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Mainstreaming Countermemory: Tracing Marginalized Narratives Through Media Representations and Community Engaged Memory Work

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Articles

Mainstreaming Countermemory*:* Tracing Marginalized Narratives Through Media Representations and Community-Engaged Memory Work

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Abstract

This article seeks to determine how and why countermemory shifts from being a fringe narrative to being a part of the U.S.'s collective narrative. We establish two complementary–and often interlocking–reasons for this shift: 1) The role of media portrayals in film and series, and 2) The impact of grassroots community-engaged public memory efforts. In the examples we study, media portrayals preceded community-engaged memory work, but these findings must be analyzed in context with the community work as part of larger rhetorical ecologies. In our research, it becomes evident that media representations can initially inspire community interest, helping groups organize and craft memory sites to shift narratives within a larger socio-political context.

Keywords: countermemory; public memory; community engagement; Bass Reeves; media

Introduction

Two streaming programs were recently announced that highlight the life and achievements of Bass Reeves, one of the first Black U.S. deputy marshals in United States history. Paramount+'s *Lawman: Bass Reeves* and Amazon's *Twin Territories* signal the potential progression of Reeves's narrative from a celebrated/symbolic countermemory into mainstream public memory. To date, our collective cultural memory and understanding of the "Wild West," a period between the 1860s and the 1890s, has been heavily influenced by historical accounts and cinematic adaptations that have largely featured white men who were often characterized as outlaws. In contrast, Bass Reeves is the antithesis of this depiction: a Black man and prominent lawman of the period. His existence in juxtaposition to the popularized narrative of the time demonstrates achievements and accomplishments that have largely been erased from popular "Wild West" narratives. Recently, two community-engaged

public memory projects to celebrate Reeves' accomplishments have developed in the Southern United States. One in Fort Smith, Arkansas which was completed in 2012 and another in Muskogee, Oklahoma which is still in the planning stages. These monuments frame the beginning of a transitional narrative of Reeves, deceased over 100 years ago, finally beginning to receive recognition in line with his accomplishments. These acts of progress, such as the erecting of monuments, may signal a change. The advancements in unearthing Black public memory figures, such as Reeves, shine light on previously stifled narratives that rebut decades of Hollywood "Wild West" characterizations that systematically erased Black lives. In this article, we critically examine three cases involving Black public figures or events to highlight how the different stages of recognition and acceptance in public memory: The Freedom Summer Murders, The Tulsa Race Massacre, and the life story of Bass Reeves, one of the first Black U.S. deputy marshals in United States history. Throughout the analysis, we determine media portrayals and community-engaged memory work as two causes for "fringe" countermemory to become part of the mainstream public memory.

In the United States, public memory is an ongoing negotiation. More often than not, tensions arise from the debates between citizens and institutions about how historical events, people, and places are communicated in the public sphere. Amy Lueck, Matthew Kroot, and Lee Panich write that "public memory, like all ideological claims about the past, does not merely reflect and preserve, but rather asserts and transmits conceptions of history, culture, and identity" (9). Moreover, Black public memory in the United States has been historically marginalized or outright erased, as have many narratives of Indigenous, Latinx, and AAPI people (Dickinson, Blair, and Ott; Dickinson, Ott, and Aoki; Gruenewald; Loewen; O'Brien "Exclusionary"). The tensions between established historical narratives and marginalized voices that challenge those narratives produce what O'Brien and Sanchez call "countermemory." They contend that countermemories "present a competing narrative of the same evidence, augmenting the narrative already in place with additional information, or telling the story from the perspective of a marginalized group or person" (9). Specifically, countermemory draws attention to the challenges of bringing these competing memories to light, which we can observe in the current debate over teaching K12 students about implications of racism and slavery. As a result, sites and artifacts of countermemory often remain a fringe narrative as opposed to more mainstream public narrative. In this article we trace the rhetorical movement of countermemory as it becomes a part of the larger accepted cultural narrative, rather than simply challenging or confronting a dominant historical narrative.

Extending the work of rhetoric scholars who examine the role of race or racism in public memory (Dickinson, Ott, and Aoki.; Gruenewald; Lueck et al.; O'Brien and Sanchez; Poirot & Watson; Tell), this article seeks to determine how and why countermemory shifts from being a fringe narrative to being a part of the U.S.'s collective narrative. We establish two complementary–and often interlocking–reasons for this shift: 1) The role of media portrayals in film and series, and 2) The impact of grassroots community-engaged public memory efforts. In the examples we study, media portrayals preceded community-engaged memory work, but these findings must be

analyzed in context with the community work as part of larger rhetorical ecologies. In our research, it becomes evident that media representations can initially inspire community interest, helping groups organize and craft memory sites to shift narratives within a larger socio-political context via "a circulating ecology of effects, enactments, and events" (Edbauer 9). In other words, it is necessary to recontextualize how rhetoric operates within public memory and observe the fluctuating impacts of these causes. In our analysis, we focus on HBO's 2019 *Watchmen* and the 1988 film, *Mississippi Burning,* because these unflinching depictions resonated with viewers, many of which were previously unaware of these historic events and presented a perspective outside of mainstream public memory. We also highlight the community-engaged memory work in Fort Smith, Arkansas, where residents sought to commemorate Bass Reeves' accomplishments; and in Muskogee, Oklahoma, where community members plan to erect a statue on the grounds of Three Rivers Museum; in Tulsa, Oklahoma. This site is of particular importance because it is the site of where a group of community activists created the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commission. And lastly, in Philadelphia, Mississippi, where Black community members remember the "Freedom Summer Murders" each year through an annual memorial service. As such, these historic figures and events take their rightful place in public memory rather than remaining as countermemories, or an interpretive account. Ultimately, we consider to what extent these examples speak to a larger evolution for countermemory and what Gruenewald calls the "transformative potential for enacting justice" (5).

Background

We focus on three major examples in this article. These examples illustrate a variety of individuals in space and time similar in that each depicts Black public memory previously overlooked in our cultural public memory prior to their on-screen historic depictions. The Tulsa Race Massacre and the Freedom Summer murders represent racialized violence and death of Black men, women, and children and even white individuals in an attempt to stifle Civil Rights. Whereas Reeves' story does not involve violence, his existence and mastery of his craft in the period exhibits continued repression from mainstream public memory. We provide a brief background of each example:

- Bass Reeves: Born into slavery in 1838, Reeves would later serve as one of the first Black U.S. deputy marshals west of the Mississippi. Reeves achieved legendary status as a lawman and was nicknamed "invincible marshal" (Burton 18) over the course of 30 years of service which resulted in the arrest of over 3,000 outlaws across Indian Territory and pre-statehood Oklahoma, home to several Indian nations living in the area, including the Apache, Arapaho, Comanche, Kiowa, Osage and Wichita (McKay).
- The Tulsa Race Massacre: The Tulsa Race Massacre took place on June 1, 1921. During the ordeal more than 1,200 buildings, including homes, churches, schools, and businesses, were burned and destroyed by a group of 1,000 white people who stormed the Greenwood District, often referred to as

"Black Wall Street." The aftermath left 10,000 Black residents homeless, while somewhere between 100 and 300 people lost their lives ("Tulsa's Historic").

- Freedom Summer Murders: Three civil rights activists, Michael Schwerner, 24, James Chaney, 21, and Andrew Goodman, 20 were brutally murdered and buried in the small town of Philadelphia, Mississippi, prompting a federal investigation of the crimes ("Murder"). Though national media coverage made the public aware of the event leading up to the discovery of the bodies, public remembrance began to fade over time.

Our analysis draws attention to time as a central, constant factor worth noting — the passage of time compounds the public acceptance of narratives that illustrate trauma of the American Black experience. Since public memory can also be understood as "living memory," these memories are "open to contest, revision, and rejection" — a process that often occurs in/through time (Phillips 2). Moreover, these three cases reveal how a countermemory faces greater challenges in becoming accepted as established, collective memory the longer it exists as a countermemory. Finally, their prominence stresses the influence these narratives have on how we view and apply historical context today with regard to public memory. As James Loewen states, "what a community erects on its historical landscape not only sums up its view of the past but also influences its possible futures" (14). Generational narratives are powerful; thus, how we memorialize the present can dramatically impact the way future generations perceive people and events. Without the luxury of consistently and impartially relaying historical information, including Black narratives, we must operate in a nonlinear method given the absence of Black perspectives from many historic sources.

For example, Bass Reeves died on January 12, 1910, and only began to officially enter the sphere of public memory over 100 years later when a memorial statue was unveiled on May 26, 2012, in Fort Smith, Arkansas (Whitten). Similarly, The Tulsa Race Massacre took place on May 31 and June 1, 1921, but the foundation of the Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commission was formed in 2016, ultimately leading to the construction of Greenwood Rising, a museum commemorating the event, which opened in late 2021 (Krehbiel). In addition to local support from committees and communities, both Reeves and the Tulsa Race Massacre received national attention in public memory through a depiction of the event on HBO's *Watchmen* series in 2019 and a well-regarded Tom Hanks opinion piece in *The New York Times* in June 2021. Similar to the previous examples, the Freedom Summer Murders occurred on June 21, 1964, and despite the lack of support from residents of the town where the murders occurred, *Mississippi Burning,* the feature film based on the events, was released December 9, 1988, six months after the 25th anniversary of the murders. Accordingly, it is important to focus on the role time plays. Which is to say, Black historical events take a long time to reach new light when buried under generational repression. If we accept time as an obstacle for countermemory, the question remains: At what point does a countermemory become part of the larger public memory, and what does it take to make this movement? In addition, how did these narratives come to achieve more exposure, so much so, their memory can no longer be denied in the public sphere? And lastly, what factors should we consider when noting this development?

Categorically, we cannot "rank" the significance of the referenced events. Ranking them is not as significant as registering them. Rather, the point is to account for their resonance as told through regional and national perspectives.

Rhetoric, Media, and Public Memory

For our examination, the fundamental mode through which negotiations occur is in media (film and television in particular) but we also explore two additional factors that shape countermemory acceptance: exposure (the scope and success of narratives, including film adaptations, museums, including the visibility of these depictions) and community engagement (the local, grassroot support of residents in and around areas impacted by the events or individuals). As these examples reveal, countermemories face challenges due to the permanent traces left by traditional historical narratives. Media plays an important part in challenging traditional narratives because it can explore those traces and make them malleable. Moreover, countermemory exposure and community engagement - as parts of the media network, so to speak - further the conversation that allows foundational assumptions to be challenged, discussed, and enhanced.

Undoubtedly, digital forms of public memory have the capacity for more widespread impact (Haskins; Lueck et al.). While Haskins primarily focuses on the ways in which the internet has created digital memory, we would argue that her perspective is also evident in other forms of media, like film and television. Following Haskins' argument, media like *Watchman* and *Mississippi Burning* become a part of public memory, especially when registered alongside more traditional artifacts, like the monument in Fort Smith. In fact, these contemporary forms of public memory have the potential to dramatically impact the way we remember history because we can access these narratives any time and as many times as we want. We do not have to travel to Fort Smith to be educated about Bass Reeves' significance. One caveat, though, is that we must be aware of how many creative liberties a particular media has taken, especially in light of inaccurate representations (see *Braveheart, Last of the Mohicans,* etc.).

Since these media forms are essentially moving images, Barbie Zelizer's scholarship that depicts visual images as having a "voice" is key to our analysis. For Zelizer, this notion of "voice" is how we can understand the role of images in memory; voice is what motivates viewers to link certain images with other events or places. Thus, voice helps viewers recognize the meaning and qualification of an image (162). In Zelizer's application of this principle to images from 9/11, she also argues that certain images stick in our memory because they help us make sense of the horror of that day (178). Applying these ideas to media like *Watchman* or *Mississippi Burning,* we contend that the presence of voice in these media portrayals allow visitors to make contemporary connections to issues of racism that continue to negatively impact our culture. Furthermore, the use of voice in these media portrayals also helps viewers to consider the significance of Black narratives and potentially move them from countermemory to more mainstream perception of public memory. Incorporating events from the past into our cultural memory, as represented in *Watchman* or *Missis-*

sippi Burning, yields a broader historical context that highlights the evolution of our societal growth, particularly for future generations. This trajectory affords our culture the opportunity to understand and compare societal progress, not only based on contemporary standards but the scope of the evolution of our cultural memory.

O'Brien and Sanchez define countermemory as "a marginalized (or often erased) form of remembering…that resituates the narratives of the oppressed or forgotten as equal to dominant narratives… characterized by a challenging—even a disruption—of dominant historical narratives" (5- 8). The rhetoric in this description, "challenging" and "disruption," highlights the work required to influence established narratives and reform public opinion. We could extricate the phrase "dominant narratives" as paramount, and theoretically, a conversion of this systematic ideology could merit a reconsideration of historic events, places, and people. Like the process of relaying historical information itself, public memory dovetails with popular culture, which is interpretive, evolving, and highly influential to current events. Popular culture, as mediated through entertainment, is our dominant narrative. Moreover, it can recklessly reference historic events and individuals for entertainment's sake rather than responsible accuracy. Creative licenses often blemish the validity of public memory and history.

Accordingly, the narratives we use to learn about ourselves can be flawed yet necessary since none of us is without a history and "we're always standing in some place in our lives and there is always a tale of how we came to stand there" (Corder 16). But there is also the responsibility of generational resonance as "virtually all studies of public memory places take account of the connections memory places draw between past and present (Dickinson et al. 30). Place constitutes a significant role in public memory, especially in terms of how narratives are shaped. This places the burden of responsibility on the present generation to reach future generations as much as it does to honor past events and individuals. In short, our public memories are histories, and we must remember how public memory is influenced by shared interpretations and depictions of historical individuals and events. Especially when, nowadays, national television programs gather more viewership through entertainment than local telecasts or newspaper articles containing the same information but remain motivated to inform do. Thus, countermemory faces the same challenges given that our collective understanding of history is muddled by a culture of interpretation as truth (rather than interpretation of truth). In other words, creative license with history is useful but can take us in a useless direction if we don't pause to consider the distinction between interpretation and truth when it comes to our forms of entertainment. It is not necessary for entertainment avenues and public memory interpretations to be exclusive, but there are resonant responsibilities that media should consider when depicting events that have been inadequately presented in public memory throughout the years.

Exposure is central to public memory since the existence of a narrative introduces the idea of a subject, and from there, the idea "lives" within its subjects. In other words, publicity enhances the narrative. Through social progression and successive entertainment outlets, "commercial representations of popular memory have become increasingly diversified and now speak directly to social groups that have been histor-

ically marginalized in the broader cultural currents of mainstream society" (Thompson and Tian 596). As a result, previously marginalized narratives in popular memory have the ability to reach national audiences. Whereas this progression bodes well for social advancement and acceptance, the celebration of previously erased Black narratives remains an uphill climb if one concedes that our current cultural moment is only beginning to accept these accounts in public memory. Rather, the scope of public memory expands and contracts with the will of society ensuring that the process of entering public memory, let alone changing perceptions of history taught in classrooms, can take years if not lifetimes to impact society. However, accepting and embracing countermemory narratives that comprise a space in public memory offer opportunities to further develop and integrate accounts of historic people and events.

Media Representations

Bass Reeves experienced a surge in popularity that began with a monument unveiling in 2012. In 2019, the film *Hell on the Border* was released (using characters based on Reeves' life) and, in 2019, his character was used by name in Netflix's 2021 *The Harder They Fall* (which opens with this statement: "While the events of this story are fictional... These. People. Existed."). *The Harder They Fall* did little to showcase Reeves' actual accomplishments but did provide name recognition and, upon release, reached 2.5 million U.S. households its first five days of streaming on Netflix (@Samba TV). Furthermore, Reeves was included in the national limelight with his inclusion in the 2019 HBO series *Watchmen* — primarily through a recreated scene from the 1921 silent film *Trust in the Law!* (This scene was playing in a theater and dramatizes Reeves' life, most significantly by way of his arresting a corrupt sheriff onscreen). With tragic coincidence, a literal explosion from the Tulsa Race Massacre interrupts Reeves' scene and the sound of sirens and more explosions appear. This violence foreshadows the horror of the murders of the massacre for the first time reenacted on screen as Black citizens fight for their lives, flee the violence, and ultimately react to the horrors. Finally, with a reported 1.6 million views on the night of the release, *Watchmen* opened the floodgates to more national exposure of the Tulsa Race Massacre through the HBO series *Lovecraft Country,* where characters travel back in time and experience the horrors of the massacre firsthand as their family tries to survive the brutality (Maas). A slew of documentaries were also released in 2021 to commemorate the 100-year anniversary of the tragedy (including The History Channel's *Tulsa Burning: The 1921 Race Massacre* and CNN's *Dreamland: The Burning of Black Wall Street*). Through these visualizations, The Tulsa Race Massacre was depicted in an unprecedented manner. And through these unflinching portrayals of the carnage in full display, The Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921 entered into public memory.

In the case of "The Freedom Summer Murders," the nation was strongly influenced to remember the violent event via a film. The 1988 Hollywood film *Mississippi Burning* "did more than reinvigorate national awareness of the 1964 murders; it renewed national interest in the case, which ultimately placed pressure on the local community to acknowledge the murders" (Whitlinger 655). Additionally, despite

critical acclaim and Academy Award nominations, the film remains "arguably better known for having sparked a national debate on the responsibility of filmmakers to accurately portray historical events" (654-655). In a 2021 *New York Times* opinion piece, Academy Award Winner Tom Hanks wrote about the Tulsa Race Massacre and the social significance of responsibly approaching history through Hollywood films. He observed that "historically based fiction entertainment must portray the burden of racism in our nation for the sake of the art form's claims to verisimilitude and authenticity... America's history is messy but knowing that makes us wiser and stronger people." If by societal standards, memories have "arrived" in popular memory following on-screen depictions, then Reeves has not officially been introduced through the medium since awareness of his role in history is just beginning in media contexts. Whereas depictions of both the Freedom Summer Murders and the Tulsa Race Massacre feature the depiction of secular events, it proves to be much more difficult to encapsulate an individual's life story.

In film, the process of telling an individual's story can serve a broader cultural metaphor through the lens of an individual's life story. Biopics, or biographical film portrayals, seek to do just that, and have been a staple in American entertainment culture helping us to better understand broader societal issues and circumstances throughout history. The emotional resonance following the main character in their environment serves as the fuel of the genre, as context and circumstance is at the forefront of the narrative. Celebrated and acclaimed films such as *Schindler's List (1993)*, *Milk (2008),* and *The Elephant Man (1980)*, have focused on perpetuating the narrative of secular lives under adverse societal conditions through the perspective amidst genocide, homophobia, and alienation, respectively. Similarly, Black historical narratives have been furthered through this style of filmmaking, ushering critical acclaim and cultural resonance including *Malcolm X (1992)*, *Ray (2004)*, *12 Years a Slave (2013)*, and *BlacKkKlansman (2018)*. A biopic of Reeves' life would contribute to the presence of Black narrative in film but also serve to illuminate a period of time, the "Wild West," which is ripe with societal misrepresentations and misconceptions in our public memory.

There have been promising developments to continue evolving the narrative of Bass Reeves., In September 2021, it was announced that award-winning actor David Oyelowo had signed on to play Reeves in a limited series for ViacomCBS and MTV Entertainment Studios (Petski). Reeves, having worked with Indigenous people in his time while pursuing and ultimately arresting outlaws in Apache, Arapaho, Comanche, Kiowa, Osage and Wichita territory represents a departure from conventional "Wild West" storylines depicted in film and media adaptations (McKay). His story personifies a congruence of Black narratives, having escaped from slavery to Native American territory and learning to speak the languages of Indigenous tribes (Burton 6). This ongoing relationship with Native Americans would serve him well, as later, it was necessary to work with Indigenous locals, as "tribal courts had no jurisdiction" over criminals in the territory (xiii). Considering the overlapping narratives of Reeves' history, one could see this culmination of perspectives unfold as building blocks of previous narratives build momentum for a historical narrative which dispels

stereotypes. Subsequently, each corresponding depiction carries with it the weight of momentum but also the foundation of support from depictions that predated that particular installment. The acceptance and embrace of previously marginalized Black narratives in film and popular memory creates opportunities to add to the sum of individual and collective perspectives.

Community-Engaged Memory Work

Along with the Bass Reeves memorial in Fort Smith, another statue commemorating Reeves has been underway for three years in Muskogee, Oklahoma, where the statue will be prominently featured on the grounds of Three Rivers Museum. According to Angie Rush, director of Three Rivers Museum, Reeves' legacy is growing, and his resonance with Muskogee residents is strong. "During the time period of Bass' life, slavery and segregation were huge factors. That in itself marginalized his and other African Americans' presence. Our hope for the Statue is that it will bring more awareness not only to Bass Reeves but to all other law enforcement officers thus fostering more conversations." As Lueck et al. argue, place- and community-engaged public memory projects center stakeholders' perspectives about public remembrance and historical representation, so rather than relying solely on media representations of Bass Reeves, Muskogee residents determined for themselves how Reeves will be commemorated (15).

For our purposes, community-engaged memory work refers to the humble, homegrown beginnings of memorials to historic figures and events wherein community members serve as grassroots ambassadors or caretakers. It is not always the case that the memory of these events and individuals rise to prominence given the spirit of domestic unity. As Lueck et al. remind us, "community-engaged memory work is complicated, fraught with potential power differentials and needful of a careful personal and political approach" (15). The divisions that arise in public narratives, especially when proximity and pride are associated, complicate the control and ownership of these memories. This process is further complicated when communities' established narrative remains separated after a memorial is established (and the chasm between public memory and countermemory is further deepened). In many cases, the chasm is the result of white people in positions of power who do not support the truth-telling efforts of countermemory. But, as Michelle Angela Oriz reminds us: "Stories are powerful, especially within the context that they are told or represented" (37). The origin of this tension, regardless of timing in relation to the opening of the memorial, is inconsequential since the "disruption" has already occurred. Ensuing emotional responses, either in favor of or opposition to the memorial, opens the door to both conversation and contestation. Conversations between members of the community can be malleable and illuminating, creating new opportunities for perspective and growth, whereas contestation can quickly become muddled, introducing combustible emotional outbursts, forcing opponents to dig in their heels at change, resulting in stunted societal growth. Ultimately, this boils down to marginalized narratives being represented and celebrated on a civic level as opposed to keeping things as they

were, without the embrace of these narratives. From the cases identified, both sides of the reaction were examined, as will be further explored.

The community of Fort Smith, Arkansas organized "The Bass Reeves Legacy Initiative" in 2010. According to Internet archives, this Public Benefit Corporation registered with the State of Arkansas to raise money for a memorial to Reeves as a local hero. Local business owners, elected officials, and interested community individuals formed the committee which set their sights on funding the Bass Reeves memorial statue, which totaled $300,000 (Whitten). Through years of work, and with assistance from civic leaders for subsidiary costs (such as the plaque and statue base), the committee secured funding through private donations raised through various community events. At the memorial unveiling on May 26, 2012, the weight of community expectations and efforts fell in unison with the shroud which covered the statue – committee members were rewarded by a local hero recreated in bronze and undeniably etched into history (Holmes). At the memorial unveiling, Reeves historian and author Art Burton said, "The more he's embraced by the local community... that helps establish who Bass Reeves is, and I do believe that's going to blossom and we'll get more of a national perspective on Bass" (Holmes). Whereas the memorial was a considerable undertaking for committee members, supporters, like Burton, understand the significance of the statue's existence as proof of Reeves' entrance and ascent into public memory.

The community spirit was strong in Tulsa, Oklahoma when, according to the organization's website, the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commission was founded in 2016 under the leadership of Senator Kevin Matthews. Through community and corporate donations, the Centennial Commission raised $30 million, with $18.2 million spent on the new history center, Greenwood Rising--the flagship project of the Centennial Commission. The freestanding facility sits on land donated by The Hille Foundation, a private, family foundation organization dedicated to supporting non-profit organizations and projects in the Tulsa area (Hille Foundation). Greenwood Rising is considered a world-class history center that serves as gateway to Tulsa's Historic Greenwood District. According to the organization's website, the facility "honors the icons of Black Wall Street, memorializes the victims of the massacre, and examines the lessons of the past to inspire meaningful, sustainable action in the present." According to the Greenwood Rising website, the Centennial Commission ceased operations on June 30, 2021, making way for a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization to continue the legacy of the public memory of the massacre. As with the Bass Reeves monument, this structure serves as a home for the memory of the victims and a tangible reminder of past events. Recently, Greenwood Rising finished seventh in a nationwide vote for USA Today's "Best New Attraction of 2021" marking a bold entrance into public memory. Categorizing the museum as an "attraction" offers pause to remember the blurred distinction between history and entertainment. The fusion of genres is indicative of the power and reach of the message.

The Black community of Philadelphia, Mississippi commemorated "The Freedom Summer Murders" through an annual event which, since 1964, is a considerable labor of love for many (Whitlinger 649). However, this event was not always

embraced by the community at large. The film *Mississippi Burning* generated national interest which forced the hands of residents to accept the reality of the event rather than keep it buried in the past. This response speaks to the power of collective public memory as many "closest" to the scene of the crime could not be mindfully more far away from public memory. Before the film's release, the town "could be described as having two mnemonic communities: the African-American community, which commemorated the event annually, and the white community, which remained shrouded in civic silence" (Whitlinger 653). The national spotlight drew attention to this small town of 7,000 residents and on June 21, 1989, over 1,000 people nationwide descended to participate in the first citywide commemoration service marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the murders (659). The film exposed the events of this town to a national audience and, as a result, prompted a response that created an organized approach that was lacking at the local level before the film's release.

The juxtaposition between community-engaged memory work and retrospective memory work (spawned from the release of *Mississippi Burning*) highlight the uniqueness of circumstance surrounding a historic person or act. Where these memory works dovetail is the resonance on our collective cultural memory. There is no doubt a blockbuster film will initially reach a broader audience than a local museum or memorial, but it is necessary to localize the subject of the film and create a "home" for the historic person or act. On a broader scale, as necessary as it is to introduce an audience to a marginalized historic person or act, it is just as important to properly localize the subject, which can often be more challenging. In the example of Greenwood Rising, despite the level of success and recognition the facility has garnered, not all Tulsa residents approve of the way the facility is marketed and operating. According to a recent article, survivors and descendants of victims of the Tulsa Race Massacre sued the city of Tulsa and other individuals, seeking "acknowledgment that the defendants' policies, actions, and inactions deprived them of wealth and created inequitable health, education, housing, and employment conditions that can and should be remedied today" (Human). Furthermore, the survivors and descendants seek ". . . restitution for the harm caused and lives and property lost, as well as an injunction preventing the defendants from exploiting the likeness of victims and legacy of the massacre for economic gain, particularly to raise funds for Greenwood Rising" (Human Rights Watch). These developments highlight the importance and complications of adequately obtaining a variety of community dedication and involvement to further the cause of the memorial.

Applications

When studying the narratives evident in The Freedom Summer Murders, The Tulsa Race Massacre, and the life story of Bass Reeves, significant correlations emerge. The way these historic events, places, and people ultimately became incorporated into public memory speaks to a culmination of progressive advancements through time, exposure, and community engagement. As such, each subsequent act effectively expanded the scope of public memory, though the process was neither steadfast nor lin-

ear. The lack of community engagement as well as the relatively short passage of time between historic events and film adaptation make The Freedom Summer Murders an outlier. The occurrence of the murders in relation to the release of the film based on the events, June 21, 1964, and December 9, 1988, respectively, was a comparatively short amount of time. Additionally, the film thrust awareness of The Freedom Summer Murders into the national spotlight without the support of the local community; the film served as both an introduction and a catalyst for further challenging conversations. The Tulsa Race Massacre and the life story of Bass Reeves were first championed locally as these Black narratives grew organically from their respective communities. From this growth, national recognition then followed, with nearly 100 years between these historic events occurring prior to being integrated into public memory through national television programs. Ultimately, one could argue Bass Reeves has not yet breached public memory, but indications are positive.

What seems uncontested is the reach of visual entertainment avenues, both the silver screen in 1988 through the release of *Mississippi Burning* and the small screen's run of HBO's *Watchmen* in 2019 were agents for influencing and shaping public memory of Black narratives to national audiences. In the 31 years between the theatrical release of *Mississippi Burning* and the television debut of *Watchmen,* many cultural and societal advancements have occurred, in addition to communication applications such as social media, but the resonance of visual mediums hold a dominant cultural influence. Whereas proximity or the localness of community engagement may no longer be necessary for gaining support of Black narratives as a result of tools such as social media and online communications, technology alone was not enough to impact public memory of The Tulsa Race Massacre prior to *Watchmen* and it still hasn't provided enough influence to make Bass Reeves a household name regardless of the wealth of information available. Perhaps it is less about the information contained in the message but rather the method of delivery via a visual platform, as it is one thing to ask an audience to read about a distressing series of racially motivated murders but another experience when these events play out organically on screens in living rooms, kitchens, and bedrooms across the world. The unflinching brutality proved to be undeniable. Additional Black narratives should expect equal resonance through visual depictions in similar formats, and in Reeves' case, the light of his heroism in spite of the darkness of both racial prejudice and everyday ruthlessness of the time would be a worthy juxtaposition. It is also crucial to note depictions in *Mississippi Burning* and *Watchmen* did not oversell or enhance these historic events, but simply acted to demonstrate visual depictions of the events. In fairness, *Mississippi Burning* is not a verbatim depiction of events of The Freedom Summer Murders, but this is not vital; the byproduct of the film and its related sentiments opened access to public memory. Others have followed, and through this formula, many more events could garner similar impacts on public memory.

Conclusion

Collectively, the public memory of Bass Reeves, the Tulsa Race Massacre, and the Freedom Summer Murders have entered various stages of public memory. They serve as examples of how patterns emerge and can inform us as to how future countermemories might be received. Though we can't discount the course of progress resulting from continued exposure and levels of community engagement, the momentum these events and individuals received has impacted the sphere of public memory. Whereas media and film depictions furthered the narrative of the Tulsa Race Massacre and the Freedom Summer Murders, Bass Reeves has not broken through public memory as a household name, though this could change following the debut of Reeves' streaming programs, as enthusiasm for his memory is on the side of progress. As mentioned, Hollywood depictions can force an agenda as well as corroborate a grassroots initiative. Moreover, community engagement and exposure act as catalysts for one another but can, less effectively, develop on their own, separate terms. Ultimately, previously marginalized Black narratives are enjoying unmatched support in public memory and these developments will shape how future generations view history moving forward. But complacency will halt progress and supporters of countermemory must gain momentum to push more countermemories into the realm of public memory. Vigilance is key because there are many more stories to tell of those whose histories are excluded. And yet, these histories have a place in what we call the public and what we collectively determine and negotiate public memory—that continually evolving construct—to be.

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