

“Safe Space” and Contested Memories:
*Survivor Movements and the Foundation of Alternative Mnemonic Traditions**

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Synopsis:

This paper explores the strategic function of “safe space” for *survivor movements* engaged in retrospective conflict over the memory and legacy of three contested experiences: child sex abuse, the Vietnam War, and American slavery. Safe space provides survivor movements – broadly interpreted to include survivors, their descendants, and/or various communities of sympathizers and supporters - with a socio-cognitive foundation for the attribution of alternative meaning to a past experience, the ascription of legacy to the past via the social construction of historical continuity, the construction of a survivor collective and a narrative of social illness, and the attribution of “victim” and “perpetrator” identities. Safe spaces, conceived of as *protected environments of alternative meaning*, are liminal, collective, protected, exclusive, and homogeneous spaces where acknowledgment, solidarity, and victimhood are emphasized over denial, conflict, and self-blaming. Safe space allows survivor movements a basis to subvert official or *default mnemonic traditions* by collectively asserting *alternative mnemonic traditions*. Survivor movements thereby establish an *alternative cognitive order* in contrast to the *default cognitive order* (often assumed to be “natural”) associated with the objectives and legacies of child sex abuse, the Vietnam War, and American Slavery respectively.

Drawing on the histories, narratives, and organizational forms of The Vietnam veterans’ movement, the movement of adult survivors of child sex abuse, and the modern movement advocating reparations for slavery, I discuss previously under-explored connections between spatial and temporal dimensions of power and conflict. Survivor movements develop to change the way past spaces of violence are officially remembered and their legacies conceived. Individuals adhere to collective cultures of *survivorhood* organized around a particular mnemonic structure for the purpose of attributing new meaning to the past in order to contest traditional relations of power. These “cognitive subcultures” subvert traditional *asymmetries of cognitive authority* and work to expand traditionally constrained *cognitive options*. They structure time, history, memory, and personal biography to contest the meaning of particular past experiences in order to contest the legitimacy of those experiences in general. Their strategies of “mnemonic battle” illuminate the cultural significance of safe space for social movements in general and survivor movements in particular.

Survivor groups emerge as social movements when they move from safe space to *public discourse* and promote new definitions of the contested experiences of child sex abuse, war, or slavery in order to impact the normative moral and political climate. Such an emergence represents an encroachment of the socio-cognitive foundations of safe space into public discourse. In public space - which is open, exposed, vulnerable, and heterogeneous space characterized by debate and conflict - *conservative movements* work to counter survivor movement strategies in defense of mainstream or default mnemonic traditions. Conservative movements defend the traditional meanings associated with particular past experiences, assert the individual nature of survivor symptomatology, construct a discontinuity between past and present, invert the attribution of “victim” and “perpetrator” identities, and deny the future implications of past events. Heated reactions by conservative movements in the public arena reinforce the survivor movement need for safe space as a *cognitive safety zone*. The promulgation of survivor movements and survivor movement narratives has led to new social understandings of trauma, violence, and the abuse of power.

I. INTRODUCTION: SAFE SPACES AND CULTURAL STRATEGIES:

"The events which transpired five thousand years ago; five years ago or five minutes ago, have determined what will happen five minutes from now; five years from now or five thousand years from now. All history is a current event."

- Attributed to activist Dr John Henrik Clarke on the *African Holocaust Slideshow*, available on the *National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations* website.

"My life has never been the same. It probably never will."

- Victim of Child Sex Abuse. Quoted in *Child Sex Abuser Quits Meyer Ministry*. St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 12/07/03

... We're partners
in that ugly dance of men
who do the killing and the dying
and survive.

- W.D. Ehrhart. 1990. *Second Thought for Nguyen Van Hung*. Posted on the Vietnam Veterans Against War website.

This paper illustrates a set of strategies employed by a particular type of social movement that has traditionally relied on a "safe space" as a foundation for its worldview. Specifically, I explore the cultural and cognitive strategies employed by *survivor movements*: social movements that challenge the traditional or default meanings and consequences associated with past experiences. By subverting the official or default meanings attributed to specific past experiences such as child sex abuse, the Vietnam War, and American slavery, survivor movements challenge the traditional relations of power associated with those experiences and the *cognitive authority* (DeGloma 2003) to define them. These social movements wage a cultural battle that reaches back into the past and extends into the future, sparking a public discourse focused on our collective understanding of trauma and the consequences of atrocity.

Survivor movements are social movements that cohere around the narratives of individual survivors and the collective process of overcoming or living through a past experience they collectively work to (re)define as atrocious and harmful in particular ways. This paper

draws on three broad cases: The Vietnam veterans' movement, the movement of adult survivors of child sex abuse, and the modern movement advocating reparations for slavery. Each of these broad social movements involves a number of organizations advocating on behalf of individuals whose lives, it is claimed, have been significantly affected by the Vietnam War, child sex abuse, and American slavery, respectively. There are significant differences both within and between these cases – most notably the nature of the experience at issue and the length of time between the movement's present and the contested past experience. But the strategies employed by each movement are formulaic. Focusing on the features common to their strategies illustrates their adherence to a generic type of social movement defined by the ways in which they challenge the “dominant codes upon which social relations are founded” (Melucci 1989:75; See also Mueller 1994:239).

Safe space allows survivor movements a foundation to develop and promote alternative perceptions of specific events and their consequences. When such alternative meanings and legacies are collectively attributed to the past, they become *alternative mnemonic traditions* around which a subculture or social movement can cohere. Survivor movements thus provide an important example of the cultural function of “safe space” in social movements. Safe space here is conceived of as both a cultural strategy and a *protected environment of alternative meaning* that can take a variety of structural, ecological, or narratological forms depending on the particular case being analyzed. They are the spaces in which the defining cultural and cognitive transformations employed by survivor movements are rooted. Whether in the form of a psychotherapeutic environment, a political organization, a spiritual center, or a convention, survivor movement safe spaces serve three main strategic functions.

First, safe spaces exist with a significant degree of separation or distance from the experience at issue. The survivor movements considered here were nonexistent or embryonic during the contested experience, only emerging or maturing after the fact. The Vietnam Veterans movement, the child sex abuse survivors movement, and the modern reparations movement all formed outside of and after the experiences and environments of the Vietnam War, child sex abuse, and American slavery, respectively. Safe spaces are “safe” in part because of this social distance. The cultural strategies employed by survivor movements are retrospective, and they are grounded in safe spaces that are sectarian and protective in essence.

Second, safe spaces function as “cultural laboratories” (Melucci 1989:60; Mueller 1994:237) that provide the foundation and impetus for survivor movement challenges to dominant or *default mnemonic traditions*. Survivor movements are “cognitive subcultures” (Zerubavel 1997: 12, 89-91) that adhere to a specific type of “frame transformation” (Snow, et. al. 1997: 245) that extends through time. These movements utilize a number of specific cognitive strategies to transform the cultural meaning traditionally associated with a particular experience or type of experience in the past. Their strategies include reframing the past, emphasizing historical continuity and the continuing implications of past events, collectively associating with a socially constructed homogenous past experience, and advocating future ideals based on retribution for past injustices. These survivor movement strategies take on an inherently social and formulaic structure, providing for a *culture of survivorhood* that is founded on alternative mnemonic traditions. Survivorhood is then often utilized in an attempt to affect social and political change.

Finally, safe space is itself a narratological strategy. It becomes incorporated into the survivor narrative and often functions to justify or ground the alternative mnemonic traditions

put forth by survivor movements. Safe spaces frame the stories of survivorhood as shared or common stories of experience. Survivor movement narratives thus often incorporate the safe space environment as a setting, and this setting helps to ground these stories in a particular genre. Such is the case with the Winter Soldier Investigation, a three-day testimonial organized by Vietnam Veterans Against War in 1971 (See Hunt 1999: 55-76; Nicosia 2001: 79-97; Winter soldier investigation [1971] 1999), which simultaneously served as both a setting to formulate and later to frame the previously unheard stories of Vietnam Veterans. Such is also the case with “Take Back the Night” marches, which have dual existence as both private and public, emerging in the course of the event from a “women’s only” space to a public space, serving simultaneously as an environment for the formulation and for the framing of narratives of sexual victimization. The function of these safe spaces as *cognitive safety zones* - as spaces in which meaning is “uncovered” - becomes an important survivor movement strategy.

Although different in many ways, the groups I discuss under the broad banner of “survivor movements” share the practice of disputing the meaning and consequences of past experiences in order to make claims about present and future relations of power. This paper focuses on their similarities at the expense of their differences in an effort to show their adherence to a broader script or genre. The common or generic cultural strategies employed by survivor movements demonstrate the function of “safe space” in challenging official or default mnemonic traditions in particular, and asymmetries of cognitive authority in general. This paper focuses on illustrating these common strategies, and thereby illuminating the significance of safe space as a cognitive safety zone or protected environment of alternative meaning. The cultural and cognitive work done by survivor movements exemplifies how such safe spaces can serve as a foundation to alter traditions of perceiving and remembering, and the dynamics of these

disputes illuminate the importance of history and memory to the construction of meaning in social conflict. The issues of child sex abuse, the Vietnam War, and American slavery may be radically different on a substantive level, but each is the focal point of a formally similar type of political struggle and each serves as a contested *terrain of mnemonic conflict*. These experiences are the focal points of “mnemonic battles” (Zerubavel 1997:97-99) around which social movements are formed.

Social Movements and the Question of “Free Space”

Social movement theorists have been increasingly concerned with the role of “free spaces” in social movement formation and mobilization (Polletta 1999; Melucci 1989, 1996; Cuoto 1993; Mueller 1994; Evans & Boyte [1986] 1992). Attention to this “intermediate level of analysis” (Mueller 1994: 235) was sparked by an oft-cited study that defined free spaces as

...particular sorts of public places in the community... the environments in which people are able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills, and values of cooperation and civic virtue... settings between private lives and large scale institutions where ordinary citizens can act with dignity, independence, and vision. These are, in the main, voluntary forms of association with a relatively open and participatory character... grounded in the fabric of community life (Evans & Boyte [1986] 1992).¹

Around the same time, the “movement halfway houses” of the civil rights movement were argued to have served a similar function (Morris 1984:139-173). The significance of these free spaces for social movements was becoming acknowledged while a new cultural trend in social movement theory was taking hold, one that criticized the dominant resource mobilization theory and emphasized the “cognitive liberation” (McAdam 1982:48-51) of movement participants.

¹ Also cited in Polletta 1999: 3 and Cuoto 1993:59.

Since then, free spaces² have been referred to as “cultural laboratories” (Melucci 1989:60; Mueller 1994:237), “base communities” (Gamson 1991:38,44,48), “protected spaces” (Tétreault 1993), “havens” or “liberated zones” (Fantasia and Hirsch 1995:146, 158), “spheres of cultural autonomy” (Taylor and Whittier 1995:163), and more (See Polletta 1999). This concept has been used in reference to a wide-range of institutional locations, from African-American churches (Morris 1984; Calhoun-Brown 2000; Greenberg 2000) and Mosques (Byng 1998), to Kuwaiti “*diwaniyya*”³ (Tétreault 1993), from disability rights organizations (Groch 2001) to the “bookstores, music festivals, self-defense and martial arts schools, rape crisis centers, publishing houses, and travel agencies” of the radical feminist movement (Taylor & Whittier 1995).

The concept of free space emphasizes and elucidates the cultural challenges and cognitive transformations performed by social movements. Free spaces are said to provide people with the ability to “envision alternative futures and plot strategies for reaching them,” as well as to “penetrate the prevailing common sense” (Polletta 1999: 3). They are the spaces where narratives of resistance are produced (Cuoto 1993). They are spaces of challenging, transforming, and “reversing the symbolic order” (Melucci 1996:357) of mainstream or dominant culture (See also Swidler 1995: 33 Fantasia and Hirsch 1995:158; Taylor & Whittier 1995: 175; Mueller 1994; Polletta 1999). In addition, free spaces have been argued to prefigure alternative social relations, providing a model for the types of changes advocated by a given social movement (Melucci 1989:60 Gamson 1991:48; Polletta 1999: 11-12). Free spaces have further been recognized as important to the formulation of a collective identity (Melucci 1996:68-86; Gamson 1991; Taylor

² Francesca Polletta’s 1999 article “‘Free spaces’ in Collective Action” provided an extremely helpful review of the literature on which this section relied.

³ Tétreault 1993 states “The term *diwaniyya* is used for a room in the house where family and friends meet regularly to play cards, sing, eat, and talk about business and politics... The gathering itself is also called a *diwaniyya*” (p. 279).

& Whittier 1992, 1995:171-175; Groch 2001) rooted in opposition to mainstream relations of power.

Survivor Movements and the Question of “Safe Space”

While the concept of “free space” provides social movement theorists with a tool to discuss the formation of a collective oppositional consciousness, a more elusive concept of “safe space” appears in a wide range of scholarship addressing a variety of substantive issues -most notably where women and gender studies intersects with a psychoanalytic and therapeutic tradition. Safe space has been identified as on-line forums for women who are coping with eating disorders (Walstrom 2000) and other personal struggles (Harcourt 2000), as communities created by female managers coping with the stresses of a male dominated workplace (Fournier & Kelemen 2001), as well as independent feminist “girl-zines” (Schilt 2003:73) and the space of telling stories, doing “identity work,” and “critiquing dominant paradigms” as “Feminist Psychologists” (Cressy, Harrick, and Fuehrer 2002). In addition, safe space is argued to be an important resource for combating homophobia in schools (Morrow & Hill 2003; Peters 2003) and providing an effective psychotherapeutic environment for lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals (Gildersleeve & Platzer 2003).

Certain uses of the safe space concept, such as when describing parks where mothers let their children play (Anderson 1972) or centers for the welfare of children (Moorer 2001), highlight the protective nature of safe space. Other uses, such as to describe an ideal atmosphere for therapeutic dialogue (Myers 2000) or the environments of conflict resolution in South Africa (Bremner 2001), highlight the function of safe-space as a space separate from the confines of dominant or mainstream meaning and social relations. These latter usages, along with the use of

the concept to describe online forums for teenagers transitioning into adulthood (Jenkins 2001), also highlight the liminal and transformative characteristics of safe space.

Spaces such as “women’s centers, health collectives, political unions, even new women’s buildings” are argued to provide for the “consciousness-raising” and “alternative culture” necessary for feminism in general (Freedman 1979). Safe space has further been identified as fundamental to Black feminist consciousness and as “prime locations for resisting objectification” (Collins 2000:100-102; See also Byng 1998; Alfred 2001), as well as necessary to healing from the impact of internalized racism (Watts-Jones 2002). Here the concept of safe space functions along side the feminist mantra “the personal is political,” emphasizing a transition from individualistic experiences to a collective acknowledgement of similarity. Thus safe spaces are described as environments where “black women’s empowerment” as a class can be achieved “through *self* definition” [italics added]. The safe space concept also combines an emphasis on therapy or self-help (See Taylor and Whittier 1995:183) with the collective goals of a class of individuals.

The spaces in which survivorhood is founded are often more isolated and protectionist than many of the free spaces discussed by social movement theorists. The concept of safe space and the concept of free space share an emphasis on cultural and cognitive transformation, but the former more accurately captures the survivor movement emphasis on protection and consciousness-raising, the later being the process of identifying common or shared characteristics of individual experience. Safe space allows individuals and groups to see events and relationships in non-traditional ways *because* it provides protection from specific contested experiences and the social relationships that correspond to them. As a function of safe space, movement adherents are shielded from culturally dominant mindsets, meanings, or modes of

seeing that are argued to be harmful to them. The socio-cognitive transformations around which survivor movements cohere thus take the form of a “discovery,” or uncovering of “truth,” as a function of protection.

Safe spaces are a particular type of free space that emphasize protection from the victim–perpetrator dichotomy, a dichotomy fundamental to the development of a survivor identity and social movement. In addition to providing for a unique type of cultural transformation, safe spaces also emphasize individual health and development. They are *protected environments of alternative meaning* in which the mnemonic strategies of survivorhood take form.

The safe spaces of the Vietnam veterans’ movement existed in the form of group therapy sessions (See Young 1995), political organizations such as Vietnam Veterans Against War (VVAW) (See Scott 1990: 300), and conventions such as the Winter Soldier Investigation (See Hunt 1999; Nicosia 2001; Barry 2004). The safe spaces utilized by adult survivors of child sex abuse took form as the consciousness-raising sessions of the feminist movement of the 1970’s and 1980’s and as group therapy sessions. These sessions culminated in a general movement against child sex abuse with a formulaic narrative of abuse and recovery (See Davis 2002; See also Rubin 1984) as illustrated in published anthologies of child sex abuse stories (See, for example, Bass & Thornton [1983] 1991) and self-help books for adult survivors (See, for example, Bass & Davies 1994). These narratives are now posted, shared, and discussed in online forums that serve a similar function.⁴ The safe spaces of the modern reparations movement existed as a variety of Afro-centric institutions associated with the Black Power movement of the 60’s and 70’s, including Nation of Islam Mosques. Currently, these movement spaces exist in the form of political organizations such as the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in

⁴ See for example, Safeguarding Our Children – United Mothers at <http://www.soc-um.org/survivors/stories/>; Susan Smiles – Surviving Childhood Sexual Abuse at <http://www.susansmiles.com/>; Escaping Hades: A Rape and Sexual Abuse Survivor’s Site at <http://www.escapinghades.com/>.

America (NCOBRA)⁵ and their affiliates, as well as international conventions, such as the 1993 Pan-African Congress on Reparations (See Gifford 1993). The physical space - whether it be the consciousness-raising circles of the feminist movement or the political meetings of reparations advocates - will take various forms depending on the conditions, resources, degree of opposition, organizing styles, etc. of the particular social movement at hand. The common thread, however, exists with the cognitive strategies that take form in each case.

This paper builds an analysis of safe space that conceptualizes “structure *as* culture” (Polletta 1999) and works further to elucidate the “cultural toolkit” (Swidler 1986) employed by survivor movements. *Survivorhood* itself has become an independent “genre of discourse” (Steinberg 1999) and a formulaic survivor narrative has become a resource for movements seeking to define and redress past injustices. Survivorhood involves specific ways of seeing and talking about the past, present, and future. Survivor strategies are cultural innovations, and safe-space (in its various forms: separatism, therapy, and consciousness-raising, to name a few examples) can be conceived of itself as a cultural innovation that is part of the survivor movement strategy.

While many have identified the culturally transformative function of free or safe space, there is very little work that exposes just *how* meaning changes within these contexts. The cognitive strategies of survivor movements illustrate how such alternative perceptual worlds take form. Safe spaces provide for an inter-subjective alternative to the cognitive order established in the spaces of the bedroom, the war zone, and the plantation. They provide survivor movements with the *socio-cognitive breathing room* to subvert the ways of thinking and perceiving within or upon which these spaces of violence operate, and to thereby alter the ways in which such experiences are remembered.

⁵ See, <http://www.ncobra.com/>.

Survivor Movements and Mnemonic Battles

Individuals and social groups assign meaning to both present and past experiences as a strategic part of the socio-mental structuring of their biographical and collective realities (Zerubavel 1997: 68-99). Both social groups (Baumeister & Hastings 1997) and individuals (Hankiss 1981) systematically distort, rearrange, or otherwise organize the past in order to suit their present motivations and objectives. The presence of the past (See Shils 1981; Zerubavel, Y. 1995; Zerubavel 1997) and the collective structuring of memory (Bartlett 1932; Halbwachs [1950] 1980, Fivush 1995; Zerubavel 1997, 2003) are undoubtedly properties of social groups, which can be defined by their distinctive “style” (Fleck [1935] 1981: 31) of cognition and *cognitive orientation* to the past.

A sociological approach to time, history, and memory highlights the ways in which the past is socially structured and situated in our minds (Zerubavel 2003: 1-2). Such an approach essentially recognizes perception and meaning to be culturally structured and politically influenced human constructions, elucidating collective norms for perception (Davis 1983; Zerubavel 1997: 23-34), the attribution of meaning (Durkheim [1912] 1995: 229-231; Sahlins 1976: 170-179; Zerubavel 1997: 68-80), and the organization of experience (Schutz [1945] 1973; Bateson [1955] 1972; Emerson 1970; Goffman [1974] 1986). Cognitive norms are particular to entire cultures (Frisch 1989) and generations (Fleck [1935] 1981; Kuhn [1962] 1970), but also differ between social groups, or cognitive subcultures, within particular cultures (See also Sollors 1994). Social conflict can thus occur between collectives rooted in different traditions of perceiving and remembering. Here conflict takes place as a function of the various cognitive standpoints “from which something can be mentally approached” (Zerubavel 1997:29-30). One need only reflect on the relatively recent disputes over the hanging of the confederate flag atop

South Carolina's statehouse (CNN 2000) or U.S. involvement in Iraq to see how social conflict is structured around divergent ways of perceiving a single spectacle.

In recent decades, the significance of culture and cognition to social conflict has become of central importance to social movement theory (McAdam 1982, 1994; Swidler 1986, 1995; Mueller 1992; Johnston & Klandermans 1995; Fine 1995). Frame analysis (See Snow & Benford 1992; Tarrow 1992; Snow, et. al. 1997; Noonan 1997), methods of discourse or narrative analysis (Wagner-Pacifici 1994; Billig 1995; Fine 1995; Johnston 1995; Eliasoph 1996; Steinberg 1999) and the study of collective identity (Gamson 1992; Friedman & McAdam 1992; Taylor & Whittier 1992; Roy 1994: part II; Johnston, Larana, & Gusfield 1994; See also Hunt, Benford, & Snow 1994) have become invaluable to our understanding of collective actions and the dynamics of social conflict. Survivor movements exemplify the importance of these cultural foci while highlighting underexplored temporal dimensions of political conflict.

Survivor movements cohere around alternative mnemonic traditions centered on the collective ascription of victim and perpetrator identities, new understandings of trauma and atrocity, and new conceptions of the individual and social consequences of past injustices. Beyond "mnemonic communities" (Zerubavel 1997: 17-18, 90; Halbwachs [1950] 1980: 27) committed to a particular memory, these movements are committed to a particular type/structure/formula of memory that corresponds to a particular narrative structure, reaching into the past and extending to the future. The safe spaces of survivorhood lay the foundation for a particular and profound type of "mnemonic battle" (Zerubavel 1997: 97-99; 2003: 2-10) because survivorhood is poised as an outgrowth of the past experience being contested. Survivorhood thus works to undermine the traditional or dominant conceptions of the past and challenge the *asymmetry of cognitive authority* within which those conceptions are formulated.

Survivorhood thus provides the basis for an assault on traditional relations of power. Its method is to contest and alter the *default meaning structures* associated with the past in order to achieve retributive objectives – whether a punitive remedy for child sexual abuse, psychological services for veterans, or reparations for slavery. Survivorhood thereby provides a foundation upon which the future can be conceived as a remedy to past injustice. Their strategic re-appropriation of the past paves the way for an alternative future. The space between the contested past and the future exists a political battle defined by *contradictory historical trajectories*. The present thus becomes the space of conflicting mnemonic traditions. In waging these mnemonic battles, survivor movements seek to usurp the authority to attribute meaning to particular past human interactions and experiences in order to contest the legitimacy of those experiences in general and the social relations associated with them. The ways that survivor movements challenge the default meanings and consequences associated with past events – their formal strategies of mnemonic battle - demonstrate the cultural mechanisms at work in safe spaces.

II. CONTESTING THE MEANINGS OF THE PAST

Survivor movements strategically alter and contest the meanings traditionally associated with past events, experiences, and social relationships. By contesting the meanings traditionally associated with the past, they establish alternative social traditions of remembering. The meaning attributed to the past then becomes the object of political conflict.

Reframing the Past

Survivor movements extend the framing process through time, whether throughout a life-course or across several generations, in order to contest the meaning of the past in the present. They strategically construct alternative “schemata of interpretation” (Goffman [1974] 1986: 21) that are applied to specific past experiences in order to structure our intersubjective attribution of significance and meaning to those experiences. Survivor movement frames serve to re-organize or transform our social interpretation of the past. They thus provide the basis upon which alternative mnemonic traditions can be founded. The official record of the event thus becomes disputed despite the fact that the past has not “objectively” changed.

Survivor movements attribute meaning in part by “keying” (Goffman [1974] 1986: 40-82) past experiences, or providing “meta-messages” (Bateson [1955] 1972) that alter the contextual (See Davis 1983: 216)⁶ and narratological scheme through which the past event is interpreted. Such a retrospective transformation occurs when adult victims of child sex abuse re-understand past game-like or dream-like interactions with a parent⁷ to be sexual, abusive, and illegal (DeGloma 2003); or when Vietnam Veterans preface congressional testimonies by referring to the Vietnam War as a “racist,” “genocidal” collection of “war crimes,” (Kerry 1971) as opposed to a patriotic venture against communism (See, for example, Young 1991: 28-31). Further, when reparations advocates refer to slavery as “the most wicked criminal enterprise in human history” (Gifford 1993), a “genocidal war against Africans,” or the “Holocaust of Enslavement” (NCOBRA 2004); or when such advocates explicitly use the term “slave holder” as opposed to “slave owner” (Clay 2002; Blake 2002), they are creating a distinct contextual

⁶ Davis refers to the transformation of meaning as “filtration”, which refers to “the modifications experience undergoes as it passes through a contextual scheme.” See p. 285, note 17.

⁷ The majority of child sex abuse offenders are a birth parent or parent figure and in most cases have and maintain an ongoing relationship with the victim. Further, varying studies report that between 89 and 98 percent are male.

scheme through which the meaning of slavery can be interpreted. Such keyings provide distinct alternatives to frames that excuse slavery by virtue of its past legality in the same manner that 19th century slave narratives countered the view of slavery as a benevolent institution (Brooks 1999).

Such a transformation of the meaning associated with past events is further achieved by virtue of the very “credentials” associated with survivor status. Survivorhood implies a certain legitimacy and exerts the power to frame both narrative and its subject matter. Like the preface to a book or an introduction to an important speaker, survivor credentials bracket (Goffman 1986 [1974]: 251-269) their narratives and attribute to them a legitimacy of voice otherwise not allowed to the layperson. Survivor credentials frame past phenomena by highlighting the “insider” perspective associated with *experience* at the expense of the “outsider” perspective associated with viewing the past as an *event*. Survivorhood itself thus exerts a transformative force on the social memory of the experience being discussed.

Altering the Structure of Attention.

In order to contest traditional meanings associated with the past, survivor movements strategically alter the structure of attention traditionally associated with past events. These movements “play up” traditionally backgrounded details while “playing down” traditionally foregrounded facets of the contested past event, thus calling attention to certain information traditionally rendered out-of-frame, “subordinated... to what has come to be defined as the main action” (Goffman Ibid. 201). Paying retrospective attention to out-of-frame activity threatens the official record of that activity. Shifting the focus of mnemonic or historic attention can alter the traditional meaning associated with a past event or experience, resulting in conflict between traditional and alternative attention structures. Such a transformation of meaning occurs when

adult victims of child sex abuse attend the sexual contact previously rendered out-of-frame in childhood golf lessons (Alex's story: 2003), "picture poker" games (Ammons 2001: 26-27), or prayer sessions (O'Neill 2003). Attention is called to previously unattended details when, for example, the reparations movement highlights the horrors of the middle passage (See Munford 1996: 209; See also Malik Watts 2004), the frequency of plantation rape (see, for example, Straightblack.com 2004), or the abduction of Africans (Clay 2002; Blake 2002). Such a strategy is employed when Vietnam Veterans testifying in the Winter Soldier Investigations report having;

...personally raped, cut off ears, cut off heads, taped wires from portable telephones to human genitals and turned up the power, cut off limbs, blown up bodies, randomly shot at civilians, razed villages in fashion reminiscent of Genghis Khan, shot cattle and dogs for fun, poisoned food stocks, and generally ravaged the countryside of South Vietnam. (Kerry 1971)

The difficulty in changing the default structure of attention offers some explanation as to the seemingly obsessive character of many survivor movements. An obsessive culture may often be necessary to force social awareness of the traditionally unseen and combat both explicit and tacit forms of social denial.

Reframing Social Relations and the Attribution of Blame.

Whereas once there was child and parent, soldier and government, slave and owner, survivor movements redefine these relationships to be one of *victim* and *perpetrator*. While not always directly employing these labels, survivor movements make use of a general *discourse of victimization* that situates the other in the position of having perpetrated an injustice. Such a strategy is apparent in underground G.I. protest cartoons depicting the Nixon administration as "war criminals" and the military as an "insane mechanized monster" (Lewes 2003: 107-109), or warning, "ask not what your country will do *to* you" (Ibid: 57. italics added). The attribution of victim and perpetrator identities then becomes a matter of political dispute.

The alternative meanings put forth by survivor movements illuminate the mnemonic traditions and cognition orders around which these movements cohere. These alternative cognitive orders are rooted in survivor movement safe spaces. Safe spaces thus provide an impetus to social conflict in the public realm. Survivor movements strategically contest definitions, occurrences, details, identities, degrees of participation, and levels of responsibility traditionally associated with the past. By offering alternatives to the mainstream meanings traditionally associated with these contested past events, survivor movements challenge the authority of those officials (whether parents, the military, or the federal government) adhering to or promoting the mainstream, traditional, and default cognitive order. When survivor movements challenge mainstream views of American slavery, child sex abuse, and the Vietnam War in particular, they are challenging the more general and entrenched frames of Eurocentric history, parental authority (a fundamental edict of most religious systems), and patriotism, respectively.

III. CONSTRUCTING THE LEGACIES OF THE PAST.

Survivor movements strategically highlight the present impact of past events, emphasizing the presence of the past and its relevance to current circumstances. The legacy attributed to past experiences then becomes the object of political conflict.

The Social Construction of Historical Continuity

The very term “survivor” directly implies a history that includes child sex abuse, rape, the Holocaust, or another atrocity. The conscious use of the term “veteran” by Vietnam Veterans Against War (VVAW) links their present status to their past participation in war. Although much more widely used, the term “African-American” is specifically designated to refer to those

Americans who descended from slaves. This term originated as “Afro-American,” achieving widespread use in the early 1970’s at the height of the Black Power Movement and the refueling of the reparations movement in the United States. The very collective identities around which survivor movements take form, facilitated by the safe spaces in which these movements cohere, maintain the past in social discourse and consciousness.

Survivor movements explicitly regard “the present as a continuation of the past” (Zerubavel 2003: 37). The personal biographies and/or collective histories around which survivor movements cohere exemplify a social construction of historical continuity (See Ibid: 37-54). Survivorhood itself requires a past *victimhood*, and survivor movements explicitly highlight a victim-status associated with a past experience. Despite the temporal locations of the contested experience in one’s early adult life (as with Vietnam veterans), one’s childhood (as with adult survivors of child sex abuse), or the history of one’s racial group (as with the descendants of slaves), survivor movements see the present as a direct extension of the past. A common denominator shared by the Vietnam veterans’ movements, the sex abuse survivors movement, and the reparations movement is the social construction of historical continuity.

The survivor narrative is a story told in retrospect that revolves around past victimization, and indeed one’s survivor status can be questioned by questioning one’s particular relationship to the past experience of victimhood. Such a disputing of present status by reference to past experience occurs when Holocaust survivors contest one another’s present narratological positioning by questioning their specific experiences of persecution under the Nazis (See Tal 1996:23-59). Such a questioning of a past status is also exemplified by Malcolm X’s famous distinction between the “house Negro” and the “field Negro” (X 1963). Survivor narratives and the survivor identity are thus simultaneously rooted in both present and past. One may be

survivor at present because one was victim in the past. The time frames associated with both identity aspects are simultaneously necessary to the socio-temporal political stance survivor movements assert in retrospective conflict.

A further way in which survivor movements construct historical continuity is by evoking “historical analogies” that liken present conditions to those of past events (Zerubavel 2003: 48-52). When VVAW opposes the U.S. war against Iraq (See Romo, Curry, & Miller 2002)⁸, when the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations likens their claims to those of Holocaust survivors or explains modern day racism as “similar to slavery” (NCOBRA 2004), and when repressed memory advocates use the psychological concept “regression” to liken the behavior of adult victims of child sex abuse to the behavior of children (See Davis 1991: 103), they are building “mental bridges” (Zerubavel 2003: 40) between the past and present. Such a socio-cognitive linking mechanism might also take a more extreme form, as when POW/MIA groups, for example, assert, “the war is not over” (See, for example, Prince 2004).

Building Cause and Effect Chains

Constructing historical continuity allows survivor movements to strategically attribute their present conditions to past causal experiences. Beyond exhibiting an “ex” status (Ebaugh 1988), survivors exude a kind of *being after*, presenting their selves as a creation of specific past experiences. They create mental links that serve as *socio-mental cause and effect chains* between a past experience and a present symptomatology. The reparations movement argues a direct causal connection between slavery and the contemporary conditions of African-Americans (See Feagin 2000; Wessel 2003; New York Class Action Case 2002). Some have argued that “adaptive survival behaviors in African-American communities” are the direct result of the

⁸ See also *Call to Conscience to Active Duty Troops and Reservists*. Available at . <http://calltoconscience.net/> and Vietnam Veterans Against War-AI at <http://www.oz.net/~vvaawai/index.html>.

experience of slavery (Leary 2004). Repressed memory advocates and the sex abuse survivor movement commonly attribute the present adverse psychological symptoms of adult survivors to their past experiences of child sex abuse. The psychological symptoms of Vietnam veterans are also argued to be “caused” by the Vietnam war (Young 1995: 135-141).

Such a strategy allows the survivor to stand as a living monument to a past atrocity. Survivors present themselves as living evidence of the consequences of the past experiences at hand. In the process they are redefining that experience in general by attributing adverse consequences to it. By implication, such experiences, and the social relations around which they occur, should not be repeated.

The Collective Public Proclamation of the Past

From the public presence of the VVAW in protests against the Vietnam War (See Hunt 1999) and the Iraq war, to public stories of child sex abuse told at Take Back the Night marches and in newspapers covering the scandals of catholic clergy, to calls for reparations for slavery made in public speeches and at rallies such as the “Millions For Reparations Mass Rally,” held on August 17, 2002 in Washington D.C., survivor movements continually proclaim the past in public venues. The act of publicly proclaiming past atrocities in part counters a more normative cultural denial of these atrocities, from particular events such as the Mai Lai massacre to child sex abuse in general. Further, such public proclamations of the past propel the survivor movement’s reframed version of the past into the social consciousness. The public proclamation of the past, the public telling of the survivor’s story, becomes symbolic of a collective moral victory (See Zerubavel, Y. 2002: 132). The survivor narrative thus becomes available “at large,” functioning as an invitation to social consciousness-raising, an open form of the consciousness-

raising that goes on behind closed doors in the safe space of therapy sessions and political meetings.

IV. CONSTRUCTING A HOMOGENEOUS PAST

Survivor movements strategically emphasize the homogeneity of their past experiences and present symptomatology. By constructing a homogeneous past, they establish a social foundation for survivorhood and the survivor movement. The homogeneity of past experience and present symptomatology then becomes the object of political conflict.

Common Etiological Descent from a Homogeneous Past Experience

Survivor movements take form around collective narratives of victimization (See Davis 2002; Patterson 2002) that emphasize common experience over idiosyncrasy. The survivor movement, rooted in a survivor collective identity, is founded on the social construction of a homogeneous and generic past, lumping a variety of individuals together despite any objective differences in their past or present situations. Commonalities in the experience of child sex abuse, in slavery and descent from slavery, and in fighting the Vietnam War will thus be highlighted at the expense of individual differences in experience, giving rise to formulaic stories. Survivor movement solidarity is grounded in such a methodological collectivism, the construction of which being a fundamental feature of the consciousness-raising activities of safe spaces.

Survivor movements emphasize a common past experience as a foundation for their present collective association. Survivor solidarity is thus similar to the solidarity of a kinship system. While descent from a common ancestor promotes and reinforces social solidarity and

“[h]aving a common past also entails some general sense of sharing a common present” (Zerubavel 2003: 63), the solidarity of survivor movements is based on descent from a generalized (generic) common past experience as opposed to a common ancestor. Sharing a common past experience, whether as the foundation for a rape support group or a Black Power political organization, provides a strong inclination to solidarity despite what other differences previously or currently exist between members. Such a sense of common descent and solidarity explains why the familial titles of “brother” and “sister” are often evoked between participants in survivor movements.

Social vs. Individual Pathologies

Survivor movements strategically stress common descent in order to emphasize collective adverse symptomatology. This collective symptomatology (for example, psychological, economic, or political) becomes the basis for the social movement and informs the organization of the injustice frame. The survivor narrative is thus a *narrative of social illness*, one that ascribes pathology to a shared experience in the social world. Victimhood is attributed to social problems that commonly affect a “class” of people, providing a stimulus for the collective to form safe spaces as an escape or means of protection from social threats, as well as to advocate social change as a means to protect individuals and achieve social justice.

The survivor movement narrative of social illness is exemplified by the Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) diagnosis (DSM-IV 1994: 424). PTSD is one of the only official psychiatric diagnoses to recognize an external cause to a psychological disorder since the third revision of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatry in 1980. This diagnosis was included in the DSM-III only after substantial advocacy and organizing on the part of the Vietnam veterans movement. Vietnam Veterans and their allies in the mental health professions

sought official recognition of the Vietnam War as a cause of psychological disorder in Vietnam veterans (Scott 1990; Young 1995; See also Shephard 2000). By the same logic, the adverse psychological and behavioral symptoms of adult survivors of child sex abuse (as a class) and the adverse social and economic conditions of African-Americans (as a class) are attributed to their past social experiences by the sex abuse survivors movement and the reparations movement, respectively. The commonality of this of this strategic narrative of social illness across different survivor movements is beautifully illustrated by the concept of “Post-traumatic Slave Syndrome” (Leary 2004). Narratives of social illness expand the survivor movement’s strategic bridging of past and present to involve a bridging between a *common* or generic past and a *common* present condition.

V. FROM SAFE SPACE TO PUBLIC DISCOURSE: ENGAGING THE STRATEGIES OF REACTION

Survivor groups emerge as social movements when they move from safe space to *public discourse* and promote new definitions of the contested experiences of child sex abuse, war, or slavery in order to impact the normative moral and political climate. In the realm of public discourse - which is open, exposed, vulnerable, and heterogeneous space characterized by debate and conflict – survivor movement strategies are hotly contested by *conservative movements*. These social movements are *reactive* in essence and work to “conserve” the traditional perceptions of the past and traditional relations of power. Survivor movements and their conservative opponents wage heated battles over the meaning of particular past experiences, the attribution of “victim” and “perpetrator” identities, the continuity or discontinuity between past

and present, the social or individual nature of survivor symptomatology, and the future implications of past events.

Safe space facilitates the cultural work of survivor movements and the construction of the survivor narrative. Survivor movement narratives then themselves become social spaces (Fine 1995:141; Cuoto 1993) in which alternative mnemonic traditions exist in public discourse. Safe space thus provides a foundation for survivor groups to enter the public as collectives organized around formulaic stories, as social movements challenging traditional understandings of past events. The strategic cultural transformations outlined above each become the focus of a political dispute in public space, as conservative movements work to discredit and delegitimize survivor movements.

Conservative counter movements arise to defend dominant or normative modes of perception. Their strategies are reactive and defensive forms of the normative or traditional modes of perception associated with the contested past events. While survivor movements provide cognitive alternatives, conservative movements seek to preserve the traditional meanings associated with the past. Thus while a survivor movement might work to redefine certain forms of heterosexual sex as rape, for example, “[i]n the public sphere, women’s experiences of rape are often redefined as sex” (Kelly 1988: 156). Safe spaces provide an impetus to this conflict by providing a foundation for an assault on traditional or mainstream meaning. The strategies of conservative movements then take form around the objective of protecting traditional meaning, and thus countering the strategic objectives associated with safe space.

Conservative movements employ a set of formulaic cognitive strategies designed to delegitimize the cognitive foundations of survivorhood and undermine the survivor movement drive to usurp cognitive authority. The official record of a particular event or experience is thus

highly disputed in the public conflicts between survivor movements and their conservative opponents. The objective contours of the past remain the same, but its meaning and legacy come to be passionately and publicly contested. Events such as child sex abuse, the Vietnam War, and American slavery serve as socio-mental fulcrums around which survivor movements and conservative movements battle over the correct understanding of a past event or experience. The strategies of conservative movements then further reinforce the survivor movement need for safe space. Such cognitive safety zones come to serve as base camps for the promotion of alternative meanings in a heterogeneous public.

Conservative movements arise in response to survivorhood to become the vocal frontline in defense of traditional meaning when its default status has been threatened. Conservative movements strategically counter the cognitive strategies of survivor movements, working to defend the public sphere from the encroachment of safe space.

Protecting the Meanings of the Past

Conservative movements work to undermine survivor movement frames and thereby destabilize the alternative mnemonic traditions of survivorhood. These movements strategically assert their own victimization in an attempt to subvert the legitimacy of survivor credentials. Thus these conservative movements are able to invert the “injustice frame” (Gamson et. al. 1982) asserted by survivor movements. Such an inversion of frame occurs when False Memory Syndrome Foundation (FMSF) members speak as “victims” of false memories, or when anti-reparations groups speak as victims of “reverse discrimination,” arguing that “whites” ended slavery and that “blacks” are Americans who owe a debt of gratitude to their country (Horowitz 2001: points 3,9,10). The attribution of victim and perpetrator identities then becomes a matter of public dispute between survivor movements and conservative movements, the latter taking on a

self-ascribed role as *victim* of survivor accusations (See for example, FMSF 2003; Horowitz 2001: points 3,7).

By first undermining the legitimacy of survivor credentials, conservative movements are free to reinforce the traditional frames associated with the contested past events, without doing so from the standpoint of *perpetrator*. Conservative movements will often aggressively and rather obsessively highlight the meanings and reinforce the structure of attention traditionally associated with the contested experience. Such a strategy performs the dual function of rendering alternative survivor versions of the past illegitimate and thereby re-establishing the threatened traditional version of the past to its default status.

Contesting the Legacies of the Past

While survivor movements emphasize the presence of the past and its relevance to current conditions, conservative movements strategically deny the relevance of the past to the present. In contrast to the survivor movement strategy of historical continuity, conservative movements employ a strategy of historical discontinuity (Zerubavel 2003:82-100) and dispute the connections between present and past that are highlighted by survivor movements. These groups emphasize historical distance (“that was so long ago”) or distinction (“then has nothing to do with now”) between past and present. They reinforce traditionally understood endings of past events, emphasizing the historical disconnectedness of present conditions. Historical discontinuity is constructed when military authorities deny the impact of war on the present mental state of its participants (See, for example, BBC 2003), or when the FMSF attributes the present psychological problems self-identified victims of child sex abuse to present therapeutic engagements as opposed to early childhood experiences (See Loftus 1993, 1997; Ofshe & Waters 1994; Kaplan & Manicavasagar 2001). Similarly, when an anti-reparations spokesperson

states that there is “no evidence... that living individuals have been adversely affected by a slave system that was ended over 150 years ago” (Horowitz 2001: point 6), he is severing that past from the present conditions of African-Americans and countering a central claim of the reparations movement. Such a strategy produces *social closure*, isolating current circumstances from their historic roots.

Dissociation from the past is a prerequisite for the de-legitimation of survivor claims and the attribution of blame to the survivor movement. In severing the past from the present and rejecting the cause and effect links constructed by survivor movements, conservative movements attempt to eliminate the social foundation for the survivor movement altogether. Such “mnemonic decapitations” (Zerubavel 1997: 85; 2003: 93-94) further enable conservative movements to levy the charge of “reverse discrimination,” blaming survivor movements for the consequences of the accusations they make. This strategy conveniently eclipses the blame levied by survivor movements for past atrocities. Where survivor movements create mental links, conservative movements create mental gulfs. The present conditions, circumstances, or symptomatology of the individual survivors are argued to have more contemporary causes.

Contesting the Homogeneity of the Past and the Survivor Collective

While survivor movements emphasize a generic commonality of past experience over axiomatic differences, conservative movements strategically emphasize individualism and idiosyncrasy. Conservative movements thus strategically dispute the rationale for a collective survivorhood. Where survivor movements exercise a methodological collectivism, conservative movements espouse a methodological individualism.

Conservative movements employ a strategy of “individualization” and will typically dispute the commonalities of the past experience highlighted by survivor movements. Where

survivor movements construct a “we” based on a common past experience, conservative movements attempt to isolate individuals by heightening the attention paid to idiosyncrasy, thus removing the social foundation for a common etiological descent. The FMSF, for example, highlights the individual experiences and circumstances of self-identified victims of child sex abuse. In the same light, the Center for the Study of Popular Culture (CSPC) states that “the reparations argument is based on the unfounded claim that all African-American descendants of slaves suffer from the economic consequences of slavery” (Horowitz 2001: pt. 6), that “many blacks were free men or slave-owners” (Ibid: pt. 5), and that “only a tiny minority of Americans owned slaves” (Ibid: pt. 3). Such a strategy of individualization is reflected in the willingness of mental health professionals to diagnose disturbed Vietnam veterans with individual mental illnesses, such as paranoid schizophrenia, despite their past combat experiences (Scott 1990: 298).

Where survivor movements stress a collective adverse symptomatology, conservative movements argue that the present conditions or circumstances of individual survivors have more idiosyncratic causes. They tend to emphasize individual pathology over social illness, thereby deflecting survivor movement claims for social change. Thus individuals who are personally affected by eating disorders (Daughter’s Story 2003) or parenting problems (Anonymous Retractor 2003) suffer from the allure of victimhood (Amy P.’s story 2003) and succumb to making false accusations of child sex abuse. By the same logic, conservative movements tend to prefer individual “discipline” as a solution to poverty as opposed to generally applicable solutions such as welfare (See, for example, Horowitz 1998). Conservative movements develop *narratives of individual illness* and often attribute deviance to survivors, casting them as psychopaths, sociopaths, or criminals. Such a strategy serves to marginalize survivor

movements and deflate their claims for social change. The retractor stories emphasized by the FMSF describing false accusations of child sex abuse serve such a strategic purpose. Similarly, the FBI Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) strategy behind falsely accusing VVAW organizers, later known as the “Gainesville Eight,” of planning to use bombs and bazookas at the 1972 Democratic and Republican national conventions (See Churchill and Van Der Wall 1990: 190) stigmatizes them as criminals and terrorists, eclipsing their collectively rooted identities as survivors.

VI. CONCLUSION

Safe spaces are protected spaces of cultural liminality in which survivor groups cohere around alternative mnemonic traditions that later become matters of public dispute. The need for safe space is in part, as survivor movements illustrate, a function of the need to re-conceive history and memory. Safe spaces provide a socio-cognitive foundation for the attribution of alternative meaning to a past experience, the ascription of legacy to the past via the social construction of historical continuity, the construction of a survivor collective and a narrative of social illness, and the attribution of “victim” and “perpetrator” identities. Safe spaces thus provide an impetus to conflict in the public arena. The disputes between survivor movements and their conservative opponents occur between contemporary yet mutually exclusive perceptual worlds or “finite provinces of meaning” (Schutz [1945] 1973: 232) around which our cultural understandings of trauma and atrocity take form.

The traditional or default meanings associated with contested past events such as the Vietnam war, child sex abuse, and American slavery are grounded within the sharp power differentials characteristic of those experiences. Such asymmetries of power are accompanied by

an asymmetries of cognitive authority within which an “individual or group exerts significant control over another’s cognitive options” (DeGloma 2003). Such asymmetries of cognitive authority explain why mainstream understandings of past events are often assumed to be natural (See Billig 1995: 66). Safe spaces allow for the subversion of this cognitive authority by providing a safety zone in which cognitive alternatives to default traditions can be grounded in collective movements. In many cases, the battles waged by survivor movements could not have been waged at the time and within the framework of the original experience, only emerging in retrospect. Challenging these dominant conceptions of the past entails challenging the asymmetries of cognitive authority within which they are formulated as well as the legitimacy of experiences such as slavery, sexual contact between adult and child, and war in general.

Further, contesting mainstream views of specific past events such as American slavery, child sex abuse, and the Vietnam War involves challenging the more general and entrenched frames of Eurocentric history, parental authority, and patriotism and the legitimacy associated with these worldviews. In contesting the meaning and legacy of the past, survivor movements are contesting the power and authority to give meaning to human experience. The conflicts between survivor movements and their conservative opponents are conflicts between alternative and traditional cognitive orders, each with divergent political and moral implications for our cultural understanding of present and future social relations and experiences. The alternative cognitive orders advocated by survivor movements have led to new social understandings of trauma, violence, and the abuse of power. The socio-cognitive dynamics of these retrospective conflicts illuminate the importance of history and memory to the construction of meaning in social life.

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