Immigration, Religion, and the Working Class: Toni Morrison's Disremembering and the Politics of a New Minority

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Introduction

History *and* memory as well as history *as* memory function to recount the minoritized status of working-class whites in Barking and Dagenham, East London and in Youngstown, Ohio. Both groups represent what political scientist Justin Gest terms the *new* minorities of the United Kingdom and United States. History *and* memory as well as history *as* memory additionally relate the experiences of an ethnocultural group conventionally known to hold minority-status, working-class Black Americans and their youth. What distinguishes history *and* memory from history *as* memory—both forms of remembering—is selective forgetting. Selective forgetting poses the following questions based on the power of framing: What is included in retelling group history? What details are excluded? Are there aspects of a group's history that are essential to the group's self-image?

In terms of selective forgetting, particular features of social history are overlooked or selected by group members based on the relevance and significance to group identity and self-image. For these three groups, history *and* memory as well as history *as* memory are rehearsed social narratives of displacement and, for one of the three, also a narrative about Toni Morrison's concept of disremembering—or tragedy. Each group's history *and* memory will be contextualized and explored.

Though different social processes, remembering and forgetting are two sides of the same coin.[1] And so, selective forgetting in this context raises the question of the minoritization of white working classes. In other words, to what extent can the term *minority* be applied to white people and (rooted in social disadvantage)?

I argue that the tension between history *and* memory, evidenced by selective forgetting, communicates the plight of all three groups that have been exposed to drastic and macrostructural social changes and transformations, which leaves them struggling to fit into wider British and American social, economic, and political systems. Subsequently, I must ask, What is the role of religion or the church born of Methodism in reacting to these groups, many of whom are denominational members? What is an appropriate religious response to their respective plights? Each group warrants a church response. However, in light of potentially "closed borders" (the Brexit decision) and "building walls" (Trumpism), what becomes important is the question of whose minoritized status (e.g., working-class whites, working-class Blacks, undocumented immigrants, refugees, migrants, or a sundry of other displaced persons) and *to whom* will the church recognize and respond?

Cultural Memory: A Place to Call Home

A trans-/inter-/multidisciplinary field, cultural memory studies (CMS) is dedicated to studying the relationship between culture and memory. Social and cultural contexts shape memory. The interplay is described as a dialogue between the past and present. Memory is *not* observable; it is a capacity. Remembering, however, is a process observable in specific sociocultural contexts that assists our understanding of the nature and function of memory.[2] Three conceptual frameworks drive CMS: (1) lived experiences, (2) the selectivity and identity-related nature of

1 Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture*, trans. Sara B. Young (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 8.

2 Erll, *Memory in Culture*, 8.

group memory, and (3) the cultural transmission of memory through tradition.[3]

Social groups that experience trauma exit the historical moment with fragile collective memories, described as "having holes in them."[4] After such experiences, cultural memory is what remains.[5] Group members revisit social traditions and exchange shared versions of the past in order to create cultural meaning in the present. That lays the foundation for a collective future. Collective memories assist group members in (1) renegotiating group identity through the process of intentional remembering, which allows group members to focus on themselves and to reconstruct their social identities; (2) intentionally remembering a socially shared past through commemorations, celebrations, festivals, religious holidays, and intergenerational networks of communication; and (3) facilitating healing and repair to reconcile families and communities to the concept of "home."[6]

Individuals who experience displacement, forced migration, and expulsion, as well as members of a community exiled from native lands who afterwards spend an uncertain existence in refugee camps, anticipate and yearn for geographic spaces and places to call "home." Jewish feminist scholar Julia Epstein speaks to this by declaring, "It is the concept of home that is torn from victims of genocide and [social

3 Erll, *Memory in Culture*, 13–18.

4 Erll, *Memory in Culture*, 110.

5 Dan Stone, "Genocide and Memory," in *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies*, ed. Donald Bloxham and A. Kirk Moses (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 102.

6 Julia Epstein, "Remember to Forget: The Problem of Traumatic Cultural Memory," in *Shaping Losses: Cultural Memory and the Holocaust*, ed. Julia Epstein and Lori Hope Lefkowitz (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 186–206. Julia Epstein writes about the influence of the community in shaping the individual self and consequently individual and social identities. Memory is a crucial aspect of self-development that occurs in relationship to "other selves in community" (194). When social selves experience a rupture of community because of a social threat, the interpretation of "home" is disrupted. Epstein further explains, "Under these conditions, acts of remembering replace the mental geography of place and of home" (194).

trauma]. . . . [These violations] slice through the continuity of selfhood in a collective way. . . . Under catastrophic historical circumstances, memory becomes a homeland."[7] Forms of cultural remembering are then captured by the "mediality of memory"—books, monuments, statues, museums, television, radio, visual art, music, and other media that serve collective interests through the group's interactions with a wider world.

History corresponds to cultural memory in two ways. History *and* memory suggests independent and distinguishable processes that mutually affect each other. Memory is the raw material of history based in a belief that the past happened in particular ways. Memory supplies oral, written, mental material to historians who objectively shape such material and conceptions into truth. In turn, history informs memory by involving individuals and societies that shape and produce collective memories through the dialectical experience of remembering and forgetting.[8] History *as* memory, on the other hand, is history-as-it-is-remembered or, said another way, history-as-cultural-remembering. History-as-cultural-remembering is interested in the "cultural practices of memory" or the "historical situatedness of memory cultures," meaning groups strongly influence selection and interpretation of past events.[9]

I will address how history *and* memory is more so a historical project by supplying cultural histories of the groups and how history *as* memory is more a memorial project making selective forgetting a critical concept. Examples of how the groups operationalize history *as* memory will also be shared. I contend that both history *and* memory and history *as* memory contribute to reinforcing the minoritized status of three groups—working-class whites in East London and Youngstown and working-class Blacks and Black youth in America who are heavily involved with Black Lives Matter demonstrations.

I argue there is a tension and, at times, a disconnect between what is written in the historical record about the global, social, and

7 Epstein, "Remember to Forget," 194.

8 Erll, *Memory in Culture*, 41.

9 Erll, *Memory in Culture*, 45.

economic changes these groups experience as opposed to how these groups *remember*, *respond to*, and *interpret* these changes. This disconnect between history and memory also works as a bridge to reinforce working-class marginality and social displacement, especially that of working-class whites.[10] Although working-class whites are marginalized, questions remain about their minoritized status. How is "minoritization" defined? Is it by marginalization due to socioeconomic status and social displacement, by race, or by both? If the church born of Methodism is to address the border control and immigration problems challenging the United Kingdom and the United States, the church must first recognize minority status and marginalized populations and then decide to which groups and how it will respond.

History *and* Memory in East London

A brief history *and* memory of the East London cities of Barking and Dagenham, as written by Harvard- and London School of Economics–trained scholar Justin Gest, begins this section. Ethnographic research produced material from interviews of fifty-five people, including fifteen elites, during a three-month cultural immersion meant to capture the mindset, actions, and attitudes of the people. Gest declares: "The story of Barking and Dagenham gets told countless times, every day of every week, in every house and meeting place in the borough. From nan to her grandson, from mum to her daughter, from a barmaid to her regular, from one man smoking cigarettes in front of a betting shop to the passerby. Each time it is told, it changes ever so slightly."[11]

This history is written and also recorded as a proud oral history that continues to be circulated among the residents of the borough. That is Gest's claim. Barking and Dagenham emerged from a promise made by Prime Minister David Lloyd George to servicemen returning home from World War I. George developed a public housing complex

10 Justin Gest, *The New Minority: White Working Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 39, 74.

11 Gest, *The New Minority*, 39.

in 1920 to reward these servicemen with "homes fit for heroes."[12] On farmland east of the Barking town center, twenty-seven thousand cottages were constructed from 1921 to 1932. Designed to exceed working-class expectations, these cottages connected and featured indoor lavatories, fitted baths, electric furnishings, telephone lines, and front and back gardens.[13]

The first set of tenants, however, were impoverished, but with the arrival of May & Baker's chemical plant, which had relocated to Dagenham, the Barking Power House electric station established in Creekmouth, and Ford Motor Company's enormous factory on Dagenham's riverfront, thousands of transplants were attracted to the borough. During and after World War II, these employers provided plentifully and supplied dependable jobs to a growing labor market. In fact, Ford Motor Company's expansion in Dagenham produced a workforce of forty thousand employees at its peak in 1953 and three thousand cars daily on four million square feet of land. Housing development followed an exploding Dagenham population, which increased from nine thousand to ninety thousand between 1921 and 1931, adding to the combined populations of Dagenham and Barking and increasing another 50 percent before 1951.

Economic opportunity initially drew working-class white men and women from what Gest describes as a "congested and tumultuous" East End of London.[14] Wanting less competition and distraction, a simpler life, and greater independence, these women and men also migrated to Dagenham and Barking for the benefits of personal transformation. However, with Britain experiencing social transformation because of the spread of imperialism and the growth of industry, the East End was also becoming populated with Eastern European Jewish immigrants and South Asians fleeing the politics and poverty of a contentious Indian subcontinent. Another reason these East Enders found the borough attractive was because it became a "refuge for London's white

12 Gest, *The New Minority*, 41.
13 Gest, *The New Minority*, 41.
14 Gest, *The New Minority*, 42.

working class," who were employed in a coterie of industries by the 1960s, and where community life became a haven for the good life.[15]

However, by the mid-1970s, the Ford Motor Company in Dagenham faced increasing competition from the European car market, which led to the company restructuring its European operations and which signaled the eventual end of car production. The company dropped from more than 28,000 employees in 1975 to 7,300 in 2000 and finally stopped its vehicle assembly line in 2002. What happened at the Ford factory was indicative of the massive downsizing that would occur across industries because of market declines. Along with the shift to a postindustrial economy came "weakened unions, liberalized labor laws, and the move of industrial jobs abroad."[16] A more global and technological economy and extensive service sector had little use for Barking's and Dagenham's tradesmen.

As of today, manufacturing is considerably smaller and continuing to decline in Barking and Dagenham, where the major businesses are in logistics and transport. Furthermore, the borough could not insulate itself from the global economy and demographic shifts foreshadowed by the 1960s restructurings and transformations. A new generation of residents moved into Barking and Dagenham when working-class whites, whose jobs were eliminated, sold their homes and left the borough. Many of the new residents are immigrants who took advantage of the lower mortgages and rental homes in the east that were a fraction of the prices in London. They are a combination of highly skilled professionals who comprise Britain's diverse middle class as well as unskilled laborers who seek work in the service and construction sectors. Many are also refugees who are seeking to better their quality of life. Nevertheless, these drastic economic changes have precipitated social and macrostructural shifts that give Gest reason to identify Barking and Dagenham in East London as a "post-traumatic" city. Such cities he describes as "exurbs and urban communities that lost signature industries in the mid-to-late twentieth century and never really recovered."[17]

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15 Gest, *The New Minority*, 42.

16 Gest, *The New Minority*, 9, 43.

17 Gest, *The New Minority*, 7.

History *as* Memory in East London

History retold is history *as* memory or history-as-cultural-remembering. Instead of retelling history-as-it-is-culturally-remembered, I offer vignettes of cultural memories for how residents of Barking and Dagenham *remember*, *interpret*, and *reacted to* global transformations. I will conclude with some thoughts about the ways in which these working-class whites have been marginalized.

East London eventually succumbed to massive cultural revolutions. These cultural changes are those from which generations of white working-class East Enders were fleeing and attempting to find shelter. People of immigrant origins did not simply complement the white working class; rather, by moving into empty spaces left by those who had moved out, these newcomers were perceived as supplanting East Enders' former neighbors, friends, colleagues, unionists, and drinking partners. The smells of foreign and exotic dishes emanated throughout hallways and buildings. Residents heard dialects, nontraditional English, and foreign languages in public buses. Grocers imported products from the newcomers' home countries to meet the demands of these immigrant groups. Neighborhood pubs closed and empty commercial spaces were turned into Muslim mosques and other types of religious sanctuaries. Gest observes, "Though Barking and Dagenham's remaining working class white people have been witnessing these changes for 30 years, they are still revising their narratives of them, reinterpreting their meaning and, in so doing, reimagining their past."[18]

How societies remember is the substance of social memories. Social memories communicate the experience of social and cultural groups and express their collective memories, while solidifying group identities. Following are three anecdotes from Barking and Dagenham residents and local officials representing history-as-cultural-remembering and the collectives' social memories over thirty years.[19]

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18 Gest, *The New Minority*, 44.

19 Gest, *The New Minority*, 206. Gest supplied pseudonyms for the names of residents, local officials, and political and community leaders in order to facilitate free speech and to prevent repercussions locally after his book's

Lou and Maggie Griffiths are an older couple who live in a rented home in the old part of Dagenham. As they reimagine the past, they loudly proclaim:

> The borough was full of East Enders. People were very friendly. It was easy to settle in. People had come in after wartime, and the neighbors were good. *There was a sense of community, more so than there is now.* Since about 2004 or 2005, there was change in the borough that came with the influx of other cultures. Goresbrook Ward was previously 5% foreign; now 50% or 60% of the ward is foreign. *It is a massive change that happened too fast for people to cope with.* There's a heavy Muslim population. Africans have flooded in. They don't seem to mix with the existing community. *There's no infrastructure to deal with it, so everything got fragmented. We live in a multicultural society and I think that's good*. But when it happened so quickly, *the existing community feels threatened.* In the 1960s when the West Indians came in, no one was taken over and they mixed in. But the way we've been flooded, it inspires the animosity of right-wing groups. It's a matter of adapting, but some of these people don't speak English or make any attempt to fit in.[20]

Further, there was a time when local pubs were scattered throughout Barking and Dagenham; however, a majority of them have now closed. Pubs attract residents and regulars who connect with each other like an extended family. With the closings, locals are having to find new institutions for social engagement, and although that has increased social mixing and afforded new interactions, pub clientele are left without a place to call home. Eighteen-year-old Terry Hammonds, whom Gest encountered at one of the area's remaining and largest pubs, the Barking Dog, proves this argument by revising the past in sharing the following sentiments: "People come to the pub to have a rest from the outside. This is where they have their time together. They're just looking for a

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publication. The only public officials exempted from pseudonymity were Barking MP Margaret Hodge and Youngstown mayor John McNally.

20 Gest, *The New Minority*, 46 (emphasis added).

beverage and a chat with other Englishmen. They can't get that outside. Here you can play darts, watch sports, and talk."[21]

In 2007, the Barking and Dagenham's borough council administered a survey asking several hundred [white] residents: "What can we do to make Barking and Dagenham better?"[22] The most prevalent answer that council administrators received was: "Make it like it used to be 50 years ago."[23] Working-class whites could have conceived of neither such radical changes nor their disorienting capacity, changes that nevertheless remain markers for future social progress.

Vincent Dogan is thirty-eight years old, was raised in Hackney, and was born to a Turkish Cypriot Muslim who married an Englishwoman. His father was naturalized as a British citizen before his death a few years ago. Dogan is a member of the British National Party, a splinter group from the far-right National Front party. The BNP's political platform is the immediate return of immigrants to their countries of origin and preferential treatment for indigenous [meaning white] British citizens. Dogan joined the BNP at seventeen years old after suffering a brutal mugging by Black teenagers. Here he reinterprets the past, stating:

> When I arrived in 2004, [Dagenham] was a sight for sore eyes. There weren't as many ethnics living here as in Hackney then. *The first thing I noticed when I came out of Dagenham Heathway Station was how white it was.* And I told people here, "You've got a nasty surprise coming your way." I saw it as a political opportunity. The white demographics were vastly in favor of the BNP. If you're not part of the [Liberal Democrat, Labour, or Conservative Parties'] trick, you're not mainstream. They all agree on everything, except for the minutiae of tax. They all want to stay in Europe, allow migration, and destroy British industry. We've lost our identity.[24]

21 Gest, *The New Minority*, 49.
22 Gest, *The New Minority*, 52.
23 Gest, *The New Minority*, 52.
24 Gest, *The New Minority*, 66 (emphasis added).

In *The Broken Covenant*, the late American sociologist Robert N. Bellah acknowledges, "One man's 'cultural pluralism' can then become another man's 'nativism' with all the classic elements of violence and repression that that entails."[25] What cannot be dismissed from all three history-as-cultural-remembering anecdotes is the implied nativism of respondents. How these white working-class East Enders remember, interpret, and react to their present is *by selectively forgetting* many aspects of their history.

Respecting population statistics, the 2011 census reported: "50% of the Barking and Dagenham borough is white British, 22% is of African or Afro-Caribbean origins, 16% South Asian origins, and 8% of Eastern European origins."[26] Notwithstanding these demographics, the more turbulent the macrostructural and global changes, the more inviting the past becomes through shared collective memories.

Although these social memories are conveyed from the perspective of nativity and its entitlements, history and memory point out the challenges facing these working-class white East Londoners in this new age. Both history and memory account for labor and economic shifts that have precipitated social, political, and economic displacement made evident through the decline in manufacturing jobs, disintegration of social and cultural networks, and loss of social and political identities. Therefore, a case can be made that these white working-class nativists are marginalized, having been pushed from the center of British life to its periphery.

History *and* Memory in Youngstown (Steel Capital, USA)

A brief history *and* memory of Youngstown, Ohio, part of the Rust Belt region of the United States, is shared here. As previously stated, Justin Gest examines the actions, attitudes, and mindset of this subpopulation

25 Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 109–10.

26 Gest's 2011 census findings were reported by the Office for National Statistics, UK, 2012, 47, https://www.ons.gov.uk/.

by way of ethnographic research. He fully immersed himself in the region and culture for three months and interviewed seventy-five people, twenty of whom were elites.[27] Elites were comprised of local community leaders and active citizens, executives and managers within the steel mill industry, city heads invested in local politics, and town members as participants in governmental affairs.

Locals profess that Youngstown was the steel capital of the world. The steel industry began in 1844 when a trace of black coal was found on David Tod's Brier Hill estate.[28] With this discovery came the establishment of a thirty-mile-long stretch of steel mills along the Mahoning River. Throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s, three major plants were created: the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company of Campbell and Brier Hill; the Ohio Works of the United States Steel Corporation, west of Youngstown; and the Republic Steel Corporation, located in the downtown area. Steel production stimulated rapid population growth, which was also attributed to the arrival of European immigrants from the Levant (then known as the Eastern Mediterranean, now known as the historical region of Syria) and other parts of Europe. By 1930s, almost half of the residents owned their homes, and by the 1940s, the population reached 170,000.[29]

Steel workers and steelmaking came to symbolize and denote goodness, productivity, and power—three qualities that defined the spirit of Youngstown.[30] It was a town known for industry. Yet Youngstown's foundations are paradoxical. For more than a century, an oligarchy of families organized and structured workers' social lives and labor. Unions developed to protest unfair labor practices, wages, and working conditions. Nonetheless, ethnic segregation and discrimination simmered and threatened to disrupt worker protest movements. As Gest explains, housing and jobs were based on a social hierarchy with "white Protestants at the top, followed by the mix of Central and Eastern Europeans, the Jews, the Irish and Italians, and at the very bottom,

27 Gest, *The New Minority*, 75.
28 Gest, *The New Minority*, 76.
29 Gest, *The New Minority*, 76.
30 Gest, *The New Minority*, 76.

African Americans."[31] Laborers were exclusively represented as white and Protestant, giving rise to the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s.

The group gained a foothold in local politics as they contested the arrival and growing influence of immigrant groups. To counteract this, organized crime syndicates developed. Italian, Sicilian, Neapolitan crime families, and other immigrant groups would comprise the Mafia. It cared for immigrant families during economic downturns and ensured immigrant access to jobs. An alternative police force, as Gest describes it, "the mob was . . . 'providing a measure of fairness' in a seemingly unjust, prejudiced and conflictive environment."[32]

The Mafia continued to grow from the 1960s to 1980s, becoming a powerful organization that infiltrated local politics and the business sector. For many working-class whites, "mafia days were golden days" in Youngstown.[33] However, death, destruction, and corruption followed backroom dealings with the mob. Despite that, their influence came to a halt in the late 1970s and early 1980s when Youngstown's steel industry buckled. On "Black Monday," September 19, 1977, Youngstown Sheet and Tube closed its Campbell Works mill.[34] The closings of the other two major steel mills followed in close proximity.

Afterwards, deindustrialization triggered the loss of fifty thousand jobs in steel and related industries over the course of the next six years. The working class lost $1.3 billion dollars in manufacturing wages and endured bankruptcies and home foreclosures as a result of these huge job losses. Youngstown was up against a changing and highly technological economy, and the white working class experienced the brunt with companies moving jobs offshore to reduce the cost of overhead in order to compete globally.

Such staggering unemployment sent the city into a tailspin, resulting in the mass exodus of more than two-thirds of its population. By the 2010 census, Youngstown counted sixty-seven thousand residents, down from its peak of 170,000. The city experienced a threefold

31 Gest, *The New Minority*, 77.
32 Gest, *The New Minority*, 77
33 Gest, *The New Minority*, 77–79.
34 Gest, *The New Minority*, 79.

increase in domestic violence, child and alcohol abuse, drug trafficking, divorce, and suicide.[35] In the shadow of a weakened economy and the flight of a primarily white working class, Blacks and Latinos remained and have ascended from their low positions to an almost majority demographic.[36] Similar to East London, Youngstown, Ohio, is a "post-traumatic" city.[37]

History *as* Memory in Youngstown (Steel Capital, USA)

In this section, history retold or history *as* memory is expressed as contested, social memories of a Youngstown white working class. History-as-culturally-remembered is not aligned with the written and recorded history. Like the historical record, residents remember, interpret, and react to massive cultural reformulations in a way that points out their feelings of social deprivation as well as political and economic marginalization. In the following two vignettes, history-as-cultural-remembering is shared by white working-class community members. Ralph Mickelson, a retired steelworker, asserts: "*We were better off under organized crime*. All the streets were plowed, there was no nonsense. Now cops have their hands tied behind their backs and a patch over one eye. At least back then, the trouble they created was among themselves. Now we're all suffering."[38]

Similarly reminiscing, Hank Thompson, an industrial painter, declares:

> [Former Congressman] Jimmy Traficant cared. He was always right. Jimmy had his finger in bad things, but he was the man. He got caught, but they all do it. So you take him out and put in another guy who's stealing instead. *When the mobs were running things—the Strollos, the Predos, the Carabbias—you didn't see all*

35 Gest, *The New Minority*, 79.
36 Gest, *The New Minority*, 81.
37 Gest, *The New Minority*, 7.
38 Gest, *The New Minority*, 83 (emphasis added).

> *these drug houses, car jackings, shootings, and murders.* If you crossed them, yeah, they'd knock you off. But you probably deserved it. And they always paid in cash. It was better back then.[39]

Mickelson reinterprets the past, and Thompson reimagines the past. Paradoxically, Gil McMahon, a retiree, explains:

> White working class people don't know who to be frustrated with—the city, the state, the feds. It's just awfully hard to find a job. *Nobody cares about the white working class. We just try to hang on and do what you can for yourself.* It's just that before the mills [shut], we were working and the guys there would walk home together and felt cohesive as a group. The only remnant left of that is the bars, and most of them have closed down. That's where the neighborhoods came together. They'd start with a stiff one at 7:00 am and tell everyone what they were going to do that day.[40]

Likewise, Mo Kerrigan, an unemployed sixty-five-year-old, claims:

> *There's the NAACP, the Muslim Brotherhood—the white guy?* All he has is his little church. *White people don't have the strength or support to accomplish anything.* All the wealthy [white] people haven't done me any favors; I would have had to do something for them first. And all the black folks look at me and literally say, *"What do you want honkey?" I was born here, and they say, "Get out. This is our hood." I'm the cannon fodder.*[41]

McMahon and Kerrigan revise the past.

All four men engage in selective forgetting in constructing collective memories of the past. What is most significant about them recounting history *as* memory is *not* the misalignment of their stories with historical record, but their feelings of dispossession. Thompson's and Mickelson's nostalgia around the "better times" experienced by Youngstown's white working class when the mob was on the scene is more about them

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39 Gest, *The New Minority*, 83 (emphasis added).

40 Gest, *The New Minority*, 101 (emphasis added).

41 Gest, *The New Minority*, 101 (emphasis added).

articulating their hopes for the reinvestment and restructuring of what is now a "post-traumatic" city. Youngstown was once thriving even in the midst of conflicts that arose between the oligarchies, unions, and the Mafia running the city and who were in charge and in control of residents' labor and community actions and activities.

McMahon and Kerrigan react to what they perceive as turbulent times and tumultuous change by saying, "The white guy? Nobody cares about the white working class." For them, America is a failing meritocracy because even wealthy whites do not do them any favors. Moreover, white working-class social capital is diminishing, which is proven by the men's enfeebled social networks. Both the East London and Youngstown case studies are critical to reconsidering the tension between history *and* memory. The selective forgetting of residents in East London and Youngstown is proven by McMahon and Kerrigan's final point: working-class whites and especially those in "post-traumatic" cities are being socially displaced and therefore feeling like marginalized minorities.

Multidirectional Memory, Minority Status, and Marginalization

Theorist Michael Rothberg proposes the concept of multidirectional memory. Multidirectional memory shows how one discourse of memory can enable other discourses of memory.[42] Rather than understanding memory as competitive, Rothberg conceives of it as "multidirectional, as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing and borrowing."[43] He and other scholars think about the "multidirectionality of memory"[44] as enabling diverse victim groups to be witnesses to another group's mistreatment.

Appealing to multidirectional memory suggests that the plight of a Black American working class and youth, though distinct, is similar

42 Michael Rothberg, *Multicultural Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 6.

43 Rothberg, *Multicultural Memory*, 3.

44 Rothberg, *Multicultural Memory*, 6, 15.

to the residents of East London and Youngstown. History *and* memory as well as history *as* memory are rehearsed social narratives of displacement, but for African Americans, history-as-cultural-remembering is also a narrative about Toni Morrison's concept of disremembering—or tragedy—in the midst of unsettling social, political, and economic turbulence intensifying, what is traditionally identified as both a marginalized and minority group status.

History *and* Memory in 1960s America and the "Black Problem"

To begin, in order to recount history *and* memory, we will consider the tradition of African American social protest by using the example of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the fifty-year anniversary (2018) of his assassination. He was an exemplary 1960s civil rights figure, thought leader,[45] and proponent for American democracy. King was keenly aware of an agony of deprivation[46] stymieing American progress and advancement of peoples around the globe. In the late 1960s, this "agony of deprivation" triggered Northern Black rioting and threatened America's poor, prompting King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to organize the 1968 Poor People's Campaign for economic justice. Agonies of deprivation heralded King's final statement about issues that were critical to him.

The Trumpet of Conscience, a social commentary on national and global issues that were pertinent to him, was King's final volume of

45 The likes of public intellectuals, cultural critics, and public theologians are presently referred to as thought leaders. In the late 1800s, Henry Ward Beecher was identified as one of America's earliest thought leaders. Such people wield influence and authority over the collective. Regarding Black America, thought leaders are informed by and shape the social, political, cultural, and moral thoughts of Black America. Thought leaders supply social commentary about and constructive criticism of American society and moral discourse on the meaning of Blackness in America.

46 Martin Luther King Jr., *The Trumpet of Conscience* (New York: HarperCollins, 1987), 6.

essays written prior to his death in 1968. In it, he critiques American race relations and questions the morality of war and society's indifference to poverty. The repression of Blacks amounted to a trumpet of conscience that King recognized for "developing a sense of black consciousness and peoplehood [that] does not require that we scorn the white race as a whole. It is not the race per se that we fight but the policies and ideology that leaders of that race have formulated to perpetuate oppression."[47] Anglo-Americans as a race were not the problem; instead, harmful social policies limiting the progress and prosperity of peoples of color were problematic, especially for Blacks, since these policies were being instituted by a white majority and ruling class.

Between 1955 and 1965, the social and political conditions of Black Americans had only barely and superficially improved. Blacks had received the right to vote, legal segregation of interstate bus travel and public restrooms was dismantled, educational advancement and access to jobs were on the horizon, albeit nominally. Black Southerners were the primary beneficiaries of these legislative advancements. However, tokenism was to blame for the broader Black public's slow progression. Inequality continued to reign supreme across America, typifying a racialized Black social experience.

During that period, Northern Blacks quickly became intolerant of and outraged by the lasting inequity, reinforced by high levels of poverty, low employment and job security, unequal education, housing discrimination, and the creation of Black ghettoes. Implicated in these poor social conditions were public and legislative policies that were added to white lawmakers' refusal to accept or promote radical structural change.[48] Oppressive living conditions precipitated Black rebellion in Northern inner cities. Blacks were blamed for the destruction of their communities, lawlessness, and disrupting social order. Pinpointing their unruly behavior as the catalyst for this destruction quickly resulted in them being identified as menaces to American society.

Instead of accusing an unyielding white power structure that maintained harsh policies, Blacks who were being subjected to a

47 King, *The Trumpet of Conscience*, 9.

48 King, *The Trumpet of Conscience*, 7–9.

partial, unfair, and violent American sociopolitical system anchored by unshakable ideologies were then held responsible for frustrations that boiled over and into revolt. Their mid- to late-1960s revolt harkened back to W. E. B. Du Bois's 1903 question, "How does it feel to be a problem?"[49] Despite social and political gains, Blacks were still viewed as "problem people."[50] King evaluated the Northern situation, comparing it to other parts of the country. Trenchant social beliefs, policies, and racist structures would endure and continue to stifle Blacks for many years to come.

History *as* Memory and the Racial Politics of Disremembering

History-as-cultural-remembering in the African American experience began in the early part of the twenty-first century and was reignited in the second half of 2014 with the death of Michael Brown and the videotaped chokehold of Eric Garner, both of which sparked nationwide demonstrations because of the failure of each selected grand jury to indict the white officers involved in the deaths. Social media users were instrumental in popularizing Garner's final words—"I can't breathe." This refrain has since shaped the collective and social memories of Black people around Black victims of overpolicing, from the 1980s to the present. For participants in the Black Lives Matter social movement, "I can't breathe" is a popular refrain cried aloud to express their dissatisfaction with the excessive use of force by police in their encounters with underrepresented ethnic and racial groups, particularly young Black American men and women.

"I can't breathe" encapsulates much of what it means to be Black in America today, especially for the masses of working-class Blacks and the economically poor. "I can't breathe" embraces the plight of diverse subpopulations of people in society and abroad, suffocating from social

49 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Signet of Penguin Group, 1995), 7.

50 Cornel West, *Race Matters*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage, 2001), 4–5.

inequity and injustice. These memorial protests bear witness to victims of state violence. Renowned professor, writer, political activist, and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel talked about "remembering" as a process "not meant to enshrine a memorial but to point to and affect present action."[51]

Out of this history *as* memory, a tradition and practice of remembering, is born the current social activism of millennial and other post–civil rights generations. These youthful intergenerational groups empathize with the current pain and suffering of disenfranchised Black Americans, disenfranchisement caused by and resulting from unjust social, political, and economic conditions reified by structural racism. Similar to the Black youth of King's day, the political protests of marginalized young Blacks denote rebellion against a system unknowledgeable about and indifferent to their plight of economic deprivation, unemployment and underemployment, discrimination, undereducation, and police violence fueled by racism and eventually replicating generational social death.

With respect to social death,[52] the rate at which young Black men and women are being incarcerated and are dying at the hands of law enforcement officials who use excessive force as a form of social control is disproportionate to their population numbers. Further, social death comes as a consequence of them being dismissed and devalued;

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51 Flora A. Keshegian, *Redeeming Memories: A Theology of Healing and Transformation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 25.

52 Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985). Patterson introduced this term in his groundbreaking 1980s text, a study of sixty-six societies that practiced slavery. Social death is part of the institutionalization process of enslavement. Patterson describes the internal and external dynamics of slavery, stressing the violent domination of the enslaver over the captive involving recruitment and including incorporation into the new society. To be incorporated into the new society would entail numerous losses including the loss of social bonds and family ties, erasure of former identity, and separation of persons possessing a previous heritage. All of these losses would contribute to their impotence and powerlessness. These social factors contribute to natally alienated and socially dead peoples, even though they are native to a particular land.

though born on American soil, they are nevertheless natally alienated,[53] stripped of an identity that should brim with promise yet offers limited future possibilities and little hope because of active and aggressive forms of systemic violence that are inescapable. Revolts led by Black youth in places like Ferguson, Missouri; Baltimore, Maryland; and Chicago, Illinois, have resulted in the destruction of businesses and properties in their own communities. And, like the Blacks described by King in the 1960s, they are implicated as both cause and effect of their own suffering, thus deflecting attention from the real source—an intransigent racialized social and political system rendering them invisible and, for that reason, invaluable.

Demonstrators who become eyewitnesses to their pain are *remembering* (reconstructing a traumatic past) and responding to the social ferment by agitating for wide-ranging social changes through die-ins, rallies, marches, Twitterverse, and Facebook. Accordingly, the memorial protests of young Black activists come to represent history *as* memory since they bear witness to past distress and to traumatic wounds. Theologian Shelly Rambo argues that trauma[54] is the "wound" that remains after a life-altering encounter with death.[55]

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53 Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*.

54 Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 4.

55 Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 37, 45. Herman explains that trauma disrupts normal psychological development because it overwhelms the integrated systems people have in place to respond to danger and threat with a degree of care, control, and connection. Trauma causes persons to self-fragment; a consequence is maladaptation to everyday life. The symptomology of traumatized people emerges in the aftermath of the psychological trauma. Two of the symptoms I will describe are intrusion and constriction. Long after the violence or other trauma has passed, survivors are unable to forget the event because the traumatic moment repeatedly intrudes into their daily course of waking and sleeping life. Intrusions spontaneously break into memory as flashbacks and nightmares, making memory abnormal. Constriction is a close opposite to intrusion. During the traumatic moment, the traumatized person, feeling helpless and powerless, might dissociate—that is, separate the painful event from the rest of consciousness. A

Although the encounter might not result in literal death, the effect is a fundamentally different view of life—a shattered perspective, inextricably linking life and death, making room for the possibility of future suffering.[56] Eyewitnesses are themselves traumatized persons and/or those left behind who re-member and listen for memorial protests and cries of survival from open wounds.[57] They testify to what survives—what remains—after the trauma; ergo, cultural remembrances are what remains after the wound.

Toni Morrison's concept of "disremembering"[58] can be applied here because it expresses "a post-calamity language required to decipher the language of the scars left by collective, [social] trauma."[59] With her concept, she takes up the paradox of traumatic cultural remembering articulated by the character Sethe in *Beloved.* The scars on the formerly enslaved Sethe's back are a physical reminder of the violence perpetrated on her body and its long-lasting aftereffects. The scars prevent her from "forgetting" even though forgetting the traumatic moment of merciless and ferocious slavery lashings is necessary to her-story/history if she is to ever move toward true liberation.

Subsequently, disremembering is somaticized memory; the body registers collective trauma and remembers.[60] Disremembering (i.e., remembering forgetfully) remembers the trauma and gives witnesses

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post-traumatic stress characteristic, constriction emerges as a numbing and emotional response that can cause "forgetfulness" of the painful event, thus manifesting as a form of amnesia.

56 Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 4.

57 Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 4, 15, 22.

58 Epstein, "Remember to Forget," in *Shaping Losses*. In this essay, Epstein interrogates the maxim "never forget" by examining the dialectic that inheres traumatic cultural memory: remembering and forgetting. She explains the double bind of traumatic memory as expressed in the essay, "Instructions for Crossing the Border": "You are not allowed to remember. . . . You are not allowed to forget" (186). She introduces Toni Morrison's concept, disremembering, as an imperfect yet plausible resolution to the double bind of traumatic cultural memory (197).

59 Epstein, "Remember to Forget," 198.

60 Babette Rothschild, *The Body Remembers: Psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), xv.

the opportunity to mourn and to process the meaning of the scars. For Black Lives Matter protesters, the scars left behind are dead Black bodies that bear witness to the unconscionable acts of law enforcement authorities whose violence toward these bodies also marks the community. The scars call forth history-as-cultural-remembering, where Black bodies that have been historically subjected to race-based state violence (i.e., huntings, lynchings, attack dogs) are openly remembered.

Disremembering charges the American public to selectively forget (the social trauma) in order to focus on the victims. Dead Black bodies that remain in the aftermath of overpolicing are a way for Black Lives Matter activists to disremember the victims in the absence of words, by ironically "reinstating [the dead] as embodied selves because the [eyewitnesses] remember [victims] disremembering."[61] Protesters ultimately set the atmosphere for public and social memories by grieving the numerous losses and by disremembering and speaking life into a crowded void, the names of once-embodied selves, selves whose dead bodies initiated the modern Black Lives Matter and Say Her Name racial justice and social movements,[62] some of which are the names of disremembered Black bodies:

2012: Trayvon Martin (Sanford, Florida)
2014: Tamir Rice (Cleveland, Ohio)
2014: Akai Gurley (Brooklyn, New York)
2014: Ramarley Graham (Bronx, New York)
2014: Renisha McBride (Dearborn Heights, Michigan)
2014: Michael Brown (Ferguson, Missouri)
2014: Eric Garner (New York, New York)
2014: Yvette Smith (Bastrop, Texas)
2014: Jordan Baker (Houston, Texas)

61 Epstein, *Shaping Losses*, 197.

62 Homa Khaleeli, "#SayHerName: Why Kimberlé Crenshaw Is Fighting for Forgotten Women," *The Guardian*, May 20, 2016, http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/may/30/sayhername-why-kimberle-crenshaw-is-fighting-for-forgotten-women.

2014: Laquan McDonald (Chicago, Illinois)
2015: Sandra Bland (Dallas, Texas)
2015: Freddie Gray (Baltimore, Maryland)
2016: Alton Sterling (Baton Rouge, Louisiana)
2016: Philando Castile (St. Paul, Minnesota)
2017: Terence Crutcher (Tulsa, Oklahoma)
2018: Jemel Roberson (Oak Lawn, Illinois)
2019: Eric Logan (South Bend, Indiana)
2019: Brandon Webber (Memphis, Tennessee)
2019: Botham Jean (Dallas, Texas)
2019: Atatiana Jefferson (Fort Worth, Texas)
2020: Ahmaud Arbery (Brunswick, Georgia)
2020: Breonna Taylor (Louisville, Kentucky)
2020: George Floyd (Minneapolis, Minnesota)

Disremembering is a form of history-as-cultural-remembering that reinterprets, revises, and reimagines the past. It remembers (commemorates) and *re-members* Black dehumanization. By virtue of selectively forgetting the trauma of death, it simultaneously selectively remembers the gift of life. Yet, disremembering ironically cements Black American marginalization and minority status.

This returns us to the question of minoritization: What constitutes minority status? Socioeconomics; histories of disempowerment; geographic locale; demographics; racial, ethnic, and cultural discrimination; or race?[63]

Answers to these pressing questions about minoritization point to a combination of social and cultural factors that contribute to identifying minority status. Yet, I continue to raise them to consider the marginalizations of white working-class residents of East London and Youngstown who are members of "post-traumatic" cities as well as America's working-class Blacks and Black youth. Nevertheless, the following queries do remain: How shall global Methodism address mainstay issues in today's turbulent social, economic, and political climate? Does the Church have an active role in addressing justice issues?

63 Gest, *The New Minority*, 31.

Which social and cultural groups' postindustrial economic, political, and social trauma will be recognized? In what ways will the Methodist Church respond to dispossessed and marginalized groups, some of whom are identified as working-class whites, Blacks, immigrants, migrants, and youth? What is the Church's stance on nationalism and globalism—diametrically opposed and contentious concepts defining, influencing, and shaping our present world?

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