Introduction

FIRST CONTACT: DOESN'T EVERYBODY OWN A TV?

While traveling west along a beautiful tree-lined street of postbellum homes in Oxford, Mississippi, I observed what I thought to be a disturbing example of the quality of race relations in this quiet university town. A Black man, about 75 years old – driving approximately twenty-five miles per hour – was traveling in front of me along the same side street. Although the light changed from red to green a few seconds or so before the elderly gentleman arrived at the intersection, he stopped. Puzzled by his stopping, I tried to see what was wrong. I saw the vehicle on the cross street come to a stop as well, and knew the problem wasn't traffic. He then beckoned for the car – driven by an elderly White woman, in her late 70s or early 80s – to continue across. My "big city" impatience and "middle-class" self-importance induced me to blast my horn. To my dismay, the "gentleman" waited and the "lady" – after a couple of moments of thought – proceeded across against the light. "We don't have to live like this anymore," I thought while witnessing the unfamiliar show of deference in this Black–White/male–female interaction. "This is 1983," almost twenty years after the Civil Rights Movement (CRM)[1] brought an end to the Jim Crow period in the state and federal troops supported the integration of the University of Mississippi. The year 1983 was nineteen years after the signing of the first Voting Rights Act. Needless to say, the event was traumatic. More importantly, this event and similar ones I witnessed

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[1] "CRM" and "the Movement" are used (for economy and flow) to refer to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

became driving influences that guided my academic and personal searches for understanding during the next twelve years.

My assumptions about the value of the Civil Rights Movement coincided with perceptions of most Northern and urban dwellers. The Movement was (and to a point still is) viewed as a cohesive effort carried out by Blacks to bring about social change in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s. Along with this view are two major assumptions. The first, greatly influenced by the sheer numbers of people participating and the large regional area of the United States in which its activities were carried out, is the belief that a homogeneous African American community embraced the goals of the Civil Rights Movement.[2] The second assumption focuses on the gains of the movement and is influenced by changes in federal and state laws, the different "interracial" climate, and the large number of Blacks holding public office. This assumption takes for granted that the lives of Blacks in this country have significantly changed. My motivation for embarking on a study that deconstructs these assumptions was not simply my scholarly interest in studying social change but also my interest, as an activist anthropologist, in helping to institute change. My goals were to help facilitate social consciousness on a number of levels and through a number of means.[3] The research questions that influenced the collection of data constituting the body of this work, therefore, are greatly influenced by those interests. Because I, too, held the preceding assumptions, there was a need to understand why the CRM appeared not to have had a significant impact on the lives of Blacks in Lafayette County, Mississippi, so late in the twentieth century.

My journey began in 1983 when I moved to Oxford – five years before conducting organized research as an undergrad in the area and eleven years before completing the anthropological research that informs this work. But my experience at that stoplight on my very first day in town marks the beginning of my inquiry into the differences between the behavior of African Americans in other communities where I previously lived

[2] Most discussions of the Civil Rights Movement tend to see the multiple levels and circumstances of mobilization as one coordinated whole, usually spoken of as "under the leadership of Martin Luther King," a perspective that often hides the ideological differences that influenced the various mobilization efforts. There is also a tendency to overlook or gloss over contested spaces of purpose and goals, such as the varied tactics used to raise social consciousness and bring about social change.

[3] Ethnographic Films and Anthropology seemed the perfect venues for carrying out consciousness-raising ventures. I had been influenced by anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston's work and its value in raising the level of appreciation and sympathy for the experiences of ordinary Black folk and their culture.

and worked and the behavior of Oxford's African American residents. My first instinct was to place the reason for differences in behavior on small-town life. However, more interaction with people of the community led me to believe that problems of the region were systemic, and, as such, a particular type of social structure was responsible for influencing the specific levels of interracial relations witnessed. Although I somewhat understood the need for such behavior in the past, reasons for its existence in the present escaped me. Had Blacks in Lafayette County internalized Jim Crow practices to such a degree that they were now unable to abandon the behavior that developed out of their post–Civil War experience? Were they unable to produce new behavior under the new post–CRM social conditions? I anticipated, as most lay people would, that a university town – especially one with a history of social movement activity – would be progressive in terms of cultural production and social consciousness. Additionally, as a person who passed into young adulthood at the beginning of the television generation, I assumed that other African Americans had been enlightened by television and mass communication – Western inventions that I believed were part of a globalization process[4] – in much the same way.

This was not the case in Oxford. Here was a way of "being Black" that did not fit with my understanding of the meaning of being Black in the United States in the 1980s. This "way of being" differed from what I knew about the meaning of the position of being Black in Mississippi. Biographies and autobiographies such as *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (Moody 1968), *For Us the Living* (Evers 1967), and *Fannie Lou Hamer* (Jordan 1972) had introduced me to the significant role Black Mississippians played in the movement. The lives of these activists appeared to have developed and been influenced by a particular social consciousness their fellow Mississippians in Oxford did not share. I wanted to know why.

Having witnessed through my personal relationships the values placed on oral storytelling as opposed to those placed on reading, local friends were asked regularly, "Doesn't everybody have a TV?" I knew that African Americans were major consumers of television and that many of the shows on television had begun to show African Americans living different lifestyles and having different responses to Whites. Television news

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[4] Read "globalization" as consciousness raising. Communications studies suggest that the bombardment of real life and fictional stories in film and television produce homogeneous cultural practices on national and international levels. Ideas about global markets and consumerism also support theories of homogeneity.

reported stories of successful Blacks in corporate as well as political arenas. These stories, I thought at that time, should have influenced the residents' understanding of where African Americans stood in today's society. However, through my eyes, the behavior of Blacks in Lafayette County did not reflect an understanding of the changes revealed through television nor an appreciation for the gains of the Movement.

"Culture shock" was the term most often used by the locals as they tried to help me "adjust" (and perhaps "adapt") to my new environment. "But I was born and raised in a small town," was my protest against this accusation of my disconnectedness from the community, although I realized that Florence, South Carolina, was not as small as Oxford. "I'm Black [I found myself arguing] and they are Black and we have experienced the same kinds of problems, but I don't know any people who act like – *this.*" By the end of this sentence I was struggling to find the right words, each time trying to avoid such terms as "slave mentality" and "Uncle Tom." Having heard them for years, I rejected them as inappropriate terminology for referring to "my people." The negative images such words conjured up conflicted greatly with my cherished images of the way "we" actually *are* as a people. I had become convinced that the terminology originated in the dominant society and its use was "just another way to keep us divided as a people." Efforts to resolve the conflicting images guided my subsequent search for who we are as a people and why we are the way we are.

The major paradox of Oxford is that despite its centrality to radical civil rights activity widely publicized in the national and international press, closer inspection reveals a virtual lack of participation by local residents. Understanding how this could occur, why Blacks are so diverse as a people, why the Civil Rights Movement had such a markedly different impact in African American communities, and the ways in which this impact influences social action and behavior also became my driving intellectual and personal goals. These goals eventually led me to the field of anthropology and the 1994–5 research that informs this ethnographic study.

As time passed and I pursued my undergraduate studies at Ole Miss, I developed closer relationships with members of the African American community. I began to realize that many were good, hard-working people who wanted the same things for themselves and their children that I wanted – survival without excessive struggle, spiritual peace, and better lives for our offspring and ourselves. Although these same ideals seemed to me to be what the Civil Rights Movement was all about, more interaction within the African American community led me to see that many of

its members had different meanings for "survival," "peace," and a "better life." I wanted to understand the local meanings, why they had developed, and the influence they had on the community's seeming reticence to assert its hard-earned rights.

Although my early investigations between 1983 and 1989 revealed the disruptive quality civil rights activities had on communities where activities were initiated from the outside, I continued to believe that the progress of the movement was seen as beneficial and had generated feelings of pride and self-importance. Yet, when asked in 1983 whether the presence of troops in the town gave him a sense of power and pride never felt before, a man who was 11 years old during the integration of Ole Miss said, "The only thing I know [that felt different] was, before the troops came I could ride my bicycle anywhere I wanted to, and after, I couldn't." The troops' presence had completely different meanings based on varying value systems and interpretations of symbols. I viewed the presence as liberating, and he, limiting. In spite of our common history and heritage, there were some significant differences in the worldviews of Oxford's African American population and my own.

What was there about the Oxford experience that made this regional group differ from others in their approach to social problems that affected African Americans as a group? Our ways of viewing the world and, even more important to my personal interests, our ways of dealing with the world after the movement were different. Unwillingly, I began to accept that although almost everyone owns a TV or has access to one, particular historical, social, and cultural factors have an impact on that particular medium's influence. In spite of the belief that the world is "tightly enmeshed in a single global economy, [that is] intertwined by vast networks of telecommunication" (Glick-Shiller 1994:1), exposure through media to the tremendous social changes that have occurred since the Civil Rights Movement has *not* produced or perpetuated either universal cultural practices or ideologies. With these experiences, understandings, and questions, I entered the field in 1994 to explore processes, institutions, and structures that influence intragroup interaction among African Americans in Lafayette County, Mississippi, and their subsequent impact on social change, social action, and mobilization.

BUILDING A NEW PERSPECTIVE

Armed with new analytical tools, research methodologies, and anthropological theories, I returned to Oxford after an absence of four years. The new questions to which I sought answers were better informed by theory

and praxis. I was convinced that answers to my earlier questions could
be found within the Black community itself, so my primary methodolog-
ical focus of the ethnographic study was the observation of day-to-day
interaction through which the social processes, institutions, and cultural
and social problems that influence social action and political participa-
tion efforts of grassroots African Americans since the Civil Rights Move-
ment could be examined. My approach to the study differs from earlier
movement-focused works because it seeks out the perspective of those
who stood on the sidelines. Observations in 1994–5 of social practices
similar to that described in the anecdote at the beginning of this introduc-
tion and knowledge of the civil rights and race relations history of this
small college town led to questions centering on the relationship of con-
temporary social practices to the lack of participation in the movement.
Is there a relationship between standing on the sidelines and reaping the
benefits of a social movement? What is there about the structure of this
particular community that prevented its members from joining the move-
ment and helping to institute change within its own borders? In what
way does this community's particular history have an impact on current
practices?

Throughout their presence in the "New World," African Americas have
lived under political, economic, and social repression. The institution of
slavery, the "class/caste" system of social segregation and "Jim Crow–
isms" that replaced it, and racism have been the key structural forces
they have struggled to overcome. In spite of these oppressive conditions,
African Americans have often contested their subjugated position in soci-
ety and negotiated social change. Their struggles have taken many forms
and have had varying degrees of success and failure. When I first arrived
in Lafayette County, I assumed similar struggles occurred there. After all,
this was the site of one of the most dramatic and internationally known
events to take place in the history of the CRM.[5] But a different dynamic
took place in this community, a dynamic clearly unlike those I witnessed
and read about. The antebellum and postbellum homes that graced tree-
lined streets symbolized more than a former way of life; they appeared to
be symbols of the present conditions of servitude that did not reflect the
changes brought about by the movement.

An examination of the Civil Rights Movement literature reveals
gains in a number of areas of Black life. Perhaps the most significant

[5] More than twenty thousand federal troops were sent to assist James Meredith's integration
of the University of Mississippi. During this effort, three people were killed.

areas – those that have undergone revolutionary change – are interra-
cial interaction and political participation. A number of important works
focusing on the Movement were written since the beginning of the turbu-
lent 1960s. Most of these studies have been structured around the lives
of movement participants in their own communities or about civil rights
workers who traveled from community to community making the strug-
gle for civil rights a way of life.[6] What is missing from the annals of
the Civil Rights Movement is the perspective of those who stood on the
sidelines – the varying perspectives of the vast number of nonparticipants
whose lives also were affected and often believed to be transformed by
the efforts of the movement's participants. Rather than focus primarily
on the ways agency manifested itself in Oxford, a significant portion of
this work concentrates specifically on intraethnic issues that problematize
interracial interaction, political participation, and social change.

From existing literature, we know the ways in which the lives of many
of the participants have changed, and we know many assumptions asso-
ciate perceived changes in quality of life for Blacks as a social group with
reported economic advances, such as the right to vote, and institutional
corrective measures. The larger numbers of registered Black voters, more
Black elected officials, a growing Black middle class, and increased num-
bers of Blacks in institutions and positions traditionally peopled by Whites
bear witness, many believe, to "social progress." But what does this all
mean on the level of day-to-day experiences for the masses, particularly
those who stood on the sidelines? Have their lives changed? Is there a
difference in the ways in which they negotiate their day-to-day struggles?
And what are the perceptions affecting that negotiation? In what way,
if any, is the "stony road" they travel a construction of the structure of
the Black community itself and the intragroup dynamics that occur within
that community? By including these questions, this study provides another
important layer to our understandings of Black life, social movements,
mobilization, and social change.

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[6] A representative sample of those publications by both Black and White authors include
autobiographies such as Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968) and Durr's *Outside
the Magic Circle* (1985); historiographies by Barrett, *Integration at Ole Miss* (1965), Holt,
The Summer That Didn't End (1965), and Silver, *Mississippi: The Closed Society* (1964);
and sociological and anthropological studies by Orum, *Black Students in Protest: A Study
of the Origins of the Black Student Movement* (1972) and Meier and Rudwick, *CORE: A
Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942–1968* (1973). Local politicians and newspapers
often referred to the workers these studies focused on as "outsiders," an important point
for understanding the dynamics of the movement from both White and Black Southern
perspectives.

In addition to shedding light on issues related to mobilization, another layer of the study provides a significant look at issues of identity that inform our understanding of such socially constructed categories as race, ethnicity, and class. A contemporary gaze toward the documentation of the study of race has been reinstituted within the field of anthropology with an emphasis on the significance of that social category (e.g., Harrison 1995a, 1998; Gregory and Sanjek 1996). Intraracial social change among Blacks has garnered little attention in the field of anthropology in the past and is an important body of knowledge not only for building theories on the significance of race but also for expanding theories of social change. As the study reveals, perceptions are important to our understanding of the usefulness of such categories as race, ethnicity, and class in explaining the conditions under which social action is likely to occur.

This study differs in a number of ways from other social science studies and specifically the anthropological community studies. Through the analysis of issues that contribute to political participation and to the development of social movements, the study provides ethnographic data for current critical discussions on the defects of the "culture construct" as an analytical tool.[7] In addition, the study provides a look at intraethnic interaction and the ways in which it influences and is influenced by issues of identity particularly in the area of "cultural" boundaries, an area of the African American experience heretofore neglected in anthropology literature. Knowledge gained from this work has major significance for African Americans who, since Emancipation, have consistently struggled against forces of colonialism and the consequences of imperialism to build a "nation within a nation," and for scholars who investigate processes of identity construction and ethnicity.[8]

Since W. E. B. DuBois wrote *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903, social scientists have struggled to identify the ways in which "two-ness" or "double-consciousness" (i.e., being both of African descent *and* American by birth) influences behavior and efforts toward nationalism among Blacks in America. The investigation of African American participation in the American political system, a system that for more than three hundred years strategically excluded the African American as an "equal-in-power"

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[7] See Brightman (1995) for a comprehensive analysis of the culture construct as currently represented in anthropological writing.

[8] Williams' (1991) work investigates the process of identity construction among the Guyanese and vividly describes their efforts "to achieve a consciousness of nationhood" and how particular relations of personal identity reproduce ethnic chauvinism, racial stereotyping, and religious bigotry within this process of nation building.

participant, highlights the depths to which that two-ness contests, sustains, and constructs hegemonic structures. These issues related to two-ness are generally not discussed in formal settings. This work attempts to provide through identity stories an understanding of the divisiveness two-ness creates within the group. Two-ness was a significant factor in the variations in goals among the African American community during the CRM, and those varying goals intersect with processes of social change to produce a complex view of the impact of social movements and the idea of shared experiences as mobilizers and unifiers among participants.[9] The investigation also provides – for critics who contest universal allocation of persons to distinct groups – examples of the conditions under which multiple discourses further divide a community or come together to form larger systemic configurations.[10]

why mississippi?: method to the madness

My personal experiences, no doubt, are important enough reasons for choosing this particular region as my area of study, but there are other historical and social reasons that make this selection important to the study of social change, social movements, and political participation. Because the South was the major arena in which the CRM was staged, the region is an appropriate location for observing the actual long-term impact on people who first felt its influence in their daily lives more than thirty-five years before this study. But what was the social and political climate like in the 1950s and 1960s? On the one hand, the struggle for social change in Mississippi was one of the most brutal struggles during the Civil Rights Movement. Church bombings and burnings, lynchings and assassinations, and the use of armed local and state forces to physically prevent nonviolent demonstrations were regular and expected occurrences.

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[9] The CRM simply serves as an ideological and structural point in time from which social change can be examined. To evaluate the quality of the expected change, however, the goals of that movement and areas of contestation must be understood. The purpose of the movement was to institute economic, political, and social change. Although the Movement had a national impact, a number of African American communities and individuals from varied Black communities were reserved in their participation and support. A few nationally outspoken individual African Americans voiced support for the goal of equality but opposition to integration (e.g., Zora Neale Hurston).

[10] The investigation of two-ness provides examples of what Dirks (1994) refers to as varying discourses "coexisting within dynamic fields of interaction and conflict" and what Lomnitz-Adler (1992) refers to as the "culture of social relations" and the lack of cultural coherence, which will be discussed later.

On the other hand, and in spite of the tremendous violence and threats of violence, activism appeared to permeate every corner of Mississippi. Additionally, a great many communities, urban and rural, benefited directly from this insistence on social change. For example, in spite of its reputation as the state with "overwhelming obstacles" and an extremely oppressive social system for Blacks, Mississippi since the 1980s has had the unique distinction of having more elected Black officials than any other state in the union. Many stories about Mississippi detail successful influences of the movement, but areas uninfluenced by the movement remain uncharted courses. Because of these uncharted courses, my research was based in Lafayette County, Mississippi. Lafayette County was a key location in which civil rights activities occurred, and it served as a catalyst for regional and national changes in social policies. Yet unlike most of the other areas of Mississippi that the Civil Rights Movement touched, the town of Oxford and Lafayette County are often referred to, by some of its residents, as "the place the Civil Rights Movement left behind."

Lafayette County, Mississippi, is an excellent location for gaining perspectives from nonparticipants. The economic, social, and political structure of the community and the 1994 perceptions of African American residents regarding their position in that structure provide rich data for understanding the ways in which their lives have and have not changed. The daily routines through which the Black community negotiates the supposed gains of the Movement shed light on intragroup interpretations of what it means to be Black in America, the place of Blacks within the country, and the effect those interpretations have on mobilization. For example, in spite of the stiff competition Mississippi gives Alabama and South Carolina each election year for recognition as having the most Black elected officials, Lafayette County, which has a 26 percent Black population, did not elect a Black to public office until the 1990s, more than twenty-five years after the integration of the University of Mississippi and the passing of the Voting Rights Act.[11]

This investigation also provides a detailed ethnographic description of the spatial, economic, religious, social, political, ideological, and demographic structures of Mississippi's Lafayette County African American community. Ways in which these social phenomena have an impact on concepts of identity and are interconnected in terms of their influence on social change and behavior are emphasized. Identifying the

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[11] According to the 1990 U.S. Census, Lafayette County has a population of 7,980 African Americans, 23,151 Whites, and 695 "other races."