



2004

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Recommended Citation

Hoerl, Kristen. Representing Byron de la Beckwith in Film and Journalism: Popular Memories of Mississippi and the Murder of Medgar Evers" (pp. 243-249). (2006). In P. Bizzell (Ed.), *Rhetorical Agendas: Political, Ethical, Spiritual* (Selected papers from the 2004 Rhetoric Society of America Conference.) Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. Available from: digitalcommons.butler.edu/ccom_papers/26

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Representing Byron de la Beckwith in Film and Journalism: Popular Memories of Mississippi and the Murder of Medgar Evers

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On June 12 1963, NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers was shot to death in front of his home in Jackson, Mississippi. Nine days later, police arrested avowed white supremacist Byron de la Beckwith for Evers's murder. Although prosecutors created a strong case against him, Beckwith was set free after two juries of white men could not reach a unanimous verdict (Nossiter unpaginated preface). The outcome of these trials fit within a broader pattern of state-sanctioned violence against activists and African Americans during the 1950s and 1960s. During these decades, state police frequently looked the other way when blacks and civil rights activists were beaten or killed. The state's legal system also failed blacks and activists; Beckwith's trials in 1964 were examples among many cases in which all white juries failed to convict whites of murdering blacks despite strong physical evidence against them.

Remarkably, the Jackson City Council asked the state to reopen the case against Beckwith in 1989. In 1994, thirty years after Evers's death, a jury comprising white and black jurists convicted Beckwith. Beckwith's conviction was unprecedented; never before had so much time lapsed between a homicide and the conviction of the person responsible for the crime. The trial against Beckwith is also remarkable for the media attention it garnered. Between 1989 and 2001, at least 376 articles in the nation's leading newspapers featured Beckwith. In 1996, the Hollywood film *Ghosts of Mississippi* recalled state district attorney Bobby DeLaughter's efforts to bring Beckwith to trial and have a jury find him guilty of Evers's death.

The media sources that attended to Beckwith's trial represented what Pierre Nora refers to as *lieux de memoire*, or sites of memory (1). As public memory scholarship attests, memories do not merely commemorate the past; they also ascribe meaning to these events for con-

temporary social and political life (see Ehrenhaus; Kammen; Lipsitz). Renewed interest in Beckwith suggests that memories of violence against civil rights activists and blacks have political roles in the present. Journalistic coverage and the film about Beckwith's conviction helped to constitute the unresolved case of Evers's death as a contemporary social injustice; media attention to Beckwith in the 1990s also brought the racism embedded in Mississippi's legal system during the 1960s into the national spotlight. By engaging memories of Evers's death as evidence for a contemporary trial, both Beckwith's conviction and commercial media attention to it demonstrate how popular memories are inextricable from the contemporary situations that evoke them.

Commercial media such as national newspapers and Hollywood entertainment films circulate broadly and are available to a wide range of audiences in the United States; thus, they constitute preeminent sites of memory about the past. Because the financial imperatives of commercial media frequently run counter to the interests of publics that observe them, I hesitate to describe these representations of the past as public memories, but I concede that these memories are popularized by mainstream media. In this chapter, I explain how the narrative within *Ghosts of Mississippi* constructed a particular memory about the history of racism in Mississippi's recent past. I also describe how this narrative resonates within the patterns of messages that appeared across coverage of Beckwith's trial in three prominent national newspapers: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *USA Today*. By describing the commercially successful docudrama, *Ghosts of Mississippi*, and a range of national news media coverage surrounding Beckwith's trial, I argue that popular memory should be understood as intertextual rhetorical phenomena. Rather than explore newspaper articles and *Ghosts of Mississippi* as discrete rhetorical texts, I suggest that the relationship between these texts encouraged readers to draw particular meanings from Beckwith's trial. I also draw attention to the ways that commercial media function rhetorically by ascribing particular meanings to racially motivated violence from the past and to contemporary efforts to resolve them.

THE NARRATIVE OF A HERO: DE LAUGHTER'S TRIUMPH IN *GHOSTS OF MISSISSIPPI*

The narrative of *Ghosts of Mississippi* revolved around the efforts of Hinds County Assistant District Attorney, Bobby DeLaughter, to bring Beckwith to trial in the early 1990s. According to the film, DeLaughter initially resisted requests to bring Beckwith to trial because he believed little evidence remained to prove Beckwith was Evers's murderer. In addition to the lack of physical evidence tying Beckwith to the crime, DeLaughter's wife and parents objected to the state's interest in retrying the case. As the film accurately remembered, DeLaughter's father-in-law Russell Moore, who died before the case was revisited, was the judge who originally presided over the court proceedings in the 1964 trials that failed to convict Beckwith. Frequently, DeLaughter's family articulated racist beliefs, including the idea that integration had ruined their way of life. Despite these obstacles, DeLaughter persisted in building a case against Beckwith. This film followed DeLaughter's efforts to attain evidence against Beckwith, gain the trust of Evers' widow, Myrlie, and convince a jury who finds Beckwith guilty in the film's final scene.

In contrast to the film's heroic image of DeLaughter, the film depicted Beckwith as a despicable character who spouted anti-Semitic, racist statements in almost every scene that included him. When jurists announced Beckwith's guilt, cheers resonated throughout the court

house and among the crowd outside. Those who objected to Beckwith's conviction were not visible in the film's closing scene. Thus, this scene suggested that Beckwith and his racist sentiments had been eradicated from Mississippi. Indeed, as Myrlie Evers emerged from the courthouse with DeLaughter at her side, she announced to the crowd, "This is a new day for Mississippi." As this final scene suggested, Beckwith's conviction stood in metonymically for the value changes within Mississippi's social and political order.

Mississippi's civic identity was figuratively redeemed through DeLaughter's personal transformation as well. DeLaughter's conflicts with his family were central to the film's narrative about the history of racism in Mississippi. Because the racist ideology of DeLaughter's wife was fundamentally at odds with DeLaughter's ideals, his relationship with her dissolved. As the case against Beckwith progressed in the film, DeLaughter met and eventually married another woman, Peggy Lloyd, who applauded DeLaughter's efforts to bring Beckwith to trial. When DeLaughter began to doubt whether seeing the case to trial was worth the risk to his family's safety, Lloyd reminded him, "someday your children are going to be able to tell their children that it was their daddy that put away Byron de la Beckwith." Through Lloyd's conviction, DeLaughter was reassured that prosecuting Beckwith was "the right thing" to do.

The narrative of *Ghosts of Mississippi* represented what Janice Hocker Rushing and Thomas Frentz refer to as a social values myth in which the changes in the values of a society are symbolically represented through the struggles of characters featured in film (69-70). In the beginning of the film, DeLaughter was caught at a crossroads, forced to choose between his convictions in furthering the cause of social justice and his ties to his racist parents and wife. After he chose to pursue Beckwith's conviction, DeLaughter was able to build a new family. It is little coincidence that, within the film's narrative, DeLaughter's new family grew stronger as evidence against Beckwith mounted. Ostensibly, DeLaughter represented Mississippi's "new [white] man." Thus, the transformation of DeLaughter's personal life metaphorically represented a transformed Mississippi free from its racist, violent past.

MELODRAMA IN JOURNALISM: LEAVING RACISM IN MISSISSIPPI TO THE PAST

The myth of social values transformation also emerged in journalistic coverage of Beckwith's trial. Collectively, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *The Washington Post* covered the trial in ninety-five articles. These articles described the events leading up to Beckwith's arrest in 1990, the arguments made by attorneys defending and prosecuting Beckwith during his trial in 1994, and the Evers's celebration following Beckwith's conviction. As early as 1990, journalists acknowledged the significance of the case for public memory. According to one reporter from the *Washington Post*, Beckwith's "case has hung unresolved in the collective memory of a state where many attitudes about race have changed dramatically" (LaFraniere A1). Although newspapers set Beckwith's case in the context of Mississippi's violent and racist past, they featured Beckwith as central to that history. According to several reports, Evers's murder was one of the first killings of a well-known civil rights activist in Mississippi. (Dreifus 69; LaFraniere A1; Mayfield 38; Smothers A18). His was also one of the first deaths to galvanize the civil rights movement (Dreifus 69; Parker A1). Reporters frequently quoted DeLaughter, who told them, "This single, cowardly act of the person responsible for Medgar Evers's assassination has proba-

bly done more to hurt the state and the perception of Mississippi than any other single act I can think of" (LaFraniere, A1).

Coverage prior to Beckwith's conviction frequently characterized Beckwith and the 1964 trials against him in pejorative language or implicated him in the shooting. For example, a *New York Times* reporter described Beckwith as an "unregenerate hater" (Goodman C14), and a *USA Today* reporter stated that Beckwith's "grandfatherly [...] image falls apart as soon as he opens his mouth" (Howard 3A). Although negative portrayals of Beckwith were not isolated to coverage of the prosecutors' arguments against him during the trial, prosecutors' remarks provided some of the most colorful denunciations of Beckwith. According to one report, DeLaughter compared Beckwith to a snake when he told jurors, Beckwith's "venom has come back to poison him" (Booth, "Beckwith" A1). By characterizing Beckwith as a hate-filled man, as the obvious suspect in Evers's death, and in the image of a serpent, which is an archetypal symbol for evil, newspaper reports cast Beckwith as the villain centrally responsible for Mississippi's damaged reputation.

By describing Beckwith as a modern-day villain amid instances that highlighted institutional racism in the state's legal and justice system, newspaper coverage of the events that led to Beckwith's conviction positioned Beckwith as a metonymy for racist violence in Mississippi state history. Indeed, many reports acknowledged that the trial was not only about Beckwith; it was about "the Mississippi of the 1960s" (Mayfield, "Court" 3A; see also Booth, *Jackson* B1; Smothers, "30 Years" A12). According to several newspaper articles, Beckwith's conviction would not only undo a grave injustice from the past; it would rhetorically purify Mississippi's image. Individuals quoted in several newspaper articles stated that Mississippi "was growing up" (Smothers, "Supremacist" A18) and had begun a "cleansing process" (Nichols and Howlett A1). As Booth reported, "The guilty verdict was seen by many here as a sign that Mississippi [...] had moved far beyond the state-supported racism that almost tore the country apart in the turbulent 1960s" ("Beckwith" A1). George Smith told *Washington Post* reporters, "reopening the case shows that, even though you're black in Mississippi, our system works" (Mayfield, "Court" 38). Resonating with Myrlie Evers's final speech at the end of *Ghosts of Mississippi*, newspapers noted that, for many people, Beckwith's conviction demonstrated that racism in Mississippi had been left in the past.

RESACRILIZING MISSISSIPPI: HISTORY AS A FANTASY BRIBE

Ghosts of Mississippi and the news media framings of the trial suggested that Beckwith stood for something larger than himself; according to these texts, he was the embodiment of Mississippi's violent and racist past. Likewise, individuals such as DeLaughter and Evers were framed as heroes that embodied Mississippi's emerging identity. Popular memory surrounding Beckwith's conviction provided a melodrama whereby Mississippi was transformed by the state's efforts to convict Beckwith and embrace the goals of racial justice. Deming explains that heroes and villains who personify good and evil represent the urge toward achieving resacrilization in a modern age that has lost its faith in absolute value systems (6). By counterposing Beckwith and DeLaughter, *Ghosts of Mississippi* also portrayed a resacrilization of Mississippi's racist past. Because Beckwith represented the evils of Mississippi's racist past, the climax to narratives constructed in both the film and in journalistic coverage called for Beckwith's expulsion.

This framing of Beckwith's trial as a scapegoat for Mississippi's history of violence against African Americans and civil rights activists has implications for race relations and

social injustice in the United States during the 1990s, when these memories were constructed. Although Beckwith was responsible for the death of Evers, he was not solely responsible for the injustices done to African Americans and civil rights workers during the 1960s. As the history of the civil rights movement attests, Evers's death was part of a larger pattern of violence against blacks and civil rights activists used to intimidate those who would challenge segregation and demoralize the movement.

The predominant framing of Beckwith as the cause for Mississippi's tarnished reputation also belies the poverty and de facto segregation of black and white neighborhoods in Jackson and elsewhere in the nation.¹ Popular memory's attention to Mississippi as the source of America's violence against African Americans also scapegoats one state for racial inequities and state-sponsored brutality against African Americans that have persisted throughout the United States. In 1995, African Americans were three times more likely to live in poverty than whites (Vobejda A1). During the early 1990s, as the case against Beckwith was growing, racial profiling was garnering news media attention as another incarnation of racism within America's justice system. News reports indicated that, although African Americans represented 12 percent of the population during the 1990s, they made up almost seventy-five percent of all routine traffic stops (Rogers, par. 2), comprised half of the nation's prisoners (Thomas A01), and were the most frequent victims of police shootings (Thomas A01).² Images of violence against African Americans were not relegated to memories of the 1960s either. The image of three white police officers beating Rodney King in 1991 bore resemblances to images of police officers beating activists and blacks in Southern states during the civil rights movement. Resonances between images of blacks abused by the justice system in the 1960s and the 1990s indicated that state authorities had not yet accorded equal status to blacks when Beckwith was convicted. Thus, memories of Mississippi drew attention to systematic racism in the United States that has persisted for decades.

In the context of ongoing racial inequities and contemporary instances of police brutality against African Americans, the popular memory of Beckwith's conviction offered media audiences what Jameson refers to as a "fantasy bribe." In contrast to images of King's beating, Beckwith was an easy social villain to capture the attention of the national imagination in the 1990s. At least in principle, Beckwith's anti-Semitic beliefs and his comments celebrating Evers's death were inimical to prevailing political sentiments of recent decades that celebrate the civil rights movement as a sign of progress for the United States. While popular memory of Evers's death and the struggles to prosecute Beckwith paralleled ongoing racial injustices in the United States' legal system, the narrative scapegoating of Beckwith in popular memory symbolically designated racism to memory. Consequently, this popular memory discouraged audiences from paying critical attention to contemporary instances of racially motivated violence.

The popular memory surrounding Beckwith's trial has implications beyond its significance for race relations at the end of the millennium. This study indicates that memories become popularized through the narrative patterns that run across documentary, or journalistic texts, and dramatic, or entertainment media. The omnipresence of the melodrama of the scapegoat and the social values transformation myth that ran across these texts indicates that narratives are not exclusive to fictional films or to individual texts, but constitute the broader frameworks in which commercial media encourage audiences to understand their place in history. The implications of popular memory of Beckwith for race relations in the 1990s warn us that, as narratives emerge through docudrama and in journalistic framings, they may become naturalized. In the absence of competing memories about the past, popular memo-

ries that emerge through news reports and film may acquire presence as an authentic representation of the past and obscure the selectivity of the narrative's frame. In order to challenge this narrative's ascendancy as the popular memory of institutionalized racism in recent U.S. history, activists and scholars must also seek to construct usable counter-memories that hold present leaders and institutions accountable for contemporary social injustices. Such counter-memories would more amenable to the cause of social justice that activists such as Medgar Evers struggled for.

NOTES

1. Booth presents coverage unique among articles covering Beckwith that explores the racial inequities that have persisted in Jackson into the 1990s ("Jackson" B1).
2. In 1991, 33 of the 47 victims of Chicago police shootings were black. Likewise, 152 blacks in Indianapolis were shot by police, compared to 85 white victims (Thomas A01).

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