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I Still Remember America: Senior African Americans Talk About Segregation

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Abstract This paper identifies the survival and coping strategies senior African Americans adopted during segregation in the southern USA. Describing how they maintained positive outlooks on life, our respondents discussed family unity, community strength, the contestation of African American inferiority, religious faith, fighting physical aggression, and downplaying the impact of segregation. They consistently mentioned differential treatment, violence, and their inability to access most public spaces. Respondents depicted segregation as a group, rather than an individual, experience. The findings reveal the significance of lived experience and collective memory in processes of identity formation for African Americans, and they have implications for contemporary race relations in the USA.

Keywords Segregation · Collective memory · Coping · Group identity · Older African Americans

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I, too, Sing America

*I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes.
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow Strong.*

*Tomorrow,
I'll still sit at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen."*

*Besides
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed.*

I, too, am America.

Langston Hughes
(1902–1967)

Introduction

Racial segregation was a legal and ideological system that was oppressive for African Americans. During this regime, black Southerners had to make the decision to actively challenge unfair laws or remain silent in their communities (Collier and Collier 2000). Because segregation had spatial dimensions, black Southerners had to carefully monitor their public behaviors to avoid victimization and humiliation. In the quotidian, they confronted negative images and definitions of blacks that the racist society promoted. Nonetheless, black Southerners created sources for collective empowerment. They built strong communities, schools, churches, and businesses. These entities promoted their sense of competence, self-respect, and solidarity in the face of beliefs in African American inferiority. While the process of coping with segregation generated attitudes of defiance as well as complete or partial deference, it allowed African Americans to form a memory that acknowledged their collective oppression.

The narratives we present in this paper are a sample of individual and collective experiences of survival and resistance. They have been shaped by the common memories of a past marked by segregation, racial discrimination, and exclusion. African American histories are fraught with the denial of civil rights and full societal membership. Our participants used storytelling to teach children about this past, particularly about violence and ways to prevent it. Through storytelling, messages of

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self-worth, protection, and respect were promoted. Moreover, it seems that storytelling facilitated the creation of a common culture during segregation, which buffered many African American families and communities from dissolution.

The findings indicate the salience of specific issues in the recollections of the senior African Americans we interviewed. They talked about their fear of violence, discrimination in public places, the racist actions of white Americans, the need to remain strong and respect one another, and family solidarity. They discussed the civil rights movement and the black leadership, as well as the Ku Klux Klan. Themes related to the strategies of survival, recollections of discriminatory acts, and collective memory are the specific foci of this paper.

The Influence of Jim Crow

Jim Crow segregation was a major conduit of white racism against African Americans (Cell 1982; Collier and Collier 2000; Wormser 2003). Boasting “separate but equal” treatment of blacks, Jim Crow laws (particularly in the South) prevented African Americans from becoming full members of society. Following Reconstruction, former slaves received little protection under civil rights legislation (Cell 1982; Raper 1969). Due to the inequitable distribution of land and wealth, many were forced to work in sharecropping, under conditions similar to slavery, until the 1960s (Carr 1997; Finkelman 1992; Franklin and Moss 2000). Simultaneously, most endured substandard accommodations in hotels, schools, and other public spaces (Wormser 2003). In all, such actions promoted ideologies of white supremacy and African American inferiority in the USA (Woodward 1955).

Throughout the 1900s, segregation was characterized by sociopolitical forces that limited the life chances of African Americans. Widespread lynchings, primarily of black men, promoted fear in the hearts of many and reinforced the belief that African Americans were inferior to whites (Ginzburg 1996; Raper 1969). Many of these terrorist acts were promoted to keep African Americans from voting because, for many whites, black suffrage was synonymous with racial mixing and black equality (Roedriger 1991). Poll taxes and voting literacy requirements—which disproportionately affected blacks—were later instituted in order to silence the political voice of southern African Americans (George 2000). Such actions occurred with limited recourse to the US government. Situating our participants’ narratives within this history, we acknowledge that the adverse material and psychosocial effects of segregation have left indelible imprints in the lives of senior African Americans (Bergman and Jucovy 1982; Feagin and Sikes 1994).

Theoretical Sensitivity

Coping with Jim Crow: A Social Psychological Approach

Literature on the social psychology of coping with racial/ethnic discrimination informs our analyses. African Americans had to develop mechanisms to cope with systematic discrimination (e.g., unfair wages) and racist ideologies that regarded blacks as inferior (Foster 2000). The narratives that we present highlight two

patterns: “direct actions” and “palliative modes” (see Lutwack 1984). The former refers to actions that transform undesirable situations. In the case of segregation survivors, to become involved in the activist work of the African American community may represent an active way to challenge the system. Palliative modes, on the other hand, are more conservative and do not intend to alter racist systems. Sociocultural elements—such as the cultivation of close family ties, religiosity, and communication strategies that accentuate the internal value of being black—are important in this regard (Elsass 1992; Eyerman 2001).

To understand the psychological impact of segregation, we draw upon findings among Holocaust survivors from Nazi Germany. In order to make sense of their oppressive experiences, Holocaust victims often have relied on hope that their plights would one day end (Chodoff 1997; Lutwack 1984). Others deny the negativity of their situations. For the oppressed, this is perceived as helpful to the preservation of self-worth and dignity. At other times, Holocaust victims engaged what Chodoff (1997, p. 153) has called the “isolation of affect,” in which individuals rationalize their experiences as not being bothersome to them. Although we recognize the distinct histories and consequences of American segregation and the Holocaust, we also argue that senior African Americans’ coping mechanisms are similar to those used by Holocaust victims.

Jim Crow and Collective Memory: A Sociological Approach

The commonality of Jim Crow experiences among African Americans constitutes a collective memory (Kansteiner 2002; Halbwachs 1980). Having a history of slavery and oppression from white-dominated society, African Americans link their individual experiences with those of the group and with events involving the group’s history. These linkages constitute more than just the recollection of past events (Kansteiner 2002). Rather, they uncover shared bodies of knowledge produced within African American life (Schwartz 1982, 2000). Collective memories contain cultural meanings and perceptions of group identity, behaviors, and institutions (Rothstein 2000). African Americans use this knowledge to guide their social interactions and solve dilemmas they encounter (Rothstein 2000). For example, due to the collective memory of slavery, generations of African Americans have perceived white people and white culture as threatening to them (Chafe et al. 2001).

The collective memories of Jim Crow and the discourses that accompany them are part of the shared cultural system that informs the social and political consciousness of African Americans (Irwin-Zarecka 1994; Schwartz 1982). They shape African American group identities and, therefore, tell us about their cultural and political consciousness and sense of group membership. Collective memories also preserve black culture inasmuch as cultural ideologies are transmitted through the group’s understanding of past events.

The Interviews

We conducted ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews with senior African Americans. All spent most of their lives living in Florida or Georgia. The interviews

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took place in the cities of Gainesville, Alachua, and Hawthorne—all in North-Central Florida—and were scheduled with volunteer participants from two different religious communities. On a visit to a Baptist church, one of the investigators solicited participants after explaining the purpose of the research project to the congregation. At the end of the religious service, people willing to participate handed in their personal contact information. The visit resulted in six participants. Several days later, they were contacted for the interviews. Two other participants were contacted at a non-denominational racially integrated church with the help of a parishioner, and interviews soon followed. The final two interviewees were known to one of the investigators and were contacted and interviewed at home.

The interviews occurred in with comradeship and sympathy. Frequently, the atmosphere became emotional, and the interviewees altered the tone of their voices to communicate the intensity of the events they were narrating. All interviews were carried out in participants' homes. On average, interviews lasted 100 min. The authors conducted and transcribed all the interviews. A grounded theory approach guided our analysis of the data (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

At the beginning of the interviews, we collected data on age, occupation, place of birth, and residency. The open-ended questions focused on biographical topics like their upbringings, perceptions about life, family, and community. Questions were designed to understand their lived experiences during segregation. In addition, we asked about their relationships and interactions with white Americans. We also asked specific questions regarding the way their families and communities coped with segregation. Our participants were:

1. Mrs. Hill, 68 years old. She grew up in southern Georgia, but primarily worked as a housekeeper and laundry room clerk in Florida.
2. Mrs. Page, 68 years old. She was reared in Gainesville, FL and was a restaurant cook for most of her life.
3. Mrs. Jeter, 69 years of age. She was reared in Gainesville, FL and was a housekeeper.
4. Mr. Perry, 79 years of age. He lived all his life in Gainesville and Hawthorne, FL and worked diverse jobs (agriculture, construction, military, and post office clerk).
5. Mr. Jones, 70 years of age. He lived all his life in Gainesville and Alachua, FL. He worked as a dish washer, shoe-shiner, and groundskeeper.
6. Mrs. Howard, 68 years of age. She was reared in Miami, FL, but lived the latter half of her life in Alachua, FL. She worked as a gas station attendant and housekeeper.
7. Mrs. Robins, 76 years of age. She lived in Georgia for most of her life, but moved to Gainesville in the 1980s. She worked as a housekeeper.
8. Mr. Peterson, 81 years of age. He was reared in Putman County, FL and has lived in Hawthorne, FL for 50 years. He is a retired mechanic and currently is a church pastor.
9. Mrs. Jordan, 75 years of age. She was reared in Putman County, FL and has lived in Hawthorne, FL for 50 years. She is a retired clothing store clerk.
10. Mr. Johnson, 68 years of age. He was reared in Alachua County, FL and is a retired supermarket clerk.

Results

Passive and Active Scripts: Building Dignity

Victims of oppression often rely upon beliefs in their personal worth in order to manage the stress of their circumstances (Bettelheim 1979). This was the case for most of our participants. Mrs. Howard, for example, stated that African American people “kept themselves up” and “went along with their lives” because they prayed together as a family and desired to improve their lives.

We amused ourselves. We stayed together. We stayed in our neighborhoods. We played together. You wanted to become something and get inspired. Many did better in school in those times than now. I remember in those times you wanted to become something and then leave [pause] you know...to go north. I was very talented at the time. I wrote poems. I could sing. I did a lot of things to entertain myself and others.

For Mrs. Howard, “becoming something” allowed the African American community to preserve its self-worth. These messages of self-appreciation took different forms and emphasized different topics in other narratives. The statement “kept themselves up” indicates the desire for personal integrity. At the same time, it shows that threats to African Americans’ self-esteem were recurrent and systematic, so protection against those messages was needed. Dignity was kept by teaching the concept of racial equality. It was reinforced through family interaction, as older relatives often taught younger ones about the unfairness of Jim Crow. The unity of the black family remained a source of empowerment. Mrs. Robins pointed out these themes when she explained how her family lived during segregation.

You had to pray and be together with your family and things like that. This is what my mother and father told us when we came up. Any man, woman, a boy, or a girl that wanna put a hood over his head had to be a coward...try to frighten you instead of coming face-to-face. If any KKK or redneck comes and cut his blood and I cut mine right here no one can’t say that’s my blood or that’s his. It’s all the same. We are all the same. The skin color is different.

African Americans also needed to reinterpret the intent of segregation laws so that white racism, not black inferiority, was seen as the basis of Jim Crow. They did this by altering the meaning of racist expressions. This redefinition allowed some participants to endure racism without incurring emotional or physical harm.

They [whites] didn’t call us blacks [pause] you know. [pause] The word nigger came up a lot. They still call us niggers...hey you nigger, nigger this...nigger that...nigger pick up that over there. But, it didn’t matter to us. My father told us not to pay attention to that because they want to make you angry and break you down. When you know the meaning of nigger you know that a white person can be a nigger, too. (Mr. Jones)

Attempts to redefine racial epithets have traditionally contributed to the civil rights efforts of the oppressed. In this regard, language functions as a site of contestation and struggle. Mr. Jones and Mrs. Howard’s accounts exemplify the

efforts of African Americans to challenge the linguistic power of whites. These accounts also demonstrate how acts of resistance occurred in the private sphere.

Getting Help from God

Religious faith has helped African Americans to cope with racism (Feagin and Sikes 1994). Our participants' narratives contain the belief that God's omnipotence grants them justice and prevents undue life suffering. Religiosity was frequently referred to in terms of persisting in prayer, but it also morally obligated participants to fight against segregation's principles. Any differentiation made for people was to be perceived as the duty of God, not white people. This logic undermined notions of white supremacy.

After all what happened, after all what we had to deal with, thanks God we are here. We are still here... We are still here! (Mrs. Jeter)

There have been people who have terrible experiences, but basically I didn't. I don't know [pause] you know it's been time now [pause]. I had known things about how was it and how bad it was to us. But I have been the type of person who never let those experiences take over. The way I feel is that I leave God to deal with it. God knows how to deal with it. (Mrs. Page)

Faith gave respondents a sense of security because God acted as their protector and defender. It helped them to view segregation as a violation of Christian principles, which emphasize the equality of all human beings in the eyes of God. In addition, the respondents mentioned God's help in maintaining their equilibrium in situations of stress and indignation. Importantly, God seems to have acted as a unifying figure, the one that kept African Americans together during this perilous time.

Denying the Effects of Segregation

The denial of personal pain functioned as a survival mechanism for some participants. For others, it likely served to eliminate emotional stressors associated with these harsh circumstances (Bettelheim 1979). The narratives show that the denial of the pain during segregation was combined with ideologies of equality, self-respect, and family values. That is, segregation existed and was processed as a negative event, but pain associated with it was minimal because of strong values in equality.

It didn't bother me very much because my father and mother were not the kinds that spent all day talking about living segregated from the other race. We didn't dwell on it. We didn't dwell on just one thing. We just didn't. Thanks to our parents we had a normal life. They tried to cheer us up. They didn't want us to feel different and lash out at the other race because of what they have done to us. We had no transportation. We had to walk many miles to go to school. School buses were for those who lived way out in the county...In the cities where whites had their homes, they had school for every subdivision. It was easy for them. So, I mean, I really didn't dwell that much. We were content. Our parents took care of us. It really didn't bother us. (Mrs. Howard)

For some reason it never bothered me. I just wasn't into it like maybe some people. And even when my children were coming up, I told my children...I told my children everybody is the same! You are one color, I am one color, and I don't think I am better than you. You have to treat people the way you wanna be treated, black or white. You know. You be nice to them. I had white friends and black friends. So, you know what, if I want something and I have to go to the back, I don't want it! (Mrs. Page)

These respondents conveyed feelings of empowerment in the way they downplayed the impact of segregation. But, rather than a mere indication of symbolic violence and/or alienation, this form of storytelling also illustrates a yearning for agency and visibility. The message is that the decision to inflict pain on African Americans was not up to white people alone. The attitudes and behavior of African Americans themselves was a more decisive factor in shaping African American quality of life.

Fighting Back

Surviving segregation was also dependent upon active responses from African Americans. With high racial tensions, families often had to directly confront white antagonism. Mrs. Robins described how her parents taught the older children of her family how to shoot a firearm in case of confrontation with the Ku Klux Klan. Stories about fighting the Klan indicate the reality of dangers faced by African American families. The tone of the narratives suggests that when violence reached intolerable levels, blacks more readily embraced active coping strategies.

You had to take care of yourself. That's what dad always told us. Your parents would take you out to practice how to shoot. I was the oldest of six, and when my mother and father had to go some place, they left me in charge of the children, and said 'keep the gun up so that no one would get it'. And if I hear noise my father said, 'put the children behind and shoot...shoot the KKK'. (Mrs. Robins)¹

In black communities, Jim Crow laws were transgressed without the risk of white retaliation. One participant described an occasion when she did not proceed to the back of a bus because of the safety she felt as the bus was in a black neighborhood.

I was standing and the driver said 'I am not going to move the bus until you go to the back.' I said, 'I am not going back there.' And I didn't. We were in a black neighborhood and he couldn't do anything. I didn't go. I don't know, that day I just didn't care. But my father was very scared. (Mrs. Jordan)¹

On the other hand, disavowing the desires of white people represented a protection for African Americans. One participant's brother did not want to work for whites because he considered it humiliating.

¹ A complete version of his account appeared in Joe R. Feagin's *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression* (2006:145).

My brother used to say, ‘I am not going to clean white people’s tables I am not going to clean their floor. I am not going to serve them with a smile on my face.’ He was angry...He didn’t want to be told nothing by them. My mother complained because he couldn’t keep a job. He wanted to work for blacks, but he couldn’t keep a job with white people. He decided not to serve and clean for them. (Mrs. Jeter)

Parents Teaching Survival

Parents taught survival techniques to their children. Teaching the risks of being black, ways to overcome racial hostility, and self-respect created a cultural bond in which African Americans felt protected and valorized. Their stories demonstrate how intergenerational transmission of survival tactics (e.g., “My parents always told us...”) produced empowerment at the group level. Such are not uncommon in African American families today (Russell-Brown 1998).

There was unity when we were coming up. Your parents told you everything, so you knew how to be careful. You did hear about [nonwhite] people being beaten up and murdered. You learned it was race against race, the KKK and all that. (Mrs. Jordan)

When my children were born everything was still segregated. I told my children not to pay attention to what people say about your mother or your father. I taught them not to bother with name calling. (Mr. Johnson).

These recollections illustrate the importance of sharing survival lessons in the African American family. Parental teachings were important in guiding the social behaviors of younger blacks, solving social dilemmas, and promoting a healthy group identity within a segregated society.

Spatial Dimensions of Oppression

White domination of blacks had a spatial dimension. Segregation assured white supremacy in a period of economic transformation (Chafe et al. 2001; Finkelman 1992). As both a legal system and ideology it permitted legal and political differentiation between African Americans and whites, and circumscribed the limited physical mobility that blacks had. This legitimated the presence of segregated hotels, theaters, churches, restaurants, and railway stations (Cell 1982). Our participants’ overwhelming reference to spatial dimensions of segregation shows how their collective memory was shaped during this period.

If you were working in a white household like some of the women did...you had to go to the back door and then come in, and after that you could go to the front. You could only go to the front from the inside...[laughs]...It was stupid...entering from the back.... (Mr. Peterson)

Right here in downtown Gainesville there was a place that sold hamburgers. It was called Louise Hamburger Shop. They had a little place there with a hole where you could go and look through. But you couldn’t go up front. [pause] It

didn't make sense. I also remember a black man who went trying to drive a sort of a truck. He was very scared. It was very dangerous to do that. Driving a truck was a white man's job. (Mr. Perry)

Segregation served to "keep blacks in their place," so any violation of it could result in white violence. Cell (1982) argues that whites perceived the black presence in many southern cities as a threat to American society. For this reason, race riots in Memphis, New Orleans, and other cities occurred because of whites' efforts to act out these fears. The control of physical space by whites symbolized the sociopolitical control whites had in the South. As a result, everyday interaction among black and white Americans was marked with a racialized view of public space. Our participants' accounts showed that they understood racism based upon differential access to physical space.

Omnipresence of Violence and Fear

Our participants discussed that many acts of violence occurred when whites felt blacks were not kept under foot. When the number of free blacks augmented in cities after 1865, whites became especially fearful that African Americans would overtake urban space (Ginzburg 1996). Historians also document that among whites, African Americans were seen as "naturally" being destined to farm work in rural areas (Cell 1982). The dynamics of segregation promoted white-on-black violence. The accounts of the participants are testimonies of the collective damage done to African Americans:

The KKK marched at times. They burned crosses in front of Negro houses. You know...The Negroes who had good jobs. They were nasty. (Mr. Johnson)

I was chased down the street by University of Florida students. They liked to chase Negroes with baseball bats and water balloons. And they would also come to our neighborhood because they were allowed to do so...We really went through a lot. (Mrs. Jordan)

This [African American] man was walking with his wife in the downtown. There was a soldier club downtown and they went there. They [KKK] told this man's wife to run away because they was going to kill her husband. And they killed him. I don't know which person it was. I don't know why. But they killed him. You couldn't walk downtown like now. They could kill you for anything. They did a lot of nasty things. They did a lot of burnings, too. (Mr. Johnson)

This man from Georgia [emphasized]. This man had a little coffee shop. They didn't want him to have a store because he was a colored man. His body was torn apart and thrown to the river...The KKK did it. That was so bad. We never forgot that (Mrs. Howard).

In these accounts, violence is contextualized in space, which reinforces the importance of the spatial dimensions of black oppression during segregation. The Ku Klux Klan had considerable visibility in public spaces, and this augmented the feelings of victimization felt by our participants. These narratives make violence a group experience by emphasizing the collective impact of violent actions. Given the

phraseology used in their stories (e.g., “what happened to us,” “they came to our neighborhood,” “we had to endure a lot,” etc.) it is clear that our participants perceived their individual experiences at the level of the group.

Discussion

Our participants’ narratives demonstrate that their survival strategies were built around family unity, contestation of black inferiority, cultivation of religious faith, fighting physical aggression from whites, and downplaying the effects of segregation. Oppression was clearly described in spatial terms. Notably, their inability to utilize public space like whites could demonstrate how segregation was constantly used to promote the idea that whites were superior to African Americans. Overall the narratives emphasized consciousness of power difference, inequality, violence, family life, and community. The difficulties of life during segregation were not limited to racial issues alone, however. Poverty and other social problems are articulated as collective experiences as participants repeatedly discussed the difficulty of work and economic hardship for African Americans as a whole.

Recollections of violence were prevalent in the memories of segregation. Participants devoted considerable time and energy to discussions of the Ku Klux Klan and other mechanisms of violent, white domination in the South. Their stories demonstrate that for many senior African Americans, white violence is likely a salient component of the collective memory process. Such has implications for contemporary race relations in the USA, given that many younger African Americans are aware of the struggles of their predecessors (Feagin and Sikes 1994). The intensity of the memories of violence likely depended on geographical circumstances—like proximity to urban settings—given the distribution of racial riots in the mid-to-late 1900s. Nonetheless, like segregation as a whole, violence was defined in spatial terms. Participants emphasized the location of violent acts and the social and physical consequences they could incur by crossing physical boundaries created for black exclusion. Depicting violence as a common pain made this a collective experience: even if it did not personally happen to them, it was narrated as if it was their own. Simultaneously, their narratives of coping unfolded in a collective tone, emphasizing that “we just tried to live our lives” in order to deal with the everyday onslaughts of racism.

Denial, although used to cope with pain and humiliation, did not totally negate the oppression of African Americans. Some participants actively reconciled the tension between denial and acknowledgement that segregation adversely affected their lives. On some occasions, participants would discuss how segregated society was not bothersome for them, but later state how harmful lynchings, public disregard, and second-class status were for them. These narratives illustrate that for senior African Americans, denial does not occur in a vacuum. It likely helps them to cope with the very real pain of living in an overtly racist society while, at the same time, allowing them to recognize the injustice of this society (Bettelheim 1979).

Conceptualizing segregation as a moral issue helped participants make sense of their experiences, redefine negative situations as good, and endure racist and other adverse circumstances on future occasions. Their narratives evoked humanistic

notions of all races being equal and, therefore, worthy of equal treatment. Religion was particularly notable. While racism and segregation were defined as human-made creations, our participants discussed their Christian faith as both a coping mechanism and tool to counteract racism. They expressed equal treatment as a foundation of God's will for humanity; therefore, segregation was wrong because it was in contradiction to the nature of God. Yet, faith helped them to endure segregation by giving them hope for societal change and the belief that they were obligated to unify for the benefit of African Americans as a whole. Religious beliefs merged with the needs of the family and community to counter the ideology of black inferiority.

Though only presented by a few survivors, these narratives represent the social and political reality of the American South during Jim Crow. The themes of resistance, empowerment, faith, marginality, violence, and racial intolerance are remarkable features and illustrate episodes of American history from the perspectives of people long marginalized by dominant society. They may be relevant for understanding the social lives of older African Americans and are relevant for understanding the cultural, political, and social attitudes of contemporary African Americans (see Kansteiner 2002).

As other studies demonstrate, the narratives of African Americans challenge white racist ideologies by producing a collective memory that differs from that of whites (Feagin 2006; Southern Regional Council 1997). Scholars criticize white narratives for undermining the deleterious nature of segregation for African Americans. They tend to overemphasize innocence and naiveté of whites; the role of "good whites" in fighting racial oppression; and good relations between African Americans and whites (Thompson-Miller and Feagin 2007, 2008). African Americans, however, tend to highlight violence, discrimination, property losses, socioeconomic struggles, etc. because these were real struggles that they endured (Feagin 2006). In this regard, they counter whites' abilities to offer justification for race-based problems blacks faced then and continue to face now. Ultimately, white narratives fail to recognize the impact of systemic racism on the lives of African Americans (Feagin 2006). This misrecognition is clearly present in cinematic narratives too. Several civil rights films (e.g., *A Long Walk Home* and *Driving Miss Daisy*) made by white Hollywood filmmakers emphasize the role of good whites in fighting racial oppression and the innocence of most whites (Liberato and Foster 2006, unpublished manuscript). This mnemonic dissonance is of great importance as it suggests the existence of conflicting interpretations of the past among African Americans and whites, which can impact each group's views about the pressing issues of the present and the future.

As with all research, this study has some limitations. Our small qualitative sample limits the degree to which our findings can be generalized to all senior African Americans. Because our participants were native to Florida and Georgia, the narratives that we present may have been different if we had recruited participants who were reared in other Southern states. We did not ask respondents about their motivations for participating, nor did we ask those who did not participate to indicate their reasons for not participating. Therefore, we do not know if participants and non-participants differed in relevant ways. The themes drawn from the narratives are representative of the experience of the senior citizens interviewed in this project.

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Further research is needed for studying memory of segregation across diverse sectors of African Americans and across different generations.

In sum, the narratives presented in this paper represent a challenge, a form of contestation to the depictions of race relations found in mainstream sociopolitical discourses, media, and history books. Yet, they underscore African Americans' perception of segregation being a group experience. They challenge the ambivalence embedded in a narrative of race relations that frequently perpetuates positive "fictions" of white people (Vera and Gordon 2003). In doing so, they undermine white supremacy and the institutionalization of racism today. They tell a story of adaptation and resilience while, simultaneously, revealing the imprint of a crippling racist society in the lives of older African Americans.

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