

## From Countermemory to Collective Memory: Acknowledging the “Mississippi Burning” Murders<sup>1</sup>

Claire Whitlinger<sup>2</sup>

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*Sociologists have long been interested in collective representations of the past, as well as the processes through which individuals, groups, or events have been excluded from those representations. Despite this rich body of literature, few studies have examined the processes through which long-silenced countermemory becomes integrated within “official” public memory. This study examines two instances of silence breaking in Philadelphia, Mississippi—the town notorious for the silence, denial, and collective obstruction of justice surrounding the 1964 “Mississippi Burning” murders. By reconstructing and comparing the event structure of the twenty-fifth and fortieth anniversary commemorations—both interracial community-wide events unique for having punctuated Philadelphia’s prevailing silence on the murders—this article finds that commemorability and mnemonic capacity are necessary but insufficient factors for “silence breaking” commemorations to emerge. This study identifies two additional criteria necessary for commemorations that publicly acknowledged long-silenced pasts: pressure from external forces, and the convergence of interests between those previously opposed to and those in favor of acknowledgment.<sup>3</sup>*

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**KEY WORDS:** civil rights movement; collective memory; commemoration; race relations; silence; U.S. South.

### INTRODUCTION

In 2004, Philadelphia, Mississippi—the town notorious for the silence, denial, and collective obstruction of justice surrounding the 1964 murders of civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner—was once again the subject of national attention. On June 21, an interracial coalition of local citizens organized a community-wide commemoration marking the fortieth anniversary of the murders and calling for justice in the case. The dominant discourse of the national and local press praised the event as “a remarkable racial reconciliation,” “great for the community,” and “a turning point,” while academics described Philadelphia, Mississippi, as a “model for racial reconciliation in the state” (Anon. 2004).

This interracial commemoration and call for justice, however, must be considered in light of the city’s previous commemorative practices. While Philadelphia’s

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<sup>2</sup> Department of Sociology, LSA Building, Room 3001, University of Michigan, 500 S. State Street, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104; e-mail: cwhitlin@umich.edu.

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African-American community had commemorated the event annually since 1964, these events remained almost entirely unacknowledged within Philadelphia’s dominant public sphere. Only once before had a similar community-wide commemorative event taken place. On June 21, 1989, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the infamous murders, an interracial group of local Philadelphians organized a remarkably similar community-wide commemoration service. Over 1,000 people from around the country, including nationally known civil rights movement veterans and Mississippi government officials, descended upon Philadelphia, a city with a population of roughly 7,000. The event marked the first time that family members of the victims and many prominent civil rights activists had returned to Philadelphia since 1964.

Outside of these two events, Philadelphia’s commemorative landscape looked markedly different. These two commemorations constituted a radical departure from the mnemonic status quo: they punctuated the silence that for 40 years had made up Philadelphia’s official public memory. These two instances, then, represent moments of “silence-breaking” whereby a previously silenced countermemory is integrated within dominant public discourse. Despite a vibrant literature on the acknowledgment of difficult pasts (Conway 2009; Olick 2007; Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991), we know relatively little about the circumstances under which countermemory becomes collective memory, especially in contexts like Philadelphia where a contested past is nationally relevant, but the tension between silence and acknowledgment is fundamentally local. This article examines how a city, that once epitomized what appeared to be intractable Southern racism, came to acknowledge its silenced past through interracial community-wide commemorations at two distinct moments in its history. As scholars, activists, and politicians commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of major civil rights legislation of the 1960s, this study reminds us that the way we remember and choose to recognize the impact of the era are contextual and shifting.

By reconstructing and comparing the event structures of the twenty-fifth and fortieth anniversary commemorations, this article finds that commemorability and mnemonic capacity are necessary but insufficient factors for “silence-breaking” commemorations to emerge. This study identifies two additional criteria necessary for commemorations that publicly acknowledged long-silenced pasts: pressure from external forces, and that the interests of those previously opposed to and those in favor of acknowledgment converge. To contextualize these findings, I begin by reviewing literature on silence, denial, and acknowledgment of difficult pasts. I then reconstruct and compare the event structure of both the twenty-fifth and fortieth anniversary commemorations. Finally, I suggest broader theoretical implications related to when and how long-silenced countermemory is acknowledged, and conspiracies of silence dismantled.

## ACKNOWLEDGING SILENCED PASTS

Sociologists have long been interested in collective representations of the past (Halbwachs and Coser 1992 [1925]; Olick and Robbins 1998; Zelizer 1995), the processes through which individuals, groups, or events have been excluded from those

representations (Armstrong and Crage 2006; Irwin-Zareka 1994; Pelak 2015; Sturken 1997), and the challenge of commemorating difficult pasts (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002; Wagner-Pacifi and Schwartz 1991). Thus, in addition to research on collective memory and the many vehicles through which it is represented, scholars have demonstrated a growing interest in memory's inverse—silence, denial, and social forgetting (Cohen 2001; Rivera 2008; Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger 2010; E. Zerubavel 2006). Yet, as Schudson (1997:348) reminds us, “memory is a distortion since memory is invariable and inevitably selective. A way of seeing is a way of not seeing, a way of remembering is a way of forgetting too.” Remembering and forgetting are thus intimately intertwined. But not all social forgetting is “benign.” Sometimes social forgetting is the product of voluntary, conscious efforts to silence particular pasts (Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger 2010:1107). At its extreme, this form of silence represents a “conspiracy of silence,” that is, “when a group of people tacitly agree to outwardly ignore something of which they are all personally aware” (E. Zerubavel 2006:2; see also Cohen 2001). This particularly pernicious form of silence undermines social solidarity by impeding the development of open communication and trust that forms the basis of democratic political culture (E. Zerubavel 2006:85; on democratic political culture, see Alexander and Smith 1993; Berezin 1997; Somers 1995).

Several book-length studies of silence and denial as a social (as opposed to merely psychological) phenomenon have identified a number of factors contributing to the emergence and maintenance of conspiracies of silence. For both E. Zerubavel (2006) and Cohen (2001), the concept of mutual denial is key for understanding “how one can actually be aware and (at least publicly) unaware of something at the same time” (E. Zerubavel 2006:3). According to these authors, collective denial, like its psychological variant, is the result of pain, fear, shame, and embarrassment—all emotions surrounding difficult pasts. It is not surprising, then, that perpetrators, as well as their families and communities, whether consciously or unconsciously, would suppress difficult pasts (Giesen 2004; Smelser 2004; Tsutsui 2009).

Most importantly, a sociological perspective on silence and denial reminds us that collective memory is structured and maintained by asymmetrical social relations. Those occupying dominant social positions are able to advance a particular “official” version of the past by controlling access to information, the means of dissemination, and the very terms of discussion (Boyarin 1994; E. Zerubavel 2006). Agents of official public memory, moreover, advance their agenda by colonizing public space with their version of the past, often at the expense of “vernacular” countermemory—a phenomenon well documented by historians of the American South (Blight 2001; Bodnar 1992; Brundage 2005; McLaurin 2000).

Considering the power asymmetry characteristic of Southern history, the challenges facing agents of countermemory in Philadelphia, Mississippi, were considerable. But while conspiracies of silence become more difficult to dismantle as time passes, the passage of time also creates more opportunities to break the silence (E. Zerubavel 2006:61). Mnemonic dominance, even in totalitarian societies, is never total (Irwin-Zareka 1994; Olick and Robbins 1998:127), and in such circumstances, vernacular or countermemory can survive, and even thrive, both under and against mnemonic hegemony (Bodnar 1992; Y. Zerubavel 1995). In her study of Israeli

national memory, Yael Zerubavel (1995) observes that collective memory can and often does successfully suppress oppositional memory, but countermemory may also gain enough momentum to break out of its oppositional status and become official memory. Exactly how countermemory becomes collective memory, however, remains an underexplored topic in memory studies. Relatively few empirical case studies have explicitly examined the process through which countermemory becomes collective memory, and those that have examine cases of national memory (Barkan 2001; Cohen 2001; Davis 2005; Torpey 2006; Tsutsui 2006, 2009).

One way local communities acknowledge silenced pasts is through public commemoration. The effort to create a commemoration is as much constrained as it is enabled by a number of sociological factors. Scholars examining the conditions facilitating commemoration identify two critical factors for commemorations to emerge: commemorability and mnemonic capacity. While commemorability refers to a particular event’s ability to be constructed as worthy of commemoration (Irwin-Zareka 1994), mnemonic capacity represents the ability of agents of memory to construct a commemorative vehicle (Armstrong and Crage 2006). First, then, agents of memory must be able to define an event as commemorable in the eyes of the public. Events that are disruptive, violent, or large scale tend to be perceived as commemorable (Pennebaker and Basanik 1997; Oliver and Meyers 1999; Schudson 1989; Wagner-Pacifiçi 1996), as are events where victims are particularly sympathetic (Spillman 1998; Wagner-Pacifiçi 1996). The 1964 murders meet all of these criteria but remained unacknowledged and uncommemorated within Philadelphia’s dominant public sphere. While these explanations may account for the commemoration of difficult pasts, they tend not to address situations where resistance to a particular historical episode is so powerful and pervasive as to have prevented public discussion of that event for decades. Thus, the challenges to commemorating silenced pasts are formidable and arguably more difficult to overcome than commemorations of merely “difficult” pasts. Explaining how silenced pasts can achieve commemorative status requires not only for the factors enabling active commemoration, but also those that can dismantle conspiracies of silence.

To understand when and how such deeply unspoken events can become openly recognized within the dominant public sphere, commemorability and mnemonic capacity are both necessary but insufficient factors by themselves. Two additional criteria are necessary for long-silenced pasts to be publicly commemorated. First, external forces must place pressure on local communities to acknowledge the events. Second, drawing on insights from critical race theory (Bell 1980), to achieve that acknowledgment the opposing forces for and against recognition must converge.

## METHODS AND DATA

I examine two distinct moments of community-wide public acknowledgment: the twenty-fifth and fortieth anniversary commemorations of the “Mississippi Burning” murders in 1989 and 2004, respectively. I reconstruct and analyze the event structure of both commemorations with the help of Event Structure Analysis

(ESA). ESA uses an interactive computer program (ETHNO) that prompts the researcher with a series of counterfactual questions based on the sequential order of actions identified by the analyst. In doing so, the program probes the researcher's construction, comprehension, and interpretation of the event. Thus, ESA is a non-numeric heuristic methodology enabling the researcher to analyze and interpret temporal sequences constituting the narrative of an event (Griffin and Ragin 1994). The basic purpose is to assist the researcher in unpacking an event into its constituent parts, and then analytically reconstituting the sequence of actions as a causal interpretation of what happened and why it happened as it did (Griffin 2007). ESA, therefore, does not *reveal* causality, but *elicits* the researcher's understanding of complex causal relationships by scrutinizing an event's logical structure (Griffin 1993; Heise 1989; Heise and Lewis 1988).

Data come from interviews and archival sources. In-depth interviews were conducted with 53 key informants between 2009 and 2013, most of whom participated in planning the commemoration services. Each of these interviews followed an interview schedule, with flexibility in the order and content of questions based on the individual's unique experiences. Key informants were first identified through newspaper coverage of the commemoration services and later through snowball sampling. Archival data came primarily from local and statewide news sources (i.e., *The Neshoba Democrat* and *Jackson Clarion Ledger*) as well national news coverage of the 1989 and 2004 commemorations (via the AccessNews online database). Additional archival data was collected at five archives and a variety of other documentary sources (personal papers, diaries, archived computer files). The archives included the Mississippi Department of Archives and History (Jackson, MS), the Department of Archives and Special Collections at the University of Mississippi (Oxford, MS), the Special Collections at the University of Southern Mississippi (Hattiesburg, MS), the Wisconsin Historical Society (Madison, WI), and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (New York, NY). At these locations, I gathered newspaper clippings, commemoration brochures, and unpublished documents from related civil rights organizations and the victims' families.

## **BACKGROUND: A PHILADELPHIA STORY**

On June 21, 1964, in Philadelphia, Mississippi, three civil rights workers—James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman—failed to report back before nightfall. Volunteers staffing the Meridian headquarters of Congress of Federated Organizations (COFO)—the umbrella organization coordinating Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)—feared that the young men had been abducted or even killed. This occurred during the first week of what would be called “Freedom Summer,” a massive voter registration campaign in Mississippi. The disappearance of these men generated global media speculation. While the press adopted and reinforced COFO's initial suspicions that Philadelphia's sheriff and deputy were somehow involved in the disappearances, among local Philadelphians reactions were diverse.

A small group of white dissidents sided with the civil rights community and called for immediate federal intervention, but the majority of white Philadelphians believed the disappearances were a “hoax” or “Northern conspiracy” and did little to aid the investigation (Mars 1977).

Finally, after six weeks, the search effort came to a close when a local informant provided the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) with the location of the bodies. By the end of the formal investigation, three Ku Klux Klan members had confessed to the FBI and recounted in detail how local Klansmen—including business leaders and law enforcement officials—had kidnapped, murdered, and ultimately buried Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman 30 feet beneath an earthen dam on the outskirts of town.

Three years after the murders, seven men from Neshoba County (in which Philadelphia is situated) and nearby Lauderdale County were convicted on federal charges that they denied Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman their civil rights. However, despite over 44,000 pages of FBI documentation on the case, no one stood trial for murder—a *state* charge that no Mississippi district attorney had seen fit to prosecute until 2005 (Ball 2006).

For the next 25 years public discussion of the murders was largely concealed by a “conspiracy of silence” (E. Zerubavel 2006). Members of the African-American community of Philadelphia, on the other hand, organized annual commemoration services at local black churches. During the period between 1964 and 1989 (and again until 2004), Philadelphia could be described as having two mnemonic communities: the African-American community, which commemorated the event annually, and the white community, which remained shrouded in civic silence. No local elected officials or local newspaper coverage spoke of the murders. These two spheres of remembrance, dominant and counterpublic, maintained parallel trajectories for the next 25 years.

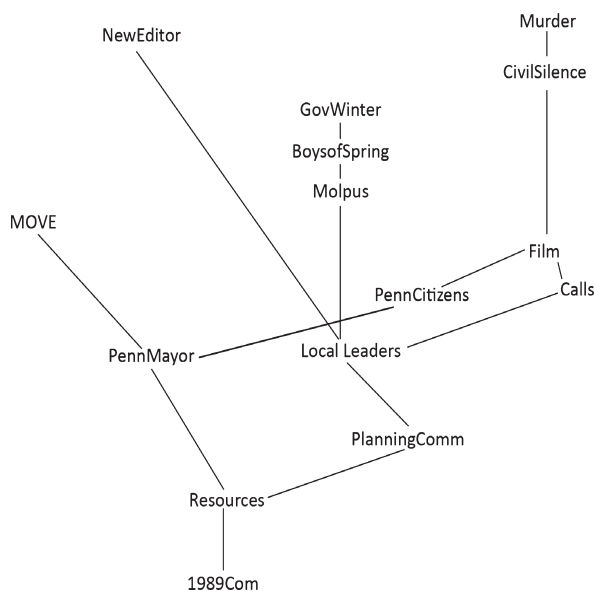
## DATA ANALYSIS

### *Event Structure of the 1989 Commemoration*

Figure 1 depicts the sequence of actions that were significant in the evolution of the community-wide commemoration in 1989, which is notable for breaking a nearly 25-year-long civic silence. Three actions serve as critical junctures: the national release of the film *Mississippi Burning* (Film), which reinvigorated the national collective memory of the murders; the mobilization and organization of local agents of memory (LocalLeaders); and finally, the availability of external financial support via the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania mayor’s office (Resources). In the following section, I explain how these critical junctures channeled the effects of temporally prior occurrences to result in the 1989 commemoration.

### *Mississippi Burning Reinvigorates National Collective Memory*

Philadelphia’s conspiracy of silence began to be dismantled on the eve of the twenty-fifth anniversary when Alan Parker’s film, *Mississippi Burning*, was released



Abbreviation	Date	Description of Action
Murder	June 1964	Klansmen murder Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman
CivilSilence	June 1964	Discussion of murders excluded from Philadelphia's civil sphere
NewEditor	1966	Dearman takes over as editor/owner of <i>The Neshoba Democrat</i>
GovWinter	1980	William Winter elected governor of the state of Mississippi
BoysofSpring	1982	Molpus among young Winter staffers referred to as the "Boys of Spring"
Molpus	1983	Molpus elected secretary of state of Mississippi
MOVE	1985	Philadelphia, PA, mayor scarred by fatal confrontation with MOVE
Film	Jan 1989	The film <i>Mississippi Burning</i> released nationwide
Calls	Jan 1989	Editor learns thousands could arrive for the twenty-fifth anniversary
LocalLeaders	Jan 1989	Dearman writes Molpus about planning a city-wide commemoration
PennCitizens	Jan 1989	Philadelphia, PA, natives urge mayor to support Mississippi commemoration
PlanningComm	Feb 1989	Local agents of memory organize a planning committee
PennMayor	Feb 1989	Philadelphia, PA, mayor's office offers financial and organizational assistance
Resources	Feb 1989	Commemoration planning committee accepts Pennsylvania mayor's assistance
1989Com	June 1989	Commemoration planning committee holds 1989 city-wide commemoration

Fig. 1. ESA of 1989 commemorations.

on December 9, 1988. The film, which is roughly based on the 1964 murders, was largely responsible for reinvigorating national awareness of this watershed moment in American history that was largely unknown to a post-civil rights movement generation. Initially, the film's screenwriter, Chris Gerolmo, faced resistance from young studio executives who had never heard of the case and believed it to be an isolated instance of Southern violence with little national appeal (Toplin 1996). After four years' reworking the script, however, Orion Productions decided to finance the project. The film went on to receive critical acclaim through seven

Academy Award nominations, but is arguably better known for having sparked a national debate on the responsibility of filmmakers to accurately portray historical events. Critics charged that the film obscured the importance of blacks in the civil rights movement, misportrayed FBI intimidation tactics, and depicted white Southerners as bigoted, while others defended the filmmakers’ creative freedom. The film’s director, Alan Parker, has spoken candidly on this issue arguing that he was “trying to reach an entire generation who knows nothing of that historical event” (Toplin 1996:42). He was attempting to captivate a generation not likely to watch *Eyes on the Prize* or any of a number of documentaries that illuminated this particular story. “That’s enough a justification,” Parker reasoned, “for the fictionalizing” (Toplin 1996:42). Regardless of the film’s ethical implications, *Mississippi Burning* reignited national interest in the 1964 murders, which turned the national spotlight, once again, on Philadelphia, Mississippi.

The film’s release did more than reinvigorate national awareness of the 1964 murders; it renewed national interest in the case, which ultimately placed pressure on the local community to acknowledge the murders. Stanley Dearman, the owner and editor of the local weekly paper, *The Neshoba Democrat*, was keenly aware of the national interest in this case. Since 1966, when he became the paper’s managing editor, Dearman had fielded questions from eager newspaper reporters interested in tracking Philadelphia’s racial “progress.” Each anniversary, especially “big” anniversaries such as the twentieth or twenty-fifth, unearthed a new cohort of inquisitors; the release of *Mississippi Burning* just months before the twenty-fifth anniversary intensified this effect (on the periodic nature of commemorations, see Olick 1999; E. Zerubavel 2003). Figure 2 shows the number of articles mentioning the murders in the *New York Times* from 1964 until the thirtieth anniversary in 1994. The coverage exploded in 1989 following the release of *Mississippi Burning*. It is unclear from Fig. 2, however, whether the news coverage preceded the 1989

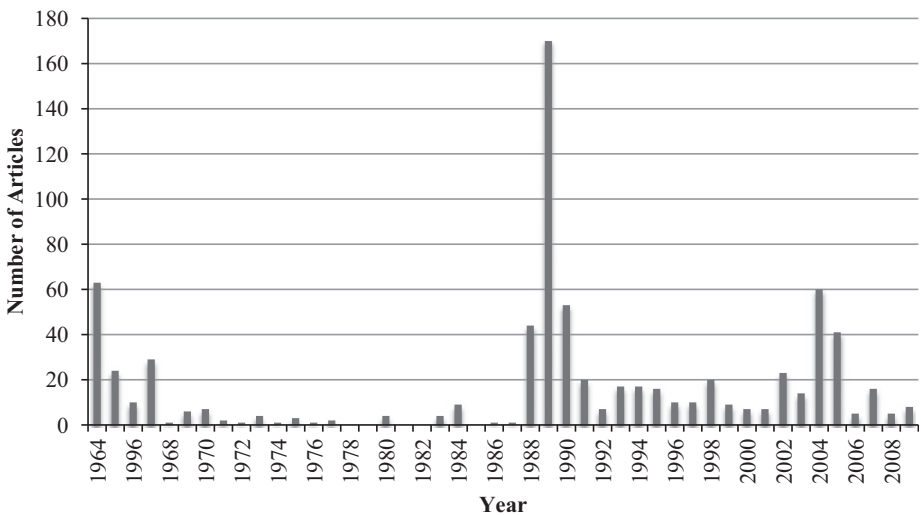


Fig. 2. Number of articles mentioning the murders in *New York Times*, 1964–2009.



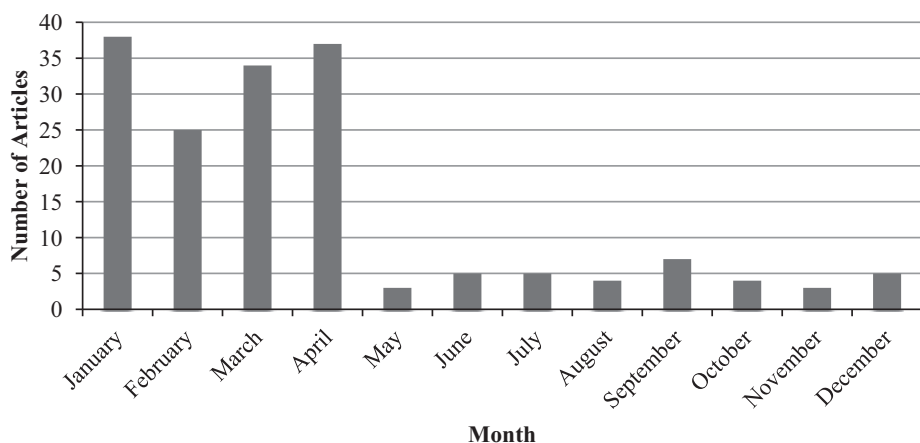


Fig. 3. Number of articles on *Mississippi Burning* murders in *New York Times*, 1989.

commemoration or was a result of the 1989 commemoration. Breaking down the newspaper coverage by month, Fig. 3 demonstrates that the surge in coverage occurred between January and April, just after the film's release but months before the June 21 anniversary.

A staff reporter from *The Neshoba Democrat* in 1989 recalls Dearman's reaction to the movie's release: "*Mississippi Burning* was coming out and [Dearman] knew all the media had come and he knew with the movie and the 25<sup>th</sup> they were really going to come, so he got some people together and said, 'You know, we've really got to put our best foot forward'" (interview, April 10, 2013). This quotation reveals the complicated motivations of local citizens for acknowledging the murders. It indicates that individuals, at least those connected with the newspaper, were concerned that large crowds would likely descend on Philadelphia to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary and suggests that locals assumed they would be under national scrutiny via the national media.

Potential media scrutiny was not the only motivation for Philadelphians to publicly acknowledge the murders. For decades, tourists had been making the pilgrimage to Philadelphia on the June anniversary of the murders, but in 1989 Dearman received more phone calls than usual and sensed the number of students and civil rights groups planning to visit for the twenty-fifth anniversary would be larger than the town had yet experienced. This posed significant organizational challenges. With a population of roughly 7,000, Philadelphia was not equipped to host thousands of potential visitors. How this many visitors would be housed, fed, and transported was a potential logistical nightmare that required attention. Without preparation, Philadelphia leaders worried their town might be ridiculed on a national stage once again. With the potential arrival of thousands of visitors and a large media presence, organizing a public acknowledgment also provided a public relations opportunity. Organizing a community-wide commemoration would thus enable Philadelphians to challenge the *Mississippi Burning* narrative that had plagued the city's reputation for decades.

*Mobilization and Organization of Local Agents of Memory*

The second critical juncture in the 1989 event sequence represents the mobilization and organization of powerful local agents of memory (LocalLeaders) and marks the confluence of three separate sequences: Philadelphia native, Dick Molpus, emerging as a political leader (Molpus); Stanley Dearman’s ascendancy as editor/owner of the local newspaper (NewEditor); and the surge in national interest in the 1964 murders as a result of *Mississippi Burning*’s national release (Calls). While this last sequence was set into motion just months before the anniversary, the first two sequences indicate long-term processes precipitating the 1989 commemoration.

That Dick Molpus and Stanley Dearman would emerge as powerful agents of countermemory was not inevitable nor inconsequential. Over time, and as a result of deeply personal experiences, both men developed the opinion that the murders had been wrong and the community ought to acknowledge its “corporate responsibility” (interview, March 26, 2013). From a contemporary vantage point this might seem unsurprising, but it is important to remember that in 1989, many locals ardently opposed this position such that these sentiments had never been expressed in a public forum. Without expressing these opinions publicly, both men came to occupy positions of power and moral authority, Dearman as editor/owner of the local weekly newspaper, and Molpus as the Mississippi’s Secretary of State, the second highest elected position in the state.

As the editor/owner of the local weekly newspaper, Dearman possessed unrivaled control over local public discourse (Garfrerick 2010). He single-handedly decided what was printed, and ultimately read, by the majority of Philadelphians—both white and African American. Dearman took over *The Neshoba Democrat* in 1966 from editor Jack Tannehill, who had been largely criticized for his coverage of the 1964 murders. Throughout the first two decades of his tenure, Dearman began writing stories about, and including pictures of, local African Americans who had previously been excluded. In this small, yet significant, way, Dearman primed Philadelphia for change while also maintaining his stellar reputation. More importantly, Dearman’s position as the newspaper’s editor/owner afforded him control over essential silence-breaking technology. The local newspaper could—and would—be used to promote the 1989 commemoration, and later reinforced the event’s import by reprinting the transcript of the entire ceremony in the next week’s issue.

Dearman, however, could not have organized a community-wide commemoration on his own. While he had lived in Philadelphia for years, he was not born in Neshoba County, and thus not a “native son.” Dick Molpus, on the other hand, *was* born in Neshoba County and hailed from one of the county’s most prominent families. In the 10 years proceeding the twenty-fifth anniversary, Molpus had risen in the ranks of state politics, first as an adviser to Governor William Winter helping to pass the 1982 Education Reform, and then later as Secretary of State, which was the position Molpus held when Dearman wrote to him about the upcoming twenty-fifth anniversary. Dearman had known Molpus since he was a child and knew Molpus would be a willing ally: “There will be a lot of people in Philadelphia [for the twenty-fifth anniversary],” Dearman recalled writing to Molpus, “and we need to start thinking about what we can do about it” (interview, March 26, 2013). Molpus

agreed, and offered to help organize a commemoration planning committee (PlanningComm), despite the warning by key advisers that such an act would be political suicide.<sup>4</sup>

Once Dearman and Molpus decided to move forward with the idea, they convened a planning committee made up of local leaders, and though efforts were made to engage African-American members of Mt. Zion Church, the planning committee was largely dominated by local white businessmen (interview, April 23, 2004).

### *Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Provides Necessary Resources*

As a local organizational infrastructure took shape, an unexpected ally emerged bolstering the group's mnemonic capacity. After viewing *Mississippi Burning*, several prominent residents of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, envisioned a "Philadelphia to Philadelphia" project whereby citizens of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, would assist some sort of commemoration in Philadelphia, Mississippi, and urged Mayor Wilson Goode to support the idea (PennCitizens). Under most circumstances, it would be difficult to imagine a mayor from a large Northern city allocating significant financial resources to commemorative efforts in a small Southern town, but Mayor Goode had some reputational management issues of his own (Fine 2001). Several members of the 1989 commemoration committee later speculated that Philadelphia, Pennsylvania's mayor desired positive press in the wake of an embarrassing incident where city police dropped a bomb on occupied row houses attempting to end an armed impasse with MOVE, a black liberation organization, killing 11 and destroying 65 homes (MOVE).

Several months before the twenty-fifth anniversary, representatives from Goode's office reached out to the Neshoba County NAACP president, Pete Talley, offering their services to support a citywide commemoration (PennMayor). While at first suspicious of the Pennsylvanian's motivations, the Mississippi-based planning committee members came to find their institutional support, including a substantial financial investment, advantageous. "We were out of our league," according to one 1989 planning committee member, but "we had the mayor's office from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, from a major city in the United States who knew about public presentations and these kinds of things and had people on staff who were professionals doing that kind of stuff, particularly getting the word out." The "Philadelphia to Philadelphia Project" was formalized, and as a result, two representatives from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, made regular trips to Mississippi in preparation for the commemoration service providing their professional services and access to the resources of Mayor Goode's office. Thus, with access to sufficient resources, a local organizational infrastructure to channel those resources, and the motivation to acknowledge the town's violent history, the first community-wide commemoration of the 1964 murders came to fruition.

<sup>4</sup> In the governor's race six years later, Dick Molpus (Dem.) was defeated by Kirk Fordice (Rep.) who won the election with 55.4% of the vote—and even carried Molpus's home county, Neshoba (Nash and Taggart 2009:254). Some have speculated that Molpus's involvement in the 1989 commemoration played a role in his defeat (Sokol 2006:328).

*Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Commemoration and Return to Silence*

On June 21, 1989, over 1,000 people from around the country descended upon Philadelphia to participate in the first citywide commemoration service marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the murders. Of the many speeches delivered that day, the statement delivered by Dick Molpus is particularly notable. The first Mississippi elected official (and native Philadelphian) to publicly apologize for the murder, Molpus spoke directly to the victims’ family members sitting in the audience: “We deeply regret what happened here twenty-five years ago,” Molpus lamented, “[w]e wish we could undo it. We are profoundly sorry that they are gone” (Molpus 1989). In light of decades of silence and denial in Philadelphia’s public sphere, this acknowledgment was a radical, and some would argue, courageous act.

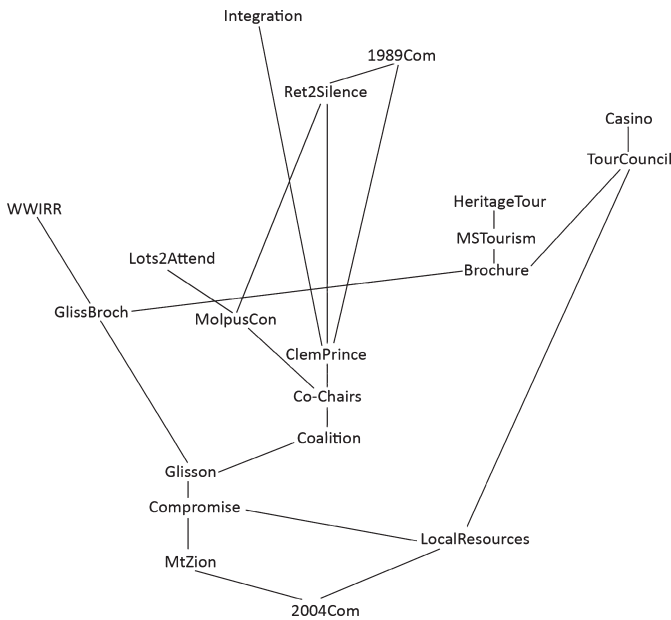
The event appeared to signal that the city had reached a turning point, and Philadelphians—both black and white—hoped that was the case. Most Philadelphians were well aware of their city’s stigmatized reputation having heard countless stories about businesses choosing not to invest in Philadelphia, or travelers continuing their journey on to the next town for fear of staying in Philadelphia overnight. For many locals, especially those with significant political or economic stature, the twenty-fifth-anniversary commemoration presented an opportunity to articulate the city’s positive change. This “conversion narrative” is exemplified by Molpus’s remarks at the commemoration service:

I mean it when I say it, that this is a new day in Philadelphia, this is a new day in Mississippi. No one is saying that this corner of the earth is perfect, and of course it isn’t. There are shortcomings that we see every day, but we are working, we are struggling, we are trying to create the kind of community and state that can be a beacon to the nation and to the world. . . . We’ve come through a tough, a sad chapter in our state’s history, but we’ve learned this lesson. We’ve learned that our real enemies are not each other. (Molpus 1989; on conversion narratives, see Hobson 1999; Somers and Block 2005:273–275; E. Zerubavel 2003:19)

Despite this optimism, the reality of Philadelphia’s moral redemption was challenged the following morning when employees of the local newspaper arrived to see the white columns flanking the entry to their office defaced with red spray paint spelling “K-K-K.” Likewise, Dick Molpus received 26 death threats in the first three days after his public apology (interview, July 14, 2009). Outside the dedication of a state-sponsored historical marker at Mt. Zion immediately following the 1989 commemoration, commemorative activity was again limited to the African-American community, which continued to commemorate the event annually at relatively small church services. The broader interracial civic engagement with this difficult past returned to its pre-1989 state.

*Event Structure of the 2004 Commemoration*

Fifteen years would pass before Philadelphia would once again confront the 1964 murders. Leading up to the fortieth anniversary in 2004 a number of sequences converged resulting in a second community-wide commemoration service (Fig. 4). Four actions that are particularly notable include the mobilization of local agents of memory (MolpusCon), the consolidation of a local organizational infrastructure



Abbreviation	Date	Description of Action
Integration	1970	Mississippi public schools integrated
1989Com	June 1989	Commemoration planning committee holds 1989 commemoration
Ret2Silence	June 1989	Philadelphia returns to broad civic silence
Casino	1994	Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians builds nearby casino
TourCouncil	2000	State grants Philadelphia permission to establish a Tourism Council
WWIRR	Nov 2002	Glisson appointed Director of Winter Institute
HeriitageTour	Dec 2002	Mississippi Development Authority (MDA) begins heritage tourism
ClemPrince	Fall 2003	Clemons and Prince discuss need for the city-wide commemoration
MSTourism	Feb 2004	Tourism Council seeks assistance from MDA
Brochure	Feb 2004	Tourism Council decides to compile African-American heritage brochure
GlissBroch	Mar 2004	Molpus invites WWIRR to assist brochure committee
Lots2Attend	Mar 2004	Molpus learns thousands could visit town for fortieth anniversary
MolpusCon	Mar 15, 2004	Molpus convenes steering committee to discuss commemoration
CoChairs	Mar 15, 2004	Clemons and Prince appointed co-chairs of task force
Coalition	Mar 22, 2004	Clemons and Prince convene task force (i.e., Philadelphia Coalition)
Glisson	Mar 2004	Clemons and Prince invite Glisson to assist Philadelphia Coalition
Compromise	May 2004	Glisson brokers compromise between agents of memory
MtZion	May 2004	Mt. Zion leadership decide to support Philadelphia Coalition
LocalResources	May 2004	Philadelphia Coalition secures resources from city, county, and tribe
2004Com	June 2004	Philadelphia Coalition hosts 2004 city-wide commemoration

Fig. 4. ESA of 2004 commemoration.

(CoChairs), access to institutional expertise (Glisson), and acquisition of local financial and political resources (LocalResources). In many ways, these critical junctures resemble those leading up to the 1989 commemoration with one important difference: the existence of a prior “silence-breaking” commemoration (1989Com).

*Agents of Countermemory Mobilize Once Again*

As in 1989, the approach of a “big” anniversary precipitated efforts to organize a citywide commemoration. Those involved in the twenty-fifth anniversary commemoration had anticipated that the fortieth anniversary might also draw large crowds. That expectation was confirmed when Dick Molpus received a phone call from an organizer associated with Mt. Zion claiming that 40 busloads of visitors were planning to attend. Following the precedent established by the 1989 commemoration, Molpus convened a meeting of city leaders, many of whom had participated in the 1989 commemoration, to discuss the possibility of hosting a second community-wide commemoration (MolpusCon).

While the 1989 commemoration influenced how organizers thought about the form and content of the 2004 commemoration, it was not determinative (Olick 1999). Much had changed in the preceding years to support a “politics of regret” (Olick 2007), most notably, the successful prosecution of civil rights–era crimes (Gill 2007; Romano 2006). Furthermore, a new generation of mnemonic agents had emerged in the preceding years with their own ideas about how a community-wide commemoration acknowledging the murders should take shape.

At a March 15 meeting of city leaders organized by Molpus, two members of this younger generation emerged as powerful agents of memory and were appointed co-chairs of a newly formed commemoration task force (CoChairs).

*Agents of Countermemory Consolidate and Organize*

When Leroy Clemons, the recently elected president of the local chapter of the NAACP, and Jim Prince, the successor to Dearman as the editor/owner of *The Nes-hoba Democrat*, were appointed co-chairs of a new commemoration task force, the proverbial torch was passed to a new generation of mnemonic leadership. Both Leroy Clemons and Jim Prince were born during the time period some have dubbed “the long silence” (Ball 2006). Between 1964 and 1989 there was little, if any, public discussion of the murders in Philadelphia’s dominant public sphere leaving each Philadelphia child to “discover” this history on his/her own.

That Clemons and Prince would emerge in 2004 as leaders of a new generation of mnemonic activists and co-chairs of an interracial commemoration task force is not only the product of personal discoveries, but also of broader historical developments (Santoro 2015). Between 1964 and 2004 there was much change in Mississippi, in particular, the forced integration of public schools in 1970 (Integration). For the first time in the history of the state of Mississippi, large numbers of white and African-American children attended school together (Bonastia 2015). Leroy Clemons recalls how attending Philadelphia’s integrated public school as an African American affected his relationship with white students.

Well, now, when they integrated schools I was in the third grade. . . . We didn’t see each other as black and white and that we needed to be segregated because the history wasn’t passed down to us. . . it allowed us the time to develop relationships where we could get to the point now where we can handle the past and that baggage that came along with it.

Here, Clemons notes the importance of the passage of time for cultivating relationships unbound by the strictures of the Jim Crow South. Integration had not only enabled Prince and Clemons to interact in school but also at work. As high school students, Clemons and Prince had become friends working for Stanley Dearman at the local newspaper. Without having established this relationship in their youth, it is unlikely that Clemons and Prince would have stopped to catch up with each other in fall 2003—a conversation where both shared their concerns about the upcoming fortieth anniversary. By 2003, both men had risen to prominent positions in the local community.

Standing outside City Hall in 2003, they began to talk about the anniversary and realized they were thinking along the same lines. The commemoration, argued Clemons, “does not need to come from just the black community,” referring to the annual commemoration held by African Americans at Mt. Zion, “[i]t needs to be a *community-wide* approach to doing something,” declared Clemons (interview, May 15, 2013, my emphasis). Prince concurred based on his experience of the 1989 commemoration. “So here I am,” recalls Prince, “it’s 2004 and I know the fortieth is coming and I’m right where Stanley Dearman was [in 1989]. I knew when I bought the paper I was inheriting that burden. . . so it was kind of natural for me to say let’s model this after what we did in ‘89” (interview, April 10, 2013). As in 1989, two powerful agents of memory recognized a joint objective and joined forces to organize a citywide fortieth anniversary commemoration service. Their leadership, however, suggested that the murders affected future generations and addressing past wrongdoing the responsibility of all Philadelphians, not merely those directly involved in the crime.

Once Prince and Clemons were ordained co-chairs of the newly formed commemoration task force (CoChairs), they invited others to participate, thus consolidating the organizational efforts of local agents of countermemory in what ultimately became a 30-member multiracial coalition, the Philadelphia Coalition (Coalition).

### *Winter Institute Provides Resources and Expertise*

The third critical juncture (Glisson) links institutional support for racial reconciliation efforts at the state level (WWIRR) with the local organizational infrastructure (Coalition). In 2002, Susan Glisson, a Georgia native who had received her master’s degree in Southern Studies at the University of Mississippi, was appointed Director of the newly created William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation at the University of Mississippi, an organization founded to follow up on work begun when Winter helped bring President Bill Clinton’s “One America” Initiative to its only Deep South Public Forum at the University of Mississippi (Lawson 2009). Two years after the Winter Institute was founded, Dick Molpus asked Glisson to advise Philadelphia’s Community Development Partnership (CDP) on their effort to develop a brochure highlighting Philadelphia’s African-American heritage. As a protégé of former Mississippi governor William Winter, Molpus served on the board of the Winter Institute and was familiar with the institute’s work (Nash and Taggart 2009:144). In 2000, the state of Mississippi had granted Philadelphia’s

request to create a Tourism Council, which is significant because the Tourism Council could collect a 3% bed tax at city hotels, thus creating a new source of revenue for promotional materials such as heritage brochures. The request to establish a Tourism Council was a response to a surge in local tourism as a result of Pearl River Resort and Casino constructed on nearby Choctaw land in 1994 (Casino). This new source of funding bolstered the city’s capacity to organize and promote commemorative activities, without which the 2004 commemoration might not have occurred. This local source of funding, however, was insufficient to support the creation and management of the commemoration service being planned. With Glisson already in town supporting heritage tourism efforts, Clemons and Prince invited her to consult with the Philadelphia Coalition. Glisson’s experience facilitating conversations on racial issues proved critical as she assisted the multiracial, multigenerational Philadelphia Coalition in navigating sensitive and often conflictual conversations. Without the coalition making it through these difficult conversations, their efforts to organize a community-wide commemoration would have likely fragmented (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002). The thoughts of one coalition member reflect a common sentiment regarding Glisson’s involvement. “Well, you know, having Susan Glisson involved, it probably couldn’t have happened without her help and expertise. . .” (interview, April 3, 2013). Without having engaged in thoughtful dialogue, this interracial coalition’s efforts to organize the commemoration may well have stalled. In this way, the Winter Institute’s institutional support was crucial for maintaining the local organizational infrastructure.

The Winter Institute was also influential in facilitating compromises between the Philadelphia Coalition and local government bodies (city, county, and tribe) that were initially resistant to supporting the commemoration (Compromise). For instance, representatives from the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians were reluctant to endorse the coalition’s “Call for Justice,” which the coalition planned to present at the commemoration, not because they denied the local community’s collusion in the crime, but out of fear that with this new knowledge Choctaw children might “learn to hate.” Glisson served as a key broker working closely with representatives from the tribe to secure a compromise: the chief would offer a letter of support and contribute financial resources while not actually signing the resolution (LocalResources).

Finally, the Winter Institute’s access to the resources of the University of Mississippi also proved to be a critical asset. “We invited all the top officials,” one coalition member recalls. “And that’s the sort of thing. . .where Ole Miss helped us.” The coalition did not have the ability to do media relations, so the University of Mississippi’s Public Relations Office provided assistance inviting statewide officials and coordinating with the media. “We couldn’t have done it without the Winter Institute” (interview, March 22, 2013).

### *Breaking the Silence. . .Again*

On Sunday, June 20, 2004, thousands of visitors once again descended upon Philadelphia, this time to mark the fortieth anniversary of the infamous 1964



murders. The program titled, “Recognition, Resolution, Redemption: Uniting for Justice,” was more explicitly social justice–oriented than the 1989 commemoration. Several weeks before the commemoration, the Philadelphia Coalition held a press conference calling for justice in the case. Exactly what type of justice the coalition had in mind remained vague, even among coalition members. This ambiguity allowed for multiple interpretations of the call for justice and the commemoration itself (on multivocal commemorations, see Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991). While some were vocal about pursuing legal justice, others argued that the call for justice and commemoration would be good for business. Jim Prince, the editor of *The Neshoba Democrat*, articulated this position in a June 9 article: “As an economic development issues, we could not be able to pay in a lifetime for the type of positive coverage for our county” (Prince 2004a). The commemoration, thus offered an opportunity “to show the world this community has changed” and the editorial continued, “the world will be watching” (Prince 2004b).

The program began at 2 p.m. with an hour-long service at the Neshoba County Coliseum, the only venue large enough to accommodate the number of visitors. Here, a diverse set of speakers flanked the stage perhaps best exemplified by an Associated Press photograph capturing Mississippi’s conservative governor, Haley Barbour, shaking hands with civil rights veteran, activists, and congressman, John Lewis. The Community Development Partnership participated in the commemoration by passing out a number of promotional materials including round cardboard fans with the caption, “I’m a fan of Philadelphia Tourism” and civil rights tourism brochures highlighting a number of civil rights–related sites (e.g., the jail where Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman were held, the former COFO offices, and the funeral home once owned by Charles Evers where he helped register black residents to vote). Driving tours visiting these sites ran at regular intervals from the Coliseum, each narrated by a white and African-American Philadelphia native. Finally, the day’s events concluded with a smaller church service at Mt. Zion. Dick Molpus, once again, took the stage, but he went further than in 1989 where he had been the first Mississippi elected official to publicly apologize for the murders. In 2004, Molpus reminded his fellow Philadelphians of their complicity in allowing impunity to reign and urged those with “local roots” to support efforts the state attorney general and local district attorney who sought to prosecute the case (Ladd 2004).

The reverberations of the 2004 commemoration didn’t end there. A year later on June 21, 2005, “Preacher” Edgar Ray Killen was convicted in the case on three cases of manslaughter, thereby institutionalizing acknowledgment of Philadelphia’s difficult past.

## DISCUSSION

As the data analysis demonstrates, the twenty-fifth and fortieth anniversaries resulted from a confluence of factors, including a number of contingent historical developments. Despite the particularities of each commemoration, comparing the event structure analyses of both commemorations reveals significant commonalities.

The analysis suggests that in addition to commemorability and mnemonic capacity, which are characteristic of the emergence of commemorations broadly, commemorations that incorporate previously excluded discourse within the dominant public sphere also require an external pressure and interest convergence.

### *External Pressure*

Both the twenty-fifth and fortieth anniversaries were preceded by external developments that placed pressure on the local community to acknowledge the 1964 murders. The first and most significant of these developments was the national release of the film *Mississippi Burning*. The film reinvigorated national interest in the case and led a number of individuals, including representatives from the national media, to visit Philadelphia, Mississippi, for the upcoming twenty-fifth anniversary. This interest, however, preceded any local efforts to organize a community-wide commemoration; it was the primary impetus motivating local agents of countermemory to mobilize.

Likewise, in 2004 external interest pressured local citizens to plan a fortieth anniversary commemoration. This time, however, the external pressure was generated through a different mechanism: the memory of commemoration (Olick 1999). As in 1989, local leaders began to receive more phone calls regarding the commemoration of the 1964 murders in the months preceding the fortieth anniversary. And like in 1989, it became clear that potentially thousands of visitors would descend on Philadelphia to mark the anniversary. This came after a number of fortieth-anniversary celebrations commemorating various civil rights milestones such as the Freedom Rides (1960/2000), and the murder of Jackson-based NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers (1963/2003). Thus, the national civil rights community was prepared to travel to Philadelphia in June 2004, whether the local community was prepared for them or not.

Furthermore, despite the 15-year hiatus, the twenty-fifth anniversary commemoration in Philadelphia in 1989 had set a precedent for local agents of memory. Having witnessed the twenty-fifth anniversary commemoration as young adults, a new generation of mnemonic activists felt pressure to hold another commemoration service. Some in this new generation felt that the 1989 commemoration had been a missed opportunity; it had not been transformative in the way many had hoped when Philadelphia's dominant public sphere returned to broad civil silence on the issue of the murders. In this way, the twenty-fifth anniversary affected the form, content, and very conditions of possibility for a fortieth-anniversary commemoration.

### *Interest Convergence*

In addition to external pressure on the local community, the interests of those opposed to and those in favor of acknowledgment needed to converge (Bell 1980). With the release of *Mississippi Burning* just six months before the twenty-fifth anniversary of the murders, the national spotlight was once again turned on the small community of Philadelphia, Mississippi. Aware that the national media would be in

town covering the twenty-fifth anniversary, local leaders seized the opportunity to challenge the “Mississippi Burning narrative” that portrayed Philadelphia’s white community as ignorant and deeply racist. While restoring Philadelphia’s damaged reputation was motivation enough, many local business owners hoped that such an event would stimulate the local economy. Thus, those who had previously condoned the public silence, whether explicitly or implicitly, had sufficient motivation for publicly acknowledging the murders.

The same reputational and economic motivations for acknowledging the murders were present in 2004, arguably even more so. By the early 2000s, a number of political and economic developments on both the state and local level shifted conditions of possibility for local community-wide commemoration. On the state level, the Mississippi Development Authority had developed an infrastructure to support African-American heritage tourism statewide. This was part of broader regional efforts to cultivate African-American tourism (Carrier 2004; Dwyer and Alderman 2008). Locally, a burgeoning tourism industry had grown alongside the Pearl River Resort and Casino, enabling Philadelphia’s Community Development Partnership to create a Tourism Council that could not only provide support for commemorative activities, but also channel profits back into the city. Thus in both 1989 and 2004, reputational concerns and economic opportunities reduced resistance from those who had previously opposed public acknowledgment.

### *Commemorability and Mnemonic Capacity*

Last, the commemorability of the 1964 murders and the mnemonic capacity of local agents of memory to construct a commemorative vehicle were crucial components of both the 1989 and 2004 commemoration. While the commemorability of the 1964 murders was never in question, the mnemonic capacity of local agents of memory was not assured. The twenty-fifth anniversary commemoration may not have occurred were it not for the organizational support and financial resources provided by the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania’s mayor’s office. No one on the 1989 commemoration planning committee had organized an event of this scale or import, with the exception, perhaps, of Dick Molpus. But as demonstrated above, Molpus’s staff was not entirely supportive of his involvement in these commemorative efforts going so far as to describe his participation as “political suicide.” Without resources available within the state of Mississippi, the resources provided by external allies from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania proved essential.

By 2004, resources to support racial reconciliation efforts had developed within Mississippi. In many ways the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation under the stewardship of Susan Glisson, served the same role as the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania’s mayor’s office had 15 years previously. Members of fortieth-anniversary commemoration task force, or Philadelphia Coalition as it was later called, were all volunteers most of whom held full-time jobs. The Winter Institute provided the coalition with a consultant (Glisson) who could essentially work full time on commemoration planning. Furthermore, Glisson’s experience mediating racial dialogues ultimately proved crucial as divisions within the coalition and challenges

from outside threatened the group’s viability and thus the commemoration’s emergence.

In both cases, it is important to note that the local communities’ mnemonic capacity was buttressed by external institutional support. It appears, then, that external forces are not only critical for creating a configuration of pressure on the local community, which provides incentives for the local community to commemorate; external institutional actors also provide necessary financial, organizational, and political support, without which less-well-resourced agents of memory might not be able to construct a commemorative vehicle. As one of the few events to alter the trajectory of the civil rights movement, the national importance of the 1964 murders was never in question. Local agents of countermemory in other contexts, however, might have to more actively work to frame their silenced pasts as relevant to a broader audience, should they wish to bolster their mnemonic capacity.

## CONCLUSION

By reconstructing and comparing the event structure of the twenty-fifth- and fortieth- anniversary commemorations of the “Mississippi Burning” murders, this article illuminates the factors contributing to the emergence of commemorations that acknowledge long-silenced pasts. While the circumstances surrounding each commemoration were unique, both represent distinct moments of public acknowledgment in the mnemonic trajectory of Philadelphia’s official public memory. While Philadelphia’s African-American community had hosted annual commemorations since 1964, Philadelphia’s white community remained largely shrouded in silence. Not until the twenty-fifth anniversary did local elected officials publicly acknowledge the murders as part of community-wide commemoration service. Despite this momentous acknowledgment, Philadelphia’s dominant discourse on the murders returned to silence for another 15 years. Only after a second community-wide commemoration in 2004 would Philadelphia’s conspiracy of silence be dismantled.

Despite the historical particularities and the interdependence of the two commemorations, I conceptualized each as a separate case of silence breaking for comparison. Four factors were necessary for silence-breaking commemorations to emerge. In addition to commemorability and the mnemonic capacity, silence-breaking commemorations also required external pressure and interest convergence. The analysis presented above suggests that external pressure can motivate local agents of countermemory to challenge the status quo. Silence breaking, however, also requires that the interests of those opposed to and those in favor of commemoration converge.

These findings suggest broader implications for understanding when and how conspiracies of silence are deconstructed. First, it appears that deconstructing conspiracies of silence takes time. While the passage of time is not an explanatory factor in its own right, it enables necessary political, economic, and normative shifts to take root. Furthermore, just as the cumulative nature of memory makes silence more difficult to break over time, countermemory is characterized by that same

cumulative effect. Thus, the passage of time can enable agents of countermemory to develop an oppositional infrastructure. Second, this analysis of the 1989 and 2004 commemorations indicates that individual episodes of silence breaking do not necessarily dismantle a conspiracy of silence. The 1989 commemoration, while notable as the first moment of public acknowledgment, did not sustain open public discourse regarding the 1964 murders. Finally, it appears that external pressure and external resources are critical for creating conditions of possibility for acknowledgment in cases where local resistance is considerable.

While this article examined the emergence of two instances of silence-breaking commemorations, future work might consider the consequences of such silence-breaking vehicles. Why, for example, do some instances of silence breaking have long-lasting effects, while others represent only momentary fractures in the status quo? Additionally, further explanatory potential could be harnessed through cross-case comparative analysis of failed and successful attempts to break silences, as well as comparisons of such processes across different levels of analysis (local, national, and international).

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