

History, Memory, and the Road to Racial Justice in the “Belly of the Beast”

Looking ahead at a new era of looking back

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In the past few years, the US has entered a new phase of grappling with its history of slavery, and racism. The toppling of Confederate monuments, divisive debates over how to teach about racism in schools, and new light on revisionist histories have brought the role of history to the fore of the conversation. In this contribution, we see how discourse and praxis around memory and racial justice have evolved through the story of one education and community building organization’s attempts to reckon with its past in the deep South.

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As the US enters a hopeful but charged new era of addressing its history, an organization in Mississippi can provide one model for moving forward. Because the state has long had the worst reputation for racial violence and the strongest resistance to racial justice, many have described it as the “belly of the beast.”

The birth of the Winter Institute in 1999 signaled a new era of reckoning with history in the state of Mississippi, which some could argue meant a new era of reckoning in the United States at large. It was rare for its time and has continued to cut a path in the state, region, and beyond. For more than 20 years, the organization has been rooted in a strong foundation but always a dynamic creature, adapting to the needs of community partners, responding to changing opportunities in youth work, and supporting other organizations. As always, it continues to navigate political pressures that would steer towards an opposite vision of the future.

In 1998, the University of Mississippi (UM), hosted a series of meetings that culminated in a large town hall event as part of *One America in the 21st Century: The President’s Initiative on Race*. The initiative “was tasked with examining race, racism, and the potential for racial reconciliation in America using a process of study, constructive dialogue, and action.”¹ William F. Winter, who served as governor of Mississippi from 1980-1984 and remained a respected leader and voice for Mississippians across party lines, was on the advisory board and was responsible for UM’s participation. The process in Oxford was by all accounts an astounding success—so much so that Gov. Winter encouraged university leadership to establish a more permanent conversation on race.

Out of this was born a scrappy new organization eventually named the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation. It was led by a young white woman named Susan Glisson, a graduate of the university’s Southern Studies master’s degree program who had helped convene the One America initiative at UM. Dr. Glisson was a student of the US Civil Rights Movement and had endeared herself to a number of key movement veterans. Among those were leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), both of which were guided by a vision of grassroots local leadership, including the voices of young people.

Dr. Glisson brought that vision to the new institute. Like SNCC and its mentor, Ella Baker, she believed that impactful, sustainable change began at the community level and should be guided by the local voices that know that community best. She began responding to calls from small groups in Mississippi towns, including those with the fewest resources and the biggest needs, such as access to clean water. The responsiveness to local calls and the belief in local wisdom set a foundation that continues in the organization's work today.

Commemorations and Collective Memory

It soon became apparent that while many Mississippians felt an earnest desire to reckon with the state's history and legacies of racial injustice, few people felt equipped to begin or even participate in the conversation. The state and its many localities where atrocities had occurred lived under what Jacqueline Byrd Martin called "a cloak of silence"² about what had happened and the long-lasting impacts that remained.

Jackie Martin was a civil rights veteran and city administrator in McComb, a town in Southwest Mississippi that had been a center of Black voter registration, student sit-ins and walk-outs, and other nonviolent organizing. It was also an area of violent reprisals by white supremacists against those efforts to push Mississippi forward. In 1964, McComb was called "the bombing capital of the world"³ because of the near daily bombs targeting Black churches, homes, and businesses. Martin called upon Dr. Glisson and the Winter institute to go to McComb and collaborate on efforts to lift that "cloak."

In those early years of the Winter Institute, the significance of collective memory and public narratives became increasingly important. Oral history projects and public commemoration events were a keystone of the Winter Institute's work, always in collaboration with local people who invited it in. In each community, at least one local person served as a bridge between the Institute and local community members, many of whom were skeptical of an organization led by a white woman and based at the university most closely associated with white supremacy in Mississippi.

Understandably, many Black Mississippians—particularly those who had lived through the civil rights era—felt uncertain about both the safety of sharing their stories and the legitimacy of entrusting this organization. Many felt that their stories had been left out of the histories and conversations, overshadowed by savior narratives and told by those with no personal connection to the local region. Many African Americans suffered great personal harm during the Jim Crow era and Civil Rights Movement, and many took huge risks to bring about change, yet their stories had never been validated within or outside of the local community.

What had dominated were the stories of those given hero status, like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., while local voices were often ignored. So, some people who were witness or participant were—and still are—concerned that historians, filmmakers, and younger activists wanted to appropriate and profit from their experiences and, often, their trauma. Overcoming skepticism was also a challenge for older white people, who often feel like the histories of their communities are more complex than what's told through the major media as only one-sided, assuming that all white people were explicitly racist.

Early Communities

These early communities included McComb, where Jackie Martin was the key convener and the trusted local person who could vouch for the Winter Institute's credibility and intentions. There, the Institute supported an oral history project and a public event showcasing stories and cross-racial perceptions of the 1960s. This led to a collaboration between the Winter Institute, the McComb School District, and the Washington DC-based nonprofit organization Teaching for Change, helping teachers gain comfort with teaching local, state, and broader civil rights histories in more honest and engaging ways. Eventually, the district implemented a "Local Cultures" class that trained high school students in oral history and built on the interviews collected earlier.

In Newton County, where civil rights leaders and brothers Medgar and Charles Evers had been reared and were expelled for their voter registration activity, a multiracial group asked for the Winter Institute's assistance with a public commemoration of Medgar Evers, who had been assassinated by a white supremacist at the height of his organizing work in 1963. This event opened the doors to what had been an unthinkable reckoning with local history, just up the road in neighboring Neshoba County. There, in 1964, Ku Klux Klan (KKK) and white law enforcement officers murdered civil rights workers James Chaney (age 21), Andrew Goodman (age 20), and Michael Schwerner (age 24) in what became known as the Freedom Summer murders.

It was perhaps the most notorious crime of the civil rights era in Mississippi and had stigmatized Neshoba County for decades. The "cloak of silence" began to lift as the 40th anniversary of the murders approached and a group of local Black, white, and Choctaw tribal citizens—many of whom had been children or not yet born when the murders happened—invited the Winter Institute in to help them wrestle with the history and reshape a local narrative. Again, an oral history project played a key role in opening the conversation, in companion with a series of public dialogue meetings led by the Institute's Susan Glisson.

These ongoing dialogues, held in a traditional circle gathering structure, became a pivotal lesson that set the course for the Winter Institute's future work. Through the circle process, in which each person was invited but not required to share their own stories related to the history of the murders, or their motivations for participating in the dialogue, the power of storytelling enabled unaddressed wounds, anger, and fear to surface and see the light of day.

Out of this process over several months grew the Philadelphia Coalition, which the Winter Institute helped to organize a large public memorial event attended by hundreds of people from across the state. The Coalition built on this success by calling on state officials to reopen the investigation into the murders. Within the community, many knew the perpetrators, including Edgar Ray Killen, the key organizer who had never been held accountable for any of it.

The group partnered with family members of Andrew Goodman, one of the murdered men, to push the attorney general for a prosecution. On June 21, 2005, the 41st anniversary of the crime and one year after the public event, a jury found Killen guilty, and he was sentenced to 60 years

in prison. The Institute and the Philadelphia Coalition went on to host a conference on teaching civil rights history and to develop an ongoing youth program in the community. Out of the Philadelphia Coalition grew the first Black mayor of the town, which even two years earlier would have seemed nearly impossible.

Similarly, in Tallahatchie County, a rural area of the Mississippi Delta, few had imagined their community could become a model for historical reckoning until the news from Neshoba County. Again, an interracial group of local people, led by the vision of a county supervisor named Jerome Little—one of the area’s first Black elected officials—called upon Glisson and the Winter Institute to help them wade into what felt like potentially dangerous territory. In 1955, 14-year-old Emmett Till, a Black youth from Chicago, was brutally killed while visiting family in Mississippi, an incident that many attribute as a major catalyst for the broader US Civil Rights Movement.⁵ In response to attempts to investigate and pursue justice, the white community galvanized against the murders, and an all-white jury freed them during a sham trial.

With the Winter Institute’s support, the community group formed the Emmett Till Memorial Commission (ETMC), which began a sometimes fraught but forward-moving process of dialogue, oral history, and collective action. In 2007, the group held a ceremony issuing a formal apology to Till’s family for the community’s role in the miscarriage of justice. The apology, like other public commemorations, was rooted in the belief that “racial reconciliation begins with telling the truth...honest investigation into our history...[as ways] to move forward together in healing the wounds of the past and in ensuring equal justice for all of our citizens.”⁶

The Winter Institute continued to support ETMC as it moved to restore the courthouse in Sumner, which now serves as a living museum of Emmett Till’s story. The Emmett Till Interpretive Center (ETIC) is now across the street, and a driving tour and historical markers connect sites to the story of Till, the murder, and the oppressive culture that silenced justice there. After 15 years, the Winter Institute remains a partner with the ETIC and its movement to broaden education about Emmett Till.

Community and Trust Building Foundation

The significance of these early commemoration and public history events can’t be overstated in guiding the Winter Institute’s work in the years since. The success of the story-sharing and dialogue processes became the foundation of the work. The organization’s reputation for navigating difficult histories and issues grew, rooted in a process that built trust and a sense of true community. Dr. Glisson recognized the need to create a more formal structure for the processes that had evolved through engagements with the key early communities. In tandem with various organizations, she developed a vision that became known as The Welcome Table.

The process was built on the tenets learned from the Civil Rights Movement and the early communities: go only where invited, take your cues from local people who know the community best, build relationships and trust through story-sharing, uphold truth telling as a key principle, create space for vulnerability and learning, and support collaborative projects driven by the participants.

In the past decade, the Winter Institute team has been invited to lead the Welcome Table process in an expanding collection of “communities,” including towns in Mississippi and Tennessee, public school districts, universities, private secondary schools, medical schools, the Mississippi State Legislature, nonprofit organizations and NGOs, professional networks and organizations, state agencies, and for-profit businesses.

At the invitation of Mayor Mitch Landrieu’s office, the Winter Institute led the Welcome Table New Orleans, where several cohorts of community members engaged in dialogue and projects over more than two years. One of the final steps led by the Winter Institute centered on Mayor Landrieu’s hope to remove monuments and statues romanticizing the “Lost Cause” mythology of the Confederacy. Using the Welcome Table methodology, the Winter Institute convened dozens of New Orleanians to share their thoughts about the monuments and their impact on collective memory. A few months later, in May 2017, Landrieu’s administration removed monuments commemorating Confederate generals Robert E. Lee and P.G. T. Beauregard and the President of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis, as well as one celebrating the battle of Liberty Place.⁷ The removal of these monuments was a turning point in the growing movement to remove iconography celebrating the Confederacy and Lost Cause narratives.

Youth Voices and Nonformal Youth Education

As work in communities flourished outside of the university setting, students at the University of Mississippi began to flock to the Winter Institute in search of opportunities to learn. Impassioned young people sought internships, began convening student groups using the Winter Institute model, or simply went to the office to hang out and absorb. A new era of student life began to grow at a university better known for conservative sororities and fraternities that center a Southern flavor of whiteness than for student activism focused on diversity and inclusion.

By 2010, student interns, affectionately known as “Winterns,” launched a vision for a Youth Engagement program at the Winter Institute. The idea was to nurture a future generation of Mississippi leaders and citizens with a more complete understanding of the state’s history and how structural inequities were created and continue to operate. With the guidance of Susan Glisson, and in collaboration with the Medgar and Myrlie Evers Institute, the university students helped host the first Summer Youth Institute (SYI), now in its 13th year.

Until Covid-19 forced it to go virtual, SYI was a yearly residential experience hosted on a Mississippi university campus, free of charge to participants. Applicants are Mississippi rising high school sophomores or juniors (ages 14-17). The first couple of years saw participants mostly known to Winter Institute staff or interns, but as the program grew more established, the Youth Engagement staff made a serious effort to recruit from as diverse a pool of applicants as possible, including race, gender identity, region of the state, religious background, immigration background or status, socioeconomic level, physical ability, academic achievement, and type of school—public (including well-resourced and very poor schools), independent/private (parochial or so-called segregation academies born from white resistance to school desegregation in the 1960s), or homeschool. A truism repeated many times each summer is that during the 9-day period of SYI, it’s the most diverse space in the state of Mississippi.

Grade minimums have never been required, nor has extracurricular or previous leadership experience. The idea is for students not typically highlighted by school counselors or teachers as high achievers to have an opportunity at leadership development, exposure to a college campus, learning topics not typically covered at school, and new relationships—creating room for those with lower grade averages, learning challenges, and other obstacles. Many of the early SYI students came from families with no university experience, and several had no aspirations for higher education until SYI helped them gain more comfort in a college setting.

The curricular approach to SYI has always used Mississippi civil rights history as an entry point for growth and leadership development. The program utilizes a variety of learning sessions, documentary films, and field trips to sites of memory. A highlight each year is a trip to Neshoba County, where participants visit spaces important to the story of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, both in life and death. In more recent years, the program has included a trip to Tallahatchie County to visit spaces of the Emmett Till story, visiting with staff at the Emmett Till Interpretive Center, some of whom helped start SYI as university students.

The Winter Institute staff and paid mentors hired for the duration of the program, many of whom come back for subsequent years, take great care to scaffold these visits after significant relationship building and emotional preparation for the young people. The sites are full of emotion and stories of both violence and community resilience. In post-program evaluations, participants consistently rank these field trips as the most impactful.

Until Covid, the SYI program culminated with student presentations for family, friends, and community members. Each student designed a project grown from their own interests and passions to be carried out in their home communities over the following two years. Winter Institute staff would spend months following up with SYIers about their projects, checking to see the progress or if they needed support. Over the years, students led many impressive projects, including community gardens, a self-esteem club for young girls, school recycling programs, a beach and waterway cleanup, anti-bullying programs, diversity clubs at schools, and a state teen sexual health and sex-ed network.

But the shift to a virtual program during the Covid pandemic has given the Winter Institute an opportunity to evaluate this aspect of SYI. A pattern began to emerge, highlighting the fact that while some participants were able to follow through on their projects, quite a number began to view the project as the one negative and burdensome aspect of the SYI experience, for a variety of reasons unrelated to motivation.

Because SYI has a robust alumni network, with many participants now beyond university and in the professional world, it has become apparent that many SYI alums viewed the experience as profound and transformational, and they went on to achieve remarkable projects once they got to university. This evaluation opportunity has caused the Winter Institute to rethink the project aspect and plan for adjustments in the Summer 2022 session, which hopefully will be in person.

Recent Work in Historical Memory

The Institute has continued to support projects in historical memory and commemoration. The most prominent began in 2017 and is now called the [Lafayette Community Remembrance Project](#), which focuses on the history of lynching in Lafayette County, Mississippi. The movement grew out of research on Elwood Higginbottom, victim of the last documented lynching in the county in 1935. Out of this research, the Winter Institute convened a group of local residents, including a Welcome Table group started two years prior. The project grew quickly into a collaboration among local community members, researchers based at the University of Mississippi, local elected officials, churches, local civil rights organizations, and Higginbottom family descendants.

It has grown to include small memorials for victims' families, large public events, circle meetings, historical marker installations, and collaborations with elected officials. The project includes ongoing collaboration with the Equal Justice Initiative and its Community Remembrance Project, which focuses on the history of lynching in the United States.

Since then, several other Mississippi communities have approached the Winter Institute for support with memorializing lynching victims and growing historical memory movements. Participants often draw connections between public history about lynching and the movements to remove Confederate monuments. While this has created tensions with public officials, it has also offered opportunities to engage with them using the Welcome Table techniques, moving conversations forward.

Changes Ahead

The past few years have seen several changes for the Winter Institute, which has always had to be a dynamic organization quick to respond to changing political landscapes, national crises, and calls from communities.

In 2018, the Winter Institute left the University of Mississippi to become a standalone nonprofit organization and moved its headquarters from Oxford to Jackson, MS, the state capital. In Winter 2021/2022, the organization will see another significant shift, as it retires the name "William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation" and adopts a new moniker.

The new name – The Alluvial Collective – will no longer be linked to a particular person and won't be saddled with the contested term "reconciliation," a word that has always caused debate about how reconciliation is possible where there was never any form of parity. Rather, the term refers to the rich and fertile soil deposited by the flow of a river, forming layers of promise and growth from the river's history and journey. The term "alluvial" is particularly associated with the Mississippi Delta region.

Entering a new phase offers challenging and exciting opportunities: responding to new critiques from both ends of the political spectrum, continuing nonformal education on topics now highly politicized in the US, and focusing efforts deeper into Mississippi systems while expanding engagements to national and international exchange programs. At its core, the organization has

been adaptive and responsive throughout its history, and this new phase requires that now more than ever.

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