

**The Social Appropriation of Legacy:**  
**A Symptom of Elite Control in American Society**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines how the legacies of assassinated individuals are preserved in the collective consciousness of America. While these legacies are deeply ingrained in national thought, they have been constructed in ways that are radically different from reality. They have been appropriated, as American society has simplified, changed, or ignored the actual beliefs and actions of these assassinated figures. Case studies of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Abraham Lincoln, and John F. Kennedy illustrate this. The metamorphosis of legacy described here does not occur out of ignorance and is not a product of collective action. Rather, it reflects elite control in America, as a small group of individuals influence the agents of socialization associated with instilling impressions of these figures (i.e. media and school system). The implications of the elite-controlled social appropriation of legacy are discussed in the context of the implementation of democratic governance.

## **Genesis of the Essay**

While my essay topic evolved over time, it originated from one serendipitous observation I made this past summer. As I was walking home one afternoon through the Upper West Side of Manhattan, I noticed a family of tourists (I'm not using "family" as a collective noun, as in a "gaggle of geese" or a "murder of crows") taking pictures. I found it curious that this family was on the Upper West Side; surely, my neighborhood is historic, but as a general rule, most tourists are endemic to the southern areas of Manhattan, and, when they find themselves in my neighborhood, they typically do not venture out of Central Park. I also found it unusual that they were taking pictures of a large apartment building that, at first glance, is not particularly notable. It took me a few moments to realize why that building was remarkable to them: it was where John Lennon was shot. Since that day, I've been reflecting on the social aspects of death: Why was the building where Lennon was shot worthy of being preserved in a picture? Why was this location important to these individuals? Who becomes famous in death? How do we as a society manage the deaths of influential people? Through steady and consistent contemplation, I came upon the driving question of this essay as it is written today.

*There are three deaths. The first is when the body ceases to function. The second is when the body is consigned to the grave. The third is that moment, sometime in the future, when your name is spoken for the last time.*

-David Eagleman, *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives*

Eagleman's redefinition of mortality posits that death is both an individual experience and a social one. In describing mortality in social terms, the meaning of immortality shifts as well — as an individual's legacy carries forward perpetually, he or she lives on in the same manner through his or her peers. It is important to explore, though, misrepresentations of the lives of those who become socially immortal. Eagleman's concept of immortality is applicable to American society (especially given its respect of the past), but so is the misrepresentation of the lives of these individuals. Invoking historical figures in contemporary dialogue and thought often entails oversimplification and alteration of the true events of their lives. However, this posthumous metamorphosis of historical figures occurs in its most radical form when recounting the lives of assassinated figures. This process is more radical in that the legacies of assassinated individuals are not only further away from reality, but they also color contemporary discourses in more frequent and perceptible ways.

It is clear that, when an influential person is assassinated, his death, and the legacy of his death, is forever preserved in a society's collective consciousness. However, as I will argue, the narratives of such men (it is a sad truth that history is a patriarchal account) are appropriated and changed so as to serve particular social functions. Namely, they are altered in order to avoid conflict and promote solidarity among citizens. Often, this process entails simplifying, modifying, or ignoring their lives and beliefs. Case studies of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Abraham Lincoln, and John F. Kennedy illustrate this. Ultimately, the appropriation and

recasting of legacy is an elite-controlled exercise; as it will be argued, the modes of constructing legacies (e.g. media and education) lie in the hands of a very small proportion of the population.

Given the implications that assassination — and the power-laden processes that follow — has on the implementation of democracy, I will discuss the current topic in the context of America, a nation that holds republican principles as sacrosanct. In doing so, this analysis will shed light not only on the nature of democracy in practice, but also on the barriers to ensuring its authenticity. Even a nation that is deeply committed to democratic values has to contend with these barriers. The first step in this complex argument is defining ‘collective consciousness’ and applying it to the American context. In other words, how can an entire country have a consciousness and how do the legacies of assassinated figures remain part of it?

### *Collective Consciousness and Collective Identity*

The roots of the concept of the collective consciousness grow out of the writings of Émile Durkheim (1858-1917). Durkheim was concerned, in part, with how greater social forces act upon individuals and how coherence is established and perpetuated among members of society. He posits that this process occurs in the form of social facts — values and norms that exist external to individuals but exert a force that fosters obedience (Durkheim 1950). Social facts act upon the individual as constraints; individuals are punished, in one form or another, for failure to adhere to them. They are enforced through omnipresent institutions like media, education, family, peers, and law. Social facts delineate behaviors ranging from family structure to eating habits — essentially every cultural norm and belief. Through his contributions, Durkheim fashioned an overarching notion that thought can be shared. To be specific, individuals who

belong to the same society have been ‘programmed’ (or socialized) to think, act, and perceive their surroundings similarly. In this way, consciousness can be collective insofar as there can be striking similarities in how individuals think and, most importantly for my purposes, how events affect them.

The existence of a collective consciousness is predicated upon shared identities. It is through these identities, that thought and reaction can be uniform and that a group ethos can emerge. For example, industrial workers have a collective consciousness in that they identify as being part of a group (as seen in unionization) and even mobilize concertedly (e.g. strikes [Cowie 2001]). The conception of the collective consciousness relevant to this analysis is one that occurs at the level of the nation. According to Benedict Anderson (1991), nations and national identities are “imagined”; members do not interact on a face-to-face basis, but socially construct the meaning of belonging (P. 6). However, belonging is not simply a matter of self-identifying as part of a nation — it requires actual or perceived commonalities between citizens. It is important to note that nations are not simply political entities. Such a description defines a “state”. Rather, nations delineate bodies of people who are united by a common culture; belonging to a nation is deeper than belonging to a state.

The difficulty in conceiving of America as a nation, and therefore being able to argue for the existence of a national (or collective) consciousness, lies in its diversity. How can a heterogeneous, multi-cultural country with no official language, religion, or ethnicity be composed of a citizenry that is largely uniform in who it praises and how and why it praises them? Yet, where America lacks these characteristics, it compensates with a strong sense of shared belief. This is clear, for example, in the belief in the American Dream, which has been part of the American zeitgeist for hundreds of years, cutting across racial, economic, and other

demographic lines (Cullen 2003). Furthermore, one frequently encounters the argument that diversity is central to the American identity, especially in the patchwork quilt and melting pot metaphors. Most important in this paper, however, is the belief in civic participation. Despite low voting rates, other forms of civic participation (e.g. free speech, ability to politically organize, petition legislators, advocate for lobbies and interest groups, etc) are valued. As it will be made clear, the deep respect for civic participation in American society is part of the importance of understanding the wider political and ideological ramifications of elite control over the appropriation of the legacies of the assassinated. While a few other general American values may be listed, in all, it is clearly tenable that the primary foundation of the American national identity is a shared belief system that is identified as ‘American’.

The country also fulfills two other major facets of nationhood, as described by Anderson. First, Americans place significant emphasis on both their legal and cultural borders (Anderson 1999). This is clear in discussions surrounding immigration and the accompanying discourse of the “other” — in defining who is not American, the American identity is crystallized. Second, the fraternity between people who identify as American outweighs divisions in other categories. Anderson argues that “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail [...], the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (1999: 7). This is evident in the phenomenon of poor soldiers enlisting in the military; they decide to enlist to (among other reasons, of course) defend their fellow citizens, despite possessing less capital (economic, but also social capital) and, as a result, being at a disadvantage. If the American national identity is so valuable to Americans that inequality is forgotten, it follows that a national consciousness exists in America.

An exploration of the appropriation and preservation of legacy in a national context must incorporate the ways in which beliefs about historical figures are passed along in a society. Commonalities between the work of Durkheim and Anderson provide insight into this reproduction of the collective consciousness. In his discussion of nationalism, Anderson traces the origins of national consciousness to the rise of “print-capitalism”, arguing that the circulation of printed works created “unified fields of exchange” and arenas for commonality to develop (1999 44-45). Durkheim also emphasizes the role that media plays in facilitating collective thought, although his scholarship includes the examination of other institutions. The analysis of the social construction of legacy that follows will touch upon these “agents of socialization” in order to establish how the legacies of certain individuals are continuously perpetuated by society. Given the nature of how knowledge of national heroes is passed on, two agents of socialization will be discussed in the case studies of this paper: schools and media. The prior is important, as American history classes, which typically cover the figures analyzed here, have been standardized in American schools. However, visual media also plays a role in this process (most notably in the case of JFK), as it has become so entrenched in American society as a source of information and since it has a large impact on school curricula.

### *Institutional Power in American Society: Elite Control Over Modes of Social Reproduction*

Any discussion of the elite control of virtually anything is apt to be viewed with skepticism — cynicism in its purest form is normally dismissed as absurd. C. Wright Mills’ theory on the power elite receives the same treatment. According to Mills (1959), the individuals who control the dominant institutions in a society (which he argues is the military, the economy

or corporations, and the political system) possess, and exercise, the power to alter and constrain social conditions. While I am skeptical of the existence of the power elite (a title that connotes an evil board or council that convenes in an underground lair), I find Mills' broader assertion convincing: the way American society is organized renders it vulnerable to control by the few who occupy particular positions of power. What is persuasive about this argument is that it asserts the simple, yet poignant idea that the rising control that institutions hold in society, which is essentially a byproduct of a state-system of governance and a market economy (bureaucracy and large establishments are necessary to carry out normal operations), concentrates power in the hands of a few individuals. According to Rothkopf (2008), who updated Mills' theory to apply to the present, power is wielded less in the political and military spheres, and more in the economic sphere. In other words, different, more discreet, and illegitimate forms of power are in play and a small group of people wields them.

A manifestation of institutional power and elite control central to this essay lies in the fact that vast amounts of money enable the control of information and therefore the legacies of assassinated individuals. As mentioned above, the school system and the media are the two principal agents of socialization that alter how these figures are viewed after their deaths. Control over media sources is in the hands of a few companies and the few individuals who directly manage them, what Rothkopf (2008) calls the "information elite". In fact, at the end of the 1990s, nine corporations controlled the overwhelming majority of television, movies, books, and radio (McChesney 1999). According to Eric Klinenberg (2007), the FCC's deregulation of the media is causing further media conglomeration, stifling of local reporters (who are more likely to criticize corporations), and the prepackaging of news. Control over the media also includes book publishing and textbooks — print media. Given that school curricula are decided within

individual states, there is less standardization of content (even No Child Left Behind, which put more power to influence education in the hands of the federal government, only set broad test score goals), which renders the whole system more vulnerable. Textbooks that are being published are used in schools all over the country and therefore provide one of the few systems of standardization of content. Given that curricula are often shaped around textbooks, control over media (and print-media specifically) extends into the education system in a nearly universal way (Collins 2008). Thus, examining how assassinated people are portrayed in textbooks is an entry point for how they are portrayed in society at large.

As it will be demonstrated, the legacies of the four most discussed assassinated figures have been changed in order to avoid conflict and promote social cohesion. The underlying motive of promoting cohesion is that any conflict can easily change course and challenge the existing social structure (the American Revolution is an historical example of this). The greater the hostility associated with a topic, the greater the potential for a conflict to destroy the structure. It is not a coincidence that three of the four case studies in this paper are related to race, an incredibly divisive topic in America. Furthermore, according to Lewis Coser (2011 [1956]), “internal conflicts in which the contending parties no longer share the basic values upon which the legitimacy of the social system rests threaten to disrupt the structure” (P. 217). Thus, the goal of those at the highest point of the power structure is to disrupt the discourse about the disparity and divergence between the interests of the public and the interests of the elite. Such a narrative would describe a conflict between two parties (the elite and others) who do, in fact, view the “legitimacy of the social system” in different terms (legitimate vs. illegitimate power). Avoidance of such conflict relies upon maintaining a sense of solidarity between Americans so that difference is not perceived as inequality resulting from control. In this way, this goal of

social cohesion is the strengthening of national identity — as Anderson (1999) argues, reinforcing the fraternity between individuals of unequal social classes is a major facet of belonging to a nation. In other words, Americans must be convinced that, despite social and economic inequality, their shared status as American citizens renders it unlikely that the elite would exercise such power over them. This process has been accurately described in the writings of Gramsci (2002) as ‘cultural hegemony’. Gramsci argues that the ruling class, which controls the modes of production (media, in this case), indoctrinates the masses with values that enforce elite control (clearly, Gramsci was influenced by Marx). Consistent with his intellectual predecessor, Gramsci argues that the elite class endeavors to hide their indoctrinating practices from the masses and convince them that their beliefs came from within them. A challenge to cultural hegemony, and the present account of the motives of the elite, lies in the books (which I have cited above) and other forms of media that allege such control; why would those in power allow such information to come into the public eye? Yet, elites must maintain the illusion that democracy is not being challenged by their power, which requires free speech. The most effective method of allaying fears and stymieing the outbreak of conflict is to allow the existence of the idea of elite control but to ensure that it is viewed as illegitimate by instilling and maintaining imagined fraternity and avoiding conflict. This is the current state of affairs.

*Discussing Race: The Neatly Constructed Narratives of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X*

Martin Luther King, Jr. is perhaps the most renowned activist in American history. We know him as an American hero, a guardian of the persecuted, a warrior pitted against inequity, and a paragon for future generations. Due to our treatment of King as the quintessence of justice,

we continuously attempt to model present action after his vision. We ask, “What would Martin Luther King, Jr. do or say about...” However, these discussions are informed by an overly simplified abstract of the beliefs of an incredibly complex individual. The one-dimensional portrait that we draw of King, which is the dominant depiction of him in our collective consciousness, is wildly divergent from reality.

This fictive King is a moderate in his views of solutions for lamentable race relations. He is touted as a “moral guardian of racial harmony” whose main priority was peacefully advocating for change in a society that refused to accept black citizens (Dyson 2000: 6). It is through this peaceful advocacy that he is portrayed as having modest social goals that rely upon white institutions to come to fruition. Certain quotations of King are lauded to keep this portrayal alive. “Letter from Birmingham Jail” is frequently used as an example of the goals and methods of King: to seek “negotiation” through nonviolent action (King, 1998: 191). Yet, in the same piece, King acknowledges his reputation as an extremist. His “I Have a Dream” speech is perhaps his most well known work, with emphasis on one passage in particular: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character” (King 1998: 226). Yet, this passage from the same speech is rarely mentioned: “There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges” (King 1998: 224-225). Clearly, certain quotations from King become displaced and canonized so that the figure we have constructed in our collective consciousness remains intact.

In reality, King was quite radical — he advocated for a new American social order. He did not want to slowly mold America, he wanted to tear down its edifice and construct a new

one. He sought not only racial justice, but also economic justice, borrowing from Marx's playbook, an ideology that America was not particularly keen to at the time (Dyson 2000). The FBI did not tag King as "the most dangerous Negro in America" and did not wiretap his phones because he was a moderate (Dyson 2000: 80; Alridge 2006: 674). He was considered so dangerous because his advocacy for changing the conditions of the poor was too significant of a threat. He was attacking the tacit foundation that his America was built upon. The fact that his assassination occurred just as he began to emphasize these issues suggests (albeit in the form of a conspiracy) that his attacks were taken seriously. Yet, King is not heralded as a proponent of the poor, just one of racial peace. Furthermore, we tend to misunderstand King's civil disobedience as passive resistance. In reality, actively disobeying laws is a statement about how American society is broken, not misguided — laws represent the values of a society and therefore breaking laws out of ideological consideration demonstrates the belief that the institution these laws represent is also broken. In order to understand why we have crystallized these widespread perceptions about King, one must also examine how the legacy of Malcolm X has been constructed and how it relates to that of King.

Whereas King is portrayed as the friendly, modest advocate of positive race relations, Malcolm X holds a place in our collective thought as a black militant. The problem with this portrayal is that it ignores the changes in Malcolm's views over time. It is certainly true that he, for much of his life, advocated for a Garveyist, anti-integration view of the path to black equality. He preached about the evils of white America and even produced a documentary entitled "The Hate that Hate Produced" (X and Haley 1999: 259-262). His speech "The Ballot or the Bullet" has been raised up as an embodiment of his beliefs.

And now you're facing a situation where the young Negro's coming up. They don't want to hear that "turn the-other-cheek" stuff, no. In Jacksonville, those were teenagers, they were throwing Molotov cocktails. Negroes have never done that before. But it shows you there's a new deal coming in. There's new thinking coming in. There's new strategy coming in. It'll be Molotov cocktails this month, hand grenades next month, and something else next month. It'll be ballots, or it'll be bullets. It'll be liberty, or it will be death. The only difference about this kind of death — it'll be reciprocal. (X 1964)

After seeing a quotation like this, it would be difficult to think of Malcolm as anything other than militant.

We do not encounter the same type of social redaction of Malcolm's views compared to those of King; Malcolm's legacy is altered because he is portrayed as temporally uniform. During his time as a minister with the Nation of Islam (1952-1964), Malcolm certainly advocated for a more militant approach to race relations. Picking and choosing certain quotations from his preaching would not betray his entire ideology at that time, as it would for King (X and Haley: 1999). However, complications in the simple, truncated narrative of militant Malcolm become more apparent after considering his conversion to Islam. In participating in the Hajj (the pilgrimage to Mecca), Malcolm became more receptive to the idea of interracial efforts to combat racism and to assisting other civil rights leaders (X and Haley 1999). According to King, the great tragedy of Malcolm's assassination was that it "occurred at a time when [he] was reevaluating his own philosophical presuppositions and moving toward a greater understanding of the nonviolent movement and toward more tolerance of white people generally" (King 1998: 268-9). Of course, Malcolm never had the opportunity to act on these new beliefs — he found himself in the path of a shotgun shortly after reexamining his values. However, the fact that the evolution of his ideology is ignored in the present indicates that Americans' conception of the black power movement and related approaches to racial inequality are apt to be misinformed.

One can observe the reproduction of the fables of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. in institutional agents of socialization. According to Alridge (2006), who conducts an analysis of

the most popular American history textbooks, the portrait of King as a moderate activist is present in each examined text. They all distance King from his radicalism by selecting small excerpts from speeches that support this perspective. Malcolm receives a similar treatment as one textbook proclaims that he “trumpeted black separatism and inveighed against the ‘blue eyed white devils’” (Alridge 2006: 678). Alridge also notes, “almost every text contrasts a moderate, magnetic, and inspirational King with an angry and militant Malcolm” (2006: 678). Thus, we see that in the realm of education, perhaps the farthest-reaching agent of socialization, students are exposed to the static portrayals of these men. We also see this depiction in visual media. For example, in “Do the Right Thing” (1989), Spike Lee examines how the legacies of Malcolm and King are at war both within communities and in the minds of individuals. Before the credits roll, Lee places one quotation by King and one by Malcolm that simplify and dichotomize the two figures. Similar depictions arise in the news, particularly around Martin Luther King, Jr. Day (for examples, see <http://abcnews.go.com/US/video/dont-know-much-about-martin-luther-king-jr-18247786> and <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2012/01/14/quote-on-mlk-memorial-to-be-changed-after-complaints/>).

Ignorance has not caused the simplification and dichotomization of Malcolm and King. Rather, the two figures are immortalized in monochromatic forms in order to neaten conversations on race. Race and racism are undoubtedly two of the more sensitive and divisive topics in American society and even talking about it can be difficult. In transforming King and Malcolm into cultural landmarks that represent polar positions on race, it becomes easier to have discussions on the topic without actually breaking new barriers and making progress, which might ultimately challenge the social structure (perhaps the system itself must be challenged in order to overcome white hegemony). This is, in part, because the different connotations of the activists’ approaches imply that there are only two ways to view race relations. Similarly, these

portrayals of King and Malcolm help to avoid discussing the dirty details of racial inequality, which might cause antagonism. Therefore, invoking the names of the figures in lieu of discussing the discouraging realities of race in America serves as a safety valve against conflict in a racially diverse, but white hegemonic society. Furthermore, dichotomizing Malcolm and King renders it easy to assign value to the two differing views of race relations. It is clear that King's supposedly moderate views are portrayed as more viable in the American consciousness. King is referenced much more frequently and has his own national holiday, in which we reflect on who he was (or who we believe he was) on an annual basis. Malcolm, of course, has not been given such an honor. In regarding the lives of the two activists differently, there is widespread acceptance of the views apparently embodied by King, but not those by Malcolm. In this way, the black militant approach has been effectively stamped out because it is perceived as a threat to the current power structure, while peace and passivity have been magnified.

*"The Great Emancipator" Absolves Us of Sins of the Past*

Recently, Abraham Lincoln has been viewed as one of the "best" presidents in American history. Popular opinion polls reflect this, as Lincoln is consistently ranked at the top of the presidential pyramid (ABC News Poll 2000; C-Span Poll 1999). While Lincoln holds this place in the heart of Americans, in part, because of his navigation of the Civil War, his esteemed historical status is primarily tied to his portrayal as the "great emancipator". In viewing him as the nation's primary successful advocate of abolition, we tend to gloss over aspects of his life that complicate his image as an unwavering champion of racial equality. Namely, we do not

discuss the reality that Lincoln's views on race and slavery were very complicated and seemingly contradictory.

According to George M. Frederickson (2008), the view we hold today of Lincoln as the "great emancipator" took hold during the rise of the civil rights movement. We have come to conceive of Lincoln as temporally uniform in his views of slavery: emancipation was an entrenched political goal of his. Lincoln is not only viewed as an abolitionist, but as a stalwart of black equality. For example, in his depiction of the "great emancipator" in *Lincoln*, Steven Spielberg (2012) inserts a scene in which the president interacts with Elizabeth Keckley, a black modiste who worked at the white house, and advances his view that he pays no heed to race when judging his peers. More radically, Henry Louis Gates Jr. (2009) argues that Lincoln has been reinvented as a "race-relations patron saint" (P. xxvi).

The contemporary conception of Lincoln that we hold in our collective consciousness both ignores inconsistencies in his views over time and in his beliefs about slavery and how they differ from racial equality. Firstly, Lincoln fought the first half of the Civil War without the ultimate goal of abolition. He "placed a higher priority on engaging and conciliating Southern whites, as an element of saving the Union, than he did on ensuring immediate and total emancipation" (Escott 2009: 249). In fact, Lincoln made it clear during the incipient stages of the Civil War that, if possible, he would have restored the Union without abolishing slavery (Frederickson 2008). It was only when abolition became a tactic to win the war (seizing slaves and offering them posts in the military) that slavery became entwined in the conflict. This occurred in 1863 (two years after the war started) with the Emancipation Proclamation. It is true that Lincoln was a firm opponent of slavery throughout his life; he described himself as "*naturally* anti-slavery" (Frederickson 2008: 86). However, we betray history when we describe

the Emancipation Proclamation in terms that suggest steady deliberation — its occurrence was based on a serendipitous turn of events that put slavery in the purview of the War. Secondly, freeing the slaves was not, in the eyes of Lincoln, synonymous with racial equality, even though the lens of the present entangles the two. Despite successfully advocating for the Thirteenth Amendment, Lincoln used the “n-word” freely until 1862, he toyed with the thought that creating a separate colony for freed people (i.e. permanent segregation) would be ideal, and he enjoyed racist jokes and minstrel shows (Gates 2008). Furthermore, Lincoln’s policies to aid African Americans were limited, as exhibited by his advocacy of enfranchising only “very intelligent negroes” (Escott 2009: 249; Gates 2009: xxv). Partial suffrage still implies a racialized perspective that being black is an obstacle to the intelligence necessary to elect worthy representatives. It is arguable that Lincoln’s views on equality were in the midst of becoming more progressive; he revealed his desire of circumscribed enfranchisement during a speech at the end of his life, which may indicate an evolution of opinion on black suffrage. Yet, American society clings to a portrait of Lincoln that ignores flux, doubt, and weakness, preserving him in a one-dimensional way.

Reinforcement of the socially constructed Lincoln occurs primarily in education, especially given Lincoln’s important status in American history. In his bestselling book, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, James W. Loewen (1996) illustrates how the idealized representation of Lincoln is ubiquitous in American history textbooks. He demonstrates that many textbooks omit parts of documents that complicate the Lincoln we believe in, the most notable one being a letter Lincoln sent to Horace Greeley in 1862, in which he states his true priorities in the Civil War (Loewen 1996). In fact, most textbooks do not even provide a full speech or letter originating directly from Lincoln. Loewen also points out that Lincoln was not solely responsible for

eradicating slavery; Congress helped pass the Thirteenth Amendment and black and white soldiers contributed to the abolitionist movement as well. Black soldiers swayed public opinion of slavery in slave holding states that remained in the union during the war and white soldiers voted (as in the case of Maryland) to abolish slavery during 1864 (the emancipation proclamation only applied to states in the Confederacy [Loewen 1996]). Yet, in conceiving of Lincoln as the “great emancipator” we imply that it was his efforts alone led to abolition.

Preserving the narrative of the Lincoln we hold dear serves to ease us of the psychological and social impacts of the legacy of slavery and the conflict that arises out of it. While we continue to acknowledge that slavery existed in America’s history, we view Lincoln as the figure that washed the blood of slavery off our hands. The deracination of the institution plays like a dramatized film in the American consciousness: ‘although there was darkness in the past, Lincoln, in his unwavering views of racial equality, showed us the light and cleansed our mind of guilt’. We avoid the awkward situation of confronting race-based slavery in a racially diverse society by deceiving ourselves into believing that the implications of slavery do not carry forward into the present. We reject that the house of slavery planted a firm system of white dominance in a post-slavery society. In doing so, we dodge discussions that could lead to conflict. Lyndon B. Johnson described the reality of race and the legacy of slavery in America at a commencement speech at Howard University in 1965:

You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, “you are free to compete with all the others,” and still justly believe that you have been completely fair.

We have moved far from the mentality of affirmative action that Johnson advocated for in that speech. In fact, the most poignant evidence that we are convinced, as a nation, that we have already morally confronted slavery, lies in the recent Supreme Court Case (and the handful that

preceded it) against affirmative action. A white woman alleging that she was discriminated against being admitted to college because of her race is ludicrous in the context of institutional racism against underrepresented races (Liptak 2012). The fact that the Supreme Court decided to hear the case demonstrates the sad reality that even on the institutional level, America has forgotten about slavery's waves through time. It is notable that affirmative action is very controversial and provokes racial antagonism. Erasing the system of affirmative action, then, extinguishes another topic that could cause conflict in the long run. Thus, the appropriation of Lincoln's legacy not only allows American society to ignore its slavery-infused roots, but also the conflicts that derive from the shadow that slavery casts on American society.

*The Assassination of John F. Kennedy: A Mystery in the Greater American Narrative*

Kennedy is a fascinating example for this essay because he is remembered solely because of his assassination. He was in office for nearly three years before he was cut down, and yet, his biggest contribution was dying. As is the case for King, Malcolm, and Lincoln, this contribution is defined by how he is perceived posthumously, not by what he actually did or stood for. Ultimately, America has extracted out of his death both an American figure to collectively mourn and a national mystery, both of which serve to bind citizens together.

The true significance of Kennedy's life lies in what he symbolized at the time he was elected president. According to Eyerman (2011), Kennedy's election was not only seen as a societal swing towards progressivism and social reform, but also a formalized manifestation of the power of youth civic engagement. Although his presidency was bogged down in Cold War threats, his rhetoric called for a new analysis of the state of America. Furthermore, Kennedy's

engagement with the media and television not only demonstrated a change in the nature of the presidency, but also helped bring the highest office directly into the homes of millions of Americans (Cottrell 2010).

Ironically, Kennedy's use of television as a tool and a social bridge contributed to him being defined principally by his assassination. In the same way that millions of Americans saw him thrive in their television sets, they gathered around in their living rooms to watch the coverage of his death. In viewing the reactions of distraught Americans on the news, people watching at home felt the same sadness — November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1963 became the day that eclipsed (literally and figuratively) Kennedy's entire life (Eyerman 2011). Yet, the televised assassination of Kennedy's killer, Lee Harvey Oswald (which can be viewed here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xU7Lhd7Wwo>) is the event that ultimately gilded Kennedy's death with a sense of mystery that continues to grip Americans to this day. The murder of Oswald created significant interest in conspiracy theories surrounding the event and the assassination is perhaps the most discussed conspiratorial event in American history. Furthermore, the murder of Oswald "denied the nation the ritual cleansing process of a public and publicized trial", which further embedded Kennedy's assassination in the minds of the American people (Eyerman 2011: 3). Clearly, the media was instrumental in both establishing Kennedy's political career and in recasting his legacy. As for the latter, the media continues to actively engage in perpetuating the mystery of his assassination. This can be seen in documentaries like *Frame 313: The JFK Assassination Theories* (2008), *Investigating History: The JFK Assassination* (2004), *The JFK Conspiracy* (1992), and others, which all renew conspiracy theories about his assassination. Understanding the media's roles in preserving Kennedy conspiracy theories also entails understanding what evidence is not available. For example, it is notable that the video of

Oswald's murder shows his death and his murderer very clearly, whereas the only footage of Kennedy's assassination is blurry and does not provide much evidence. In having access to the two videos, it is hard not to feel frustrated with the stain of Kennedy's unpunished assassination and become preoccupied with the mystery behind the assassination.

Through generally ignoring Kennedy's principles, symbolism, and executive actions and focusing on his assassination, Kennedy became a figure to be mourned by Americans and his assassination became one of the hallmark stories of American culture. This appropriation of Kennedy's legacy serves to foster attachment and allegiance among Americans. To be specific, it contributes to the perception that, as Anderson (1999) argues, there exists broad equality across America. Feeling sadness, but curiosity in particular, from Kennedy's death is a common American experience. While certain historical events or figures only resonate with certain groups in America, the Kennedy assassination can evoke similar reactions in all Americans, regardless of background (75% of Americans believe that there had been a cover-up of the assassination [Fox News Poll 2004; Eyerman 2011]). In this way, the event stresses the similarities inherent in being an American, not the differences that exist among American subgroups. The Kennedy example attests that American social fraternity is not only in common belief in greater values, but also in shared stories — the Kennedy story is a cultural landmark.

### *The Assassinations We Do Not Discuss and Why They Evade the Collective Consciousness*

Examining which assassinated figures do not enter contemporary discourses attests to elite control over the appropriation of legacies, as it can be argued that the only legacies that are perpetuated and molded by the elite are those that can serve their purpose of conflict avoidance.

Conversely, legacies that do not receive this treatment are from individuals who cannot bolster cohesion when recounted in the present. This includes individuals whose lives would necessarily be schismatic in contemporary dialogue (as in, it would be impossible to change their legacies to avoid conflict). Medgar Evers serves as a good example of this. Evers, the NAACP's first field secretary, spent the last ten years of his life advocating for civil rights and devoting his time to ending segregation at the University of Mississippi. His assassination at the hands of a Ku Klux Klan member in 1963 cannot, regardless of context or presentation, be depicted in a light that would inspire unity (Williams 2011). His death exhibits the rawness of the awful and bloody race relations that defined America throughout history in terms that are too concrete to be refashioned for another purpose.

Assassinated individuals who hold no influence or value in contemporary America are also overlooked by elite efforts to appropriate legacy. This category applies both to figures that Americans are apathetic towards and those that hold political views that not all Americans agree with. As for the prior, Chester A. Arthur and William McKinley are very rarely discussed in common dialogue, despite holding the highest political office in America at different times. There would be no reason for elites to focus on depicting these figures in particular ways because it would not have a huge effect on the American population. As for the latter group Harvey Milk serves as a good example. Ensuring LGBTQ rights is not a topic that all Americans stand behind: only 52% of Americans believe the government should legally recognize unions between same sex couples (AP-National Constitution Center Poll 2010). Harvey Milk, the first openly gay person to be elected, has become a symbol of the LGBTQ rights movement, and as a result, is not a figure fit to be marketed to all Americans (it would be fascinating to see whether/how his legacy changes after LGBTQ rights become more widely accepted in the future). If a figure does

not represent values that all Americans can stand behind, it would be difficult for the elite to appropriate his or her legacy so as to promote fraternity among Americans and avoid conflict.

### *Implications and Resistance*

The process of recasting legacies described here challenges the implementation of democratic governance. The ethos of democracy is one in which change derives from political discourse and voting. Thus, access to accurate information is instrumental in the democratic process — citizens must be able to engage in true dialogues and vote and voice their opinions based on facts. Democratic governance breaks down when individuals debate topics and information that have been handed to them by others. In this way, when Americans are convinced that there is only one correct way to view race relations or that the implications of slavery do not carry forward into the present, their views on race (and affirmative action) are different than they would be if their understanding of King, Malcolm, and Lincoln was not shaped by the motives of others. Furthermore, despite the benefits of social cohesion, avoidance of conflict is unhealthy in a democracy. Conflict is a medium through which citizens can voice concerns about the state and society. This is why Thomas Jefferson, in a letter to James Madison, wrote, “I hold it that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical” (Jefferson 1787). Given fact that Americans are still influenced by the republican values of Jefferson, the realities of democratic governance described here are highly unfortunate.

Elite control over information is not absolute, however, and there exist certain forms of resistance to it, the primary one being the Internet. The Internet is essentially unregulated and

uncensored and therefore is a vehicle for information that may not be readily available otherwise; people with access can maneuver it freely. For example, one can simply check wikipedia.org and see that Malcolm X's views were shifting at the end of his life. Yet, there are ways in which information is limited on the Internet by external actors. For example, a person or a corporation (which are apparently similar) can pay Google (the most popular search engine by a wide margin) to prioritize certain results in searches. Furthermore, battles over the regulation of the Internet are also emerging. For example, SOPA (Stop Online Privacy Act) and PIPA (PROTECT IP Act), which are two laws that give the U.S. government *and* copyright holders (i.e. corporations) more strength in managing the Internet. While the laws are meant to stop Internet piracy, in practice they would serve to extend elite power to have control over the last bastion of free information. In the near future when Congress makes a decision on PIPA, the future of democratic governance may be decided in the same moment.

In this paper, I argued that the legacies of assassinated individuals are altered postmortem through elite-controlled agents of socialization. Through case studies of assassinated Americans, I demonstrated that the appropriation of legacy is practiced to bolster social cohesion and dodge conflict. I applied theories of hegemony and the power elite to explain that this process occurs so as to limit challenges to the social power structure. The significance of alteration of legacy lies not only in its implications for democracy (as stated), but also in the way individuals connect with the past. Hanging above my bed in my dorm room is a poster of Martin Luther King, Jr. with the following quotation emblazoned on it: "the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice". There is something about this sentence that inherently resonates with my core, but now that I understand more about King and how he is depicted, the poster as a whole has a new meaning. The significance of King is not only in what he actually stood for, but also the

personal connection that I have established with him. The fact that I decided to hang the poster on my wall is more important than King himself; I am helping to keep him immortal and I am part of the social aspect of his death. I am not the only one, though — we all inherit King's legacy and the legacies of the monoliths of the past, and we all have connections to them. The real tragedy occurs when that others dictate these connections.

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