

Counternarratives: Community Writing and Anti-Racist Rhetoric

Laurie Grobman,
Penn State University,
Berks

Elizabeth Kemmerer,
Penn State University,
Berks

**& Meghan
Zebertavage,**
Penn State University,
Berks

Co-authored by a professor and two undergraduates and drawing on interviews with community partners, this essay analyzes a community writing project to document the Civil Rights Movement in a northern city. In collaboration with a local African American history museum, students interviewed 22 African Americans ranging in age from 62–90 years old who lived in Reading, Pennsylvania during the 1960s and 1970s Civil Rights Movement. Beyond the 22 oral histories recorded, transcribed, and housed at the museum, students, community members, and the professor researched, wrote, preserved, and shared a history of the Civil Rights Movement as experienced by African American members of the local community. Aligned with the “political turn” in community-writing partnerships advocated by Shannon Carter and Deborah Mutnick (7), the coauthors argue that collaboratively producing and studying local civil rights history is a form of anti-racist writing pedagogy. The rhetorical, historical project under study illuminates the rhetorical and powerful nature of current narratives of race and racism. As we and all our collaborators documented Civil Rights era history together, we began to circulate layers of counternarratives that both expose and challenge racial realities in productive ways.

As historian Matthew Countryman claims, “the story of the modern civil rights movement is usually told as a regional tale, the efforts of African-American Southerners and their Northern allies, black and white, to overturn Jim Crow segregation in the face of the heated and often violent opposition of white Southern politicians, sheriffs, and racist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan” (“Why Philadelphia”). But there are other stories to be told, he argues, including those in Northern cities that require us “to see the problem of race in American society as a national rather than just a Southern issue” (“Why Philadelphia”). Countryman’s *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (2006), Thomas Sugrue’s *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (2008), and Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard’s *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980* (2003) are important full-length studies of the Civil Rights Movement beyond the Southern states. Other books and scholarly articles look at the Civil Rights Movement in local regions, such as Milwaukee, Iowa, Detroit, Chicago, Grand Rapids, Oakland, Newark, St. Louis, New York City, and Cleveland. These counternarratives are important social justice activities, providing new perspectives on history to rethink anti-racism strategies in the 21st century.

In 2015, undergraduate students in an upper level rhetorical theory class partnered with a local museum—the Central Pennsylvania African American Museum (CPAAM)—to uncover new perspectives on history by documenting the Civil Rights Movement in one northern city, Reading, Pennsylvania. Students interviewed 22 African Americans who lived in Reading during the Civil Rights Movement with the aim of eliciting these individuals’ experiences, everything from their recollections of seeing and hearing about the major milestone events; discussions about these events and their meaning and implications with family, friends, fellow church members, co-workers, and others; their participation in any civil rights activities on the national, state, and local level; reflections on the Civil Rights Movement then and as well as its present implications; and anything else they wanted to share. The eldest of our 22 narrators was 90, born in 1925, and the youngest was 62, born in 1943. The eldest was 43 in 1968 when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated; the youngest was 15. Of the 22 participants, eleven traveled to the South

during the Civil Rights era. Fifteen were born in Reading, while the others were born either in Maryland or other southern states.

From these rich personal stories, students, community members, and the professor researched, wrote, preserved, and shared a history of the Civil Rights Movement as experienced by African American members of the local community. This nearly 30,000-word manuscript, *Through the Eyes of Local African Americans: Reflections on the Civil Rights Movement in Reading and Berks County, Pennsylvania*, was drawn together primarily from the oral histories, also utilizing the limited documented historical information on the Civil Rights Movement in and experienced by residents of Reading. 250 copies of the manuscript were printed and shared, and copies remain in the CPAAM exhibit; moreover, the entire manuscript is published online.

Continuing a decade-long partnership through which our college and CPAAM pursue the museum's mission to recover, uncover, document, preserve, and disseminate local African American history, this collaboration sought to add historical information to and remediate the historical record that has for too long excluded and distorted African American history.

We, the professor (Laurie) and two undergraduates (Elizabeth and Meghan) see this rhetorical, historical project as part of the "political turn" in community-writing partnerships advocated by Shannon Carter and Deborah Mutnick, "joining forces with local communities and emerging social movements, and supporting their efforts to rebuild and retool for a more equitable, just, democratic, environmentally sustainable society" (7). Producing historical discourse is rhetorical and political. As Kathleen Turner argues, "rhetorical processes constitute historical processes and that historical study constructs reality for the society in which and for which it is produced" (2). Further, "doing rhetorical history" adds knowledge to both history *and* to rhetorical theory (Burkholder 298).

Toward that end, we argue that constructing and studying civil rights history is a form of anti-racist writing pedagogy. We suggest that the rhetorical, historical project under study illuminates the rhetorical and powerful nature of current narratives of race and racism because,

as Victor Villanueva so aptly puts it, “Behind [language] there is a material reality—the reality of racism, still present, and not all that new after all” (n.p.). As we and all our collaborators documented Civil Rights era history together, we began to circulate layers of counternarratives that both expose and challenge these “not all that new” racial realities in productive ways.

TOWARD A “FULLY COLLABORATIVE” MODEL OF COMMUNITY-ENGAGED PEDAGOGY AND SCHOLARSHIP

The city of Reading is located in Berks County in southeastern Pennsylvania, approximately 65 miles west of Philadelphia and 125 miles southwest of New York City. In the first half of the twentieth century, Reading was a thriving industrial center, known for the Reading Railroad made famous by the board game, Monopoly. Less publicly known or remembered—perhaps willfully—is that African Americans have been in Berks County for centuries; between 1780 and 1825, 138 slaves were registered to 46 different slave owners in the Berks County Record of Slaves. The labor demand in the flourishing ironworks industry was met through slavery and an indentured workforce (Bining 93), and free African Americans started coming to the region in the 1820s and did street cleanup, farming, and blacksmithing (Devlin). The 1850 U.S. Census lists the African American population in Reading at 285, all of them free, most employed as domestics and in service industries; some are boatmen who own barges that transport coal between Schuylkill County and Philadelphia; by 1870, 311 African Americans reside in Reading, just 1% of the city’s population.

Today, African Americans comprise 10% of the city’s population. Much of the attitude about how the community has been treated is summed up by former City Councilman Frank D. McCracken, the first African American elected to Reading’s government: “The black community sees itself as being overlooked . . . It’s almost as if we were not here” (Forester). But for nearly two decades, there has been a concerted effort by a small group of individuals to document African American local history to make it very clear that the community was and is here. Through CPAAM, a local, all-volunteer African American museum established in 1998, they have documented, preserved, and

shared local African American history. The three primary community partners in the project under study, Patsy Jefferson, Robert Jefferson, and Mildred Gilyard, have been at the forefront of this work.

Our collaboration continues through this research and article writing. Robert, Patsy, and Mildred eagerly shared their ideas, insights, reflections, and assessments of the project through interviews with Laurie in June 2016, a full year after the website and publication of *Through Their Eyes* was publicly disseminated. Their knowledge contributions are critical to this scholarship and our continued collaborations.¹ As Reva Sias and Beverly Moss plainly state, African American “community partners’ voices must not be overlooked” (11). Patsy, Robert, and Mildred have been politically and socially engaged in anti-racist work in varying ways and degrees for more than six decades. They recognize how their lives and other African Americans’ lives have changed for the better during their lifetime, yet make very clear that racism and discrimination persist. Robert and Mildred were also among the 22 oral history narrators interviewed by the students in March 2015.

Without a doubt, this partnership and this project are shaped by several categories of difference, primary among them being race. The student population at our college is 9.5% Black/African American, 11.8 % Hispanic/Latino, and 70% white (Collegedata). As in our past collaborations, the community partners and Laurie acknowledge the unequal relations of power in our community and our collaboration. The partners and Laurie acknowledge race and racism, then and now, and together try to educate students from perspectives to which many of them have never been exposed. We generally believe that our varying expertise on race and racism—their lived experiences and Laurie’s scholarly study and understanding—combine for a potent partnership that informs college students and our community(ies). These individuals also know that race is a critical facet of the curriculum in Laurie’s classes. Throughout the decade-long partnership, Laurie, Mildred, Robert, and Patsy have practiced, reflected on, and modified the community work to maximize widely agreed upon principles of community writing, including collaboration, democratization of knowledge, reciprocity, negotiation, compromise, and open communication.

One principal facet of the current project was a deliberate attempt to get closer to what Kerry Strand, Sam Marullo, Nick Cutforth, Randy Stoecker, and Patrick Donohue call a “fully collaborative” model of community-based research in which community partners are involved at all stages of the project to help determine research objectives, project direction, analysis and interpretation of data, and public dissemination of outcomes (8). This time, we included students in the planning phase in meetings with community partners and included community partners in the development of oral history interview questions and drafting/writing processes in the classroom. As Hiram E. Fitzgerald, Karen Bruns, Steven T. Sonka, Andrew Furco, and Louis Swanson assert, a “broadened engagement philosophy” (10) of knowledge-making “is built on understanding that most societal issues are complex and inherently multidisciplinary. The kinds of specialized knowledge that dominated the latter part of the 20th century are inadequate to address fully today’s complex societal issues” (11). Together, students, community partners, and Laurie determined the shape of the historical project; recruited interview participants; developed interview questions; organized, conducted, and transcribed 22 interviews; researched additional documented information; decided how to organize and select from the voluminous information; wrote the narrative; selected the title and cover design; and reviewed and edited the final manuscript. Many students attended CPAAM’s Historical Committee’s meetings, and several community partners attended some of our classes. As student John Gangi wrote in a reflective, analytical essay for the course,

These meetings were also a place of collaboration. We mostly watched as the CPAAM board would go back-and-forth with Professor Grobman, working together to find logistical solutions to the problems such as finding narrators, setting dates for the interviews, and refining the structure of the project at large. Seeing the actual faces of some our narrators for the first time reinforced that our work would be the “fruit of a collaboration among the inhabitants of a common locale” (Fields 159). We even visited the physical location of CPAAM in downtown Reading—a reminder of the importance of our work.²

Although “fully collaborative” is an ideal, we are confident we achieved an environment “where students and community members mutually interact—where the logic of inquiry can freely exist through constructed spaces of shared collaborative inquiry” (Juergensmeyer 154). In one of many examples, the title and cover of the book were created through a shared process, communication among the students, Laurie, and our community partners. Together, we chose to create a word cloud (printed below), representing the range of the narrators’ responses from the interview question asking them to characterize the Civil Rights Movement in one word.



The title, *Through the Eyes of Local African Americans: Reflections on the Civil Rights Movement in Reading and Berks County, Pennsylvania*, was ultimately a compromise on Laurie’s part. I, Laurie, initiated the conversation by proposing the title “A History of the Civil Rights Movement as Experienced by African American members of the Berks County Community.” One committee member replied with “An idea for a title could be ‘REFLECTIONS of the CRM in Reading, Pa’ with a subtitle of *Through the Eyes of Local African Americans*,” followed by another member’s “I like ‘Reflections of the Civil Rights Movement in Reading, Pennsylvania’ along with the subtitle ‘Through the Eyes of Local African Americans.’” I wondered whether the suggested subtitle breached the notion of shared authorship we strove for, but

in the end, I chose to say nothing, and ultimately, the group decided to reverse the order of the subtitle and title. I added this sentence to the cover page to emphasize the collaboration: “Produced through a Partnership between Penn State Berks and the Central Pennsylvania African American Museum.” As student Gangi described, “In the end both of the planning phase, interviews, and the authorship of the piece were marked by collective decision making and ultimately compromise.”

PEDAGOGY: COMPETING NARRATIVES IN/OF CIVIL RIGHTS HISTORY, ORAL HISTORY, AND “STANDARD” EVIDENCE

I (Laurie) designed the course curriculum around the relationships and interactions between oral history, history, and the clash of dominant and counternarratives revealed through collaborative, historical rhetorical production and in particular, the power relations in language, discourse and standards of evidence. Leon F. Litwack’s *How Free is Free?: The Long Death of Jim Crow* (2009), stressing oral history’s vital role in challenging the dominant narratives of American history and conventional sources of historical evidence, is especially significant in presenting counternarratives on the Civil Rights Movement and its aftermath. Litwack begins the book’s third and final section, “Fight the Power,” with information about the progress since Bloody Sunday. He notes, for example, that in 1985, Selma Mayor Joseph T. Smitherman, also Selma’s mayor in 1965, acknowledged his guilt for the violence on Bloody Sunday. Yet, as Litwack also observes, in 1999, whites “largely avoided the historic celebration. Perhaps their indifference reflected the ongoing controversy over whether whites or African Americans would control the commemoration of Bloody Sunday” (97). Litwack also documents some of “the limits, significant limits, to the nation’s commitment to racial justice” in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement (107), putting forth his argument that “even as the Civil Rights Movement struck down legal barriers, it failed to dismantle economic barriers” (109), from “the violence of poverty” to the failure to reallocate resources (110).

Readings on the Civil Rights Movement in the North also included texts by Sugrue (“Northern”), Patrick, and Countryman (“Why

Philadelphia?”). Leslie Patrick’s study tells of efforts to dismantle Pennsylvania’s “distinctive Jim Crow approach that was informally in place” (31) in the first half of the twentieth century, and she notes several female civil rights leaders, including Daisy E. Lampkin, who has been described as “in herself an institution” (30). Countryman’s discussion of the civil rights movement in Philadelphia also underscores that “segregation was practiced all across the city in hotels, restaurants, theaters, workplaces, trade unions, residential neighborhoods, even schools.” He offers analyses of the 1964 Columbia Avenue riots and the desegregation of Girard College to illustrate “that the struggle for civil rights was as relevant to the black residents of Philadelphia as to black Southerners” (“Why Philadelphia”).

Critical to this curriculum were the difficulties in writing African American history, the implications of missing evidence, and thus the necessity of oral history to a more accurate, multi-voiced African American historical narrative (Ebron; Fields). Further, students explored the importance and limitations of oral history as historical evidence generally (Shopes) and pertaining to the Civil Rights Movement (Rogers). It was vital for students to understand the rhetoricity of historical evidence and their roles as history-makers in the context of the suppressed, forgotten, distorted, demeaned, and ignored body of African American history. Accustomed to the privileging of historical documents in the construction of history, students were challenged to consider not only how vast the erasure or nonexistence of written history when slaves were never taught to read or write but also when the historical evidence—such as court cases and legislation—were written by whites. Elizabeth refers to the readings as a toolbox to work with in a topic and genre that not many of the students were familiar with. We (Elizabeth and Meghan) learned a lot of information from the narrators that never made it to textbooks or into our classrooms, offering us another view of historical events, which allows us to connect them better to the incidents happening today. Sitting alongside our community partners who lived through this history, we understood their narratives as differently-filtered, if not unfiltered, and had to balance what we were learning about oral history, memory, and standards of evidence while honoring their recollection of experiences.

We (Elizabeth and Meghan) learned through the class readings that oral histories have the unique ability to express aspects of history that may not be readily available in any other form; they share personal accounts, thoughts, and feelings in combination with historical events to create “extraordinarily powerful narratives” (Rogers 568). However, as Linda Shopes writes, “for all their considerable value, oral history interviews are not an unproblematic source” (5). Oral history interviewers must always question the reliability of the narrator. For example, she explains that even though the narrator might say something is true or happened, it may not have happened, or if it did happen, the narrator did not fully comprehend the situation as a whole (5-6). These misrepresentations of history may be purposeful, in order for the narrator to make him or herself appear better or more influential than he or she may have actually been, or they may act as a type of coping device for the narrator. Shopes warns that, especially in moments of great injustice or high-intensity, the narrators may “manipulate the facts” to make whatever happened “less senseless and more comprehensible to them” (7).

Rogers similarly observes these limitations of oral history in the Civil Rights Movement, from the “propensity of human memory to retain more vivid memories of dramatic events than of more mundane experiences” to the interviewees’ “tendency to move themselves to the center of a political event or conflict” (568-69). We were also attuned to the unintentional errors of the narrators due to age, forgetfulness, or simply the brain’s tricks. As Karen Fields explains, “Memory fails, leaving blanks, and memory fails by filling blanks mistakenly” (150), requiring that interviewers “cross-check” information (152). This process can be done by comparing a narrator’s statements either to recorded historical documents or to the testimony of other narrators.

As writers, we faced challenging evidentiary contradictions as we and our peers attempted to “glean from personal testimony the movement of history” (Fields 160) in situations with conflicting evidence. As the following example reveals, when individual memory interacts with dominant narratives, writers must balance evidentiary claims while acknowledging the necessity of oral history to African American history. Our peers and we asked our narrators about their recollections about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination on

April 4, 1968. With Robert and Patsy in our classes earlier in the semester, the group decided on the following three questions:

1. There were many reactions following the news of Dr. King's death, including local services. Do you remember participating in these, and what were they like?
2. Were there other formal reactions, and if so, what?
3. If not, do you think there should have been?

Many of the oral history narrators in the project recalled a peaceful gathering in downtown Reading following Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. Robert, however, recalled a more threatening scene:

I can recall at one of those gatherings, up here at 5th and Penn, they had the police on top of the roofs of the stores with rifles, not pointing at anyone but just the fact their presence was there. And they didn't know what to expect, "How is the Negro community going to respond, how are they gonna react?" Because riots were taking place all over the country and of course they think "well it can happen there, it can happen here" so they sort of nipped it at the bud.

No other narrators mentioned officers with rifles, and no articles in the local newspaper mentioned rifles. We were not aware of any other official documents that confirmed Robert's recollection.

Acknowledging our limited time and resources, we (Laurie, Elizabeth, Meghan, Robert, Patsy, and Mildred) decided to use the phrase "Mr. Jefferson remembers..." to qualify his recollection as a recollection. We chose to include his recollection—despite it being the only one—because of the larger issues the situation raised, from methodological concerns to policing in/of African American communities. Despite agreeing to this wording, Robert stuck by his recollection, vociferously stating in the June 2016 interview,

Yeah, I saw it. Oh, believe me. Oh my gosh, you know, why did I think that...why would they have rifles? Because what was happening through the city. I was...28 years old. They had the

marksmen up on top of the roofs and the rally, it wasn't really a rally, it was a commemoration of Martin Luther King, and the stage was right there on Penn Street, and when my friend walked up the street, I looked up and saw guys up on the roof. That really, that upset me.

Fields discusses how tensions between interviewer and narrator sometimes arise because “what not only cannot but must not be remembered mistakenly” may be misremembered (152). Fields' narrator, her grandmother, felt Fields had violated her trust (153). Fortunately for us, in our project, Robert agreed with the decision, although he stands by what he refers to as his “vivid” memory. As we describe below, we also realized that this possibly misremembered memory teaches us about the present.

A LOCAL COUNTERNARRATIVE INFORMS THE PRESENT: THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND BLACK LIVES MATTER

Quite possibly, Robert's recollection of police with rifles in the aftermath of Dr. King's assassination is “an ideologically tainted memory summoned in a view of present political purposes” (Fields 153). Fields suggests that “memory ‘tainted’ by interest” functions to “get the true past required by a particular present” and to “perpetuate, by rendering it creditable to those concerned, a respectable consciousness of we-feeling” (153). Robert's memory may have been accurate, but if not, we see it as possibly performing the function Fields describes. We (Laurie, Meghan, and Elizabeth) see in our study's Civil Rights counternarratives a clear and critically important connection to current racism and racial tensions that surfaced in August 2014 when an unarmed African American 18-year old, Michael Brown, was shot and killed by white police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. Protests following the shooting were intensified three months later when a St. Louis County grand jury refused to indict Wilson. As described in the *New York Times*,

The decision not to indict Mr. Wilson set off a wave of anger among those who had gathered outside the Ferguson Police Department. As the night wore on, the situation grew more intense. Buildings

were set on fire, and looting was reported in several businesses. . . . Mr. Brown's death prompted weeks of demonstrations and a response from the police that include tear gas and rubber bullets. Confrontations between protesters and law enforcement officers continued even after Gov. Jay Nixon deployed the Missouri National Guard to help quell the unrest. (Buchanan, et al.)

Yet a federal investigation of the Ferguson criminal justice system released in the 2015 United States Department of Justice Report documented that "African Americans experience disparate impact in nearly every aspect of Ferguson's law enforcement system."

As we complete this manuscript in mid-November 2016, the nation's racism has been exacerbated by the election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States after a summer of race-related killings in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; St. Paul, Minnesota; and Dallas, Texas. As Peniel Joseph asserts, aspects of the summer of 2016, "for better and worse, have indeed echoed the political and racial turmoil of the 1960s."³ Importantly, Joseph counter-writes the dominant but "fiction[al]" narrative of the Civil Rights Movement as "a political and moral good, the consequence of a unified nation coming to grips with ancient legacies of bondage," with a less-told but truer story: "The civil rights era featured thousands of arrests; state-sanctioned violence against peaceful demonstrators; FBI surveillance of American heroes; the Klan and white supremacists gaining new standing; white and African American students being murdered by law enforcement; and African American children being spat on, cursed at, and arrested for trying to integrate public schools."

We (Elizabeth and Meghan) were taken aback by the similarities in what we were hearing from our narrators and reading in the "official" discourse of the local newspaper in the aftermath of Dr. King's assassination with current racial injustice, racial strife, and white resistance to acknowledging reality. Our access to any official documentation in the aftermath of Dr. King's assassination was limited to *The Reading Times* and *The Reading Eagle*, morning and afternoon papers published by The Reading Eagle Company. The newspapers tell a story of "unrest" in Reading beginning on the evening of April 8, 1968 and several days of tension between African American leaders

and the white administration. The April 9, 1968 morning headline, “City Police Stiffen Ranks after Downtown Disturbance,” states,

Police were placed on 12-hour shifts in the wake of last night’s disturbance in Reading which led to broken windows, minor fires and at least one instance of looting. . . . More than 150 youths, mostly Negroes, roamed the downtown area for almost four hours as Mayor Victor R. H. Yarnell and Negro leaders tried to talk them into going home. . . . Police Lt. Harry N. Eisenbise also had summoned the riot squad, but the mayor sent the squad back to City Hall and he began mingling with the youths, who broke up into several bands. . . . There were no attempts to cause physical harm and observers said various members of the roving bands were trying to convince their companions to go home.”

We all note that the discourse of “mostly Negroes, roam[ing] the downtown,” “roving bands,” and the riot squad called in (then sent away) is echoed in recent attempts by the white power structure to control the opposition also by using familiar terms like “riots” and “disturbances.” The media extensively covered the upheaval in Ferguson following the death of Michael Brown, so much so that they appeared to be the only type of protest in the city. Images of burning buildings and police cars and people looting from stores circulated the media, painting the citizens of Ferguson in a horrible light while the images of the peaceful protests—people holding up signs, singing and chanting mantras, sitting candlelight vigils—were either ignored or included with such inconsistency that they were soon forgotten.

Even when the media covers peaceful protests, some of the participants have been verbally attacked as if their demonstrations were violent. A recent example of this includes a celebrity protest to the way African Americans and other minorities are treated in the United States. During a preseason game in August, 2016, NFL player Colin Kaepernick refused to stand while the National Anthem played before the game. Since his protest, many other NFL players have joined the movement, either sitting, kneeling, or standing with a fist in the air during the National Anthem. Kaepernick and others

have faced a large amount of backlash and controversy even though the protest is nonviolent.

In the Civil Rights Movement study in Reading, many narrators recalled an atmosphere of fear and mistrust in their city in the midst of riots across other parts of the nation. Calvin Summers spoke about the Ku Klux Klan's strong presence in this community, having "seen them burn crosses up, way down on the south side of Reading, up behind South Street, up behind the cemetery. They had meetings, burned crosses." Eddie Mann remembers "some reactions in terms of people on the street, young people, many whom certainly felt that that was an injustice. And kinda like a feeling of unrest and wanting to, you know, maybe just go out and—I don't know that I would say—certainly not a term that I would use—but just, kinda just raise hell." Narrator Giddens recalled several boycotts about the policing of African Americans in Reading during the 1960s and 70s:

There was a lot of police brutality and double standards, much like is going on now, so as young people we got together and marched on City Hall and boycotted outside the building with signs and things like that. There was another time we crashed the city council meeting the same way. They were all non-violent and we had a campaign to boycott the *Eagle Times* because the negativity of the paper and the things that they were writing when they wrote about the African American community it was always negative type things, never talked about the good of the community—we formed a coalition to stop buying the *Eagle Times* paper.

In her post-project interview in June 2016, referring to police violence today against African Americans, Patsy states, "It's like some things never change, it's just done in different ways, it never changes. It's amazing, history repeats itself, it just looks different." The past-in-the-present is illuminated as community-engaged student rhetoricians and community partners collectively construct local civil rights history, encouraging students to pay closer attention to and more fully understand the issues facing African Americans today. Hearing the interviewees speak about injustices in the past as well as the present makes it patently obvious that racism is still very much

alive. The significance of hearing and connecting accounts, especially in a historical context, from those that have experienced it first-hand is vital. It fosters growth, sensitivity to others, and creates an engaging forum for students in learning from their community. We have no doubt that consuming oral history narratives and producing history from them illuminates that the issues of race in our nation today are rooted in history.

A LOCAL COUNTERNARRATIVE OF ACTIVISM FOR OUR COMMUNITY

One of our narrators, Alice Natera, suggests, “the young men who are being killed violently by police men, I look at that and I think okay is this a new way to come through the back door?” Natera’s reference to “coming through the back door” recalls egregious aspects of the Jim Crow South and also a counternarrative we had not heard before, what two of our narrators refer to as “Up South.” “Up South,” according to historian Matthew Countryman, is “a punch line to the many stories black Philadelphians, and their counterparts in other northern cities, told each other about their encounters with racism in the North. Racial segregation was not enforced by laws but by the unspoken rules that told you not to walk on that side of the street or go to that swimming pool” (*Up South* 10). Mattie Stevens described the situation in her interview this way: “You’re going north and you think you free to go anyplace and then they don’t post signs but they’ll come out and tell you that ‘no blacks’ . . . so that’s kind of hard to accept, too—because we just went through this in the South and you think it’s different in the North and it’s not.” William “Gus” Giddens told us,

Here you had subtle racism. . . . you weren’t allowed to do certain things, go certain places. . . . You couldn’t go to certain parts of town, and the cops would pick you up. You couldn’t be with certain people, blacks and whites didn’t mingle too much in those days in school or in the street—you’d be picked up and taken into City Hall or whatever they could do so it was all kind of subtle things that they did.

Lionel Carter’s description was the most chilling we heard: “We always told [that] white people down South were more honest than what was up here. The white people down South would tell you to

your face, ‘Nigger, I don’t like you. We don’t want to be around you.’ But up here they kind of like smiled at your face and pulled strings in the background.”

It became clear that our narrators’ individual and collective civil rights activities were shaped by their awareness that the treatment “up south”—though unjust—was far better than down south and that they would protect themselves by “not making waves,” as Robert put it in his interview with a student. He reiterated in his interview with Laurie, “it’s happening there but not here, we’re alright, and we weren’t alright.” The need for self- and family protection and fear of what might result from political involvement seemed to be responsible for a “laid back” attitude in the local African American community regarding the Civil Rights Movement: “There wasn’t a lot of protests about racism,” Robert explained. Calvin Summers remembers that people “just felt bad, went to church, cried, and just mourned [Dr. King], that’s all. There wasn’t that much action here in Reading at that time.” The overwhelming sense was a focus on family, work, and survival. Robert claimed, for instance, that during those years, “You know, just go to work, earn your living, come home take care of your family. . . . Reading was not really an environment, a community of people that would protest outwardly.” Judith A. Ridner and Susan W. Clemens-Bruder argue much the same about the Civil Rights Movement in the nearby city of Allentown, PA, where “many [African Americans] retained a cautious deference toward whites. They made their way in the Valley, as they had in the South, by working hard, focusing on their families, churches, and social groups, and rarely rocking the racial boat” (56). Robert echoes the lack of organized activism in Reading at the time, stating, “I didn’t see marches and protests and boycotts. We didn’t experience that here in Reading. It was more just conversation, you know, among people themselves, in the churches.”

However, we believe the collective narrative reveals another counternarrative: a greater collective political activism than each individual alone remembers. First, Evelyn Morrison notes the significance of the Black press, “the colored paper out of Pittsburgh,” in Reading. As Morrison states, it was a “really important . . . tool of communication among the Afro-American community. . . . It was

Negro people reporting about Negro issues; so it was coming from a Negro perspective. . . . all the Negro families bought the colored paper, you know.” Quietly but surely challenging official discourses, this instance of the “muted and cautious activism during the civil rights movement” was documented by Ridner and Clemens-Bruder in the nearby city of Allentown (52).

Morrison and Robert both also point to what Patricia Hill Collins refers to as “unofficial, private, and seemingly invisible spheres of social life and organization” (217), activism that includes “strategies of everyday resistance” that “try to create spheres of influence, authority, and power within institutions that traditionally have allowed African Americans and women little formal authority or real power” (225). Ranging from the private, individual actions of African American mothers within their homes to the more organized group behavior of African American churchwomen and sorority sisters, African American women use a variety of strategies to undermine oppressive institutions. Patsy speaks directly to this “group survival” (Collins) activism in her discussion of conversations in churches in the 1950s and ’60s:

It was like a safe place, where they could talk about it and not really have to share anything outside. I would suspect that because the churches were much larger, they were more cohesive, I would say, they were more committed to their church or their religion and I think then they did because all churches always had organization within them. Women, ushers, women’s and men’s choir, you name it, other kinds of organizations that went on within, and I would think a lot was shared then. Not that they took it outside the walls, but they might have begun themselves or felt safe within those doors that they could do that and not necessarily take it out, and even I think people that worked at that time went out to work, most of them worked in Caucasian environments. You wouldn’t talk about that. You would never do that.

Morrison also told stories of other arenas of African American women’s talk when “taking the buses back and forth to the suburbs where they called it the rich white neighborhood” for their domestic work, and “after church they would talk about ‘you know on the

bus she heard, read the newspaper she heard.” Patsy reiterates the significance of women’s bus conversations, stating, “Then you could talk. I mean, it wasn’t like, out there at a public stage. . . . And that’s how they communicated a lot, by going back and forth twice a day, every day, and communicated with each other because they were together that much.” Robert, in this same June 16 interview, noted that the project’s interview questions about the Montgomery Bus Boycott’s impact in Reading prompted a memory of his mother on Reading’s buses: “And it reminded me, in Montgomery they had the boycott, the bus boycott, how I used to see the women at the bus stop, and my mother included, it was the West Lawn bus and the Wyomissing bus was crowded with day workers going to their jobs.”

We also see in these stories what Rogers describes as “the changes of heart and mind that movement participation produces” (572). Rogers argues that in oral histories of the Civil Rights Movement, “narrators describe the changing consciousness that accompanies movement activity as they recount their own journeys from alienation to resistance, from a passive anger or fatalism to political action” (572). Morrison, one of our narrators, describes her developing, individual political consciousness within both the family, community, and national politics. After her older brother participated in the 1963 March on Washington, he returned home and “talk[ed] about the excitement of seeing so many Negro people gathered together, and this man Martin Luther King who was so articulate and so powerful in his speech...and then we saw a picture of my brother. Andrew Young was next to [Dr. King] and then another guy and then our brother was in this picture.” This was, as Morrison states, “a coming to political consciousness,” a “turning point for me” because,

As I grew up in the '60s where things were socially changing, politically changing, then I was right in the mix. Even though I was a young teenager, my mom and my dad gave me the permission to participate, and that's where my way of thinking was literally cemented in terms of supporting community and one for all and all for one, understanding the black power movement, understanding black social consciousness. We had training, we had workshops. We had a place called the House of Soul.

Several narrators describe the more overtly activist organizations that emerged throughout the years. The Community Action Training School (CATS), modeled on the Black Panthers, was headquartered in a house on Buttonwood Street, fortified by sandbags. Lorraine McNeil describes CATS as:

A milder version [of the Black Panthers], because we didn't do weapons and all of that. But what they did was, they picked up on, I think it was a combination of Malcolm X and the Panthers, because they picked up on the social suggestions that were coming out. So they did a free breakfast program, a free health clinic. Those were some of the other responses to "nationalism," that "We can do for ourselves."

Lorraine McNeil recalls The Freedom School in which "we tried to teach history, actual African American history to young, particularly black kids, that we felt at the time they were not getting as part of the curriculum in the schools." The school "was staffed by local men, they served as role models for youth," according to McNeil, who states that the Freedom School was named Cae Lamunba Jackson Collective and was affiliated with the Black Panther Party. Giddens was involved in what he describes as a "youth movement," and "there was a big difference in the way the older folks thought and the way the younger people thought; we wanted it now and they were more peace loving and wait and see what happens." The youth movement had fifty to one hundred members. At 18, Giddens was involved with the YMCA, which had some leaders who espoused black power, and Giddens sometimes traveled with them as part of what he called "YMCA action." Then, "we would bring it back to the community."

Arguably, the counternarratives of activism uncovered through this work and theorized by scholars of African American history and culture such as Collins convey that activism happens in multifaceted ways. While the bigger activist moments tend to be the most highlighted, the importance of the smaller moments should be interwoven to create a very real sense of the larger picture. It is important for all of us to listen, read, and understand these counternarratives as we continue to work toward racial justice. Further, the counternarratives of activism we find in the collected histories may alter the way the

local African American community views its civil rights era's pasts and inform its current activist efforts.

IMPLICATIONS: "WE CAME A LONG WAY, BUT WE STILL GOT A LONG WAY TO GO"

As Sugrue argues, the "long and intense history of racial violence and conflict in northern towns and cities" matters to understanding the full extent of the nation's historical legacy (*Sweet* xxvii). The North "is central to understanding the history of racial inequality and civil rights in the United States" (37). This "counternarrative" includes both well-known cities such as New York City, Philadelphia, Washington, DC, and Chicago, but also more "obscure places" (38)—to which we have begun to add Reading, Pennsylvania. This is "*our*" America, Sugrue stresses, and we must consider how and in what ways the north is also responsible for racism, persistent racial inequality and racial hostilities, poverty, and crime and violence (xxviii).

Sugrue's assertions could not be more vital than at the present moment. Despite mountains of evidence of widespread unwarranted racial disparity in the criminal justice system (see, for example, "Sentencing"), much of white America continues to deny its presence, blame the victim, and/or advocate for an abstract "we must be united not divisive." But as James Chase Sanchez and Kristen R. Moore passionately argue, "The recent tragedies serve as a reminder of the past's presence, and the #blacklivesmatter movement signals an effort both to resist the racist politics of the 21st century and to remember Black struggles" (1). Sanchez and Chase "call on rhetoricians to address and engage with the Black Lives Matter movement in new ways," suggesting that "the #blacklivesmatter movement continues to re-invite and recreate public rhetoric" (6). We suggest that in both process and product, *Through the Eyes of Local African Americans: Reflections on the Civil Rights Movement in Reading and Berks County, Pennsylvania* pedagogically and publicly challenges rhetorical and material racism. We encourage further community writing projects in rhetoric and composition that produce and circulate counternarratives to dominating narratives of race. As one of our narrators, Calvin Summers, states, "We came a long way, but we still got a long way to go."

NOTES

1. I have interviewed these individuals several times as recounted in published work, and as in the past, they were eager to be interviewed for this article but not interested in co-authoring. All gave their informed consent to be interviewed and quoted. Mildred's introduction appears in the print and online versions of *Through the Eyes of Local African Americans*.
2. Gangi gave written consent to quote from his essay.
3. Joseph is the Barbara Jordan Chair in Political Values and Ethics and a professor of history at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the founding director of the Center for the Study of Race and Democracy at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin.

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Laurie Grobman is a Professor of English and Women's Studies at Penn State University, Berks. Laurie's teaching, research, and service center on community writing, multicultural education, and social and racial justice. Primary among this work is the facilitation of community-based undergraduate research projects to (re)write local histories of marginalized ethnic, racial, socioeconomic and cultural communities in Berks County and the city of Reading in Pennsylvania. Laurie has published several articles on community writing in journals such as *College English*, *College Composition and Communication*, *Community Literacy Journal*, *Reflections*, and *Journal of Public Scholarship in Higher Education*. Her most recent co-edited collections are *Service Learning and Literary Studies in English* (MLA 2015) and *Pedagogies of Public Memory: Teaching Writing and Rhetoric at Museums, Archives, and Memorials* (Routledge 2015). Laurie has twice published with undergraduate co-authors in professional journals in Writing Studies. Laurie was the 2014 Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching Outstanding Baccalaureate Colleges Professor of the Year.

Elizabeth Kemmerer grew up in a small town near Reading, Pennsylvania. She will graduate from Pennsylvania State University, Berks in May of 2017 with a B.A. in Professional Writing and a minor in Business. She enjoys writing fiction and non-fiction, and she hopes to finish writing her novel one day soon.

Meghan Zebertavage graduated from Penn State University, Berks in December 2016 with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Professional Writing. She is starting part-time work as a Grants Coordinator for the non-profit ReDesign Reading. She is hoping to also break into the publishing industry and is currently applying for positions.