

## Memphis to Missouri Outline

- Begins with a soundbite from Only God Knows, the poem read aloud in LeMoyne Testimonial EY.

That was an excerpt from LeMoyne Testimonial EY, an oral reflection on the Memphis Sanitation Strike of 1968. The Strike began with the death of two black sanitation workers, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, who were crushed to death by defective garbage compactors on February 1. Eleven days later, most of the city's sanitation and sewage workers did not show up for work. Their demands were simple: better wages, safer working conditions, and recognition of their union. However, Mayor Henry Loeb refused, imploring the protesters to return to work. Undeterred, the strike continued, drawing support from the Memphis black community after police attacked nonviolent demonstrators with mace and tear gas. Soon the protests garnered the attention of Martin Luther King, Jr. who rallied Memphis to follow him in a nonviolent march. However, the march dissolved into riots and Mayor Loeb declared martial law, bringing in 4,000 National Guard troops.

- Inset soundbite from reflection on riots.

Determined to achieve economic justice by nonviolent means, King returned to Memphis to lead another march. However, the evening before the scheduled demonstration, King was assassinated on the balcony of his hotel. In the wake of his death, another march was organized. On April 8th, two months since the strike began, an estimated 42,000 nonviolent demonstrators stood before city hall. With national pressure mounting and the King's tragic death resting on his shoulders, Mayor Loeb finally conceded to the protesters' demands a few days later.

White citizens in Memphis wondered what had happened to their city's good race relations? How had the death of two sanitation workers culminated in riots, protests, and the National Guard? The truth is, race relations in Memphis were never good. The city had long dealt with a history of segregation and unfair treatment for black residents. Lorraine Jones, a black woman born and raised in Memphis, recalls the discrimination of her youth.

- soundbite of Lorraine recounting racist encounters

African-Americans at the time were excluded from unions and paid much less than their white counterparts. They faced dangerous working conditions, racism, brutality, and a police force largely culled from the Ku Klux Klan. The deaths of Echol Cole and Robert Walker were not the reason for the strike, they were the catalyst— the straw that broke the camels back. The black

community in Memphis was tired of maltreatment and discrimination, but it took bloodshed to erupt the anger simmering underneath. Echol Cole and Robert Walker would never be listed among civil rights martyrs, their names largely forgotten.

Almost five decades later, Ferguson Missouri would descend into riots and protests that echoed the Sanitation Strike of 1968. Like in Memphis, the demonstrations in Ferguson began with bloodshed. Michael Brown, a young black man, was shot to death in the middle of the street by white St. Louis policeman, Darren Wilson. As crowds gathered, rumors swirled that Brown had tried to surrender and Wilson had shot him in the back. Though Michael Brown's death was the catalyst to the demonstrations, the true aggregate was Missouri's municipal courts that targeted poor and black citizens. Missouri law professor named T. E. Lauer issued a warning, naming Missouri's municipal courts "a modern anomaly." It was "disgraceful," he argued, that poor people accused of municipal ordinance violations didn't receive lawyers. Arresting and confining citizens for petty violations of municipal codes was unnecessary. Many municipalities, he wrote, had clearly "conceived of their municipal courts in terms of their revenue-raising ability," and those financial incentives influenced judges' decisions. That was 1966. In the ensuing decades, these "kangaroo courts" enabled small towns to pad their budgets by extracting fines from people for extraordinarily minor violations of municipal codes — under threat of jail. Violations like wearing baggy pants or failing to subscribe to a designated trash service. These local courts targeted poor communities, particularly black neighborhoods. Much like Memphis in 1968, the climate in Ferguson was ripe for unrest.

Just as the Sanitation Strike began with peaceful demonstrations, nonviolent protestors gathered in Ferguson first. The day after Brown's death was a day for memorial. However, as night fell, crowds at a candlelight vigil grew unruly. Again an echo of the Memphis Strike, the St. Louis police force adopted a hard stance toward the protests. Confronting the riots and demonstrations alike, officers dispersed crowds with smoke bombs, flash grenades, rubber bullets and tear gas. For two days the protests surged with thousands of demonstrators demanding the criminal prosecution of Darren Wilson. At night the riots continued and police brutality mounted. Is this really happening here, Americans asked themselves as they watched news reels akin to footage from Syria and Iraq? The parallel of police brutality between the Memphis Sanitation Strike and Ferguson is disturbing to be sure. The first protest a part of the Civil Rights Movement and the latter a demonstration for Black Lives Matter, nearly 46 years apart. It's understandable to wonder, are we just going in circles? Thankfully, no we are not. The Civil Rights Movement addressed the civil and political rights of African-Americans, achieving

many long-standing victories, including the 1964 Civil Rights Act, 1965 Voting Rights Act, and the 1968 Fair Housing Act. But it did not directly confront the “the radicalized degradation black people endured.” Black Lives Matter is less a demand for legislative action and more a broader claim for “black humanity.” While this movement is new, the appeal to humanity has deep roots in history. Anti-slavery campaigns in the eighteenth-century appealed to the consciousness of nations, proclaiming, “Am I Not a Man and a Brother?” During the Memphis Sanitation Strike, garbage workers carried placards stating, “I am a Man,” that embodied a quote by Reverend James Lawson, who said, “For at the heart of racism is the idea that a man is not a man, that a person is not a person. You are human beings. You are men. You deserve dignity.”

Slowly, black activists and white allies must chip away at the attitudes of a nation and combat the institutions that permit and foment racism. As president Obama once said to Marc Maron of “WTF Podcast,” “Societies don’t, overnight, completely erase everything that happened 200 to 300 years prior.” However, one difference between Ferguson and the Sanitation Strike demonstrates that social progress has been made since the end of the Civil Rights Movement. Unlike Ferguson, the Memphis Sanitation Strike of 1968 derived mostly negative responses from the media. Major new outlets condemned the demonstrations and commended Mayor Loeb for his hard stance against the strikers. Only a few small publications reported from the perspectives of the protestors, including our very own college paper, The Sou’wester. In Ferguson, the arrest of Washington Post reporter Wesley Lowery and Huffington Post reporter Ryan Reilly, along with the harassment of other journalists, drew mainstream media attention in support of the demonstrators. The heavily militarized reaction to relatively peaceful demonstrations was unnerving to people across the nation. The attention was a double-edged sword. We now know that the protestors were reacting to a media narrative that was filled with misinformation. Bruising on Wilson’s cheek supported his claim that Brown had attacked him before the shooting and three separate autopsy reports confirmed that none of the bullets entered through Brown’s back. In court, some eyewitnesses changed their stories or admitted they never actually saw the shooting. “But their accounts echoed across the media landscape, that Darren Wilson shot Michael Brown in the back, that Brown had his hands up, that he was trying to surrender.” While the media storm regarding Brown’s death was misplaced, their coverage drew national attention to the bigger issues at hand: a municipal court that targeted African-Americans and police brutality that had long gone unchecked. In the end, Ferguson worked, just as the Sanitation Strike did 46 years ago. Nine months after Brown’s death, the Missouri legislature passed a bill that capped the amount of revenue that

municipalities can collect from tickets. Gov. Jay Nixon signed the legislation in 2016.

Furthermore, President Barack Obama signed an executive order creating the Task Force on 21st Century Policing. The initiative recommends police agencies improve community policing, eliminate ticket quotas, equip street cops with body cameras and use social media to foster trust with civilians.

Despite this progress, America still has a long way to go. First, the media must do better on its coverage of race. An op-ed piece by Eric Deggans by NPR called for news outlets in the wake of the Michael Brown grand jury decision to provide solid, factual reporting on the evidence considered, the extent of the rioting, the police response to violence, and details about the grand jury process. As Deggans wrote, CNN anchors squabbling over how many protestors were acting violent is, “The kind of buzz-inducing conflict that drives cable news ratings and kills enlightening conversations.” On top of that, Deggan adds that, “Each cable news channel fine-tunes its coverage for its target audience, including how that target audience sees racial issues.” Both CNN and Fox News cater to an audience that is mostly white. So it isn’t surprising that Don Lemon, known for challenging the dominant views of many black communities, is CNN’s most prominent black anchor. Similarly, a study from the Brookings Institute in 2011 reported that 46 percent of Americans believe discrimination against white people is equally as big a problem as discrimination against people of color. However, of those respondents, 70 percent said they trusted the Fox News Channel. It would follow that big Fox News stars such as Sean Hannity and Bill O’Reilly would reflect the views of their target audience, questioning the notion of white privilege and insisting there is little racial bias among institutions. What America needs now is an educated public and news coverage from an industry that can see past its own priorities.

Lastly, if institutional racism is to end, black communities must continue to hit America where it hurts— the pockets. According to Forbes, black shoppers hold more than \$1 trillion in spending power. Speaking to the Memphis protestors in 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. encouraged demonstrators to utilize the power of economic withdrawal in his legendary speech, “I’ve been to the Mountaintop.”

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"God sent us by here, to say to you that you're not treating his children right. And we've come by here to ask you to make the first item on your agenda fair

treatment, where God's children are concerned. Now, if you are not prepared to do that, we do have an agenda that we must follow. And our agenda calls for withdrawing economic support from you.”

In a dark prophetic moment, Dr. King said later in his speech, “Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now.” The next day Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, but his immortal words live on:

\*\*\* [insert excerpt] “We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop.”