6. History in Black and Red: African Americans and American Indians and Their Collective Pasts

At family gatherings, African Americans transmit "wisdom," as one respondent put it, from one generation to the next. "When the old people get with the young people," a 37-year-old St. Louis warehouse worker told us, "the old people tell the young people how it was when they were growing up." "It's usually the older folks that have the stories to tell," agreed a self-employed man from Pinetop, Arizona. The same could be said of white families and indeed all the families we heard about in our phone calls. People of varying backgrounds talked about their energetic pursuit of the past through looking at photos and writing in diaries, their powerful sense of connection to the past at family gatherings and holiday celebrations, and their strong trust in historical information from older relatives.

Yet black "older folks" also told some different stories and told them differently; so did the 186 Pine Ridge Sioux we called. Individuals from both groups often started with their families and their intimate pasts but then drew upon a broader set of cultural and historical materials. A 33-year-old Memphis photographer illustrated how stories about the past of a particular family become stories about the history of African Americans and how both sets of narratives offer guidance for living in the present. Asked by our interviewer to name a person and an event from the past that had a major impact on her, this woman talked about her grandmother. She described her grandmother's death as a turning point—a "Pandora's box"—that taught her "that love was more strong than I had ever imagined it to be." This moment reinforced some basic lessons she had absorbed from her grandmother: "I learned from her that regardless of whatever you do as a person you have to learn to genuinely like people. And she taught me that people around me (some I would not like), taught me to tolerate them, tolerate things you don't like. And that goes now in my life. You have to tolerate things you don't like or you'll go crazy. She was a loving person and to this day her memory is with me as if she were still alive."

Earlier in the interview, when we asked why this woman felt intensely connected to the past at family gatherings, she quickly extended the story of her grandmother into the story of slavery and of racism. "My family is a part of me," she explained, "and my grandmother and great-grandmother are part of the past. I might not have lived then but I am a part of it. My great-grandma, her parents were slaves, she used to tell us about living on the plantation. And as a kid you learned to stay out of people's way . . . the white man's way. You grew up very quickly."

For this woman, family stories about "slavery times" were not some abstract history lesson; a century and a half later, they helped her make sense of her own life. "We sit and talk about slavery, we bring it up and wonder. My old relatives, I really respect them for what they went through and it makes my life seem not so bad. I think back to what they had to go through, the struggles. I went through struggles, but it's nothing like that. You can't even put them in the same breath—there is no comparison." For this young woman, then, the living past included not only her grandmother but also much more distant relatives who struggled to survive. And she recognized that slavery was an experience her family had in common with millions of other African Americans.

This collective and wide-ranging sense of the past gives particular force to the same woman's complaint that her high school teacher did not provide "black history" that was as "in depth" or as "interesting as the other history she was teaching." "There wasn't enough information to tingle in the mind," she said, explaining why history classes made her feel almost entirely disconnected from the past. She didn't see her family history as unrelated to the history that was taught in school, but she said her teachers failed to make that connection. "Knowing about my family," she observed, "that's part of blackness." And knowing about the past of the United States is part of the same package: "I feel it goes together in some way, because I'm black and an American in the community, and I feel it's all blended into one."

As they thought about questions of change and continuity, life and death, many African Americans turned to the experiences of their grandparents and to the experiences their grandparents shared with other African Americans. When we asked a 34-year-old black woman from suburban Maryland to select the past she found most important (the past of her family, her ethnic or racial group, her current community, or the United States), she selected "family" but quickly pointed out the artificiality of the question. "The past of your family is also the past of your racial group," she said. With innumerable variations, our 300 black respondents (76 from the national sample and 224 from the special African American sample) used materials from both their families and their culture for resolving questions like "Who am I?" "How will I be remembered?" and "Can I make a difference in the world?"

Similarly, the Oglala Sioux we interviewed blended the stories of their families, their tribe, and American Indians. "In our culture," remarked a police officer on the Pine Ridge reservation, "family is the most important thing." But then he added, "The racial group would be the same thing. While you find out about your family, you find out about your culture." He harked "back to when we lived in tepees. A strong warrior would kill four buffaloes—he would take for his family and would give the rest to the tribe." Connecting family and tribal identity came easily to Pine Ridge Sioux since the two histories were so closely intertwined. One young man proudly noted that "my mother's father wrote the tribal constitution," that "Crazy Horse married my great-great-grandmother," and that "we have five uncles and three aunts . . . on the tribal council."

All Americans use the past to build and affirm primary relationships; African Americans and American Indians also use the past to affirm and build ties to their communities. They not only see themselves as sharing a collective past, they sometimes use these collective pasts to construct the sort of progressive narratives—history with a capital "H"—that seem harder to find among white Americans. And in some ways American Indians and black Americans also connect their narratives much more explicitly to the American national story than most white Americans do, even while they dissent sharply from its traditional formulations.

"Our race, our people": African Americans and Their Collective Pasts

We could hear black Americans blurring the boundaries of the personal and the public, the individual and the collective, when they spoke of "roots." Whites who mentioned "roots" were usually referring to their family tree. African Americans were also interested in their "family roots"—almost one third of them reported investigating the history of their family in the past year.[1] But "roots" meant something broader.[2] Explaining why she shared "common history with other African Americans," a Brooklyn woman said, "we all come from the same place. Our roots are all the same." Discussing the importance of family history, a black woman from Maryland commented: "It's your beginning . . . your racial and roots heritage." To talk about your family history was also to talk about the history of your race; to listen to a grandparent describing the struggle of your family was to listen to a description of black history. White respondents rarely spoke about their family history as a microcosm of the history of the nation, their region, their local community, or their ethnic group, but black respondents often described their family history as an exemplar of the black experience in America.

The black Americans we interviewed tended to blur the "I" and the "we." White respondents often talked about "I" or "me" in explaining why family history is important; when they spoke of "we" or "us" they were generally referring to their family. Black respondents peppered their answers with collective pronouns that intended broad meanings. When a 34-year-old Detroit postal worker noted that "other Americans" had experiences "similar to the things we went through," he added a clarification: "We—meaning my race of people." Most respondents didn't need to explain. Those who spoke about "how we came to be in this part of the world" or how Martin Luther King Jr. "made a mark in history for us," led struggles "to get us equal rights," and fought for "our race, our people" showed again and again how their sense of a collective past enabled them to claim a collective voice in the present.

Asked which area of the past (family, nation, community, or ethnic/racial group) was most important to them, more than one quarter of African American respondents chose ethnic or racial history—a proportion almost seven times greater than among white Americans.[3] Even that figure—because the question forced people to choose between family and race—understates the powerful differences. The collective cast to the answers given by black respondents pervaded the survey. In an interview almost two hours long, a 50-year-old high school counselor from Alabama told us about how she explained the civil rights movement to her children and grandchildren, how she felt visiting the Birmingham civil rights museum, what she thought of films like *Mississippi Burning*, what she learned about slavery in school, what winning the right to vote meant to her, and how Martin Luther King Jr. personally affected her. Not surprisingly, then, when we asked her, "What specifically about the past of your racial or ethnic group is important to you?" she grew slightly exasperated. "They'll know. I already said that. I seem like I'm answering the same thing."

Our questions may have tried the patience of some respondents, but their answers painted a clear picture of how African Americans use a shared set of historical events, figures, commemorations, sites, and even sources. Although we did not hear a unified "black" narrative, African American respondents described patterns and drew on historical references that distinctly set them apart. Racial identity was like a watermark that invariably showed through the pages of the transcripts. We realized this as we read the responses in the national sample and could tell without checking the demographic data, which was in a separate database, when we were reading an interview with an African American. Later we heard the same distinctive voice in the 224 interviews in the special black sample. (Appendix 1 discusses the sampling procedures we used.)

"He is no father to me": Black Counternarratives of U.S. History

Black and white respondents drew distinct timelines for American history. Asked, "What event or period in the past has most affected you?" the two groups gave significantly different answers. Vietnam, World War II, and

TABLE 6.1

An "event or period in the past that has most affected you." African American and white European American differences in relation to selected events:

Event	Black	White
Civil rights	30 (22.4%)	9 (5.4%)
Slavery	15 (11.2)	2 (1.2)
WWII	9 (6.7)	21 (12.5)
MLK assassination	6 (4.5)	0
Assassinations of the 1960s	6 (4.5)	1 (.6)
Vietnam	6 (4.5)	19 (11.3)
JFK assassination	2 (1.5)	14 (8.3)
Gulf War	2 (1.5)	9 (5.4)

(Percentage is of blacks and whites who chose any public, rather than personal, event.)

civil rights made the top six choices for both, but whites were twice as likely to choose Vietnam and World War II, and blacks were four times as likely to choose civil rights. Black respondents talked largely about key moments or periods in African American history: the civil rights movement, slavery, and Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination (see table 6.1).

African Americans talked about these historical moments when answering other questions as well. Asked what children need to learn about the past, almost half mentioned themes and topics in black history, from slavery to segregation to civil rights. Although many insisted that the schools needed to teach these stories, they also wanted "kids to learn this from their parents or grandparents or their relatives." A 55-year-old civil servant from California complained that in school "nothing was taught about the slaves or the black man other than we were slaves." But from his grandparents, he learned more positive lessons about blacks under Reconstruction through stories about "a great-great-grand uncle named George W. Murray, who was the last black congressman from South Carolina."[4]

When white Americans incorporated well-known historical events or people into their family narratives, they often appeared as the backdrops for more intimate tales—how we learned self-reliance during World War II, for example. In the black narratives, famous people and events figured much more centrally. Asked why family gatherings made him feel connected to the past, a 63-year-old Washington, D.C. man began rather blandly: "We talk about relatives that are dead, events that happened years and years ago." Pressed for a specific example, he recalled:

> When my ma was a small girl—10, 11, 12. She wasn't very big and lived in southern Illinois. Grandfather built a home for them. The assumption was that he, as a black, was building it for someone white because of the quality of the home—special leaded glass from New Orleans. When the whites realized the family was black, the Klan came to burn them out and my mother and grandpa went out on the road and stood on either side of the road. And when the Klansmen came down the road with torches to burn the house down, my ma and her father were hiding in ditches on the side of the road and fired into them. So it appeared that many people were there. So many Klansmen were wounded that they turned and ran.

The Washington man told us a family story about his mother and grandfather's triumph, but he linked it to a much wider racial context, as did dozens of others who described their family's experiences with slavery, sharecropping, Jim Crow, and civil rights.

Asked to name "a person, either a historic figure or one from your personal past, who has particularly affected you," just under half of the black respondents chose a historic figure. Of those, half chose Martin Luther King Jr., who appears to stand far above all others in the black historical imagination. Indeed, King was selected by more than five times as many black respondents as the second choice—Jesus Christ. Aside from Christ, only a handful of whites were mentioned.[5] Most of the rest of the votes went to a scattering of black leaders, from Frederick Douglass to Malcolm X.

A government worker from suburban Maryland denoted this distinctive historical pantheon (as well as the racial exclusiveness of the dominant narratives) when he told us, "This has always been a stickler with me . . . the reference to George Washington being the father of the country. . . . Being black, he is no father to me. . . . When it is put that way—'the father of our country'—that has no meaning to me. The first president, I can understand that, but the father of our country, no. Then, another thing: Abraham Lincoln—my perception of the Emancipation Proclamation—freeing the slaves—was only done to win the war. They needed bodies and who was on the front line? The black troops."

Not only did African Americans venerate particular historical figures, many of them also seemed to have a stronger sense of a public (and especially American) past than white Americans did. So even as black Americans asserted a counternarrative of famous black figures and events, they also implicitly recognized a traditional American narrative that white Americans eschewed. In answer to our question about a person from the past who had affected them, about one quarter of white Americans but two fifths of black Americans selected a recognizable public figure from American history. White Americans more often cited a parent than all the national historical figures combined. By contrast, more black Americans chose Martin Luther King Jr. than any particular relative.[6]

White Americans simply do not have a shared, revered public figure comparable to Martin Luther King Jr. Nor when they talk about public figures like Kennedy or Lincoln do they make them powerful living presences within their lives, as blacks do with King. A student born five years after the civil rights leader's death embraced him as a "role model" and "a hero." King's life offered lessons for how individuals should live and how society should operate. He taught a 70-year-old Cleveland woman that all people need to "get along together in this world." A 69-year-old Detroit man heard a more personal message: "I had been kind of hothead, fighting here and there. As the times developed and I found out things about Martin Luther King, I learned that sometimes you have to take things and that gave me a good example to my life. I kind of got myself together to the point now where I'm almost a preacher." King's life offered lessons for both self and society. "I loved his nonviolence movement of trying to change the way things were by not fighting or being violent," said a retired Maryland woman. "He influenced me a great deal, that just made me want to better myself and my family."

Not surprisingly, African Americans regard King's birthday as an important national holiday. Asked to make a choice between July fourth and Martin Luther King Jr. Day, they chose King's birthday by a margin of almost four to one as the day that made them feel more connected to the past. Some black respondents said the fourth of July fell well outside their historical vision. A secretary from Grambling, Louisiana talked about Juneteenth, which celebrates the freeing of Texas slaves.[7] But of July fourth, she said: "To be honest, when I look at that particular holiday, it is more of a white holiday . . . a white thing. I do celebrate it, but I think back to when it actually took place, I look back to the people who were actually in it back then. Where were we back then?"

Ironically, most whites view July fourth as a distant or largely irrelevant historical event, an excuse for familial celebration; black Americans, by contrast, warmly testified to their direct connections to Martin Luther King Jr. Day. They told stories that made the emergence of King and the civil rights movement into crucial turning points when they personally, along with other African Americans, took more control over their lives. "The fourth is the celebration of America's independence from Britain many year ago," noted a 42-year-old car salesman from St. Louis. "But that doesn't mean I was free. [That's] what Martin Luther King did for me personally and what he did for black people in general. I was 16 years old when he died, and I lived my whole life with him up until that point." A 63-year-old West Indian man explained that he felt more connected to the past on King day than on July fourth, "because I struggled through that era. . . . I worked in south Florida. I could not go in restaurants and mix with the white people." King, a 51-year-old Georgia man agreed, "helped us not have to go to the back of the bus."

Many African Americans fashioned their distinctive historical consciousness by celebrating holidays like King's birthday and constructing a black historical landscape. Unlike white Americans who tended to visit history museums and sites serendipitously on trips to someplace else, African Americans often deliberately sought out and commemorated the black past. Virtually every black respondent who mentioned a museum or historic site talked about black history. The civil rights museums in Birmingham and Atlanta, the Frederick Douglass House in the Anacostia neighborhood of Washington, D.C., and the Schomburg Library in Harlem imparted powerful messages to black visitors. Even when black respondents talked about visits to "white" institutions, they described a quest for African American history—an exhibit on black women at the St. Louis Museum or on black music at the Missouri Historical Society. Asked which historic sites made him feel connected to the past, a 50-year-old Milwaukee businessman replied: "I visited the old slave markets in Carolina, where I felt very connected, whereas I visited the old landings of Christopher Columbus in Jamaica or the Bahamas and I felt no connection."

African Americans often described pilgrimages to black shrines. "I always go" to "the Martin Luther King museum here in Memphis" on April 4 (the day King was assassinated), a Tennessee woman told us. White Americans often found visits to historic sites and museums meaningful because they allowed the family to talk about the past. Black respondents tended to directly connect their personal and family narratives to the specific public historical narratives that these sites presented.

African Americans were also more likely to connect deeply with particular historical films and books; they often integrated materials from these sources into their personal sense of the past. Though the historical books and films mentioned by whites were too scattered to suggest any conclusions about reading patterns, black respondents repeatedly brought up the same books—especially *Roots* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (both, in effect, written by Alex Haley)—and films and television programs (again, *Roots* but also *Mississippi Burning* and Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*). Black Americans drew upon *Roots* in a way that few white Americans did for any book or film; some offered detailed memories of the TV series even though they hadn't seen it for many years. Others talked about the show's lasting effects: "When I first saw *Roots*," said a 33-year-old Tennessee woman, "it had an impact on me—left my imagination open and wondering. Being an African American, I wondered. You had to wonder. Even with the information out there about slavery, I had to wonder. When I went to Mississippi and saw where the plantations used to be, I envisioned myself being there. . . . I had a mental vision. I could see the women on the porch washing the clothes, the kids, the men in the fields."

For these black Americans, a rich oral historical culture modifies and reinforces the historical narratives provided through books, films, and museums. A 30-year-old custodian told us that he felt especially connected to the past when reading history books. Asked for a specific book, he first mentioned a biography of Martin Luther King Jr. but then explained how his mother's memories had amplified its meaning: "I remembered what my mother was telling me, because she lived back in his days. . . . And she would explain to me what happened and how everything took place. . . . She told me what kind of man he was, how he was trying to stand up for what was right so that people no matter what color, they'd all be equal." A government worker and retired military officer from Sacramento who was twenty-five years older described a similar process, even while talking about more distant events. Asked why reading a collection of slave narratives, *Bullwhip Days*, made him connect with the past, he explained, "Being a black man . . . I could identify and also having been reared by my grandparents, who were of the first generation born free, I could identify with and understand the book better. . . . My great-grandfather was six years old when slavery was ended."

For many African Americans this orally transmitted history—as well as particular, trusted books, films, and museums—competes with an "official" version of the past that is often distrusted. African Americans judged high school and college teachers, museums, and books as significantly less trustworthy than did white Americans; but they more favorably evaluated accounts from eyewitnesses and relatives. Black Americans described themselves as more connected to the past than white Americans when gathering with their families but less connected when visiting museums, reading books, or studying history in school.[8]

Many African Americans criticized the history taught in school, which they said "ignored," "distorted," or even "lied" about the black experience. An Atlanta firefighter who gave studying history in school a 2 on the 10-point connectedness scale and high school history teachers a 3 on the 10-point trustworthiness scale explained his answers: "I'm not saying that I didn't trust a history teacher. It was the material they were giving that I did not particularly trust. Basically, just being an African American, our contributions to history are not presented. They are left out. If you are presenting history you want to include everyone, but African Americans are often left out."

Despite this forceful critique of mainstream history, African Americans still placed their experiences within American history. When we asked black respondents, "How much of a common history do you think you share with other Americans?" only 7 percent said "none." Almost three quarters said they shared "a lot" or "some," and another one fifth said "a little."[9] When we then asked what common history they shared with other Americans, they generally avoided conventional sentiments about freedom and democracy. Instead, they found common ground in the history of migration or struggle against oppression—identifying with other immigrant and poor Americans rather than with dominant social groups or mainstream political ideals.

"Your ancestors, my ancestors," a 44-year-old Memphis mail carrier said to an interviewer whom he correctly perceived to be white, "all came from the east side of the world—Africa, Great Britain. My forefathers, your forefathers all came to America. They had one common goal, to live here. Some came as slaves. There were slaves that were white, called indentured servants. The ones who weren't were truly slaves. We all share a certain situation of coming to a new country. That's how I can identify with . . . other Americans. The only ones who I can't are the Indians." "We're basically all . . . born of immigrants," said a Petersburg, Virginia woman in a phrase used by several others, "whether the original immigrants were free or not." "Well," observed a Brooklyn tap-dance instructor in her twenties, "everyone has gone through a struggle in one way or another."

This sense of a shared history in the United States helps explain why relatively few black respondents identify primarily with Africa rather than America. When we asked whether the past of any other place in the world seemed more important than the past of the United States, only about one fifth said yes—although of those, almost three quarters named Africa as that place. Many black Americans sympathize with and support Africa, but fewer than one sixth placed their strongest historical associations there. A retired Memphis woman who is quite involved in the history of her family and the black community told us, "I'm an American, born in the U.S. . . . I don't feel African American, I feel black American."

Their powerful sense of racial identity did not prevent African American respondents from talking about the mulatto nature of American culture. Though our minority sample included only those who identified themselves as "black or African American,"[10] more than 10 percent of this self-selected group mentioned racial mixing in their family's past. Half of those who mentioned interracial family pasts (and most of those with stories about the more distant past) referred to Indian ancestors. A Texas man in his twenties noted that he had been trying to learn more about "where I come from because I have a lot of Indian in me."[11] Such stories seemed to reflect an effort to root African American history more firmly in American soil, to question clear-cut racial categories. A Georgia man whose great-great-grandmother was a Cherokee made the point sharply: why do white people think they are superior to blacks, he asked, when "we all have the same blood?"

"How we struggled to where we are today": Black Narratives of Group Oppression and Progress

Like other respondents, African Americans found the past a particularly useful resource for thinking about whether they could make a difference in the world. Like other respondents, they constructed narratives in an effort to understand how and why things change and how they could themselves effect change. They differed from white respondents in that they often used a broad set of cultural materials in thinking about those questions, and they pushed the question of personal effectiveness into issues of group agency—asking whether or not they could join with others to make a difference in the world.

This merging of the personal and the political was evident when a black state worker and community activist from Connecticut talked at length about writing in his journal, an intimate form of historymaking for most other respondents. "My journal," he explained, "is basically information about what I've done in the community in the past and poetry, tidbits of poetry, because I like writing poetry. It's based on, I'd just say cultural plights, like slavery, or what a lot of people feel is a systematic oppression in America of certain ethnic groups." Out of this private record, he crafted a public narrative of black history by writing a newsletter and running a community organization aimed at "enhancing awareness to the people who had been through my same plight" and "uplifting the African American community in which I live." Of his community work, he said: "I thought it was my duty, because every individual who exists on this earth today is definitely a part of history. It does not matter whether he's a butcher or a baker, the president or the low man on any totem pole, he is a part of history."

Black Americans like this man tended to share three types of stories in response to the question "What specifically about the past of your racial group is important to you?" (In fact, the same sets of narratives reappeared throughout the survey.) One was the story of oppression, discrimination, and racism: slavery obviously plays a central role in such narratives, but so do later episodes of racial violence and discrimination. Indeed, a vaguely worded question about the past of the respondent's racial group evoked very concrete and personal stories of oppression. A 72-year-old Chicago man answered rather matter-of-factly: "My father's cousin was tarred and feathered in the South—no reason given, because he was black." A Gary, Indiana man of the same generation began his answer with a general statement about the importance of learning "the way the black man is treated in the United States—so far as opportunities, denial, the hate, the bigotry." But then he described how, when he "was living in Mississippi, I was drafted into the service for one reason—I was told for fighting for my country. But I didn't know how could I consider this my country, when I couldn't even vote, I had to go into the back door to get something to eat or drink, and I had to bring it out. I couldn't even stay in there. And I had to fight for my country. That was very hard for me to understand when I was 18. Still is."

Although African Americans often recounted this depressing and ongoing tale of racial discrimination, they also talked about how particular individuals overcame oppression and made important contributions to crafts, agriculture, or science. In discussing this second type of story, three different people brought up Dr. Charles Drew—not a well-known name among white Americans. Drew, according to a 34-year-old postal worker, "invented blood transfusions but he died from a car accident, and the reason he died was because he wasn't admitted into a hospital to receive a blood transfusion that would have saved his life."[12]

The third, and most frequent, black historical narrative combines the first two by describing group struggle to overcome the racism and oppression of white society. Often, it is a hopeful story about group progress that suggests how individuals can take control of their lives. As a Dallas housewife put it, "From slavery times—things that I had read—it made me think about how far my children have come from the past of the children back then. It helps to overcome any of the hostilities that you might feel . . . and to look toward to the future."

To a startling degree, black Americans constructed a story of progress when they looked at the past—a rather traditional story that was hard to find among white Americans. When they named public events that had affected them, about one third of the African American respondents talked about change for the better or worse, and of that third, almost three quarters described change for the better. (By contrast, more than four fifths of white respondents described change for the worse.) Asking themselves whether it was possible to make a difference in the world, African Americans answered that "we" can, that groups and movements can alter a seemingly unchanging regime of racism and discrimination and push history into a new trajectory.

They often used metaphors of distance or travel when they drew lessons from past events, talking about how we "have come a long way," "how far Martin Luther King brought us," or "where we came from to how we struggled to where we are today." To some extent, emancipation from slavery offered the paradigm for this progressive narrative. Asked to name the period or event that had most affected him, a young Arkansas steelworker chose "the era of slavery with an emphasis on the abolition of slavery resulting in black Americans or black men, in particular, being able to have full rights and privileges as Americans, especially the right to vote." Asked to draw a lesson from that era, he replied: "If there is a strong enough desire in the community at large, inevitably that change is going to take place because of our system of democracy and each individual's power to make that change happen."

Black respondents most often found a story of progress in the civil rights struggle. A Detroit woman spoke about "freedom" and then defined it by saying, "Thank God we're able to drink from the same fountains as other races, we're able to vote, and we're able to go places." For a 65-year-old Detroit woman, the changes could be summarized in two incidents separated by six decades. The first was from her Arkansas childhood: she and father were run off the road and threatened by a white man who was angry because he'd been turned away at a country store that had given her father credit. "We didn't deal with white people too much," she said of those days. The second was a recent shopping trip: "When we got groceries, a young [white] man took our groceries to the car. . . . I think it's so nice. It's just so different now."

Black respondents employed similar narrative strategies when they talked about advances won under Martin Luther King Jr.'s leadership. King "fought against blacks sitting in the back of the bus," a pipe fitter from Newport News, Virginia explained. King "opened the doors for better opportunity for the black man," agreed a Georgia math teacher. King, many concurred, taught about not only equality and nonviolence but also resolution in the face of adversity. King "kept on marching on," said the math teacher. King "taught persistence," added a Chicago man in his mid-thirties. "It's like he never gave up his quest for civil rights no matter what obstacle stood in front of him."

Not all black respondents drew such affirmative messages from history. With the death of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King Jr., a 61-year-old Chicago man argued, "the dream was lost, and blacks are back twenty or thirty years, back before he started his dream." King's birthday, agreed a 57-year-old unemployed Massachusetts woman, "makes me sad because I feel the man died for nothing, because what he was killed for, people are not doing what he set out to do or to try to get better jobs, schooling, rights, and education for everybody."

Just as some read the story of civil rights and King as that of a dream betrayed, others told the story of slavery with an emphasis on brutality and oppression. Slavery, in the words of a 33-year-old Baltimore retail manager, "has torn me away from a lot of heritage, a lot of heritage I will never know . . . a crime that has never been answered for." A 26-year-old Detroit waitress provided the sharpest version of this alternative interpretation of the black past when she described what she learned from her boyfriend, who is "really into history": "He feels like black people wouldn't be the way they are if it weren't for slavery—the things that the white people did. He blames everything on the white man. I don't agree with him, but he does."

These interviews were exceptions: most black respondents found hope rather than despair in the past. From the civil rights movement, a 21-year-old Brooklyn student told us, "I learned that people can overcome no matter what the obstacles are." The progressive view of most African Americans is remarkable not simply because they *have* faced enormous oppression in America but also because we cannot locate a comparable optimistic public historical narrative among white Americans.[13]

Even when white Americans drew more directly upon the substance of national historical events like Vietnam and the Kennedy assassination, they often constructed privatized, fragmented, or pessimistic narratives. Asked what lessons they drew from public historical events, few offered narratives about ordinary people acting together to change the world. White Americans had not experienced anything as empowering as the civil rights movement; they made the Vietnam War and the Kennedy assassination into stories about betrayal—stories about the world spinning out of control. By contrast, some black respondents found hope even in