A Tale of Three Bridges

Pont Saint-Michel, Paris, 1961;

Trefechan Bridge, Aberystwyth, Wales, 1963;

Edmund Pettus Bridge, Selma, Alabama, 1965

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The mobilization of different publics to protest national or local laws, policies, and events is a key feature of democratic life, and it was especially so in the 1960s. This essay examines three demonstrations of civil disobedience that took place in the first half of the decade. Each group campaigned nonviolently for a different cause but all demanded recognition of an ethnic minority group's rights whether in France, Wales, or the US South. It explores the extent to which these protests have become a focus of public commemoration and considers the role of politicians and the media in the act of remembrance, with a demonstration's meaning enhanced in one case, and marginalized or suppressed in the others. The bridge acts as an arc of history and cultural memory, drawing the separate episodes together in a shared perception of social justice. An overworked metaphor, it will hopefully be enlivened in this transnational and transatlantic context through the axiom that memory activist and filmmaker Medhi Lallaoui expressed as the need for all citizens to be "on equal memorial terms with others."[1] This is

1 With Agnès Denis, Lallaoui made a film about the Paris protest, *Le silence du fleuve*: *17 octobre 1961* (1991), and is quoted in House and McMaster (298). House and McMaster's study is a thorough and careful account that recognizes

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the kind of ethical turn that would unite the moral with the memorial in public discourse. But this discussion is mindful of the improbability of such unity when ethnic membership and territorial definitions of national remembrance are at stake and community memories contested, measured, and ranked in national contexts.

The bridge is not only an anchor for the discussion but also a site of solidarity for protestors and a conceptual apparatus that carries an ethical burden; governments have inherited responsibilities for the violence that took place during two of the demonstrations, and for the recognition of all. Constitutional and republican conceptions of identity are grounded in the continuities that disenfranchised protestors attempt to rupture, and W. James Booth warns how slippery a national sense of accountability can be: "Most fundamentally, because we are not one with the perpetrators, because we do not share with them a political identity, we are not accountable for their injustices."[2] Racial injustices have been successfully folded into a national narrative of resolution and redemption in the US; accountability for such injustices remains caught up in controversy in France; and, as something of a control in this experiment, the campaign for Welsh nationalism is ongoing in the UK; and, of course, the mass media will always ensure that some events are prized, just as they obscure or forget others.

In 2015 it will be 50 years since civil rights protestors crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge over the Alabama River, connecting Selma to Montgomery via Highway 80. The demonstration of March 7, 1965, when marchers were attacked by state troopers with clubs and tear gas, was filmed by television cameras and broadcast around the nation and across the Atlantic. That broadcast and two subsequent marches—one aborted on March 9, and the other successful on March 24 when some 25,000 people arrived in Montgomery having walked 54 miles in five days—led to the bridge being described as the "Bridge of Freedom." That image has been continually reinforced, not only by politicians and the media but by the protestors themselves, as when veteran Selma activist Amelia Platts Boynton titled her memoir *The Bridge Across Jordan* (1979), contributing to Selma's place in movement mythology by fixing the Edmund Pettus Bridge in

the political tensions that have prevented full commemoration on both sides of the French-Algerian divide.

2 Booth, "Communities of Memory," 250.

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a long history of African American struggle located in religion and faith. SNCC Chairman then, and US Congressman now, John Lewis (D-GA), has been crucial in ensuring that the bridge remains a fixture in movement history, most recently in the memoir *Across That Bridge* (2012). Lewis was leading the march when he suffered a fractured skull; he was the seventh patient treated at Selma's Good Samaritan Hospital of 55 people admitted on the afternoon of "Bloody Sunday."[3] Lewis received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2011, and his testimony underlines the event's significance in a long arc of racial justice in which he includes the election of President Obama, the Occupy Movement, and the Arab Spring, and that is made to recall the French Revolution and the activism of Mahatma Gandhi, as well as "other social transformations down through the ages [that] came to pass because people decided they deserved to live under a higher conception of reality."[4]

The symbolic role that the Edmund Pettus Bridge has accrued is understood in stark contrast to an event that was largely hidden from history and only quietly acknowledged on its fiftieth anniversary in 2011: the shooting and drowning of Algerian protestors by Paris police during a peaceful demonstration on October 17, 1961. The story sticks like a fishbone in the throat, as historian of public memory Edward T. Linenthal describes those indigestible stories that each nation has but does not want to tell.[5] A delayed form of metropolitan memorialization began in the 1990s, and in 1999 the tragic and brutal murder of between 100 and 300 Algerians was tacitly acknowledged by Prime Minister Lionel Jospin.[6] Then, in 2001, Bertrand Delanoë, the socialist, and North African-born mayor of Paris, placed a memorial plaque on the bridge at Saint-Michel, as a formal

3 Good Samaritan Hospital Emergency Room log, March 7, 1965, reproduced in Bond and Lewis, 570–72.

4 Lewis, *Across That Bridge*, 174.

5 Linenthal, "Epilogue," 213.

6 The number of dead is not precise because it is not definitely known. See, for example, Brunet, and House and McMasters who indicate that killings were taking place at the hands of murder squads and who cite a social worker in the *bidonville* slums in 1961 who alleged that "among those who were recovered from the Seine were blokes who had been arrested elsewhere than on the demonstrations because the police knew they were FLN. The police took advantage of the opportunity to liquidate them" (135). In the documentary *Drowning by Bullets* (1992), an officer who would not involve himself expresses deep regret over what happened.

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acknowledgement that a "bloody repression of the peaceful demonstration" had taken place there (‹‹à la mémoire de nombreux Algériens tués lors de la sanglante répression de la manifestation pacifique du 17 octobre 1961››). The protests in Paris and in Selma, Alabama, may be read alongside a peaceful protest that took place in Aberystwyth in 1963. On 2 February, student members of Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg (the Welsh Language Society), protesting for equal status for Welsh with English, conducted a sit-in on Trefechan Bridge. Its fiftieth anniversary in 2013 was celebrated with a political rally and a reconstruction of the protest, followed by the performance of a play, but limited attention was paid to the protest outside of Welsh nationalist circles. The demonstration in Wales helps us to think about why three non-violent protests on three different bridges should be assiduously remembered or persistently forgotten.

It is the differences between them that illuminate a common strategy in which an actual bridge begins as a protest site and thereafter potentially functions as a memory site. In French historian Pierre Nora's formulation, memory sites are material, symbolic, and/or functional. He argues that public memory is a form of heritage that "relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image" and acknowledges the role of media memories in forging collective memories, asserting that "ours is an intensely retinal and powerfully televisual memory."[7] If the protest on the Edmund Pettus Bridge has become symbolic of racial change, a range of different media were crucial in making that happen. The media's role also helps us to understand why a demonstration of Welsh nationalism could have been overlooked as a national story, and how the colonial French context contributed to the erasure of the horrific murders that took place in Paris in 1961. The writer James Baldwin once warned that, "To overhaul a history or to attempt to redeem it . . . is not at all the same thing as the descent one must make in order to excavate a history. To be forced to excavate a history is also to repudiate the concept of history, and the vocabulary in which history is written . . ."[8] This essay therefore examines some of the excavations one must make in order to comprehend the comparative significance of three very different protests in 1960s transatlantic cultural history and it acknowledges that memory work

7 Nora, "Between Memory and History," 13, 17.
8 Baldwin, *Above My Head*, 480–81.

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is often hard work performed in different "vocabularies"; it demands that attention be paid to facts and realities that are not easily or openly faced when the link between nation-state and cultural memory is so politicized.

PARIS 1961 AND PONT SAINT-MICHEL

In 1961 a shocking event took place in one of the most celebrated capital cities in the world. Why then, did the shooting and drowning of nonviolent protestors by Paris police during a peaceful demonstration on October 17, 1961 not receive international opprobrium? French Algerians and Algerian migrants organized a peaceful protest to oppose a curfew to which only they were subject and which was rigorously enforced from 8:30 p.m. each night, its rationale to prevent the FLN (Algeria's National Liberation Front) from collecting funds in the evenings. The Pont Saint-Michel in Paris is made representative here because it was only one of a number of bridges where Algerian demonstrators met their deaths. The extent of the violent repression undertaken by French police was suppressed, and only in recent decades has this demonstration been mobilized by political groups or found place in historical studies. The Paris protest in particular makes manifest the complexities of remembering and forgetting, inclusion and exclusion in the context of France's war with the pro-independence FLN.

The bodies of the dead could not be committed to the ground for a timely Muslim burial, a further insult to the Algerian community, and the risk in the years that followed was that the Algerian dead would exist only in what Nora has described as a "moment" of history, "torn away from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, not yet, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded."[9] This romantic metaphor both evokes the effect and conceals the trauma. If *lieux de mémoire* are not made available to "block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial"[10], the risk is that victims of atrocities of which subsequent governments are ashamed will be lost to public memory as well as lost to history. Like the anonymous Arab in Camus's *L'Étranger* (1942), who lies not only dead but outside of

9 Nora, "Between Memory and History," 12.
10 Ibid., 19.

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history in that novel, this event epitomizes the problem of the erasure of the dead and, whether unclaimed from the river Seine after October 17 or "lost" to families following deportation on October 19, their families too were typically rendered silent. As Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelan summarize in *The Presence of the Past* (1998), "The world seldom believes the horror stories of history until they are documented in the mass media."[11] Journalists were not completely silent at the time. Indeed, *l'Humanité*'s cover story of 17 October 1961 was accompanied by a photograph of graffiti reading ‹‹ici on noie les algeriens›› (Here is where Algerians are being drowned), and journalist René Dazy witnessed the demonstration on Pont Saint-Michel: "They marched in good order, the leaders at the front, with an inexpressible dignity."[12] But police records of the night of October 17 were not made available until 1999 when the Archives de la Prefecture opened the files. Over the course of the night, it is recorded that some 11,538 people were arrested but that police prefect Maurice Papon's report listed only three people dead, despite eye-witness testimony that police were hauling demonstrators over the city's bridges into the Seine.[13] Limiting media coverage was a key factor in closing down the story, with most newspapers expected to accept the explanation that Paris police had successfully contained an incident that could otherwise have escalated and that police officers had defended themselves against marauding protestors (fig. 1).

The significance of the protest is missing from most studies of social movements and occluded from studies of the era, excepting those that focus specifically on Paris.[14] For example, secrecy around the violence of the police response allowed cross-cultural commentators, such as Arthur Marwick in his comparative study of cultural revolutions, *The Sixties* (1998), to assume that despite discrimination against Algerians in France, "there was no real analogue of the American race issue."[15] It is also hard to imagine that students who rallied in May 1968 and organized a general strike to protest police brutality could have known about the events of 1961; had they

11 Rosenzweig and Thelan, *Presence of the Past*, 98.

12 The cover image is reproduced at http://3.bp.blogspot.com/_Zl30kmKdHQM/SttIW9vCG4I/AAAAAAAACWo/c5obLfl7wf8/s1600/UneHuma.jpg. Yasmina Adi made a documentary film with that title in 2011; Dazy in *Vérité-Liberté* 13 (November 1961) quoted in House and McMaster, 120.

13 See Cole; House and McMaster.

14 See Ross.

15 Marwick, *Sixties*, 547.

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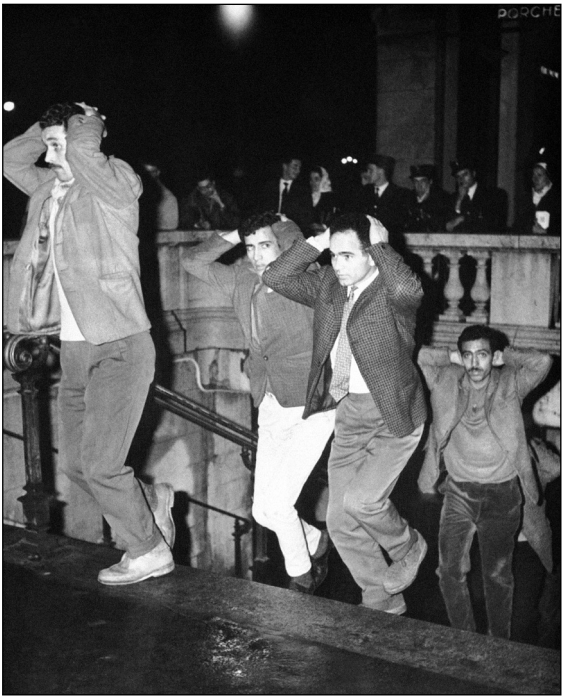
Figure 1: Algerians emerge from a Paris subway station with their hands on their heads after being arrested in Paris, Oct. 17, 1961.



Courtesy of the Press Association

known, they could have harnessed them to their cause. In the early 1960s hostility to imperialism was gaining momentum as a worldwide force with African independence struggles, students in the US civil rights movement reading Frantz Fanon and adapting his philosophy of strategic violence to cultures of resistance, and French youth protesting against conscription to fight in France's war against Algeria.

Maurice Papon had been a prefect in Algeria before he was made Paris police commissioner in 1958. Only when events conspired to bring Papon into the media spotlight for a different reason, did the extent of police repression on October 17, 1961 make banner headlines. In 1981 evidence emerged that during the Nazi occupation and Vichy regime, Papon had par-

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ticipated in the deportation of some 1690 Jews to Auschwitz. He was finally sentenced to ten years in prison in 1998. Jean-Luc Einaudi, whose *La Batallie de Paris 17 octobre 1961* had been published in 1991, then alleged that Papon's actions in 1961 also constituted a crime against humanity and, in turn, Papon accused Einaudi of libel for stating that he had ordered "a massacre." Einaudi was granted the legal right to call the murders a massacre but controversy persists among both politicians and historians as to the number of deaths verified and the politics of activist groups in recovering what happened.[16] Such groups are crucial in building cultural memory of the event, though. A group of French Algerians, for example, initiated a March for Equality and Against Racism in 1983 and their spokesperson, Farïd Aichoune, declared in a statement that collapsed time, "It was yesterday in the middle of Paris; it was our mothers and fathers who were being killed: but for the oldest among us, it was us too."[17]

Different groups, including government bodies and professional historians, manage cultural memory in the national imaginary. When countries formalize the link between memory and nation by establishing a national cultural policy, the remit is to promote national heritage but also to protect it by ensuring certain government controls over the production and communication of a culture's memory. Novelist and intellectual André Malraux was appointed France's first Minister of Culture in 1959 and served until 1969, resigning when President Charles de Gaulle left office. The shameful event that occurred in 1961 could not be easily enfolded into a narrative of a heroic French resistance with which both de Gaulle and Malraux were associated—even though it could be argued that Algerian nationalist strategies were modeled on the French Resistance in World War II. De Gaulle even awarded Papon the Legion of Honor in 1961, though the prefect would be stripped of the award in 1999.

Historians act as custodians of the past in the way that Pierre Nora understood when he conceptualized *les lieux de mémoire* as national sites of memory, rallying many of the nation's professional historians to spend ten years and seven volumes mapping France's memory sites. Nora's overreaching thesis was imbued with the determination to preserve consensually France's key memorial sites. France's war with Algeria is not included in

16 See, for example, Jim House, "Leaving Silence Behind."
17 House and McMaster, *Paris 1961*, 293.

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the seven volumes translated into English as "Realms of Memory," and, therefore, neither are the events in Paris in 1961, or, indeed, a detailed evocation of cultural memories around Algeria's gaining independence from colonial France in 1962. That a memory project of such note and importance should ignore Algeria is striking when the nation's relationship goes back to the French invasion of Algeria in 1830. In this context, Nora's memory project is best read alongside David Assouline's three-volume study of immigrants in France, *Un siècle d'immigrations en France* (1996–1997), that traces that relationship. Historical studies impose narratives on the past to make it legible, and while historians interpret memories as sources, they are often skeptical of what may be emotional or aggrieved. Nevertheless, historians like Einaudi, House and McMaster, Cole, and others who have painstakingly reconstructed the demonstration and its context have had to engage submerged micro-historical participant accounts. In his 1950 study of collective memory, Maurice Halbwachs distinguished between autobiographical and historical memory, the former framed by different group identities and the idea of community, the latter forged in particular cultural moments and national contexts. As studies of the 1961 protest allow, the memories of different publics are more far more complex and contradictory than a nation's public history.

History is perspectival and counter perspectives disturb what may be couched as a dominant official, national, and colonial perspective on events. In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (1977), historian and philosopher Michel Foucault investigates the kind of a historiography that "disturbs what was previously considered immobile."[18] We see this in action when we consider the ways in which public knowledge of the events in Paris in 1961 was mired in doubt. While the French government embarked on a damage limitation exercise, the Selma bridge crossing has been mobilized very successfully as a national celebration of democracy in action. Although African Americans were beaten and tear-gassed, through multiple anniversaries and politicians' strategic allusions to Selma, the annual bridge crossing is the largest commemorative event to harness the nation's political culture to the activism of a "minority" group. Its success is brought into relief by the Welsh demonstration.

18 Foucault, *Language*, 160.

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ABERYSTWYTH 1963 AND PONT TREFECHAN

The demonstration that took place on February 2, 1963 was organized by students at the universities of Aberystwyth and Bangor. The Trefechan Bridge over the River Rheidol was chosen as a functional site for a protest to rally locals to the campaign to make Welsh an official language but only with the benefit of time and an emphasis on heritage has it been more properly understood as what it was: part of a much wider project to preserve Welsh as a national language. It has now been described as "one of the most important protests in modern Welsh history," by the National Library of Wales[19], with Pont Trefechan "one of the key historic events that help to structure the Welsh nation-building project" according to the only detailed study of the event published in 2008 by Rhys Jones and Carwyn Fowler.[20]

In 1962 during his BBC Welsh Annual Lecture, Saunders Lewis, former president of Plaid Cymru, Wales's national party, had declared, "Restoring the Welsh language in Wales is nothing less than a revolution. It is only through revolutionary means that we can succeed."[21] Protecting Welsh from the hegemony of English already had a long history going back to the Middle Ages, but Lewis's declaration of 1962 inaugurated a new incarnation of the movement for change in the form of the Welsh Language Society. Protestors who rallied as a result of his speech were inspired by "spiritual leaders," in the figures of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., and by acts of civil disobedience like the sit-ins that began in 1960 in Greensboro, North Carolina. One Welsh historian has described the demonstrators' decision to stage a sit-in as "a technique popular with protestors across the world from North Carolina to Warsaw."[22] The Welsh students began by marching with placards but did not gain the attention they craved. Consequently, some 40 of them chose to stop traffic moving in or out of

19 "I was there!" 20 March, 2008 at http://www.llgc.org.uk/index.php?id=1514&no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=995&cHash=d78545199ea44475493a7fa6a5932db2.

20 Jones and Fowler, 84.

21 Quoted in *Tynged yr Iaith*: The Welsh Language Society, Broadcasting in Welsh, The Welsh Language Act at http://www.llgc.org.uk/ymgyrchu/Iaith/TyngedIaith/index-e.htm.

22 Dylan Phillips, *Trwy Ddulliau Chwyldro: Hanes Cymdeithas yr Iaith*, *1962–92* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1998), 236, cited in Jones and Fowler, 78–9.

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Aberystwyth by blocking the bridge with their bodies. Traffic was halted but, disappointingly for the demonstrators, no-one was arrested. Had they been, they could have protested the fact that they were unable to exercise a basic human right to use their national language in official life. Police procedures and legal processes, including trials, were conducted in English with Welsh having no official status. The students hoped to assure themselves of the kind of publicity Lewis had provoked by refusing to submit to those processes.

If the Welsh sit-in is a control in this essay's discussion, it is because the protest did not realize its potential at the time. Only now that memory of the event has been reactivated, has its meaning been reconfigured, as in 2008 when cultural geographers Jones and Fowler published *Placing the Nation: Aberystwyth and the Reproduction of Welsh Nationalism* and lifted the demonstration out of its silo of "local" interest to receive detailed exploration as a component of Welsh nationalism. Also in 2008 the National Library of Wales initiated a website forum to seek out veterans of the Trefechan bridge protest, creating an online form of museology. The Library situated the protest in a series of campaigns launched in the 1960s, including those for radio and television services to be delivered in Welsh that were realized in 1977 and 1982 respectively. The demonstration is attributed with more meaning in retrospect, once inserted into a timeline as the beginning of the Welsh Language Society's policy of civil disobedience. It led to the 1967 Welsh Language Act, albeit weakened by the recommendation rather than requirement that Welsh be accepted as valid in law. In 1963 the students located the struggle for linguistic identity against the erosion of culture and the British government's failure to care enough about losing Welsh—and they made it a civil rights issue with the bridge a site of nonviolent direct action.

Times have changed. In 2008 Jones and Fowler went so far as to assert that, "there is no finer example of the tangled politics of place and how it intermeshes with the broader politics of the nation that the protest on Trefechan Bridge."[23] The Welsh Minister for Heritage announced in February 2011 that a new Welsh Language Measure would involve a Welsh Language Commissioner whose remit would extend that of the Welsh Language Board established in 1993. In March 2011, following a referendum

23 Jones and Fowler, 84.

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on the law-making powers of the Welsh Assembly, the language question was again firmly on the agenda. Now that it has been rolled into the idea of democracy-in-action, this demonstration may receive further recognition. Changing methodologies for preserving cultural memories are reflected in the growth of new media and the cyber-grid of media networks now so salient in storytelling. Methods of recovery research are developing with online platforms proving an effective way to pursue memory studies by amassing oral histories in the form of participant accounts, as the National Library of Wales is doing. Definitions of the archival are shifting in the digital age and providing internet access to photographs of the protest is one way to bring the event to public attention. At the time the event did receive limited coverage in major national papers (*The Observer*, *Times*, and *Guardian*) and longer and illustrated reports in *Cymro*, *The Western Mail*, and the *Daily Post* but there is little in the images to spark the imagination.

Figure 2: Protest gyntaf Cymdeithas yr Iaith, Pont Trefechan (Geoff Charles)

Courtesy of the National Library of Wales

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Even though the students positioned themselves as part of a wider transnational student movement while picketing, that symbolism was not picked up, and placards and slogans are barely visible in the shots on the bridge. If the demonstration stopped traffic and the photograph stops time, both needed to evoke the moment using stronger symbolism (fig. 2).

In protest movements iconography is crucial, as in the starkly symbolic visual imagery of black protestors set upon by white officials in Selma as recorded by photojournalists like John Karales in a strikingly evocative photograph of marchers holding the US flag against the backdrop of a stormy sky published in *Look* magazine. Or in the aerial shot below (fig. 3).

On the fiftieth anniversary of the Trefechan Bridge protest in February 2013, new digital technologies and social media networks were vital for creating audiences for the staging and promoting of a rally and a play. The protest was recreated only days after a census revealed that now even fewer communities in Wales use the language as their first. Today's activists promoted the sit-in protestors as "founders" of a movement and the play titled *Y Bont* (The Bridge), staged by Theatr Cymru and performed on the streets of Aberystwyth, emphasized that. The play was a community performance, co-written by a bilingual Welsh author, Catrin Dafydd, writer Ceri Elen, author and Welsh language activist, Angharad Tomos, with Theatr Cymru director Arwel Gruffydd. Based on interviews with protestors, the 2013 cast included some 60 students of four Welsh universities.[24] Reenactment is a ritual that proves most effective in shaping communal memory because, as Paul Connerton observes, it is explicit in reference to "prototypical" persons or events, "whether these are understood to have a historical or mythological existence."[25] In that sense, reenactors may be learning a lesson from Selma.

24 See "500 in Pont Trefechan rally, 50 years on," February 2, 2013 at http://cymdeithas.org/node/3954; Polly March, "Production to mark 50 years since Pont Trefechan protest," January 26, 2013, BBC Wales Blog at http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/wales/posts/production-to-mark-50-years-since-pont-trefechan-protest.

25 Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 61. A forthcoming television documentary about the event also promotes the protest on the grounds of its contemporary relevance as well as its importance to history.

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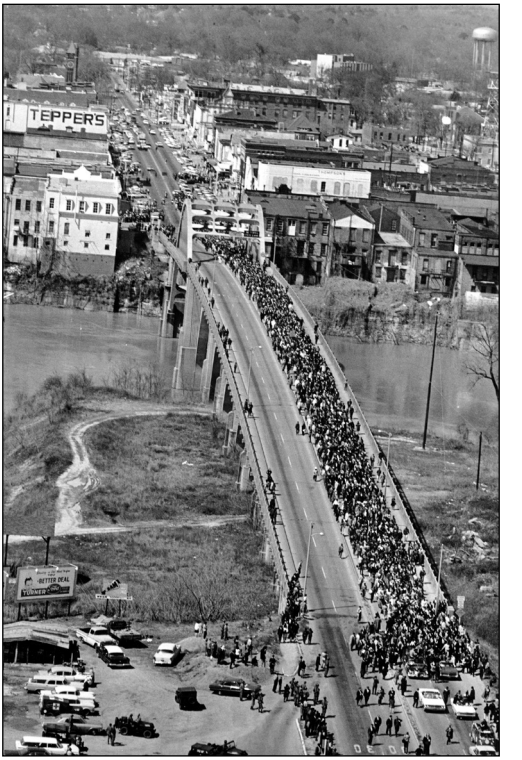
Figure 3: Civil rights marchers cross the Alabama river on the Edmund Pettus Bridge at Selma, March 21, 1965 (anon.).



Courtesy of the Press Association

MEDIA-MADE SELMA

That the television media filmed the confrontation in March 1965 distinguishes the tale of this protest from the others. Built in 1940, the bridge had been named for Edmund Winston Pettus, the last Confederate general to hold a seat in the US Senate; its name carried forward the ideology that was adapted as massive resistance to racial integration, balking at federal intervention in the region. The bridge's original meaning would change irrevo-

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cably in 1965, as former SNCC organizer Charles Cobb summarized in 2008: "What happened as a result of that decision [to march] has fixed the bridge in most minds today in a manner that its designers and earlier Chambers of Commerce could not have imagined."[26] As one journalist asserted, it has come to symbolize "a moment in history when an old order fell . . . the new have leaped the bounds of Dixie and sounded throughout the nation."[27]

Commemoration of the Selma-to-Montgomery March was underlined in 1992 when a museum was established close to the bridge, and the voting rights protests that took place there are memorialized each year in a "Bridge Crossing Jubilee" honoring symbolic figures with Freedom Flame awards.[28] There are a number of reasons why this particular local struggle for voting rights should symbolize a cataclysmic social shift. Even though the Civil Rights Act had been passed in 1964, reference in that Act to the right to vote was limited to federal elections so discriminatory rules remained in force for local elections. The protest made it clear that another Congressional Act was necessary and President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law in August 1965. Yoking an event to the passing of legislation fixes its importance in the nation's history. Selma was more than 80% black in 1965 but only 275 black people were registered to vote alongside 9,800 whites. The fact that by the end of the decade Selma had elected black representatives to office in both town and county elections made sure that this Black Belt town would be remembered as a beacon of change[29] and that 1965 would be referenced as "a pivotal turning point (in a positive sense) for the relationship between government and culture" as forged

26 Cobb, *Road to Freedom*, 229.

27 Rex Thomas, "Selma Marked End of an Era in Deep South," *Northwest Arkansas Times*, March 16, 1975, 7A.

28 The five-day celebration of civil rights activism typically attracts over 25,000 people, and has included politicians such as Presidents Clinton and Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Rev. Jesse Jackson, Congressman John Lewis, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s family, Rev. Al Sharpton, and celebrity-activists including Harry Belafonte and Dick Gregory. Sponsors include the National Voting Rights Museum and Institute, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and American Airlines.

29 For example, Karen M. McDearman, "Black Belt," *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Geography* ed. Richard Pillsbury (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2006), 158.

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through legislation.[30] The image of Selma as a template for the black franchise would not be lost on politicians. Its symbolism was underlined by the presence of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and although the grassroots struggle was waged by the Selma Improvement Association and SNCC, largely without help from King or the SCLC, the march was the first struggle in which King involved himself after being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.[31] Therefore, for some it would become "Dr. Martin Luther King's historic Selma-to-Montgomery March" and attached to his memory, especially as a result of the speech he made at the end of the march, "How Long? Not Long!"[32] Divergent readings of the event, and clashes of strategy between organizations, feature in histories of the event, as does the virulent anti-movement response to the campaign.

If both sides of the civil rights showdown agreed on a single thing, though, it was that the clash between police and protestors on the Edmund Pettus Bridge was one of the most striking visual images of confrontation recorded by the media. Selma mayor Joseph Smitherman actively opposed the demonstration but would observe that civil rights organizations had "picked Selma just like a movie producer would pick a set."[33] "Bloody Sunday," as the March 7 demonstration came to be known, was itself a powerful sound bite, and civil rights organizers were keenly aware that Sheriff Jim Clark fit the mold of arch villain and would perform for the media in ways that would throw positive light on the black freedom struggle. Clark's penchant for wearing a military helmet was probably designed to echo General Patton but SNCC's Bernard Lafayette saw the irony of a sheriff modeled on the image of the savior-hero, observing that Clark was

30 Kammen, *In the Past Lane*, 77. The VRA brought tremendous progress in black voter registration not only in Alabama, but all over the South. Within five years the number of black voters had doubled throughout the South and in Mississippi it has risen from 6 to 67%. Also the number of black elected politicians in the South climbed from 72 in 1965 to 711 in 1970.

31 A number of historians, from August Meier to Adam Fairclough, have also argued for reading King in the light of the bridge metaphor that textures this essay, with the SCLC acting as a bridge between the militant and conservative wings of the movement—that is to say, between SNCC and CORE on the one hand and the NAACP and National Urban League on the other, connecting the "Big Five" civil rights organizations of the 1960s.

32 For example, Christopher Wren, "Turning Point for the Church," *Look* 29 (May 18, 1965): 31.

33 Smitherman interviewed in the *Eyes on the Prize* episode "Bridge of Freedom."

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"trying to play John Wayne in a movie where the Duke was a white segregationist sworn to uphold the good America and the black protestors were the bad guys trying to tear it down."[34] Cameramen and photo-journalists turned to Clark as a caricature of a southern sheriff because, in advance of the march, he had confronted Reverend C. T. Vivian at a voting rights demonstration, hitting Vivian in the face and threatening to damage television news equipment. The encounter was screened for a shocked public[35] and national and international spectators caught a glimpse of the quotidian brutality black citizens faced. When, at 9:30 p.m., the ABC network cut from a broadcast of the film *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961) to fifteen minutes of footage of Clark's officers joining with state troopers to bludgeon peaceful marchers, it was clear how the scene would play in collective memory. Mayor Smitherman admitted to the makers of television series *Eyes on the Prize*, "I did not understand how big [the Selma story] was until I saw it on television." After seeing the bloodshed on television, a furious President Johnson tasked his attorney general Nicholas Katzenbach to write the most robust voting rights act he could. He pushed the Voting Rights Act through a reluctant Congress two days later. The bridge crossing commemorates the ultimate trigger for that legislation, creating the impetus to tell the story again each year.

The bridge crossing is a local and predominantly African American ritual but it is also steeped in national nostalgia. President Clinton's second inauguration in 1997 took place on Martin Luther King Day and in his speech he recalled King and Selma both when he promised that America would build a bridge towards the twenty-first century, "a bridge wide enough and strong enough for every American to cross over to a blessed land of new promise." Clinton was the first standing President to march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge on the 35th anniversary.[36] When Barack Obama announced his candidacy for Democratic nominee for President, he was invited to speak at the annual commemoration and he took a symbolic

34 Lafayette quoted in Halberstam, *Children*, 490.

35 See Graham and Monteith, "Introduction," for the role of the media in Selma and more generally in civil rights contexts.

36 William Jefferson Clinton, "Second Inaugural Address, January 20, 1997," *American History: From Revolution to Reconstruction and Beyond*, http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/william-jefferson-clinton/second-inaugural-address-1997.php

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walk over the bridge on Sunday March 4, 2007, honoring those who marched in 1965: "I am here because somebody marched. I'm here because you all sacrificed for me. I stand on the shoulders of giants."[37] In this way Obama paid tribute to the movement and inserted himself in its timeline. In March 2008 Democratic nominees Hillary Clinton and Obama were scheduled to give near simultaneous speeches at two different Selma churches just a block apart on commemoration day. The news media reporting their presence at the anniversary of the march was crucial to their campaigns. Later, when Obama's speeches were billed as "The Road to the White House," that road, it was implied, could not be traveled unless it included crossing the bridge at Selma.

Since 2007, Obama has paid his respects each year at the bridge crossing. Indeed, prior to his inauguration in January 2009, after a short march across the bridge, a prayer of thanks was said. Obama's Presidency could therefore be described by the London *Times* as "Promised Land at last for the children of Bloody Sunday."[38] Obama secured a romantic as well as a political foothold in a civil rights success story, largely exorcised of militancy in the popular imagination. Selma was the real launch of his presidential campaign insofar as in that place he began to stake out his position on race, using the Selma movement to signal his debt to, and his distance from, the Moses generation of civil rights activists for the African American franchise. As a member of the Joshua generation growing up in the post-civil rights moment, Obama not only walked across the bridge but he pushed wheelchair-bound Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, a notable veteran of the movement. When in his 2007 speech Obama hailed those of the Moses generation who died before they could "cross over the river to see the Promised Land," a long tradition of civil rights struggle was evoked, as it would be in *The Bridge*, David Remnick's 2010 biography of America's first black President. The inside cover of Remnick's study features an iconic photograph of John Lewis and Hosea Williams of the SCLC facing down

37 For Senator Obama's Selma speech, see "Obama's Selma speech. Text as delivered," *Voices*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 5, 2007, http://voices.suntimes.com/early-and-often/sweet/obamas-selma-speech-text-as-de/. For the video recording, see C-Span, March 23, 2008, http://www.c-spanvideo.org/ program/204519-1

38 James Bone, "Promised Land At Last for the Children of Bloody Sunday," *Times*, January 21, 2009.

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Fig. 4: Sen. Barack Obama pushes the wheelchair of civil rights leader Fred Shuttlesworth who is greeting former president Bill Clinton in Selma, Ala., Sunday, March 4, 2007.

Courtesy of the Press Association

troopers and the last in a series of epigraphs is Lewis's statement that "Barack Obama is what comes at the end of that bridge in Selma" (fig. 4).

Angela Da Silva, who founded the National Black Tourism Network in 1996, observed in 2002 that, "Everyone wants to march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge…and everyone wants to do it singing 'We Shall Over-

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come' at the top of their lungs."[39] The reenactment of the Selma-to-Montgomery March passes through Dallas county and into Lowndes county, infamous as "bloody Lowndes" in the civil rights era.[40] Also in 2002, Robert L. Woodson, Sr., President of the National Centre for Neighborhood Enterprises, decried what he called "the civil rights poverty-political complex" for its failure to prevent poor people living in squalor in Lowndes, without sewers or septic tanks, their children studying in school buildings with only coal-fired furnaces for heating.[41] Despite President Clinton's attempt to underline Selma's national symbolism as the new millennium dawned, veterans who had marched every year were also beginning to worry. One man told a journalist, "Older folks keep marching but the younger people aren't getting into it."[42] Whether Selma was successfully popularized by civil rights tourism or sanitized to ineffectuality in failing to provide a platform for local civil rights initiatives in the 2000s, Obama proved crucial in reviving national interest in the bridge crossing ritual that some feared would die in the twenty-first century.

MEMORY AND CULTURAL FORMS

In the US the national revival of popular interest in the civil rights movement may be traced back to the Public Broadcasting System's airing of the six-hour, six-part documentary series *Eyes on the Prize* between January 22 and February 26, 1987. Produced by Henry Hampton's Boston-based Blackside, Inc., the documentary told the stories of key moments of the movement through archival footage and contemporaneous interviews and continues to inform popular understanding of US racial history. In Selma, though, as John Lewis has observed, even children "know better than any historian the details of what happened on March 7…. They've heard the story so many times, from parents and grandparents, from neighbors and

39 Quoted in Tim Funk, "Black History Comes Alive in Southern Cities," *Daily Helmsman* (5 February 2002), 11.
40 See, for example, Jeffries.
41 William Raspberry, "Civil Rights Failure," *Washington Post*, March 18, 2002.
42 Floyd Tolbert quoted in Samira Jafari, "Marchers Want Youth to Follow in Footsteps," *Herald-Sun*, Durham, North Carolina, March 6, 2005, A10.

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friends—from the people who were there."[43] Cultural memory is dependent on stories, and in the 1960s, the civil rights movement had been the inspiration for a plethora of representations across cultural forms including fiction, popular film, painting, and photography, though many have been forgotten. *The Stone Face* (1963) is a transnational civil rights novel by African American journalist and writer William Gardner Smith that culminates in the 1961 Paris massacre as witnessed by its journalist protagonist:

> Simeon saw old men clubbed after they had fallen to the ground, sometimes by five or six policemen at a time, their bodies beaten after the men were dead. In scenes of terrible sadism, Simeon saw pregnant women clubbed in the abdomen, infants snatched from their mothers and hurled to the ground. Along the Seine, police lifted unconscious Algerians from the ground and tossed them into the river.[44]

Rushing to the rescue of a woman and child, Simeon is beaten by police, arrested and held with "literally thousands of Algerians" (204) in a sports stadium. While Simeon is released because he is a "foreigner" rather than an Algerian "other," throughout the novel he is twinned with Ahmed, a student radicalized by the cause and the "brother" whose world has intersected with his own, who is murdered on a Paris street during the demonstration. Simeon's experience of trying to understand the liberal acceptance he enjoys, in contrast to the violence and disdain shown Ahmed, presages his return home because, he has come to understand, "America's Algerians were back there" (210). The "stone face" of the title initially refers only to America's white supremacists but by the end of the narrative it includes "the face of the French cop…the face of the Nazi torturer at Buchenwald and Dachau, the face of the hysterical mob at Little Rock, the face of the Afrikaner bigot and the Portuguese butcher in Angola, and yes, the black faces of Lumumba's murderers" (205–6). Smith punctures the Parisian "fantasy world" (175) in which Simeon finds little racism and much acceptance but in which he has continually grappled with his responsibility to the civil rights movement. Once the Algerian demonstration takes possession of the city's streets, this man who lost an eye in a childhood battle with racist boys can

43 Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 323.
44 Smith, *Stone Face*, 201.

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no longer turn a blind eye to the long arc of transatlantic civil rights struggle, or to the battle he must fight at home.

Smith's novel was unusual in the 1960s and it was not published in France. What happened suffered institutional neglect and much of its meaning has had to be reconstituted by memory work, oral histories passed down as a community's heritage, and fictions of memory that attempt to correct or change readers' perceptions of what has been denied and repressed. In "Public Memory and Its Discontents" (1994), Geoffrey Hartman argues that literature "counteracts in the one hand the impersonality and instability of public memory and on the other the determinism and fundamentalism of a collective memory based on identity politics."[45] Arts can be compensatory, exposing a past atrocity, as Smith does in *The Stone Face*, or exploring it as subsequent generations have done when bringing this event to the fore, a reminder of the importance of what Marianne Hirsch in her study of the children of Holocaust survivors calls "postmemory" as a means to describe "those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can neither be understood nor recreated."[46]

Leïla Sebbar's novella *La Seine était rouge* (The Seine was red) is one of a clutch of fictions that imagine October 17, 1961 across different genres to include crime and detective fiction.[47] Published in 1999, it was written by an author whose heritage bridges France and Algeria: Sebbar is the daughter of an Algerian father and a French mother spending her childhood in Algeria and adulthood in France. *La Seine était rouge* is a self-consciously multi-voiced, cross-generational memory text that explores the ties between generations and the memories which separate them. Its modernist structuring emphasizes the difficulty of coming to a consensual understanding of what happened, or of agreeing on the event's meaning across the generations, with each character's voice contained in separate sections. Maurice Halbwachs described ties between generations as a "passé vecu,"

45 Hartmann, *Geoffrey Hartman Reader*, 422.

46 Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 7.

47 For example, Georges Mattei, *La Guerres des gusses* (1982); Didier Daeninckx's *Meurtres pour mémoire* (1984); Nacer Kettane, *Le sourire de Brahim* (1985); Mehdi Lallaoui, *Les beurs de Seine* (1986), all of which are acknowledged by Sebbar.

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or "living deposit," and Sebbar explores the ways in which imagination also forges such links.[48] This quiet novel wears its historical research lightly but is powerful in its exploration of controversial issues such as survivors' guilt and strategic forgetting, as when a barman in Bonne Nouvelle speaks up for the first time 35 years later:

> None of us provoked anything. I'm a witness to that, no one . . . they were hitting Arabs while insulting them. . . . [The police] thought their co-workers had been wounded; that's what the radio wanted them to believe. Lies. . . . I didn't see any wounded cops either in the street or on the sidewalk. I saw my compatriots, several bodies stretched out in front of the Gymnase and the Rex. Algerians had bullet wounds, not just injuries from the beatings. And the folks looking down from an apartment building were taking picture . . . journalists were there too. . . . There were hats, scarves, shoes scattered on the concrete.[49]

Sebbar's novel is dedicated to the dead, and to others who tried to keep the event in view, but she explores in most detail the struggle of young people striving to understand their parents' silence on the issue, whether due to grief, humiliation, shame, the fear of not being believed, or rage. Louis is the son of a French mother who marches with Algerian friends and is arrested with them in 1961; Amel is French Algerian and her family demonstrates; Omer's father is deported from France on October 19 after the demonstration. Seeing her mother's testimony on film, Amel is overcome by the fact that neither she (only nine years old when taken to the demonstration) nor her grandmother bequeathed memories to her in a more personal way. They seek to protect her from an aspect of her inheritance that brings them only pain, and Susan Sontag once posited that too much remembering makes us bitter because to make peace with the past, or to reconcile ourselves to it, "it is necessary for memory to be faulty and limited."[50] But Sebbar posits that Amel's foremothers' protection of her is a failure to understand that a bridge already exists between their experience and hers, and that Amel can make their experience meaningful through her own life. In this way, Sebbar enacts what David Lowenthal describes in the

48 Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 140.
49 Sebbar, *La Seine était rouge*, 78–9.
50 Sontag, *Regarding the Pain*, 103.

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evocatively titled *Possessed of the Past* (1996), that "heritage no less than history is essential to knowing and acting."[51]

Amel and Omer map the events of October 17. They follow the route Louis takes in his film about the massacre, each following the other toward the possibility of amassing truths about an event that occurred before any of them was born but which they each believe should be inscribed on the cityscape. They visit monuments of national history and in the form of political graffiti, couched in the precise official language of monumentalism, they give notice of the events of October 1961. On the quai at Saint-Michel, Amel and Omer write in red letters:

> ON THIS SPOT ALGERIANS FELL
> FOR THE INDEPENDENCE OF ALGERIA
> OCTOBER 17, 1961.[52]

While this indicates a partial understanding of the demonstration, it forms a palimpsest on the city as a memory site because the words are inserted next to the plaque on the Saint-Michel fountain that honors members of the French Resistance. In this way, the characters force a new grid of understanding that disturbs republican forms of memory and ground their community memories in a civic framework. *La Seine était rouge* is a memory text in the way historian Bernard Bailyn describes memory, as "expressed in signs and signals, symbols, images and mnemonic clues of all sorts… it is ultimately emotional, not intellectual… a living and immediate if vicarious experience."[53] Bailyn allows that memory sites "lie all about us" but, as Sebbar reveals through her characters, they can remain unseen if the state "forgets" even what happens in the plain sight of its citizens. In this way, Sebbar's fiction imagines counter memorials that would alter the city's self-memorialization— in the way that the actual plaque on Pont Saint-Michel has done since 2001—but the fact that Amel and Omer use graffiti, and that their do-it-yourself-style historical record is necessarily incomplete, shows that the trauma they seek to represent does not "fit" comfortably into public commemoration. In *The Ethics of Memory* (2002), Avishai Margalit con-

51 Lowenthal, *Possessed of the Past*, xi.
52 Sebbar, 93.
53 Bailyn, "Slave Trade," 250–51.

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tends that moral witnesses must testify what they witnessed with their own eyes, not provide testimony based on what they heard or discovered.[54] However, limiting the role of "witness" to witness-participants risks ignoring the roles that subsequent generations, and, indeed, the political fictions they write, can play in bringing a suppressed event to wider public consciousness.

CONCLUSION

Selma was inscribed in the social symbolic with speed and ease. It was difficult to contradict images emblazoned on public television. National media easily trumped counter-narratives of the Selma to Montgomery March promoted by Sheriff Jim Clark and others in the form of locally published propaganda, barely acknowledged then and largely ignored even by scholars now. President Johnson's public statement and the passing of legislation by Congress ensured Selma could be celebrated as a national success story; it could be narrated not only as a triumph for the civil rights movement but also as a federal victory against southern segregationist politicians holding out for states' rights. In this rhetoric, local and regional intransigence was overcome and President Johnson would borrow the discourse of the movement, declaring "We Shall Overcome" when he strengthened the 1964 Civil Rights Act with the Voting Rights Act. In 2001 Reverend James Webb, a local leader in Selma in 1965, declared that if the Edmund Pettus Bridge served a particular purpose, it was to "remind us never to slip into complacency."[55] It is not surprising that different publics seek noble and dignified forms of commemoration—a monument, a statue, a building named after an event, a museum—so that "we" do not fall into complacency or atrophy. Selma may have symbolized injustice but now it symbolizes the moral right and the agency of those African Americans who marched past their opponents into modernity to ensure full voting rights.

The events in Paris on October 17 entered mass consciousness only because of different—to borrow a phrase from Mark Osier—"social move-

54 Margalit, *Ethics of Memory*, 163–68.

55 Rev. James Webb quoted in Anita Weier, "A Bridge to Remember," The Madison, Wisconsin *Capital Times*, June 8, 2001 at cap.times.com.

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ments for factual recovery,"[56] including those to open police archives initiated by Einaudi. Organizations such as *Au nom de la mémoire* (In Memory's Name) and *Mouvement contre le racisme et pour l'amitié entre les peoples* (Movement Against Racism and for Friendship between Peoples) are still campaigning for memories of the event to be shared, and individual memory activists, like Einaudi, have fought to persuade the French government to acknowledge—at least symbolically—that a state crime was perpetrated and to erect a national and collective memorial. So far they have failed. In the French context, local and federal have operated differently with responsibility strategically devolved to local officials. Local councils in the Paris suburbs and outlying areas, especially those that are socialist or broadly left wing, have renamed streets October 17, or dedicated plaques and organized memorial events. The possibility of leveraging a full acknowledgment after Prime Minister Jospin admitted some state responsibility was sidestepped by restricting memorialization to the city of Paris rather than aligning it with France, the government, or the war. In his study of imagined national communities, Benedict Anderson posited that "No more arresting emblems of the modern culture of nationalism exist than cenotaphs and tombs of unknown soldiers."[57] When there are no names to inscribe or bodies to bury, there is no need to specify the nationality of the deceased; it is already understood. While the plaque erected in Paris in 2001 does state "To the memory of the Algerians, victims of the bloody repression of a peaceful demonstration," at present, French Algerian citizens are commemorated only as "Algerian" others. A national memorial to those who died would act as a reminder that France was their home.

The act of excavating historical events is often motivated by the counter-memories Foucault defines and, particularly, by the need to have one's presence acknowledged, as in the "I was there" slogans peppering the walls of the Selma museum, or the question "Were you there?" posed by the National Library of Wales to prompt people to share their memories of the Trefechan Bridge protest. In France, there is a continuing danger in only remembering the demonstrators on October 17, 1961 as victims, with what they were demonstrating against ignored. While Premier Nicolas Sarcozy did not commemorate the anniversary on 17 October 2012, a communica-

56 Osiel, *Mass Atrocity*, 270.
57 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 17.

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tion from the office of the Prime Minister François Hollande stated ‹‹La République reconnaît avec lucidité ces faits à propos de la sanglante repression de la manifestation d'Algériens à Paris le 17 octobre 1961. Cinquante et un ans après cette tragédie, je rends hommage á la mémoire des victims›› (The French Republic clearly recognizes the fact that in Paris on October 17, 1961 Algerian demonstrators were killed in a bloody crackdown. Fifty-one years after this tragedy, I pay tribute to the memory of the victims).[58] It is hoped that what happened on the city's bridges may soon be memorialized in the national imaginary, if only according to the compromised ideal that Albert Camus's described in "Neither Victims nor Executioners" (1946): "not for a world in which murder no longer exists (we are not so crazy as that!) but rather one is which murder is not legitimate."[59]

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58 ‹‹Hollande reconnaît la répression du 17 octobre 1961, critiques à droite›› *Le Monde*, October 17, 2012, http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2012/10/17/francois-hollande-reconnait-la-sanglante-repression-du-17-octobre-1961 _1776918_3224.html.

59 Camus, "Neither Victims nor Executioners," 28.

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