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**Reproducing Civil Rights Tactics: The Rhetorical Performances of the Civil Rights Memorial**

Abstract: The authors offer a reading of the Civil Rights Memorial (Maya Lin, Montgomery, Alabama, 1989) as a set of rhetorical performances that reproduce the tactical dimensions of Civil Rights Movement protests of the 1950s and 1960s. Their reading attempts to counter the reading of Abramson who claims for the Memorial a conservative political stance. Specifically, they argue that, while the Memorial reproduces the tactics of the Civil Rights Movement, it argues for a break with the past in its visual proffer of a politics of difference and a critique of whiteness.

Perhaps the very first thing we need to do as a nation and as individual members of society is to confront our past and see it for what it is. It is a past that is filled with some of the ugliest possible examples of racial brutality and degradation in human history. We need to recognize it for what it was and is and not explain it away, excuse it, or justify it. Having done that, we should then make a good-faith effort to turn our history around so that we can see it in front of us, so that we can avoid doing what we have done for so long. (Franklin 74)

What seems called for now and what many contemporary artists wish to provide is a critical public art that is frank about the contradictions and violence encoded in its own situation, one that dares to awaken a public sphere of resistance, struggle, and dialogue. (Mitchell 395)

The Civil Rights Memorial, located in Montgomery, Alabama, and dedicated in 1989, enjoyed its tenth anniversary this past November. The Memorial was commissioned by, and composes the front entrance plaza of, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), a not-for-profit organization founded in 1971 by Morris Dees and Joe Levin. The Memorial was designed by Maya Lin, the architect best known for her design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, in Washington, D.C. Although the Civil Rights Memorial is located in Montgomery, and thus removed from the most well-worn tourist trails of the nation, it has received considerable attention in the media, because of events that have been staged at its site, the fame of its designer, and the high public profile of the SPLC and Dees since the mid-1980s (Southern Poverty Law Center). It is an important cultural marker not only because of the attention it has received, but also because of its rhetoric—its representations and enactments of racial dynamics of the past, present, and future.
Our goal is to offer a reading of the Civil Rights Memorial as a rhetorical performance, or more precisely, as an ensemble of interrelated performances that rewrite the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s for the late twentieth-century U.S. Specifically, we will suggest that the Memorial’s rhetorical performances reproduce the tactics of Civil Rights activities of the mid-century, but that these re-productions work toward a commentary on race issues of the present and open up possibilities for politics, rather than advancing a summary or unitary stance. Our reading is based not only upon an interpretation of the Memorial’s design (including its inscribed text) but also upon its contexts.

Our focus here on the Civil Rights Memorial is motivated, in part, by Daniel Abramson’s claim that Maya Lin’s memorials (the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the Women’s Table at Yale University, and the Civil Rights Memorial) harbor fundamentally conservative political messages, largely as a result of what he sees as their shared central feature—inscribed timelines. Although allowing for the possibility of reading the Lin memorials as “potentially transformative,” Abramson clearly favors a different interpretation. He suggests rather disparagingly that Maya Lin’s memorials “repackage the difficult, the divisive, and the controversial into loci of popular satisfaction and conciliation” (705); represent a “conservative position” on 1960s political, social, and artistic movements; and “reestablish points of traditional authority” (707). Specifically with regard to the Civil Rights Memorial, he suggests that “the civil rights struggle is represented as being, in effect, about the authority and legitimacy of the American Constitution and its legal and political instruments (an appropriate program for a monument sponsored by a law firm)” (701). However, we are convinced that a rhetorical reading—one that attends not only to multiple design features of the Memorial, but also to its material performances and force within its context(s)—suggests a conclusion quite different than that rendered in Abramson’s more formalist reading.

We believe it is important to heed and respond to Abramson’s reading for three reasons. First, critical commentary is one means by which “the” meaning of a public artwork is established culturally (Foucault, “Discourse” 220-221). That is, interpretations like Abramson’s (or our own) can be appropriated and used in more public, if often unofficial, interpretive operations. They seep into public discourse and become “correct” ways of reading cultural artifacts or sites. We believe it would be unfortunate if Abramson’s rendering were taken as the final word on the Civil Rights Memorial.

Second, in considering what Abramson’s reading overlooks—vital dimensions of the Civil Rights Memorial that participate in composing its political message—we can attend to issues of materiality in rhetoric that are becoming increasingly salient. Abramson suggests, inexplicably in our view, that “the physical composition of the monument functions not so much to convey meaning in and of itself as to create a physical space of reading... It is left to the text itself and its graphic arrangement to convey the specific message of the memorial”
By “text,” Abramson clearly means the inscriptions on the stone of the Memorial, so his reading acknowledges but leaves uninterpreted the physical profile and spatial dimensions of the Memorial.

Abramson also neglects the specific operations of the geographical/cultural contexts of the Memorial. Left aside are the Memorial’s physical locale, the historical events it marks, and its placement in a national culture saturated by racial anxiety. To read the Lin memorials “as a suite of work” (680) seems a worthy project, but that move necessarily shifts the critical stakes from the rhetorical work each monument does to Maya Lin’s signature political aesthetic. In sum, to juxtapose Abramson’s reading and the one we propose here is to call attention to issues of rhetorical materiality at two levels: (1) the material conditions, contexts, and other discourses that articulate with a given rhetorical artifact, and (2) the materiality of the rhetorical artifact itself (Blair 16). If we wish to understand the messages available in the Civil Rights Memorial, it surely is wise to heed Abramson’s claims but also to add to them, for there is much more to attend and respond to in this important cultural site than a timeline that teaches a conservative lesson.

Third, we believe a closer look at the Memorial and ways of reading it are warranted because of the specifics of its response to one of the most profound rhetorical challenges faced in the design of any commemorative site: how to make an event of the past—what the memorial marks—relevant to the needs and desires of the memorial’s own present. That is a profoundly rhetorical challenge, and an understanding of its dynamic is unavailable in a formalist reading that bases its claims exclusively on the engraved words on a memorial. Abramson’s claims about the Memorial participate in a larger discourse that questions whether public art—specifically public commemorative art—can ever perform a rhetorical function beyond stabilization and reinforcement of the status quo (Abramson 709). If we answer with Abramson’s (only delicately qualified) “no,” then we are faced with a very serious rhetorical matter: a genre that offers no openings for difference or resistance. We find that not only unlikely but inaccurate in the case of public commemorative art.

We will begin with a brief discussion of the micropolitics of the Southern Civil Rights Movement, in order to highlight its tactical-level practices. Then we will turn to a descriptive “tour” of the Civil Rights Memorial site, followed by a discussion of its performative reproduction of the Movement’s tactics. We will conclude with a reconsideration of the political messages harbored by the Memorial, suggesting that it enacts the kind of political stance suggested by Franklin and Mitchell in the passages that stand at the beginning of this essay.

**TACTICAL DIMENSIONS OF CIVIL RIGHTS PROTEST ACTIONS**

The sit-ins and protest marches of the 1950s and 1960s Civil Rights Movement surely were multidimensional in their rhetorical character and capacity, but the specifically tactical nature of these actions carried particular messages that helped
to compose the larger Civil Rights position. Our aim in describing them here is not encyclopedic but selective, not exhaustive but partial. Instead of focusing on what the protest rhetoric meant, we examine its material dimension—what it did. Specifically, these protest actions disrupted (peacefully) the ordinary activities of towns, businesses, and citizens. They also announced the resilience and determination of those pledged to civil rights. And they situated the individual observer as the agent of change, by placing their cause—and the often cruel counter-reaction—visually and materially in the space of the everyday.9

First, Civil Rights actions—sit-ins especially, but also boycotts and marches—infringed upon or inconvenienced the space of the everyday, of “business as usual,” so as to call attention to the participants and their political and moral claims to justice. King described the tactical dimension explicitly in his “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” in 1963: “Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue” (40).10 The point was to get in the way. As Chalmers suggests, “The later experiences of SNCC in Mississippi and in southwestern Georgia, where it was joined in Albany by King and the SCLC in 1962, strongly indicated that ‘out of the streets’ was ‘out of mind’” (23). To counter that tendency, Civil Rights groups enacted a material politics, “the use of the ‘black body’ against prejudice” (Rustin 337).11

Second, the protests announced the determination of their participants, and they did that by persevering over time. This display of tenacity was vital, for as Chong argues, any breach in the visible exposition of resolve would send “an encouraging signal to the opposition and [harm] the interests of the group” (18). The activists’ determination had to be overtly maintained, sometimes for weeks or months, often in the face of taunts, harassment, and beatings, as well as threats of arrest or even death. The performance of such resolute purpose served as a demonstrative proof that the activists would not be discouraged easily, that they and their cause would not just conveniently disappear. But their maintenance of the collective front in the face of brutal opposition reinforced that argument, serving notice that the demonstrators would not be intimidated, because their cause was so consequential.

Third, the Civil Rights Movement in the South sought change by moralizing the individual and positioning her/him as the agent of change. There is no doubt that the Movement sought governmental and legal remedy; Civil Rights leaders worked directly to persuade those in positions of institutional authority, e.g., presidents, congresspersons, governors, local officials, and so forth.12 But the visible, public organizing was aimed at the quotidian, and the aim was not just to persuade voters to pressure officials, but also to change themselves. As James Lawson argued with regard to sit-ins,

the issue is not integration. . . . [I]t would be extremely short-sighted to assume that integration is the problem or the word of the ‘sit-in.’ In the first instance, we who are demonstrators are trying to raise what we call
the ‘moral issue.’ That is, we are pointing to the viciousness of racial segregation and prejudice and calling it evil or sin. The matter is not legal, sociological or racial, it is moral and spiritual. (312)

The sacrifice and suffering endured by the demonstrators were considered (and were, in some quarters) influential. As King argued, “Suffering . . . has tremendous educational and transforming possibilities” (“Pilgrimage” 110). Or, as Chong suggests in less manifestly moral terms, “From the protesters’ perspective, it is obvious that their best outcome is realized when they choose nonviolence while the authorities use unjustified force. A nonviolent strategy works only if the protesters are seen as blameless victims” (22).

Each of these tactics worked by means of a visual performance or display. The material presence and visibility of the demonstrators, as well as of their opponents, was the crucial element. The Civil Rights Movement disrupted, displayed its own resolve, and moralized individuals as change agents by compelling shifts in attitudes based on the seen. For example, the neatly-dressed, polite African American demonstrators were visible, as were their often brutish, white supremacist opponents. The visual juxtaposition reversed historically accreted, stereotypical images of African and European Americans and their relative abilities to engage civilly. As Cmiel argues, “the boycotts, sit-ins, and marches were strategic dramas outside the purview of daily decorum that inverted the social order. Whereas the caste system of the South had been built on the supposed superior ‘civilization’ of whites and the ‘backwardness’ of blacks, the [protest activities] turned this around” (267). While Movement leaders and lawyers argued the case, the demonstrations created scenes for performing it.

THE CIVIL RIGHTS MEMORIAL

Before turning to the Civil Rights Memorial’s reproduction of these Movement tactics, a brief tour of the site is in order. The Memorial is located in downtown Montgomery, on the plaza fronting the SPLC office building, a modern white and mirrored glass structure. The Memorial and the SPLC are perched on the side of a hill. Occupying the hilltop behind them is an imposing, palatial structure—the Alabama Center for Commerce. It towers above the Law Center and dwarfs it and the much smaller Memorial. The relative sizes of the three structures are exaggerated by their occupancy of different elevations on the hillside (Figure 1).

The Memorial, the smallest and most proximate of the three, as one ascends the hill, is composed of two structures. The first is a peculiar black granite structure, an inverted, asymmetrical, conical pedestal, 31 inches in height and twelve feet in diameter (Figure 2). From a distance, this piece resembles a teacup minus a handle, but Lin and the SPLC refer to it as a “table” (see Abramson 689n; and Southern Poverty Law Center). While its structure is asymmetrical, its top surface is a perfect circle (Figure 3). From an off-center well on the tabletop flows water that spreads smoothly and evenly over the full surface, falls over its edge and
disappears down a small drain at the bottom of the base. The water flows over inscriptions arranged in a circle around the circumference of the tabletop.

The 53 inscriptions mark events of the 1950s and 1960s, forming an annular timeline (see Figure 3). The majority (32) of the inscriptions name forty individuals and the circumstances of their deaths. Few of these individuals, with the exceptions of Medgar Evers and Martin Luther King, Jr., were public figures; most achieved public prominence only in death, if even then. Most were murdered in retaliation for their participation in nonviolent activism, or in attempts to obstruct advances of the Civil Rights Movement. Others’ deaths energized further activism (Zinsser 28, 36). For example, included among the inscriptions are these:

28 AUG 1955 • EMMETT LOUIS TILL • YOUTH MURDERED FOR SPEAKING TO WHITE WOMAN • MONEY, MS.

25 SEP 1961 • HERBERT LEE • VOTER REGISTRATION WORKER KILLED BY WHITE LEGISLATOR • LIBERTY, MS

15 SEP 1963 • ADDIE MAE COLLINS • DENISE MCNAIR • CAROLE ROBERTSON • CYNTHIA WESLEY • SCHOOLGIRLS KILLED IN BOMBING OF 16TH ST. BAPTIST CHURCH • BIRMINGHAM, AL
The remaining 21 inscriptions—irregularly and infrequently punctuating the murders—tell of various Civil Rights related events during the same period. Seven of these chronicle organizing activities of the Movement, for example:

5 DEC 1955 • MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT BEGINS

1 FEB 1960 • BLACK STUDENTS STAGE SIT-IN AT “WHITES ONLY” LUNCH COUNTER • GREENSBORO, NC

Nine others report legal remedies or advances secured by the Movement, for example:

24 SEP 1957 • PRESIDENT EISENHOWER ORDERS FEDERAL TROOPS TO ENFORCE SCHOOL DESEGREGATION • LITTLE ROCK, AR

9 JUL 1965 • CONGRESS PASSES VOTING RIGHTS ACT OF 1965

And the remaining five tell of setbacks or obstructionist reactions, for instance:

14 MAY 1961 • FREEDOM RIDERS ATTACKED IN ALABAMA WHILE TESTING COMPLIANCE WITH BUS DESEGREGATION LAWS

3 MAY 1963 • BIRMINGHAM POLICE ATTACK MARCHING CHILDREN WITH DOGS AND FIRE HOSES

The chronology begins with the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision that mandated school desegregation. And it ends with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination, in 1968. Between these first and last entries is a noticeable blank space (see Figure 3), that instructs visitors where to begin their reading.

The second structure, but likely the first one that catches the view of the visitor, is a convex curved, black granite wall, approximately nine feet tall and forty feet long, with water rushing down its face at waterfall speed (Figure 4). It bears a single inscription: “. . . UNTIL JUSTICE ROLLS DOWN LIKE WATERS AND RIGHTEOUSNESS LIKE A MIGHTY STREAM. —MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.” This wall forms a lower level façade for the SPLC office building, behind the table in the plaza area. To the side of the wall is an arced stairway up to the entrance of the SPLC. The stairway is roped off; only Center employees and others with business with the SPLC are allowed to ascend the stairs. Those few who are permitted up to the second level see a different view of the wall. Forming the area immediately above the wall is an absolutely still pool of water standing on uninscribed black granite (Figure 5).
The Civil Rights Memorial is a remarkably complex commemorative rhetoric. Its design components, e.g., color, shape, size, and inscriptions, combine and recombine with its contexts to create a web of multiple performances, spectacles that both reproduce and transform historically the tactics of the Civil Rights movement. We turn our attention to those now.

**A READING OF THE PERFORMATIVE RHETORIC OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MEMORIAL**

As with our discussion of the Civil Rights Movement, our focus on the Memorial attends less to issues of symbolism than to materialism. That is, we concentrate here on the performative dimension of the site, attending to what it does (Pollock 21). We are more interested here in its enactments than its representations, for the Memorial seems a perfect exemplar of Della Pollock’s suggestion that performance “discomposes history as myth, making of it a scene awaiting intervention by the performing subject” (27).

Like the Movement it commemorates, the Civil Rights Memorial disrupts and infringes on public space. The Memorial itself now is the “black body” positioned so as to create dislocation, tension, and (minor) inconvenience. The Memorial’s table structure interrupts the sidewalk and the vector of pedestrian action along it (see Figure 2). To walk in a straight line is to run headlong into the table, so the pedestrian is confronted with the choice of attending to, even engaging with, the Memorial or to go out of her/his way to avoid doing so. To engage with it is to be drawn into its narrative, to touch its historical re-creation, and to be cooled by the feel of the water. It “troubles” the pedestrian just enough to command her/his attention and at least some degree of involvement.

The Memorial infringes in a less individuated way as well. Its location in downtown Montgomery places it in a position of overt challenge to most of the landmarks in the area. Except for the King Memorial Baptist Church on Dexter Avenue and a few small signs, there are few prominent markers in the area of anything but the glories of the Confederacy and the more contemporary white establishment. Within easy walking distance are the beautifully preserved and lovingly tended first White House of the Confederacy, where Jefferson Davis resided for the first couple of months after secession; the Confederate Soldiers Monument, on the State Capitol grounds; the star embedded on the steps of the Capitol where Davis stood to deliver the declaration of secession; a historical marker at the end of Dexter Avenue commemorating the first rendition of “Dixie”; a statue of Jefferson Davis on the Capitol grounds; the preserved interior areas of the Capitol where the secession debates were held; and the state’s Center for Commerce, best characterized, we believe, as a monument to the state’s economic/political icons.

The Civil Rights Memorial disrupts this cityscape performatively, intruding upon the otherwise rather unitary character of Montgomery’s other symbolic spaces (Carr, et al. 187-191, 294). It does so serenely and with dignity, but
assertively; the Memorial calls attention to the cityscape it infringes by projecting images of the city in its refractive wall. This wall does not, like its famous predecessor in Washington, simply reflect the images of those present in the area that constitutes the Memorial’s space. Although one might catch images of oneself, those images are vague. Much clearer are scenes from outside the plaza area. The convex curve of the wall bends light, poaching those scenes from outside and incorporating them. And it appropriates and involves those who take no action to attend to it and even those who go out of their way to avoid it.

The Civil Rights Memorial also reproduces the mid-century Civil Rights protests’ announcement of resolve. It is small and appears even more diminutive against the backdrop of the gigantic Alabama Center for Commerce (see Figure 1). But it stands solidly, even determinedly, in the midst of what can be described only as an inhospitable symbolic context, “headlining” in its inscribed text the extraordinary efforts of ordinary people in securing the most basic of human rights. It displays their dedicated efforts as ongoing and resolute, even when attended by the risk of violent obstruction and murder. But the Memorial does more than represent those past actions; it reproduces them. The Memorial stands in the entrance plaza of its patron, the Southern Poverty Law Center, whose office building was constructed on this site in the aftermath of a firebombing of its previous office in 1983, by members of the Klan. The construction of the new SPLC office building itself served notice, but that announcement was invigorated by the appearance of the Memorial as part of its front façade. For this organization not only to recover, but to bring back with it a costly and prominent piece of public art, and one designed by the nation’s most famous architect, was to post a clear message that it and the issues it raises are not going away.

The assertion of determination is bolstered by the overt and intrusive presence of uniformed security personnel at the Memorial site (Figure 6). They are stationed there principally to deter terrorist action against the SPLC, which is under seemingly perpetual threat from hate groups. Although the security personnel make every effort to be “ambassadors for the Center” and to intrude as little as possible upon visitors’ experience of the Memorial (Brinkman), their presence and activities simply do (and must) disrupt the serenity of the site. But the “disruption” reinforces the message of resolve. It asserts a strong determination to continue in the Center’s work on race-related educational and legal programs. And the security presence reminds visitors by implication that there remains a forceful and dangerous opposition, willing to engage in violence to halt moves toward racial justice. The security force becomes a part of the Memorial’s performative scene, “arguing” for the necessity of ongoing vigilance and social action.

The Memorial’s reproduction of the third tactical dimension of Civil Rights protests—moralizing the individual as an agent of change—is also reproduced here and is in no way compromised by the prominence of the “institutional” presence, such as the SPLC or its security force. The Memorial, like the Movement, situates the visitor as agent. When the visitor engages the narrative in-
scribed in the tabletop, s/he literally towers over history; the table is only 31 inches in height, and so visitors gaze down to read the inscriptions (Figure 7). Moreover, a gaze across the table encompasses the whole of the narrative, allowing the visitor a commanding viewpoint on the past. His/her touch disturbs the flow of the water over the inscriptions, enabling a somatic, if symbolic, intervention in history. Because it is the ordinary person, the visitor to this public space, who is summoned as the audience, the issue posed is ethical and individual, rather than juridical or legislative. Such an audience has no standing to construct institutional edicts. And in any case, and as we will address further on, such institutional action is represented, in other rhetorical features of the Memorial, as having provided only partial remedy. Racial issues remain symbolically unresolved in the Memorial’s rhetorical gestures.

Finally, just as the Civil Rights Movement worked its politics through a visual/material rhetoric, the Civil Rights Memorial’s visual/material dimensions invite changed attitudes by compelling shifts of perspective. There are multiple examples of such shifts. But perhaps the most important case is the Memorial’s transmutation of attention from the past to the present and future. Although it does the work that any memorial must do—honoring the people or events it names—the Civil Rights Memorial also performs history in a conspicuously political fashion. As Abramson points out, the Civil Rights struggle is displayed in a realist mode, as the “neutral” disposition of a timeline engraved on the perimeter of the tabletop, with dates foregrounded and with no regular intervals among the events. However, in this timeline we see an interesting and politi-
cized construal of history, one characterized by successes and accomplishments to be sure, but also one of suffering, capricious violence, and failure.

The timeline’s chronicle cannot be described as a narrative of progress, as one might expect. The engraved successes are far fewer in number than the murders. Moreover, the accomplishments—legislation, judicial appointments, enforcement of desegregation laws, and so forth—are relentlessly succeeded on the timeline by additional murders or obstructionist actions. The initial inscription of the Brown v. Board decision represents a success for the Movement,18 but the final one marks the tragedy of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination. In fact, nine of the last ten entries in the timeline describe murders. The abbreviated quotation from King on the wall, like the unfinished timeline, suggests that the expressed goals of justice and righteousness have not been achieved. It seems fair to conclude that the representation of the past—the events of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s—is unsatisfying and ambivalent.

But the temporal dimensions of the Memorial do not end with its words or even its borders. The Memorial transmutes attention from a display of the past to a rhetorical construction of the present, from “this happened,” to this “is happening.” There are any number of signals of temporal continuity in the Memorial, including the circularity of the table, the continuous flow of the water, and most directly, the space on the table after the final inscription, as well as the ellipses and beginning of the quotation on the wall: “... UNTIL ...” These two latter gestures of the memorial in particular shift our attention to the present and future, by posing questions about when we might expect justice to prevail, and what might come next on the timeline.
The shift in time to the present and its configuration of social justice is buttressed by another, physical feature of the Memorial as well, its refractive wall. By refracting the images of its surroundings, the Memorial implicates in its own design the scene of contemporary Montgomery and the city’s residents and visitors. That scene is composed not just of the city’s surrounding Confederate memory sites, but also of the profile of Montgomery as a city and seat of government. It is a divisive, tensive profile. The city and its environs remain heavily segregated, and the city “feels” as well as looks divided.19 The wall, thus, references us to an imperfect and unresolved present, offering a visual image matching what Richard Gray describes: “[T]he old ways survive in however shadowy a disguise; the old racial prejudices are sustained in indirect, coded form” (224).

The upper level of the Memorial and its still pool of water clearly seem to represent the future. Ironically, access to the second level is foreclosed for security reasons.20 However, the view from the “future” is an interesting one. Not only is the water still, a standard cultural marker of contemplation and peace (Moore 120-129), but the elevated area also offers a vantage point to view the lower plaza level scene. The face of the wall is no longer visible; the representation of the present disappears, collapsed into the representation of the past. As one gazes down at “the past” (the table), s/he is distanced from it, removed to a space where racial strife clearly is a remnant of the past. This time shifting by visual perspective seems to suggest above all that racial justice remains a future imaginary, that it was not realized in the Civil Rights Movement.

Another example of visual/material perspective shifting that seems important here has to do with the Memorial’s color. Not all black granite is the same, and the stone used for this memorial is not at all like the uniformly black granite composing the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The material of the Civil Rights Memorial is highly variegated in color, almost mosaic-like in its composition. That color variation is not visible from even a short distance or in most photographs, but the multiple colors are unmistakable in a close view of the Memorial. Thus, as a visitor approaches the Memorial, the stark black-white color double recedes, as if as a reminder that race cannot be rendered in binary form but must be recognized as diverse and multiple, but still suffused by common interest. When we focus on color, the table, which performs the Memorial’s representation of the past, appears as a dark body inscribed with and indentured to white words. The representation of the future, however, remains uninscribed, free of any verbal coding and unencumbered of the white, discursive containment that characterizes the symbolic past.

Whiteness is displaced and subverted too by the character of many of the table’s inscriptions marking death. The mostly African American murder victims are described in the timeline not only by name, but frequently in terms that point to their innocence and/or their civic status: “youth,” “Rev.” [Reverend], “students,” “voter registration worker,” “Cpl.” [Corporal], “children,” “Civil Rights leader,” “schoolgirls,” “witness to murder,” “Civil Rights workers,” “march volunteer,”
“seminary student,” and “black community leader.” Their murderers, by contrast, are described as “Nightriders,” “white legislator,” “police,” “Klan,” “state trooper,” “deputy,” and “highway patrolmen.” These nameless individuals are represented as authorized or at least protected by institutional authority or group solidarity. When the perpetrators are not identified explicitly, the context of the murder is: “killed for leading voter registration drive,” “murdered for organizing black voters,” “murdered for speaking to white woman” “killed protesting construction of segregated school,” and “killed after promotion to ‘white’ job.”

Starkly represented here are mindless and ruthless bids to maintain power. Although the murderers are rarely identified as white, the implication is obvious. Read together, the identities named by the timeline point to a reversal of identification much like that advocated by Cornel West:

To engage in a serious discussion of race in America, we must begin not with the problems of black people but with the flaws of American society—flaws rooted in historic inequalities and longstanding cultural stereotypes. How we set up the terms for discussing racial issues shapes our perception and response to these issues. As long as black people are viewed as “them,” the burden falls on blacks to do the “cultural” and “moral” work necessary for healthy race relations. (3)

Rhetorically, the timeline seeks alignment of the visitor with those murdered (majority African Americans) and solicits division between the visitor and the murderers (presumably all European Americans).

But the timeline’s representation of the murderers as so often those in positions of cultural authority and its named “reasons” for the murders signal an even stronger move than reassigning “us” and “them.” Homi Bhabha could be describing the Memorial’s critique of whiteness when he suggests that:

The subversive move is to reveal within the very integuments of “whiteness” the agonistic elements that make it the unsettled, disturbed form of authority that it is—the incommensurable “differences” that it must surmount; the histories of trauma and terror that it must perpetuate and from which it must protect itself, the amnesia it imposes on itself; the violence it inflicts in the process of becoming a transparent and transcendent form of authority. (21)

The timeline performs the dynamics of whiteness as a form of authority that maintains itself through brutality and terror and only under the sign of rationalized insanity. Who but a terrorist or a lunatic, after all, would murder a minister, a schoolgirl, a military officer, or a community leader, or do so for the “reasons” named in the timeline? Whiteness is indeed displayed here as unsettled, disturbed, and violent in its struggle to preserve its dominance.
CONCLUSION: WHAT BRAND OF RACIAL POLITICS?

What might we learn from the juxtaposition of these two readings of the Civil Rights Memorial—the one based on a critical posture that takes author, genre, and symbolism as the significant constellation of issues in its hermeneutic, and the other predicated on readings not only of symbolic but material considerations? We certainly agree with Abramson that the shape and substance of the Memorial’s timeline are important components of its rhetoric. However, the critical moves he makes are to identify the characteristics (and political shortcomings) of the timeline as a standard historical regimen and then to assign those characteristics to the Civil Rights Memorial.

We believe that is a mistaken approach for two reasons. First, it overlooks the specific substance of the timeline’s symbolic representations in the case of the Memorial. Even if we heeded only the symbolism of the timeline, in other words, we would be inclined to read the Memorial as more critical (in Mitchell’s sense) than does Abramson. Second and more important, his reading abjures any attention to the material features of the Memorial or of its context. If we understand those material considerations as interacting with the symbolism of the Memorial, we read a much different message than Abramson does; the Memorial, in our view, encourages its visitors to reject the very position that Abramson argues the Memorial promulgates. Although we believe that studying symbolism alone and in the absence of materiality is inadequate to an understanding or critique of any rhetoric, it certainly is so in the case of public art. The discrepancies between our reading and Abramson’s highlight the differential possibilities. So, as we pose this critical reading alongside Abramson’s, what might we conclude about the Civil Rights Memorial’s political rhetoric?

Abramson’s reading of the Memorial confines its rhetoric to the inscriptions in the timeline, the Memorial’s symbolic representation of the past. Abramson concludes that the Memorial approves a reliance on institutional authority as the appropriate agency of change, thereby reiterating the status quo and reducing the difficult issues of race to a non-controversial and too easy formulation. His critique apparently presumes that the Memorial affirms for the present the substantive politics of the past. Abramson’s account of the Memorial’s timeline is descriptively accurate, if incomplete. The Memorial does represent governmental action as the principal form of intervention in and redress of racial injustice. But the Memorial’s timeline represents a past it makes every effort to displace rhetorically. If there is a politics that it preserves from the past, it is not the substantive authority of the law, but the tactical performance of resistance. What the Memorial can tell us is precisely the message Abramson reads. But if we read beyond the representations of the timeline to the Memorial’s material performances, we see a more complex and more subversive rhetoric.

We understand the Civil Rights Memorial’s rhetoric as assigning the events in the timeline to the past and declaring the actions of that finite past worthy of memory but inadequate to the goals of “justice” and “righteousness” articulated by King and
quoted on the Memorial’s wall. Nothing in the Memorial’s timeline should lead to the conclusion that the past it inscribes is a past that we should “emulate” in the present and future. If anything, the highly unsatisfying and troubling end of the timeline seems to us to imply precisely the obverse, that this is a past we should remember but not repeat or continue. The clear separation of representations of past and present from that of the future appears (literally) to reinforce that reading.

That the Memorial shifts attention from the past and even seems to argue for a break with the past is not to suggest that it dishonors the Civil Rights Movement or its participants. Instead, its message about the past seems more akin to Dyson’s assessment about the impact of King and the Civil Rights Movement:

Despite the significant basic changes that King helped bring about, the present status of poor black Americans in particular presents little cause for celebration. Their situation does not mean that King’s achievements were not substantial. Rather it reflects the deep structures of persistent racism and classism that have not yet yielded to sustained levels of protest and resistance. . . . In order to judge King’s career, we must imagine what American society would be for blacks without his historic achievements. Without basic rights to vote, desegregated public transportation and accommodations, equal housing legislation, and the like, American society would more radically reflect what Gunnar Myrdal termed the American Dilemma. King and other participants in the civil rights movement wrought historic change, but that change was a partial movement toward real liberation. (235-236)

Indeed, what the Memorial does preserve from the past is not the Movement’s reliance on institutions, but its tactical performances of protest and resistance. It imports into the present—the time of the visitor—the tactical rhetoric that draws attention, announces resolve, and enjoins the moral agency of the individual. It refuses the damage that arises from the pretense that racism ended with the Civil Rights Movement, by reenacting the Movement’s tactical politics in the present. In other words, it creates a continuity with the past by importing into its own rhetoric the performances of the Civil Rights Movement’s activist dimension. That appropriation seems to suggest that the continuity between past and present is racism. But the Memorial creates a clear discontinuity between past and present in terms of the “solutions” it symbolizes. The timeline tells the visitor that, despite the institutional changes, the goal of racial justice has not been achieved, that the methods of the past have succeeded only in part. It does not prescribe the precise means of achieving racial concord in the present and future, but it clearly argues that change is possible and desirable now, in its refracted projection of the ever changing and changeable scenes of Montgomery and in its elevated view of the future.21

The Memorial does offer, however, at least some cues for current resistance and protest. If we notice the multicolored granite of the Memorial, as we can at
close range, it suggests an aesthetic of difference and a politics of coalition, a much different position than that represented in the timeline. That message is buttressed in the fact that the designer of the Memorial is of Asian, not European or African, descent. Moreover, if we attend to the representations of the murderers in the Memorial’s inscriptions of the past, there is a devastating moral critique of whiteness to be read there. And by posing government institutions as the means of social change and as the legitimating cover for a number of the represented perpetrators of violence (e.g., legislator, police, state trooper), it reveals precisely the kinds of contradictions upon which whiteness sustains its control. The Memorial, in other words, harbors as part of its rhetoric moves toward a coalitional politics of diversity and what bell hooks has named a “deconstruction of the category ‘whiteness’” (150). That hardly constitutes a continuity with remedies of the past, at least those represented by the Memorial.

In general, then, we would argue that the Civil Rights Memorial’s rhetorical stance is not the preservative, conciliatory one that Abramson reads. Instead, we believe it participates in the kinds of memory and public art projects described at the beginning of our essay respectively by John Hope Franklin and W.J.T. Mitchell. It faces us with our own history for the purposes of change and efforts to avoid repeating the past. And it is a critical art project in every sense Mitchell describes, in its display of the violence from the Civil Rights era, its reenactments of the tactical moves of the Movement, and in its willingness to engage issues of the present and future in frank, if controversial, ways.

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NOTES

1 The SPLC reports on its website: “Most recently, the Center has become internationally known for its success in developing novel legal strategies to cripple extremist activities and to help victims of hate crimes win monetary damages against groups like the Klan.” See Southern Poverty Law Center <http://www.splcenter.org>. The SPLC gained perhaps the most fame by virtually bankrupting some hate groups by filing and winning civil claims on behalf of families of murder victims. But it has a strong educational, as well as legal, mission. The Intelligence Project tracks and reports on hate group activities and hate crimes across the U.S. And Teaching Tolerance offers grants and curricula for innovative projects on tolerance in schools. For fascinating personal accounts of some of the Center’s legal and watchdog work, see; Dees, Season; Dees, Hate; and Dees, Gathering Storm.
The Civil Rights Memorial has received less attention than its famous forerunner in Washington, but it has received some critical commentary, e.g., in Abramson; Blair; Senie 38-39; Symmes 132-133; and Zinsser. It is discussed also in the 1994 film, *Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision*, which won the 1995 Academy Award for best feature documentary.

We see the performative character of the Civil Rights Memorial as a fundamental part of its rhetoric. Our position is reliant on and works from the following sources that also treat public sites or public art as instances of (or somehow implicating) communication, rhetoric and/or performance: Armada; Blair; Blair, Jeppeson, and Pucci; Blair and Michel; Bowman; Carlson and Hocking; Dickinson; Ehrenhaus, “Silence”; Ehrenhaus, “Vietnam”; Foss; Gallagher, “Memory”; Gallagher, “Remembering”; Griswold; Haines; Hattenhauer; Jackson; Jorgensen-Earp and Lanzilotti; Katriel; Marback; Mechling and Mechling; Rosenfield; Stuart; Sturken; and Trujillo.

Our reading, like Abramson’s, will be partial. That is the case not only because of the truism that all readings are partial, but also because we are focusing on some of the features Abramson did not. Even then, there are many other rhetorical features of the Memorial that will receive far less attention here than they merit, e.g., the water imagery in the Memorial, its religious overtones, the Memorial’s place in the context of a late twentieth-century commemorative “boom,” the Memorial in relation to other Civil Rights-related memory sites, its development and construction in an era of race-related setbacks and backlashes, and so forth. This essay represents only a small portion of our critical reading; we are working on a larger project on the Civil Rights Memorial as this essay goes to press.

For excellent treatments of other Civil Rights memory sites, see Armada (Civil Rights Museum, Memphis); Gallagher, “Remembering” (King Memorial, Atlanta); and Gallagher, “Memory” (Civil Rights Institute, Birmingham).

Abramson also complains that the Memorial makes “no reference to other aspects of the 1960s civil rights struggle, such as the separatist agenda of radical black nationalism propounded by the early Malcolm X, among others” (701). It should be noted that the Civil Rights Movement typically is not regarded as containing separatism or black nationalism as among its “aspects.” If one honors the achievements of Civil Rights groups, separatist and radical groups of the mid-century would be definitionally excluded on almost any grounds. Nationalists and separatists did not seek equality of rights under the civil law of the United States; they sought, explicitly, a separate community affiliation. There certainly is every reason to honor those who have defended such separation, but to demand that a memorial to Civil Rights honor them is to make something of a category error. And it also treats separatism rather dismissively, reducing it to an “aspect” of another movement with which it was not typically even aligned.

The following collections directly address the question of a material rhetoric or have clear implications for it: the two-volume special issue of *Argumentation and Advocacy*, on “Body Argument,” edited by Gerard A. Hauser; and Selzer and Crowley, eds. Also see: Charland; Cloud, “Materiality”; Cloud, “Null Persona”; Condit; Cox; Crowley; Greene; Krippendorff; McGee, “Ideograph”; McGee, “Materialist’s Conception”; McGee, “Text”; McGuire; McKerrow, “Corporeality”; McKerrow, “Critical Rhetoric”; Railsback; Scholle; Stewart; Thomas; and Wood and Cox.

What we find most peculiar about Abramson’s conclusion is that he does attend to some other features of the Civil Rights Memorial and the other memorials, but that he ultimately dismisses the other features in favor of focusing on the timeline.
See also, for example, Miles. He suggests that monuments and memorials stand “for a stability which conceals the internal contradictions of society . . . ”(58).

Chong does a masterful job of describing the tactics of the Civil Rights Movement and in a far more thorough way than we will attempt here. Although his account suffers to some degree from the turgidity of game theory, and although Chong would certainly not describe his work this way, his book represents an admirable account of the material dimension of the protest activity.

Also see Haiman; and Rustin 337.

Also see CORE 241. The point, as Hauser suggests, is to demonstrate the irrefutability of a movement’s position: “Removal and control of the dissident’s physical body . . . underscores the body’s argumentative potency. Rebuking the dissident’s self-sufficiency in this extra-symbolic fashion creates tension for the state’s own self-sufficiency. Removing the opposition by forcibly controlling its body serves as an admission that dissident ideas cannot be refuted, thereby bestowing a hyper-rhetorical presence on the political prisoner’s body” (6).

There are any number of genuinely fine accounts of the Civil Rights Movement. Certainly the most complete in detailing the activities of the Movement leadership is Taylor Branch’s two-volume work: Parting the Waters; and Pillar of Fire. Weisbrot offers a much more condensed but still very useful history, and John Lewis’s book, Walking With the Wind, is one of a number of excellent autobiographical chronicles.

Sara Bullard, the SPLC director of research, suggests that, “A big problem [in doing the research for the Memorial] was that newspapers in the South didn’t cover these deaths” (quoted by Zinsser 36).

There is at least some precedent for understanding artworks as performative, given particular conditions. Discussing Henry Sayre’s work, for example, Pollock argues that: “For Sayre, Fischl’s paintings are performative. They require ‘our collaboration, amplification, [and] embellishment.’ By positioning audience members as agents in the production of cultural meanings, they also thus position audience members as social agents, who work out their relations with each other in and through the process of meaning making engendered by the artwork/event. The performative work thus fans outward. It makes of its own capacity for historicity an occasion for the articulation of difference and re-production of cultural authority, and so for contests over value, meaning, and power” (27).

There certainly are sites of interest to those more inclined to value the Civil Rights history of the city, but to suggest that they are prominent or easily accessible to a first-time visitor would be a gross overstatement. It took us two ten-day visits to Montgomery and repetitive, stubborn inquiries to learn that there was even a driving tour brochure of Civil Rights-related sites in Montgomery. It was unavailable at the city’s visitor center as well as at the state’s Chamber of Commerce offices in the Center for Commerce building. We finally located one at another tourist site. And it is worth noting that, while most brochures for historical and tour sites in the city are free, this one is not. For another description of the tourist context, see Blair 42-44.

According to Tom Brinkman, the Chief of Security for the Southern Poverty Law Center, the Center receives an average of two-three threats per day, either by phone or by the appearance of known hate group members at the site.

Barthes discusses this kind of empowering view in his classic reading of the Eiffel Tower.
Whether Brown v. Board was a real success, of course, has been called into question, particularly by critical race theorists. For a discussion of the issues, see Hasian and Delgado 251ff.

Our own experiences have been of a divided, racially tense city. But we are “outsiders” and not as well situated to get or give a sense of the city as are its residents. However, some of them would agree with us. Joe Levin, co-founder with Morris Dees of the SPLC, asserted in an interview with us that he believed Montgomery is extremely racist. And an editorial in the local newspaper hints of a similar admission about the state: “Like it or not, fair or not, accurate or not, the simple fact is that many people who have never been to Alabama still look on it as a haven for redneckism. There’s enough kernel of truth in that image to make it hurt” (“Pride.” Emphasis added).

Although visitors are not allowed to climb the stairs, the second level is and was intended to be part of the Memorial. According to Morris Dees, Personal interview, the SPLC plans call for a new office space in the next few years and the conversion of the current office building to a visitor center. At that point, we presume, access to the upper level will be open.

As bell hooks argues so forcefully, “No responsibility need be taken for not changing something if it is perceived as immutable. To accept racism as a system of domination that can be changed would demand that everyone who sees him- or herself as embracing a vision of racial social equality would be required to assert anti-racist habits of being” (271).

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