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REVIEW ARTICLE

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Chris Saunders

The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory

Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford, eds

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My reading of a set of essays under the title *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* (2006), edited by Renee Romano and Leigh Raiford, leads me to offer some reflections on the different ways in which the civil rights movement in the US south and the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa have been memorialized. Memory is of course a slippery concept, which Romano (Wesleyan) and Raiford (UC Berkeley) at one point choose to define as “the subjective, selective, and potentially unreliable account of the past told by those outside of the academy and circulated in the media and popular culture.”¹ They do not stick to so narrow a definition, but their concept of memory work excludes the reconstruction of the past by historians and focuses mostly on forms of public remembering.

Today, Romano and Raiford claim, the civil rights movement has “a central place in American historical memory” (xii). They divide the thirteen essays in their collection into four parts. The first concerns “institutionalizing memory”, and focuses on leading memorials in Birmingham, Memphis, Atlanta, and elsewhere, on the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, on naming streets after the Revd Martin Luther King Jr in Georgia, and on the trials of those involved in the Birmingham Baptist Church bombing of 1963. The second part, “visualizing memory”, addresses issues of representation in the media, films, and photographs, while the third, “diverging memory”, reprints a key article from *Gender and History* on the role of women in an Atlanta voter registration campaign of 1946, and follows with a splendid piece about race and gender in the Mississippi movement of the mid 1960s,

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¹ Romano and Raiford, *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, xiv. Subsequent page references to this text will be included in parentheses in the body of the article.

which shows how the ways in which civil rights activists have remembered the past have changed over time. The fourth part, “deploying memory”, shows how civil rights movement rhetoric can be taken over by others, the two examples explored being the deaf rights movement and the Christian right. These thirteen case studies illustrate how wide-ranging the idea of “memory” can be, though there are many types of memorialization not considered here, such as community commemorations and the memoirs of activists. The editors’ introduction, while helpful in providing some context to the case studies that follow, does not provide a coherent view of how that movement has been remembered and memorialized over time, nor does it interrogate why the movement has been remembered as it has, or how such remembrance relates to present concerns.

While all the essays in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* deserve close attention, all I do here is draw very selectively from some of them to illustrate some similarities and differences with the way the anti-apartheid struggle has been remembered and memorialized to date. The South African struggle has now produced a rich crop of memoirs, but relatively little on memory per se, other than the vast literature that now exists on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) process, a form of memorialization. No attempt has yet been made in scholarship about South Africa, however, to discuss as wide a range of different types of memorialization as are considered in Romano and Raiford’s volume.² In both countries the meaning of events that took place decades ago remains open to contestation, while the struggle for rights is ongoing, which clearly influences the ways in which the struggles are remembered.

The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory begins and ends with passages on Rosa Parks, to whose life and legacy the book is dedicated, and the cover photograph is of a Rosa Parks highway sign. Even before her recent death, she had emerged as an icon of the movement second only to Martin Luther King Jr, and her refusal to give up her seat on the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, on 1 December 1955 was for many a clear marker of its beginning—more so, perhaps, than the Supreme Court decision of May the previous year in *Brown v. Board of Education*.³ While Martin Luther King Jr remains the only American to have a national holiday named after him, Parks was “the ordinary woman,” the grassroots activist whose courageous resistance was able to make a difference. But there are of course problems in placing too much emphasis on any individual, while the connections between the women-led Atlanta registration drive of 1946 and other aspects of the “long history” of the civil rights movement, on the one hand, and the “Rosa Parks moment” on the other, are not explored.

That moment in 1955 is as good a place to start as any in making a comparison with South Africa’s freedom struggle. For South Africans, there is no comparable

² See Nuttall and Coetzee, *Negotiating the Past*; Coombes, *History After Apartheid*; Stolten, *History Making and Present Day Politics*. For film, see the relevant sections of Bickford-Smith and Mendelsohn, *Black and White in Colour*. No attempt will be made here to cite even the key texts on the South African Truth Commission.

³ Foner, *Story of American Freedom*, 275.

iconic moment. In popular consciousness, the struggle is often thought of as beginning as far back as January 1912, when what became the African National Congress (ANC) was founded in Bloemfontein. The ANC's long history was an important part of its claim to legitimacy in later decades. The TRC was given the task of examining South Africa from early 1960 because the Sharpeville massacre on 21 March, and the banning of the two liberation organizations in April of that year, are widely seen as a key turning-point. Others have emphasized the start of the armed struggle by Umkhonto we Sizwe, which was to become the armed wing of the ANC, on 16 December 1961, as the beginning of the real struggle.

If the beginning is not clear-cut, the end, the fall of apartheid and the inauguration of a democratic state is not hard to pinpoint. Though apartheid was eroded over time and did not collapse overnight, its ending is usually associated with events that took place within two weeks in April and May of 1994, events that have remained firmly fixed in the public memory through photographs that appear again and again in the media and even in advertisements: the long queues waiting patiently to vote on 27 April, Nelson Mandela dropping his voting paper into the ballot box in Inanda in KwaZulu-Natal, and his inauguration on 10 May at the Union Buildings in Pretoria as the first democratically elected president. Another iconic moment, though one less often remembered than the others, occurred when the ANC's election victory was announced in early May in Johannesburg, and Mandela declared, with Coretta Scott King at his side, "Free At Last!"⁴

In the American case, the passage by Congress of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts in 1964–1965 can be seen as equivalent to the ending of apartheid, while some would say that the civil rights movement came to an end with the assassination of King in 1968, or that it petered out with the rise of Black Power. While the editors of *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* first say that the civil rights movement they are concerned with "refers to the specific 1954–68 social revolution that sought primarily to grant African Americans full and true equality under the law" (xxii), they confusingly conclude their introduction by writing of the movement as not ending in 1965, 1968, or even "with the splintering of civil rights organizations," but as "an ongoing process with meanings that remain contested . . ." (xxi).

The South African struggle not only lasted much longer than the civil rights movement in the American south, but was also about much more than civil rights—even if the goal, the end of apartheid, meant different things to different people, and the means used to get there were many and varied (indeed, their relative significance remains highly contested to the present). Whereas in the United States, the civil rights struggle was fought out in only part of the country, in South Africa the struggle for freedom led in 1994 to the birth of an entirely new order. Though the representatives of the old order emphasized continuity, none could doubt that the new democratic constitutional order marked a dramatic change of direction, and there was much talk of "the birth of a new nation" and of a "new South Africa".

⁴ See Baldwin, "Soaring on the Wings of Pride", 23, drawing on Mandela, *Long Walk*, 611–12.

Much South African memorializing in the years since has been as much concerned with a nation-building project as with remembering the struggle itself. In South Africa, the ANC continues to the present to see itself as a liberation movement as well as a political party, and it propagates the idea that the struggle fought against apartheid and for social justice is a continuing one. In late 2007, at the time of the bitter contest for the ANC presidency between Jacob Zuma and Thabo Mbeki, many appeals were made to the noble traditions of the movement, while at the same time there was much talk of the need to carry the revolution forward. Constant references back to the days of the anti-apartheid struggle reflected the fact that the connection between the past and the present is far closer in South Africa than in the United States, where the civil rights movement has had a much more limited legacy.

The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory does not explore the relationship of the civil rights movement to earlier freedom struggles. As the movement adopted songs that came out of, and spoke to, the struggle for freedom from slavery,⁵ so in the anti-apartheid struggle, songs were sung that related to the wars fought for continued independence in the nineteenth century, and Mandela spoke of how he was inspired as a child by stories of armed resistance to colonizers. He saw the armed struggle from 1961 as being in the tradition of such earlier resistance.⁶ While, however, the struggle against apartheid was often seen as part of a much longer struggle against white rule, segregation and colonial oppression, the civil rights movement, though suffused with the language of biblical freedom, appears not to have identified so readily with particular earlier struggles against racial oppression.⁷

The large and lavish Freedom Centre that opened in 2004 on the banks of the Ohio River in downtown Cincinnati, Ohio, is mainly devoted to the underground railway and to slavery, but in some of its galleries it links what happened in the nineteenth century to the civil rights movement and the struggle against apartheid, in which, let us not forget, African Americans played a not insignificant role in the 1980s.⁸

⁵ See especially Carawan and Carawan, *Sing for Freedom*. What became the anthem of the movement, "We Shall Overcome" was adapted from an African American church song and was used on the picket line in a food and tobacco workers' strike in South Carolina in 1945. With its mention of "black and white together," it was sung in South Africa during the visit of Robert Kennedy in 1966, but most South African songs were about power, struggle, and even the use of machine guns. The best treatment of the role of music in the South African struggle is the documentary *Amandla: A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony* (Lea Hirsch, South Africa, 2002).

⁶ See Mandela's reference to the earlier struggles in his famous speech in the Rivonia trial in 1964: Mandela, *Long Walk*, 349.

⁷ The extent to which the civil rights movement built upon earlier struggles, whether worker-led or the nineteenth-century campaign for freedom from slavery, may warrant further research. See Hall, "Long Civil Rights Movement."

⁸ I visited the Center in October 2007 (see www.freedomcenter.org). The victories won in the struggle for freedom against slavery, from the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade to the ending of slavery itself by Lincoln's proclamation, were commemorated in often large and lively emancipation celebrations by African Americans throughout the nineteenth century; see Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom*. In South Africa, as in the US south, though formal slavery was ended in the 1830s, it was not until the late twentieth century that celebrations could be held to recognize significant victories, though the Minstrel (formerly "Coon") Carnival in Cape Town, which has taken place from the late nineteenth century to the present, can be seen to be a celebration of freedom at New Year: see especially Martin, *Coon Carnival*. On the involvement of Americans in the South African struggle see Minter, et al, *No Easy Victories* and www.noeasyvictories.org.

For memorials to the civil rights struggle, however, one goes, appropriately, to sites in the south, to Atlanta, where the King Center and National Historic Site focus on the great man,⁹ to the site of his assassination in Memphis, Tennessee, and to the many other cities that now have museums relating to aspects of the civil rights movement. *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* does no more than mention the range of such sites, and does not explain why it was some decades before such museums began to be built.¹⁰ A detailed chapter on the history of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute does, however, explore the struggle that had to be waged to gain public support to build that museum and archive.

The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory does not chart the development of the memorialization of the movement as a whole over time; we have to turn elsewhere to read of how Coretta Scott King began the task of memorializing her husband almost immediately after his funeral, and how it took decades, the expenditure of much money and not a few scandals, before the King Center in Atlanta was anything like it is today, while it took fifteen years before Reagan approved the King public holiday.¹¹ It was only from the late 1980s that other museums began to be planned, and only in the 1990s that most of them opened. While President Clinton signed Congressional legislation for a memorial to King in the District of Columbia in 1996, ten years later sufficient money had yet to be raised to begin the work.¹² In a fascinating chapter in Romano and Raiford's collection, we learn that more than seven hundred cities in the United States have streets named after Martin Luther King Jr. Though this chapter focuses on just one county in Georgia, it throws up interesting questions about the processes involved in street-naming, which it concludes can be "an arena for people to actively define and debate the movement's legacy."¹³ A map shows where streets named after King are—over fifty percent of them in places with fewer than ten thousand residents—but we do not learn when the names were given, so cannot tell how recently the naming or renaming occurred (68).

In South Africa, we are only fourteen years from 1994, and already there has been a much speedier process of memorialization than in the United States. This is at least in part because of the close connection between past and present in South Africa that I have alluded to, but it is also because of a concern with heritage tourism and the

⁹ See www.thekingcenter.org and www.nps.gov/malu/

¹⁰ These include, besides the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, the Voting Rights Museum in Selma, Alabama, the Ralph Mark Gilbert Civil Rights Museum on Martin Luther King, Jr Blvd in Savannah, Georgia, and the Rosa Parks Museum in Montgomery, Alabama. Most civil rights museums have had controversial histories: for a recent example, relating to the Memphis Museum, see Bird, "Civil-Rights Museum Faces Issues of Race, Control." In South Africa, the entire council of the state-funded Robben Island Museum was replaced after the museum reported a loss of R25 million: *Cape Times*, 14 December 2007.

¹¹ See especially Eskew, "Memorializing the Movement."

¹² The June 2007 entry on the website told of a visit by some of those involved to Stone Mountain, Georgia, to look at potential stone for the memorial to be built on the National Mall: www.mlkmemorial.org/site (accessed November 2007).

¹³ Romano and Raiford, *Civil Right Movement*, 90. The chapter is entitled "Street Names as Memorial Arenas: The Reputational Politics of Commemorating Martin Luther King Jr. in a Georgia County."

tourist dollar. While Martin Luther King Jr has usefully been compared to Albert Luthuli, President-General of the ANC,¹⁴ it is Nelson Mandela who is of course arguably the equivalent iconic figure to King in the South African case; he, fortunately for South Africa, remained active long after 1994. Though he has repeatedly said that he was only one among many, it is generally accepted that his contribution was exceptional. It is remembered above all on Robben Island, where visitors see the small cell in which he spent eighteen years, and at the Mandela Museum in the Transkei, which opened in 2000, with sites where he was born and grew up.¹⁵ While memorializing the living is usually not thought to be a good idea, an exception to that rule is made for Mandela.¹⁶

Other examples of memorialization in South Africa get away from the emphasis on Mandela as leading figure, and begin to show something of the diversity of, and the different goals and tactics within, the movement. Given the conflicts of the past, there has in some places been a concern to use apparently neutral names in place of potentially controversial struggle heroes, especially from the tradition that emerged victorious in 1994. Elsewhere, however, such names have been used; in Durban, in 2007, this provoked mass demonstrations that verged on violence. While the main museum that now documents the meaning of apartheid and the struggle against it is the privately-run Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg—which initially seemed to airbrush the struggle of those like Helen Suzman who had fought apartheid in Parliament, a mistake that was to some extent corrected when it was pointed out¹⁷—the single most important attempt at memorialization is the state project known as Freedom Park on a hill outside the capital city of Pretoria/Tshwane, on which large sums have been lavished in recent years. Unlike the Heroes Acres built by North Koreans outside Harare, Zimbabwe,¹⁸ and, twenty years later, Windhoek, Namibia, which glorify the liberation wars and those who fought them, Freedom Park does not confine itself to the recent liberation struggle against white rule. Its proclaimed aim is to heal and reconcile the South African nation; and it attempts to include all earlier struggles for freedom, including those against early colonization, and World Wars I and II. Most of the recent controversy surrounding Freedom Park, however, does not concern this misguided attempt to be chronologically inclusive, but rather the question of who should be remembered for having fought in the anti-apartheid struggle. While the names of over two thousand

¹⁴ Cook, “Awake the Beloved Country.”

¹⁵ At Umtata (Mthatha), Qunu and Mvezo: see www.nelsonmandelamuseum.org.za

¹⁶ There is nothing in South Africa comparable to the King Center at Stanford, but the University in Port Elizabeth (now part of the Nelson Mandela Metropole) has become the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU), there is the Nelson Mandela chair of politics at Rhodes University, and numerous streets are named after him, including major roads in Johannesburg and Pretoria. There is a controversial statue of him in Sandton Square in northern Johannesburg, and plans for a Freedom Tower to commemorate him in Port Elizabeth. In the Cape Town street-renaming process that took place during 2007, in which the present writer was involved, the only exception to the usual rule of not naming a living person was made for Mandela.

¹⁷ See www.apartheidmuseum.org

¹⁸ On which see Werbner, “Smoke from the Barrel of a Gun”, 82–86.

Cubans who died in Angola between 1975 and 1990 are now listed on its walls of remembrance, the idea of including the names of members of the South African Defence Force who had died was rejected. Not only were their names already listed at a military commemorative site on a nearby hill, Klapperkop, but most people saw them as having died in defending apartheid rather than in a freedom struggle.¹⁹

In films and on television, in advertisements and political speeches, references to past struggles help create a remembered picture of what happened, one that is often not historically accurate. By pointing to flaws in popular memory of the two freedom struggles, a volume such as that by Romano and Raiford may itself influence future memorialization. It is to be hoped that its stimulating treatment of how the civil rights movement has been memorialized will inspire South African scholars to follow along similar paths.

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¹⁹www.freedompark.org.za. Initial designs were said to closely resemble the Smithsonian Museum for Native Americans (Marschall, "Transforming the Landscape," 169); now that it is semi-finished, it more closely resembles Great Zimbabwe.

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