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'I was scared as hell, you know…': African American POWs in Europe and the shaping and reshaping of U.S. national memories of the Second World War

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ABSTRACT
This article joins debates about prisoner of war experiences in the Second World War, with a focus on detainees' narratives and memories. The research finds that both racial identity and the availability of public accounts can have a profound impact on the way narratives about wartime captivity are shaped and re-shaped. Drawing on oral history interviews with veterans who were part of segregated units, and who were captured and imprisoned as POWs, the article brings to light previously unheard stories, and shows the extent to which this heterogeneity affected 'memory composure' within the Long Civil Rights Movement framework.

Introduction

The exact number of soldiers who were captured and imprisoned during the Second World War is still unknown, but historians estimate that roughly 35 million combatants – equal to almost half of the global fighting forces – were, for a period of time, prisoners of war (POWs).[1] Captivity however, was not experienced or remembered in the same way by all participants and while many stories of detention have been integrated into national narratives of sacrifice and endurance, others have been marginalised and hidden from the historical record. The voices of African American soldiers who became POWs are among the most striking absences, as their experiences have been excluded from historical discourses and left out of broader narratives about the American involvement in the war as well as from accounts of

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[1]Juliette Pattinson, Lucy Noakes, and Wendy Ugolini, 'Incarcerated Masculinities, Male POWs and the Second World War', *Journal of War & Culture Studies* 7, no. 3 (August 2014), p. 180.

wartime captivity in general. This study looks at the experience of African American soldiers who were captured and held as POWs while deployed overseas and who, like many other non-white detainees, were left without recognition in post-war memories developed around narratives of national belonging that were divided along racial lines.[2] The article argues that resurfacing these stories challenges our understanding of wartime captivity and imprisonment, but also of the American experience of the conflict more broadly. Diversity, such as belonging to a culturally, ethnically or racially distinct group, plays a key role on the way former prisoners remember incarceration decades after the conflict.

Academic debates on wartime captivity have been rather lively in the last few decades, but very little has been published about the captivity and incarceration of African American soldiers.[3] Recently, historians have shown increasing interests in the

[2]Thomas A. Guglielmo, *Divisions: A New History of Racism and Resistance in America's World War II Military*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[3]For a survey of key publications on prisoners of war and internees in the Second World War see Ilse Dorothee Pautsch, 'Review: Prisoners of War and Internees in the Second World War: A Survey of Some Recent Publications', *Contemporary European History* 12, no. 2 (2003), pp. 225–38. Other notable works include: S. P. MacKenzie, *The Treatment of Prisoners of War in World War II*, 2023, which looks at policies and practices of imprisonment; Juliette Pattinson, 'Playing the Daft Lassie with Them': Gender, Captivity and the Special Operations Executive during the Second World War', *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d'histoire* 13, no. 2 (June 2006), pp. 271–92; Juliette Pattinson, *Behind Enemy Lines: Gender, Passing, and the Special Operations Executive in the Second World War,* (Manchester; New York; Manchester University Press, 2011); Pattinson, Noakes, and Ugolini, 'Incarcerated Masculinities.'; Christina Twomey, 'Australian Nurse Pows: Gender, War and Captivity', *Australian Historical Studies* 36, no. 124 (October 2004), pp. 255–74; Twomey. Felicia Yap, 'Prisoners of War and Civilian Internees of the Japanese in British Asia: The Similarities and Contrasts of Experience', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 2020, p. 31; Daniel Milne, Anoma Pieris, and Beatrice Trefalt, 'Introduction: Prisoners of the Asia-Pacific War – Forgotten Locales, Transimperial Links, and Selective Memorialisation', *British Journal for Military History* 10, no. 2 (September 13, 2024), pp. 5–17; Daniel Milne and Takeo Sasamoto, 'Memorializing Prisoners of War in Japan: Local Activism, War Criminals, and Reconciliation', *British Journal for Military History* 10, no. 2 (September 13, 2024), pp. 100–125; Other recent publications focusing on allied POWs include Thomas Saylor, *Long Hard Road: American POWs during World War II,* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2007). Adrian Gilbert, *POW: Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939-1945,* (London: John Murray, 2006). Arieh J. Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity: Britain and the United States and Their POWs in Nazi Germany,* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). is very interesting as it offers an analysis of living conditions in

contribution and role of black Americans in the conflict, as well as in their stories. Lusane in his book *Hitler's Black Victims*, offers a very detailed historical reconstruction of the incarceration of African Americans in the context of Nazi racism.[4] Parker's essay *Fighting for Democracy* situates black Americans' experiences of the conflict within the Civil Rights struggle, arguing that military service transformed their sense of citizenship leading them to articulate their grievances through a rhetoric of rights and sacrifice that criticised traditional memories of the 'Good War' while still remaining attached to national ideals.[5] More recently Delmont published a comprehensive history of black Americans fighting the 'Double V campaign' (the national campaign started in 1942 promoting the idea of a 'double victory', over racism and discrimination at home and the Axis powers abroad), whereas Guglielmo's scholarly study *Divisions* examines how the wartime American military was divided along racial hierarchies and shaped by systemic segregation.[6]

These soldiers' experiences of incarceration, however, have been largely overlooked and the main publications focusing specifically on black POWs remain Kesting's and Killingray's.[7] This article's ambition is to contribute both to academic discussions on wartime captivity and on African American soldiers' experiences in the Second World War. It discusses the way black POWs' memories of detention were shaped and

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Nazi camps and of the actions taken by the British and American governments for the safety of their POWs, based on International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) reports and official protests sent to Berlin by the allied governments.

[4]Clarence Lusane, *Hitler's Black Victims The Historical Experiences of European Blacks, Africans and African Americans During the Nazi Era,* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), chap. 6.

[5]Christopher S. Parker, ed., *Fighting for Democracy: Black Veterans and the Struggle against White Supremacy in the Postwar South*, Princeton Studies in American Politics (Princeton University Press, 2010); John E. Bodnar, *The 'Good War' in American Memory*, Paperback ed (Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2012).

[6]Matthew F. Delmont, *Half American: The Epic Story of African Americans Fighting World War II at Home and Abroad*, (New York: Viking, 2022); Guglielmo, *Divisions*, 2021. Other publications on this subject include Christopher Paul Moore, *Fighting for America: Black Soldiers– the Unsung Heroes of World War II*, Presidio Press trade paperback ed (New York: Presidio Press/Ballantine Books, 2006). Robert F. Jefferson, *Fighting for Hope: African American Troops of the 93rd Infantry Division in World War II and Postwar America*, War/Society/Culture, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

[7]'The experience of black POWs is one of the least researched areas of World War II' states Lusane, *Hitler's Black Victims*, p. 135; Robert W. Kesting, 'Forgotten Victims: Blacks in the Holocaust', *The Journal of Negro History* 77, no. 1 (1992), pp. 30–36, https://doi.org/10.2307/3031525; David Killingray, 'African Americans in Enemy Hands', in *Prisoners of War and Their Captors in World War II*, (Oxford: Berg, 1996).

reshaped over time, the broader meanings of these accounts and their significance in the construction of identity within the context of the Long Civil Rights Movement.[8] The article argues that combatants experienced capture and captivity as traumatic events, drenched in feelings and emotions, which are profoundly racialised and which will linger in their memories for decades and often resulting in self-empowering narratives. Being a POW is often described as a state of melancholy, because while significant events unfold for those who continue to fight, prisoners are at the mercy of their enemies. Wartime captivity often clashes with the revered image of masculinity that war expects from male combatants, the soldier hero ideal, that is deeply ingrained in collective memories of the Second World War, and in the 'traditional' narrative that emerged as prevalent in American public culture.[9] Wartime incarceration was seen as the antithesis of battle, experienced as emasculating because soldiers were forced to passive roles. For this reason, most accounts of the early post-war represent particular aspects of captivity, e.g. escape, brotherhood and comradeship. These elements are overemphasised, while others, such as fear, capture, shame and trauma, are silenced. These 'critical' narratives never disappeared though, and over the post-war decades, there has been a transformation of accounts of detention from stories of humiliation and suffering, to a celebration of national identity, which brings to the fore the need to locate and examine more stories of wartime incarceration, including those of African American servicemen whose experiences have remained on the margins of national narratives.[10] Recovering these overlooked accounts requires tracing the paths through which they can be re-inscribed in the historical record and this article explores those paths, analysing some elements that contributed to the resurfacing of these stories – both in archives and within broader narratives of national identity. The narratives of African American POWs were often overshadowed by accounts of achievement and the analysis of these memories' meanings highlights that wartime incarceration and the emotions connected to that experience were profoundly racialised. The meanings that narrators attach to captivity evolve from the

[8]Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, 'The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past', *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2005), pp. 1233–1263; Anne Stefani, 'Guerres historiographiques : interprétation et mémorialisation du mouvement pour les droits civiques aux États-Unis', *Cycnos* 32 'Les guerres culturelles aux Etats-Unis', no. 2 (2016), pp. 1–19.

[9]See for example Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire, and the Imagining of Masculinities*, (London ; New York: Routledge, 1994); Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation Speaks: Letters and Reflections*, 1st ed, (Norwalk, Conn: Easton Press, 1999); Pattinson, Noakes, and Ugolini, 'Incarcerated Masculinities', 179–80; Bodnar, *The 'Good War' in American Memory*, p. 4.

[10]Bodnar, 166-199; Christina Twomey, 'POWs of the Japanese: Race and Trauma in Australia, 1970–2005', *Journal of War & Culture Studies* 7, no. 3 (2014), pp. 191–205.

initial vulnerability to self-empowering narratives that emphasise the ability to overcome trauma and ultimately contribute to the double V campaign.

Resurfacing Black Combatants' Stories of Incarceration

In the Second World War many black Americans were called upon to serve in a racially segregated military, and they constituted roughly 12 percent of the total U.S. armed forces in all campaigns. Serving in various capacities, they fought on different fronts and contributed to secure victory in 1945.[11] When the U.S. joined the hostilities, the American armed forces were rigidly segregated and African Americans were disproportionately assigned to service and logistical units, and given unskilled jobs such as cleaning, maintenance or construction among others.[12] This reflected the military's racism and 'deep and longstanding commitment to segregation' that reinforced the broader social order of Jim Crow America, and the War Department's policies followed the belief that black soldiers were unfit for combat roles.[13] As the war progressed, manpower shortages became more acute and the U.S. military could no longer afford to keep thousands of trained black soldiers confined to service roles. The numbers of black servicemen sent to combat in the European and Pacific theatres gradually increased as the conflict advanced, and one notable example was 92 Infantry Division, nicknamed 'Buffalo Soldiers' from the name of the post-Civil War regiments composed only of African Americans to serve on the frontier. 92 Division became operative in 1942 as a 'coloured' Infantry Division under the command of Major General Edward Almond, with black infantrymen serving under white officers. The division was assigned to Fort Huachuca, Arizona, where soldiers were trained for about two years before being sent to Europe. Following D-Day, the it was deployed in the Italian campaign, where, after landing in Naples in the summer of 1944, it took part in heavy fighting and sustained significant losses.[14] Another well-known example is the Tuskegee Airmen, the first all-black flying unit in the U.S. armed forces. Created in 1941 as part of the Army Air Corps, the unit's objective was to train fighter pilots at the Tuskegee Army Air Field in Alabama. Their first missions were in the Mediterranean theatre and from 1944 they constituted the 332nd Fighter Group which was active in European campaigns with missions in Italy, France and central Europe.[15] A number of Tank Battalions, including the 'Black Panthers' (761st Tank

[11]Killingray, 'African Americans in Enemy Hands', p. 181.

[12]Delmont, *Half American*, pp. 25–43.

[13]Thomas A. Guglielmo, *Divisions*, p. 101, pp. 111-115.

[14]Christian O'Connell, 'A Roman Holiday? African Americans and Italians in the Second World War', *History* 106, no. 373 (December 2021), pp. 775–803; Delmont, *Half American*, pp. 229–243.

[15]On the history of the Tuskegee Airmen, see J. Todd Moye, 'The Tuskegee Airmen Oral History Project and Oral History in the National Park Service', *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 2 (September 2002), p. 580; Charles E. Francis and Adolph

Battalion), 784 Tank Battalion, 614 and 827 Tank Destroyer Battalions were also deployed in France, Germany and Belgium, whereas 93 Army Infantry Division, 51 and 52 Defense Battalions of the U.S. Marine Corps were deployed in the Asia-Pacific theatres. These units were predominantly assigned to service roles, and were therefore far less likely to be captured, despite some fragmentary evidence suggesting the presence of black POWs on the Far Eastern fronts.[16]

Eventually, over one million African Americans served in the U.S. military in the Second World War, and over a half of these were deployed overseas.[17] This meant that some of them were captured and became POWs in gradually growing numbers over the course of the conflict, although the exact figure remains unknown due to incomplete historical records.[18] The U.S. National Archives hold a total of 143,374 records of Second World War POWs, out of which only 154 are listed as 'Negro'.[19] Nevertheless, these records are imprecise, as data concerning U.S. prisoners was not always collected or recorded consistently.[20] Even more surprisingly, only one name is listed as Navy and one as Merchant Marine, and this is probably a consequence of the POW reporting protocols that varied across the different branches of the U.S. military. In the Navy, when a sailor was believed captured, the unit's commanding officer was responsible for reporting him missing in action (MIA) or as a possible POW. However,

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Caso, *The Tuskegee Airmen: The Men Who Changed a Nation*, 5th commemorative ed. with class pictures (Boston [Mass.]: Branden Books, 2008); John Holway, *Red Tails: An Oral History of the Tuskegee Airmen*, Rev. Dover ed (Mineola, N.Y: Dover Publications, 2012).

[16]Chris Dixon, *African Americans and the Pacific War, 1941-1945: Race, Nationality, and the Fight for Freedom,* (Cambridge university press, 2018), pp. 206-219. Dixon details some examples, focusing especially on the treatment of incarcerated black servicemen by Japanese troops, rather than on their experiences and accounts. Dixon's work also shows that the context of the Far East was profoundly different from the one in Europe, for racial as well as geopolitical and military reasons, and it confirms that evidence is scarce and hard to locate. Consequently, the focus of the present study remains on European theatres of war.

[17]Delmont, *Half American*, xiii; Killingray, 'African Americans in Enemy Hands.', p. 182, p. 197.

[18] Killingray, pp. 196–99.

[19]National Archives and Records Administration (hereinafter NARA), RG 389, Records of World War II Prisoners of War, created, 1942 - 1947, documenting the period 12/7/1941 - 11/19/1946, World War II Prisoners of War Data File, 12/7/1941 - 11/19/1946.

[20]The 'Racial group' field is missing in many entries, and among the 154 black POWs identified, 18 are classified as 'civilians', 89 as 'Army', whereas for 45 POWs the service field is blank.

the POW status was formally assigned if the U.S. authorities received reliable confirmation, such as POW camp rosters or International Red Cross reports. More importantly, racial information was rarely included in MIA or POW reporting procedures. As for the Merchant Marine, records indicate that 600-800 Mariners became POWs during the war and historians estimate that African Americans comprised 8 to 10% of this organisation. There are documented cases of black mariners being captured, for example when their ships were seized or sunk, and sent to the *Marlag und Milag Nord* POW camp near Bremen, or to other camps in the Pacific theatre.[21] However, as with the Navy, most Merchant Marine POW lists do not record racial identity, making it difficult to assess the exact number of detainees. U.S. military records thus underestimate the real figure to quite a large extent. When it comes to 92 Infantry Division, 56 casualties are listed as 'Captured or interned' and out of the 992 pilots who graduated to become Tuskegee Airmen, 32 were imprisoned by the Axis.[22]

The fact that black servicemen were captured and became POWs is nonetheless well established and was publicly acknowledged both during the war and in its immediate aftermath, as contemporary press coverage makes clear, even though this aspect of the African American wartime experience has been largely obliterated from dominant historical narratives. Black newspapers reported on the capture and imprisonment of black soldiers, as soon as they began to be deployed overseas in 1944. The *Cleveland Call and Post* in September 1944 published an explicit editorial calling on the War Department to provide transparent information about the fate of African American servicemen, including those who became POWs, insisting 'Let's have the facts' and highlighting that black GIs were among those captured.[23] Over the following months black newspapers documented the experience of these prisoners, including their liberation. The *Pittsburgh Courier*'s London correspondent George Padmore reported that 'German leaders are making a desperate effort to discard the Nazi superiority doctrine by attempting to win the confidence of Negro prisoners of war', describing them as 'a great martial race' to flatter them in a last-ditch propaganda effort, which

[21]Greg H. Williams, *The United States Merchant Marine in World War I: Ships, Crews, Shipbuilders and Operators*, (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2017). It should also be noted that in the U.S. National Archives POW records, the cards for individuals held at the *Marlag und Milag Nord* POW camp list their service as 'Army'; therefore, we cannot conclude with certainty that those listed as 'Civilians' were in fact Merchant Mariners.

[22] https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA438106. Accessed on 10 June 2025, Charles River Editors., *The Tuskegee Airmen: The History and Legacy of America's First Black Fighter Pilots in World War II,* (Boston, MA: Charles River Editors, 2015), Loc. 602.

[23]Library of Congress (LOC), ProQuest Black Studies pg. 8B, 'Let's have the facts', *Cleveland Call and Post (1934-1962)*, 9 Sep 1944.

was not only yet another acknowledgement that they existed, but also that their treatment was a matter of military and political concern.[24] Similarly, the *Michigan Chronicle* published the story of Private First Class Uel O. Metcalfe of 92 Infantry Division, from Flint, Michigan, who had initially been listed as MIA in Italy, and was officially reported as detained 'somewhere in a German prison camp'.[25] On Good Friday, 30 March 1945, troops of the U.S. Third Army liberated the Ziegenhain prison camp in Germany and the American POWs detained there were immediately flown to Le Havre, France, and then sent to 'Camp Lucky Strike', the well-known tent town where thousands of American troops awaited to be transported back to the U.S. after 8 May 1945. Among the 1,879 servicemen repatriated on the same ship, seven black former POWs landed in Camp Kilmer on 12 May, New Jersey, and were part of the first to be interviewed and photographed following the official announcement of V-E Day.[26] None of them are listed as 'Negro' in official U.S. military records, but they were photographed and interviewed to give brief accounts of the hardships they experienced in the German prison camps where they spent between 5 and 107 days.[27]

The U.S. military authorities themselves were aware of the presence of black POWs since early 1945, as evidenced by internal investigations into the ill treatment of prisoners. In the afternoon of Sunday, 17 December 1944, during the Battle of the Bulge, eleven black GIs walked to the house of Mathias Langer, Burgermeister of the Wereth hamlet in Belgium. They were bearing a white flag and had their hands up, and Langer and his family welcomed and fed them, until a German reconnaissance car approached. The soldiers surrendered immediately, but they were searched and made to sit on the cold and wet ground until dark: 'After it became dark, the men were

[24]LOC, ProQuest Black Studies pg. 15, 'Discard Master Race Theory to Win Confidence of Negroes', George Padmore London Correspondent, *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*, Mar. 24, 1945.
[25]LOC, ProQuest Black Studies pg. 17 'News of Flint: Prisoner of War', *Michigan Chronicle (1939-2010)*, Apr. 28, 1945.
[26]LOC, ProQuest Black Studies pg. A2, 'First Prisoners Of War Interviewed Following V-E Day: GIs Tell Of Suffering At Hands Of The Nazis', Constance Curtis, *New York Amsterdam News (1943-1961)*, May 12, 1945; LOC, ProQuest Black Studies pg. 11, 'Democratic Spirit Reigns Among Freed Prisoners of War and Wounded GI's at Camp Kilmer', *Afro-American (1893-)*, May 19, 1945.
[27]NARA, RG 389, Records of World War II Prisoners of War, created, 1942 - 1947, documenting the period 12/7/1941 - 11/19/1946, World War II Prisoners of War Data File, 12/7/1941 - 11/19/1946. Albert DeByers's name, among those interviewed in the article, does not appear in the official records, for the others the 'Racial group code' field is blank, with the exception of Raymond Abney who is listed as white although he is included in the group of black POWs mentioned in the *New York Amsterdam News Article* as well as in the *Afro-American* article published on 19 May.

lined up on the street and made to run in front of the vehicle carrying the German soldiers. Neither I nor any members of my family ever saw the Negro soldiers alive again.'[28] Langer declared in his sworn deposition. The next day the African American GIs were found dead 800 meters from his house, with their bodies partially covered in snow. They were examined a few weeks later, in an investigation carried out by 395 Infantry Regiment in the first half of 1945, to reveal that they had been shot in the head.[29] This was only one of many cases of ill treatment of black POWs that were investigated but only rarely tried: while the atrocity itself and its racial motivation could both be established, the perpetrators' identities could not be definitively ascertained.[30] What is clear, however, is that such stories remained marginalised post-war narratives of national belonging. Tracing the implications of this obliteration and the processes through which they resurfaced and entered the historical record, are essential steps to understanding the dynamics of the construction of identity and memory.

For African American soldiers the celebration of their identity is linked to questions of race and ethnicity, in the Long Civil Rights Movement framework, that situates the struggle for social justice in the U.S. within broader national and international contexts and expands its chronological, geographical and cultural scope. In other words, the movement

> took root in the liberal and radical milieu of the late 1930s, … accelerated during World War II, stretched far beyond the South, was continuously and ferociously contested, and in the 1960s and 1970s inspired a 'movement of movements' that 'def[ies] any narrative of collapse.[31]

The stories of captivity of African American combatants re-emerged in parallel to broader developments which deeply affected public memory and national narratives. After the 1980s the cultural turn first, and then the emotional turn legitimized personal accounts as valuable historical sources, contributing to the acceptance of subjectivity

[28]NARA, RG 549, Records of United States Army Europe, JAG, War Crimes Files (cases not tried), Entry A1 2239, box 26, 'Ill treatment of prisoners of war', 26 February 1945.
[29]NARA, RG 549, Records of United States Army Europe, JAG, War Crimes Files (cases not tried), Entry A1 2239, box 26, 'Memorandum, Case 6-102, Wereth', 28 July 1945.
[30]Kesting, 'Forgotten Victims: Blacks in the Holocaust', 31–33; Lusane, *Hitler's Black Victims*, pp. 141–42.
[31]Hall, 'The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past', p. 1235.

and the development of cultural forms of war memories.[32] Another crucial factor was the definition of a new psychiatric condition, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), added to the diagnostic Manual of Mental Disorders in 1980 by the American Psychiatric Association (APA). As the trauma suffered by prisoners became more accepted, it was no longer marginalised in their accounts, and black POWs stories of incarceration appeared after the creation of PTSD as a psychiatric category. Black POWs accounts also began to appear after an important evolution of the history of the Civil Rights movement, which after the 1980s was no longer the top-down history of the movement's leaders, but started to include more voices from the bottom-up, and grassroot participants became involved in the construction of Civil Rights narratives.

Stories of incarceration of African American servicemen have resurfaced as narratives of survival and recovery from a traumatic past, offering new ways to give meaning to wartime experiences. Nevertheless, compared to other POW accounts, these narratives share certain distinctive characteristics. They remain fewer in number and harder to find, which is only in part explained by the U.S. military's segregation, where black soldiers were deployed in combat roles later in the conflict and in smaller numbers. The accounts that do exist emerged decades after the war's end and are often drawn from units or divisions celebrated since the 1980s and integrated into broader public narratives about the African American wartime experience within the framework of the Long Civil Rights Movement. These stories of captivity were overshadowed by accounts of valour and achievement, as for example those of recipients of a Medal of Honor, or other heroic exploits such as those of the Tuskegee Airmen and 92 Infantry Division, which challenged and counterbalanced the wartime stereotypes about black troops.[33] In fact, these experiences contributed to transforming exclusion and discrimination in stories of triumph over adversity, thereby acknowledging racism without destabilizing the prevailing shared 'good war' narrative.[34]

[32]T. G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson, and Michael Roper, eds., *Commemorating War: The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration*, (Milton Park and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 32–52.

[33]Delmont, *Half American*, xiii. Guglielmo, *Divisions*, 2021, 317–19; Robert F. Jefferson, 'Interfaced Memory: Black WWII Ex-GIs' and Veterans' Reunions of the Late Twentieth Century', in *Oral History and Public Memories*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), pp. 187–204.

[34]'No story of African Americans in World War II fi t better into the process of crafting a virtuous tale from wartime racial hostilities than the account of the Tuskegee Airmen', Bodnar, *The 'Good War' in American Memory*, p. 178.

Some of these personal accounts are oral histories preserved at the Veterans History Project (VHP) of the Library of Congress.[35] The VHP collections' materials come from a range of different sources: some interviews are collected by in-house professional oral historians, but for the most part they are from grassroots projects, institutions, associations or even individuals from across the country.[36] In total, there are ten African American narrators who were POWs in wartime. Half of these were part of

[35]https://www.loc.gov/programs/veterans-history-project/about-this-program/. Last accessed on 12 June 2025. The Veterans History Project was created in 2000 by the U.S. Congress. The authorizing legislation (Public Law 106-380) received unanimous support and was signed by President William J. Clinton in October 2000.

[36]At present VHP preserves 121,975 personal narratives, and the vast majority of these, 64,717, are about the Second World War. This can be explained by the fact that the VHP was created in 2000, when there was a clear intention to capture the stories of the 'greatest generation' who had participated in the war, as members were coming near the end of their lives. There are 3,677 stories of POWs and by restricting the selection to 'Black or African American', 18 items can be found. In an interview conducted by the author with Megan Harris, Senior Reference Specialist for VHP on January 11, 2022, the nature of the archival process was discussed. The VHP is a public program as well as an archival program, and it is conceived as part of the Library of Congress' identity as the library of average Americans. In line with this vision, laymen and women can act as interviewers, and the materials preserved at VHP come from school projects as well as community projects. There is an effort to offer a mechanism by which voices are not silenced, as there is no active selection of the materials. The institution publishes a toolkit which indicates some basic criteria (such as interviews' minimum duration, technical requirements, etc.), but it does not actively control what is included in the archive, as long as the criteria are met. Personal narratives also include diaries, letters and other types of written accounts. The VHP database offers the following selection criteria: Wars and conflicts; Service branch; Service unit; Location of service; Battles and campaigns; Highest rank; Prisoner of war; Race; Gender. The list of these collections includes:
Isham George Benton, 92 Infantry Division, 365th Infantry Regiment - two items;
Harold H. Brown, Tuskegee Airmen - two items;
Thurston L. Gaines, Tuskegee Airmen - two items;
Alexander Jefferson, Tuskegee Airmen - six items;
Callie Johnson, 274 Quartermaster - one item;
George Jordan, 499 Battalion - one item;
John Pierce, Third Army - one item;
Luther H. Smith, Tuskegee Airmen - one item;
Rothacker Childs Smith, 92 Infantry Division, 366th Infantry Regiment - one item;
Leon Woodie Spears, Tuskegee Airmen - one item.

the Tuskegee Airmen and among the other half, only two narrators offer a clear account of their captivity. Both of them were part of 92 Infantry Division.

Tuskegee Airmen's stories are often featured in the few published works that mention black POWs in the Second World War and for the most part they are the only ones mentioned, as they were particularly well suited to reframe wartime racial divisions into heroic narratives.[37] Overall, 992 pilots were trained at Tuskegee throughout the war, they earned 150 Distinguished Flying Crosses, and came to be celebrated as 'public legends' in the postwar.[38] As a consequence, they were more likely than other groups to tell their stories on public platforms. Methodologically this study positions itself with the post-positivist approach, distanced from typicality and representativeness. Its focus is instead on meaning, and personal narratives are considered of value however unusual or unique their experiences were.[39] Historians who adopt 'the luminosity of the single case' axiom use personal accounts to explore constructions of identity, subjectivity and memory in relation with contemporary shared discourses, the wider culture and society.[40] The concept of 'memory composure' shows that memory is not only selective, but it also shapes and reshapes narratives into meaningful accounts which change as they are affected by the narrator's subjectivity, by the historical moment when the testimony is recorded, and the shared histories and collective memory of events.[41] The idea of 'public legends' defines

[37]Killingray, 'African Americans in Enemy Hands.'; Kesting, 'Forgotten Victims: Blacks in the Holocaust.' Adrian Gilbert, *POW: Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 - 1945*, Paperback ed, (London: Murray, 2007), 263–65; Bodnar, *The 'Good War' in American Memory*, p. 178.

[38]The term 'public legends' is used in reference to the theory of memory composure as developed in Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*, New ed, (Clayton, Vic: Monash University Press, 2013); Alistair Thomson, 'Anzac Memories. Popular Memory Theory Into Practice in Australia', *The Oral History Reader*, 2016th ed., (London ; New York: Routledge, n.d.), pp. 342–53.

[39]Alistair Thomson, 'Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History', *The Oral History Review* 34, no. 1 (January 1, 2007), pp. 53–57, https://doi.org/10.1525/ohr.2007.34.1.49; Alessandro Portelli, 'The Peculiarities of Oral History', *History Workshop* Autumn, 1981, no. 12 (1981), p. 99.

[40]Penny Summerfield, *Histories of the Self. Personal Narratives and Historical Practice*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 135–61.

[41]Developed by the Popular Memory Group in Birmingham, the concept of 'memory composure' plays on the double meaning of the word 'composure' to explain that we compose our memories in a way that makes us feel in alignment with our past, present and future selves. See Thomson, *Anzac Memories*; T. G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson, and Michael Roper, eds., *Commemorating War*; Summerfield, *Histories of the Self*.

selective national identities which intersect individual memories, as personal experiences and emotions are connected to public meanings.[42]

The VHP materials were all collected in the early 2000s, when a composed identity and a shared memory of the POW experience already existed, and the traumas related to that experience were recognized and accepted.[43] As the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum in the 1960s, interest in the war experiences of African American soldiers grew and the story of the Tuskegee Airmen in particular increasingly attracted attention, as their contribution to the war effort was recognized and celebrated. National interest for the Tuskegee Airmen's story sparked particularly after President Bill Clinton signed a law directing the National Parks Service (NPS) to create a national historic site in Tuskegee, Alabama and escalated after 2007 when President George W. Bush awarded them the Congressional Gold Medal, and again after veterans were invited to attend the inauguration of Barack Obama in 2009.[44] Obama had already acknowledged his gratefulness in 2007 when he said: 'My career in public service was made possible by the path heroes like the Tuskegee Airmen trail-blazed'.

The Tuskegee Airmen 'public legend' was thus established and by the 2000s it was alive and present in the individual memory of most narrators. Furthermore, by the 2000s, public narratives on the Civil Rights Struggle were collected from the bottom up, and no longer just through the accounts of the movement's leaders. Stories of heroism, such as that of Lieutenant John R. Fox who was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honour in 1997 for his actions in December 1944 as part of 92 Infantry Division, and stories of prestige and national honour such as the Tuskegee Airmen's, resurfaced in the context of the long Civil Rights era, when minorities sought recognition by claiming a place within the national 'traditional' memory of the war.[45] These stories allowed narrators to assert their identities though military excellence, rather than victimhood, thus becoming symbols of integration and Civil Rights, although this overshadowed the realities of most black servicemen's experiences that did not fit these narratives. POWs' stories fit this framework because in a context where segregation and discrimination meant being relegated to support roles, denied combat and opportunities to demonstrate valour, captivity acquired a different meaning. It meant having been a combatant and having been part of the groups who had the chance to contribute to the double V campaign. When testimonies about wartime incarceration are collected in this context, narrators tend to frame their accounts in ways that accentuate particular aspects of their experiences, while toning

[42]Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, pp. 414–49.
[43]Pattinson, Noakes, and Ugolini, 'Incarcerated Masculinities', p. 180.
[44]Moye, 'The Tuskegee Airmen Oral History Project and Oral History in the National Park Service', p. 580.
[45]Bodnar, *The 'Good War' in American Memory*, pp. 166-199.

down others.[46] Some elements, explored in-depth in the following parts, emerge as key in the shaping of these memories: the treatment received by their Axis captors which reflected the emotional burden of the racialised experience of imprisonment and the question of ethnic identity, segregation and racism, often represented by self-empowering narratives in the achievement of memory composure.

Emotions, Identity and Meaning

'Look at me. I can't hide. They know what I am.'[47]

The emotions African American POWs narrate are deeply shaped by the racialised nature of their incarceration, as they experienced fears, threats and humiliations in a certain way precisely because they were black, however they were treated by their Axis captors. These emotions shaped their wartime experiences and continued to structure the way they remembered and recounted them: emotions 'may determine what is available in memory narratives … lead directly to the past and bring the past somatically and vividly into the present'.[48] Narrators therefore confront their emotions and reshape their past in ways that negotiate both individual and collective identity intersecting the Long Civil Rights framework, which provides a powerful lens through which veterans construct these narratives and give meaning to their recollections of captivity. These memories are shaped and reshaped by racialised emotions, but also by myths and rumours about Axis racial policies and by the narrators' spiritual beliefs, thus becoming forms of post-war activism and engagement in the movement for racial equality.

This is clearly evident in the narratives where memories of encounters with enemy captors are intensely emotional and often recalled in great detail, sometimes filling up to a third of an interview. Stories of capture are remembered as episodes of trauma, through the prism of broader shared narratives about black soldiers fighting for the double V campaign against the Axis as well as for equality in their own country. Interviewees often give thorough accounts of what they felt when they were captured and fear, in particular fear of the unknown and of death, is among the most pervasive emotions. It was also profoundly racialised. Harold Brown crashed in Germany near a village during a strafing mission. He found himself in the midst of an angry crowd ready to hang him, but the local authorities managed to hand him over to the military. His

[46]Marie Francoise Chanfrault-Duchet, 'Narrative Structures, Social Models, and Symbolic Representation in the Life Story', in *Women's Words. The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, 1991st ed., (New York, N.Y: Routledge, n.d.), p. 65.
[47]Harold H. Brown Collection (AFC/2001/001/76178), VHP.
[48]Joanna Bornat, 'Remembering and Reworking Emotions: The Reanalysis of Emotion in an Interview', *Oral History* 38, no. 2 (Autumn 2010), pp. 48–49.

story of capture is pervaded by fear: 'I was scared as hell, you know [laughter]. You don't know what's going to happen. You don't know the language. … I was a young kid and just didn't know for sure what was going to happen, and that was the scary part of it, not knowing what was going to happen the next minute'.[49] His biggest fear seems to be that of the unknown, but he also connects his identity with a moment of bravery during his captivity, when he was with another pilot who was Jewish. Brown could not hide the fact that he was black, and in 2010 he retells this episode as a moment of courage: 'He … he was frightened to death because he was Jewish, and I said, "well, you know, all you got to do is keep your mouth shut and nobody will ever know you are Jewish," …. "Look at me. I can't hide. They know what I am"'. While fear of the unknown powerfully shaped this narrator's memories, for others the fear of death took even greater significance as it was profoundly related to racial dynamics of captivity. 'I knew that I was going to die because it had been rumoured that the Germans took no black prisoners. I later found out that Hitler had issued a standing order to that effect and so I didn't expect to live' stated Rothacker Childs Smith.[50] The idea that no black prisoner could survive captivity in the hands of the Nazis because Hitler ordered it became quite widespread, but it was also not entirely accurate. When African and African American soldiers were incarcerated as military opponents they were considered different and inferior by their captors, as antiblack racism and Nazi and Fascist propaganda informed the way they were treated both by servicemen and civilians.[51] Harsher treatment could result in more severe prison conditions or a poorer diet.[52] There were also cases of arbitrary killings by German forces, such as in the case of the Wereth eleven, but there is no evidence of a policy to systematically execute black prisoners instead of incarcerating them, and the treatment of black POWs was 'inconsistent and contradictory'.[53] The rumours spread after a few occasions when SS officers told French investigators in October 1944 that they had received such orders.[54] It was later reinforced in a war crimes investigation carried out in February 1946 when a witness testified that the commander of I Battalion of 17 SS Infantry Division ordered that 'no Negro prisoners were to be taken alive'.[55] As a study of Judge Advocate General papers shows, race-based war crimes targeting black prisoners happened following the initiative of Gestapo or SS officers trying to

[49]Harold H. Brown Collection (AFC/2001/001/76178), VHP.
[50]Rothacker Childs Smith Collection (AFC/2001/001/44158), VHP.
[51]Lusane, *Hitler's Black Victims The Historical Experiences of European Blacks, Africans and African Americans During the Nazi Era*, pp. 134–41.
[52]Killingray, 'African Americans in Enemy Hands', p. 182.
[53]Kesting, 'Forgotten Victims: Blacks in the Holocaust', 31–33; Lusane, *Hitler's Black Victims*, pp. 141–42, p. 136.
[54]Kesting, 'Forgotten Victims: Blacks in the Holocaust', p. 33.
[55]Kesting, p. 31.

comply to Nazi ideology.[56] In the cases of complaints by the American government that German authorities had failed to provide adequate treatment according to the Geneva Conventions, official reports show that the treatment of POWs in German camps depended especially on the commander's attitudes.[57] German and Italian commanders were aware that the Allies were holding large numbers of Axis prisoners themselves, and in most cases the need to provide reciprocal treatment overcame discrimination and racial prejudice.[58] Things started to change after the Normandy landings in June 1944 and worsened during and after the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944, when the Axis intake of allied prisoners increased and the camps became overcrowded. Unprepared to receive too many prisoners, camp conditions deteriorated deeply.[59] The POWs' accounts told later in life echo this situation, for example in the case of prisoners captured after late-1944, but the racial references do not include specific complaints of harsher treatment.

Stories of survival are part of the narratives of black veterans as well. Pilots focus on their ability to survive a downed airplane, often in line with their spiritual beliefs. After describing the damage to his aircraft during a strafing mission, Tuskegee Airman Luther H. Smith tells in detail how he tried to invert the plane so that he could bail out, losing consciousness in the process, but still managing to operate his parachute while unconscious, before landing on a tree: 'God was with me on that. That was on Friday the 14 October 1944. That was my lucky day'.[60] Narrators zoom in on the facts leading to their survival, dwelling on every detail and creating a self-empowering narrative. Childs Smith had to march with his German captors trying to reach a safer location, despite being severely wounded in his legs:

> I would count two telephone poles and I decided that when I got to the second telephone pole I would decide if I would let them shoot me or whether I go on. So I would just strain to get to that second pole, then after a while I said I can't make it to the second pole I only going to the first one. After a while I said I just can't go that far, I just going 15 steps, I cut it down to 10, then to 5, so every 5 steps I decided that I'm going to live just 5 more steps that's all I can do is just 5 more steps. That's the way I made it for the 50 miles.[61]

[56]It must be underlined that this topic has been largely neglected by historians, with very few exceptions, and more work in this field is needed.
[57]Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity*, pp. 81–86.
[58]Killingray, 'African Americans in Enemy Hands', p. 191.
[59]Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity*, pp. 97–101.
[60]Luther H. Smith, Jr. Collection (AFC/2001/001/84629), VHP.
[61]Rothacker Childs Smith Collection (AFC/2001/001/44158), VHP.

Storytelling, or history-telling, in this context is used as a way to reclaim agency and denounce discrimination back home.[62] The value of personal accounts, oral history in particular, is to tell 'less about events as such than about their meaning'.[63] The subjectivity of memory is seen as part of the strengths rather than the weaknesses of this approach, because memory is not only selective, but it re-shapes the narratives into meaningful accounts which are inevitably affected by the subjectivity of the speaker, influenced by the passage of time and the shared histories and collective memories of certain events. Narrators select facts and events and organise them along a storyline that reflects both the past-present relationship and their personal identity.[64] In the postwar, veterans transition from soldiers to 'activists', participating in the Civil Rights movement and in political mobilisation with varying degrees of involvement.[65] Storytelling is another form of activism, that veterans use to construct self-empowering narratives which allow them to embrace their initial state of vulnerability due to their racial identity, to then emphasise their ability to survive and reclaim their agency, but also their contribution to the double V campaign. Thus, through storytelling, they become actively engaged in the Long Civil Rights struggle. As Reiss' study of detention camps for German POWs demonstrates, the presence of white Axis prisoners in the Jim Crow south further contributed to expose racialised vulnerability and contradictions in American racial ideologies.[66] The treatment of white German POWs featured prominently in the double V campaign narrative as evidence of deep social injustice in the U.S. However, everyday interactions in those camps were often characterized by shared marginalisation and instances of solidarity. In the Long Civil Rights framework, encounters between Axis prisoners and black soldiers or civilians help explain how contexts of captivity are reframed in postwar memory into narratives of empowerment in the broader struggle for social justice.

Veterans who are part of the Tuskegee Airmen and 92 Infantry Division tend to identify with the 'public legend' connecting 'personal experiences and emotions with public meanings'.[67] The emphasis they place on having been part of a segregated unit and having contributed to victory nonetheless, including in captivity, informs the way they compose their memories of building the path to a more just America, as the

[62]Alessandro Portelli, 'History-Telling and Time: An Example from Kentucky', *The Oral History Review* 20, no. 1 (March 1, 1992), 51–66, https://doi.org/10.1093/ohr/20.1.51.
[63]Alessandro Portelli, 'The Peculiarities of Oral History', *History Workshop* Autumn, 1981, no. 12 (1981), p. 99.
[64]Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, pp. 521–40.
[65]Parker, *Fighting for Democracy*, pp. 174-186.
[66]Matthias Reiss, 'Solidarity Among Fellow Sufferers: African Americans and German Prisoners of War in the United States During World War II', *The Journal of African American History* 98, no. 4 (2013), pp. 531–61.
[67]Thomson, pp. 431–49.

'critical memory' of the war that was once marginalised, intersects the dominant 'traditional' narrative without overturning it: from a place of vulnerability to the contribution to the double V campaign.[68] Harold Brown's account of his initial experience in the deep south, when he went from Minnesota to Biloxi for basic training, shows a certain shock: 'it was a rude awakening'.[69] Isham George Benton from Ohio was sent to Camp Wheeler, Georgia for training. His first memory about this experience is on the camp commander's instruction on 'socialization between blacks and whites' that existed in Georgia: 'Regardless of where you are from, you are now in Georgia' he recalls, showing the 'difference in status between the whites and the blacks'.[70] Alexander Jefferson is perhaps the most vocal narrator in this group as he has been interviewed several times, and including for a publication about the Tuskegee Airmen.[71] He has a more negative stance on the question of segregation, and repeats this idea about racial discrimination in his various interviews almost as a refrain: 'This is America, this is the United States of America, racism and segregation and discrimination of the war'.[72]

Relating to 'public legends' which counter the stereotype of the black soldier who is unfit for combat, gives meaning to past experiences even when the narrator was not part of those same units. Childs Smith makes sense of his account of captivity by linking it to that of Army First Lieutenant John R. Fox of 92 Infantry Division, whose story had become part of the public narratives about the contribution of African American soldiers in the war. Childs Smith was wounded by mortar fire on 26 December 1944 in Sommocolonia, Italy and incarcerated for four months: 'Fifty years later I found out that the fusillade of shells had been called for by a Lieutenant John Fox who was a forward observer for the artillery, and he had called for fire on his own position, because he said the Germans are about to surround us. ... I heard the shots that killed John Fox and I didn't know anything about this until 50 years later'.[73] John R. Fox' actions were acknowledged for the first time in 1982, when he was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, later upgraded to Medal of Honor in 1997, when his story came to be recognised as a 'public legend' to counter the narrative of unfit black soldiers, and as a testament to their bravery.[74]

[68]Bodnar, *The 'Good War' in American Memory*, pp. 166-199.
[69]Harold H. Brown Collection (AFC/2001/001/76178), VHP.
[70]Isham George Benton Collection (AFC/2001/001/28694), VHP.
[71]Francis and Caso, *The Tuskegee Airmen*, pp. 282–92.
[72]Alexander Jefferson Collection (AFC/2001/001/90441), VHP.
[73]Rothacker Childs Smith Collection (AFC/2001/001/44158), VHP.
[74]It is believed that John Fox called his coordinates to overpower the enemy in the area of Sommocolonia, Italy, on December 26, 1944. This action meant sacrificing his own life; Rothacker Childs Smith Collection (AFC/2001/001/44158), VHP.

When asked about what his experience meant to him, Harold Brown emphasizes the concept of excitement as a refrain: 'it was all just a great big experience, exciting looking forward to what we were going to do ... very excited about the whole thing, and it was just an adventure. ... That's about the best way I can describe it, very exciting. You know, something that we looked forward to. ... We just enjoyed the moment'.[75] The fact of having been in captivity does not change this account. The other element that gives meaning to these narrators' memories is ethnic identity, which they characterise as comradeship and brotherhood: 'just one big happy family' and precisely because they were a segregated unit, 'we all knew each other' and perhaps this was even 'one of the nice things about being segregated'.[76] The emphasis on these outcomes allows them to find agency, by constructing an empowering account that they can comfortably live within the present. The Long Civil Rights Movement framework offers these veterans a powerful lens through which they construct narratives of captivity that reaffirm their agency. Although they did formally not become activists, storytelling itself provides them a form of quiet resistance, allowing them to reflect on the legacy of segregation and find meaning in their wartime experiences.

Conclusion

The stories of black POWs remained hidden from the historical record for decades after the conflict and remained marginalised within broader national narratives that privileged white experiences of the Second World War. Non-white soldiers' experiences exposed the deep contradictions of the U.S. military, that demanded loyalty while denying basic rights to black servicemen and women. The reappearance of these narratives is influenced by wider historiographical and cultural developments, such as the cultural and emotional turns that legitimised personal accounts as historical sources and by the formal recognition of PTSD that reframed trauma as a framework to understand certain wartime experiences. At the same time, the evolution of Civil Rights historiography embraced stories from below which had been overlooked up to that point.

This article has shown how memories of capture and detention were marginalised and continually reshaped over time, and that incarceration constituted a traumatic experience whose meanings evolved in relation to changing frameworks of national memory of the conflict. African American veterans' accounts of captivity began to find new places in archives as well as in public memory decades after the war, and they remain fewer in number and more difficult to locate. Those that do exist, largely emerge from units that were later celebrated within public narratives of black wartime achievement, filtered through figures of military distinction that were already

[75]Harold H. Brown Collection (AFC/2001/001/76178), VHP.
[76]Harold H. Brown Collection (AFC/2001/001/76178), VHP.

legitimised at the national level. When these memories resurfaced, they voiced the hardships of the racialised experience of incarceration, from the threats posed by the Axis captors to the challenge of knowing that one's own armed forces failed to protect them. In other words, these memories gave voice to the emotional burden of systemic discrimination. Yet these narratives rarely entered postwar memory as stories of victimhood, as their re-emergence can be situated within the longer Civil Rights era, when black Americans sought recognition by claiming their inclusion within traditional shared accounts. This context partially explains the reasons why these memories are few and very difficult to find, but it also highlights their value in revealing the meaning that black veterans give to their captivity not simply as soldiers, but as black Americans facing the legacy of segregation and the continuing struggle for social justice. In a segregated military that denied black soldiers combat roles and opportunities to demonstrate valour, being captured confirmed participation in the fight and gives access to a form of legitimacy that would otherwise be denied. The emotions associated with incarceration were reframed through racialised lenses, as the narrators' initial vulnerability is rooted in racial identity. They then emphasize endurance and survival and reclaim agency through self-empowering narratives that transformed experiences of exclusion into accounts of triumph over adversity, thereby acknowledging racism without fundamentally destabilizing the prevailing 'good war' framework.

The Long Civil Rights movement thus provides a crucial framework though which these narrators reclaim their agency, using storytelling as an act of resistance: although these men did not become formal activists in the post-war, their engagement through oral history and public testimony is a tool to affirm their place in the pursuit of Civil Rights. Their memories of captivity and their self-empowering narratives are thus inscribed in contemporary struggles for equality and Civil Rights.