

# FORGETTING THE 1960 BILOXI, MISSISSIPPI, WADE-INS

Collective Memory, Forgetting, and the  
Politics of Remembering Protest

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Mississippi has never been associated with a fondness for change, and the civil rights movement in the state was slow to take root. Even after events such as the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and the horrific 1955 Emmett Till murder created an opening for social change, the state movement developed slowly. As Dittmer states, "By the end of 1955 the black freedom movement in Mississippi was in disarray. With the school desegregation drive stopped in its tracks and voter registration campaigns crumbling in the face of intimidation and violence, activists were left without a viable program."<sup>1</sup> National civil rights organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) deemed the state too entrenched in segregation and violence to make any progress, and pro-civil-rights Mississippians found movement organizing to be nearly impossible. It seemed the civil rights movement would bypass the state entirely.

Additionally the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, enacted in 1956 to preserve segregation in the state, provided an institutionalized reinforcement of the segregationist efforts in a state known for its violence and intimidation against African Americans.<sup>2</sup> The commission's powers included the charge of performing any and all acts necessary to protect the sovereignty of Mississippi from the federal government; thus, as Dittmer noted, "simply belonging to the NAACP in Mississippi was risky business."<sup>3</sup>

Despite the Sovereignty Commission's efforts to slow civil rights actions in Mississippi, the Biloxi wade-ins signaled a change in the state. Much of the credit for the wade-ins goes to the organizational skills of Gilbert Mason, a Mississippi

physician who moved to Biloxi after studying and practicing medicine outside of the state.<sup>4</sup> Moving back to Mississippi, Mason knew that it would be difficult to tolerate segregation laws. As he described it, "As an idealistic young physician, I had no intention of living my life or seeing my son live his life within the narrow confines laid out by racist segregation laws."<sup>5</sup> Mason viewed Biloxi's segregated public beaches as a prime location for testing the laws. Claiming that the beach belonged to private property owners, the city enforced segregation laws on the beach and in the water.<sup>6</sup> "For a man who loved swimming," Mason wrote, "and who had gloried in the free use of the parks in Chicago and Washington, D.C., the idea that a marvelous oak-lined public beach was forbidden territory was just too much to abide."<sup>7</sup> The first protest to integrate Biloxi's beaches took place on May 14, 1959. Primarily designed to test the police response to the action, the protest included only a few participants, all of whom were arrested.<sup>8</sup> Mason alone attempted a second protest on April 17, 1960.

A week later, more than one hundred black protestors conducted a wade-in demonstration, completing "the first indigenous, nonviolent, direct action protest in Mississippi during the civil rights era."<sup>9</sup> The action successfully brought attention to the segregation policies of the city but was also met with an explosion of violence. Having prepared for an attack, in one location "forty white men assaulted the swimmers with iron pipes, chains, and baseball bats."<sup>10</sup> The immediate violent reactions on the beaches quickly became known as "Bloody Sunday."<sup>11</sup> As Mason described it, "Our folks were like lambs being led to the slaughter. I thought, 'Lord, what have I gotten these people into.' Some of the forty or fifty blacks at the foot of Gill were already in the water with at least four or five hundred whites surrounding them and beating whomever they could lay hands on."<sup>12</sup> Moreover the violent reactions on the beach carried over into neighborhoods, creating the worst racial riot in Mississippi, in which "at least fifteen African Americans sustained serious injuries inflicted by the white mobs who patrolled the area into the next morning."<sup>13</sup>

As a result of this protest, Biloxi's black citizens began to organize more formally as the national civil rights movement recognized the significance of the organized activities and made plans to bring the Biloxi wade-in model to other parts of the segregated South.<sup>14</sup> Given the effect the wade-ins had on the Mississippi movement, those actions have not received the recognition they deserve. As Matthew Pitt observes, "Though the wade-ins were sandwiched by the Greensboro lunch counter sit-ins and the famed Freedom Riders, the protests have gone largely unheralded, even though they served as a litmus test for future segregation challenges."<sup>15</sup> The wade-ins challenged the segregationist mandates of Mississippi, calling into question the rights of African Americans in the state. Great resistance from local and state officials to the integration of the beaches led to a federal lawsuit in the late 1960s that eventually opened the beaches to

public use, demonstrating the power of the wade-ins to enact change in Mississippi. This powerful yet gradual change in Biloxi's integration policies made way for the integration of the Biloxi public schools in 1964. This essay analyzes public discourse surrounding the 1960s wade-in attempts, specifically focusing on the way public officials minimized the violence of the wade-ins, blamed outside agitators for organizing the events, and actively worked to create laws aimed at penalizing peaceful protest. The public narrative served to preserve an active agenda of forgetting and distorting public memory of the wade-in events.

As the rhetoric surrounding the wade-in events resulted in a dominant narrative of minimizing the power of the attempts at racial integration, so too did the commemoration events emphasize a narrative of erasure. Fifty years later, the anniversary remembrance celebrations in Biloxi served to commemorate the wade-ins as a significant turn in the civil rights movement. While serving to remember the wade-ins, the ceremony and historical marker placement also muted some of the memory of the past. While the rhetorical image of the protests energized the civil rights movement in the 1960s, the fiftieth-anniversary efforts minimized the significance of the wade-ins as an integral part of civil rights history. By analyzing the public discourse of the 1960s wade-ins and two specific anniversary events, this essay advances general understanding of how the rhetoric of forgetting permanently alters remembrance and suggests wade-ins as an alternative to the sit-in model of protest.

### Remembering to Forget

The Biloxi wade-ins came at a time in the American South when laws and local authorities routinely subdued protest. The rhetorical framing of the protests matters to the study of rhetoric because it demonstrates how culture and language have political implications on race. While a relationship of *memoria* existed between the wade-ins and their commemoration, public forgetting was required for the commemoration's success and for healing to occur in a state known for its resistance to integration in all forms. Layered within these discourses of memory and forgetting are the complexities of race.

To understand how forgetting and memory are interwoven, we turn to memory scholars who view memory as the opposite of and antithetical to the act of remembrance. Some acts of forgetting occur when attempting to remember historical events productively. Andreas Huyssen suggests that, "inevitably, every act of memory carries with it a dimension of betrayal, forgetting, and absence."<sup>16</sup> Likewise Maurice Halbwachs argues that in the process of remembering, societies tend to restructure the acts of remembrance in ways that are invariably not the same as the original event. As societies make efforts to commemorate, they must selectively choose that which they will remember.

Halbwachs argues this process is a part of our social memory, in which “the various groups that compose society are capable at every moment of reconstructing their past. However, as we have seen, they most frequently distort the past in the act of reconstructing it.”<sup>17</sup> Halbwachs further argues that to achieve equilibrium societies tend toward erasing memories that might divide groups: “It is then reason or intelligence that chooses among the store of recollections, eliminates some of them, and arranges the others according to an order conforming with our ideas of the moment.”<sup>18</sup> For the wade-ins forgetting emerges as an inevitable act to find peace within remembered pasts, made more complex because race is at the center of the events.

To undertake an effective rhetorical analysis of the Biloxi wade-ins and their fiftieth-anniversary remembrance, race must be considered as an integral factor in the construct of memory. Derek H. Alderman calls the struggle over which parts of memory get preserved the “politics of memory”<sup>19</sup> and frames this concept within the painful remembrance of slavery: “This recovery process requires finding a suitable commemorative surrogate for representing the often traumatic experiences of the enslaved, which invariably involves a struggle to find the ‘right’ words to describe the nature of slavery.”<sup>20</sup> The politics of memory surrounding the wade-ins’ commemoration are complicated by the tension between remembering hurtful pasts and the desire to commemorate such a significant historical event. Victoria Gallagher, writing of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, argues that issues surrounding race emerge within the public memory: “The consequences of materiality include issues of partisanship, particularly institutionalization of memory and, thereby, value. As a result, the highly contested nature of race relations and civil rights in the United States means that related memorials enact a dialectical tension between reconciliation and amnesia, conflicts resolved and conflicts simply reconfigured.”<sup>21</sup> Embedded within the rhetoric of the wade-ins and their remembrance are the cross-sections of race, memory, and culture, making those intersections potential sites for forgetting.

To read the wade-ins rhetorically, we turn to archived documents of the 1960s and the memorializing features from the fiftieth-anniversary commemoration. Three sites of rhetorical analysis emerge. First, this study analyzes the way the wade-ins and opposition to those wade-in attempts were rhetorically constructed during the 1960s. Second, we analyze the documents surrounding the publicizing of the commemoration within the historical context of the original wade-in events. Finally, we critically analyze the commemoration by deconstructing the rhetoric of the historical marker as a reaffirmation of both active and inevitable forgetfulness, including the site of the marker as an important feature of the rhetorical landscape. While the 1960s narrative emphasized forgetting as a means of minimizing a rhetoric of protest and inevitable change

for Mississippians, the commemorative events likewise deploy rhetorics of forgetting in order to commemorate. Each of these analysis sections deconstructs acts of remembering, forgetting, and the implications of race and discrimination, concluding with the implications of this text on the politics of memory as well as our understanding of sit-in protests and memory.

### The Wade-Ins—Past and Present

Documents housed within the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission archives as well as local news coverage of the fiftieth anniversary events give insight into the ways that discourse surrounding the wade-ins functioned to frame the events in a particular way. Rhetorical analysis of those documents covers the existent representation of wade-in history shaping the memory of the event. First, an analysis of the historical events of the 1960s wade-ins helps to construct a rhetorical timeline for this project and demonstrates that from the initial wade-ins until to the present day, public officials constructed intentional forgetting as a means to restructure public memory.

### 1960s Resistance and the Construction of Forgetting

As the first act of resistance against the segregationist policies in Mississippi, the Biloxi beach wade-ins signaled the beginning of organized civil rights actions in the state. Official discourse and public response utilized tactics of minimization, intimidation, and distraction, serving to incite public forgetting and alter permanently the discourse of the wade-ins. This section serves to frame three rhetorical themes as a way of capturing the politics of memory that allowed public forgetting to become an active part of the unfolding wade-in discourse from 1959 to 1963. First, local officials minimized and mischaracterized the wade-in efforts. Second, public officials blamed “outside agitators” for protests and violence related to the wade-in. Finally legal efforts to ban protesting and narratives related to African American misuse of public spaces helped frame resistance to the integration in Biloxi.

The first in a series of integration attempts at Biloxi’s beach occurred in 1959. However local police officers and town officials made great efforts to keep the wade-in demonstrations out of the media by downplaying each integration attempt. News articles from the *Jackson Clarion Ledger* and *Memphis Commercial Appeal* labeled Mason’s solo April 17 wade-in attempt as the “first specific passive demonstration against segregation practices in strictly-segregated Mississippi in the current wave of such protests in the South.”<sup>22</sup> News outlets, using reports from local officials, helped to reinforce the narrative of forgetting through inaccurate reporting of wade-in attempts.

After the April 17 wade-in, local officials tried to undermine the attention that the actions received. Mayor Laz Quave, for example, said, "They're trying to make a national issue out of it, but we're trying to handle it locally." Police Chief Herbert McDonald, meanwhile, avoided the press and their requests for arrest records, claiming that "it would take too much time to look it up."<sup>23</sup> Minimizing the importance of the integration efforts continued even after the Bloody Sunday riot, when a desk sergeant from the police station reported that he was not aware of any white persons arrested. "Maybe some Negroes were arrested," he stated; "I understand they were fighting among themselves."<sup>24</sup> Although media outlets reported incidents of injury and several nonfatal shooting victims on Bloody Sunday, local officials and police continually hid arrest numbers and records.

In an attempt to contain the story, local authorities turned their attention toward outside agitators as the true instigators of the protest and riot. The Associated Press reported Mayor Quave's estimation that the entire protest was a "cold calculation" and that "most of the Negroes who started the agitation were from out of state or upstate."<sup>25</sup> This was an accusation frequently used to downplay the significance of collective civil action. As Bruce D'Arcus explains, "This is the essence of the outside agitator argument: that individual inciters enter localities from elsewhere, spark unrest that otherwise would not occur and then disappear, leaving local communities to deal with the aftermath."<sup>26</sup> In the case of the wade-ins, officials claimed that the outsiders included foreign nationals, black residents of surrounding states, and members of the NAACP. In the April 24 *Clarion Ledger*, the general manager of the Biloxi Chamber of Commerce blamed the NAACP for the event and claimed that it was funded "with overseas money from enemies of the United States."<sup>27</sup> Locally accusations of the NAACP's involvement in the wade-ins served to vilify the organization, even though the organization denied organizing the wade-ins and resulting riots.

According to D'Arcus riots challenge local authority and order as well as what it means to enact citizenship.<sup>28</sup> In the case of the Biloxi wade-ins, particularly Bloody Sunday, the resulting riots acted as threats to the social order and segregationist politics of Mississippi as enforced by the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission. Mayor Quave said he was afraid that this was just the beginning of the racial riots in Biloxi, stating, "We've got Negroes here from Alabama, Louisiana, all parts of Mississippi and everywhere else."<sup>29</sup> Mason denied that external groups organized the wade-in efforts on Bloody Sunday and insisted that mobs of local whites incited the subsequent violence, chasing African Americans back into their neighborhood and tormenting them through the night.<sup>30</sup>

Eventually a federal court case filed against Biloxi officials claimed that Quave and local police officers "aided and abetted" the white mob. In August 1960 the *Commercial Appeal* reported that "the federal government charged . . . that Gulf Coast law enforcement authorities permitted a white mob to attack a

group of Negroes when they tried to integrate the beach." Furthermore evidence revealed that a local physician alerted the sheriff of Gulfport that the wade-in would happen on April 24.<sup>31</sup> Despite national recognition of city culpability, the strategic labeling of the protestors as outsiders served to undermine the significance of the event to the national integration efforts.

The final rhetorical strategy used during the wade-ins relied on public discourse that attempted to intimidate the African American community through legal means and a misinformation campaign. Bloody Sunday was the most dramatic of the wade-in attempts. In the days after the brutal attacks on beach demonstrators, Mississippi governor Ross Barnett signed a bill that allowed "prison terms up to 10 years for anyone inciting a riot in which a person is killed or injured."<sup>32</sup> Gulfport, Mississippi, district attorney Boyce Holleman told the *Jackson Daily News* that the bill "provides that persons who gather in a crowd in a public place with intent to create a breach of the peace and refuse an officer's request to disperse may be charged with disorderly conduct. This simply means that even the peaceful exercise of a constitutional right can, at certain times and under certain circumstances interfere with public safety and must yield in the interests of public safety."<sup>33</sup> The *Jackson State Times* reported that Mason was responsible for the violence.<sup>34</sup> In the days following the rioting, local city and county officials publicly discussed separatist beach areas for African Americans. The public deliberation framed this as an effort to deter any planned wade-in or riot attempts. The *Times Picayune* reported that "further race riots were apparently staved off here Saturday after city and county officials met. . . . In this view, Negro leaders said their people would refrain from demonstrations Saturday and Sunday, risking clashes with whites."<sup>35</sup> The rhetorical tactic served to delay further integration efforts, but Mason rejected segregationist compromises, stating, "We merely wish to have the right to use any part of the beach we choose."<sup>36</sup>

As local government worked to mitigate future wade-in attempts, sheriffs began to regulate weapons sales. Local sheriffs in the three coastal Mississippi counties demanded that all firearms be registered. The sheriff in Jackson County denied a connection to the wade-in violence, insisting that "merchants must keep a record of all sales of firearms and ammunition [*sic*], including make, caliber and name of purchaser."<sup>37</sup> Statewide media reported that all three Biloxi hardware stores sold out of ammunition, rifles, and shotguns in the days following Bloody Sunday.<sup>38</sup> The registry of firearms along with citywide curfews and a heightened police presence in Biloxi demonstrated the fear that another protest would prove far more violent than Bloody Sunday.

State segregationists also worked to discredit Mason's reputation in several newspapers. On the editorial page of the *Jackson Daily News*, in an article questioning Mason's commitment to his patients, the author cited an uptick in

African American use of the Harrison County Health Department since the riots. In an effort to discredit Mason, the editor claimed that while he "moved himself to the publicity limelight, no new medical business is coming Dr. Mason's way."<sup>39</sup> The editorial argued that the African American community was turning to the public services provided by the state of Mississippi and away from Mason because of his involvement in the wade-ins.

The final form of intimidation came in the form of a disinformation campaign in the national news that skewed the relationship between the African American community and the beaches. Granted for black use in the 1950s, a section of Gulfport's beach (a city adjoining Biloxi) was revoked because "they littrede [*sic*] the beach and used it for a love-making ground" and were unsanitary, causing residents to insist on closing the beach. One resident said, "That the Negroes once had use of the beach is general knowledge around here, but the reason for closing it will never get into a newspaper north of the Mason-Dixon line."<sup>40</sup> Local government employed multiple tactics to discredit and disrupt the wade-in efforts and future integration advances. Eventually, Mason relied upon the federal case to mandate public access to the beaches. Though local officials made efforts to minimize the significance of the wade-in, accused outside agitators of instigating the integration movements, and blamed African Americans for the segregation needs, Mason held out hope that the federal suit would force integration and overturn strong segregationist efforts in Mississippi.

In June 1963 Mason again organized a wade-in, alerting Biloxi mayor Daniel Guice of the integration plans some five weeks in advance. Police officials gathered to watch the protest and fended off more than two thousand white spectators who, after less than an hour, began to slash tires of the protestors and act unruly. A group of sixty-eight African Americans and three whites were arrested for protesting. After this event no other organized wade-ins occurred. The federal suit (*United States v. Harrison County*) mandated beach integration in 1968 but was followed by several years of appeals to overturn beach integration. Finally the limitation on appeals lapsed, opening Harrison County beaches to all citizens on July 31, 1972.<sup>41</sup>

The rhetorical themes emerging from the original protests illustrate purposeful attempts at minimizing the desegregation efforts, leading to an altered memory of the integration efforts of the civil rights era in Mississippi. The active work by local officials to diminish publicly the impact of the wade-ins and the violence of Bloody Sunday further reinforced the relationship between racial politics and the public forgetting. Public memory for the segregationist was best served through active efforts toward forgetting and erasure of the wade-ins by public officials. In the fiftieth-anniversary remembrances, similar efforts at forgetting emerge in the preservation of progress; selective memory prevails.

## Fiftieth-Anniversary Remembrance

Though a modest marker and ceremony commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the wade-ins, it was the public conversation, awareness raising, and recollection of memories that proved significant for rhetorical analysis. James Young suggests that “it may even be the activity of remembering together that becomes the shared memory; once ritualized, remembering together becomes an event in itself that is to be shared and remembered.”<sup>42</sup>

Prior to 2009 members of the Biloxi community began organizing a set of commemorative events. For example a local resident’s Facebook page called for regular meetings near the historical marker to raise awareness, and the page served as a place for announcing meetings on the beach to gather in remembrance. The *Smithsonian Magazine* completed a retrospective story about the anniversary, bringing the event to a larger audience. Most interesting, however, was the limited exposure the actual remembrance events heralded. Though the wade-ins were the first demonstration of Mississippi’s civil rights efforts, the dedication and remembrance ceremonies received little public attention. Initial press accounts remembering the wade-in started in 2009 with a story announcing the planned ceremony by a local television reporter on her blog.<sup>43</sup> Gilbert Mason’s son coordinated the planning of a three-day ceremony along with local community members, university and college faculty members, and the NAACP. The program included panels on the wade-ins, conversations about race, and the dedication of the historical marker, all held at the Jefferson Davis branch of Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College. In June 2010 a much smaller ceremony held under a tent near the beach unveiled the historical marker at its current site. The state’s public broadcasting station publicized a remembrance of the final wade-in on June 24, 2013.<sup>44</sup> The 2009 commemoration is of particular interest, however, as it included a significant keynote address by former governor William Winter. Winter’s speech, in particular, highlights the ways racial politics encourage public forgetting.

Winter, Mississippi’s Democratic governor from 1980 to 1984, was part of the “New Mississippi” movement, referring to the efforts to bring Mississippi into the civil rights era and leave segregationist politics behind. Winter’s passion for education and healing the racial divide earned distinction nationally.<sup>45</sup> In his keynote address at the 2009 wade-in commemoration, he lamented, “You didn’t see this white face on the beach with Mason because white people, like me and many others, were intimidated by the massive forces of racial segregation. I have to admit I could not stand up to the pressure for being in public life in Mississippi and come out four-square for the elimination of segregation and for that I apologize today.”<sup>46</sup> Even with, or perhaps because of, his reputation for

aiding in the creation of New Mississippi, Winter administered an apology in his address, recognizing that he did not do enough to aid Mason in his fight for civil rights during the wade-ins. Winter's remarks, rather than emphasizing the great changes in the state or his fight against discrimination during that tumultuous time, focused on what was left undone, leading to violence. A reporter at the commemoration noted that the other speakers at the anniversary weekend, most of them African American, thought the former governor had little for which he needed to apologize.<sup>47</sup> However a critical reading of Winter's remarks reveals that upon reflection, some fifty years later, he recognized that his relationship to the civil rights work did not truly help to accomplish change. Charles Bolton, Winter's biographer, argues that the speakers at the commemoration "understood that he had done what he had to do in order to remain politically viable, a strategy that allowed him to retain enough power to fight successfully for educational improvement and racial healing in the years ahead."<sup>48</sup> With political aspirations in his future, Winter did not participate in such battles during the height of the Civil Rights era. Witnesses at the event emphasized strong opposition to hearing Winter's apology, asserting that his record of service to the state erased his need to apologize. Given this tension between speaker and audience, Winter's act of apology has far greater implications for the understanding of memory and forgetting than speakers at the commemoration realized.

Winter continued his remarks after the apology for his unwillingness to stand beside African Americans, speaking about racial progress and ending segregation. He said, "There has also been much tangible progress on race in this country, including the election of Barack Obama, as the first black president."<sup>49</sup> Winter's reference to electing a black president has been a much-used trope in political speech in recent years. While the election of a black president is progressive in many ways, as Winter suggests, it certainly does not demonstrate healing from the wade-in era, nor even progress in Mississippi, given President Obama's lack of support in the state.<sup>50</sup> Michael Newsom reported Winter's perspective on race, writing, "the efforts of Mason and others helped to end a system that was contradictory to what [Winter] thinks the U.S. is about. [Winter] said whites also benefited from the end of segregation as people of all races were prisoners of the system. [Mason] helped free us too."<sup>51</sup> Winter's address deemed Mason a hero and a leader of civil rights in the state. Undoubtedly these accolades were true; however Winter's remarks focused on the heroism of Mason without reference to the violence of the wade-ins. He praised Mason as the man who freed all people from oppression, when in the case of the wade-ins, white officials and citizens were the perpetrators of brutal violence against peaceful black wade-in demonstrators. Winter's revision of the wade-ins serves to cull memories, forgetting the violence and brutality of the white citizenry. Winter preserved Mason as a hero while being careful not to vilify Mayor Quave, Police

Chief McDonnell, the State Sovereignty Commission, or any other guilty parties. Rather he deferred to an apology where he accepted blame for not helping while being careful not to blame others.

Though Winter did not become governor until twenty years after the wade-ins, he was an active political figure in Mississippi during the civil rights era. His address at the anniversary highlights how the discrimination politics during the Biloxi wade-ins have been impacted by time. James Young argues that "the reasons for memory and the forms memory takes are always socially mandated, part of the socializing system whereby fellow citizens gain common history through the vicarious memory of their forbears' experiences."<sup>52</sup> Winter's apology, as a former governor and state leader, frames the wade-ins through his ideological lens, further reinforcing the politics of memory where race is concerned. Winter's keynote address at the commemoration served to empower the public toward holding memory as a perspective in time rather than actively remembering the events in order to heal. This type of rhetorical response encourages listeners to forget the brutality of Bloody Sunday and the civil rights era through apology and blame. Winter, however well-intentioned as a representative of the state, allowed his apology to take the place of true remembrance during the anniversary efforts.

In 1999 Biloxi announced plans to create a monument to the wade-in struggle; however by 2010 a single historical marker stood as the only public commemoration of the wade-ins, acting as the monument in the lack of a more robust commemorative form. The final act of the fiftieth-anniversary commemoration ceremony was the dedication of the marker. Combining analysis of the rhetoric of the commemoration ceremony and a close reading of the historical marker affords a more robust reading of public forgetting.

### Historical Marking

A historical marker can be viewed as an act of pure remembrance. A sign becomes a monument, especially without obvious physical markers of events, such as memorials, buildings, or other historical objects. In the absence of other forms of remembering, the historical marker is granted the authority to stand in for all memories. Additionally this historical marker becomes the place of memory, the site from which memory springs. Young asserts that "traditionally, the monument has been defined as that which by its seemingly land-anchored permanence could also guarantee the permanence of a particular idea of memory attached to it."<sup>53</sup> Although the problem of segregated beaches existed across the Gulf Coast, the integration efforts primarily occurred in Biloxi, led by Mason. Today the commemorative marker preserves, selectively displays, and contains the memory of the wade-ins through forgetting.

This example of a marker “containing” the memory is full of potential in that it provides an opening for public dialogue about the historical event but is also constraining in that it makes the event smaller and less significant in some ways. If the marker acts as a container—a marker of physical space—then the violent acts are remembered as happening in only one location, and the symbolism of the event is also located and contained within one small space, the physical marker itself. As Victoria Gallagher argues, “Memorials serve multiple rhetorical functions and in the case of civil rights memorials, communities attempting to reclaim moral high ground . . . may use memorials to perform a kind of public apologia or therapeutic cleansing.”<sup>54</sup> In this case the historical marker appears to be a significant recognition and remembering of the event, thus making an argument that the community has reached a point where it can come together and reflect on the meaning of the protest and the reaction to it. At the same time, the physical location of the marker erases many other spaces where integration efforts and bloody counterprotests took place. Thus without yet accounting for the words that are placed on the historical marker, the physical presence of the marker alone serves as a rhetorical example of both remembering and forgetting.

The beachfront location of the historical marker also defines and confines the location of the space in meaningful ways. In the space that now separates the beach from the privately owned historic homes of such controversy sits the historical marker near the newly constructed visitor’s center and the lighthouse, all public spaces. The tall, white lighthouse serves as a constant reminder of Biloxi’s location and a beacon of light in the darkness. That the original wade-in protests occurred near the lighthouse calls forth the metaphor of moving from darkness into light. Given that the wade-ins were a symbolic action, the addition of the light/dark symbolism brings another layer of meaning to the act, emphasizing the morality of the protest. Moreover today the sandy beach and gulf waters are the backdrops of the marker, further signifying a rhetorical cleansing. The marker itself is an act of cleansing sins, as it serves to commemorate while at the same time containing memory in a single artifact, thus permitting the act of forgetting. The rhetorical washing-away of the wade-in events on the same soil bloodied fifty years prior also gives the community permission to heal. Simultaneously the marker forgets and forgives, all the while sacrificing true remembrance.

In addition to the symbolism of the marker, the discourse on the marker is the next indicator of the rhetorical strategy at work in this act of remembering and forgetting. The language of a historical marker is not without careful consideration. The term *historical marker* proves challenging on its own, as it portends to tell a neutral version of a past event. Historical markers such as the one describing the Biloxi wade-ins include language about the event, however, and

this selection is inherently rhetorical. As Alderman asserts, “commemorative narratives, although having the appearance of being objective and value-free, are deeply implicated in the social construction and contestation of history.”<sup>55</sup>

The marker’s account of the historical event acknowledges the earlier wade-ins, unlike the scarce media attention and accounts from the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission. Listing three separate occasions in the opening paragraph, including the original 1959 action, the marker acknowledges the broader extent of the organizing efforts. The passive nature of the opening sentence is noteworthy, however. Readers are told that “the Biloxi beach front was the site of planned civil rights wade-ins demanding equal access to the public beach.” In this case there are no actors to applaud or blame, although the wording indicates that it was “planned,” alluding to actors. As others have argued, the use of the passive voice can have the effect of taking the emphasis off of the actor (speaker or, in this case, protestor or reactionary) and placing it onto the occasion.<sup>56</sup> Thus in this case the sentence highlights the beach—not the actors—and leaves only physical space to commemorate.

The next sentence, though, clarifies who was involved in the action: “On April 24, 1960, several citizens, both black and white, were injured and arrested, including the leader of the wade-ins, physician Dr. Gilbert R. Mason, Sr.” The selection of the word *citizens* is noteworthy here, because earlier attempts to mark protestors as outsiders are erased with this discursive indication of belonging. Of course the marker does not necessarily label them as Biloxi or Mississippi citizens, but the assumption is that the protestors and those who opposed them all belonged there—they were citizens. More significantly the choice to emphasize that both black and white citizens were injured and arrested muddles understanding of the events and, because it too is in the passive voice, begs the question of who did the injuring. It is not clear based on this description who was protesting or reacting, whether there were both black and white protestors and violent responders, nor who was primarily injured and arrested. Thus, this sentence brings noteworthy attention to the event but, at the same time, seems to leave out significant details. It is also noteworthy that the marker notes the leader of the Biloxi wade-ins, Gilbert Mason, in this sentence. The recognition of Mason as the leader who brought about significant changes in the Biloxi area, however, is not necessarily clear. On the marker he is recognized as the leader of protests, but viewers have to make a connection on their own that he can be credited for the positive change, as well. Of course the limited space on historical markers can always be blamed for brevity, but the rhetorical message that this brief description sends is powerfully distorting.

The final sentence on the marker indicates the significance of the events: “This series of protests gave birth to the Biloxi branch of the NAACP, major voter registration drives in 1960, and a 1968 federal court ruling opening the

beach to all citizens.” Since the previous sentence makes clear that both black and white citizens were involved in the event, reading this next sentence against that message indicates that all of those involved in the protest were part of the actions that brought forth the positive outcomes. That is, of course, true in many ways. As Davi Johnson explains, the Birmingham civil rights campaigns needed both the villains and the martyrs to portray visually the severity of racial violence in the South.<sup>57</sup> In reality, though, the violent white reaction to the Biloxi wade-ins mainly delayed progress in this area, given the lack of media coverage (and thus the same rhetorical cachet that the Birmingham images yielded for the movement). It is also noteworthy that the outcomes that are highlighted on the marker are all systemic changes—organizations being formed, voting rights advocated for, and a court decision ending segregation. Potentially more powerful results were the cultural shifts that might have been stimulated by these actions. Although structural change is easier to recognize, cultural change is more likely to bring about fundamental improvements in the lives of African Americans. Moreover in this case the empowerment of the African American protestors—seeing that it was possible to organize protest action in Mississippi—was far more meaningful to the long-term success of the state movement.

Thus the historical marker both commemorates—remembers—an important event in Biloxi and Mississippi history but also forgets much of the story. As Bradford Vivian points out, “Intentional or unintentional episodes of distortion, excision, or loss in regard to the past understandably signify not only commemorative but ethical failings when imperatives to archive, document, and preserve hold the moral high ground.”<sup>58</sup> The brevity of the historical description may account for some of the forgetting, but because this is the only commemorative marker of the Biloxi wade-ins, the historical omissions, passive voice, and vague wordings are particularly significant. At the same time, regardless of intentions, public forgetting may serve, in some cases, an important rhetorical function of allowing communities to move forward. As Vivian notes, “In their pragmatic outcomes, public appeals to forget neither solicit immediate and complete amnesia nor insert yet another selective interpretation of the past alongside myriad partial recollections that comprise the ordinary fabric of collective memory. Rather, such appeals function rhetorically by calling on the public to question whether communal affairs would be improved by radically altering the normative form and content of collective memories that have hitherto defined its past, and hence its current identity.”<sup>59</sup> Thus the act of remembering is important because it concentrates memories on one location or event, erasing other places and events and making it easier to forget painful memories. The easing of painful remembrance is a way of sanitizing the bloody history of the wade-ins, truly complicating remembrance.

## Implications of the Commemoration

Pierre Nora notes that "modern memory is, above all, archival. . . . The less memory is experienced from the inside the more it exists only through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs."<sup>60</sup> In the 1960s Biloxi's public officials actively worked to deny the grassroots initiatives that led to the wade-in demonstrations. From the moment of the first civil rights protest in Mississippi, memory was denied, omitted, and forgotten. Today the only physical monument to the Biloxi wade-ins is a historical marker, which serves as the sole physical representation of the first civil rights demonstration in the state of Mississippi. In the case of the wade-ins, acts of forgetting in the face of remembrance ceremonies are in some ways inevitable and simultaneously purposeful. An analysis of the remembrance surrounding the Biloxi wade-ins leads to important conclusions about the way that the event is remembered, as well as broader conclusions about the rhetorical act of remembering and forgetting.

Analysis of wade-in rhetoric shows that responses to the protests changed over time. During the height of the civil rights movement, public officials actively sought to omit and obscure details regarding the wade-ins. The mayor and police officers intentionally placed blame on outside agitators and sought to minimize the impact of the wade-ins on the community and the larger civil rights efforts. Media outlets reported these inaccuracies, further skewing the public's perception of the wade-ins and motivating violence. Important details of the wade-ins were routinely omitted and underreported, making it likely that local citizens were not aware of the demonstrations or, if they were, were encouraged to dismiss the events as insignificant.

The active encouragement of forgetting in the 1960s influenced the ways that the wade-ins are remembered and commemorated today. Some of the modern-day forgetting appears to be motivated by the belief that forgetting a painful past removes barriers to healing. However the historical relationship between forgetting and remembrance emphasizes the danger of forgetting.

In every case the divisive details are removed from memory, affording the community an opportunity to reconcile. However to reconcile requires that the conversation is halted, the haunting details omitted, and memory sanitized. Works of memory such as these acknowledge wrongdoing but do so by containing and placing boundaries around the pain and violence of the wade-ins. Remembrance, no matter how painful, may be necessary to unmask the evils of the past truly. However motivations to forget seem far more likely given the constraints of race associated with the Biloxi wade-ins.

To ignore the glaring boundaries of race on Biloxi's remembrance efforts is not possible. For Mississippi racism and its shameful past are central to any

memory work. Forgetting may be inevitable; however this is tempered by the need never to forget the racist oppression and history of violence of the Jim Crow South. Although Mississippi was slow to join the civil rights movement, the wade-ins forced the state to confront inequities for blacks, resulting in violence and pain over the integration of its beaches. Given the early efforts to obscure the facts, the recent remembrance efforts were already destined toward forgetting. The Biloxi wade-ins and fiftieth-anniversary events reveal the power of memory and the politics of forgetting. Memory's inevitable foe has historically been viewed as forgetting. The danger of forgetting is the real possibility that it will be done unconsciously or surreptitiously. In some instances forgetting may be necessary for healing, but only when it is taken seriously and done thoughtfully, not out of passive defensiveness but as an active response.

In addition to conclusions about forgetting, this example also sheds light on the role that the sit-in (or in this case, wade-in) protest model plays in the forgetting process. The wade-ins find their strength in the same way as their weakness. Sit-ins are an appealing rhetorical strategy because they are easier to form and organize than other protest events. That apparent simplicity is partially because the sit-in is a temporary commitment on the part of the protestor. Moreover that brief commitment means that a movement is not dependent on known actors in the movement. All of these characteristics mean that sit-ins are quick to form and quick to dissipate. Thus movements can use sit-ins to draw attention and to send a message with less of an investment (in all senses—money, time, and political/networking efforts) than other actions might take. This also means that sit-ins are potentially problematic regarding their rhetorical strength. In this case the wade-ins were certainly successful in drawing additional people into the civil rights movement, forcing negative action on the part of the segregationists, and providing a legal challenge for the movement. However because the actors and actions were so fleeting, they were easy to forget. For example the immediate forgetting was made easier because few names could be associated with the event. Additionally because this was not a slowly brewing action that could easily be filmed, photographed, or reported on, many of the details were lost (intentionally or not). Thus the Biloxi wade-in memorial may seem somewhat disingenuous when accolades are given to many unnamed actors. That is both a failure of the marker discourse and also potentially a weakness regarding the sit-in protest model and its role in remembering a movement.

Is Mississippi ready to move forward? Throughout the state memorials and historical markers note a few of the events of the civil rights movement in the state. Historical markers have been erected in recent years as part of a new state-sponsored Freedom Trail project in order to denote the lunch counter sit-ins at an F. W. Woolworth store in Jackson, James Meredith's admission to Ole Miss,

Bryant's Grocery Store where Emmitt Till was accused of whistling at a white woman, and the Greyhound Bus station where the Freedom Riders peacefully entered Mississippi, to name a few. Those markers demonstrate a desire simultaneously to remember the civil rights struggle and to forget the years of inactivity and resistance.<sup>61</sup> More recently the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum opened in Jackson on December 9, 2017. A significant step for the state, the museum is the largest effort for reconciliation and remembrance in the history of Mississippi. Of course the dual challenge of remembering and forgetting exists within the design, creation, and display of artifacts at the museum.

The Biloxi wade-ins, public commemoration, and dedication of a historical marker each remind us of the challenges of memory, especially with the existence of a strong desire to forget. We take away from this study a better understanding of the complexities of forgetting and its relationship to issues of race. The wade-ins and their commemorations serve as touchstone examples for moving forward in a state known for its past resistance to racial healing. These lessons about memory and forgetting in the face of racism will be important as Mississippi negotiates future racial healing.

#### Notes

1. Dittmer, *Local People*, 70.

2. During the 1950s several prominent African American leaders were murdered in the state of Mississippi. The year 1955 marked the slaying of NAACP leader Rev. George Wesley Lee, political activist Lamar Smith, and fourteen-year-old Emmett Till. By the 1959 wade-in and subsequent integration efforts, intimidation through violence and the threat of death was well understood as not just possible but, in some parts of Mississippi, expected. For more on these events and others, see John Dittmer, *Local People*, 29.

3. Dittmer, *Local People*, 29.

4. Pitt, "Civil Rights Watershed."

5. Mason and Smith, *Beaches, Blood, and Ballots*, 49.

6. Pitt, "Civil Rights Watershed."

7. Mason and Smith, *Beaches, Blood, and Ballots*, 50.

8. Pitt, "Civil Rights Watershed."

9. *Ibid.*

10. Dittmer, *Local People*, 86.

11. Pitt, "Civil Rights Watershed."

12. Mason and Smith, *Beaches, Blood, and Ballots*, 68.

13. Butler, "Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission," 107.

14. *Ibid.*; Mason and Smith, *Beaches, Blood, and Ballots*, 68.

15. Pitt, "Civil Rights Watershed."

16. Huysen, *Present Pasts*, 4.

17. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 182.

18. *Ibid.*, 183.

19. Alderman, "Surrogation and the Politics of Remembering Slavery," 90.

20. *Ibid.*, 93.

21. Gallagher, "Memory and Reconciliation," 304.

22. United Press International, "Negro Doctor Breaks Color Line."
23. *Ibid.*
24. United Press International, "Racial Battle Enlivens Beach."
25. Associated Press, "Biloxi Patrolled by Armed Cops."
26. D'Arcus, "Dissent, Public Space and the Politics of Citizenship," 363.
27. United Press International, "All Biloxi Police Called to Duty in Race Crisis."
28. D'Arcus, "Dissent, Public Space and the Politics of Citizenship."
29. United Press International, "Negroes Fined in Biloxi Rioting."
30. Mason and Smith, *Beaches, Blood, and Ballots*; United Press International, "Racial Battle Enlivens Beach."
31. United Press International, "Police Accused of Aiding Mob."
32. "Aims to Forestall New Coast Clash."
33. *Ibid.*
34. "Tension Simmers in Biloxi."
35. Ferguson, "Separate Beach Facilities on Coast Are Discussed."
36. *Ibid.*
37. United Press International, "Racial Meeting Held at Capitol."
38. United Press International, "All Biloxi Police Called to Duty."
39. Sullens, "Dr. Mason and His Patients."
40. "Biloxi Beach Quiet Sunday."
41. Butler, "Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission," 142-43.
42. Young, *Texture of Memory*, 7.
43. Roberts, "Remembering the Biloxi Wade-Ins."
44. Burnett, "Final Biloxi Wade-in Anniversary Remembered."
45. Bolton, *William F. Winter and the New Mississippi*, 269.
46. *Ibid.*
47. *Ibid.*; Newsom, "Marker Honors Struggle of Many."
48. Bolton, *William F. Winter*, 269.
49. Newsom, "Marker Honors Struggle of Many."
50. Blow, "Election Data Dive."
51. Newsom, "Marker Honors Struggle of Many."
52. Young, *Texture of Memory*, 6.
53. *Ibid.*, 3.
54. Gallagher, "Memory and Reconciliation," 317.
55. Alderman, "Surrogation and the Politics of Remembering Slavery," 94.
56. Leff, "Dimensions of Temporality in Lincoln's Second Inaugural."
57. Johnson, "Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 Birmingham Campaign."
58. Vivian, *Public Forgetting*, 6.
59. *Ibid.*, 47-48.
60. Nora, "Between Memory and History," 13.
61. The state of Mississippi's Freedom Trail website announces the historical markers and lists them, stating that the trail was created "in commemoration of the state's pivotal role in the American Civil Rights Movement." Mississippi Development Authority, "Mississippi Freedom Trail." Although the wording of the website calls for its own rhetorical analysis, the website does indicate a desire to recognize the significance of these historical sites. To date twenty-five markers have been put in place, and four are planned in the future. Mississippi Development Authority, "MDA Tourism Announces Mississippi Freedom Trail."