

Her Brothers' Keeper: A Sister's Quest for Justice

by Sylvia Bell White and Jody LePage

Introduction

That evening of February 2, 1958, Sylvia Bell White and her friend, Stella, were driving down Center Street in Milwaukee. The two women, then in their twenties, had gone to pick up the cake pans, punch bowl and cups that Sylvia had left at her younger brother Dan's birthday party the night before. Now they were hurrying back to Sylvia's house, so that she could get ready for her night shift at a nursing home. As they crossed Sixth Street, flashing police lights caught Sylvia's eye. "That looks like Dan's car down there," she remarked without stopping.

Further down Sixth Street, Daniel Bell lay dead in the snow, shot by the police during a traffic stop. Unable to justify the killing as it had happened, the shooter planted a knife on Dan's body. He and the officer with him devised a cover-up story. Without notifying the family, the police department gave the officers' account to the media.

"Mama, they killed Dan!" Sylvia was getting dressed for work, when her son cried out the news. Stunned, she struggled to make sense of the television newscast. One detail rang false. The police said that Dan had jumped out of the car with an open knife in his right hand. Anyone close to Dan knew that he was left-handed. When she and her brothers, Lawrence and Patrick, raised the issue at the police station that night, they received only racial insults in response. Twelve days later, on Valentine's Day, an all-white inquest jury declared the killing "justifiable homicide."

Sylvia lost more than a brother to this incident. She had always been more than a sister. More than that fun-loving little girl who braved playing in the Louisiana swamps with the boys. More than the beautiful young woman the Bell brothers could be proud to dance with at nightclubs; the cool jazz/blues enthusiast who married Milwaukee's first black deejay, O.C. White. The only girl of thirteen children, Sylvia had shouldered responsibility at an early age for mothering her siblings. Later, when younger ones came North, she and the older brothers acted as parents. Now the shooting of Daniel would destroy two additional lives. When Jimmy and Ernest, the two closest to Dan, went to identify his body, the trauma did irreparable psychological damage to both.

A wrongful death lawsuit filed in 1960 only brought the Bells greater sorrow. Their father collapsed in court and never regained his health. He died a broken man, crushed by what seemed a cruel irony. He had raised his thirteen children in a Deep

South state notorious for violent racism. Yet Dan had been killed up North — where this father had sent his children as if to the Promised Land. Dock Bell lived his last years in inconsolable grief. Just before dying, he predicted that what had really happened that night would one day come to light. Remarkably, it did.

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Twenty years after the death of Daniel Bell, one of the officers involved, Louis Krause, decided to reveal how the killing had occurred. Hearing Krause's narrative, Milwaukee District Attorney, E. Michael McCann, and Assistant DA, Thomas P. Schneider, decided not to re-open the case, unless they could get the shooter, Thomas Grady, to confirm the allegations. Krause had credibility problems. When the story broke a year later, the *Milwaukee Sentinel* headlined his ten convictions for offenses such as check fraud, in an article that cast him as an opportunistic alcoholic.¹ By then, however, the DA had wiretap tapes of Grady confirming much of Krause's account.

Further corroboration came from an unimpeachable witness, former Milwaukee Police Detective Russell Vorpapel. Involved in the 1958 investigation, Vorpapel had always felt that “justice had not been done” in the Daniel Bell case. Disturbed enough at the time to consult his pastor, Vorpapel soon left the Milwaukee Police department for a career with the FBI. When the Bell case re-opened, he revealed aspects of the coverup that Krause and Grady were still trying to hide. Grady said on the tapped phone that telling the truth would cause “problems for everybody way down the line... hundreds, hundreds of people that'd be in the soup.” In court, he claimed that this referred only to family and friends. Krause gave contradictory testimony about his superiors' involvement. Vorpapel implicated three higher-ranking detectives, the former Chief of Police and District Attorney. Equally important, his testimony exposed an underlying culture of racism.²

Daniel Bell's family had mixed emotions about the reopened case. A *Milwaukee Sentinel* article entitled, “Confession Ends Family's 21 Years of Pain,” indicated that no such closure had occurred. Patrick Bell told the interviewer that some of brothers would

¹ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, September 7, 1979.

² In addition to the *Milwaukee Journal* and *Milwaukee Sentinel*, sources for the case include interviews with Bell family attorneys Walter Kelly (August 1999) and Curry First (June 2001); Kelly's presentation to the Civil Rights Section of the Wisconsin Bar Association Convention, June 2000; records for: *Dock Bell v. Thomas Grady and the City of Milwaukee*, 1960 (Milw. Co. Case No. 286 538); *State of Wisconsin v. Thomas F. Grady* (Milw. Co. Case No. 79 CF 6087); and records of the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals in Chicago for *Patrick Bell, Sr. et al v. City of Milwaukee, et al*, 1979, Docket No. 79-C-927.

not even want to hear this news, since “they wanted to get as far away from the memory of the incident as possible.” Lawrence spoke of a family formerly “always together on things,” until the pain of Dan’s death “tore us apart.”³ Sylvia angrily recalled the courtroom bullying of her late father. By the time Grady confessed, Jimmy Bell had spent twenty years institutionalized for mental illness too severe to permit any statement. Ernest lived in and out of institutions. His 1980 deposition alternated between moments of lucidity and fantastic ramblings about the killing. Other siblings struggled with depression and nightmares. The toll already taken tempered their enthusiasm, as they filed a civil rights lawsuit. During the family’s depositions, Patrick was asked whether he would any feel better if he learned that the killing was accidental. “I never feel right about that, about the killing of my brother,” he declared. “Never.” Rough handling of those unhealed wounds came with this new possibility of vindication.

The courtroom/media battle did not end, even after a jury agreed in December 1981 that a racially motivated conspiracy had violated the civil rights of Daniel Bell and his family. Unwilling to pay the \$1,795,000 awarded, city officials appealed and repeatedly refused the family’s offers to settle for smaller sums. In an editorial for the *Milwaukee Journal*, City Attorney James Brennan accused the Bells of treating Daniel’s death as “a legal gold mine to be exploited for maximum profit.”⁴ Cutting remarks proliferated, as local politicians used public discussion of the case to score points with constituents. Sylvia and her brothers felt particularly stung to hear their family stereotyped as welfare-dependent in the media-buzz following the county’s demand of reimbursement from any eventual settlement. Other than paying for the institutionalization of Jimmy and Ernest, the Bells had made limited use of welfare. Instead, they persevered through ugly experiences of racial discrimination, found jobs and stayed working. Eddie had put in 25 years at American Motors; Patrick 31 years and Lawrence 20 years at A.O. Smith. “My brothers and I have worked,” said Sylvia in tears to a county board meeting, “We have paid taxes.”⁵ After nearly three years, the city finally made serious settlement offers — but only in the last hours before the federal appeals court ruled. Now the Bell family, with Sylvia in the lead, chose to await the verdict.

In September 1984, the U.S. Court of Appeals in Chicago ruled largely in their favor. The award of \$1.6 million was twice the amount the Bells had offered to settle for earlier. Approximately one million remained after attorneys’ fees. Milwaukee County

³ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, August 30, 1979.

⁴ *Milwaukee Journal*, December 14, 1982.

⁵ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, August 30, 1979.

received more than \$70,000 in reimbursement. The rest did not go far when divided by twelve. Sylvia used her portion to restore the family homestead in Louisiana. The real compensation lay in winning a measure of justice.

The Daniel Bell case matters to history because it exposes abuses that African Americans have all too commonly endured in a society that proclaims its commitments to equality before the law. What happened to Dan and his family exemplifies the experiences behind divergent black/white views of race and policing. Rarely does police testimony so clearly show that minority communities have reasons to mistrust. In Milwaukee, the Daniel Bell case re-enters public discussion with each new questionable incident. Historically, the case also holds interest because the unusually long period between Dan's death and the final disposition falls across key decades of civil rights activism and changing attitudes. The years since have shown the rarity — and thus heightened the importance in the history of civil rights law — of the Bells' legal victory. In another frame of reference, the Daniel Bell case has significance because Sylvia's involvement stimulated her desire to tell the kind of life story that history rarely has occasion to record. From outside the privileged sectors of society comes a woman's story. An African-American story. Or, as Sylvia would prefer, a "plain American" story.

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"What so proudly we hail," answered Sylvia, when I wished her an especially happy Fourth of July 2009. I had phoned thinking about the first African-American President of the United States. Her response seemed to sweep past that historical moment to a larger picture: of a nation whose words promising freedom, equal justice and brotherhood many African Americans have made deeply their own, despite a history that has often contradicted those ideals. Sylvia's poetic leap to the national anthem, "came straight from the heart." Of course, she intended specifically to hail the presidency of Barack Obama. The morning after the election, she told me she had stayed up all night watching TV, "trying to take it in" — and keenly aware that the history she had lived through had everything to do with the emotion she felt.

Sylvia's autobiography does indeed wind through much history. She mentions grandparents born in slavery and her father's knowledge of black Southerners voting during Reconstruction. She details what Roosevelt's New Deal meant to her family and her brothers' report of their experience as soldiers in World War II. She talks about the Montgomery bus boycott and about attempts to protest the Daniel Bell killing in Milwaukee, a frustrating effort that ultimately helped spur civil rights activism there. In

the early 1960s, Sylvia left the city for the nearby countryside, an unusual step for 20th-century African Americans in the North. She bought land and worked out relationships in an all-white farm community where many inhabitants had never had contact with black people. She moved to Los Angeles for five years beginning in 1968, a high point both in the youth counter-cultural movement of “The Sixties” and, profoundly important to Sylvia, the popularization of a Black Power culture. Returning to rural Wisconsin, she found signs there, too, of the “different world” that would frame the reopening of her brother’s case. Sylvia harbors no illusions, however, about the persistence of racism. Entering the 21st century with incisive observations about the harm done by decades of backlash, she lived to witness the historic 2009 election and the unprecedented incivility in expressions of opposition to the first African American President. Her story says all the more about how far we have come — and still have to go — as a nation, because it connects with our history in a wide geographical sweep.

The first half of Sylvia’s narrative takes place near Springfield, Louisiana, forty miles north of New Orleans, in a long-established African American community called Hayne Settlement. These chapters develop a vivid sense of place. Sylvia’s words transport the reader to the dreaded yet beloved swamps where she and her twelve brothers played, the strawberry fields they worked, the house her father built. She shows us a nurturing space that family and community created for children, despite the economic deprivation and cruel racial traditions that necessarily touched their lives. At the center of this picture stands a powerful father. The chapter about him opens with the kind of Louisiana tropical storm that once “blew away” the nearby church. In a house battered by rain and wind, a man with arms outstretched stands praying aloud over the children assembled at his feet. The father who shaped Sylvia’s childhood remains a presence in every chapter of her life. She proudly tells how the community honored his work and integrity by naming a road for him. Dock Bell left his children a rich legacy of values and showed them how an African American could maintain dignity in the 1930s and ‘40s South.

Until age seventeen, Sylvia knew no other world than this region where officials brazenly maintained racial disparity in services such as public schooling; where electoral systems kept blacks from voting; where laws segregated public and private spaces. These official forms of discrimination encouraged an undisguised regional version of the racism that African Americans faced nationwide. Louisiana resembled the rest of the South in much of this, yet maintained its distinctive character.

During slavery, African captives in North America feared sale to Louisiana more than anywhere else. The swampy land around New Orleans proved exceptionally lethal

for both slaves and slaveholders. Poisonous snakes, alligators, malaria-bearing mosquitoes and waterborne micro-organisms accompanied the area's intense heat, high humidity, hurricanes and tropical storms. Sugar production — a Louisiana particularity — added to higher slave mortality rates. After the 1793 invention of the cotton gin, cotton growers settled the Deep South, bringing more than a million slaves — most of them forced to journey from East Coast states on foot. These newcomers to Louisiana joined an unusual population. On the one hand, New Orleans slave-importing brought in many first-generation Africans. On the other, the area's early French and Spanish settlers married and freed slaves more readily than whites along the East Coast. A relatively large number of African Americans lived free in Louisiana during slavery, some wealthy and highly educated. After emancipation, however, white reaction placed the state among the worst for deadly violence against people of African descent.⁶

Sylvia's birth in 1930 coincided with the beginning of the Great Depression, when racial violence had decreased some and making a living demanded more attention than anything else. Planters still grew sugar cane just south and west of her home. Cotton dominated the northern part of the state, reaching southwards near Springfield. In rural Louisiana, most African Americans worked as sharecroppers or agricultural wage workers. Earning next to nothing, they commonly fell ever deeper into debt. During the Depression, many could find no work. At a time when land ownership was relatively rare among Southern blacks, Sylvia's father cultivated his own five-acre plot. He and other local truck farmers grew vegetables for market, but specialized in strawberries. In the late 1860s, the Illinois Central Railroad had initiated strawberry growing in the area by distributing plants. By 1900, the "Strawberry Express" was carrying trainloads of berries to Chicago. Dock Bell began berry growing as he cleared his land in the 1920s. He bought the farm — and continued supplementing his income — through a job at one of Louisiana's many small sawmills. After logging the land, the sawmill owner sold parcels of it to her workers because, Sylvia explains, "she wanted to keep 'em there."

More than a million African Americans left the South in the Great Migration that began in 1914 and lasted until the Depression. Later, as lumbering declined and agriculture mechanized, African Americans in the rural South saw their jobs disappear. Many followed the lead of an earlier generation. In 1947, Sylvia joined a second wave of migration that would include some 5 million people by 1970. Like other migrants, Sylvia

⁶ Louisiana sources include, Hall, Gwendolyn Midlo, *African Americans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the 18th Century*, (1992); McDonald, Roderick A., *The Economy and Material Culture of Slaves: Goods and Chattels on the Sugar Plantations of Jamaica and Louisiana*, (1993); and Wall, Bennet H., *Louisiana: A History*, (1984).

had noticed the dignified demeanor of visiting relatives from up North. She imagined the North as a place where black people found the equal opportunity promised by America, but denied them in the South. In Sylvia's narrative, a teenager's idealized expectations and indignant response to the disappointments bring migrant experiences into sharp focus. Her daring constantly tested the limits imposed by Northern racism.

Sylvia migrated to Milwaukee, then a city of about 620,000 people, located ninety miles north of Chicago on Lake Michigan. Lake breezes chilled her June arrival. In January that year, sixty-mile-an-hour winds had turned 18 inches of snow into drifts that reached first-floor eaves. Wisconsin's cold contrasted strikingly with Louisiana's sub-tropical weather. Yet Sylvia found the city's racial climate far more shocking.⁷ On her first day there, she learned that the bread-baking factory across the street hired only whites. The news left Sylvia "almost ready to 'bout face and go back." Instead, she applied for a job at the bakery and received one of many racially motivated refusals. Taking what work she could get, Sylvia would continue seeking, but never obtain that Milwaukee factory job.

Many black Southerners came there in these years expecting to find work. Among the most industrialized cities in the nation, Milwaukee employed about 56% of its workforce in manufacturing in the late 1940s and early '50s. The city's well-known brewers, tanners and meat-packers remained significant employers, although no longer as important to the local economy as industries manufacturing metal goods, precision instruments, machinery and heavy equipment such as cranes. Birthplace of Harley-Davidson, Milwaukee also produced automobiles. Companies there had begun hiring blacks during World War II, pressed by a labor shortage and government oversight of defense industries. When large numbers of workers returned after the war, many employers resumed their prewar practice of hiring only whites.

In Milwaukee, as in other Northern cities, undercurrents of racism surfaced as the African American population increased. Growing from 7,501 in 1930 to 12,400 when Sylvia arrived in 1947, the number of blacks in the city reached 63,458 by 1960. Between 1940 and 1970, the African American portion of the population went from 1.5% to 14.7%. Residential segregation increased. Divisions intensified within the city's vibrant black community. Long-established black Milwaukeeans felt their situation worsening as whites reacted to the influx.

⁷ Milwaukee sources include, Trotter, Joe William Jr., *Black Milwaukee*, (1984); Gurda, John, *The Making of Milwaukee*, (1999); Jones, Patrick D., *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* (2009).

Earlier waves of immigration had given Milwaukee its size and character. In the 19th century, Germans came to dominate the ethnic mix that also included large Polish, Irish and Italian sectors and smaller numbers from the Balkans and Eastern Europe. The percentage of immigrants and their children peaked at 86.4% in 1890 and remained among the nation's highest for decades. As elsewhere, different nationalities formed enclaves and developed rivalries. Milwaukee had less turf violence among ethnic youth gangs, however, than large cities such as nearby Chicago. The city took pride in its lower crime rates, cleanliness and work ethic. A conservative culture respected authority, enforced rules and curbed individual behavior. Yet Milwaukee also had a fun-loving side. When Prohibition ended in 1933, some 20,000 citizens attended a gigantic beer party that the city sponsored — but postponed for eleven days until Lent ended. Bound up with ethnicity, religion pervaded everyday life in this predominantly Catholic city.

Milwaukee history features a striking combination of cultural conservatism and leftist politics. The city's voters kept a Socialist mayor, Daniel Hoan, in office from 1916 until 1940 — twenty years after the collapse of the Socialist Party nationwide. Although Hoan made speeches comparing profiteers to democracy-hating kings, he also improved municipal services with a conservative thrift that impressed non-socialists. In 1936, *Time* magazine put Hoan's picture on the cover and praised him for running, "perhaps the best-governed city in the U.S." As Cold War rhetoric prevailed elsewhere, Milwaukee put socialist Frank Zeidler in the mayor's office in 1948 and re-elected him until he quit running in 1960. Before the 1956 election, his opponent instigated a rumor campaign saying Zeidler so favored blacks that he had billboards down South inviting them to Milwaukee.⁸ Although Zeidler did show some concern for this growing part of the city's population — and conservatives cast the left as giving preferential treatment to blacks, socialism certainly did not translate into any less racial prejudice and discrimination in Milwaukee than black people faced in other Northern cities.

Media-highlighted moments reveal a contradictory mix of racial attitudes during Sylvia's Milwaukee years. In 1949, when a black World War II veteran moved his family into a county-operated trailer park, a white mob forced them to leave. Immediately, leaders of the city's Urban League and NAACP chapters, the mayor's Human Rights Commission and local newspapers mobilized support for the black family's rights. Squeezing an apology from mob ringleaders, Milwaukee congratulated itself. A few years later, however, well-meaning liberal members of a mayoral commission blamed inner-city poverty and substandard housing — not on job and

⁸ The rumor campaign came to national attention in *Time*, April 2, 1956 (23). See related materials in the Frank Zeidler papers (Boxes 47 & 48) Milwaukee Public Library.

housing discrimination or slumlords — but on black residents described with racist stereotypes. This report differed little from one issued under Zeidler’s conservative successor, Henry Maier, whose commission on race asserted in 1963 that black migrants “lack a sense of family intimacy and interdependence.” By then, Sylvia wished that she and her family had stayed in the segregated South.

Sylvia’s account of her life has historical importance beyond its intersection with events in national and local history. She speaks from a social position shared by most African Americans of her generation — but under-represented in the historical record. Her autobiography complements the fine array of Civil Rights leaders’ memoirs, for example, with the perspective of those African Americans who watched the movement on television, heard about it on the radio and by word of mouth. Born outside the small circle of the black middle class, Sylvia did not receive the education usually prerequisite to having one’s say. On one level, she recounts experiences shared by the multitude of African Americans eking out a living by menial labor. Yet what she has to say takes unpredictable, non-representative turns. A woman, she has a relationship to gender shaped by growing up with twelve brothers. Raised a Southern Baptist, she emerged deeply religious, but in an unconventional way. Her views, her moves and the unfolding of her life make an improvisational jazz on the theme of human possibilities.

Sylvia’s story exemplifies the complexities of an issue that arose when history turned its attention to oppressed groups. Debate has raged over where to focus. Do we risk downplaying the harm of oppression, if we also celebrate what oppressed people have managed to do with their situation? Sylvia stands among those indomitable individuals who press the limits and make everything they can of their lives, no matter what. Despite the deprivations of black childhood in the rural South and rampant discrimination in the North, she found jobs, earned a living and eventually owned property, first in Milwaukee and then in the country. In California, she landed a job at a hospital that had not been hiring blacks, went to night school and obtained a GED diploma. She involved herself energetically in the reopened Daniel Bell case, then played a crucial consulting role as the Milwaukee Repertory Theater developed and staged a play about the case in 1987. Honored in her rural home community, she had a large and enthusiastic following at Milwaukee’s Fond du Lac Avenue Farmers’ Market where, until 2004, she sold produce. Or, as one observer put it, “held court.” People gathered around her vegetable stand for the pleasure of a moment’s conversation. Finally, she succeeded in getting her story told and taped several years before feeling the first symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease. Yet Sylvia remains painfully aware that racial injustice prevented her from realizing her dreams of getting a good education, becoming

a nurse — or even landing a job that would have allowed her to retire. “What happens to a dream deferred?” asked Langston Hughes in one of his most famous poems.⁹ Sylvia’s story answers with both clarity and nuance.

When Sylvia and I met in 1973, we were both selling vegetables at the Farmers’ Market in Madison, Wisconsin. She had just returned from a five-year sojourn in California and looked the very image of “Black Is Beautiful.” Her large Afro harmonized with a face deep in color and glowing from within. I had never met a person so quick to love. Or so easy to love back — for her energy, her intelligence and the inexhaustible wellspring of fun that accompanies her quest for racial justice. We talked earnestly about changing the world. We joked about boyfriends and such. Sylvia’s sparkling youthfulness dissolved the eighteen-year age difference between us. I imagined that she, too, was in her twenties. What pleasure conversing with this witty, hip, joyous woman! Never would I have guessed what she suffered. I hadn’t heard of the Daniel Bell case and would not connect her with it when I did. I knew her by her married name, Sylvia White. She said nothing to me about Daniel in those first years. “Trying to forget,” she later explained.

By 1987, Sylvia’s desire to remember and speak had rekindled. That summer, she asked me to help write her story. We agreed to start when I finished school, neither of us imagining how long that would take.

As we began making tapes in 1998, we had multiple reasons for envisioning a non-scholarly book. Sylvia wanted to reach readers who had not gone to college — including nieces and nephews then in their teens. I had university students in mind, but certainly not the forum of debate in African American studies. My area of specialization was in European history. The question of objectivity hovered as well, although the very discipline that requires consideration of differing views also discourages claims of neutrality. We all speak from our positions — and produce more reliable work when we make clear where we stand. I have loved Sylvia for years and stand with her among all who seek to eradicate racism. In that respect, we do not differ from most scholars in this field.¹⁰ Our work did seem to overstep academic bounds in other ways, however.

⁹ Originally entitled, “Harlem,” the poem is read by Hughes and interwoven with jazz in the audio recording, *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951).

¹⁰ One historiographical essay published in 2000 characterized work on the civil rights era as not yet truly scholarly because “historians have tended to share a sympathetic attitude towards the quest for civil rights.”

Contrary to all guidelines, I did not insist on controlling the length of taping sessions. Nor did the quality of Sylvia's narration diminish, even when she kept us going for nearly five hours on the first day. Every session, we interrupted taping with off-the-record remarks and playful gab. Perhaps this helped Sylvia speak more freely than she would have in an impersonal setting. Yet oral historians could argue that our relationship and procedures create as many problems as they solve.¹¹

Increasingly popular in the early 1980s, oral history faced questions about reliability. How could we believe the stories captured by tape recorders? Defenders countered by noting the bias and inaccuracy in standard historical evidence such as newspapers, letters or written memoirs.¹² Indeed, under relentless scrutiny in the last decades of the 20th century, no sources proved able to offer more than versions of what happened. Where possible, historians corroborate — comparing Sylvia's words to court records, for example. Yet no strategy provides access to an actual past. Written or oral, memoirs have the added problem of depending on long-term memory, a notorious function not even reliably unreliable.¹³ That Sylvia developed Alzheimer's disease reminds us to mention pathological conditions entailing memory loss. "Normal" memory, too, gives plenty of reasons for doubt. Historians took note decades ago of findings in neurophysiology and psychology that memory works not by storing and retrieving remembered material, but rather by constructing memories — and updating them to fit the rememberer's present views. Individuals "reshape, omit, distort, combine and reorganize details from the past," in a memory construction process that resembles historians' work with documents.¹⁴ Standing on ground this shaky, many historians have abandoned traditional claims of factuality and located reliability in complementing standard methods with greater transparency about viewpoints, procedures and debates.¹⁵

Charles W. Eagles, "Towards New Histories of the Civil Rights Era," *Journal of Southern History*, LXVI: 4, Nov. 2000: 816. Many historians would disagree with this notion of the scholarly.

¹¹ Our relationship bridges racial and social differences, for example, that scholars such as Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis see as insurmountable obstacles. Etter-Lewis, *My Soul Is My Own*, (1993) 139. Taking the opposite view, Paul Thompson asserts that habits of "social conformity" can distort interviews between individuals too much alike. See, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 3rd ed., (2000, orig. 1978) 140.

¹² Thompson, Paul, *Voice*, Chapter 4, 118-172.

¹³ Discussing her grandmother's memoir, *Lemon Swamp and Other Places* (1983), Karen Fields reaches beyond the point that memory does not reliably fail to larger questions about science and knowledge, "What One Cannot Remember Mistakenly," in Fabre, Geneviève & Robert O'Meally, eds., *History & Memory in African-American Culture* (1994) 150-163.

¹⁴ Thelan, David, "Memory and American History" *Journal of American History* V. 75, no. 4, Mar. 1989: 1120 & 1123.

¹⁵ Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally describe today's historian as knowing that "history is not so much a fixed, objective rendering of 'the facts' as it is a constant rethinking and reworking in a world of chance and change" in Fabre & O'Meally, eds., *History & Memory*, 3.

Meanwhile, interest in a wider world has reshaped history departments and heightened appreciation of oral testimony.

Vital to documenting the point of view of oppressed groups, oral history has helped restore credibility to a field of study long distorted by one-sidedness. Before scholarly questioning of Western Civilization went deep, majorities of people worldwide knew an untold other side to stories of Enlightenment, democratization and humane values.¹⁶ For African Americans, the other side held horrors glossed over in most histories of slavery and Reconstruction until the mid-1950s. Once resolved to draw forth these neglected viewpoints, historians grappled with problematic documentation. For example, whites gathered most North American slave testimony — and under questionable circumstances.¹⁷ Better-documented periods also present problems such as a “culture of dissemblance” among early-20th-century black women, who responded to racist oppression by choosing not to speak about important gender issues.¹⁸ Although oral history permits us to hear from people who cannot or would not write their stories, practitioners have recognized that interviewing/taping procedures can reproduce distorting power relationships.¹⁹ We must qualify any claims, then, of hearing the oppressed speak “freely.”

Complicating the picture here, Sylvia initiated and drove this project. She sat down at the tape recorder with a story she had been preparing to tell for years, a narrative partly shaped by courtroom experiences. Of course, the telling affected what she had to say. Yet Sylvia remained firmly at the wheel, even as my questioning expanded her initial story. She also participated to an unusual extent in the work that followed taping. In addition to reading version after version, she contributed perspectives throughout the initial research phase. Enthusiastic about the idea of framing her chapters with historical information, she regularly made the 50-mile round trip to meet and discuss what I was reading.

During such untaped sessions, I noted remarks of particular interest and added them to the text. It didn't work well to ask Sylvia to retell something. Using these notes

¹⁶ This central theme in Fabre & O'Meally, *History & Memory* David Blight's “W. E. B. Du Bois and the Struggle for American Historical Memory” and Geneviève Fabre's “African-American Commemorative Celebrations in the Nineteenth Century.” See also, Blackburn, Robin, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern* (1997) and Gilroy, Paul *The Black Atlantic: Modernity & Double Consciousness* (1993)

¹⁷ During slavery, abolitionists penned stories told by escaped slaves. Another large set of narratives emerged when a New Deal program paid local people — almost all whites — to interview elderly former slaves in the 1930s and '40s South.

¹⁸ Hine, Darlene Clark, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women: Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance” in *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Reconstruction of American History* (1994) 37-47.

¹⁹ A central idea in The Personal Narratives Group, *Interpreting Women's Lives* (1989) 13-14 & 201-203.

and ten tapes made over three years, I cut and re-organized the narrative — guided by her comments and my commitment to the integrity of her words.

Her own words. That imperative seemed less complicated before I began transcribing the tapes. At the time, Sylvia was reading Ernest Gaines' *A Gathering of Old Men* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Since she found it difficult to read phonetic renditions of dialogue, I tried removing non-standard spellings — such as the initial 'th-' that Sylvia pronounces 'd-' about half the time. The text retained the cadence of her speech. Later, a more difficult issue arose. Denied a basic education in childhood, Sylvia has strong feelings about how this injustice affects her words — no matter how well-spoken she seems to others. When we first met, I took for granted that she spoke Black English and assumed that she'd gone to college. In fact, Sylvia has taken adult education courses since her teens. She corrected grammar here and there in the transcribed text. When she wanted me to "correct" her narrative further, however, I balked. Arguments for an "authentic" voice did not impress Sylvia. I had already cut and rearranged her words — and elicited whole chapters by questioning her on topics she had not emphasized or mentioned. We moved beyond this impasse only after several memorable discussions.

"Grasp," Sylvia suggested. I had stopped mid-sentence, looking for a better word than 'register' to describe how we can't see — can't "grasp" what we're seeing — without using language. Sylvia had jumped ahead, already responding to my point that language affects not only how we communicate, but also how we perceive and think. Now her facial expression said, "Okay. But so what?"

Why would this matter here? To start, because European languages such as English carry racist threads that reach back hundreds of years. You grow up using a language saturated with fear and hatred of the "other" — even if you yourself are targeted. Maybe you throw out the most blatantly offensive words and expressions. But what about less obvious words and grammar rules that hold your mind in certain patterns: subject/object, superior/inferior, superordinate/subordinate? Underlying messages in language can easily go unrecognized and warp our thinking in ways we might not choose. Language thus plays a part in that stubbornly persistent racism that Martin Luther King called "unconscious." We have moved beyond much of the overt racial hatred that plagued Sylvia's youth. Yet unacknowledged negativity pulls us backwards — away from racial justice — despite changes hard won in the Civil Rights era. The more we underestimate language, the more it powers that retrograde drag.

At the same time, language can work — and has potential — as a progressive force. Despite the unconscious effects language has on us, we can and do change it.

We're constantly inventing, adopting or dropping expressions, bending and altering rules. Equally important, factors such as social inequalities and differing histories put people in varying relationships with language. The dominant culture's words and rules occupy our minds differently. And these differences can throw open alternative possibilities.

One morning as Sylvia and I sat in a library meeting room working on the book, I learned that my mother had just passed away. Struggling with this news, I saw in Sylvia's eyes something greater than I could grasp. Something that seemed to reach beyond time and space. I had a word for it. Love. One of those words that academic discipline would ask you to define. Define the word with words defined by other words — in that endless go-round of words and meanings that have no necessary link with anything outside language. Such as the look in Sylvia's eyes. Feeling that Sylvia would better comprehend such a look, I realized more poignantly than ever why I have always considered her a teacher as well as a friend.

In August 1998, Sylvia and I flew to New Orleans, then drove to her Springfield home. We crossed what she called "the longest bridge" — over a flat, yellow-green expanse with a scattering of dead-looking trees. Briefly, Lake Pontchartrain stretched into the distance. Then came forests of tall pines and hardwoods with Spanish moss hanging ghostly grey. We stepped out of the car at cousin Ben Tillman's. As we walked past his blooming roses, an overcast sky gave the August heat a surprisingly gentle presence.

On Ben's carefully painted porch, he and Sylvia caught up on family news. She fanned herself with a pale blue Chinese paper fan, looking momentarily — and to me quite surprisingly — ladylike. I realized I had never seen her in a skirt before. Ben Tillman, a deacon at Galilee Baptist, gave us a tour of the church. Everything was new, except the pastors' portraits, the cornerstones and the giant oak still standing out front.

Later, we turned onto the road named for Dock Bell. At first, Sylvia drove past Papa's house, now half-burned and boarded up. She had not yet seen it like this, had not come here for years. "Gave up," she said, "after the fire." Further up Bell Road, we stopped and borrowed a hoe from brother Henry Bell's widow, Pulu. Back at Papa's house, Sylvia hitched up her skirt and strode into the tall grass, hoe ready for snakes. Examining the house, I could see hints of the remodeling she had done. Here, a glass oval showing above a door's protective plywood; there, a shattered glass sliding door. Sylvia declared that she would never repair the place again.

We drove past the swampy woods where Sylvia and her brothers used to play. Cypress stumps stood in water the color of a new cast-iron skillet. Sylvia pointed out the juke joint where she danced as a teenager, a tiny building now almost completely hidden by bushes and trees. In Springfield, we saw the old store where her family used to buy supplies, one of the few places they were allowed to enter. Further down the road was a school — for both black and white children now, Sylvia noted.

That night, we ate sweet potatoes, hush puppies and Gulf shrimp at a restaurant in Hammond, where whites and blacks seemed to enjoy each other's company and the white owner stopped at our table for a cordial chat. The next day, at a sandwich place in Albany, we saw hostility in other customers' faces: an older man in the back of the room; young men at the next table. We turned away from them, but met the same look everywhere in the room. Hatred. After lunch, Sylvia said she was glad I had seen that, too. Her sister-in-law, Betty, did not find the Albany experience surprising. "Things change very slowly down here," she observed.

We encountered four generations of Sylvia's kin: from her mother's last living sister to grandnieces and grandnephews. A distant cousin working in the Livingston Parish Clerk of Court's office helped us locate documents. A childhood friend jumped in his car and hurried to see Sylvia. Her nieces and nephews made no secret of their admiration. "Aunt Sylvia is powerful," Sadie declared, "so powerful!"