



MEMORY AND RECONCILIATION IN THE BIRMINGHAM CIVIL RIGHTS INSTITUTE

VICTORIA J. GALLAGHER

The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute is located in downtown Birmingham, Alabama across the street from Kelly Ingram Park where black citizens were sprayed with fire hoses and confronted by police attack dogs in the spring of 1963. Across the street, on the side of the Institute, is Sixteenth Street Baptist church where four young black girls were killed by a bomb blast on September 15, 1963. To the right of the front entrance of the Institute is a statue that memorializes the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, a key leader of the civil rights efforts in Birmingham during the late 1950s and early 1960s who endured bombings and physical attacks on himself and his family. Visiting the Institute on a Sunday, and walking through the gallery that depicts segregated Birmingham, I met the father of two boys who were the first to integrate an all-white school in Birmingham during that turbulent time. He now serves as a volunteer at the Institute. He took me over to the portion of the gallery devoted to segregated schooling and showed me the picture of himself and his sons on that most difficult day, surrounded by angry white people yelling and shaking fists. In Birmingham, at the Institute, historical conflicts are localized and brought close to home.

Memorials and monuments, including those like the Institute that are devoted to honoring the accomplishments and reminding us of the tragic losses accrued during the civil rights movement, have proliferated in the last decade. Various theoretical explanations of the motivations, social consequences, and material nature of such artifacts have been offered along with close and provocative analyses of specific memorials.¹ While national memorials such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the Holocaust Museum, and the Aids Quilt have tended to dominate such scholarship, critics and theorists have begun paying attention to the increasing number of civil rights-related museums and memorials appearing in communities around the country, particularly in the Southeast.² Among such public commemorative artifacts, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute is unique, combining a

Victoria Gallagher is Associate Professor of Communication at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, North Carolina. She wishes to thank Carole Blair and two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions.

memorial to a living civil rights activist (the Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth) with an interactive museum that recreates the story of black citizens, racism, and civil rights efforts in Birmingham, Alabama.³ By enabling visitors to look at, listen to, and feel the kinds of institutional discourse experienced by blacks, whites, and other racial and ethnic groups throughout the history of Birmingham, the Institute meets its professed goal, establishing a space for rethinking and re-envisioning our past, our current and future selves, and our relationships to one another. Yet it also creates a largely unnoticed but silently powerful institutional discourse of its own, entrenched in a highly Americanized theme, a "tradition of progress."

The goal of this paper is to describe and analyze the rhetorical consequence, form, and content of the Birmingham Institute. Whereas traditional rhetorical criticism emphasizes the intent of a rhetor and determines effect (and rhetorical success) based largely upon the extent to which the rhetor accomplishes his or her goal(s) via language, criticism of material artifacts such as memorials requires a broader conceptualization of effect that can account for both their material form (emphasizing visual vocabularies and contexts in addition to linguistic ones) and the social functions they enable. In the case of memorials, the consequences of materiality include issues of partisanship, particularly institutionalization of memory and, thereby, value. As a result, the highly contested nature of race relations and civil rights in the United States means that related memorials enact a dialectical tension between reconciliation and amnesia, conflicts resolved and conflicts simply reconfigured. Analysis of the Institute's visual vocabularies and material presence provides a way to illuminate this tension and determine its implications. To that end, the first section of the paper draws from recent scholarship on visual grammar and argument, cultural memory, and public commemorative artifacts to establish a framework for analysis of the consequence, form, and content of the Birmingham Institute. The following two sections are devoted to a description of the artifact and the analysis of its varied elements. The paper concludes with a summary of the findings and an evaluation of the Institute's rhetorical character.

CRITICAL ISSUES

Consequence

The process by which memorials come into being, their very nature as public, material artifacts leads to a permanence and institutionalization that must be carefully examined. Carole Blair emphasizes this point in her argument for theorizing a material, as opposed to strictly symbolic, rhetoric.⁴ From her perspective, rhetoric's capacity for consequence and partisanship goes far beyond the goal orientation of a speaker or designer or group of rhetors. Thus in analyzing memorials as rhetorical artifacts of memory, a critic must consider the power relations and the types of

institutional functions that such memorials serve. One way to get at these issues is to examine the social actions in which visitors participate through their experience of the Institute. In an article critiquing genre theory, Carolyn Miller provides a way to examine consequence based upon the social action or the definitional acting together that occurs when people construe situations as recurring. Her argument is that recurrent situations are social constructs that result from definition, because what recurs is not "a material situation (a real, objective, factual event) but our construal of a type."⁵ Thus when people hear an oration at a funeral and define it as a type of discourse commonly called a eulogy, they are construing a type that provides them with some sense of a shared, recurrent, even predictable, experience of the specific oration itself as well as funerals in general.

In her analysis of Israeli Pioneering Settlement Museums, Tamar Katriel explores this terrain by developing "a discourse-centered perspective on the study of heritage museums as 'sites of memory.'"⁶ She is concerned with determining how they develop a shared orientation to the past. She concludes that heritage museums produce multilayered discourses of the past in which history and memory orientations interpenetrate. They invoke "a rhetoric of history, which may both utilize and dissolve claims to factuality" and thereby invite critical inquiry.⁷ Katriel's claims are based not upon the intent(s) of the museum founders, stated or otherwise, or upon the immediate and long-term effects of the museum(s) on visitors. Instead, they are a result of exploring the definitional process of people acting together: the social function(s) that the museums serve and in which tour guides and visitors engage. Similarly, this analysis focuses on the social functions that are performed through visitors' experiences of the Birmingham Institute.

Form

Although public commemorative art may be examined in terms of form/style and content as are speeches and literary works, these artifacts, as Blair puts it, "summon attention to their assiduous materiality." This materiality results both from their "presentness"—they are not over (speech), nor finished (book), but "remain in our perceptual fields as long as we are near by"—and their heavy reliance on nonverbal/nonlinguistic modes of symbolism.⁸ Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen sum up the challenge of analyzing primarily non-linguistic forms in their justification for a grammar of visual design:

Visual structures realize meanings as linguistic structures do also, and thereby point to different interpretations of experience and different forms of social interaction. The meanings which can be realized in language and in visual communication overlap in part, that is, some things can be expressed both visually and verbally; and in part they diverge—some things can be "said" only visually, others only verbally. But even when

something can be “said” both visually and verbally the way in which it will be said is different. For instance, what is expressed in language through the choice between different word classes and semantic structures, is, in visual communication, expressed through the choice between, for instance, different uses of colour, or different compositional structures.⁹

In addition to examining visual structures, paying attention to visual contexts is also important. This is particularly true in the case of civil rights memorials to the extent that they are radically contextual. Given the status of race relations in the United States, civil rights memorials “can never be taken at face value but are essentially complicated, unfinished texts.”¹⁰ As a result, they are interpretable only provisionally and with a clear understanding of historical, political, and physical contexts. Context also figures centrally in David Birdsell and Leo Groarke’s work on visual argument. They argue that “at least three kinds of context are important in the evaluation of visual arguments: immediate visual context, immediate verbal context and visual culture.”¹¹ While Birdsell and Groarke’s approach is somewhat reductive because they focus on artifacts that are solely visual, or visual and verbal, and therefore fail to account for material aspects of rhetoric that move beyond sight and sound (e.g., touch, three dimensionality: being located “inside” the text, etc.), their work highlights several important aspects of the meaning-making process.

Three insights from Birdsell and Groarke’s article are useful for this analysis. First, sequences of images and visual cues beyond a single message source are part of the immediate visual context. According to Birdsell and Groarke, these elements enable us to recognize single frames or units as part of an overarching narrative or argument. In galleries such as those in the Institute and in many museums, a combination of visual and verbal texts—e.g., photographs with captions, newspaper clippings, maps, drawings, video taped interviews, short films, graffiti, and so on—are used extensively. Birdsell and Groarke would argue that the sequence of these images and other visual cues from other sources (taped voices and conversations, three dimensional displays, design of the building, lighting, and so on) are influential in determining their interpretation. Second, the verbal captioning of visual images throughout the museum may establish “a context of meaning into which the images can enter with a high degree of specificity while achieving a meaning different from the words alone.”¹² Captions are an example, therefore, of an immediate verbal context and are also connected to the possibility of conventionalized images. This is so, according to Birdsell and Groarke, because recognizable types may be invoked through narrative description or visual depiction, but it is often the visual image that calls attention to the type. A third relevant insight concerns cultural conventions of vision, or what Birdsell and Groarke refer to as visual culture. Visual culture—which includes what it means to see, what it means to represent seeing, and shifts in the meaning of particular elements of visual

vocabulary—changes significantly over time. To the extent that visual culture “provides the broad master narratives of design which are the background for more specific visual . . . texts”—texts which may perpetuate or challenge those narratives—examination of visual contexts invoked within the Institute is essential.¹³

Content

Memorials function as both repositories and catalysts for memory and memory making. But the development of a shared vision of the past can be elusive. At the same time, memorials do come to represent at least some degree of public consensus about the past. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, with the controversial addition of the sculpture/statue and American flag to the wall designed by Maya Lin, provides a case in point. While multiple versions of and approaches to the past are represented, the combined physical elements of the memorial suggest a finished, albeit multifaceted, past. A critic must, therefore, carefully account for the shimmering character of memory and the kinds of struggle contained therein. This is particularly true when evaluating memorials that draw attention to the “sins” or key controversies of a culture, community, and/or nation. As Edward Linenthal suggests, “The more volatile the memory, the more difficult the task to reach a consensual vision of how the memory should be appropriately expressed, and the more intense become the struggles to shape, to ‘own’ the memory’s public presence.”¹⁴

In his book, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, Michael Kammen suggests “a relentlessly dialogical relationship between the values of tradition and progress (or modernism) in American culture.” This manifests itself in the way that local communities “extol a ‘tradition of progress’ that seems absolutely central to the community’s evolution” and which is then ascribed to the nation as a whole. But national traditions are not amalgams of local ones. Rather, communities tend to “partially appropriate the form but not necessarily the content of national historic rituals.”¹⁵ As we shall see, this dialogical tension is central to the rhetoric of the Institute. One of the overarching themes of the “story” told in and through the museum galleries is the progress black people made despite or because of the context of segregation and institutional racism and within and beyond the context of the civil rights movement. The final gallery of the museum portion of the Institute internationalizes the issues of civil and human rights but, again, in the context of progress: accomplishments and conflict in Birmingham serve as a model or, at least, an inspiration for what can and does happen elsewhere.

For Kammen, the dialogical relationship between tradition and progress is reinscribed in the ongoing tension between what he refers to as “the party of hope” and “the party of memory.”¹⁶ Social diversity within the United States means that there are multiple memories rather than a monolithic collective memory and thus, “a powerful tendency to depoliticize traditions for the sake of reconciliation.”

Memory is activated by contestation, and amnesia is induced by the desire for reconciliation. Thus "the politics of culture in this country [the United States] has everything to do with the process of contestation and with the subsequent quest for reconciliation."¹⁷ If this is so, does the theme "tradition of progress" better serve (using Kammen's terms) the party of hope—of reconciliation brought about by amnesia—or the party of memory—of contestation brought about by conflicting, multiple memories? To put it another way, are history and memory peculiarly fractured or peculiarly joined?

Greg Dickinson's description of contemporary culture as characterized by "generalized tendencies towards loss of stabilized place and diminution of memory and tradition" which, paradoxically, leads to a deep desire for memory, supports the thesis that memory and history are peculiarly fractured.¹⁸ His analysis of Old Pasadena as a contemporary site of memory that is "determined to embed visitors in a warmly remembered past, a past that can cover the confusions of the present," reveals memory disconnected from what Kammen refers to as "meaningful historical knowledge."¹⁹ But there is also the possibility that the changing values which "have caused the sacred to be profaned and the profane made sacred [Graceland and the Lincoln Memorial both as cultural shrines]" have also led to the perception that memory is history, that they are becoming peculiarly joined.²⁰ Unless someone remembers something, historically it might as well not have happened. Holocaust memorials that urge us never to forget are based on the assumption that history and memory are, or perhaps must be, joined. This analysis includes close examination of the extent to which the Institute's galleries and displays invoke contestation and/or reconciliation, memory and history joined or memory and history fractured.

As the preceding discussion of consequence, form, and content indicates, the method for analysis of the Birmingham Institute involves examining the museum's visual vocabularies and material presence in order to determine the following: 1) functions the Institute as a societal discourse serves for visitors; 2) visual contexts invoked within the Institute; and 3) the extent to which the Institute's galleries and displays invoke contestation and/or reconciliation.

DESCRIPTION

The idea for the Institute originated with the previous mayor of Birmingham, David Vann (a white man who grew up "taking segregation for granted"), and was conceived as a means to deal explicitly with Birmingham's past and to reinforce present and future progress.²¹ It came to fruition under Mayor Richard Arrington Jr.'s guidance despite the initial resistance of members of the Birmingham business community, some of whom have now joined the Institute's board of directors.

The Institute building is an imposing structure. It takes up about a quarter of a city block and, as indicated earlier, faces Kelly Ingram Park. Primarily red brick, the

building is comprised of a central entrance recessed from the street and flanked by rectangular, brick wings. The central entrance includes a brick and cement courtyard that leads to a series of white concrete steps ascending to a beautiful rotunda. Compared to other buildings in the immediate vicinity, the Institute is clearly newer, more substantial, and, due to the courtyard and rotunda, more architecturally interesting than its neighbors. However, it is similar in height to surrounding buildings.

Despite its imposing structure, the Institute building has features that make it "user-friendly." There are parking spaces and meters in front and on the side of the building as well as a parking lot in the back, providing visitors with easy access to the building from their cars. A round ticket kiosk to the left side of the courtyard, stairs, and rotunda enables visitors to quickly determine how to gain access to the building itself. Just beyond the kiosk is the door to the Institute's well-supplied bookstore. To the right of the courtyard, in front of the other brick wing, is the statue of Reverend Shuttlesworth, standing in a dignified, yet engaged pose. His gaze is up and out over Kelly Ingram Park. He is dressed in a suit, with one arm down at his side and the other holding a Bible tucked up high as if ready to be pulled out and read.

The museum part of the Institute consists of ten galleries that take visitors from the era of segregation in Birmingham through the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s to current struggles for human rights around the globe. In addition to museum-style galleries, the Institute houses administrative offices; a gallery devoted to changing exhibits and features; a fledgling archive, including an oral history project with over 150 interviews; and, as indicated above, a bookstore. Although initiated and sponsored by local government, it is now funded largely by private dollars. On average, 900 people a month visit the Institute.²²

In the promotional video for the Institute, a visit to the museum is described as "a self-directed journey through the civil rights movement and the history of African American life in Birmingham."²³ The journey begins with a film titled, "Going Up to Birmingham," that describes 1) the origins of the city (the city was founded after the Civil War as a desirable place for industry due to vast mineral resources in the area), 2) the contrast between the experience of whites and blacks during the early years, and 3) the self-contained culture black people built in response to the strict color line that emerged in the city. At the film's end, the screen rises and visitors are invited to walk through the opening into the gallery devoted to segregated life in Birmingham. The first display, located directly in front of the visitor as he or she passes through the archway, contains two water fountains, one clean and in good repair labeled "white;" the other dirty and in ill repair labeled "colored." To the left is a display depicting conditions for mine workers and a description of the brief period of interracial cooperation among workers in the locals of the United Mine Workers of America and the Western Federation of Miners during the 1890s. To the right is a

mock-up of the inside of a city bus divided into colored and white sections. The gallery also includes displays depicting segregated housing, schools, entertainment venues, legal access, and churches.

Immediately following this gallery, the visitor moves into a large, darkened room with life-size, realistic-looking images hanging from the ceiling on what appears to be Plexiglas plates. A tape of voices plays continuously as visitors walk among the images so that each of the figures appears to be talking about his or her beliefs and experiences regarding segregation and racism. Visitors thus hear “people” expressing sentiments that are often kept unexpressed in “mixed” company in our somewhat desegregated, contemporary society. After the gallery of images and voices, visitors walk down a long hallway with a visual timetable on one wall detailing events in Birmingham immediately preceding the emergence of the civil rights movement. One key event is the shut down of the Alabama NAACP in 1956 due to legal harassment and the formation, under Rev. Shuttlesworth, of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR).

A sculpted image of Rosa Parks riding on a bus provides a segue into the next series of interconnected galleries, which expand the focus from Birmingham to civil rights demonstrations and events throughout the South and the nation. The time line contains Birmingham events on one side and all other events on the other side. Slides of protesters accompanied by taped voices reading, chanting, and singing; a replica of the burnt out shell of one of the freedom riders’ buses along with a brief film featuring the riders and the brutality of the responses to them; and a replica of MLK’s jail cell are examples of displays in these galleries. Newspaper clippings, photographs, filmed interviews of people who were children in the 1950s and ’60s and participated in the marches are also used throughout. The first of the final three galleries is filled with life-sized statues of individuals representing a variety of racial/ethnic, age, and economic backgrounds. The labels on the statues inform visitors they are encountering the Selma to Montgomery marchers. The visitor must walk “with” them to continue through the museum. In addition, this part of the museum is one of the few areas to be lit by natural light (via windows) so the visitor emerges from the darkness begun with the introductory film and continued throughout the spotlight galleries of segregation and civil rights, into the light of walking with “others” in a march for freedom. The next gallery contains milestone markers engraved with key events (late 1960s onward) in the city of Birmingham as it worked toward greater integration. The final gallery expands the visitor’s journey, moving beyond Birmingham to contemporary human rights struggles around the world. The display is divided into stations, each containing the image and audio story of a particular person who has suffered direct oppression as a result of the color of her or his skin, gender, beliefs, political actions, and so on. After such a “journey,” the memorial sculpture of Rev. Shuttlesworth, which comes into view once again as visitors leave the Institute, may evoke a new and/or renewed set of associations.

ANALYSIS

Social Functions

The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute serves three readily identifiable functions, namely education, remembrance, and preservation. Conversations with the Institute's staff make clear that one of their main goals for the Institute is to educate, to provide meeting space, community programs, and significant speakers to augment the educational function of the museum.²⁴ The Institute also includes a bookstore and an archive that provide information not readily available or distributed elsewhere. While all memorials might be said to have an educational function, civil rights memorials differ both in the extent of the educational function and the need for it. Consider other memorials related to events and people of national significance, such as the Lincoln Memorial, World War I and II Memorials, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and Confederate memorials. Because a great deal of information is regularly distributed in educational centers around the country regarding the Lincoln presidency, World Wars I and II, the Civil War and the Vietnam War, there is little need to make such information available at the memorial sites. In contrast, national studies continue to show that African American and black history, and even civil rights history, is less widely available.²⁵ The need for and extent of the educational function is one way that both staff and visitors act together to define experiences of the Institute as recurring or shared. For instance, in *Ebony* and other magazines targeted to the black community nationwide, special feature articles encourage summer family trips to Birmingham, to Atlanta, and to Montgomery for the purpose of educating children about their heritage by exposing them to civil rights-related sites.

A second function of the Institute might be described as a remembrance function, but it moves beyond simple reaffirmation of values. Rather, Katriel's argument regarding heritage museums is appropriate for the Institute as well: "were the values and ideas so painstakingly invoked within the museum walls still alive, there would be no need to enliven and celebrate them in these specially designed lieux de memoir."²⁶ One of the key values of the civil rights movement celebrated in the Institute's galleries is non-violent social change. Yet, non-violent social change is currently not valued as highly as it was in the early part of the civil rights movement (late 1950s, early 1960s). Consider such cultural evidence as interpretations and responses to the Los Angeles riots after the Rodney King trial (e.g., celebrating the riot as a revolutionary act, suggesting that rioting was an acceptable means for expressing rage at an intransigent culture, and so on), and pop culture recreations of history and heroes that embrace more direct, often violent means of resistance (e.g., the iconography of Malcolm X and the proliferation of T-shirts, ball caps, and jewelry emblazoned with the slogan, "By any means necessary"). In the face of such cynicism, the Institute

reasserts the power of non-violent social change in both Birmingham and around the world. Like holocaust-related memorials that strive to reinforce memory as a way to guard against the return of forms of oppression and evil directed toward Jewish people, the remembrance function of the Institute argues against forgetting the past. Its displays confront visitors with memories of what the attack dogs, fire hoses, bombings, and daily confrontations with racist discourse were like. For individuals, particularly children, who are encountering this "history" without any personal memory, memories of past events are formulated through the recreations of the exhibits. Engaged in a kind of representational pilgrimage, some visitors assuage guilt, some gain wisdom or understanding, others create and re-create racial identity or gain a sense of the past, some experience humility, and so on, but they are all engaged in an experience centered on remembrance.

Beyond the educational and remembrance functions, the Institute serves a preservation function tied to its physical location. At least several blocks from the business, shopping, and restaurant districts of Birmingham, the Institute is in an urbanized area where tourists, black, white, or other would not ordinarily visit. However, the Institute serves as an anchor for a collection of other historically relevant sites in the immediate vicinity, including the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and Kelly Ingram Park, creating an historic district of sorts. As a result, visitors view and experience this neighborhood differently than other similar ones around the city with the "as it was" overriding, the reality of "as it is now."

The brick, mortar, and glass that comprise the actual building in which the Institute is housed have an impact not only on the neighborhood and how it is experienced but also on the way in which visitors experience the Institute itself. Thus, the consequences of the Institute's materiality move beyond the preservation function. There is permanence to an architecturally sturdy building with corners, flat surfaces, curves, right angles, and symmetry. And that permanence provides institutional credibility since it suggests that the "work" carried out within the physical, material structure is of established value and lasting importance rather than ephemeral, soon to be forgotten. It also means that visitors follow "rules," albeit largely unwritten, that restrict choices about how to move through and experience the museum. These rules are established by the physical layout of hallways and galleries, which control the flow of sensory stimulation, interpretation, and meaning making. They are reinforced by the presence of volunteers who guide visitors in appropriate directions and moderate behavior.

The physical layout evokes the journey metaphor used by board members, the archivist, and the promotional video to describe what a visit to the Institute is like. Upon entering the rotunda area, the visitor is greeted by a museum guide who explains whether and how long one must wait to see the introductory film and begin "the journey" through the museum galleries. If the film is currently running, visitors are directed to the gallery to the right of the entrance that features

changing exhibits. In the galleries themselves, display areas construct clear “paths” and museum guides are present at various places to provide information or assistance.

The movie provides an historical context that invites audience identification and interpretation. Once visitors have watched the movie and moved through the screen into the ensuing galleries, the physical layout of displays and the lack of roped off areas allows them to experience the models, objects, pictures, and written discourse very directly. Images of regular lives are intertwined with violence. Stark differences between day-to-day settings are readily at hand. Loud sounds, angry voices, formal speeches, blues and jazz music work together to create an emotional experience reinforced by lighting changes. Even the placements of benches, where they are as well as where they are not, affect the physical mood. For instance, benches are placed by particularly disturbing video clips (e.g., a videotape of the beating of the freedom riders in Birmingham, and interviews with those beaten soon after the attack) or moving testimonials (e.g., video clips of interviews with adults who took part in the freedom marches as children), but are not found in the displays depicting black culture in segregated Birmingham or along the walkways depicting the timelines of the civil rights movement in Birmingham and across the nation.

The format, layout, and design of the Institute are consistent with the conventions of a particular societal discourse, namely, museums. Traditionally, museums preserve the artifacts of most value to a culture as well as present an “authorized” version of history (this latter is particularly true if a museum is state-sponsored). While the multisensory format means that the Institute is geared to a mediated culture that values, even expects interactive and experiential design features, there is no space for visitors to contest the story, or in this case, the journey presented. The final gallery devoted to ongoing international civil rights struggles suggests that there is still more to be done (but not necessarily in the new, “All American City” of Birmingham?), yet visitors experience a journey with a clear beginning and end, and few choices to be made along the way. A journey, in other words, that bears only slight resemblance to real life. Given the extent to which the Institute draws upon conventions of discourse common to museums, can it overcome people’s tendencies to respond as they would to a website or TV show, substituting voyeuristic observation for more direct political and social action? While individuals may be changed, transformed, even re-created by their experience of discourse and material artifacts, that change becomes socially meaningful when they, in turn, engage in types of social action such as protesting, voting, debating, arguing and so on. But the types of social action in which visitors engage through their experiences of the Institute as described above have more to do with learning, remembering, and preserving than with action and contestation.

Visual Contexts

Museum discourse also shapes experiences of the Institute by providing one of the key visual contexts which visitors rely upon to develop interpretations of the visual displays. As in historical museums, the displays use time lines, Plexiglas covers and containers, newspaper-style photographs, written materials, and dramatic lighting, as well as "re-created" historical tableaux. Unlike more traditional historical museums, however, the visual structuring, the creation of "meaningful propositions by means of visual syntax," is accomplished largely through transactional rather than classificatory patterns.²⁷ In other words, rather than displaying impersonal artifacts evenly spaced in symmetrical cases with corresponding labels, the galleries' artifacts and re-creations are personal, dynamic, and dramatic, representing deeds done, by whom and to whom. The visual vectors that evoke transactions between, for instance, visitors and the character types represented in the hall of images or the burned out bus shell model and the videotaped images of Birmingham citizens beating Freedom Riders, play a role similar, according to Kress and van Leeuwen, to action verbs in the semiotic code of language. The result is that rather than representing a fixed and stable order of things as in a traditional historical museum, the Institute represents a history that is dynamic and unfolding, and arguably more engaging.

Another visual element in the Institute galleries is associated more directly with the visual discourse of memorials rather than museums. Listing the names of martyrs, heroes, and loved ones, of real people with real lives who suffered and/or conquered has become something of a convention for commemorative discourse, particularly since the inception of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. In the Institute, the names of heroes and martyrs figure prominently in captions beside photographs and on videotape, in blown up newspaper headlines projected on the walls, in displays of newspaper articles and pamphlets. Whereas the list of names on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial draws attention to the sheer number of people killed during the conflict, the names listed in various places and formats throughout the Institute celebrate individuals' lives and deaths. Visual invitations to mourn are delimited by a focus on action and circumstance. This is an important difference because in the case of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the immediate cause of death, the war, is identifiable and finished. In the case of the Institute, the immediate causes of death vary but the underlying cause, namely racism, is consistent and still present.

Contestation vs. Reconciliation

In one sense, the Institute invokes contestation simply because it represents the history of a large American city from the explicit point of view of its black citizens.

The gallery on segregation works by contrasting the realities of black citizens and white citizens to contest the notion that separate could ever be equal, then or now. In addition, quotations from newspapers and citizens in the early part of this century, for instance, defending separate educational facilities in the name of freedom of choice, have a strangely familiar ring, and challenge the perception that we have moved beyond the need for a focus on civil rights. The hall of images (and voices) also focuses on contested and, for that matter, contentious viewpoints, putting them into conversation with one another and with the thoughts, feelings, and beliefs of visitors who walk among them. The voices and images are varied enough that almost everyone will be made uncomfortable by at least one, whether the discomfort is due to feeling belittled, or guilty, or attacked, or defensive, or threatened, or strangely exposed. In that sense, the gallery represents the contested reality that freedom of speech all but guarantees within our culture.

However, the overarching theme of the Institute and the museum is one of progress. The promotional video clearly reflects this theme as the voiceover describes the extent to which the museum “examines the past, embraces the present and expects greatness in its future.”²⁸ The physical layout, lighting, and thematic progression of the museum evoke a move from darkness into light, from the oppression of segregation to the accomplishments of citizens, from the specific circumstances of Birmingham to a global sensibility and kinship. Thus Birmingham is transformed from “Bombingham” to an “All American City” that remembers its past (in the guise of historical knowledge and facticity rather than myth and legend) and has learned and continues to learn from it. What is hidden by this “tradition of progress” theme are current demographics showing that Birmingham, like so many other American cities, continues to be segregated. For example, as of 1990 approximately 64 percent of black citizens or 64 percent of white citizens would have had to move in order to create an integrated city. Continued suburbanization appears to be increasing this level of segregation. Also, white citizens are more likely to be employed and to make more money than their black counterparts.²⁹ While the museum exhibits and promotional materials do indicate that the work of attaining civil rights is not finished, there is no clear assessment of the current state of affairs in Birmingham within any of the galleries. History is therefore fractured from current reality on a day-to-day level. The Institute helps people to vividly experience, remember, and interpret events and accomplishments removed from them in time and space but is less useful in assisting one to interpret the comments of a rental-car spokesperson about the good and bad sections of the city. Even the choice to memorialize a living civil rights figure (which would seem to allow for contestation since a living person can cry foul when history is being “tampered” with for ideological and/or pragmatic goals), can also be read as a move towards reconciliation and amnesia. Though Rev. Shuttleworth was and is admired for his bravery and energy, he was also criticized for being difficult to

work with, headstrong, undemocratic, publicity driven, ego-centric, and the like.³⁰ Memorializing him just off the entrance is a way of honoring him without allowing his contested story to take over.

The impulse toward amnesia in the name of progress that characterizes discourses of memory suggests that black experiences and history are acceptable to the extent that they emphasize problems of the past in terms of progress rather than current failings. Discourse suggesting that failure outweighs progress or that there is a key flaw within the very fabric of the culture is considered radical, extremist. Widely shared negative responses to the rhetoric of Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, and even Martin Luther King Jr. in the years immediately preceding his death demonstrate the powerful cultural dictate against such discourse.

The subculture that developed despite/in response to racism and the experiences of individuals who served the black community are thus foregrounded in the Institute's representation of Birmingham's history. Trials and tribulations are represented first and the indomitable responses second, suggesting that despite bad societal conditions and policies, the people have and will overcome. For instance, the segregation gallery first depicts the awful working and living conditions of black citizens, and then the successful black businesses that developed, the strength of black churches, and the fertile blues and jazz scenes. Black citizens who started successful businesses, particularly funeral parlors and insurance companies, are honored for their service to the community without any skepticism regarding their motives or the ensuing distribution of wealth and the emergence of a class system within the black community.

In the United States, mainstream, "ordinary folks," (meaning non-deviants, those representative of a majority or who evoke the widest identification with the greatest number of other citizens) and people in positions of power within stable institutions are most likely to be "heard." By contrast, individuals who represent positions differing from current political reality (for instance, socialism, communism, fascism, and revolution) are often ignored, rebuked, and discounted. In the Institute this is reflected in the privileging of voices of young marchers who are now upstanding members of the Birmingham community, of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, of mainstream newspaper reporters, national correspondents, ministers, singers, and musicians. Despite the fact that they were considered radical by many at the time, the voices of Martin Luther King Jr. and the freedom riders are also privileged (both King and the freedom riders were depicted as outside agitators by the Birmingham establishment). Their voices are "heard" to the extent that they argue for change within a basically good system rather than a radical restructuring of society as a whole. Even in the hall of images the representations of nurse, doctor, businessman, worker, housewife, children, and so on are clearly meant to evoke the "ordinary folk" of Birmingham and the dominant, albeit contested sentiments of the day. Voices that are not heard or that are "softened" considerably by the cursory

way in which they are treated include the wives of male civil rights leaders (basically relegated to pictures with their families, or standing with and in support of their husbands); Reverend Shuttlesworth (talked about and shown in pictures but whose own words are less featured; he “disappears” once he leaves Birmingham); alternative newspaper reports (newspaper clippings featured are from mainstream newspapers and magazines); members of the Black Panthers, Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X (these last three appear in the time lines and in some newspaper accounts but they are not central); in other words, individuals considered to be outside the norm or who fit less clearly into a vision of continued progress both for Birmingham and the nation.

Oral histories, reproducible events, mediated accounts and information that can be presented on a time line all count as knowledge and are “taught” to visitors through their direct experience of the Institute galleries. The knowledge that comes from personal experience and involvement is privileged not only in the representation of history within the galleries but also, as discussed above, in the physical and visual layout of the galleries. Visitors experience a journey that provides them knowledge of hardship and conflict but also of how some, although not all, problems were solved and how incremental change was accomplished.

If the Institute can be faulted for silencing perspectives that challenge the ideology of progress, it must be appreciated for the blueprint it provides showing how individuals can work within a dominant social structure to bring about change. The Institute provides an optimistic vision for the future and at the same time clearly represents the difficulty of the journey.

CONCLUSION

Determining the number of visitors to the Institute, the number of special programs held in its meeting rooms, reviews of the museum galleries in newspapers and magazines, and so on may provide useful information as to the impact of the Institute on some people. But determining these kinds of traditional effects based on the assumption of a symbolic text falls far short of illuminating the consequences of the Institute’s materiality. It also does little to explain how and why meaning-making experiences occur. By examining visual as well as verbal vocabularies, contexts and consequences, we are better able to evaluate the Institute beyond the intent of founders, board members, and designers.

Such analysis is particularly relevant to the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute because of conflict surrounding continued racial inequities in the United States. Memorials serve multiple rhetorical functions and in the case of civil rights memorials, communities attempting to reclaim moral high ground (e.g., the transformation from “Bombingham” to the “All American City”) may use memorials to perform a kind of public apologia or therapeutic cleansing. Who wins and who

loses when the "tradition of progress" narrative is enacted in civil rights-related memorials? And can any city host a civil rights exhibit without engaging in some kind of apology or cleansing? While these questions suggest further examination of civil rights memorials as a category or genre of material artifacts of public memory, analyzing the rhetorical consequence, form, and content of the Birmingham Institute reveals the following: 1) that an experience of the Institute includes educational, remembrance, and preservation functions leading to re-envisioning one's heritage, engaging in a pilgrimage, and enlivening and reinvigorating key values of individuals and communities; 2) that the visual structures within the Institute are transactional rather than classificatory, promoting an experience of history that is fluid rather than static; and 3) that the Institute portrays both sides of the dialectical relationship between history and memory, but ultimately privileges one over the other. Contestation is demonstrated in the detailed history and lived experiences portrayed in the museum galleries. But the Institute's overarching institutional discourse, grounded in a tradition of progress, triumphs in the end, making it a place for experiencing reconciliation and regeneration rather than conflict and debate.

NOTES

1. The following articles provide a good representation of scholarship regarding theoretical approaches to and explanations of public, commemorative artifacts such as memorials and monuments: Daniel Abramson, "Maya Lin and the 1960s: Monuments, Time Lines, and Minimalism," *Critical Inquiry* 22 (1996): 679-709; Carole Blair, "Challenges and Openings in Retheorizing Rhetoric: Contemporary U.S. Memorial Sites as Exemplars of Rhetoric's Materiality," unpublished paper presented at the Pennsylvania State Conference on Rhetoric, Summer 1997; John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992); Greg Dickinson, "Memories for Sale: Nostalgia and the Construction of Identity in Old Pasadena," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 83 (1997): 1-27; Sonja Foss, "The Construction of Appeal in Visual Images: A Hypothesis," in *Rhetorical Movement: Essays in Honor of Leland Griffin* ed. David Zarefsky, (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1993); William H. Gass, "Monumentality/Mentality," *Oppositions* 25 (1982): 127-44; and Alan Radley, "Artifacts, Memory and a Sense of the Past," in *Collective Remembering*, ed. David Middleton and Derek Edwards (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1990), 46-59.
2. Critical essays analyzing the Vietnam Veterans Memorial include: Carole Blair, Marsha S. Jeppeson, and Enrico Pucci Jr., "Public Memorializing in Postmodernity: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial as Prototype," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 77(1991): 263-87; Sonja Foss, "Ambiguity as Persuasion: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial," *Communication Quarterly* 34 (1986): 326-40; and Richard Morris, "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Myth of Superiority," in *Cultural Legacies of Vietnam*, ed. Richard Morris and Peter Ehrenhaus (Norwood: Ablex Publishing, 1990), 199-222. The process of founding, developing and siting the Holocaust Museum is examined in Edward T. Linenthal, *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1995). There are two published essays that critically analyze civil-rights related museums and memorials: Victoria J. Gallagher, "Remembering Together: Rhetorical Integration and the Case of

- the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial," *Southern Communication Journal* (1995):109-119 and Bernard J. Armada, "Memorial Agon: An Interpretive Tour of the National Civil Rights Museum," *Southern Communication Journal* 63 (1998): 235-43.
3. Other civil rights-related memorials, for instance the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Atlanta and the Montgomery, Alabama Civil Rights Memorial, tend to honor specific individuals or groups of individuals who gave their lives in the struggle to accomplish full civil rights for black citizens. The Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, housed in the hotel building where MLK was shot, is the most similar to the Institute because of its museum format but it is quite different in emphasis and scope. For instance, it has features normally associated with a shrine (e.g., funeral wreaths outside the room where King was shot, exact recreation of the room). In addition it is less complete in its coverage of the movement and of civil rights issues worldwide.
 4. Blair, "Challenges and Openings."
 5. Carolyn Miller, "Genre as Social Action," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (1984): 151-67, 157.
 6. Tamar Katriel, "Sites of Memory: Discourses of the Past in Israeli and Pioneering Settlement Museums," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80 (1994): 1-20, 4.
 7. Katriel, "Sites of Memory," 7.
 8. Blair, "Challenges and Openings."
 9. Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (London: Routledge, 1996), 9.
 10. Victoria Gallagher, "Rhetoric, Conflict and Memory in Postmodern Society: The Case of the Montgomery Civil Rights Memorial." Unpublished paper presented at the National Communication Association annual conference, Chicago, November 1997.
 11. David Birdsell, and Leo Groarke, "Toward a Theory of Visual Argument," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 33 (1996): 1-10, 6.
 12. Birdsell and Groarke, "Toward a Theory," 6.
 13. Birdsell and Groarke, "Toward a Theory," 7.
 14. Linenthal, *Preserving Memory*, 52.
 15. Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 14.
 16. Kammen, *Mystic Chords*, 704.
 17. Kammen, *Mystic Chords*, 13.
 18. Dickinson, "Memories for Sale," 6.
 19. Dickinson, "Memories for Sale," 7; and Kammen, *Mystic Chords*, 687.
 20. Kammen, *Mystic Chords*, 687.
 21. David Vann quoted in *Inspired by the Past, A Vision for the Future*, Promotional Videotape, Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, 1997.
 22. Wayne Coleman, Archivist, Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, Interview with author, Birmingham, Ala., June 8, 1997.
 23. *Inspired by the Past*, 1997, voice-over.
 24. Coleman, Interview with author, June 8, 1997; Richard Arrington and David Vann, taped interviews included in *Inspired by the Past*, 1997.
 25. See Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile and Unequal* (New York: Ballantine Books), 39-41, 167-171.
 26. Katriel, "Sites of Memory," 5.
 27. Kress and van Leeuwen, *Reading Images*, 45.

28. *Inspired by the Past*, voice-over.
29. Census data from UAB Center for Urban Affairs, "Demographic Atlas for Jefferson and Shelby Counties," (The Board of Trustees of the University of Alabama at Birmingham, 1995), 11-18, 26-33, 37-47.
30. David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986).