ABSTRACT

BROWN, TAUREAN REED. Adopting The Black Radical Perspective: An Analysis of Autobiographical Accounts. (Under the direction of Dr. Michael L. Schwalbe).

Throughout modern U.S. history challenging the system of capitalism on its ability to create freedom, justice, and equality comes with dangerous consequences. Sociologists have long been interested in how people mitigate consequences when their behavior is perceived as offensive or abnormal. Symbolic interactionist scholars suggest that accounts are a way for people to justify or excuse their actions. Accounts allow people to shift the meanings attached to their behavior, which in turn changes how people react to it. This study focuses on a population that's largely overlooked by sociological research on accounts. Black radicals have a political perspective that says the injustice, inequality, and discrimination Black people experience is a product of the very structure of U.S. society, particularly capitalism. I examine the autobiographical accounts of Black radical activists who ascribe to such a worldview. Through telling their experiences with racism, Black radicals shift the meaning of their politics as being extreme and irrational to being reasonable and acceptable. This research corroborates theory and findings on how people use accounts to shift the meaning attached to things, and how cultural environments shape these accounts. It also demonstrates the value in studying Black radicals as individual actors.

Adopting The Black Radical Perspective: An Analysis of Autobiographical Accounts

by
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DEDICATION

To Emani, Eden, and my parents.

BIOGRAPHY

Taurean Brown was raised in Kinston, NC where he graduated from Kinston High School in 2005. After high school he attained a Bachelor's of Science in Fisheries, Wildlife, and Conservation Biology from North Carolina State University. After his undergraduate career Taurean became active in struggles against racial injustice and inequality. Since the Fall of 2016, he has been a graduate student in the sociology department at North Carolina State University with a focus on inequality.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

"I'm a communist" Derrick tells his mother. Her eyes widened. "You're a what?" she says staring at her 22-year-old son. Derrick feels his heart racing. He wasn't sure when it was going to happen, but he knew someday it would come. Today happened to be that day. Derrick blurted out his political identity in the middle of an intense conversation with his mother. He's fed up with her subjecting him to unsolicited political rants. Usually he finds a way to slip out of the room. When an escape isn't possible, he would internally go to another place.

Today Derrick can't muster the strength. His mother struck a nerve when she said, "Only a fool wouldn't have voted for Hillary Clinton." Usually he can ignore her liberal talking points, but as someone who sees Clinton as a bloodthirsty imperialist, he can't let this go unchallenged. Derrick understands why a liberal perspective appeals to his mother, but he is tired of hearing her preach about it. His mom is a 52-year-old middle-class Black woman from a working-class background. Despite her experience with discrimination and inequality, she believes her upward mobility is proof that the Black American Dream exists. The problem isn't the system, it's the people denying access to it.

"The institutions themselves are rotten to the core, Ma. You're not going to vote oppression away," Derrick says. He can see the bewilderment that now occupies his mother's face. He tries to give his best rundown of the class system. "So you're a Russian now?" Mom asks after Derrick's attempt at an explanation. Exhausted, he doesn't know what to say. It's been almost four years since he began organizing against local police brutality during his senior year of high school. He knew this wasn't going to go well. His mother can't wrap her mind around Derrick's politics. She sees her son's generation as having more opportunities than hers. She

expects Derrick to provide an explanation that justifies wanting to overhaul society as we know it.

This fictional story of Derrick and his mother represents an experience that a person goes through when they behave in ways that others perceive as problematic or abnormal. Unexpected behavior is disruptive to social life. Our interactions with others revolve around implicit and explicit rules that guide our behavior within a given context. Violating these rules creates a need for an account.

The concept of accounts is grounded in the work of scholars like C.Wright Mills and Erving Goffman. Mills (1940) was one of the first sociologists to look at how people use language to explain their untoward behavior. Goffman (1959) looked at the tactics people use to protect themselves against consequences potentially arising from their socially undesirable behavior. Building on Goffman's work, Scott and Lyman (1968) described accounting strategies that people use for different situations and audiences. Numerous scholars have extended this work, creating a sociology of accounts (Orbuch 1997). According to Orbuch (1997), analyzing accounts provides useful insight into the human experience and the collective understandings of social organizations. Black radicals are a population that have received little attention by sociologists. My study connects the sociology of accounts to this particular group of people.

I became interested in pursuing this project during the fall of 2016. The presidential election gave me an opportunity to see where people were politically. Specifically, I was interested in Black people's perspectives. At that time, we were just two years since the rebellion in Ferguson, Missouri. As an organizer, I wanted to know whether the movement pushed people toward a more radical critique of American society. Over the course of the election, I paid close attention to discussions among Black youth, mostly via social media. It seemed to me that young

people were adopting a more radical perspective. This left me to wonder what it takes from someone to make this leap from the popular liberal approach to a more radical approach.

A Black radical perspective draws a direct connection between racism, capitalism, and imperialism. This viewpoint holds that freedom, justice, and equality aren't possible given the way U.S society is organized. For the US ruling class, it's critical to keep such perspectives from gaining popularity. In years past, red-baiting allowed American elites to stigmatize any perspective that called the capitalist system into question. Doing so can be not only stigmatizing but dangerous. Throughout modern U.S. history, those who have challenged capitalism have been jailed, beaten, and assassinated.

Given the stigma and danger associated with a radical perspective, it's sociologically interesting to consider people who adopt it. Black radicals are people who go against the norms of American society and may be called to account for their views. This led me to wonder about how such accounts are formulated. These accounts do not necessarily explain how Black people come to a radical view. But they do offer a view to how Black radicals legitimate an oppositional stance toward basic social arrangements that most Americans, Black and white, either take for granted or accept as unchangeable.

One of the principal tenets of symbolic interactionism is that people act towards things based on the meanings those things acquire through social interaction (Blumer 1969). In mainstream U.S. political culture, people typically learn that radicalism means violence and extremism. Given these meanings, it is not surprising that radicalism is seen as deviant and something that must be accounted for. But the very act of giving accounts can change the meaning of the deviant person or act—in this case, the meaning of radicalism and of being a Black radical. When Black radicals give accounts, in face-to-face interaction or some other way,

they seek to transform the negative meanings others assign to their behavior. What is radical and forbidden might thus be rendered reasonable and acceptable.

My study looks at how Black radicals make political meaning by giving extended narrative accounts. To examine this process, I analyzed fourteen autobiographies written during two historical periods, the 1920s-30s (coincident with a period of radical labor organizing) and the1960s (coincident with the Black Power movement). I propose that Black radicals account for their politics through telling stories about their experiences with racism. Radical writers use these narratives to portray racism as endemic to American society. Such a portrayal allows radicals to redefine their politics from unreasonable to rational and necessary.

In the next section I discuss what a Black radical perspective is and why people must account for it. I briefly consider how previous sociologists have conceptualized accounts and where this project fits within that legacy. Next, I describe the methods I used to find and analyze the autobiographies. Following this section, I show how Black radicals use their stories about encounters with racism to portray U.S. society as fundamentally flawed. I then argue that these narratives offer implicit justification for adopting radical politics. Finally, I suggest that these stories provide insight into the framing process of social movements.

THE PROBLEM: ACCOUNTING FOR A RADICAL PERSPECTIVE

My project arises from an interest in ideology. What's been particularly interesting for me are the ideas and beliefs around the social and material conditions of Black people in the United States. I want to know who/what people feel is responsible for the inequality, injustice, and discrimination Black people experience in this country. Most mainstream explanations point vaguely to categorical factors like socio-economic status or education levels. These explanations

suggest that reforming social institutions like the education and justice systems will improve conditions for Black people. Non-mainstream analyses hold that the conditions Black people face result from the structure of American society. People who articulate such a worldview are sociologically interesting because they take such a non-normative stance.

According to Karl Marx, "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force" (Marx 1845/1978:172). If Marx says is right, this explains why people think that the reforming mainstream institutions is the practical response to solving social problems. In order to maintain their legitimacy, the ruling class must convince people that their institutions can address social problems. When it comes to Black people, the ruling class must convince us that their institutions can address the injustice and inequality we experience. Black radicals reject this notion.

In the United States and other Western countries many people associate "radical" with Muslim extremist groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda. Sociologist Kehinde Andrews (2018) pushes back against conflating radicalism with extremism by arguing that they are actually opposites. According to Andrews, extremism is "taking the fundamental principles of an idea to an extreme" (2018:xviii). Radicalism, on the other hand, challenges fundamental principles. In accord with Andrews, I reject the equation of radicalism with extremism. I use radical in the same sense that Angela Davis does when she says, "radical simply means grasping things at the root" (quoted in Griffin 1996). A Black radical perspective thus seeks to identify the fundamental source—capitalism specifically—of Black people's suffering in American society.

Andrews (2018) may take issue with centering an anti-capitalist critique within Black radicalism. He may accuse me of conflating Black radicalism with Marxism. The tendency to

make Marxism the test for radicalism has long fueled debates among those concerned with the liberation of Black people. The debate revolves around whether Marxist thought can properly deal with the question of race. It's a conversation rooted in the long standing "class versus race" debate. While I can't resolve this debate here, it is worth considering as part of the context for my analysis.

Probably the most repeated critique of Marxist thought is that it's economically determinist. Marx is accused of reducing all problems to the social relations of production, and therefore is inadequate for analyzing racial, gender, and other forms of oppression. Critical race scholars Michael Omi and Howard Winant (2015) argue that class-based theories of race are limited because in many cases racial conflict doesn't overlap with class conflict. They argue that Marxism sees capitalism as the cause of racism. From their perspective, the Marxist solution for racism is for people to join a working-class struggle against the capitalist system. This is a problem for Omi and Winant because Marxists often treat racism as a secondary issue to class struggle.

 Kehindre Andrews (2018) also has a problem with Marxists reducing racism to a byproduct of capitalism. Andrews's main criticism centers on Marxism's theory of social change. Andrews challenges Marx's view of history that posits slavery and colonialism as pre-cursors to capitalism. He argues that Marxists fail to see how these oppressive systems remain relevant within modern society. When it comes to overturning the capitalist system, Andrews suggests that Marxists center the experience of Western—white—workers, which overlooks the oppression of people in the Global South by failing to account for slavery and colonialism as still-existing systems.

Historian Cedric Robinson (2005) voices a similar critique as Andrews. Robinson challenges the Marxist view of capitalism as a revolutionary force that destroyed more repressive systems like slavery and feudalism, while creating new forms of oppressive social arrangements. According to Robinson, Black radicals view capitalism as a system that helped reinforce older forms of exploitation rather than usher in new ones. He argues that attributing the downfall of systems like chattel slavery to the revolutionary force of capitalist development erases the role of Black people in social change.

When it comes to critiquing Marxism's ability to analyze race, it's important to define Marxism. I understand Marxism to be a science, not a religion. Therefore while Marx's thoughts—particularly his analysis and critique of capitalism—are foundational, they are neither absolute nor infallible (Cox 1948). As such, I am critical of both Marxists who use class analysis to avoid dealing with issues of race, and of those who invoke race to invalidate a class analysis. It's reductionism on both sides. Capitalism and white supremacy are are mutually reinforcing systems of oppression that reproduce inequality (Reed 2013).

Power is at the heart of Marx's analysis, and that's what makes it valuable for analyzing race. Black radicals understand racism to be a question of power, not attitude. Kwame Ture— formerly Stokely Carmichael—articulates this is in his famous quote, "If a white man wants to lynch me, that's his problem. If he has the power to lynch me, that's my problem. Racism is not a question of attitude; it's a question of power." Black radicals foreground this mutual relationship between capitalism and racism, and some embrace Marxism as a way to understand it.

For the most part, sociological research on Black radicals has been limited to social movement studies. Scholars often treat Black radicals as factions within a broader social

movement such as the Civil Rights and Black Power movements (Killian 1972; Haines 1984; Allen 1992). Most of these studies look at radicals at the organizational level. My project centers on individual Black radicals. I focus on their autobiographical narratives to understand how they account for adopting a worldview that challenges the basic structure of U.S. society.

Accounts

People use accounts to explain untoward behavior to audiences to whom they feel accountable (Scott and Lyman 1968). Sociology shows us that our social life depends on accounts. Without accounts, social relationships would fall apart every time a social actor did something non-normative. For social institutions to function, these breaches must be repaired, and accounting is how we do it. Examining accounts can thus be a means to explore the reproduction and change of social structures.

In sociology, the study of accounts is often traced to C. Wright Mills's classic 1940 *American Sociological Review* article "Situated Actions and Vocabularies of Motive." Mills laid an early theoretical foundation for the study of accounts by looking at how language is used to coordinate social interaction. Mills argues that we use vocabularies of motive to explain and legitimate action to ourselves and others. To be able to repair the interactional breakdown that might occur if our actions are questioned or challenged, we must be able to invoke an acceptable vocabulary of motive. We must be able, in other words, to give an acceptable account for why we acted as we did, if others perceive our act as abnormal or offensive. "Motives," in Mills's view, are not inner psychological forces but reasons we can offer to rationalize our actions and thereby keep interaction from breaking down (1940:905).

Marvin B. Scott and Stanford M. Lyman (1968) are most often credited with offering a modern conceptualization of accounts. They define accounts as "statements made by a social actor to explain unanticipated or untoward behavior" (1968:46). People use these linguistic devices to protect their self-image or status from damage in the event of having their behavior called into question. Scott and Lyman (1968) conceptualize two types of accounts: justifications and excuses. A justification accepts responsibility for non-normative behavior, but denies that the behavior is wrong. An excuse accepts that the behavior is wrong, but invokes mitigating circumstances to deny responsibility. Both forms of accounts must be formulated, as Mills proposed, in a socially acceptable vocabulary.

What counts as an acceptable account depends on the cultural environment. Cultural norms typically include rules about who can demand an account from whom and who must give an account to whom. For example, it is generally understood in U.S. culture that parents can demand accounts from their children. When children misbehave, parents can call them to account, possibly imposing penalties for unacceptable accounts. In Derrick's story, his mother expects him to embrace mainstream liberal or conservative political values. When Derrick says he is a communist, he rejects this expectation and she calls him to account. The account he offers is intended to render his radical politics acceptable and preserve his identity as a good son.

Accounts that are not formulated in an idiom an audience finds acceptable are likely to be rejected (Scott and Lyman 1968). An account that works in one environment with one audience might not work in another. George W. Bush's account for invading Iraq in 2003 might have been honored by his most loyal supporters, but it was rejected by millions of anti-war activists. Even if the manner and content of an account are situationally appropriate, an account that is perceived as dishonest or inauthentic might still be rejected (Blumstein 1974).

While early work focused on people using accounts to protect self-images put at risk in interaction, later work looked at accounts as stories people tell to create definitions of reality and collective memories (Orbuch 1997). According to Orbuch (1997), this social constructionist approach presents accounts as giving people a greater sense of control and understanding about themselves and the world around them, a way to cope with stressful events, a sense of closure, a sense of hope, and a sense of order. The "accounts-as-stories framework" broadens our understanding of how accounts are used and what they accomplish (Orbuch 1997).

In the United States, people are socialized to believe that capitalism is the best form of economy. They are also socialized to think mainstream institutions can address social problems. These views are normative and do not (usually) require accounts. Radicals, in contrast, want to overthrow the capitalist system. They often advocate for socialism, some with the goal of creating a communist state. Even thirty years since the end of the Cold War, and communism still carries a negative connotation in U.S. society. It's this legacy of anti-communism that makes radical politics deviant, and what is defined as deviant must be accounted for.

Many Black radicals have used autobiographies to offer accounts for their politics. Autobiography is arguably one of the most revered traditions in African American literature. Historian Kathryn Nasstrom describes it as, "one of the richest modes of individual and collective expression, dating back to the slave era" (2008:329). Autobiographies can thus be a rich source of data. Using the accounts-as-stories framework, I view autobiographies as stories that radicals tell to make sense of their political stance. Cognitive psychologists have argued that people tend to construct narratives as the best way to make sense of their experiences (Baumeister and Newman 1994). Writing autobiographies allows Black radicals to explain their non-normative political stance, and to do it with reference to the context of their lives.

By analyzing these autobiographical accounts for patterns, I'm able to see what Orbuch (1997:460) calls a "culturally embedded normative explanation" for adopting a Black radical perspective. While my main focus is how radicals self-justify their politics, I'm also aware that how they account for their politics can serve as a way to communicate and even persuade people to action. These accounts, in other words, have farther-reaching sociological implications.

Nasstrom (2008) notes that Black autobiographies consistently engage with political, social, and economic issues that affect others in the community. Black radical autobiographies not only provide opportunities for self-justification, they also provide opportunities to inform and call people to action. Later in this thesis, I suggest that when Black radicals account for their politics, they not only seek to preserve a self-image but also to create a social movement frame for a struggle against racial oppression and economic exploitation.

METHOD

The history of Black radicalism is centuries long and extends far beyond the borders of the United States. However, given my interest in those who articulated opposition to capitalism and racism, I decided to focus on autobiographies written by Black radicals who lived mainly in the United States. To locate suitable autobiographies, I used the search terms "Black communists," "Black radicals," and "Black socialists." Once I entered a list of names, I repeated the search using each name individually to determine organizational affiliation and whether an autobiography existed. After completing this process, I identified 31 Black radical autobiographies.

To achieve manageable historical coverage, I focused on two historical periods. The first period, or first-wave, begins with the generation born at the dawn of the twentieth century. Many

of them are the children of parents born at the end of chattel enslavement or the beginning of

Reconstruction. During this time, they witnessed the rise of industrial capitalists to top of the

U.S. ruling class. Many became disillusioned by the failed promises of Reconstruction. Political

parties such as the Socialist Party of America and the Communist Party USA, though not without

struggle, provided space for Black people to cultivate a radical perspective. Black-centered

organizations, such as the African Blood Brotherhood, also pushed people toward a more radical

understanding of U.S. society. These thinkers, writers, and activists expressed solidarity for

revolutionary movements in Russia, vehemently opposed fascism, and fought white supremacist

violence in the United States.

The second period is the last half of the twentieth century. This generation is mostly

made up of people born between the early-1940s and the mid-1950s. They witnessed and

participated in the Black Freedom movement of the 1950s and 60s. Just as the earlier generation

was disappointed by Reconstruction, many of the radicals in this second period were fed up with

what they saw as inadequate reforms. Organizations such as the Black Panther Party,

Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), and Black Liberation Army were home for people

with revolutionary worldviews. They expressed solidarity with third-world liberation

movements, challenged US imperialism in places like Vietnam, and sought to put power back in

the hands of the people through anti-capitalist self-sufficiency programs.

Given the immense volume of data, I selected seven autobiographies from each historical

period (see Appendix A). The first-wave radicals were all men. Unfortunately, I did not locate

any autobiographies written by Black radical women during this period.[1] There are four men and

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[1] This is not because women weren't active in these movements. Several Black women radicals such as Claudia Jones, Grace Campbell, and countless others gave their lives to the struggle against racism, capitalism, and sexism during this time.

three women representing the second-wave radicals in my sample. Across both time periods there is diversity in terms of occupation, class background, and geographic location.

I took an inductive approach to data analysis (Charmaz 2006). I analyzed the autobiographies using line-by-line coding up to the point in the texts where the author signals adopting a radical analysis. I identified this moment when the writer describes either joining a radical organization, such as Communist Party USA, or when they articulate an understanding that the United States must be transformed on a fundamental level. While coding, I began writing analytic memos that allowed me to develop concepts based on patterns emerging from the data (Charmaz 2006). This process led me to discover that Black radicals portray racism as endemic to U.S. society through telling about their experiences. My analysis of the texts shows that the writers describe racism in the United States in four distinct ways: As pervasive, as undaunted by respectable behavior or status, as perpetuated by unaccountable authority figures, and as deeply damaging. I interpret these portrayals of racism as implicitly making a case that U.S. society is fundamentally flawed and needs overhaul, not merely reform. The compelling need for overhaul, I argue, is what serves as an account for a radical perspective.

PORTRAYLS OF RACISM IN AMERICA

Every autobiographer in my sample described experiences with racism. I use the term "racism" to refer to incidents of injustice or oppression that the authors attribute to race. These incidents include police brutality, lynchings, job discrimination, injustice in the courts, and other discriminatory acts. The stories that radicals tell about racism constitute "portrayals of racism in America." In telling about their lives, Black radical autobiographers depict racism as they

experienced it rather than as an abstraction. The Black radicals whose autobiographies I analyze describe encountering racism in three ways.

The most common way is experiencing an event directly. For example, former Black Panther Flores Forbes begins his autobiography by telling two stories about run-ins with the police while growing up in San Diego. Another former Black Panther, Imam Jamil Al-Amin (H.Rap Brown), tells of learning about racism indirectly from his mother's story about a time when rich white people refused to pay his grandfather for working on their farm. Finally, radicals describe witnessing racism. Witnessing includes seeing an incident directly, as when former African Blood Brotherhood and Communist Party USA member Harry Haywood is eyewitness to a nurse degrading another Black soldier in an army hospital. Radicals also tell of encountering racism through observing racial inequality in diverse settings. For example, Paul Robeson recalls the racial conditions of his hometown. "Princeton was Jim Crow: the grade school that I attended was segregated and Negroes were not permitted in any high school (1988:10).

Through their stories about experiencing, learning about, and witnessing oppression, radicals provide their depiction of racism in the United States. The authors portray racism as (1) pervasive; (2) indifferent to respectable behavior or status; (3) often perpetrated by unaccountable authority figures; and (4) deeply damaging. Below I offer examples of each type of portrayal. Later I will argue that these portrayals of racism serve to justify a belief that the United States is in need of fundamental change.

Racism Is Pervasive

Autobiographers describe racism in America as far-reaching, evident in the behavior of individuals and institutions. In their stories, racism seeps into every aspect of their lives. No place is safe for Black people. Under this portrayal of racism, U.S. institutions become

centerpoints for encountering racism. Several writers provide stories of confronting racism in

courts, the education system, electoral politics, the workplace, and the military.

According to these narratives, racism permeates American society. For example, after

forging friends with Black artists during the 1920s, former Communist Party USA member

William L. Patterson describes how deeply racism penetrates life in the United States.

It was during this period that I met a number of theater people, mostly Afro-Americans. From them and through their varied experiences I was to learn how racism permeated through every phase of American life. The results of corruption and debasement were not only met in the courts and in daily political and industrial life, but also in the world of the arts. Black artists were assigned roles of maintaining the images of a buffoon, a razor-wielding rapist, or a head-scratching, eye-rolling, superstitious moron, the Black actor did not get on stage. They could accommodate themselves—or else. Racism pervaded everything, but few Black artists knew how or were ready to fight. (1991:68)

Other radicals depict racism as pervasive by ascribing it to the way of life in America. For

example, upon his return to the United States from military service in France, Harry Haywood

saw the racism in American society more sharply.

I had been away from the States for quite a while, in free France so to speak and I had become less used to the American nigger-hating way of life. But I was thrown abruptly back into reality as soon as I crossed the threshold of the American army hospital in Brest. (2012:64)

Former Black Panther Assata Shakur also speaks to racism being a way of life when she recalls

her experience with segregation.

We'd drive hours without being able to stop anywhere. Sometimes we would pull into a filthy old gas station, buy gas, and then be told that were not permitted to use their filthy old bathroom because we were Black. I can remember clearly squatting in the bushes with mosquitoes biting my bare buttocks, and my grandmother handing me toilet paper, because we could not find a place with a "colored" bathroom. Sometimes we were hungry, but there was no place to eat. Other times we were sleepy and there was no hotel or motel that would admit us. If i sit and add up all the "colored" toilets and drinking fountains in my life and all of the back-of-the-buses or the Jim Crow railway cars or the places i couldn't go, it adds up to one ball of anger. (2001:138)

Several writers describe confronting racism at school. Founding member of the Black Panther

Party Huey Newton shows racism seeping through one of America's most cherished institutions.

At the time, I did not understand the size or seriousness of the school system's assault on Black people. I knew only that I constantly felt uncomfortable and ashamed of being Black. This feeling followed me everywhere, without let up. It was a result of the implicit understanding in the system that whites were "smart" and Blacks were "stupid." Anything presented as "good" was always white, even the stories teachers gave us to read in the early grades. Little Black Sambo, Little Red Riding Hood, and Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs told us what we were. (2009:17)

Today, mainstream U.S. political culture portrays institutional racism as a fading relic. It is seen as something that society has largely eradicated through anti-discriminatory legislation and cultural shifts. When people think of racism today, they often see it as an unfortunate and retrograde individual failing. Contrary to this view, Black radicals write about witnessing, experiencing, and learning about racial oppression in ways that place it at the heart of social life in America. As such, it is not a problem that can be solved by therapy or education, as suggested by mainstream liberal and conservative views. If racism is at the heart of American society, then fundamental change is necessary and reasonable.

Racism Is Undaunted by Respectable Behavior or Status

Racism is also portrayed as being undaunted by respectable behavior or status. In the authors' accounts, acting in a respectable manner and/or having some sort of respectable status offers little to no protection against racism. This portrayal of racism challenges the popular belief that Black people can overcome racism by behaving correctly or occupying positions that give a person status in society.

Black radicals give several examples where they or others faced racism despite behaving in a way that mainstream white society would consider respectable. For example, Americans generally value excellence in academics and athletics. Despite achieving this, Paul Robeson faced a racist school principal.

Well, as a boy in high school I tried my best to "act right." I would make the best of my opportunities. I would measure myself only against my own potential and not see myself in competition with anyone else. Certainly I had no idea of challenging the way things were. But courtesy and restraint did not shield me from all hostility: it soon became clear that the high school principal hated me. Dr. Ackerman, who later rose to higher positions in the New Jersey school system, made no effort to hide his bitter feelings. The better I did, the worse his scorn. The cheers of my fellow students as I played fullback on the football team—"Let Paul carry the ball! Yay—Paul!"—seemed to curdle the very soul of Dr. Ackerman; and when the music teacher made me soloist of the glee club it was against the principal's furious opposition. He never spoke to me except to administer a reprimand; and he seemed constantly to be looking for an excuse to do so. One fault I had was occasionally being late to class in the morning—probably because our house was only a few hundred yards from the school! "Early to bed and early to rise" was always a hard rule for me to keep, and sometimes I misjudged the few minutes needed to get up and get to class. Then, like a watchful hawk, Dr. Ackerman would pounce on me, and his sharp words were meant to make me feel as miserably inferior as he thought a Negro was. (1998:20-1)

Gainful employment was no protection either, Robert Hillary King accounts an experience of

encountering racist charges of vagrancy despite showing proof of employment.

I now had responsibilities to shoulder, and a job was essential. For the first months after leaving the reform school, I managed to find temporary employment. During this period, Louisiana (or maybe it was just New Orleans) had a "vagrant law" which required males of working age to show "visible means of support." Policemen could stop a male (especially a Black male) and ask for check stubs, employer's phone number, etc. If he couldn't show sufficient "means of support," the police had the power to arrest him, and hold him in detention for seventy-two hours; the law became known as "The 72." The cops had a field day abusing this law, applying it to Blacks even when support was evident. The few times I was arrested on a "72," I produced check stubs proving I worked. Nevertheless, I was charged, booked, and held for 72 hours under "investigation.." I would get arrested on a Saturday night and be held until Tuesday night. When I returned to work, someone else had usually taken my place. But I was lucky. Many brothers who were arrested on a "72" ended up doing time in prison. While being investigated and interrogated they would be coerced by the police into signing "confessions" to unsolved crimes. (2012:126)

Labor organizer and communist Hosea Hudson described similar experiences. His sharecropping

family worked from sunup to sundown, yet still found hard work to afford no protection from

racism all around them.

And all the while, no matter how hard we worked, there was the atmosphere of threat and intimidation all around us. (1991:11)

William L. Patterson, a lawyer, formed close relationships with other Black people with highly

respectable occupations. Despite their status, racism severely impacted their lives.

I was being guided to a specific line of political action and thought by the universal complaints
of Black men against racism. They came from every source, every person I encountered. It was
Nora who brought me into contact with many of the leading Negro artists—among them
Florence Mills, who rose to stardom in Bye, Bye Blackbird; Abbie Mitchell; Rose McClendon, a
truly great dramatic artist. For all of these women, the road to stardom was paved with insults,
humiliation, and degrading sex demands. Rose McClendon, whose talents were respected by her
Broadway fellow-artists, never got the roles she deserved. The managers saw to that, always
placing the blame on the white theater-going public. The Cotton Club, where Lena Horne
worked, was owned by gangsters; not the duly elected gangsters of the political world but the
professional thugs of the underworld who worked with their political counterparts. It was located
in the 140's on Lenox Avenue, the heart of the ghetto, yet no Black guests were allowed inside.
It served the elite of gangsterism, legitimate and illegitimate. It was an insult to the people of
Harlem, yet none of the white liberals who were promoting the "cultural renaissance" at that time
made the slightest protest...In retrospect I would say that everywhere I turned—toward
professionals, lawyers, doctors, artists, business men, working men and women, the men on the
docks among whom I had worked—hatred of racism prevailed. (1991:70-1)

       Most people in the United States are taught to believe in the American Dream, and Black

people are no exception to this pattern. We are taught that education and good behavior are the

vehicles to success. The more successful you become, the less power racists have over you. This

line of thinking implies that racism in American society can be overcome by individual

achievement. From this perspective, Black radicalism is hard to account for. Why tear down a

society that provides opportunities to succeed and triumph over racism? Black radical accounts

challenge this view by showing that racism cannot be evaded or eradicated by the few individual

success stories that a capitalist economy allows.

       The promise that if you work hard and follow the rules you will be rewarded is

unfulfilled in the America depicted by Black radicals. Racism remains an obstacle, regardless of

how you act or the status you hold. According to this portrayal of racism, there is nothing a

Black person can do in terms of behavior or attaining status in society that would place them out

of harm's way. This suggests that the problem of racism can't be solved by Black people acting differently or displaying signs of higher status. Deeper change is required.

Racism Is Often Perpetrated by Unaccountable Authority Figures

The authors' encounters with racism often include an unaccountable authority figure. Autobiographers write about their encounters with these figures who abuse power when dealing with Black people. Some of the most common authorities include police, teachers, and bosses/employers. Black radicals describe how these authorities enact violence, discrimination, and other forms of injustice with near complete impunity.

The unaccountable authority figures that appear most often in the autobiographies are the police. Writers across generations detail experiences where the police beat, detain, and harass Black people. Former Black Panther Flores Forbes experiences with the police were so impactful that he begins his autobiography with this story:

I WAS TWELVE YEARS OLD that day in 1964, riding my brand-new Sting-Ray bicycle up the hill from my parents' home on ...Forty-seventh Street in Southeast San Diego. When I reached the intersection of Forty-seventh and Market, I could hear the tires of a car slowly following behind me on the gravel of the parking lot. I stopped at the light and heard a man with a distinctly Southern drawl call out, "Boy, come over here." I was pretty scared by the time I turned around and saw two white policemen just getting out of their cruiser. The officers came over to me and said, 'Would you come with us?" I started looking around for help. I wanted to shout, but nothing came out of my mouth. I was terrified. The policemen took my bike and put it in the trunk of their car, opened the back door, and told me to get in. People in their cars were looking at this scene, but they just passed on by. Like a frightened fool and the innocent I was, I hopped in. There was some degree of positive excitement: I was getting a ride in a police car. They drove me up the hill on Market Street toward downtown San Diego. After a ten- or fifteen-minute ride, they pulled into a residential area just short of downtown and drove up to several other police officers and a white couple. The car stopped and the cop on the passenger side got out and walked over to the group of people and pointed back toward me while explaining something. The couple walked over to my side of the car and peered in. They looked at me, then at each other, before the white man shook his head. He took the woman by her hand and walked back toward the policemen, who returned to the parking lot I was kidnapped from. There was this huge crowd of people, and standing in the center was my mother. The policemen stopped, got out, and went around to open the trunk and get my bike. My mother, with the crowd of

neighbors in tow, approached the cops asking, "What are you doing with Flores? Did he do anything?" The cop got my bike and told my mother to "back off, bitch. This is official police business." My mother stopped in her tracks. This was the first time I ever saw my mother kill someone with a look. They let me out of the car. I ran to grab my bike and get near my mother. No sooner did this happen than the police car pulled off, spinning its tires in the gravel and kicking up rocks and dirt as it dipped into the street and drove away. For me, this was strike number one against the police. (2007:9-10)

Jamil Al-Amin (H. Rap Brown) also writes of highlights witnessing injustice via cops at an early

age.

I'd had experience with cops before, because they didn't want the Black kids to shoot off firecrackers at Christmas time. In the white community, you'd think there was a war going on, there'd be so many firecrackers going off. But they'd drive through the Black community to make sure we didn't shoot off none. We did anyway and would just run and hide when we saw the police car coming. But the point of their doing this was to instill fear of the police and of authority in us while we were still quite young (2002:35).

Even first wave Black radicals describe racist experiences with cops. Nelson Peery recalls an

experience where the police beat Black youth just for existing.

Second only to those on the North Side, our area got the meanest cops on the force. They were the major influence forcing us along a predetermined path. Whenever the cops saw more than three of us together, they would stop, frisk, and question us. If money had been taken out of milk bottles, if a car battery was missing in the adjacent white neighborhood—things we stopped doing a year ago—they would accuse us. Chuck had just received his five-dollar pay when they stopped us. When he pulled out his five dollars, they wanted to know where he stole it. "I got a job. This is my pay," Chuck told them. The cop said he was going to check it out and Chuck better not be lying. They got back into the squad car. Chuck mumbled "white motherfuckers" under his breath. The cops leaped out of the car like attack dogs. A backhand slap and Chuck was on the sidewalk. They turned to us. "You want some of it?" We didn't answer for fear they'd kill Chuck. As they drove off, we helped him up and turned back toward home. The cold-blooded violence of the cops frightened us. Although we were barely seventeen and no match for them, they fingered us and intended to stop us before we got started. (1994:42)

Authority figures at school and the workplace also featured consistently in the autobiographers'

encounters with racism. For example, Harry Haywood recalls confronting racism at the hands of

a substitute teacher.

One day a substitute teacher took over our class. I was about ten years old. The substitute was a southerner from Arkansas. During history class she started talking about the Civil War. The slaves, she said, did not really want freedom Because they were happy as they were. They would have been freed by their masters in a few years anyway. Her villain was General Grant, whom she contrasted unfavorably with General Robert E. Lee. "Lee was a gentleman," she put forth. "But Grant was a cigar-smoking liquor-drinking roughneck." She didn't like Sherman either, and talked about his "murdering rampage" through Georgia. I wasn't about to take all of this and challenged her. "I don't know about General Grant's habits, but he did beat Lee. Besides, Lee couldn't have been much of a gentleman; he owned slaves!" Livid with rage, she shouted, "That's enough—what I could say about you!" "Well, what could you say?" I challenged. She apparently saw that wild racist statements wouldn't work in this situation and that I was trying to provoke her to do something like that. (2012:22-3)

Similar to his experiences with the police, Flores Forbes talks about confronting racism from his

boss at a job he held as a teen.

My work experience at the NTC led me to feel that something was terribly wrong with life because of the color of my skin. I was fifteen years old and my supervisor, in his unintelligible Southern drawl, would call me "boy" or "niggra" without missing a beat." Coupled with my treatment by the police when I was twelve and fourteen years old, and seeing how this man could say just about whatever he wanted to me, I began to realize something about life. I was a boy or nigger, niggra, what have you, in a racist country and didn't even know it because sunny San Diego had lulled damn near every black person there to sleep. (2007:13-4)

As children we're taught to respect authority figures in society. We tell children that cops

are here to keep us safe, teachers just want us to learn, and bosses are necessary for managing

work. Our social institutions give these people power. We are told that these institutions are

neutral, and thus should be respected by all. People who believe this are unlikely to see the need

for radical politics. They may argue that if an authority figure is racist, the institution—under

rules forbidding discrimination—will remedy the problem. This optimistic view implies that

fundamental change isn't needed; rehabilitation or removal of the individual bigot will suffice.

What the autobiographical accounts of Black radicals show, however, is that authority

figures are not held accountable for mistreating Black people. The accounts further show that

institutions are not neutral, and that authority figures are reflective of the racist biases built into

these institutions. Such a portrayal suggests that racism in American society is often expressed

by and *through* its legitimate authority figures. Racism is thus not an individual aberration but rather a feature of how white supremacist institutions routinely operate.

Racism Is Deeply Damaging

Finally, autobiographers portray racism in America as deeply damaging. The autobiographers describe their various encounters with racism as physically and emotionally wearing. In these accounts, individuals and institutions treat Black people as less than human, implying that Black lives don't matter. The result is not merely fleeting pain but lasting damage.

The authors show how racism is deeply damaging because it comes up again and again as a reminder of one's unequal status. Former Black Panther and political organizer Elaine Brown provides an example of how small encounters such as a hair salon denying her service can be emotionally damaging in a society fraught with racism.

On about our third or fourth day there, I decided to take a break from reading, to get my hair coiffed for him. I called the Sands' beauty salon. The receptionist there told me there were no openings for that afternoon. She suggested I try the small hotel across the street that took the Sands' overflow. That salon told me someone could take me in about fifteen minutes. "May we help you, miss?" a man standing at the door of the beauty salon across the strip said the minute I stepped up to the doorway. "I have an appointment to get my hair done," I said, entering the shop. "I'm afraid there's been a misunderstanding," he replied. "We're booked solid for the rest of the afternoon." As I looked around the nearly empty shop, I realized I had almost escaped the memory. The rush of blood that comes with humiliation overwhelmed me. I felt dizzy from being slammed so hard against my reality. If you black, git back, way back. "Well, I just called fifteen minutes ago. I'm the one who called from the Sands. I made an appointment," I responded weakly. "Do you know the name of the person you spoke to?" he asked, looking around the shop with mock concern. The hair-dressers standing around shrugged their shoulders, puzzled looks planted on their faces. Holding my head high to restrain the flow of tears, I turned sharply away from them without speaking another word and walked back to the Sands. I cried the entire hour it took me to wash and style my hair myself. Though we usually had our dinner in one of the hotel's restaurants, Jay ordered it in our suite that evening. He wanted to be intimate, he said, though his mood was celebratory. Perhaps Sinatra had agreed to star in his film. "Your hair looks especially beautiful tonight," he said, with what I felt was a psychic irony, as he opened a bottle of champagne. Tears trickled down my cheeks. I could not speak. When he saw my tears, he came around to my side of the dining table and knelt down beside me. He begged me to tell him what was wrong, pressing me tightly in his arms. I cried out my little story. As I spoke and he

stroked my hair, he began to shake, literally. He was shaking so hard, my body trembled in his embrace. As he released me and got up, I saw that his face was so red he looked as if he would burst. He snatched up the telephone receiver and demanded to speak to Entratter. (2015:86-7)

Nelson Peery provides an example for how damaging racism is when he recalls his father's reaction to the murder of Peery's uncle.

My Uncle George—Pop's younger brother—had been murdered. When assigned a white man's job in the stockyards in Saint Joe, the white man shot him down in cold blood.
Pop read snatches of the letter aloud. When he finished reading, he dropped the letter to the floor, buried his face in his hands, and wept from his guts. "Oh, God," he moaned over and over. "I'd rather it had been me. My poor brother--my baby brother." Mom comforted him for hours and then slowly packed his clothes so he could go and return to the earth that which had been so brutally taken from him. White man's justice declared the murderer insane at the moment he pulled the trigger and released him (1994:31-2).

Racism in America is often portrayed as something that can be overcome by apologies, as reflected in the practice of colleges apologizing for their past complicity with slavery. Such actions suggest that the damage caused by slavery is largely a matter of lingering resentment or bad feelings. This view calls for soothing words, not reparations, relinquishing of privilege, or changes in how institutions operate. Radicalism is thus unwarranted. The accounts of Black radicals suggest, however, that the damage runs deeper and is ongoing, and without fundamental change will never be relegated to the past.

Black radicals describe an American society in which racism causes severe damage to Black people by denying their humanity. Black people in this society are not people, but rather boys, niggers, monkeys—pretty much anything but human. Black radical autobiographers expose the emotional damage this treatment inflicts on Black people. The implication is that racism is not a minor inconvenience but a deeply wounding force that demands strenuous and far-reaching efforts to eradicate.

The autobiographers whose work I examined offer a damning depiction of American society by telling their stories of witnessing, experiencing, and learning about racism. Their narratives show a society in which racism is pervasive, and in which neither respectable behavior nor status can protect Black people against it. Radicals also portray racism in America society as perpetrated by authority figures, not marginal miscreants. Black radicals also reveal racism as deeply wounding to the humanity of Black people. Implicit in this portrayal is a justification for adopting radical politics. If what the authors say about racism is true, this would suggest that American society requires fundamental change. The solution must be extensive and penetrate the very core of American society. Under these conditions, radicalism is reasonable.

IMPLICIT ACCOUNTING FOR A RADICAL PERSPECTIVE

Experiences with racism were recounted in all the autobiographies in my study. In the previous section I discussed these experiences as portrayals of racism in American society. Radicals portrayed racism as (1) pervasive; (2) indifferent to respectable behavior or status; (3) often perpetrated by unaccountable authority figures; and (4) deeply damaging. Black radicals thus implied that (1) racism is fundamental to American society; (2) Black people can't solve the problem by acting differently; (3) appealing to authority figures for fairness won't solve it; and that (4) racism is so damaging that it warrants major societal change. Through telling of their experiences with racism, Black radicals implicitly justified their politics.

Radicals depict racism existing in every aspect of American life. It's present when children go to school. It's present in the government. It's present in the military. It even follows a person home. Radicals argue that modest reform will not solve the problem due to racism's omnipresence in American society. If modest reform won't address the issue, radical action is

necessary. A radical perspective understands that racism isn't an odd happenstance or a fading relic from a previous era. It is still woven into the fabric of America, and legislative tweaking won't make it go away.

Black radicals portray racism as undeterred by respectable behavior or social status. By implication, Black people can't fix the problem by acting differently. Respectability politics—centering on the behavior of Black people—is no solution. Black elites nonetheless use this ideology to shame poor and working-class Black youth for their plight. For example, at the 50th Anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, Bill Cosby gave his infamous "Pound Cake" speech, arguing that Black people could no longer blame white people for social problems like mass incarceration, unequal education, and poverty. Cosby cited teen pregnancy, bad parenting, and sagging pants as examples of the backwardness of Black youth. Black radicals reject this conservative response to racial inequality. In their experiences, "good" behavior doesn't protect against racism. This justifies adhering to radical politics because it frames racism not as an internalized problem for Black people to deal with, but rather an issue that involves the entire society.

Abusive authority figures were central in radicals' confrontations with racism. The autobiographers' experiences with racist police, teachers, and bosses imply that representatives of American society express its racist nature. A popular suggestion for combating racism is an appeal for people in positions of power to act "fairly." Racial bias training for police officers is a clear example of this line of thinking. In their accounts, Black radicals suggest the futility of appealing to these authority figures for fairness. Their experiences with these figures affirms that racism is endemic to U.S. society. Authority figures are a reflection of the problem, and thus not likely to be a source of its solution.

Accounts from Black radicals depict racism as deeply damaging. They talk about it as a dehumanizing force that impacts them physically, emotionally, and mentally. Their accounts come together to show how racism damaged not only themselves but also their families and entire communities. If what they're saying is true, this means that racism isn't a minor inconvenience; it can't be fixed with an apology. This portrayal of racism justifies adopting a perspective that treats racism with the seriousness that it deserves, a seriousness that calls for far-reaching change.

Black radicals offer a strong indictment of American society that they use to justify adopting a radical perspective. If it's true that behavioral changes, reforming authority figures, and policy changes won't solve the problem, then radical change is warranted. If the problem arises from the root, then going after the root is sensible action. Radicalism, in this view, is not merely oppositional but constructive.

Scott and Lyman (1968) describe the different types of justifications people employ to avoid being discredited by untoward action. In Scott and Lyman's scheme, radicals can be seen as using a *denial of injury* type of justification. American society is the "victim" that Black radicals deny in their accounts. Radicals in other words, are not unfairly demonizing a society that gives them freedom and ought to command their allegiance. Rather, they are criticizing a foe that deserves criticism. To be radical is not discrediting but elevating.

Black radicals might also be said to use an *out of options* justification. This means justifying a course of behavior as the only viable option. In their accounts of racism, Black radicals imply that all polite socially acceptable options for addressing racism have failed, and radicalism is the only remaining option. It is the necessary and realistic solution. As Paul

Robeson said, "I have made my choice. I had no alternative. The history of this era is characterized by the degradation of my people" (1998:53).

Other marginalized groups have used similar rhetorics of justification. Sandberg (2009) found that African drug dealers in Norway invoked racism to account for their criminal activity. They told stories about job discrimination, police brutality, and violent racist attacks. The drug dealers justified their behavior by pointing to societal flaws. The dealers' narratives suggest that if they didn't live in a society full of racial discrimination and violence, then they wouldn't need to sell drugs. Sandberg (2009) calls this "oppression discourse," which suggests that anybody under similar circumstances would act the same way.

Black radicals used oppression discourse to suggest that anybody would, if they experienced racism in the same way, see the need for radical change. Accounts in this form are effective in eliciting reader sympathy for the writer (Sandberg 2009). This strategy, however, comes with a cost: being discredited as a victim (Dunn 2008). My analysis doesn't speak to this possibility, but it's something that could be explored in a study of reader reactions.

Looking at the broader context in which radicals write these autobiographies suggests avenues for further research. Davis (2000) argues that the two major approaches to accounts overlook the role of third parties by focusing only on the individual as the account-maker. These third parties can be other people or even institutions. Davis found that account-making process by children who falsely accused their parents of sexual abuse is a collabrative effort between parents, therapists, and advocacy organizations. Political radicals likewise shape their accounts in relation to political organizations and social movements. How these organizations and movements affected radicals' accounts is a matter that could be explored in further research.

Beyond Accounting

Social movement scholars refer to the way activists diagnose a social problem, present solutions for it, and motivate others to support the solution as framing (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow 2004). It is through framing that activists identify stakeholders and victims, and lay blame for a problem. (Gamson 2002). In writing their autobiographies, Black radicals engage in framing; they implicitly give readers a diagnosis and a solution in the form of radical change. This way of framing the problem does more than justify the narrator's politics. It can also help to justify the political strategies adopted by social movements.

It's not until the last few decades that scholars began looking at the relationships narratives have to the framing process in social movements (Hunt and Benford 1994; Polletta 1998; Steward et al. 2002). Researchers have observed that narratives are a critical way frames are produced and distributed (Steward et al. 2002). More recently scholars have begun to look at the narratives that activists tell about themselves (Polletta 2006; Polletta et al. 2011; Cabaniss 2019). Schwalbe and Shay (2014:169) argue that these self-narratives are "disguised framing devices," meaning that frames are embedded within self-narratives, frames that can be adopted by other social movements.

My analysis has shown that implicit in the personal narratives of Black radicals is a diagnosis and solution for racism in America. While I've focused mainly on narratives as self-justification, others who identify with the narratives can adopt their implicit frames as well. Framing in narrative form can be especially powerful because of reader identification with a narrator. As Schwalbe and Shay (2014:169) suggest, self-narratives are effective for promoting social change because they offer a "matter-of-fact description of states of affairs, their basis in

seemingly indisputable personal experience, their vividness and memorability, and their

emotional force."

Framing can, of course, be a contentious process (Benford 1993). Goffman (1974:322)

argues "frame disputes" happen when a subordinate group tries to challenge a dominant group's

framing. If narratives are essential to the framing process, this means the narratives can also be in

contention with other narratives. For example, historian Kathryn Nasstrom's (2008) work looks

at how autobiographies by civil rights activists align with and challenge dominant narratives

about the Civil Rights Movement. My analysis shows how Black radicals disputed reformists

frames—on which the Civil Rights Movement was based—and advanced a frame that called for

more radical action.

Future research should do more to focus on how the contentious nature of the framing

process shapes storytelling in social movements. Emily R. Cabaniss's (2019) recent work on the

reframing strategies of immigrant youth activists looks at how storytelling can help challenge

frames. She shows that collective storytelling and "character work" (Jasper et al. 2018) are

effective for marginalized factions looking to challenge dominant frames within a movement.

While my project shows the embedded frame within the self-narratives of Black radicals, this

work can be expanded by comparing these narratives to stories Black liberals and conservatives

tell about racism.

CONCLUSION

I analyzed the autobiographies of fourteen Black radical activists with the goal of

examining how these individuals *account* for believing that an overhaul of American society is

the only way to liberate Black people from oppression. I found that Black radicals use their

experiences with racism to portray racism in America in a way that implicitly justified their non-normative political stances. Sharing their experiences with racism allows Black radicals to present their political beliefs as logical and necessary. Embedded within these narratives about racism in America is a social movement frame that suggests that revolutionary struggle is the only solution to the problem.

This study shows how Black radicals give meaning to their political perspectives by crafting extended narrative accounts. By telling about their encounters with racism in America, the authors challenge the mainstream view of radicalism as unwarranted. Black radical autobiographies further challenge the equation of radicalism with violence, extremism, and irrationality. When life testimony shows racism to be endemic to U.S. society, to be built into its institutions, to be inescapable and deeply damaging, it is, by implication, reasonable to adopt a politics that aims at fundamental transformation.

As discussed earlier, a general principle is that people are likely to honor accounts that they feel are credible and authentic (Scott and Lyman 1968; Blumstein 1974). Autobiographies are powerful vehicles for establishing both qualities. Life stories invite readers to identify with, come to know, and come to trust the narrators of those stories. The present study, focusing only on narratives, provides no answer to the question of whether these accounts worked with their intended audiences at the time they were published. Perhaps the more important question, from the standpoint of creating a non-racist society, is whether they work with readers today.

Black radicals, then and now, hold that people who seek equality for Black people must look closely at the basic structure of the United States, not just at attitudes, beliefs, and acts of interpersonal discrimination. If Black radicals are right about racism in America, efforts to fight

it must be oriented to more fundamental change. Their autobiographical accounts are a powerful

means to convey this analysis to others. To honor their accounts is to honor the pursuit of justice.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A

First-wave
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