely remind us that this might have been fine for Hobbes, but the contract is a trap for Black Lives Matter.²⁶ The incremental politics of making things better, generation after generation, will falter under the conditions of slavery. Slavery, like a snake, will simply evolve around those incremental changes. It will offer fame and fortune to a biracial young man who grew up with a single mother in a trailer park—I'm talking about myself—while slavery sustains the conditions in which another person with similar character, background, and intelligence slips easily into a prison system where involuntary servitude is constitutional.

We are faced, then, with an important question: Are there ways to remember the civil rights movement that address some of the concerns I have noted here? Can we build useful memories that create a civil society with alternative civic calls? I believe the answer is yes.



DIRECTOR AVA DUVERNAY IS A VOCAL PROPONENT of the idea that cultural production and entertainment have a civic calling. Her 2016 documentary film, *13th*, examines the history of U.S. incarceration and is an obvious example, but we also can see this principle in her fictional work like *Queen Sugar*. Here, I would like to consider three lessons from her 2014, Oscar-nominated film *Selma*. These lessons arise from a configuration of memory that focuses on the experiences of black women within the film, and they serve as either a complement or an alternative to Obama's memory. I will let you decide which.

Lesson #1: A feminist memory highlights the intersectional nature of oppression. Most collective memories of the civil rights movement focus on singular aspects of protest. The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom becomes King's "I Have a Dream Speech." The racial and gendered tensions in working class Montgomery, Alabama become Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her bus seat. The Selma campaign becomes either the violence of Bloody Sunday or the victorious marching of white and black protestors. For reasons that are perfectly understandable, but nonetheless limiting, the deep and complex texture of the civil rights movement is flattened. The movie *Selma* fights that urge.

In one of its early scenes, we watch as Annie Lee Cooper, played by Oprah Winfrey, tries to register to vote. A white registrar calls her name, "Annie Lee Cooper, get on up. I haven't got all day." In this call, the registrar interpolates Cooper into a specific relationship to himself. She is a supplicant; he is the authority. It is his time that matters. The registrar is immediately to business, but the business he pursues is not civic.²⁷ He states, "You work for Mr. Dun down at the rest home, ain't that right." With this line of dialogue, the film illustrates how voting rights and economic opportunity are intertwined. Then, immediately to the issues of class and race, the film adds patriarchy. The registrar says, "I wonder what old Dun will say when I tell him one of his gals is down here stirring a fuss." One of Dun's gals. Annie Lee Cooper belongs to Mr. Dun. She doesn't belong there, in the court house. She belongs back at work with all the other gals, taking care of the elderly who are mostly likely white. The threat here is clear. Her attempt to register, as a black woman, disrupts the peace. If she persists, she might not have a job to which she can return.

DuVernay's film puts the intersectional politics of gender, class, and race into conversation, but to this three-part mix the director adds the structural and personal dynamics of oppression. The registrar is an individual and he is the state. When Cooper hands over the paperwork, she says, "It's all right this time," but the registrar interrupts her—"It's right when I say it's right." It is his opinion that matters. He is both the conduit to civic participation and the gatekeeper who determines who may enter. He begins by requiring Cooper to recite the preamble to the Constitution. "You know what a preamble is?" he asks. When she succeeds, he asks her how many county judges there are in Alabama. After she answers, "67," he shakes his head slightly and, after a pause, says, "name them." In that command, the registrar has thrown down an obstacle that Cooper cannot overcome. In fact, she could never overcome the obstacles to her registration, because the interlocking systems of oppression can always invent more. Furthermore, the simultaneously personal and structural nature of Cooper's experience results in a situation where responsibility for the fact that Cooper can't vote is easily diffused. The state can say that it is not to blame; the registrar is acting out of personal prejudice. The registrar can say that he is not to blame; he is following the law. In this space, where neither official party is responsible, it is Cooper who is to blame for the denial of her application. This is often the case when the personal and institutional axes of oppression intersect.

The second lesson of a feminist memory of the civil rights movement problematizes the boundary between the public and private spheres. Our collective civil rights memory is typically a memory of brave deeds in public spaces. In point of fact, a lot of the work of the civil rights movement was performed in private. Most certainly the consequences of public advocacy were always borne out away from the public eye. One scene in the film offers a powerful depiction of how the boundary between public and private is undermined. It is the scene where Coretta Scott King confronts Martin Luther King, Jr. after they listen to a sex tape that purports to prove Martin's infidelity.²⁸

The scene that DuVernay constructs involves some speculation and a degree of fiction. Like most private scenes, there is no record, and those who were there have said little about it. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Dr. King's public agitation caused the federal government to investigate his private life. We know that the FBI wiretapped King's home and his hotel rooms. We know that the FBI was aware of King's extramarital affairs, and that an audio recording and a letter were sent to his home in an attempt to coerce him into leaving the movement. We also know that Coretta received the material and gave it to her husband. It is not likely, however, that the couple listened to the audio tape together as they do in the film. In addition, Coretta denied ever confronting Martin about the issue of infidelity.²⁹ Thus, Coretta's questions—"Do you love me? Do you love any of the others?"—are likely fictional, but they are not the most important dialogue of the scene.

Coretta tells Martin that because of his work, their family has "no foundation." Their children do not have the things that they need, "all because of how it would look." She has gotten used to this, for better or for worse. "But," she says, "what I have never gotten used to is the death, the constant closeness of death." This is the scene's key dialogue. It reveals how death and the threat of death were omnipresent for movement activists. Death was not just a public experience. Death was always felt in intimate, private spaces where parents, partners, and children were denied their loved ones. Death was both an individual and shared sorrow, a severing of relations forever.

Furthermore, the potential of death terrorized people in the movement. It created, in Coretta's words, a fog that kept a person from seeing life. What was true of death was true also of other dimensions of the civil rights movement. We must remember that the public and the private cannot be separated easily. When we forget this connection, we risk missing the very people and problems that most need our attention.

The third lesson of a feminist memory of the civil rights movement is closely related to the second. As we recognize that the boundary between public and private is unstable, we are confronted with the idea that the black body may not be a heroic site of civic action. The black body may be the vulnerable location of a violence that began in slavery and continues to this day. This idea is most evident in DuVernay's portrayal of Bloody Sunday.³⁰ In this scene, the metaphorical fog of death that Coretta described to Martin has become material. The bridge is shrouded with tear gas that indicates death's likely presence. White officers in teargas masks bludgeon the young and old, male and female as they attempt to flee. Of particular interest to me is how the scene reaches back in time to images of slavery. Especially in the slow shots of white men on horseback chasing down the black protestors, I am reminded of slaves running through the fog, pursued by slave hunters. Your gender, your age, the speed of your legs do not matter. The threat of death surrounds you and violence comes out of the mist. The whip that lays down the law is there and the distances between slavery and 1965 and today are collapsed in the memories of black audiences who have dreamed of this race before. It is not a race that they typically win.

Let's not flinch from this doubled memory. DuVernay's re-enactment of Bloody Sunday prompts us to remember the vulnerable body and our own collusion in its harm. We tend to remember the violence of the civil rights movement through the language of redemptive suffering or heroic sacrifice. With the exception of Emmett Till, our collective memory washes out all the blood in the grainy black and white photographs that line the walls of so many civil rights museums. Violence is acknowledged as historical fact; their loss is our gain. But there is nothing heroic in the images that DuVernay presents to us. The march of black citizens for justice is turned, at least for the moment, into black bodies lying on the ground, unconscious, bruised, bleeding. We are called upon to witness this scene and consider whether and how we are responsible for what we have seen. Their vulnerability is also our vulnerability, and the systems that made such violence happen in 1855 or 1965 may still persist today.

Of course, history did not end on Bloody Sunday. The film moves on and the images of suffering are replaced with black and white marchers moving forward into the future. The end of the movie coincides well with the memory of *Selma* that President Obama provided for us earlier. But I want to warn you away from the conclusion that the movie's final images are either redemptive or primarily about the nation. Their marching did not ease the physical or emotional wounds of Bloody Sunday. It did not change the minds and hearts of the white men and women who lined the road to Montgomery and called them nigger. Instead, the protestors marched to honor the dead and the dying. They marched out of love for themselves and their community. Many, but not all, marched because of a faith in God. But ultimately, they marched because the only life-affirming response to death and slavery is resistance, resistance "by any means necessary."



IF WE ARE REALLY GOING TO SAY that the civil rights movement is part of the American story, then we have an obligation to listen more closely to its call. That call begins with a request that each of us, in our own way and as the opportunities arise, stand up and declare, “**My life matters**. I have something to say and a civic responsibility to say it.” The civil rights movement advances a second call, which insists that we look at people who have interests, experiences, and needs that are not our own and say, “**Your life matters**. Please, tell me about it. I will listen, though I may not understand, and I will support the effort to see your life fulfilled.” The civil rights movement calls to us yet a third time, asking us to recognize that **structure matters**. Life is lived in and among material systems; therefore, we have to produce scholarship that considers whether existing structures are sufficient to meet the needs of the people that they are supposed to serve.

Finally, the civil rights movement calls to us a fourth time and it says, “**Black life matters**.” Not in some abstract expression about a community that we avoid on our way to work, but in the radical specificity of a single living being. We need to listen to this call, not for the sake of the nation or a mythic narrative that began with the Declaration of Independence. Black life matters not because we are marching toward a more perfect Union. Black life matters, because people are dead and they didn’t have to die. Black life matters, because more people will die tomorrow. Saying this doesn’t magically resolve the differences that sometimes make us two nations, hostile and unequal. Hard work is necessary. But maybe if we take this idea seriously, it could be enough for us to start again. So much of the civil rights movement comes down to one simple claim—life matters, in all of its specificity, faults, problems, and contradictions. Life matters. So does death. What more important calling for communication is there?





ENDNOTES

- ¹ *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968).
- ² **Andrew Hacker**, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 46.
- ³ **Hacker**, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal*, 47.
- ⁴ The Carroll C. Arnold Distinguished Lecture took place three days after the unexpected election of President Donald Trump. At the time, protests against the President-elect and his controversial campaign statements had erupted in many cities, including Philadelphia, the site of the 2016 NCA convention.
- ⁵ **Frederick Douglass**, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?: An Address Delivered in Rochester, New York, on 5 July 1852," in *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, ed. John W. Blastingham and John R. McKivigan (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 368.
- ⁶ This slogan appeared on the splash page of the museum's website after the museum's dedication and was still available as of December 8, 2016. See <https://nmaahc.si.edu>.
- ⁷ **Owen J. Dwyer**, "Interpreting the Civil Rights Movement: Place, Memory, and Conflict," *The Professional Geographer* 52, no. 4 (2000): 660-671.
- ⁸ **Dorit Wagner**, "The American South: From Civil Rights Struggle to Civil Rights Tourism," *American Studies* 56 (2012); Karen L. Cox, ed. *Destination Dixie Tourism and Southern History* University Press of Florida, 2012).
- ⁹ U.S. Supreme Court, "Shelby County V. Holder," 570(2013).
- ¹⁰ **Vanessa B. Beasley**, "Speaking At Selma: Presidential Commemoration and Bill Clinton's Problem of Invention," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (2014): 267-289; **Carole Blair** and **Neil Michel**, "Reproducing Civil Rights Tactics: The Rhetorical Performances of the Civil Rights Memorial," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2000): 31-55; **Victoria J. Gallagher**, "Remembering Together: Rhetorical Integration and the Case of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial," *Southern Communication Journal* 60, no. 2 (1995): 109-119; **Victoria J. Gallagher**, "Memory and Reconciliation in the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 2, no. 2 (1999): 303-320; **Kristen Hoerl**, "Mississippi's Social Transformation in Public Memories of the Trial Against Byron De La Beckwith for the Murder of Medgar Evers," *Western Journal of Communication* 72, no. 1 (2008) 62-82; **Kristen Hoerl**, "Burning Mississippi Into Memory? Cinematic Amnesia as a Resource for Remembering Civil Rights," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26, no. 1 (2009): 54-79; **Kristan Poirot** and **Shevaun E. Watson**, "Memories of Freedom and White Resilience: Place, Tourism, and Urban Slavery," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (2015): 91-116.
- ¹¹ **Barack Obama**, "Remarks Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery Marches for Voting Rights in Selma, Alabama," Online by **Gerhard Peters** and **John T. Woolley**, *The American Presidency Project* (March 7, 2015), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=109728>.
- ¹² **Obama**, "Remarks Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery Marches for Voting Rights in Selma, Alabama."

- ¹³ **Obama**, "Remarks Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery Marches for Voting Rights in Selma, Alabama."
- ¹⁴ **Obama**, "Remarks Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery Marches for Voting Rights in Selma, Alabama."
- ¹⁵ **Obama**, "Remarks Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery Marches for Voting Rights in Selma, Alabama."
- ¹⁶ **David Howard-Pitney**, *The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2005); **Wilson Jeremiah Moses**, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982), 8. For a more extended discussion of Obama's use of the American Jeremiad see **John M. Murphy**, "Barack Obama, the Exodus Tradition, and the Joshua Generation," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 97, no. 4 (2011): 387-410.
- ¹⁷ **Obama**, "Remarks Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery Marches for Voting Rights in Selma, Alabama."
- ¹⁸ **Obama**, "Remarks and a Question-and-answer Session at a Young Leaders of the United Kingdom Town Hall Meeting in London England," Online by **Gerhard Peters** and **John T. Woolley**, *The American Presidency Project* (April 23, 2016): <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=117100>.
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- ²⁰ **Jelani Cobb**, "The Matter of Black Lives." *The New Yorker*, 2016; **Jabari Asim**, "Standing in Blackness," *The Crisis* 122, no. 2 (2015), 29.
- ²¹ **Keeanga-Yamahita Taylor**, *From #blacklivesmatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), 165.
- ²² **J. Hooker**, "Black Lives Matter and the Paradoxes of U.S. Black Politics: From Democratic Sacrifice to Democratic Repair," *Political Theory* 44, no. 4 (2016): 448-469; **Taylor**, *From #blacklivesmatter to Black Liberation*, 165; **Clarence Lang**, "Ferguson, Baltimore and the Sixties," *The Crisis* 122, no. 3 (2015): 10-15.
- ²³ **Saidiya Hartman**, "The Time of Slavery," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (2002): 757-777; **Saidiya Hartman**, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). **Orlando Patterson**, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
- ²⁴ **Frederick Douglass**, "In What New Skin Will the Old Snake Come Forth?: An Address Delivered in New York, New York, on 10 May 1865," in *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, ed. John W. Blastingham and John R. McKivigan (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 85.
- ²⁵ **Khalil Gibran Muhammad**, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); **Carol Stabile**, "Criminalizing Black Culture," in *The Race and Media Reader*, ed. Gilbert B. Rodman (New York: Routledge, 2014).
- ²⁶ **Charles W. Mills**, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).
- ²⁷ Professor Wilson played three clips from the film *Selma* during his presentation. The first of these appeared at this point in the lecture. The scene of Annie Lee Cooper attempting to register to vote can be found in *Selma*, directed by Ava DuVernay (Hollywood, CA: Paramount Home Entertainment, 2015), DVD, 00:07:00-00:08:31.
- ²⁸ The confrontation described in the lecture between Coretta Scott King and Martin Luther King, Jr. can be found in *Selma*, 01:02:10-01:05:30.
- ²⁹ **Darryl Pinckney**, "Some Different Ways of Looking at Selma," *New York Review of Books*, February 19, 2015. Online at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/02/19/some-different-ways-looking-selma/>.
- ³⁰ The film's portrayal of the events of Bloody Sunday can be found in *Selma*, 01:14:15-01:17:50.



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