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Williams, Dwayne E.

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WILLIAMS, D

Liberating the Past from the Future, Liberating the Future from the Past: Race and Reconciliation in the United States and the New South Africa

Dwayne E. Williams

Susquehanna University

AWS 434

Democracy and history always live in a kind of tension with each other. Nations use history to build a sense of national identity, pitting the demands for stories that build solidarity against open-ended scholarly inquiry that can trample on cherished illusions. Here the pressing question is which human needs should history serve, the yearning for a self affirming past, even if distorted, or the liberation, however painful, that comes from grappling with a more complex, accurate account.[1]

Race is the Knife that deepens our understanding of democracy.

Taylor Branch

INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the last three centuries South Africa and the United States have been nations in which history, 'race' and democracy have been intimately linked.[2] *The unifying national narrative that both countries share is in many ways, a story of how white supremacy triumphed if only momentarily. Still, simply because a national history has been designed to legitimate white domination does not mean that it cannot be thrown out or that an alternative vision cannot be offered. The five-volume Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report represents an alternative vision about South Africa's past, present, and future. Certainly, questions about the past have at a minimum become more complicated in South Africa. The wide interest in the work of the TRC also offers the possibility of exploring alternative visions about the past in the United States.*

The destruction of the system of apartheid on the one hand and, the success of the modern phase of the Civil Rights Movement on the other have necessitated to some degree, a reordering of national consciousness in the U.S. and South Africa.[3] *In both instances the public discourse about the past has raised important questions. Why does history matter? What is the role of history and historians in societies? How can the past be used to prepare citizens to embrace or contest the possibilities of living in a new kind of multi-racial democracy? This essay addresses these questions by examining how the United States and South Africa have recently confronted the thorny relationship between history, race, and democracy. It argues in part, that the wide interest in the TRC reflects a new willingness by most South Africans, to confront their collective national past in ways fundamentally different from* their American counterparts. *It explores first some of the barriers to serious reflection about the American past. Second, it*

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[1] *John K. Wilson, The Myth of Political Correctness: The Conservative Attack on Higher Education (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 84.*

[2] *See George M. Freidrickson, White Supremacy:A Comparative Study in American and South African History (Oxford:Oxford University Press, 1981).*

[3] *See Jacqueline Dean and Roger Sieborger, "After Apartheid: The Outlook for History," Teaching History 79 (April 1995): 32-38; Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee editor. Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998).*

examines how the TRC report embodies a set of ideas that speak directly to South African history. Finally, it suggests why Americans should look to the South African experience as a model of how to initiate a national discourse about confronting the pitfalls of our collective national past.

RACE AND RECONCILIATION IN THE UNITED STATESRACE AND RECONCILIATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Virtually every modern nation founded on a nationalist ideology has had to reconcile the texts, images, and symbols that represent what it stands for and where it came from with the fact that social, cultural, and economic life simply will not stand still. The United States is no different in this regard. However, in a world that is continually changing and restructuring itself, too many Americans have come to expect that the past must stand still. *They have failed to acknowledge what Benedict Anderson has so persuasively made clear which is that as the world changes so do the ways all nations imagine themselves, their achievements, and their place in the international order.*[4] *The common approach to teaching about the past in the United States centers on a kind of sacred story with strong nationalist overtones. It derives much of its coherence from the groups it has chosen to ignore or dismiss.*[5] *One good example of this point is how many Americans are taught about the rise of the United States to world power. We are told that our heroic figures helped create a system that combined power and "genuine democracy" to catapult America to greatness. Students are usually introduced to the doctrines of American Exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny which they are taught inspired conquest triumphant conquest at home and around the world. This story is usually put forth as a legitimizing explanatory framework and is aimed at helping legitimize the national project we know called American Civilization*[6]*. But this story, like most historical narratives aimed at solidifying a certain kind of national consciousness has to omit much about the American past. It has to forget slavery, the conquest of indigenous communities and the often-oppressive constraint women and immigrant populations faced. Still some historians have elected to defend this skewed version of the American past by arguing that American history is an either/or proposition. Either we accept the triumph of American civilization or face the possibility that new heroes and heroines will supplant the old ones.*[7] *This defense of American Civilization is not, however, about protecting a pantheon of heroes. It is, instead, a recognition that reinterpreting American history in light of a different set of ideas and experience threatens the hegemonic hold of our sacred notion of history. What American history lacks is not more heroes but a history-making process framed by competing notions of truth and reconciliation.*

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[4]*Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities (New York:Verso, 1991).*

[5]*Gary Nash, History on Trial: Cultural Wars and the Teaching of the Past (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998); Frances FitzGerald, America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century (New York: Little, Brown, 1979).*

[6]*John M. Murrin et. al Liberty, Equality, Power: A History of the American People (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996); Lawrence W. Levine. The Opening of the American Mind:Canons, Culture, and History (New York: Beacon Press, 1996).*

[7]*This ideological viewpoint has been most recently championed by a group of American education critics that have*

A more recent instance which underscores my point is the unsealing of the files of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission.[8] Thirty years ago in the mist of the Civil Rights Movement, this commission was the gatekeeper for a segment of American society that can only best be described as paranoid and closed. As one writer put, "sometimes its seems God put Mississippi on Earth just for our moral contemplation." To its proponents however, the MSC had protected the state (at least it whites citizens) from what were perceived as forces of evil: communist, civil rights workers, journalists, and anyone else who posed a threat to their American way of life. Its wider mission was to wage war on the growing civil rights movement and to ensure that Black citizens did not become full participants in American democracy. Most Americans do not need to me reminded that in the 1960's Mississippi was America at it worst. They know tt was a place where bigotry, secrecy, and repression defined and shaped daily life. They know that if you were a Black person seeking to exercise any fundamental democratic rights, Mississippi was also the deadliest place in the United States. People died, they were disappeared, or tortured in a police state which could have been the blueprint for Guatemala, Chile, or Argentina. Mississippi was America's magnolia-scented version of apartheid South Africa.[9] Yet today like other post-apartheid societies America is caught between remembering and forgetting when comes to the part of our past reveal by the MSC.

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been labeled by Gary Nast as the "humanist Right." This group argues that history should be most concerned with imparting ideas and knowledge rooted in Western Civilization. See Newt Gingrich, To Renew America (New York: Harper Collins, 1995) and William J. Bennet, The De-Valuing of America:The Fight for Our Culture and Our Children (New York: Summit, 1992).

[8]The Mississippi Sovereignty Commission functioned from 1956-1977. Together with the White Citizens' Council and the Ku Klux Klan, it formed a triumvirate of repression in Mississippi. For a more complete discussion of the MSC and the way it operated see John Dittmer, Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi (Urban, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 58-69.

[9]Perhaps the most infamous example of how the MSC worked can be seen in the 1964 murder of civil rights workers Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman. It is now known that a paid informant of the commission provided the license plate number of a blue Ford station wagon owned by the Council of Federated Organizations. The COFO was a kind of umbrella organization of the vast 1964 voter-registration effort known as "Freedom Summer." The tag of that car was disseminated by the commission to sheriffs' offices throughout the state. Months later the three civil rights workers were in that Ford when they were pulled over by a local sheriff and members of the Ku Klux Klan. The three were murdered on June 21, 1964, shot in the head, outside the town of Philadelphia. Two days later the car was found in swamp, the tires burned off, the windows blown out. The bodies were found

Like the TRC report, the 124,000 documents released by the MSC has raised questions about the need for truth and reconciliation. It has pitted those who would like to put the past beyond the limits of memory against those who believe that you have to honor the past, explore it, understand it, and confront it before society can move forward. The opening of the MSC's files has reminded Americans in general and Mississippians in particular that the past cannot be wished away. Not surprisingly, the general reaction by whites to the release of the MSC files has been to distance themselves from that part of the American past. Unlike in South Africa where the release of the TRC report at least elevated public discourse about the need reflect on the past, the MSC files were met with silence. According to Bill Minor a Mississippi journalist whom has followed the events surrounding the MSC files:

> *"The past is the closed book, and they don't want to open it.... That's the psyche of white people in this state. You and I may believe that if you ignore the lessons of history, you're doomed to repeat them. But the average person in this state doesn't believe it. We are some kind of microcosm for something in this country, and I can't quite figure it out. I sometimes think it's like original sin; Race is the original sin that many thousands, or millions of Americans carry with them, but that down here we're just doomed to repeat. Nobody thinks those days could come back. Well who says?*[10]

Yet, the history revealed by the MSC is not so much a false story as it is one-sided and distorted. The seemingly wide reluctance by white Mississippians to opening the books of the past reflects the larger fact that a majority of Americans simply are not willing to accept a version of our national past in which truth or reconciliation can be made tantamount to accountability. Americans are reluctant to speak about the past for fear that they may have to confront a darker legacy than what they learned in school or experienced at home. As perhaps the most famous Mississippians, William Faulkner once put it, "there is no such thing as <u>was</u> because the past <u>is</u>... And so man, a character in a story at any moment of action, is not just himself as he is then, he is still all that made him, and the long sentence is an attempt to get his past and possibly his future into the instance in which he does something." The something that Americans are doing is avoiding any serious discussion how history, race, and democracy intersect to shape our collective national past. We do not want to challenge the myths that bind or divide us. Consequently, Americans have trouble reconciling history, race and democracy because we have yet to make our minds up about how we want to define America itself.

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some two months later. Before the release of the MSC files, the car had been the only clue to their disappearance.

[10] *Bill Minor quoted in Paul Hendrickson, "Unsealing Mississippi's Past, pp. 12-13 <u>The Washington Post Magazine</u> May 9, 1999.*

DO WE JUMP OVER HISTORY?:TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

The work of the TRC suggest both the problem and the opportunity for a society who view history as an essential tool in re-defining national identity. In the case of South Africa, the TRC is a problem for many because it has opened up wounds about the past which if allowed to go unaddressed could tear society apart. The report's focus on the recent past (1960-1994) past lays to bear how much the life experiences of Black, Coloured, and Indian Communities differed from Whites during the apartheid. The systemic pattern of human rights abuses reported by witnesses and recorded by the TRC could prove to be a serious barrier to remedying inequality in society. Conversely, the TRC is an opportunity for others because now confronted with the testimonies about the past, citizens are pressed to look past and reject old exclusionary ideas about race and community an replace them with a new national narrative anchored by reconciliation and moral redemption on the one hand and history and democracy on the other. If what defined apartheid was that it encouraged and rewarded people to set themselves apart from those different in order to profit from prejudice, then the TRC serves as a reminder that the commonground for the new South Africa will not be prejudice but the past.

As a result what seems to be happening in South Africa is that South Africans have been sustained by a new national identity that has been forged on the basis of what might be call a symbolic community. This sense of community has (been a bulwark against) rejected manipulation of 'race' 'tribe' and 'ethnicity' which were the hallmarks of the apartheid era.

CONCLUSION

My aim here has been to underscore that as South Africans have had went about facing their shared national past Americans would like to forget that the main thing history can teach us is that human actions have consequences. The problem is Americans have a very selective memory when comes to our national past regarding certain subjects. (Slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam) This selective memory encourages a kind of collective forgetting in which Americans are reluctant to acknowledge that to know history is to recognize that once certain choices are made (e.g. to continue the institution of slavery, desegregate public schools) they cannot be undone. They foreclose or open the possibility of making other choice. Thus, American history if fully revealed would underscore how the choices we have made in the past shapes the present and the future our country. Speaking about how Americans think about the past Gerda Lerner points out that:

> *We learn from our constructions of the past what possibilities and choices once existed. We then draw conclusions about the consequences of our present-day choices. This in turn enables us to project a vision of the future. It is through history-making that the present is freed from necessity and the past becomes usable.*[11]

The choices we have made in the past have left many Americans searching for the usable past that Lerner speaks. The hope is that if we can "bear witness" to our collective national past a new national narrative could emerge. This narrative would speak to contests and conflicts over power and how such conflicts reflect the long struggle among various groups to push their way into the sacred spaces of American life. It would transform the governing narrative of the American past from a story about the rise of the 'American Civilization' (read as white, male, superior) to a narrative that highlights the struggle(s) to fulfill the American ideal of liberty, equality, and justice. The biggest obstacle to cultivating such a narrative is the inability of most Americans to reconcile their ambiguity about how race. We are unsure if we want to know how it has shaped our national past. This collective reluctance to acknowledge that race (like gender and class) has been a constant and dynamic feature of social, political, cultural, and economic life may explain why Americans want certain questions about our national past left unanswered. Do we really want a different kind of 'truth' about our national history? For to know how our past choices helped create inequality demands that we be accountable individually and collectively for how we have profited from prejudice. If the United States were courageous enough to create an institution like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission it would not only help us confront race, it would also deepen our understanding of how democracy is suppose to work.

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[11]*Gerder Lerner, Why History Matters (New York, 1998), 117*