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Remembering Ruby, Forgetting Frantz: Civil Rights Memory, Education Reform, and the Struggle for Social Justice in New Orleans Public Schools, 1960-2014

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and the Struggle for Social Justice in New Orleans Public Schools, 1960-2014**

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Dedication

For the faculty, staff, and - most of all - the students of Validus Preparatory Academy, my first and best guides into the world of teaching and learning, and the ones who first made me fall in love with what a school can be.

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Abstract

Remembering Ruby, Forgetting Frantz: Civil Rights Memory, Education Reform, and the Struggle for Social Justice in New Orleans Public Schools, 1960-2014

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This project is an interdisciplinary exploration of the national memory of school integration and its stakes for evolving education reform movements, grounded in a case study of Ruby Bridges and the William Frantz School. In 1960, six-year-old Ruby Bridges embarked on a struggle to integrate William Frantz Elementary in the Upper Ninth Ward of New Orleans. Her harrowing ordeal captured the hearts of the nation and transformed Bridges into a powerful icon of the civil rights movement. Today, a statue of Bridges honors that history in the courtyard of the Frantz building, but Frantz Elementary itself closed in 2005 after years of failing to meet state standards. The historic Frantz building now houses Akili Academy, one of the many charter schools around which the New Orleans public school system was remade in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

This project brings together cultural memory studies, childhood studies, education history, and education policy to chart an evolving popular memory of Ruby Bridges and the Frantz School against the backdrop of shifting tides of education reform in New Orleans from integration to the charter school takeover. I trace the construction of Ruby Bridges as an icon of the civil rights movement, and examine how the history and memory of Bridges and the Frantz School have been mobilized by various stakeholders in the years after 1960. I aim to highlight what is erased and obscured in dominant narratives of both the individual and the institution, to engage with alternative interpretations of that history, and to trace the connections between the popular memory of social justice movements, local education histories, and evolving education reform agendas. Ultimately, this project sheds light on the place of the past in competing visions for the future of New Orleans public schools.

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Introduction

A bronze statue sits in the courtyard of the William Frantz School building on North Galvez Street in the Upper 9th Ward of New Orleans. The statue depicts a young African-American girl, with school books under her arm and a bow in her hair, standing by a staircase. The child represented in the statue is Ruby Bridges, and she is depicted here at the age of six, standing by the front steps of William Frantz Elementary, the school that she desegregated on November 14th of 1960. That year, Bridges -- the lone black student assigned to integrate Frantz and, in the wake of boycotts from the rest of the student body, the only student in her class for most of her first grade year -- became emblematic of the national struggle to integrate public schools. Her harrowing daily ordeal, which required an escort of federal marshals to help her pass safely through angry white mobs, captured the attention of national media and the hearts of the nation, and she remains enshrined in national memory today as an icon of the civil rights movement.

The statue of Ruby Bridges at the Frantz building, entitled *Honoring the Power of Children*, was unveiled in November of 2014, on the 54th anniversary of Frantz's desegregation. Bridges herself, then sixty years old, attended the ceremony - along with her mother, one of the federal marshals who had escorted her to school, and her first grade teacher. The ceremony thus reunited the central characters in the 1960 integration crisis on the steps of the school where the drama unfolded. But while the ceremony took place at the Frantz *building*, the Frantz *school* itself no longer exists. After years of failing to meet state standards, the school was closed in June of 2005, and the building suffered severe damage in the flooding caused by Hurricane Katrina a few months later. The renovated William Frantz School building -- its historic name still prominently

displayed above the door -- now houses Akili Academy, part of the Crescent City Schools charter network.

Akili is part of a wave of charter schools that popped up in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina devastated the city in August of 2005. In the aftermath of the storm, Louisiana legislators moved swiftly to remake New Orleans' public school district as a decentralized, charter-based system. As a result, New Orleans is now the largest test case in the country for a controversial model of school reform with national, even global, reach. Proponents of this model promise to revolutionize education for New Orleans' children by providing all students access to high-quality, high-performing schools. Crescent City Schools, the operator of Akili Academy, exemplifies this mission, describing itself as part of a "movement" that "provides life-changing educational experiences for students," and in doing so, "transforms a city."¹ Akili Academy honors its historic home in many ways, from the statue in the courtyard to the Ruby Bridges classroom inside, and the legacy of Ruby Bridges presented on the campus aligns neatly with the stated mission of the school and its operator, positioning Akili as part of the next generation of the fight for equitable education in New Orleans. But as an independent charter school serving a 98% black student body, Akili also highlights the changes that have transformed public education in New Orleans since Ruby Bridges first walked up the steps of Frantz Elementary in 1960.²

Several narratives thus intersect at the site of *Honoring the Power of Children*: the story of a civil rights icon who embodies a triumphant mythology of school integration and the civil rights movement; the story of a Ninth Ward school building that gestures toward a more complex history of the New Orleans school system; and the story of a charter school movement that is remaking public education in post-Katrina New Orleans and beyond. This dissertation takes that

¹ "Mission and Values," Crescent City Schools, www.crescentcityschools.org/en/about-us/mission-values/.

² Demographics drawn from Akili's 2017-2018 School Report Card. Louisiana Department of Education, "Akili Academy of New Orleans," www.louisianaschools.com.

intersection as a launching point. Framed by two key moments of upheaval in the history of New Orleans education -- the battle over integration and the post-Katrina charter school takeover -- this project traces the interrelated trajectories of a public memory, a public figure, and a public school between 1960 and 2014. In doing so, it unearths a tangled knot of historical narratives about integration, equity, and public education that have shaped memory and policy surrounding schools and social justice over the last fifty years.

In this dissertation, I consider the legacy of integration in New Orleans through a focus on the desegregation crisis of 1960, asking how Ruby Bridges' integration of the Frantz School has been remembered, commemorated, celebrated, and forgotten over time. Over the course of this project, I shift my gaze from the story of Ruby Bridges as it has circulated in national culture, to the life of the woman who lived that history, to the school that she desegregated, and finally, to the school that took its place. I consider how each of these focal points reveals different dimensions of the memory of the 1960 desegregation crisis, of the forces that have amplified some aspects of this moment in local and national history and erased others, and of alternate ways we might make sense of its meaning for the present. While this project moves in multiple directions, then, it is centrally concerned with what anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls the production of historical narratives: the process by which the stories that we tell about the past take shape. Trouillot argues that the production of historical narratives is always also a production of historical silences, and accordingly, this dissertation is as much about what is flattened, obscured, and elided in the memory of Bridges and the Frantz school as it is about what is emphasized. Through the course of this project, I explore the stakes of these choices, not just for how we remember the past, but for how we engage with continued inequities in the present.³

³ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

I am therefore interested not only in the production of historical narratives, but in their application: the various purposes and projects for which history is mobilized and erased. Accordingly, this project also touches on questions of policy, and on the material effects of the history I engage with here on schools and students. In her recent text on the way the 1957 desegregation crisis in Little Rock, Arkansas has been memorialized, Erin Krutko Devlin writes that it is “essential to be attentive not only to the construction of public memory, but also its practical applications.”⁴ Like Devlin, I argue that memory manifests in material ways, and that schools are a particularly rich site from which to interrogate the way policy emerges from and evolves in tandem with historical narratives about the past. While this project is not an analysis of integration policy or law, I do intend for the legacy of the integration crisis in New Orleans to refer not only to how this moment in history has been memorialized and forgotten, but to the material outcomes of integration in New Orleans public education, and to the effects of changing policy and ideology around race and schools. A core argument of this dissertation is that there is no meaningful way to separate out these strands: what we remember about the history of education shapes and is shaped by policy and practice in schools.

To make this argument, I weave together cultural memory and education history through a focus on Ruby Bridges and William Frantz Elementary, engaging with the historical narratives surrounding both, and exploring what both the person and the institution reveal about a longer and more complicated legacy of integration. I begin by exploring the construction of Ruby as a national icon of the civil rights movement between 1960 and 1995, in order to trace the development of a dominant national memory surrounding school integration. Then, I turn my attention to Ruby Bridges herself in the decades after 1960, considering how her efforts as an author and activist in the period between 1995 and 2005 shed light on alternative interpretations

⁴ Erin Krutko Devlin, *Remember Little Rock* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2017), 8.

of her history and its meaning for the present. Next, I use the Frantz School as a case study through which to explore changing education policy and its effects on the New Orleans public school system between 1960 and 2005 - a history which gestures towards shifts in a broader national conversation about schools and social justice in the fifty years following integration.

In pursuing these three threads, I aim to demonstrate their co-dependence, as well as their material effects on the current landscape of education in New Orleans. With this goal in mind, the final chapter of this dissertation returns to the Frantz building after 2005, when Frantz Elementary School had been permanently closed and the building, damaged by Hurricane Katrina, lay vacant. I explore two charter school applications, put forward by both the Ruby Bridges Foundation and the leadership of Akili Academy, as examples of competing visions for a future school to be housed in the historic Frantz space. This final chapter weaves together the investments of the preceding three, arguing that both the terms of the debate over the future of the Frantz building and its outcome were shaped by competing understandings of the history of New Orleans education and of the relevance of that history for the present.

Trouillot argues that any analysis of historical narratives must engage with questions of power, because, as he writes, “the production of historical narratives involves the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such production.” Power is not merely related to the production of history, but so deeply embedded in that production that it becomes “constitutive of the story.” In history, Trouillot writes, “power begins at the source.”⁵ Ultimately, this dissertation considers how power shapes the construction of the memory of integration in New Orleans, as well as who is empowered by these narratives in the contemporary landscape of education, and who is left behind. I argue that the contemporary education reform movement in New Orleans draws on a memory of the 1960 integration crisis

⁵ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, xix, 29.

that requires the erasure of all but a sliver of the three key pieces of that crisis, obscuring the experiences of Ruby Bridges herself, beyond the confines of her first grade year; the history of the William Frantz School, beyond the close of the 1960-1961 academic year; and the pursuit of integration as a meaningful path to equity in public education. What remains is a broad and malleable narrative of perseverance and reconciliation, embodied in the figure of one very brave little girl. This dissertation traces the construction of that narrative, highlights its power and its limitations, and considers its stakes for the ongoing struggle for equity in New Orleans public schools.

A Brief History of Crisis and the Long Struggle for Equity in New Orleans Public Education

This dissertation is framed by two moments of crisis in New Orleans public schools - the 1960 school desegregation crisis, and the 2005 charter school takeover. In both of these moments, events unfolding in New Orleans schools became a focal point for a broader, national conversation surrounding race, equity, and public education. In 1960, the country watched as New Orleans became the first major school district in the Deep South to integrate - and, in turn, as the city became a national symbol of the depth and ferocity of white racism, as well as a warning to other cities of what not to do as they arranged their own integration plans.⁶

Photographs from the New Orleans integration crisis made the front page of newspapers around the country; today, the crisis remains an iconic example of the national struggle to desegregate public schools.

In 2005, the nation's eyes were on New Orleans again. The images emerging from the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina and the ineptitude of the federal response had shocked

⁶ See, for example, Morton Inger, "New Orleans: The Failure of an Elite," in *The Politics of School Desegregation* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1968).

onlookers nationwide. As Gloria Ladson-Billings put it in 2006, “for the first time in a very long time, the nation - indeed the world - was confronted with the magnitude of poverty that exists in America.”⁷ And in the aftermath of that storm, the city’s school system became an important touchstone in the resulting conversation about race, poverty, and inequality. With a long reputation as one of the lowest-performing school districts in the country, the pre-existing New Orleans public school system was emblematic of the deep inequalities that structured life for New Orleans residents. With that system crippled by the storm, education reformers from around the country moved to make New Orleans the test case for a controversial approach to school reform - a charter-based model, built around principles of accountability, decentralization, and choice - which they promised would herald a new era for New Orleans schools.⁸ If the 1960 integration crisis made New Orleans a national emblem of the struggle to integrate schools, the crisis of Katrina and the resulting charter-school takeover made the city synonymous with the charter school movement.

But the framing of “crisis” belies the ways in which both of these moments were born from a longer and connected history of the struggle for equity in public education in New Orleans, and around the country. Flashpoints in education history such as the 1960 integration crisis and the 2005 charter school takeover simultaneously illuminate this longer history and obscure it. These two moments of crisis form an important backdrop to this project, as two

⁷ Gloria Ladson-Billings, “From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools,” *Education Researcher* 35.7 (October 2006), 10.

⁸ Charter schools receive public funding and some degree of public oversight, but are independently run by private entities. By their very nature, charter schools vary widely; painting them with one brush does a disservice to the variety of charters that exist and their equally varied philosophies. Conversations surrounding post-Katrina school reform in New Orleans largely (although not exclusively) tend to focus on a particular model of charter school. These schools, often referred to as “no-excuses” schools, typically offer a high-intensity academic experience, with extended school days and years, and an intensive focus on core academic subjects. This academic intensity is often paired with an equally intensive school culture, with demanding expectations for student behavior, and explicit character education intended to inculcate a school’s core values. Akili Academy is an example of such a school, and the philosophies underpinning this approach are explored further in Chapter 4 using Akili as a case study.

instances of major upheaval related specifically to issues of race and equity in New Orleans public schools, and as two moments when that local upheaval was the center of focused national attention. This dissertation is invested in exploring the ways in which national narratives about social justice and schools interact with local histories and local spaces, and the integration crisis and the charter school takeover represent two moments when these entanglements and tensions are particularly apparent. But I am also invested in calling attention to the history that lies between 1960 and 2005, that connects these two moments in time, and that is easily obscured by the comparative urgency of these crises.

Very little of this history is entirely unique to New Orleans, and neither of these crisis points existed in isolation. Rather, both the integration crisis of 1960 and the charter school takeover of 2005 were intimately related to events unfolding across the country. In 1960, New Orleans was not the first major public school district to be desegregated as a result of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, and it was hardly the only dramatic confrontation over integration to play out on television screens across the country.⁹ The sites of many of those confrontations, from Little Rock to Boston, remain etched in a national memory of desegregation, as well. Charter schools were gaining traction around the country long before Hurricane Katrina, and other cities - including Chicago and Detroit - parallel New Orleans as key battlegrounds in the advancement of charter-based education reform. Certainly, the major themes that appear in the longer trajectory of New Orleans education from 1960 to 2005 and beyond - integration, white flight, the rise of school accountability and high-stakes testing movements, and the growth

⁹ A list of major desegregation crises prior to 1960 includes: the 1956 confrontation over desegregation in Mansfield, Texas, the 1956 attempt to integrate the University of Alabama by Autherine Lucy, and the 1957 integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Other school districts had, by 1960, proceeded with integration voluntarily, including Baltimore and Maryland.

of charter schools - mirror those that have shaped the history of other major urban school districts in the decades since *Brown v. Board of Education*.

The history of New Orleans education, then, reverberates beyond New Orleans, helping to illuminate national trends. But New Orleans is a particularly rich entry point into this national story for several reasons. First, while the charter school movement has a broad reach, New Orleans remains its epicenter - both because of the concentration of charter schools in its school system, and because of the nature of that system's creation. New Orleans is the nation's first majority-charter system - as of July of 2019, no traditional public schools remain in the system.¹⁰ Moreover, this system was effectively put into place overnight - a dramatic and sudden remaking of the district made possible largely because of the devastation wrought by Katrina. In his study of school reform in Austin, Larry Cuban writes, "Short of a natural disaster -- such as Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005 and the San Francisco earthquake in 1906 - school districts change slowly, in small increments."¹¹ There was nothing slow or incremental about the charter school takeover in New Orleans, and as Cuban notes, such moments are rare in the history of education reform. In New Orleans, the transformation was swift and total, and in the process, the city was explicitly positioned by both supporters and opponents of its new school model as ground zero for charter-based school reform. As a result, the speed and scale of the transformation in New Orleans means that the city highlights the stakes of this movement like few other places in the country.

The other reason to focus this study on New Orleans is Ruby Bridges herself. Other students in the history of school integration loom large in national memory - the Little Rock Nine,

¹⁰ Marta Jewson, "New Orleans Becomes First Major American City Without Traditional Schools," *The Lens*, 1 July 2019. The number of traditional public schools in the district is subject to change; however, the vast majority of New Orleans schools have remained charters since 2005.

¹¹ Larry Cuban, *As Good As It Gets: What School Reform Brought to Austin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 146.

for example - but both Bridges' youth and her association with figures like Norman Rockwell and Robert Coles helped to transform her into a powerful national symbol of integration and the broader civil rights movement in a manner unlike any other single individual associated with school integration. Finally, Bridges' continued involvement in New Orleans schools joins together the national memory of school integration with the history of New Orleans education reform in a particularly tangible way, allowing me to map the transition from integration to the charter school movement alongside the trajectory of an evolving national memory surrounding integration, and to chart the connections between the two.

In the remainder of this introduction, I outline a history of the two flashpoints that frame this study, and situate them briefly in the context of a longer history of New Orleans education. Then, I consider how that history has been mobilized in American memory, and engage with the stakes of that memory for an evolving vision of the relationship between public schools and social justice.

On November 14th of 1960, four African-American girls, all six years old, walked through the doors of two New Orleans elementary schools formerly reserved for white students and officially began the process of desegregating New Orleans public schools. Three of the girls - Tessie Prevost, Gail Etienne, and Leona Tate - were assigned to McDonogh 19, in New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward. The remaining child, Ruby Bridges, went alone to William Frantz Elementary, located across the Industrial Canal from McDonogh in the Upper Ninth Ward. Fearing violence, city officials did not release the names of the students or the schools in advance of November 14th, and as a precaution, they assigned all four children federal marshals to escort them safely to and from school. As word of the selected schools spread, white parents began arriving at McDonogh and Frantz to remove their children. While the other students disappeared over the course of the day, the crowds outside the schools grew with white parents who gathered

to protest. By the end of the day on November 14th, the stage was set for the drama that would unfold almost daily for the remainder of the year: every morning, Gail, Leona, and Tessie would set out for McDonogh and Ruby for Frantz. Federal marshals would usher all four children through screaming white mobs, and they would walk through the doors to classrooms without any other pupils, where they would spend the majority of their first grade year alone.

Lloyd Rittiner, the president of the Orleans Parish School Board in 1960, nicknamed November 14th, 1960 “D-Day,” a short-hand for the day the schools would desegregate, but also a nickname that gestured towards the sense of drama that loomed over the event.¹² But for all the weight attached to it, D-Day is best understood not as an isolated event, but as the culmination of a much longer process: the struggle to integrate New Orleans public schools stretched back for generations. In fact, November 14th, 1960 might more accurately be described as the beginning of the second integration of New Orleans schools, which had already been integrated for a period of time after the Civil War, a brief outlier in an otherwise long history of black exclusion from the public education system. In 1868, the newly reconstituted Louisiana Legislature passed Article 135, requiring an end to schools reserved for white students. Two years later, integrated education formally began in New Orleans, and continued - despite fierce white opposition - until the end of Reconstruction in 1877 brought an official end to the experiment. By the beginning of 1878, New Orleans schools were once again operating on a segregated basis, as they would for nearly the next century.¹³

But resistance to the deep inequities that structured public education remained, as well. Throughout the next century, the African-American community organized around demands to expand black public education, to increase funding for black students and pay for black teachers,

¹² Liva Baker, *The Second Battle of New Orleans*, p. 394.

¹³ For more on the first integration of New Orleans schools, see Donald E. DeVore and Joseph Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools: Public Education in New Orleans, 1841-1991*.

to build new school buildings and fix existing ones. But every victory was hard-fought. In 1900, the school board officially capped public education for black students at fifth grade, leaving the black community in the position of organizing to regain the right to a middle and high school education; the first public black high school - McDonogh 35 - was not built until 1917. Very few resources were allocated to build or renovate schools for black students. In 1850, local millionaire John McDonogh left his fortune for the education of poor children of all races and genders in New Orleans, explicitly stating his intention that the money he left behind be used to build schools for white and black children alike. His wishes were largely ignored by the white School Board members who distributed the funds from his endowment almost exclusively to white students.¹⁴

Reminders of this history were everywhere in 1960, if you knew where to look for them. On D-Day, Etienne, Prevost, and Tate desegregated McDonogh 19, a school that was constructed with money from the McDonogh fund - their entrance into the school thus marking a long overdue step towards the completion of McDonogh's wishes that children of all races and genders would benefit from his fortune. As I will explore in more detail in Chapter 3, the School Board opted to begin desegregation at McDonogh 19 and Frantz rather than at Lusher, a school located in New Orleans' wealthy Uptown neighborhood, where white parents were so eager to model peaceful integration for the city that they petitioned the Board for the opportunity. Their enthusiasm would have appalled the namesake of Lusher Elementary: Robert Lusher, the state superintendent of education installed in 1878 who dismantled integrated schools after

¹⁴ For more on the history of African-American exclusion from public education in New Orleans, as well as the history of resistance to and organizing against this exclusion, see Donald E. DeVore and Joseph Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools* and Liva Baker, *The Second Battle of New Orleans*. For more on these themes across the country, see James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (1988), and Hillary J. Moss, *Schooling Citizens: The Struggle for African American Education in Antebellum America* (2009).

Reconstruction, wrote that white students should be “properly prepared to maintain the supremacy of the white race.”¹⁵ Finally, Bridges, Tate, and Etienne all completed high school at Francis T. Nicholls, named for the post-Reconstruction White League-backed governor of Louisiana who oversaw the imposition of Jim Crow in New Orleans. At the time the girls enrolled, African-American students at Nicholls were embroiled in a tense struggle to replace the school’s mascot, the Rebel, with something a little less explicitly Confederate.

As these examples suggest, the New Orleans schools at the center of the integration crisis highlight a much longer history of exclusion and resistance out of which the 20th century desegregation movement grew, reminding us that the battle to integrate public schools was - in New Orleans as around the country - only the latest chapter in a long struggle for racial equity in public education. Importantly, the question of whether the fight for school integration represented a better approach to that struggle than a strategy built around equalization of resources generated vigorous debate in African-American communities.¹⁶ These debates serve as a reminder that integration for its own sake was never the goal; rather, integration was a means to an end, a tactic in a struggle for equity. In Louisiana, that struggle had begun to coalesce around school integration in the 1930s, when the NAACP began testing segregation at the graduate school level. The push towards integration in New Orleans had been gathering particular speed since 1952, when A.P. Tureaud, the star lawyer for the NAACP in Louisiana, sued for integration on behalf of Oliver Bush in *Bush v. Orleans Parish School Board*. In 1954, the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* provided a federal mandate to desegregate - but it would take six more years before any black students entered white schools in New Orleans.

¹⁵ Liva Baker, *The Second Battle of New Orleans*, 24.

¹⁶ For two important examples of this debate, see W. E. B. DuBois, “Does the Negro Need Separate Schools?” *Journal of Negro Education* (1935), and Zora Neale Hurston, “Court Order Can’t Make Races Mix,” *Orlando Sentinel* (1955). For a discussion of how the equalization vs. integration played out in Louisiana, specifically, see Liva Baker, *The Second Battle of New Orleans*.

In the aftermath of the *Brown* ruling, the Louisiana state legislature fought desegregation at every turn, even after Federal Judge J. Skelly Wright required the Orleans Parish School Board to begin the process. The School Board, in turn, did everything in its power to stall desegregation - and, when it arrived at the doorstep regardless, to minimize its impact while still complying with the law on paper. In August of 1960, after years of back and forth between Wright, the Board, and the Legislature, New Orleans moved forward with the implementation of an integration plan which was incredibly limited in scope. Only first graders would be eligible to integrate, and under the so-called pupil placement law, any family who wished to send their child somewhere other than their currently assigned school had to formally apply for a transfer. The Board planned, moreover, to open schools on a segregated basis as usual in September, and *then* open up the transfer process, forcing interested families to move their child in the middle of the year. Furthermore, applicants were subjected to a rigorous examination process, which measured their suitability on no fewer than seventeen criteria, including academic achievement, IQ, psychological health, and home environment.¹⁷ Despite these formidable obstacles, approximately 130 students applied. Only five passed, all girls. One withdrew, reportedly due to fears of a PR disaster after the School Board learned that the girl's parents were not married.¹⁸

After nearly 100 continuous years of segregated public education in New Orleans, then, four African-American girls were poised to enter two white elementary schools. But even this tiny step towards integration was met with an outpouring of intense white resistance. The Legislature held special sessions and attempted to close the entire school system - and continued their attempts to use state power to defy Wright throughout the crisis, who in turn repeatedly

¹⁷ Adam Fairclough, *Race & Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 239. For more on the specifics of the selection process, see Morton Inger, "New Orleans: The Failure of an Elite," in *The Politics of School Desegregation* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1968).

¹⁸ Fairclough, 239.

parried their waves of emergency legislation. Leander Perez, the leader of the white Citizens' Council that organized local resistance to desegregation, helped to whip up white anger, spurring boycotts and protests that lasted throughout the year. The mobs that gathered outside of the schools - nicknamed the Cheerleaders by the press - shouted slurs at the six-year-olds and threatened to poison and strangle them. The few white families who dared to break the boycott were themselves harassed so ferociously that at least one family fled the city altogether. In the days after November 14th, white teenagers started city-wide riots that ended in 250 arrests. While the intensity of white resistance abated somewhat after the Christmas holidays, protests and boycotts continued throughout the year.

But through it all, the girls remained. By the following year, the mobs disappeared, and white students began to slowly return to Frantz and McDonogh. Although the number of African-American students in previously all-white schools increased slightly, no comparable uproar greeted their arrival. Over the next ten years, the pace of integration proceeded at a crawl, not reaching all grade levels until 1970 - but it proceeded nevertheless. In 1977, twenty-five years after A.P. Tureaud first sued the school board, the Bush case was finally cleared from the docket, the presiding judge ruling New Orleans to be in compliance with the desegregation order. Opposition to integration remained in New Orleans, but the city never again experienced the kind of massive resistance seen during the 1960-1961 school year. The crisis was over.

Forty-five years later, a new crisis descended on New Orleans in the form of Hurricane Katrina, which made landfall on August 29, 2005. Katrina and the devastation it wrought constituted a disaster for the entire city at every level, and the school system was no exception. When the floodwaters subsided, over two thirds of New Orleans public school buildings were seriously damaged, many beyond repair. The students, faculty, and staff that had worked and learned in those buildings were scattered across the country. Many would never return to New

Orleans. All, surely, were deeply affected by the trauma of the storm and by what it had done to the city. The entire system was effectively shut down; in January of 2006, only a handful of schools were open, serving a vastly diminished student body.¹⁹ It was not clear when the school system would be able to return to anything resembling normal operations - if ever.

The storm itself, then, created an unprecedented situation for the New Orleans school system. But it also shone a national spotlight on the state of the system before the storm. In the months before Katrina hit, the New Orleans public school system was already in crisis, albeit of a different kind. The Board was facing a deficit so massive that they had already effectively relinquished control of the district's finances to the state. Seven superintendents had come and gone in the previous ten years. The FBI had opened an investigation into several Board members on charges of corruption. The district was ranked 67th out of 68 in the state of Louisiana, which was itself ranked among the worst in the nation. The majority of public schools in New Orleans were considered failing according to state standards. There was talk of widespread closures. No one knew - even before the hurricane made landfall - what would happen next for New Orleans schools, but it was clear that the district was facing a dire situation.

Depending on who you ask, the hurricane either cleared a path out of this crisis, or precipitated a new and worse one. Certainly, it generated change on a massive scale: the school district that emerged from the destruction of Katrina bore little resemblance to the one that predated it. In the immediate aftermath of the storm, the Louisiana Legislature seized control of the New Orleans public school district, transferring almost all New Orleans public schools to the control of the state-run Recovery School District (RSD), and firing the pre-existing teachers, faculty, and staff en masse. The path was now clear for the RSD to rebuild the New Orleans system from the ground up, with new employees, new leadership, and, as it turned out, new

¹⁹ Susan Saulny, *The New York Times*, "Students Return to Big Changes in New Orleans," 4 January 2006.

schools -- because with only a few exceptions, the RSD did not re-open the schools that had existed in New Orleans before the storm. Instead, they closed those schools permanently, and invited applications to operate charter schools out of the pre-existing buildings. Overnight, New Orleans became a massive educational experiment: the nation's first majority-charter school district.

Like the crisis of 1960, however, the post-Katrina upheaval had longer roots. Privatization, choice, and accountability - the core values around which the new system in New Orleans was built - were gaining ground as organizing principles in education at the national and state level long before the state seized control of the Orleans Parish school district. And that district had not fallen into disrepair overnight, either. On the contrary, the state of New Orleans public schools in 2005 called attention to how little had changed in the half-century after integration for students of color in New Orleans, who were still attending overcrowded, under-resourced schools, and - if the test scores coming out of these schools were any indication - still struggling to receive a quality education in a district that had effectively re-segregated.

In New Orleans, as in other cities around the country, the experience of integrated public education was short-lived, as white flight emptied the schools of white students over the course of the 60's and 70's. By 1980, the New Orleans public school system was 84% black, and the majority of students attended defacto resegregated schools. The departure of the black middle class, while less rapid, added to the disappearance of a middle-class base.²⁰ Just as D-Day did not mark the beginning of the struggle for equitable education in New Orleans, the crisis of 1960-1961 did not mark the culmination of that struggle, either. A unitary district on paper did not translate to meaningful integration, and it certainly did not translate to equity.

²⁰ DeVore and Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools*; Carl Bankston & Stephen Caldas, *A Troubled Dream: The Promise and Failure of School Desegregation in Louisiana* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002).

The architects of charter school reform in New Orleans articulated their mission directly in relation to this history. For the proponents of the New Orleans system, Hurricane Katrina was a disaster, but it was also an unprecedented opportunity. As the leaders of the takeover repeated over and over again, the pre-Katrina school system was a failure. The catastrophe of the storm was a chance to hit reset: to build new and better schools that would provide New Orleans' students with the education they deserved and had been denied by the previous educational regime. A charter school model, they argued, wrests power away from a bureaucratic and inefficient government, and gives it back to educators and families, offering administrators the ability to lead their schools without government interference, and extending to parents the ability to choose the best school for their family. School attendance would be de-coupled from residential zones, ensuring that students would not be trapped in a low-performing school merely because of their address. This vision was framed explicitly in terms of equity and empowerment. Consider, for example, the language used in "New Orleans-Style Education Reform: A Guide for Cities," a guide compiled by leaders of the charter school takeover in New Orleans, designed for other cities interested in following in the footsteps of New Orleans: "In making this shift," the guide claims, "...the city has given power back to its educators and families."²¹

For critics of the reforms, however, the new system represented not a solution, but a new crisis for the faculty and staff of the pre-existing schools, for the students of New Orleans and their families, and for public education more broadly. For scholars and activists who organized in opposition to these reforms, the effects of Katrina had been consciously manipulated by pro-charter forces in a classic example of what Naomi Klein calls the "shock doctrine," a process by which aggressive and controversial market-based policies are imposed on a community too

²¹ New Schools for New Orleans, "New Orleans-Style Education Reform: A Guide for Cities" (2012), 15.

stunned by trauma to effectively resist them.²² Questioning both the degree of power held by the local community in the new system and the quality of education offered, opponents argue that choice-based systems fail to account for the needs of all families and children, allowing many students to fall through the cracks; that many neighborhood schools have been closed against the wishes of students and families; that charter systems fail to nurture and protect a strong teaching force or to encourage long-term investment in local communities, and that the choices of parents in this new marketplace are incredibly constrained by the continued inequities that shape the lives of citizens of New Orleans.²³

Most damningly, critics argue that school reform models like the one applied in New Orleans function as part of a larger neoliberal restructuring of resources at the expense of “undesirable” communities. Kristen Buras and Pauline Lipman, in particular, have traced the links between school reform, housing policies, and gentrification projects to argue that patterns of neighborhood school closures and openings often serve the interests of developers rather than communities or students. For these scholars and others, shifting towards a decentralized, charter-based system ultimately opens up opportunities for private companies and entrepreneurs to siphon resources away from already under-resourced communities.²⁴

Furthermore, the effects of these processes are shouldered disproportionately by communities of color. Before Katrina, 71% of teachers in New Orleans schools were African American; in 2009-2010, in the wake of mass firings and an influx of new teachers, that number

²² Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2007). See also Kenneth J. Saltman, *Capitalizing on Disaster: Taking and Breaking Public Schools* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2007).

²³ Kristen Buras, *Charter Schools, Race, and Urban Space: Where the Market Meets Grassroots Resistance* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Adrienne Dixson, “Whose Choice? A Critical Race Perspective on Charter Schools,” in *The Neoliberal Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, Late Capitalism, and the Remaking of New Orleans* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2011).

²⁴ Pauline Lipman, *The New Political Economy of Urban Education: Neoliberalism, Race, and the Right to the City* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

had dropped to below 50%.²⁵ Additionally, neighborhood schools closed in the aftermath of the storm largely served black communities, and these communities were less likely to see new schools reopened in their neighborhoods. Based on this data, Buras, Dixson, and others argue that neoliberal school reform protects the interests of whiteness, dispossessing communities of color and, in some cases, encouraging their departure from the city altogether. The resulting system relies on teachers and administrators from out of state, furthering the disruption of community-based, neighborhood schools. These processes, Buras, Dixson, Lipman, and others argue, are not accidental: ultimately, this scholarship suggests, the architects of charter school reform are working to dismantle, rebuild, and redefine the New Orleans community.

But such strident critiques of neoliberal school reform run the risk of putting progressive scholars and educators in the position of defending a deeply flawed public education system - a system that has historically failed communities of color. In fact, from a critical race perspective, the crisis of Katrina is only the newest evolution of a longstanding pattern. Critical race theorists in education, building on Derrick Bell, remind us that the American public education system was, from its inception, built around the exclusion of blacks and the protection of white interests. Bell interprets events that appear to expand black access to education — such as the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision - not as indications of a fundamental shift in the distribution of power but as examples of momentary interest convergence that do little to change long-term prospects for communities of color.²⁶ This perspective calls into question the framing of 1960 and 2005 as crisis points in New Orleans in the first place: a longer history of New Orleans schools suggests that the school system has never emerged from an ongoing crisis of racial inequality. Indeed, historians Donald DeVore and Joseph Logsdon, writing in 1991, conclude in

²⁵ Dixson, “Whose Choice?”

²⁶ Derrick Bell, *Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

the final pages of their 150-year history of the New Orleans school system that the city's public schools "have never met the needs of the poorest children of the city, especially the black poor."²⁷

This history of ongoing racialized inequality in public education is, again, not unique to New Orleans. In her 2006 AERA Presidential Address, Gloria Ladson-Billings suggests that the term "achievement gap" is insufficient to describe the effects of the deep and pervasive educational inequalities around race, class, and gender in the United States. "We do not have an achievement gap," she writes, "we have an education debt." Ladson-Billings argues that the term "education debt" gestures towards the "historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies" that have created these unequal outcomes over the course of generations. In contrast, describing these inequalities as an "achievement gap" runs the risk of promoting a focus on short-term solutions without addressing these deep-rooted underlying factors - directing our attention to the symptom rather than the disease.²⁸

Ladson-Billings delivered her AERA address in the spring of 2006, just months after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, and she closed her speech by linking this national conversation to that specific disaster, writing that the images that had come out of Katrina served as "illustrations" more powerful than any language she might use to describe the education debt. Images of this kind, she argues, should "remind us that the cumulative effect of poor education, poor housing, poor health care, and poor government services create a bifurcated society," and should "compel us to deploy our knowledge, skill, and expertise to alleviate the suffering of the least of these." At the same time, Ladson-Billings suggested that in this damaged city might lie the foundations from which to build something new:

²⁷ DeVore and Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools*, 291.

²⁸ Gloria Ladson-Billings, "From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools," *Education Researcher* 35.7 (October 2006), 5.

“Where could we go to begin from the ground up to build the kind of education system that would aggressively address the debt? Might we find a setting where a catastrophic occurrence, perhaps a natural disaster - a hurricane - has completely obliterated the schools? ... It would have to be a place where people were so desperate for the expertise of education researchers that we could conduct multiple projects using multiple approaches. It would be a place so hungry for solutions that it would not matter if some projects were quantitative and others were qualitative. It would not matter if some were large-scale and some were small-scale. It would not matter if some paradigms were psychological, some were social, some were economic, and some were cultural. The only thing that would matter in an environment like this would be that education researchers spoke to pressing concerns of the public. I wonder where we might find such a place?”²⁹

Ladson-Billings was not the only person for whom post-New Orleans Katrina encapsulated both the nation’s education debt and, perhaps, the place where committed educators might begin to build a system that addressed that debt. But not everyone imagined this new system in the same way - and those differences hinged, in part, on how various stakeholders made sense of the history of educational inequality, both nationally and in New Orleans, as well as how they defined social justice. This dissertation argues that scholarship grounded in cultural memory can help to shed light on these divergent visions for public education in post-Katrina New Orleans, by investigating the sense of the past on which they rely.

Third-Wave Civil Rights: Mobilizing the Memory of the Civil Rights Movement

The history of inequity in New Orleans schools outlined above has relevance for the 2005 charter school takeover, not only because this upheaval constitutes an important chapter in that ongoing history, but because the principles guiding the contemporary school reform movement in New Orleans are yoked to a vision of social justice that draws on a national narrative surrounding civil rights and on the specific, local history of New Orleans schools.

²⁹ Gloria Ladson-Billings, “From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools,” *Education Researcher* 35.7 (October 2006), 10.

The framing of the charter reform movement as what Kristen Buras calls “third-wave civil rights” extends beyond New Orleans.³⁰ Nationwide, the “managers of choice” - a term that Janelle Scott uses to describe the advocacy network of district administrators, think tanks, and politicians advancing a pro-charter agenda - have frequently marketed the mission of the charter school movement by drawing on the language and imagery of the civil rights movement, linking the work of charter school reformers to the work of earlier activists fighting for a better, more just world. The stakes of this rhetorical strategy have been explored by a growing number of scholars, who point to the narrow and selective interpretation of civil rights history that such a positioning relies on. Janelle Scott argues that the “managers of choice” mobilize civil rights history in a manner that “distills the most individualistic aspect of civil rights aspirations while neglecting broader communitarian components,” and “largely constructs the civil rights of parents in terms of consumerism.”³¹ The thinning of civil rights history that Scott describes is not exclusive to the rhetoric of the charter reform movement. Rather, it aligns with broad trends in the construction of the civil rights movement in American memory more broadly. This dissertation brings scholarship surrounding cultural memory - and, particularly, civil rights memory - into conversation with the work of scholars engaging with the charter reform movement and its relationship to the history of New Orleans public schools.

Scholars of civil rights memory Leigh Raiford and Renee C. Romano note the rise over the last thirty years of what they call a “consensus memory” of the civil rights movement. This dominant narrative dates the civil rights era from the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., highlights the movement’s nonviolent strategies and its emphasis on social and legal reform, and focuses on individual, high-profile

³⁰ Buras, *Charter Schools, Race, and Urban Space*, 4.

³¹ Janelle Scott, “Rosa Parks Moment? School Choice and the Marketization of Civil Rights,” *Critical Studies in Education* 54.1 (2013), 6, 15.

leaders and iconic figures.³² This narrative, of course, is neither uncontested nor univocal. However, thinking about consensus memory allows us to sketch the contours of this popular narrative as well as to consider its consequences: the focus on high-profile leaders and watershed moments of the movement over the everyday activism of grassroots struggle; the simplification of the civil rights movement into a narrative of good versus evil, with clear heroes and villains; and the insistence on a hopeful narrative of progress towards racial justice at the expense of critical engagement with ongoing systemic racism. These themes paint a portrait of the purpose and potential of the civil rights movement that is necessarily limited.

Civil rights memory hit its stride in the 1990s, and is kept alive and well today through documentaries and feature films, museums and memorials, and the continued circulation of iconic photographs and newsreels from the movement. The power and appeal of these representations is confirmed by their popularity: civil rights tourism today is a multi-billion-dollar industry. But the very popularity of these narratives constrains their political possibilities, requiring museums and monuments to attract and appeal to a wide audience and, accordingly, to avoid polarizing representations of historical events and figures. Moreover, the dominant themes of civil rights memory align with popular representations of the movement circulating during the 1950s and 60's - and reflect the silences of those representations, as well. In his critique of iconic civil rights photography, Martin Berger argues that many of the most famous and widely-circulated photographs of the era "reduced the complex social dynamics of the civil rights movement to easily digested narratives," most of which positioned blacks as passive victims in need of white intervention. These photographs provoked emotion in sympathetic whites, but they did little to challenge the prevailing racial order:

³² Leigh Raiford and Renee C. Romano, "Introduction," in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006).

“If, as many scholars of the civil rights era have claimed, photographs of the struggle helped advance social and legislative change, such photographs also limited the extent of reform from the start. To the degree that narratives illustrating white power over blacks helped make the images threatening to whites, the photographs impeded efforts to enact - or even imagine - reforms that threatened white racial power.”³³

Similarly, the emphasis placed on the emotional resonance of civil rights history in mainstream representations today may preclude more thoughtful and critical uses of this history. Edward P. Morgan argues that the culture of public memory surrounding civil rights gives rise to what he calls “spectator democracy,” which encourages us to “sit back and *feel*” the emotions generated by representations of a past which is “turbulent but ideologically safe.”³⁴ His critique aligns with the work of Erika Doss and Marita Sturken, who have traced the links between memory, capitalism, and public feeling in American cultural life. Sturken argues that the practices of consumption common at contemporary memorial sites encourage visitors to see themselves as “tourists of history,” which she defines as “a particular mode through which the American public is encouraged to experience itself as the subject of history through consumerism,” with the end goal of a “cathartic ‘experience’ of history.”³⁵ This catharsis relies on individual, first-hand encounters and personal emotion. Erika Doss agrees that these are key components of our contemporary memorial culture. For Doss, our “memorial mania” prioritizes individual memories and personal feelings generated through “authentic” encounters with history. Like Morgan, both Doss and Sturken argue that this emphasis can be politically stultifying, channeling attention towards how an individual *feels* and deflecting attention away from sustained social action.

³³ Martin A. Berger, *Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 4, 6.

³⁴ Morgan, Edward P., “The Good, The Bad, and the Forgotten: Media Culture and Public Memory of the Civil Rights Movement,” in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, 159.

³⁵ Marita Sturken, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

The work of Doss, Sturken, and Morgan suggests that it is possible to feel strong emotions about the past, to crave a personal experience with it, to feel familiar with it -- all while remaining detached from it. The past can be moving, in other words, without being disruptive. Popular representations of history may just as easily bolster the seeming naturalness of prevailing social inequalities as disrupt or challenge them. As Morgan puts it, this relationship to the past requires nothing more from us than to sit back and *feel* in order to leave with a sense that we have had a close encounter with history.

The narrative of Ruby Bridges, as it has been circulated and framed in American culture in the decades following 1960, reflects these broader themes and grounds them in the context of school integration. The dominant narrative of Bridges' experiences, like the consensus memory of the civil rights movement more broadly, emphasizes a triumphant narrative of reconciliation by focusing almost exclusively on six-year-old Ruby during the 1960-1961 academic year, positioning her as a powerful emotional figure, but detaching her from all other context that might generate a more sustained critique of ongoing inequities in public education. This dissertation traces the process by which this version of Ruby and her significance to American culture rose to prominence, and considers the stakes of this construction for education reform in New Orleans.

Overview and Chapter Summaries

This dissertation loosely follows a chronological path, tracing the intertwined histories of Ruby Bridges and the Frantz building between 1960 and 2014, with an eye to how their trajectories are entangled with a public memory of school integration at the national and local level, as well as with the changing tides of education policy and education reform from integration to the rise of the charter school movement. But importantly, I do not interpret this project as a biography of Ruby Bridges nor as a history of the Frantz School. I was unable to interview Bridges herself for

this project, and while I have been as attentive as possible to her voice and her version of events as it has appeared in press statements, interviews, and in her books, I do not pretend any access to some more authentic or unfiltered understanding of Bridges' story, or to the meaning she might privately ascribe to the histories I engage with here. I focus on Bridges as a crafter of her own legacy, and I consider how the versions of her history she herself authored diverge from the dominant one created by others. I hope to underscore that Bridges and Ruby – the name I use to differentiate the imagined iconic figure from Bridges herself - are not exactly interchangeable, to highlight the ways in which the emotional power of Ruby has often obscured the more complicated but no less powerful life of Bridges, and to consider how the presence of Ruby has empowered and constricted Bridges' own efforts in the sphere of education reform. Bridges is therefore a crucial figure in the chapters that follow, but this dissertation is ultimately an analysis of the construction of a memory, not an attempt to convey a full or complete portrait of an individual life history.

The Frantz community in the years between 1960 and 2005 remains similarly elusive here. This dissertation underscores the urgency of prioritizing the voices of school communities, and an oral history of the Frantz school is a natural and necessary direction for future scholarship. But providing that history was outside the scope of this project, which aims, first and foremost, to highlight the process by which certain historical narratives about schools, civil rights, and social justice become dominant - to expose the roots, as Trouillot would put it, of that process.³⁶ In the pursuit of that goal - and in my emphasis on Ruby, as well - I have focused largely on dominant narratives. In doing so, I hope to highlight the absences and silences on which those dominant narratives rely.

³⁶ Trouillot, xix.

Chapter one positions Ruby Bridges as a touchstone for a public memory of the civil rights movement and school desegregation. During the tumultuous 1960-1961 school year, Bridges appeared on the front pages of newspapers around the country, clambering up the too-large steps of Frantz Elementary under the watchful eyes of federal marshals. Tate, Etienne, and Prevost received similar press attention at the time, but Bridges alone remains a national icon of this moment in American history, in part because of the way her story was represented by others. In 1964, American illustrator Norman Rockwell published a painting inspired by Bridges' experiences in the pages of *Look* magazine: *The Problem We All Live With* remains one of the most iconic images of the Civil Rights movement today. Meanwhile, child psychologist Robert Coles worked with all four children in New Orleans throughout the integration crisis, but he returned to Ruby throughout the duration of his Pulitzer-prize winning career. In 1995, he published a best-selling children's book, *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, bringing Bridges' experiences to life for a new generation. In Chapter 1, I trace the construction of Ruby as an icon of the civil rights movement between 1960 and 1995. I focus on *The Problem We All Live With* and *The Story of Ruby Bridges* as two key representations of Ruby, and by situating these representations within the broader career of the men who created them, I consider the forces that shaped the construction of Ruby over time, highlighting the stakes of that dominant narrative.

Chapter 2 turns to Ruby Bridges herself, who spent most of the years after integration with no awareness of the way her story was circulating on a national level. After the cameras disappeared at the end of the 1960-1961 school year, Bridges continued her education mostly outside of the public eye, speaking little of her traumatic first-grade year, and receiving only sporadic attention from local or national press. That changed in 1995, when the publication of *The Story of Ruby Bridges* re-ignited interest in Bridges and abruptly catapulted her back onto a national stage. With the proceeds from Coles' children's book, Bridges started the Ruby Bridges

Foundation and embarked on a new career as a public figure, speaking around the country about her childhood experiences and engaging in educational advocacy through the work of her Foundation. In Chapter 2, I explore the relationship between Bridges the person and Ruby the icon in the years after 1995, when Bridges re-entered public life, and until 2005, when Katrina hit New Orleans and the charter school take over began. I focus on Bridges' framing of her own history as an author through a close reading of her 1999 children's book *Through My Eyes*, and I engage with her work as an activist through the Ruby Bridges Foundation, in order to investigate how Bridges attempted to break free from the dominant framing of her narrative, offering an altogether different interpretation of her history, while simultaneously attempting to leverage that framing in the service of a different set of goals.

The second set of chapters in this dissertation focus more fully on the Frantz building, although they do not leave Bridges behind. By 1995, the year of Bridges' return to public life, Frantz was resegregated, serving a 100% African-American student body. The building was badly in need of repair, and the school was struggling academically, receiving low scores on statewide standardized tests. Eager to revitalize Frantz, Bridges began by working to secure official recognition of the school's history. In June of 2005, through the efforts of the Bridges Foundation, William Frantz Elementary was officially placed on the National Register of Historic Places. In the same month, however, the Orleans Parish School Board voted to close Frantz, which was officially designated as a failing school according to state standards. In Chapter three, I engage with the tension between the public framing of Frantz as both a famous and a failing school, focusing on two sets of documents as representative of each narrative: the 2005 application to list the Frantz Building on the National Register of Historic Places, and the official school report cards issued for Frantz by the Louisiana Department of Education in the years before the school's closure. By tracing a longer history of Frantz from 1960 to 2005, this chapter

investigates how both of these narratives rely on selective interpretations of the past, with significant consequences for the future of the school.

Chapter four focuses exclusively on the post-Katrina landscape for the first time. In August of 2005, Frantz suffered severe water and wind damage from the hurricane. With the building vacant and a new school system under construction, the Ruby Bridges Foundation submitted an application to charter a new school out of the Frantz building. That application was rejected, and ultimately, Akili Academy was granted the rights to the Frantz building. Through a close reading of the Bridges Foundation's application and the application put forward by Akili Academy, I investigate how different relationships to the history of the community and the school building gave rise to different visions for a future school housed in the historic space. Finally, in the conclusion, I turn my attention to the school that eventually came to occupy Frantz as it exists today: I return to Akili Academy, considering how the historical narratives of race, social justice, and public education this dissertation has explored manifest in the landscape of the school.

Over the course of this dissertation, I argue that the dominant national memory of Ruby Bridges' 1960 integration of the William Frantz School hinges on the erasure of a fuller portrait of both Ruby Bridges and of Frantz, and of the histories they embody. The life of the pioneer of school desegregation and the history of the school she desegregated each point towards a rich but complicated legacy of integration, re-situating 1960 into a much longer and still unfolding history of the struggle for equity in public schools. Those histories contain moments of powerful organizing, bitter loss, and a persistent, enduring commitment to a different future for New Orleans public schools - all deeply rooted in the specific, lived experiences of local schools and the communities surrounding them. They call attention to the material effects of education policy on schools and students, highlight the larger systemic forces that shape inequities in education,

and point to how we might draw on the past to seek new solutions to those inequities in the present.

But the dominant national memory of this moment elides those histories, directing public attention toward national narratives and away from local experiences, towards individuals and away from movements, towards feeling and away from action, and towards the past as a site of struggle for social justice rather than the present. The result, I argue, is a malleable narrative of social justice and its relationship to public schools that requires little engagement with the experiences of the schools, communities, and students most immediately impacted by the ongoing struggle for equity in public education.

Constructing A Civil Rights Icon: Norman Rockwell, Robert Coles, and the Emergence of Ruby in American Memory

Introduction: Ruby Bridges, American Icon

On July 15th, 2011, Ruby Bridges visited the White House. It was not her first visit to the grounds: she had come to Washington on a cold day in January a few years earlier to see Barack Obama inaugurated as the first African-American President of the United States. But this visit was more personal: Norman Rockwell's 1963 painting *The Problem We All Live With* had been temporarily installed in the White House, just outside of the Oval Office, and was on display through the summer of 2011. As *The Problem We All Live With* was inspired by the events of Bridges' own childhood, she had been invited to come and view the painting in person - and to meet the President while she was at it. And so, on July 15th, President Barack Obama stood side-by-side with an adult Ruby Bridges as they looked together at a painting inspired by her experiences as a six-year-old child, and talked about what those experiences meant for the nation.

In 1960, Bridges had been among the youngest pioneers of the school desegregation movement. In 2011, with Obama nearing the end of his first term, it was easy to see the election of the nation's first African-American president as a satisfying bookend to a movement that Bridges - and others like her - had started with their first steps into all-white public schools some fifty years before. Press coverage of the meeting made this narrative explicit. In New Orleans, Jonathan Tilove of the *Times-Picayune* wrote that without Bridges' "iconic act of fortitude," it is "possible to puzzle whether Obama would today be president of the United States."³⁷ Obama

³⁷ Jonathan Tilove, "Ruby Bridges painting is on display in White House," *The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), 16 July 2011.

himself echoed these sentiments. As they looked together at Rockwell's painting, the President told Bridges, "I think it's fair to say that if it wasn't for you guys, I wouldn't be here today."³⁸

With that statement, Obama folded both Bridges and an iconic representation of her into a national narrative of progress towards racial justice. In doing so, he only reinforced what was, by 2011, already a popular interpretation of Bridges and her resonance in American history: Bridges' place in the pantheon of civil rights heroes was well-established, and her experiences had been called upon for decades as a powerful example of the sacrifices and the bravery that defined the struggle to end segregation. But there was nothing inevitable about what Bridges came to represent in American culture: her association with a particular interpretation of the civil rights movement was forged over the course of half a century, and shifted over time. I argue in this chapter that the emergence of Bridges as an icon of the civil rights movement - and the particular meanings attached to her - largely resulted from the way her story and her image circulated in the works of two men in the decades after 1960: American illustrator Norman Rockwell and child psychologist Robert Coles. Together, these men constructed an icon with powerful emotional resonance, who came to figure prominently in a national narrative of the civil rights movement. This chapter traces the evolution of that icon.

Although Rockwell and Coles pursued two very different professional paths, Ruby Bridges played an important role in the career trajectories of both men. After fifty years producing feel-good illustrations of an idealized American life, Norman Rockwell pivoted in the early 1960s to much more politically-engaged work, and *The Problem We All Live With* - the first example of this new chapter in his career - was inspired by Bridges' integration of Frantz Elementary. Rockwell never met Bridges, and she never appeared in his work again, but *The*

³⁸ William Allman, "President Obama Meets Civil Rights Icon Ruby Bridges," 15 July 2011, obamawhitehouse.archives.gov.

Problem remains among his most celebrated works, and it stands today - as the White House blog put it in 2011, when the painting was installed outside the Oval Office - as “an important national symbol of the struggle for racial equality.”³⁹ Robert Coles, in contrast, met Bridges when she was six years old and worked with her closely during the 1960-1961 school year. He wrote about her frequently over the course of his prestigious, Pulitzer-prize winning career, and in 1995, he wrote *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, a best-selling children’s book based on Bridges’ experiences as a child.

In 1960, when Ruby Bridges was walking up the steps of Frantz Elementary, Norman Rockwell was nearing the end of his career. The professional life of Robert Coles, in contrast, was just beginning. The professional and personal orbits of the two men overlapped, and they would eventually meet and even work together, briefly, collaborating on a children’s book about desegregation in 1968. Mostly, though, they lived and worked in different spheres. But their mutual connection to Ruby Bridges is more than just coincidence; the two men were connected more broadly by their contributions to the dominant discourses surrounding childhood in 1960’s America, which were crucial to the desegregation movement. Rockwell and Coles were considered experts, respectively, in the realms of childhood innocence and child psychology: the twin pillars of the cultural foundation on which the *Brown v. Board* decision was built. Both men interpreted Ruby through the framework of these investments, and in doing so, they created a character that embodied both the power and the limitations of a vision of racial justice built on this foundation.

Throughout this chapter, I refer to the little girl that Rockwell and Coles imagined, painted, wrote about, and remembered as Ruby, in order to differentiate between the character and Bridges herself. This is a particularly tricky distinction in the case of Coles, who knew

³⁹ Allman, “President Obama Meets Civil Rights Icon Ruby Bridges.”

Bridges and based his writing on his interactions with her. But it is important to highlight the distinction between Coles' remembered Ruby and Bridges herself, because it draws attention to how little involvement Bridges had in the construction of the mythology surrounding her. The life of Ruby Bridges extends well beyond November 14th, 1960, but once the national news media disappeared, she lived the rest of her childhood and early adulthood mostly out of the public eye, and with very little awareness of the way that her story was circulating in the works of men like Rockwell and Coles. This means that Bridges did not benefit from their work, nor did she have an opportunity to influence it - at least until 1995, when the publication of *The Story of Ruby Bridges* brought her back into the national spotlight. Once she re-emerged, she had new opportunities to take charge of the story - but only within the parameters of a narrative about her childhood that was already well-defined. How Bridges engaged with that narrative is the subject of the next chapter. Here, I focus on Ruby. In this chapter, then, Bridges herself is mostly absent, a dynamic that mirrors the way that the dominant memory of her life was created. Looking more closely at the creation of Ruby sheds light on how the character came to obscure the person, and on how - by 1995 - the two became conflated once again.

This chapter traces the construction of Ruby between 1963, when Norman Rockwell painted *The Problem We All Live With*, and 1995 - when Robert Coles published *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, and Bridges herself re-entered the public stage, changing the calculus of the story. I chart the evolution of Ruby by mapping her appearances in the work of Rockwell and Coles during this thirty-year period, focusing on how the character they created reflected their own investments, ideologies, and professional interests. In doing so, I highlight the process by which complex narratives become collapsed into iconic figures that take on a life of their own, considering whose interests are served by this process, and what possibilities are erased. It is important to emphasize that *The Problem We All Live With* and *The Story of Ruby Bridges* are not

the only representations of Ruby Bridges: this chapter is not an attempt to map all or even most of the ways that Bridges has appeared in American memory. But these two representations are the most influential; they defined the parameters for future representations of Ruby - even those authored by Bridges herself.

Both Rockwell and Coles contributed to the creation of Ruby in distinct ways. Rockwell made Ruby iconic, creating the dominant image associated with her; Coles kept her alive in public memory over the next thirty years by returning to her in his work. Rockwell associated Ruby with a nationalist narrative of progress towards racial justice; Coles imbued her with a spiritual and moral force. The character they created evolved over time, reflecting shifts in the careers of both men but also in national discourses around race: Rockwell's 1963 painting reflects the dominant tropes of black passivity and vulnerability that framed the civil rights movement for the mainstream press in the 1960's; Coles' 1995 children's book embodies reconciliation narratives popular in the 1990's.

But despite these shifts, the basic contours of the Ruby that Rockwell and Coles created remained constant, and set the parameters for how she is still frequently represented today. By 1995, Ruby had become a powerful affective figure: her power rested in the way she made onlookers *feel*. That power was generated largely through her innocence, her youth, and her isolation, and it hinged largely on white emotion: the emotional impact of Ruby on white audiences became her defining characteristic. It was also redemptive: Ruby had the power to change minds, to open hearts, and to forgive, making her a powerful embodiment of racial reconciliation. Finally, that narrative gestured not towards the specifics of school desegregation in New Orleans, but towards a broader national narrative of the civil rights movement: a shift that made it easier to frame Ruby as a triumphant figure. In the end, this made Ruby a character who

represents individualism over community, feeling over action, and individual racial tolerance over educational equity.

By tracing how that character evolved over time, this chapter unearths its foundations in the same ideologies that gave rise to the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, demonstrating how those ideologies became embedded in the popular memory of desegregation, as well. The rest of this dissertation explores more fully the erasures that framing relies on, as well as its stakes for contemporary efforts to address inequities in New Orleans schools.

Deeply Moved: The Transformative Impact of *The Problem We All Live With*

On the 6th of January, 1964, Chester Martin of Chattanooga, Tennessee wrote a brief letter to the American illustrator Norman Rockwell.⁴⁰ He wrote it by hand, with neat, slightly crooked handwriting, and mailed it to *Look* magazine, where he hoped it would reach the artist. The letter read:

Dear Mr. Rockwell,

I have never written to a national figure before, nor do I intend to make a habit of it now. Allow me to say that I have never been so deeply moved by any picture as by your painting in the current issue of *Look* Magazine (14 January 64). Thank you for showing this white Southerner how ridiculous he looks. The truth is pretty hard to take until we get it from a Norman Rockwell.

Very truly yours,

Chester Martin

The image that so deeply moved Chester Martin was *The Problem We All Live With*, published in the January 1964 issue of *Look*. The painting was tucked a few pages in to the feature article, entitled “How We Live,” which the magazine described as a “52-page

⁴⁰ Chester Martin to Norman Rockwell, 6 January 1963 [sic], Box 5, Norman Rockwell Separated Correspondence; Civil Rights Correspondence, Norman Rockwell Museum Archives, Stockbridge, MA.

kaleidoscope of the realities, problems, and pleasures of American living.” Although the painting was ostensibly connected to this kaleidoscope, the editors had taken pains to set it apart: the preceding page was blank except for the painting’s title, a brief note - “painted for Look by Norman Rockwell” - and instructions for the reader to turn the page.⁴¹

When they did, they would have encountered an arresting image of a small, African-American girl, walking forward. She is dressed in all white, from her starched white dress with matching bow to her white tennis shoes with white socks rolled down around her ankles. She walks sandwiched between four U.S. Federal Marshals, marching in uniform and in unison, their size underscoring her small stature. Her gaze is fixed ahead of her; she does not seem to notice the tomato that has splattered beside her, or the graffiti that mars the wall with the words NIGGER and KKK. Printed across a two-page spread with bleed on all four sides, the painting was by far the largest image in the issue, and one of the few that wasn’t a photograph. Beyond the title and artist, the magazine offered no caption to help readers interpret what they saw: the image stood alone.

Chester Martin was not the only reader moved by his encounter with *The Problem We All Live With* in the pages of *Look*, although not everyone was moved in quite the same way. David Malarcher of Chicago was moved to write and send to Rockwell a twenty-stanza rhyming poem inspired by the painting.⁴² On the other hand, at least one reader was moved to cancel his subscription. Allen Hurlburt, *Look*’s art editor, wrote Rockwell in February of 1964 to say that the magazine had already received some fifty letters about the painting, mostly positive. And reading through the ones that survive in the Rockwell archives, I’m struck by the depth of the emotional response they contain. “We were stunned by the dramatic quality of your illustration,”

⁴¹ *Look Magazine* (28.1), 14 January 1964.

⁴² David Malarcher to Norman Rockwell, 12 February 1964, Box 5, Norman Rockwell Separated Correspondence; Civil Rights Correspondence, Norman Rockwell Museum Archives, Stockbridge, MA.

wrote Theodore Toporowski, from Adams, Massachusetts.⁴³ “May the pathos of it affect [others] with as much heartache as it did me,” wrote Mrs. W. E. Leverett of Miami Shores, Florida.⁴⁴

The negative responses reveal strong emotion, as well. “Just where does Norman Rockwell live?” asks a letter-to-the-editor sent from Bedford, Texas. “Just where does your editor live? Probably both of these men live in all-white, highly expensive, highly exclusive neighborhoods. Oh, what hypocrites all of you are!”⁴⁵ In his note to Rockwell about the painting’s reception, Hurlburt did not spend much energy describing the critical letters, except to poke fun of an “indignant Southerner” who confused Norman Rockwell with Rockwell Kent.⁴⁶ His casual tone belies the vitriol contained in some of those letters, like the one from G.L. LeBon of New Orleans, who described the painting as “vicious lying propaganda being used for the crime of racial integration,” and its artist as “nothing short of a traitor to the white race.” His letter ends with this message, delivered in all caps: “THERE CAN BE, AND THERE WILL BE, NO COMPROMISE WITH THE VICIOUS CRIME OF RACE MIXING AND INTEGRATION. THE WAR HAS JUST BEGUN!”⁴⁷

It is perhaps not surprising that Rockwell’s image struck a nerve with a segregationist from New Orleans, who surely recognized the scene as a reprise of the one that had played out in the 9th Ward a few years before -- maybe LeBon had even been in the streets in 1960, shouting at Ruby Bridges when she passed by. But Chester Martin’s letter shows that Rockwell’s painting resonated beyond New Orleans, too. In January of 1964, Chattanooga was in the early years of its

⁴³ Theodore Toporowski to Norman Rockwell, 1 January 1964, Box 5, Norman Rockwell Separated Correspondence; Civil Rights Correspondence, Norman Rockwell Museum Archives, Stockbridge, MA.

⁴⁴ Mrs. W. E. Leverett, Letter to the Editor, published in *Look Magazine*, 25 February 1964.

⁴⁵ Joe E. Moore, Jr., Letter to the Editor, published in *Look Magazine*, 25 February 1964.

⁴⁶ Allen F. Hurlburt to Norman Rockwell, 18 February 1964, Box 5, Norman Rockwell Separated Correspondence; Civil Rights Correspondence, Norman Rockwell Museum Archives, Stockbridge, MA.

⁴⁷ G.L. LeBon to Norman Rockwell, 6 January 1964, Box 5, Norman Rockwell Separated Correspondence; Civil Rights Correspondence, Norman Rockwell Museum Archives, Stockbridge, MA.

own school desegregation battle, which - while comparatively peaceful - would drag on for decades. Martin, too, seems to have recognized himself and his world in the image somewhere, but unlike LeBon, he found the recognition a little shameful and, ultimately, transformative.

I read G.L. LeBon's letter as a warped twin to Chester Martin's - in fact, both were dated on January 6th, 1964.⁴⁸ On the same day, then, in two different parts of the country, two men were so moved by Rockwell's painting that they sat down to write to the painter and tell him how they felt. While their responses were polar opposites, both point to the way *The Problem We All Live With* functioned for viewers. Both men interpreted Rockwell's painting not as a neutral depiction of a historical event but as a moral and emotional argument about segregation - and segregationists, because both men recognized that the painting was ultimately less about its protagonist than it was about the audience, and the audience's position in relation to the little girl. For Martin, the painting prompted a shameful self-reflection: he wrote that the painting showed him how "ridiculous" *he* looked. LeBon, likewise, recognized that *The Problem We All Live With* painted him as the villain - this, for him, made it "lying propaganda." Randolph Casper of California imagined that the painting might have a transformative effect on the LeBons of the world: "Even a Klu Klux 'Southern Gentleman' might blush," he wrote.⁴⁹

If LeBon's letter is any indication, hardened segregationists were not necessarily converting at the sight of *The Problem We All Live With*. But years later, Robert Coles himself suggested that the painting did have a significant impact on at least one white Southerner who had opposed the integration of Frantz. In 1999, Coles contributed an essay to the catalogue

⁴⁸ Martin's letter is, in fact, dated January 6, 1963, but as this is a full year before Rockwell's painting appeared in *Look*, I have taken the liberty of assuming that Martin, like so many of us, slipped up when writing the date early in the new year.

⁴⁹ Randolph Casper to Norman Rockwell, 3 January 1964. Sent to Donna Fricker by Linda Pero of the Norman Rockwell Museum, 3 March 2005. William Frantz School file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.

accompanying the *Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People* exhibition. In the essay, entitled “Ruby Bridges and a Painting,” he described the impact of the painting in 1964, when it first appeared in *Look*, on one white father in particular, who had participated in the boycott of Frantz a few years before. Coles quotes his reaction: “That magazine tells you to ‘look,’ and I sure did, I thought ‘there she is; the nigra kid.’ You look at her and you begin to feel sorry for her - a lot of people will, I’m sure. It’s not *her* we were against, you know. It’s the interference in our life by those folks up in the North...”

Coles writes that he was struck by what he describes as a “shift in [the man’s] language and his sentiment or ideology” in this reaction: “For him,” Coles writes, “‘nigra’ was a less hostile or insulting or demeaning characterization - as opposed to the word ‘nigger’ which, heretofore, he’d all the time used. Moreover, he was now (as never before was the case) letting Ruby herself off the hook...I couldn’t help but feel then that a magazine’s picture had somehow touched his heart, had given him some psychological if not moral pause.” For Coles, this was representative of the transformative possibilities of *The Problem We All Live With* - a painting that, in his words, “brought together African American and white antagonists,” causing them to recognize something of each other’s humanity in a small but crucial step towards healing.⁵⁰

Coles’ essay points to the way that *The Problem* was and is still today framed as redemptive, a painting that can change minds by changing hearts. Understanding that framing requires an engagement with the politics of childhood innocence in 1960’s America, and its role in the larger framing of the civil rights movement, in the 1960s and today. But it also requires an engagement with Rockwell, and the position of the *The Problem We All Live With* in the larger arc of his career. Rockwell’s painting generated such a strong response because of its place in a

⁵⁰ Robert Coles, “Ruby Bridges and a Painting,” in *Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People* (New York: Henry Abrams, Inc., 1999), 105-107.

universe that he had worked for decades to cultivate, and which felt familiar to his devoted audience of white, middle class Americans. That universe hinged on an illusion of American innocence that *The Problem We All Live With* disrupted.

A Man I Trusted: Norman Rockwell and American Innocence

In January of 2018, I called Chester Martin to ask about his letter. Tracking Martin down was not difficult; he still lives in Chattanooga. Getting him to talk about Norman Rockwell wasn't difficult, either, as he had followed Rockwell's work devotedly for most of his life. Now in his mid-eighties, he could still describe to me in detail the only Norman Rockwell original he'd ever seen, the sound of Rockwell's voice on the radio, and the closest encounter to Rockwell he ever had: through a friend of a friend, who'd once seen the artist get out of a car. Rockwell had written back to his letter, in February of 1964, and Martin had saved the reply and envelope for the rest of his life.

Fifty-four years later, Martin didn't remember *The Problem We All Live With* as changing his mind about integration so much as underscoring what he already believed: as he described it, the painting "punctuated [his] way of thinking." And he no longer remembers the particulars of his first encounter with it. But he remains clear on why he was moved by what he saw: after following Rockwell for so many years, Martin said, he believed the illustrator to be "as good an American as there ever was on the planet." He was receptive to the painting's message, he said, because "it came from a man I trusted."⁵¹ Like Martin, Rockwell's fans were devoted to him because of their association between Rockwell and American values, and their implicit trust in the universe he had created - a universe that relied on the tension between realism and fantasy.

⁵¹ Chester Martin, interview with author, 27 January 2018.

These characteristics formed the foundation of his career, and framed the response to *The Problem We All Live With*, as well as its legacy.

The level of devotion that Martin describes is typical of the massive and still thriving community of Rockwell fans across the country. The Rockwell Museum and Archive in Stockbridge, Massachusetts receives over 120,000 visitors every year.⁵² And Rockwell fans continue to have an incredibly personal relationship to his work. Rockwell's grandson, who grew up in Italy, wrote about his surprise, on first coming to the United States, at the reaction people had to his last name: "People would often ask me if I was related to [Norman Rockwell] and tell me how much they loved his work. The fondness with which people spoke of him made it seem like they knew him, as if Norman's works were in their family album alongside pictures of birthdays, graduations, and vacations."⁵³ Viewers did not encounter *The Problem We All Live With* in a vacuum. They encountered it as a surprising pivot from one of the most well-known artists of their lives - an artist that many of them, like Chester Martin, had come to trust.

In part, that trust was born out of familiarity. Born in 1894, Rockwell produced his first cover for the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1916 and his last in 1963: in total, he created over 322 covers for the magazine most closely associated with his name. By 1964, his paintings had been appearing in American living rooms for the better part of the century. In the event that you weren't one of the *Post*'s millions of subscribers, you might still have encountered Rockwell's work in the annual calendar he produced for the Boy Scouts of America for over fifty years, or seen his advertising work for one of over 150 companies.⁵⁴

⁵² "Annual Report: Fiscal Years 2014 & 2015," Norman Rockwell Museum, www.nrm.org.

⁵³ John Rockwell, "Foreword," in *Norman Rockwell: Behind the Camera*, Ron Schick (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2009), 7.

⁵⁴ Judy L. Larson and Maureen Hart Hennessey, "Norman Rockwell: A Viewpoint," in *Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999), 42.

The sheer longevity of Rockwell's career also contributed to the sense that he was a "good American," as Chester Martin called him. Rockwell had been a constant presence through many of the major events of the preceding fifty years - the Depression, two World Wars, the assassination of President Kennedy - and for his audience, his covers helped to define and interpret the twentieth century. Sometimes, his work commented on American values explicitly. In the *Four Freedoms*, for example, Rockwell gave concrete form to the freedoms articulated in President Roosevelt's 1941 State of the Union Address: freedom to worship, freedom of speech, freedom from want, freedom from fear. Paintings like these, which the Office of War Information used to raise money for war bonds, forever associated Rockwell with American patriotism. For his supporters, this made him an American hero, and for his critics, it proved that he was part of the American propaganda machine. For both, however, Rockwell and American values were indelibly linked.

But the bulk of Rockwell's work chronicled the events of the twentieth century more obliquely, focusing less on the headlines of the day than on the lives of ordinary people. Even in his *Four Freedoms* series, Rockwell grounded the abstract values Roosevelt articulated in mundane scenes: a family at the dinner table, a man standing to speak at a town hall, parents tucking their children into bed. This approach was typical of the vast majority of Rockwell's paintings, which illuminated small moments from everyday life: a woman and her grandson bow their heads in prayer before a meal; a man gets a new television installed in his home. More often than not, these scenes grew from Rockwell's imagination, but they tapped into something that millions of Americans around the country found familiar, scenes that spoke to their lives, their traditions, and their sense of themselves.

This familiarity was partly the result of an intentional strategy by the magazine that employed Rockwell for most of his career. As the dominant weekly circular for much of the

twentieth century, the *Saturday Evening Post* played a crucial role in the creation of mass culture and the white middle class. Especially in the pre-television era, the *Post* had outsized influence as what Deborah Solomon calls a “national frame of reference,” and the magazine’s founding editor, George Horace Lorimer, took full advantage of that position to cultivate a steady readership.⁵⁵ Because the *Post* was reliant on advertising space rather than subscription price to turn a profit, Anne Knutson writes, the magazine “used formulas that cut across class and gender lines,” and in doing so, “helped to define a huge new market - the emerging middle class - and identified that market’s needs for its advertisers.”⁵⁶ Rockwell’s style was deeply shaped by his relationship with the magazine and with the developing white middle class. For the magazine to sell, the scenes Rockwell depicted needed to feel welcoming and recognizable to a wide national readership. As Knutson puts it, “A Rockwell cover image was designed and used to sell three things to a newly defined public: the magazine itself; the goods advertised inside the magazine, and perhaps most importantly, a vision of who we are and how we should be as Americans.”⁵⁷

But Rockwell’s reputation as “the people’s painter” was more than just advertising strategy; it grew, as well, from his approach to painting.⁵⁸ Fundamental to Rockwell’s work was his belief that art should require no intermediary: his viewers should be able to interpret and respond to his paintings on their own. This belief was necessary for an artist whose paintings appeared on the cover of the *Post* with no titles or captions; they had to be able to stand on their own. Rockwell was beloved, accordingly, because his art was accessible. Sometimes, he was despised for the same reason: his approach seemed increasingly anachronistic in the age of

⁵⁵ Deborah Solomon, *American Mirror: The Life and Art of Norman Rockwell* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 9.

⁵⁶ Anne Knutson, “The Saturday Evening Post,” in *Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999), 144.

⁵⁷ Knutson, 152.

⁵⁸ Laurie Norton Moffatt, “The People’s Painter,” in *Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999).

Jackson Pollock, and Rockwell's status as a successful commercial artist associated with a middlebrow magazine only heightened the disdain he faced from the art world. But it was exactly these qualities that earned him the devotion of a massive audience of middle-class Americans.

The accessibility of Rockwell's art was grounded in his devotion to realism. Rockwell's son wrote that the "absolute realism of my father's pictures was the means he used to create the direct and unmediated relationship between picture and public ... The pictures are so clear and detailed, so precisely and simply there in front of us, that they seem to present the story innocent of artifice. We can encounter the picture directly because it shows us a physical reality we do not doubt."⁵⁹ In order to provoke real emotion, Rockwell believed, a painting had to feel real - and as a result, his paintings were firmly grounded in the real world. Much Rockwell lore is devoted to the artist's quests for the right props, the right setting, the right models: he once put out classified ads in the paper for hospital patients with eye injuries to help him convincingly paint the bruising on a black eye. His finished paintings were rarely identifiably set in any specific place, but they often grew from real places. Rockwell would scout out exactly the right diner or doctor's office - and then he'd use the real space as a springboard into a fictional world. His models were mostly friends, family, or people he met on the streets. This adherence to the details of the material world provided grounding to his idealized universe.

But the realism of Rockwell's style did not mean that the world he imagined was realistic. As Peter Rockwell himself noted, "the difficulty of this type of realism is that it takes a great deal of artifice to construct it." For Rockwell's son, the tension between artifice and realism was at the heart of his father's work as a painter. He cautioned viewers to remember that

⁵⁹ Peter Rockwell, "Some Comments from the Boy in a Dining Car," in *Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999), 74.

“although we encounter the painting directly, the painter is in careful control of what we see.”⁶⁰ Peter Rockwell refers partly to his father’s technique: the painstaking process of rendering a three-dimensional world in a two-dimensional form required all kinds of tricks. But there was a larger artifice operating in Rockwell’s work, as well: the world he created, which felt so familiar to his audience, was always a fantasy, an aspirational America. Rockwell acknowledged as much in his autobiography, writing, “Maybe as I grew up and found that the world wasn’t the perfectly pleasant place I had thought it to be I unconsciously decided that, even if it wasn’t an ideal world, it should be and so painted only the ideal aspects.” His work could be serious, even melancholy - but real conflict or danger of any kind were absent. As he put it in his autobiography, “If there was sadness...it was a pleasant sadness. If there were problems, they were humorous problems.”⁶¹ Even the crisis of World War II materialized in Rockwell’s work mostly through the comic misadventures of a fictional soldier named Willie Gillis, who faced no battlefields nor death. This, after all, was part of the appeal of Rockwell’s universe: it was not a place where viewers felt uneasy.

Importantly, that idealized, reassuring world was a white one, designed for a white audience. Rockwell’s son reports that the artist had always been personally supportive of civil rights causes; he had helped to advocate for the desegregation of sororities at the University of Vermont in 1946.⁶² But despite the occasional inclusion of characters of color in his work, Rockwell’s paintings largely reflect the instructions he reportedly received from George Horace

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 74.

⁶¹ Norman Rockwell, *Norman Rockwell: My Adventures as an Illustrator* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1960), 44.

⁶² Jane Allen Petrick, *Hidden in Plain Sight: The Other People of Norman Rockwell’s America* (Informed Decisions Publishing, 2013), 3.

Lorimer that his covers should “never show colored people except as servants.”⁶³ Whatever Rockwell’s personal politics, the universe he created had always been populated mostly by a white cast, and it had served to reinforce a white world, in which people of color were minor and supporting characters, whose presence did nothing to disrupt the sense of overall ease and harmony. No racial tensions or inequalities existed to trouble the readership of the *Saturday Evening Post*. Rockwell had, for most of his career, imagined those inequalities out of existence, creating a world where no such intractable problems existed - crafted a universe, in short, that catered to white ease.

Children and childhood were key to this fantasy. Rockwell had built his reputation as a painter of children, who were frequently the subject of his *Saturday Evening Post* covers. In fact, David Hickey argues that Rockwell’s “tolerance for and faith in the young” is what made him a “peculiarly American artist.” Kids were the bedrock of Rockwell’s America: “he painted a society grounded not in the wisdom of its elders,” Hickey writes, “but in the promise of its youth.”⁶⁴ For half a century, Rockwell had been painting quintessential images of an idyllic American childhood: little boys with dogs, little girls with dolls, kids playing baseball, jumping into swimming holes, cheering for the football game, getting ready for the prom. In keeping with Rockwell’s broader universe, the kids he painted were sometimes mischievous, but fundamentally innocent: his little boys sometimes broke rules, and even his little girls got into the occasional scuffle, but there was no suggestion that these children were troubled or troublesome or doing anything other than exactly what kids should be doing. And, like the rest of his universe, the children he painted were overwhelmingly white.

⁶³ Karal Ann Marling, *Civil Rights in Oz: Images of Kansas in American Popular Art*, (Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, 1997), 11.

⁶⁴ David Hickey, “The Kids are All Right: After the Prom,” in *Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999), 120-121.

Rockwell's children thus reflected and helped to reify deeply-ingrained cultural beliefs about the sanctity of white childhood that had been developing for over a century in tandem with the end of slavery and the rise of Jim Crow. The notion that children were inherently innocent and pure began to take root in American culture in the late 18th century; by the mid- nineteenth century, the innocence of childhood was an omnipresent cultural trope. Importantly, however, assumptions of innocence did not apply to all children: rather, as Robin Bernstein puts it, innocence was "raced white."⁶⁵ At the same moment that American culture was inundated with images of delicate white girls with blond hair and angelic smiles, black children were increasingly portrayed in American popular culture as pickaninnies: mischievous, dirty, and wild children. Minstrel shows, children's books, and other cultural artifacts often featured pickaninnies encountering violence: falling into the mouths of alligators, or shooting themselves with shotguns. The framing of these scenarios as harmless fun or comic relief helped to cement the stereotype that black children did not feel pain or need protection in the same way as white children. And in the same cultural moment that increasingly linked white childhood, and especially white girlhood, to vulnerability and innocence, the lack of these characteristics in popular representations of black youth meant that black children were increasingly not portrayed as children at all. As Bernstein puts it, "the libel that African American juveniles were invulnerable, did not suffer, and were not victims... defined them out of childhood itself."⁶⁶

These cultural tropes were never static or unquestioned, but were resisted by both black and white activists. Abolitionists intentionally publicized the suffering of black adults and children under slavery. "When abolitionists dramatized slaves' pain," Bernstein writes, "they

⁶⁵ Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 4.

⁶⁶ Bernstein, 42.

based an argument for human rights on the ability to suffer.”⁶⁷ Early 20th century racial uplift ideologies reflect a similar attention to representation amongst African American elites. Photographs regularly published in W.E.B. DuBois’s *The Crisis* magazine intentionally countered stereotypes of African American children with representations of immaculately dressed and perfectly behaved black youth. These representations were not just about disproving stereotypes of African-American children: they were about challenging the inequalities and injustices that these stereotypes masked and justified. As Rebecca de Schweinitz notes, “in the minds of many early-twentieth-century African American leaders, the struggle for middle-class respectability, perhaps best represented by images of idealized children, was indistinguishable from the struggle for racial equality.”⁶⁸

Rockwell was not painting pickaninnies; as in his larger universe, he was mostly not painting children of color at all. But his depictions of white children did more than reinforce the sense that an innocent, wholesome, American childhood was a white one; they were foundational to the apparent innocence of Rockwell’s America. Bernstein has traced the links between the development of white childhood innocence and a larger posture of white obliviousness to racial inequities. She terms this dynamic “racial innocence,” or “the use of childhood to make political projects appear innocuous, natural, and therefore justified.”⁶⁹ The innocence of white childhood as it had developed by the early twentieth century was so blinding that it provided a powerful association of innocence with whatever it touched. Rockwell’s paintings are no exception: Rockwell placed white childhood at the center of the American values his paintings embodied for

⁶⁷ Bernstein, 50.

⁶⁸ Rebecca de Schweinitz, *If We Could Change the World: Young People and America’s Long Struggle for Racial Equality* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 24. For more on the representation of black childhood in the abolitionist movement, see also Mary Niall Mitchell, *Raising Freedom’s Child: Black Childhood and Visions of the Future After Slavery* (NYU Press, 2008).

⁶⁹ Bernstein, 4.

so many of his viewers, and in doing so, he created a sense of the whole universe as a racially innocent place - harmless, and deeply oblivious to the question of race.

***The Problem We All Live With* and The Politics of Childhood Innocence**

Given the work they were accustomed to, Rockwell fans who encountered *The Problem We All Live With* in January of 1964 would have found themselves in deeply unfamiliar territory. For one thing, the image was not on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, but in the pages of *Look* magazine. The change of venue signalled a larger shift: although *Look* published plenty of fluff, it had also gained a reputation for its civil rights reporting when it published an interview with the murderers of Emmett Till in 1956.

What caused this shift? Rockwell's biographers offer no clear epiphany, although significant changes in his life had been brewing for some time. He had entered a more politically engaged circle: his wife had entered treatment for alcoholism at the Austen Riggs Center, prompting the family's relocation to Stockbridge, Massachusetts, where Rockwell entered therapy with Erik Erikson, and had conversations about current events with neighbors like Reinhold Niebuhr.⁷⁰ At the same time, Rockwell's relationship with the *Post* was under strain: a new editor had moved the magazine in a different direction, featuring more politicians and celebrities on the covers. Rockwell, accordingly, was employed more frequently as a portraitist - a role which he disliked, balking at its constraints on his creative license. Starting in the early 1960's, Rockwell had begun to suggest that he wanted to try out a different kind of work. In a 1961 interview, he said, "Now I am wildly excited about painting contemporary subjects, pictures

⁷⁰ Marling, *Civil Rights in Oz*, 14. After Mary's death, Rockwell remarried in 1961 to Molly Punderson, who some biographers credit with pushing him towards a more politically-oriented worldview.

about civil rights, astronauts, the Peace Corps, the poverty program.”⁷¹ Moving to *Look* would allow him to explore these subjects.

The Problem We All Live With was Rockwell’s first painting for *Look*, where he would continue to publish until the magazine folded in the early 1970’s. And with this first painting, Rockwell made clear that he intended to move in a very different direction. In *The Problem We All Live With*, Rockwell looked squarely at the biggest social issue of the moment, with no wink, no comic relief, no playful or reassuring undertone. His title alone, with its frank acknowledgment of the existence of a problem -- and its insistence that it was “our” problem -- was uncharted territory.

Like so many of Rockwell’s paintings, *The Problem We All Live With* tells a clear and easily accessible story, even without any explanatory captions. The only brightly colored objects in the painting are the child’s school things, the marshals’ yellow armbands and the tomato splattered on the wall. As a result, the viewer’s attention is immediately drawn to the central plotlines of the narrative: the child is on her way to school (or returning from it), the men around her are marshals, and she is in hostile territory, indicated by the tomato and the racial slurs scrawled on the wall behind her. At the heart of this scene is the girl herself, and Rockwell worked to ensure that his viewers would focus here. By cropping the heads off of his marshals, Rockwell reduced them to bodies in uniform, making the little girl the only whole person in the painting and the natural focal point for the viewer. In addition, the marshals create a bubble of empty space around the child. While this space was a necessity for any painting intended for a two-page spread in a magazine, it also further reinforced the importance of the figure at its center.

That figure was a young, African American girl. She does not appear to be afraid. Rockwell could have placed the girl on either side of the gutter, closer to the front pair of

⁷¹ Quoted in Marling, *Civil Rights in Oz*, 8.

marshals or to the two behind. Preliminary sketches indicate that the artist played with both options, but his ultimate decision creates a sense of forward motion -- the child is pushing onward, not lagging behind. This positioning gives an impression of determination, which is mirrored in the girl's face: Rockwell's little girl wears a smooth and calm expression, her gaze is fixed directly in front of her. But despite her bravery, she is still young and vulnerable, inviting pity and protectiveness as much as admiration. The height of the men around her - underscored by the fact that we cannot see their whole bodies - emphasizes her small stature. Their uniformity draws attention to her individualization, but also her isolation. The school things she clutches remind the reader of her youth, as does her outfit: a giant bow on the back of her dress, and a matching one in her hair, tennis shoes on her feet with her socks rolled down around her ankles. Against a background of beiges and greys, the little girl's clothes are blindingly, immaculately white.

This scene and the figure at the heart of it would have been immediately legible to an American audience that had watched multiple desegregation battles unfold on the nightly news since 1957. In 1964, it might have brought to mind not just the crises in Little Rock and New Orleans, but the children huddled against fire hoses during the 1963 Birmingham Children's March, or the four young girls who had been murdered when a bomb exploded at their Birmingham church only a few months before *The Problem We All Live With* appeared in the pages of *Look*. Rockwell's little girl marked a turning point in his own career, but his painting generated such strong responses not only because it was so unusual for Rockwell, but because it was so familiar in the context of 1960's America. Childhood innocence had helped Rockwell create an idealized, innocent universe; now, he deployed the same tools to point viewers towards the problem of race, rather than away from it. But he was hardly the first to do so: questions of

race and childhood innocence were central to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, and to the broader civil rights movement.

The school desegregation movement had linked cultural investment in childhood and a growing interest in psychology together in a powerful assault on segregation. Organized resistance to legalized segregation dates back far before the 1950's, and the NAACP had been methodically attacking school segregation in courts since the 1930's. But the primary focus of these cases had been graduate schools, as the NAACP believed that equalization at this level was more feasible, and that public opposition to integration with this age group would be less pronounced.⁷² *Brown v. Board* relied on the legal foundation laid by these cases, but it was cases surrounding younger children that finally dismantled legal segregation. Rebecca de Schweinitz notes that midcentury America was particularly receptive to arguments focused on childhood, as mainstream American culture "glorified domestic life" and concerns about juvenile delinquency were high.⁷³ At the same time, the developing field of psychology heightened attention to the interior world of children, and to the possibility that they might suffer or be damaged in ways invisible to the naked eye. Erik Erikson - Rockwell's psychologist by the 1960s, and a mentor of Robert Coles - was key to the development of this body of research.

The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision reflects its cultural moment: the decision - built, in part, on the research of psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark - argued that segregation generates "a feeling of inferiority" in children of color that may "affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone."⁷⁴ In her analysis of the research that supported this assertion -- especially the famous Doll Tests, in which children were asked to associate black

⁷² Baker, *The Second Battle of New Orleans*, 125.

⁷³ de Schweinitz, 4.

⁷⁴ Opinion of the Court in *Brown v. Board of Education*, in *Brown v. Board of Education: A Brief History with Documents*, Waldo E. Martin, Jr., ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998).

and white baby dolls with positive and negative attributes -- Robin Bernstein writes that the Clarks and the NAACP produced “a spectacle of black children’s pain” that framed “segregation as cruelty towards children” and civil rights as a “form of child protection.” The *Brown v. Board* decision accepted this framing, and in doing so, Bernstein argues, the Supreme Court justices took steps toward “culturally desegregating childhood innocence itself.”⁷⁵ *Brown v. Board* was groundbreaking not just for its assertion that segregation could harm children of color, but in its public concern with children of color suffering in the first place. Black children, the Supreme Court asserted, were innocent children, too, and their pain violated American ideals.

In the aftermath of *Brown v. Board*, segregationists pushed back against this argument. Finding that segregation on the basis of race alone would no longer stand in court, white supremacists turned to a different refrain: that black children were maladapted at best and dangerous at worst, and that integration would therefore bring disorder and chaos, and endanger white children. Segregationist rhetoric frequently conjured the specter of interracial sex and portrayed black youth as violent and diseased. This kind of rhetoric -- echoed by segregationist leaders around the country -- fanned the fires of resistance and contributed to the hysteria of the mobs that gathered outside of schools like Frantz. But it was a legal strategy, too, allowing Southern legislators to argue their right to keep black children out of white schools in order to “protect public health, morals, and welfare” -- rights they argued were granted to the state under the 10th Amendment - rather than to maintain segregation, per se.⁷⁶

The struggle to desegregate schools that followed *Brown v. Board* unfolded in the context of these competing portrayals of black youth, and young children remained central to that struggle as it evolved into a broader assault on the structures of Jim Crow in the 1960’s. Rebecca

⁷⁵ Bernstein, 241.

⁷⁶ Baker, 226.

de Schweinitz argues that African-American activists “often focused on ideas about childhood and images of children to explain the meaning of the movement and to elicit public support for civil rights politics.”⁷⁷ The NAACP was careful in their selection of the children who would desegregate schools, focusing on young people whose “obvious respectability” in dress and demeanor would stand as a visible rebuttal to the arguments of white supremacists that black children were violent and dangerous.⁷⁸ In doing so, the NAACP repeatedly staged a morality play for the nation between rabidly angry white mobs and perfectly composed black children. The resulting press coverage left no question about which side was violent and dangerous.

By 1963, the threat of violence to innocent children had become one of the defining tropes of the broader civil rights movement. Iconic photographs of the 1963 Children’s Crusade in Birmingham, in particular, framed the struggle in terms of white adult violence towards passive and peaceful black children. By the time Rockwell began work on his painting in the late fall of 1963, the 16th Street Church bombing in Birmingham that killed four young African-American girls reminded the nation just how far white supremacists were willing to go. Those four girls were not the first children to die in the civil rights struggle, nor were they first to shake the conscience of the nation: the murder of Emmett Till in 1955 struck a similar chord. But as Rebecca de Schweinitz points out, the rhetoric of childhood innocence played out quite differently in the trial of Till’s murderers: the defense attempted to portray Till as manly, aggressive, and dangerous, and therefore deserving of his death. Their ability to even attempt this strategy in relation to the murder of a fourteen-year-old demonstrates how tenuously white Americans applied notions of childhood innocence to black children, particularly boys.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ de Schweinitz, 90.

⁷⁸ de Schweinitz, 107.

⁷⁹ The gendered dynamics of discourses surrounding childhood innocence contributed to the disproportionate number of girls and young women who participated in desegregating schools. For more on

But in 1963, no one tried to argue that little girls at church were anything other than innocent. “To the nation’s press, the black community, and much of America, the death of four girls at church and two black boys in the violent aftermath of the bombing became undeniable evidence of the depravity of southern racism,” writes Rebecca de Schweinitz. The two boys mentioned by de Schweinitz highlight an important point: six black children were killed on September 5, 1963, but the two boys -- one of whom was killed by police, the other by white teenagers -- have largely faded from national memory. The girls, on the other hand, remain enshrined in civil rights history as martyrs. Church-going little girls were resonant symbols of innocence in a way that no other children were.

It was in this political and cultural context that Rockwell’s *The Problem We All Live With* was published. Rockwell was not, then, a pioneer in portraying African-American children as innocent. On the contrary, his painting echoed what had been one of the dominant tropes of civil rights photography for the last decade. But Rockwell’s work made a particularly resonant statement, because of how strongly he was associated with the imagery of childhood innocence. In *The Problem We All Live With*, Rockwell folded the small African-American child at the center of his painting into the universe of childhood he had already created. The dress in *The Problem We All Live With* mirrors other spotlessly white outfits worn by young white girls in *After the Prom* and *Girl at the Mirror*. The schoolgirl clutching her books echoes other Rockwell students, in *Day in the Life of a Little Girl*, *Girl with Black Eye*, and *Checkup*, all of which featured little white girls with braids and bows and schoolbooks, and outfits nearly interchangeable with the girl from *The Problem*, rolled socks and all. At first glance, at least, the protagonist of Rockwell’s new painting might have been any of Rockwell’s little girls, except that

the role these women played, and the gendered dynamics of desegregation itself, see Rachel Devlin’s *A Girl Stands at the Door: The Generation of Young Women Who Desegregated America’s Schools* (New York: Basic Books, 2018).

she was black. And this was exactly what made *The Problem We All Live With* powerful: Rockwell's painting made segregation absurd by making his little girl legible first and foremost as a child, like any of the others he had painted.

But unlike other Rockwellian children, this girl had little space for anything beyond innocence or bravery. Most of the kids in Rockwell's universe are brimming with life, movement, emotion, and often, mischievousness. The child in *The Problem We All Live With* is in motion, too, but her movement is small and constrained, and her emotions are difficult to read. Few Rockwell children are so physically and emotionally composed, unless Rockwell portrayed them asleep. Likewise, few of Rockwell's other children need much protection, from grownups or anyone else, because they never face real danger. But the little girl in *The Problem* requires a federal escort to arrive safely at school. Unlike any other child that Rockwell had painted before, she is the target of real hate. She may be brave, but she's also vulnerable.

In this way, too, Rockwell was typical of the portrayal of the civil rights movement in the mainstream media. Iconic photographs of the era focus on middle-class, well-dressed children, passively and peacefully resisting an onslaught of white violence and hatred. These were not the only photographs of the era taken: as Leigh Raiford and Martin Berger have chronicled, black newspapers and organizations often circulated photographs that showed black protesters in more active, defiant, and agential roles. But more often than not, these were not the photographs that made the front page of national papers, which targeted a white, moderate audience. Such a media framing catered to the conscience of whites without troubling the established racial power dynamics. "By placing blacks in the timeworn position of victim and supplicant," Berger writes, "the photographs presented storylines that allowed magnanimous and sympathetic whites to

imagine themselves bestowing rights on blacks, given that the dignified and suffering blacks of the photographic record appeared in no position to take anything from white America.”⁸⁰

Rockwell’s painting fits within this racial logic. His mostly white, middle class viewers are invited to pity and fear for the little girl in *The Problem We All Live With*, to feel anger at anyone who would hurt her, and to align themselves with those who protect her - in this case, the U.S. government, represented by four white marshalls. In this way, Rockwell’s painting is ultimately a patriotic one: it highlights the gap between the experience of the little girl and the American ideals Rockwell upheld in his previous work, but it offers a resolution, too: the government can, and will, ensure the rights of children like this one. This interpretation is underscored by a story Rockwell liked to tell about the Russian press - who, he said, had misinterpreted his painting, suggesting that it depicted policemen taking the little girl to prison.⁸¹ A closer look at the article - entitled “Democracy, American Style” - suggests that Rockwell overplayed the misinterpretation: *Pravda*, in fact, offered a fairly accurate description of *The Problem We All Live With*. But by including the painting in an article that also discussed the abuses of Southern police forces against peaceful protestors, “Democracy, American Style” did allow its readers to conflate the two, and therefore to assume that Rockwell’s marshals were oppressing, rather than defending, the little girl. Such an interpretation would be, in fact, quite reasonable: all across the country, civil rights protestors were finding the local authorities more likely to be part of the problem than the solution.

⁸⁰ Berger, *Seeing Through Race*, 8.

⁸¹ This story originates with Stanley G. Barsky, the Soviet Desk Officer for the U.S. Information Agency, who in March of ‘64 sent Rockwell a clipping from *Pravda* (dated February 28), a translation of the text, and a note, which read: “I thought the attached presentation of your work in the Soviet press may be of interest to you. This, obviously, is a Soviet misrepresentation.” Box 5, Norman Rockwell Separated Correspondence; Civil Rights Correspondence, Norman Rockwell Museum Archives, Stockbridge, MA.

But for Rockwell, such a conclusion was unthinkable. The surprise and amusement with which he repeated the story of the “Soviet misunderstanding” underscores the degree to which he was invested in a different interpretation: to the artist and his audience, there was no question at all about whose side the marshals were on. The country had a problem, yes, but the government was there to help solve it. This, then, is the bigger misunderstanding, and a revealing one. The Soviets were critiquing the American system, pointing to a rot at the heart of American democracy. For Rockwell, racial prejudice was at odds with American ideals, but his faith in those ideals was unshaken. And in placing his little girl within this patriotic framework, he tied the emotional power of his painting to a national narrative of progress towards eventual triumph over racism.

From this perspective, *The Problem We All Live With* was not such a pivot after all. Rockwell centered racial injustice in his work, but he did not fundamentally challenge the notion of American innocence at the heart of his universe. Instead, he offered a path toward redemption: through recognizing “the problem,” through feeling moved by the sight of this little girl, white Americans could find their way back to their ideals. And with *The Problem We All Live With*, Rockwell embedded that framework into the memory of Ruby Bridges - although, importantly, the association between the person and the painting was not instant, but forged over time.

Rockwell’s Ruby

Why did Rockwell turn his attention to the subject of school desegregation in 1963? I have already outlined the factors influencing his pivot towards more political work, but they do not necessarily explain why Rockwell tackled this particular painting at this particular time. Letters between Rockwell and Hurlburt suggest that the subject and design of *The Problem We All Live With* came not from *Look*’s editors but from Rockwell himself: “As you know,” Hurlburt wrote to

Rockwell in October of 1963, “Dan and I are very excited about your idea for a painting of the Negro child and the marshals. We like it as you described it to us and I think we all agree that it should occupy a complete spread with bleed on all four sides.”⁸² Nothing about “How We Live” - the feature article in the January 1964 issue of *Look* in which *The Problem* was included - suggested that Rockwell intended his painting to directly illustrate its contents, which gave as much weight to reflections on modern design as it did to segregation. And while it’s likely that Rockwell encountered press coverage of the desegregation of New Orleans schools in 1960, the crisis that had unfolded three years before had long since faded from national headlines. 1964 marked the ten-year anniversary of the *Brown v. Board* decision, which may have influenced Rockwell’s timing.⁸³ If so, however, the painter might have depicted any number of subjects to reflect on this anniversary. Why, then, did Rockwell turn to Ruby Bridges in 1963?

Biographers suggest that *The Problem We All Live With* may have been inspired by texts already in circulation. Ruby Bridges had in fact first appeared in the work of John Steinbeck, who had traveled to New Orleans in 1960 with his standard poodle, Charley, curious to see the desegregation crisis first hand. Steinbeck had chronicled his visit in *Travels With Charley*, and while there’s no definitive evidence that Rockwell read it, the book was extremely popular in the early 1960’s, and Karal Ann Marling writes that the text’s episodic nature made it exactly “Rockwell’s kind of book.”⁸⁴ More persuasively, perhaps, Rockwell’s painting mirrors Steinbeck’s description of Ruby Bridges almost exactly:

⁸² Allen F. Hurlburt to Norman Rockwell, 1 October 1963, Box 5, Norman Rockwell Separated Correspondence; Civil Rights Correspondence, Norman Rockwell Museum Archives, Stockbridge, MA.

⁸³ Norman Rockwell Museum chief curator Stephanie Haboush Plunkett suggests this connection in a digital painting tour of *The Problem We All Live With*. Norman Rockwell Museum, “Painting Tour: ‘The Problem We All Live With’ (1964),” YouTube Video, 9 December 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4Trz-ijBYg>.

⁸⁴ Karal Ann Marling, *Norman Rockwell* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997), 143.

“Four big marshals got out of each car and from somewhere in the automobiles they extracted the littlest Negro girl you ever saw, dressed in shining starchy white, with new white shoes on feet so little they were almost round. Her face and little legs were very black against the white...The little girl did not look at the howling crowd but from the side the whites of her eyes showed like those of a frightened fawn. The men turned her around like a doll, and then the strange procession moved up the broad walk toward the school, and the child was even more a mite because the men were so big.”⁸⁵

Marling also suggests that Rockwell’s title might have been inspired by a moment from the following chapter: Steinbeck discusses what he’s just seen with a local who tells him, “But you’re from the North. This isn’t your problem.” “I guess it’s everybody’s problem,” Steinbeck replies.

Simultaneously, Robert Coles - who had been working with Ruby Bridges and her family, along with other students in the middle of desegregation battles, for three years -- had begun to publish his findings. By 1963, Rockwell might have encountered Coles’ work in any number of spaces: he’d been published in *The New Republic*, presented his work for the annual conference of the American Psychiatric Association in the spring, and was working on an article for the *American Journal of Psychiatry* in October, the same moment exactly that Norman Rockwell was discussing his idea for a painting with Allen Hurlburt. Moreover, Rockwell and Coles ran in overlapping circles: by 1963, Rockwell was on the board of the Austen Riggs Center, where Coles’ research would likely have been discussed - especially because Coles was a devoted disciple of Erik Erikson and his work.

Ultimately, we can’t know with certainty the degree to which the work of Steinbeck or Coles influenced Rockwell. Perhaps he’d simply never forgotten the photographs of a little girl he’d seen in the papers in 1960. But these possible sources for his painting nevertheless indicate something significant: when Rockwell decided to move forward with *The Problem We All Live With*, he was depicting a story that was already in circulation. Rockwell was not the only person thinking about Ruby Bridges in 1963 - although he may not have known he was thinking about

⁸⁵ John Steinbeck, *Travels With Charley In Search of America*, 50th Anniversary Edition, (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 186.

her, exactly, since newspaper accounts from the time omitted her name for her own safety. But as early as 1963, multiple versions of the story of Ruby Bridges already existed in popular culture and in academic literature, versions with wide reach in a variety of social circles. The story was already taking on a life of its own. And Rockwell helped to further it - because whether Rockwell was responding to those versions or remembering the girl herself, *The Problem We All Live With* was neither a portrait of Bridges nor an illustration of the desegregation crisis of November 1960 in New Orleans, exactly. Instead, his painting was an interpretation, an illustration of an idea rather than an attempt to represent events exactly as they unfolded.

Ruby Bridges' anonymity in 1963 may help to explain why Rockwell did not attempt to photograph her in person, as he had when commissioned to paint other famous individuals. But given Rockwell's connections to Robert Coles through the Riggs Center and Erikson, he likely could have tracked down Bridges, if he had wanted to. Instead, he worked from a model named Lynda Gunn, the granddaughter of a friend, and one of the very few African-American children in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Rockwell met first with Lynda's cousin, Anita, a girl of around the same age who lived in nearby Great Barrington, and conducted modeling sessions with both children. He told the families that the final painting was a composite figure, although most biographers agree that Lynda was the primary model for the finished product.⁸⁶ Likewise, Rockwell did not mimic AP photographs of Bridges exactly. Instead, he added and removed details as he saw fit. The tomato splatter, the racial slurs, the school things clutched by the little girl, and even the dingy wall in the background are details of Rockwell's imagination.

⁸⁶ Lynda's cousin, however, still made her mark on the painting: when he first met Anita, Rockwell was drawn to the blue dress she was wearing, and he asked her family to make another, in white. Rockwell seemed to feel that his models and their costumes matched the vision in his head: "I already have the 7-year-old girl," he wrote to Allen Hurlburt. "She is just perfect. Her grandmother is sewing the white dress for her."

At the same time, Rockwell excluded material that did not serve his purpose: there is no evidence that Rockwell was invested in capturing the details of New Orleans in 1960, or the Upper 9th Ward, or of the William Frantz School: in fact, there is nothing in this painting that ties it to a particular location at all. A number of the AP photographs of Ruby Bridges' first day at school featured her mother, but in Rockwell's painting, the little girl walks alone. Much press attention was devoted to the so-called Cheerleaders who gathered to protest every morning - indeed, Steinbeck wrote about these women at length, and Coles devoted a great deal of effort to understanding the inner workings of the families who opposed integration. But the protestors are absent here, too: their proximity is implied only by the tomato splatter on the wall. Rockwell was a thoughtful, thorough, and controlled painter, meticulous about every decision. That he did not include these details underscores that he was not interested in representing exactly what had unfolded in November of 1960. As Deborah Solomon put it, "he was not transcribing a scene but inventing one."⁸⁷

That approach is exactly what gave the painting its power. Many of the letters written to Rockwell after the publication of *The Problem We All Live With* in 1964 suggest that the impact of the painting lay in the fact that it *was* a painting, rather than a photograph or a news report. David Malarcher wrote that the painting "illustrates and emphasizes more forcibly than a whole library of words just what our constitution and its just administration mean to each and every citizen."⁸⁸ Another admirer wrote, "All of us in 1963 are well read when it comes to the revolution now sweeping America. In fact, we are so well read that another article or another painting tends to put us to sleep. YOU have just said in one painting what most people cannot say

⁸⁷ Solomon, 368-369.

⁸⁸ Malarcher to Rockwell, 12 February 1964.

in a lifetime.”⁸⁹ Will McBride, a friend of Rockwell’s and a photographer, agreed: “You certainly can say a lot more in your paintings than we photographers with our pictures.”⁹⁰

In his 1999 essay on *The Problem We All Live With*, Robert Coles underscored this point, writing about the difference between “television’s documentary footage and the work of an artist - a painter’s kindly but firm evocation of a moral moment in a nation’s history, as contrasted to the first-hand, sometimes only thinly edited camera work that appeared on home screens.” The power of Rockwell’s painting, he argues, lies in the fact that it is *not* an attempt to accurately portray Ruby Bridges or the situation on the ground outside of Frantz - it is no straightforward, first-hand, “thinly edited” reporting of the facts. Only because it is not, Coles suggests, can it evoke “a moral moment” that speaks to a nation.⁹¹

As with so many of Rockwell’s paintings, then, the power of *The Problem We All Live With* lay in the tension between reality and artifice. Grounded in real events and meticulous details, the painting feels real and recognizable, and it generates real emotion. But the image is nevertheless ultimately an invention, an interpretation of real life events that transcends them to speak to something larger. If it hadn’t captured something of “the real Ruby,” Coles suggests, the painting could not have rung true - but if Rockwell had attempted nothing more than a portrait of Bridges, he would not have been able to speak to a nation.

Responses to the painting indicated that even in 1964, the image was interpreted not as a direct depiction of any one particular incident, but as a broader reflection on larger national

⁸⁹ Letter to Norman Rockwell (author illegible), 2 January 1964. Sent to Donna Fricker by Linda Pero of the Norman Rockwell Museum, 3 March 2005. William Frantz School file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.

⁹⁰ Will McBride to Norman Rockwell, 10 January 1964. Sent to Donna Fricker by Linda Pero of the Norman Rockwell Museum, 3 March 2005. William Frantz School file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.

⁹¹ Robert Coles, “Ruby Bridges and a Painting,” in *Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People* (New York: Henry Abrams, Inc., 1999).

themes of racial injustice, civil rights, and desegregation. In all of the letters I have cited, not one mentions Ruby Bridges by name. Of course, in 1964, the identity of the little girls who had helped to integrate New Orleans schools was still not widely known - but more broadly, I have not encountered no letter that ties the painting specifically to events in New Orleans in 1960. In fact, one letter to Rockwell assumed that *The Problem We All Live With* referred to an incident in Alabama.⁹² This is not to suggest that no reader made the connection - but these letters highlight that the response of readers was never about the specific people, or places, or events that had inspired Rockwell; it was about the way his painting made them feel. Rockwell had not created a painting of Ruby Bridges - he had created a symbol. This remained true for years: it was not until the 1990's that Ruby Bridges and the painting became consistently linked in the public mind.

I emphasize this point because over time, the difference between the girl in Rockwell's painting and Ruby Bridges herself became increasingly blurred. By 1995, when Ruby Bridges re-entered the national spotlight, the inspiration and the painting had been linked explicitly. Today, Rockwell's image is equated with Ruby Bridges, and sometimes by Ruby Bridges herself: the logo of the Ruby Bridges Foundation, for example, features the silhouette of the girl from *The Problem We All Live With*.

But the distinction between the two matters because, as Peter Rockwell reminds us, the painter of *The Problem We All Live With* has control over what we see. Rockwell linked his little girl to a national and nationalistic narrative of progress towards racial justice that transcended the particularities of New Orleans in 1960. But he did so by excluding those particularities from the story altogether, in favor of a near total focus on the innocence and youth of the little girl at the

⁹² Randolph Casper to Norman Rockwell, 3 January 1964. Sent to Donna Fricker by Linda Pero of the Norman Rockwell Museum, 3 March 2005. William Frantz School file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.

center of the story he was telling, and on the way she made audiences feel. Rockwell's painting was all about Ruby, as he envisioned her - but it was not fundamentally about Bridges, specifically, or about what had happened to her, or about the school she was walking towards. But because of the eventual link between the painting and the person - because the two would become nearly synonymous - Rockwell's choices in the creation of his symbol ultimately embedded these same themes into the memory of Ruby Bridges, too, and helped to define what she herself meant to the nation.

Touchstone: Ruby Transforms Robert Coles, and Vice Versa

In his 1999 essay on *The Problem We All Live With*, Robert Coles wrote about his relationship with Ruby Bridges, the little girl that - by then - was widely known as the inspiration for Rockwell's painting. In that essay, Coles describes how he first came to know Ruby, as he refers to her, through what he calls a "fateful coincidence [that] changed my life." Coles tells the story like this: it was the fall of 1960, and he was stationed as an Air Force physician in Biloxi, Mississippi. On the day in question he was traveling to New Orleans for a medical conference, when he found his route obstructed by a police blockade, related to a commotion surrounding the desegregation of a nearby school. Coles decided to walk the few blocks to the school and see what was going on for himself. He found the crowd of protesters easily and observed them for a while as they chanted, "Two, four, six, eight, we don't want to integrate!" Coles writes that he was on the verge of turning around when "a hush, an almost audible spell of silence" fell over the crowd at the arrival of several cars:

"Out of them, a number of men jumped quickly, warily, and out of one car, two men and a small girl dressed in white, with a white bow in her hair and a lunchbox in her right hand. Suddenly, as the men and the child approached the school, walked up its steps, the crowd got back its collective voice and started the chant I'd already heard, kept repeating it, interrupted by cuss words, threats, terrible curses. The girl didn't look back; the men kept walking and, I noticed, were armed."

Shortly after the girl and her escort entered the building, Coles left - but he was “lost in melancholy thought,” and ultimately, as he describes it, this chance meeting set in motion the rest of his career: “Not long afterwards,” he writes, “in a way, my working life began: I determined it was my job to try to get to know Ruby Bridges, that girl I’d seen...and in the years following, a host of African American children who initiated school desegregation in city after city of the deep South...”⁹³

Soon after meeting with Bridges in 1960, Robert Coles launched a study into what would become one of the defining questions of his career: how did children handle the pressures and stresses of desegregation? He set out to get to know the four first-graders chosen to desegregate New Orleans schools, and he and his wife began to visit Ruby, Tessie, Leona, and Gail on a regular basis.⁹⁴ From these initial meetings grew a research project which would take up much of the next several years of Coles’ life. By the following school year, Coles had expanded his study to Atlanta, and by 1963, he had spent two years meeting regularly with 41 students, white and black, in both cities.⁹⁵ The result of this research was a slew of articles, published in a wide variety of professional and popular journals, that would eventually form the backbone of Coles’ first book: *Children of Crisis: A Study of Courage and Fear*, published in 1967. *Children of Crisis*, in turn, was the first of a five-volume treatise on American childhood which would consume the next decade of Coles’ life and, in 1973, win him the Pulitzer Prize. By the turn of the century, Coles’ four- decade career had generated a Harvard professorship, a well-established reputation as an expert on American childhood, and more than 40 published books.

⁹³ Robert Coles, “Ruby Bridges and a Painting,” in *Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People* (New York: Henry Abrams, Inc., 1999), 105-107.

⁹⁴ Robert Coles, *Children of Crisis: A Study of Courage and Fear* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1967), 23.

⁹⁵ Robert Coles, “Southern Children Under Desegregation,” *The American Journal of Psychiatry* 120 (October 1963), 333.

Coles wrote his essay on Rockwell's painting in 1999, by which time his story about meeting Ruby by chance on the streets of New Orleans would have been familiar to anyone who followed his work. He'd repeated versions of the same story across published works, interviews, and speaking engagements for years. Since 1990, he had consistently pointed to Ruby Bridges as the spark that had launched his illustrious career. In a 1995 interview with the *New York Times*, Coles described Bridges' impact on his life in dramatic terms: "My life has never been the same since I stumbled into her," he explained. "She is my touchstone, because if I hadn't seen her and seen what happened, I would have gone on and never gotten involved. I was just thunderstruck by that mob and her stoic dignity, and so I went back and watched it again and again."⁹⁶ Touchstone is an apt description of Bridges' role in Coles' work, not just because meeting her set him on a particular professional trajectory, but because he returned to her again and again throughout the arc of his career. Bridges is the thread that runs throughout Coles' writing, a presence who comes and goes but never disappears altogether, and who serves as an illustration of an increasingly wide range of themes.

But Ruby did not always play such a starring role in Coles' writing. Her place in Coles' early work is important, but circumscribed: he learned a great deal from her about how children cope with desegregation, but he did not spend much time meditating on what she might offer beyond that context. For the first thirty years of his professional life, Coles did not describe his surprise encounter with Ruby Bridges as a turning point in his career. In fact, he did not describe this encounter at all. In Coles' work prior to the 1990's, I can find no reference to a chance meeting with Ruby Bridges on the streets of New Orleans in early 1960. Coles did know and work with Bridges, beginning in the fall of 1960 - but in his earlier writing, he tells the story of

⁹⁶ George Judson, "Child of Courage Joins Her Biographer; Pioneer of Integration is Honored with the Author She Inspired," *The New York Times*, 1 September 1995.

how he came to work with her quite differently. In his work prior to 1990, Coles writes that he went to New Orleans specifically to study the children involved in school desegregation there, and he emphasizes the role of the NAACP in connecting him to the families involved. There's no turning point, no fateful moment when he sees Ruby on the street and everything changes: just a child psychologist methodically conducting a research study.

In fact, in his writing prior to 1990, Coles identifies a different moment as a turning point. In *Children of Crisis*, he writes at length about an incident in early 1960 when, while stationed in Biloxi, he stumbled across a protest over the segregation of a local beach and witnessed a confrontation between a young white man and an older African-American woman which had a lasting effect. "I can still feel myself standing there," he wrote, "benighted, frightened, seized with curiosity, suddenly quite restless. I was not morally outraged...I simply wanted to go away; and I did." But he did not forget what he had seen, and over the next few weeks, a "new consciousness took root." Eventually, he found himself focusing on desegregation and civil rights in his research, and increasingly, he found himself not just an impartial researcher but involved in the struggle. From the vantage point of *Children of Crisis*, Coles looks back and identifies the beach protest as a turning point: and, he writes, "I think most people of the South - Negroes and whites alike - have experienced some of the same surprise I did, a jolting flash when one kind of world begins to collapse, another begins to appear, and it all becomes *apparent*."⁹⁷

The language Coles uses to describe this encounter and its impact is similar to the language he later uses to describe meeting Ruby on the street. But for some twenty-five years, Coles identified this moment - not meeting Ruby - as the turning point in his professional trajectory. In his 1989 book *Intellect and Spirit: The Life and Work of Robert Coles*, Bruce A. Ronda describes the beach moment as a Road-to-Damascus-style "conversion experience" in

⁹⁷ Coles, *Children of Crisis*, 4-8.

Coles life - and makes no reference at all to a first meeting with Ruby Bridges.⁹⁸ One year later, Coles published *The Spiritual Life of Children*, and for the first time, he identified his encounter with Ruby - not the Mississippi protest - as the moment when everything changed. From that point forward, the story became a fixture in Coles' descriptions of his own career.

My intention in pointing out this discrepancy is not necessarily to question Coles' sincerity in his post-1990 descriptions of Ruby. Rather, I intend to highlight that the role she played in the narrative of his own life changed significantly - that over time, Coles revisited and reinterpreted his past relationship to Bridges, and she, in turn, came to mean something new in the context of his work. This underscores the constructed nature of her character in his writing all along; the Ruby readers encounter in Coles' work was always filtered through his own interests and investments. In turn, Coles' identification of Bridges as the fulcrum of his career reflects a larger shift in the way she is depicted in his writing. Over the course of that career, Ruby become both an increasingly fixed and an increasingly flexible symbol in Coles' work. Fixed, because Ruby transformed from a messy, complex individual into a character whose contours were well-defined and predictable. And flexible, because the meaning of that character became increasingly broad: Ruby became a way for Coles to talk not just about desegregation, or child development, but to touch on themes of courage, resilience, and spirituality. In 1995, Coles published *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, a text which represents the apotheosis of Ruby's development in his writing. In it, he recounted the story of how Ruby prayed for the mob that gathered outside of her school to torment her - crafting a narrative that had very little to do with desegregation, and everything to do with forgiveness.

⁹⁸ Bruce A. Ronda, *Intellect and Spirit: The Life and Work of Robert Coles* (New York: Continuum, 1989), 15.

This Ruby looked very different from the one that had appeared in his work throughout the 1960's. Coles spent most of his career insisting on the full, complex individuality of his research subjects, and resisting frameworks that flattened those individuals by transforming them into generalizations or symbols. In the end, he made Ruby into exactly the sort of symbol he claimed to reject. Tracing the trajectory of that process allows us to see how desegregation dropped out of the memory of Ruby Bridges, and how the Ruby left behind became a symbol of racial reconciliation.

Research Subjects and Human Beings: Coles and the Social Science of Civil Rights

Whatever Ruby Bridges would come to mean to Coles, he initially interpreted his meetings with her solely through the lens of his research. Deeply influenced by the work of Erik Erikson and Anna Freud, Coles was interested in the relationship between individuals and the society around them, but he was specifically interested in learning what the stresses of desegregation revealed about individual psychology. Building off the work of Kenneth and Mamie Clark and others, Coles was invested in the effects of desegregation on a child's mental and emotional health. The *Brown* decision had hinged on the work of psychologists like the Clarks who had demonstrated that black children's sense of self suffered under segregation, that racial hatred caused damage to black children in ways that might not be visible to the naked eye. Coles was interested in the logical next question: what were the effects of desegregation on children, both black and white? And what inner traits might best equip a child to withstand the stresses of a desegregating environment?

In Coles' earliest publications, Ruby reflects these research concerns. In the early 1960's, Coles' work appeared in a wide range of professional journals and general interest magazines, including the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*,

Contemporary Psychoanalysis, American Scholar, Daedalus, the New Yorker, and the Atlantic. In these early articles, Ruby is a near-constant presence. Sometimes she is identified by name and sometimes she's anonymous, but the six-year-old girl from New Orleans who integrated her school all alone is clearly an important and revealing case study for Coles, a model of how children remain children despite the stresses of integration. In a March 1963 article for the *Atlantic*, Coles is interested in the ways Ruby interpreted the chaos of desegregation through the filter of her six-year-old concerns: she worried, he notes, that the crowd had gathered to punish her for being a bad child, perhaps for harboring fantasies of getting rid of her younger siblings and having her parents all to herself. "In her thoughts," Coles writes, "the crowd could represent a set of reproving parents or the myriad voices of her own unfolding conscience instead of a group of obviously disturbed people."⁹⁹ He repeats across several publications the story of a young white girl who told Ruby that her mother had forbidden them to play together, and then immediately initiated a game with her: evidence, for Coles, that the racial attitudes of parents are easily overwhelmed by the more pressing realities of life and play for children.

But in these early publications, there's little indication that Ruby is more important or interesting to Coles than the other children with whom he met regularly. Ruby is a regular character in these works, but no more so than a promising black Atlanta high schooler who found the stresses of desegregation too much to bear, or a white teenager in the same city who found his segregationist beliefs tested by the individual black students he came to know. Ruby serves in these early articles as one of a cast of characters whose experiences support Coles' conclusions. But she does not transcend this purpose, either as an individual with whom Coles developed an important relationship, or as someone with exceptional characteristics. On the contrary, Coles' stance toward her is distant and professional. Here, Coles approaches Ruby and the other children

⁹⁹ Robert Coles, "In the South These Children Prophesy," *The Atlantic*, March 1963, 112.

in his study as interesting and important case studies in a project that still fit comfortably within the boundaries of social science.

Coles also situated his analysis of these individual cases within the framework of his broader interest in desegregation. Across his early articles, Coles emphasized that it is difficult to generalize about the effects of desegregation on children, whose individual psychological profile will greatly determine their reaction to the stresses of attending a desegregating school. But he was still willing to come to conclusions - this was, in fact, the point. In a July 1963 pamphlet documenting his research, Coles writes, "Lives are unique. Given this, however, can we come to useful or meaningful *conclusions* or *generalizations* about human beings involved in social changes? I should think so."¹⁰⁰ He proceeds to do just that, urging desegregation programs that target younger children -- who revealed more flexible racial attitudes in his research - and arguing that both white and black children can and do learn effectively in integrated classrooms. At first, then, the children were a means to an end for Coles: designing more effective desegregation programs.

Very quickly, however, the individuals began to take up more room in Coles' research, and he shifted his attention towards an investigation of individual psychology, and away from the framework of desegregation. In his early research, Coles was surprised to find less evidence of damaged children than he had expected. All of his subjects felt the pressures of their circumstances; some suffered more than others from anxiety, loss of appetite, sleeplessness, and other manifestations of stress. But Coles' evidence mostly suggested that "Negro children, young and old, in most cases endure the stresses of initial desegregation in Southern cities without

¹⁰⁰ Coles, *The Desegregation of Southern Schools: A Psychiatric Study*, (Atlanta: Southern Regional Council, 1963), 20.

evidence of significant psychiatric illness.”¹⁰¹ Most of his children were, at the end of the day, children - healthy, happy, and remarkably adaptable. Older children were more keenly aware of the stakes of their situation, and more articulate about the complexity of their feelings towards desegregation. But their concerns, anxieties, and pleasures were not so different than those of any other teenager. This finding opened the door to skepticism from Coles about how far social science could take him towards understanding individual psychology.

By 1967, this skepticism manifested in the production of a book that grew from Coles’ earlier articles but was an altogether different animal. In *Children of Crisis*, Coles’ training as a psychiatrist remains visible, and his central research question remains the same - although Coles had by then expanded his research beyond students in desegregating schools to encompass participants in the Freedom Summer movement, as well. But his insistence on individual experience had grown beyond a research concern. Coles had come to see individual experience as absolutely foundational: a core methodology which would transform the presentation of his work.¹⁰² This belief formed the bedrock of his approach to Ruby for the first half of his career: he insisted on her full and complex humanity, even as - as we will see - he demonstrated a tendency to romanticize her regardless. Coles’ methodology in *Children of Crisis* also cemented the seeming authenticity that would become a hallmark of his work - a sense that he offered unfiltered access to the individuals in his study. That presentation was always misleading, but it contributed to an easy conflation between Ruby Bridges and Ruby as she appeared in Coles’ writing.

While individual narratives were important in Coles’ earlier work, in *Children of Crisis* those individual narratives take over the text to become not evidence supporting a point, but the

¹⁰¹ Coles, “Southern Children Under Desegregation,” *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 120 (October 1963), 343.

¹⁰² Coles, *Children of Crisis*, vii - viii.

point itself. *Children of Crisis* is, largely, an anthology of stories from individual people's lives, presented in some detail. Often the section bears the name of the individual at its center: John Washington, Tessie, Martha Simpson. These narratives are framed within a few chapters of theory and big-picture reflection at the beginning and end of the text, and interspersed throughout are Coles' musings on what we might learn from each story. But the stories do not necessarily lend themselves to easy reflection - instead, they form a constellation of perspectives, some of which support Coles' own arguments, and some of which baffle him, or even directly contradict his views. Rather than smoothing over these wrinkles, Coles preserves them, and describes his own reactions, his evolving thinking, and even his disagreements. The result is a sense that the reader is standing beside Coles, seeing what he sees, hearing what he hears, and making sense of it along with him -- that we, in other words, are being presented with the evidence, and have the opportunity to make sense of it ourselves.

This effect is strengthened by the prominence Coles gives to the stories themselves. Sometimes, Coles is a first-person narrator, presenting us with his recollections of the conversation. At other times, Coles transforms the transcripts of his conversations into first-person monologues: the section "After Joe Holmes," for example, begins, "I was born in Reform, Alabama; that's between Birmingham and Columbus, Mississippi. My daddy worked on shares -- cotton and some tobacco." The section continues, from start to finish, in this vein - narrated by its central character, in first person, with no sign of Coles at all. Regardless of presentation, however, the bulk of each section is given over to the words of the individual in question. The result is a sense that the voices of Coles' subjects come to the reader unfiltered - that they are allowed to speak for themselves.

From the opening chapters of the text, however, Coles acknowledges that these narratives are, in fact, filtered quite heavily. In his chapter on methodology, he explains that he has taken

hundreds of interviews and worked to “extract what I thought to be the significant part of the material,” a process that involved “weaving together fragments,” cutting out sections, and sometimes “ignor[ing] time by putting together sections from separate interviews.” Coles also writes that he has sometimes altered dialect to present narratives in “familiar (middle-class) grammar and sentence structure.” These decisions were made, he writes, with the intention of “conveying to the reader what about that person, that life...sheds light upon the central...issue this book aims to examine.”¹⁰³ In his book on Coles, scholar Bruce Ronda agrees that Coles was not “simply transcribing some of his many interviews, but rather deliberately shaping this material into different kinds of stories.” The technique leads Ronda to describe Coles as a “translator,” someone who “take[s] the text (here, the lives and words of his subjects) and render[s] it intelligible to another audience.”¹⁰⁴ Importantly, Coles was making choices about what to include and exclude, how to shape each narrative for his readers. Like Rockwell, he controlled what the audience could see. What version of Ruby, then, did he choose to present?

Ruby is an important character in *Children of Crisis*. Her story is the first one presented to the reader, and Coles returns to her at length in the next chapter, and then more sporadically throughout the rest of the text. But her presence here offers a revealing contrast to the figure who emerges in Coles’ later work. First, Coles’ work with Ruby here continues to reflect his research on the effects of racism and desegregation: for example, Coles devotes much of his first chapter with Ruby to describing the drawings she created for him during their sessions together (many of which are reproduced in the text), and analyzing what they reveal about racial attitudes and fears that she was not always able to articulate in any other form. Second, for all her importance, Ruby does not eclipse the other characters whose stories make up *Children of Crisis*. Her narrative is

¹⁰³ Coles, *Children of Crisis*, 33-34.

¹⁰⁴ Ronda, *Intellect and Spirit*, 54, 43.

only one among many, including that of Tessie Prevost, one of the young girls who desegregated McDonogh 3, who receives nearly as much space in this text as Ruby. In fact, even when writing about Ruby, Coles is equally interested in the cast of characters surrounding her. In his two chapters dealing extensively with Ruby, Coles explores the motivation and worldview of her parents, and of the segregationists who had boycotted Frantz or participated in the mob outside of the school. By 1995, these other characters would disappear almost entirely from the narrative. Third, Coles does not shy away from describing the stress of desegregation, particularly on Ruby's family. Ruby's father had lost his job; her grandparents were receiving death threats. Coles was well aware of the toll the situation took: he was prescribing sleep medication to Ruby's father to help him cope with the stress. But, again, by 1995, he made little mention of these difficulties.

If in 1967, Coles was interested in aspects of Ruby's experiences that would later lose prominence in his work, he was also less interested in aspects of those experiences that would later become central. Several of the stories related to Ruby that would later become mainstays of Coles' repertoire are barely present here at all. As I have already mentioned, Coles makes no reference to a dramatic encounter with Ruby on the street as a catalyst for his work. He does recount a version of the same story - or at least a very similar one - that he would later include in his 1999 essay on Rockwell's painting, in which the family of "Jimmie," a classmate of Ruby's, indicates their shifting feelings towards Ruby by referring to her as a "nigra" - but if *The Problem We All Live With* played any role in that transformation, Coles did not think it worth mentioning in 1967. And there is no mention of Ruby praying for her antagonists - although her prayer would later become the focus of Coles' 1995 children's book.

Children of Crisis, then, gives little indication of the singular role Ruby would eventually come to play in Coles' work, or of the anecdotes from her life that he would eventually

emphasize. But the central theme that Coles would eventually cultivate through Ruby is nevertheless present: in *Children of Crisis*, Ruby is already a figure associated with reconciliation and redemption. The two sections in which Ruby is a central character both pair her with a white counterpart: in the first chapter, Ruby's drawings and reflections on race are paired with those of her classmate, Jimmie, whose parents are segregationists. In the second chapter, Ruby's fears and anxieties are paired with those of Mrs. Patterson, a white woman and a member of the Cheerleaders, who stands in the crowd every day and threatens to poison Ruby. In the case of Jimmie, Coles argues that his contact with Ruby at school eventually shifts his own racial attitudes and those of his family. Mrs. Patterson experiences no such redemption - she is as hateful at the end of the section as at the beginning - but Coles nevertheless uses Ruby to draw parallels between their experiences, creating what he calls a "symbolic link" between two individuals who were both isolated and afraid. Although Mrs. Patterson does not say so herself, Coles argues that she hates Ruby because she recognizes herself in the little girl: "Listening to Mrs Patterson," he writes, "...it becomes clear that Ruby's isolation as a Negro expressed this woman's sense of her own condition. She shouted at the Negro girl because she was moved to cry out and protest her own fate. What she called the Negroes she feared herself to be; what she saw in that Negro child was herself, unhappy and isolated."¹⁰⁵ In both cases, Ruby becomes a figure who can teach white people something about themselves, even if they aren't always capable of accepting the lesson.

In this way, Ruby mirrors the larger structure of Coles' book, which mobilizes these glimpses into the lives of individuals on the frontlines of the civil rights struggle and "translates" them, to use Ronda's language, so that his audience can glean meaning from them. That audience was, in *Children of Crisis* and most of Coles' other works, largely white, wealthy, and Northern.

¹⁰⁵ Coles, *Children of Crisis*, 85.

Coles' defaults to a shared "we" in his text that is assumed white, set apart from a black "they:" "Amid the talk we hear these days about the 'culturally disadvantaged' Negro children," he writes, for example, "I think we tend to overlook that the Negroes..." Or, elsewhere, "It may seem a bit obvious and simple-minded to insist upon putting the Negro's problems in the context of those shared by all of us as human beings..."¹⁰⁶ His authorial voice similarly marks a distance from the South as a whole, assuming a Northern readership: "We outside the South," he writes, "may find it convenient, or even important to think of its white people as psychotic haters...or moral idiots. This way we can saddle them with the most profound kind of emotional attachment to segregation..."¹⁰⁷ Coles writes at length about being an outsider to the South, an identity that is important throughout the text, as he maps his own journey into a developing consciousness of race relations.

Coles' purpose is not to mark his distance from the South so that he can bolster the moral superiority of the North. On the contrary, he returns repeatedly to the idea that Northerners should not watch the unfolding drama in the South with a sense of personal moral comfort. "I wonder about the eager emphasis given private, aberrant motives by some in our society," he writes, "... The bestiality I have seen in the South cannot be attributed only to its psychotic and ignorant people...we must all know that the animal in us can be elaborately rationalized in a society until an act of murder is seen as self-defense and dynamited houses become evidence of moral courage. Nor is the confused, damaged South the only region in this country in need of that particular knowledge."¹⁰⁸ For Coles, studying and understanding the South - translating the Southern experience for a Northern audience -- is crucial precisely because he sees the South as holding a "redemptive promise" for the rest of the country:

¹⁰⁶ *Children of Crisis*, 103, 334.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 380.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 315.

“The United States...has known little frustration and defeat for some time. The South has lived intimately with both, and it may have some wisdom to offer from that experience...The South has not only seen the gloomy and tormented side of man’s destiny; it has seen it and known enough of it perhaps to realize also the redemptive promise and power in human suffering.”¹⁰⁹

If the civil rights struggle in the South is a national morality play, its starring characters are the activists - mainly children and young adults - who have experienced first-hand the suffering Coles describes and who are pushing onward anyway. But in 1967, Coles was hesitant to turn his subjects into symbols. He resisted drawing general conclusions from individual experiences: “In general,” he writes towards the end of his text, “I have been trying to indicate that I find the task of talking about ‘the Negro’ difficult indeed, the more so because of how many individual Negro men, women, and children I know.”¹¹⁰ He struggled, too, with the idea that suffering has value, or even that suffering should be the primary lens through which to see his research subjects:

“So it is not all disorder and terror for these children. That is, the Negro child will play and frolic, eat and sleep like all other children; and though this may seem no great discovery, it is essential that it be mentioned in a discussion which necessarily singles out special pains or hazards for analysis. Sometimes when I read descriptions of ‘what it is like to be a Negro’ I have to turn away in disbelief: the children I have been working with ... simply do not resemble the ones portrayed.”

And yet Coles was not particularly interested in the normal day-to-day side of these children’s lives -- or only insofar as helped him to understand his primary concern: how these children coped with the strains and stresses of the crisis they were in the midst of. In fact, their ability to maintain more or less normal lives even in the midst of such circumstances only heightened for Coles, in the end, the sense that they were special - or became so, due to the circumstances in which they found themselves. The result was a tension between Coles’ insistence on the complexity and particularity of individual experience, and his tendency to romanticize the individuals in his story nonetheless. His portrayal of Ruby, in the end, reflected that tension, too:

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 14-15.

¹¹⁰ Coles, *Children of Crisis*, 349.

“I have not shirked reporting Ruby’s symptoms, or those of her race’s older leaders. Yet it must be said that under grave stress she and they have somehow done more than persist, more than endure. They have prevailed in the way that Faulkner knew they would by summoning every bit of their humanity in the face of every effort made to deny any of it to them. In so doing they have become more than they were, more than they themselves thought they were, and perhaps more than anyone watching them can quite put to word: bearers and makers of tradition; children who in a moment...took what they had from the past, in their minds, out of their homes, and made of *all* those possessions something else: a change in the world, and in themselves, too.”¹¹¹

Coles ends his text with a quote from James Agee, insisting on the irreducible uniqueness of an individual life, never “quite to be duplicated, nor replaced, nor has it ever quite had precedent: but each is a new and incommunicably tender life...”¹¹² And Ruby is only one of many “incommunicably tender” lives in *Children of Crisis*: present, important, but not a standout among the large cast of characters. Yet the groundwork had been laid for the symbol she would become.

Rough Diamonds: Ruby Revisited

Ruby never entirely disappeared from Coles’ work, but as he moved on to studying children in other parts of the country, she became a less central character in his writing in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Where she does appear in his writing during this period, Coles commits himself even more explicitly to the importance of viewing her and the other children he has known holistically, rather than making symbols of them. In “Baldwin’s Burden,” he critiques James Baldwin’s brief reference in *The Fire Next Time* to the young children who faced down mobs to desegregate schools, arguing that Baldwin does damage to these children by romanticizing them and flattening the complexity of their individual situations: “We can be proud of them without turning them into martyrs,” he writes, and, “If these Negro children and others like them throughout the South are not to be stripped of their humanity the highest honor we can grant them is the truth of

¹¹¹ Coles, *Children of Crisis*, 365.

¹¹² *Children of Crisis*, 381.

their lives.”¹¹³ In the “The Weather of the Years,” Coles similarly writes that academics and experts should fight the temptation to “turn the youths we presumably hope to understand into cannon fodder for the theoretical wars we so often wage.” And he reflects on the risks of preserving in writing discrete moments from the full spectrum of a person’s unfolding life experiences: it is “dangerous,” he writes, to quote from “a girl at such-and-such an age, then from the same person later...By selecting this or that remark I make a case of sorts - and run the risk of failing to indicate the breadth and depth of a particular life.”¹¹⁴

“The Weather of the Years” and “Baldwin’s Burden” were both reprinted in *Farewell to the South*, a 1972 collection of essays Coles had published over the previous ten years. In the introduction to the text, Coles said an official farewell of sorts to Ruby. He considered the text a “good-bye” to a chapter in his life, he wrote, as he had stopped visiting many of the families he had come to know regularly. He was now more of a “distant visitor,” and as he moved on to other projects, he felt that he was, as he put it, “ending the most absorbing work I have ever done.”¹¹⁵ And for the next five years, Ruby did largely disappear from Coles’ writing. But starting in 1978, he returned to her, and framed her in an altogether different light - one entirely detached from the context of desegregation, and much more focused on Ruby as a moral and spiritual leader. In the process, his previous concerns about romanticizing children or condensing the complexity of their lives disappeared altogether.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Coles, “Baldwin’s Burden,” in *Farewell to the South* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1972), 40-41.

¹¹⁴ Robert Coles, “The Weather of the Years,” in *Farewell to the South*, 308.

¹¹⁵ Coles, “Introduction,” in *Farewell to the South*, 16.

¹¹⁶ In 1990, Coles would credit his mentor Anna Freud with this shift: in the introduction to *The Spiritual Life of Children*, he wrote that 1978 had marked a turning point in his career. Having finished all volumes of the *Children of Crisis* series, he found himself unsure of where to go next - and, he writes, Freud suggested to Coles that he and his wife return to his earlier work to look “for what they might have missed back then.”

In 1978, Coles published *Festering Sweetness: Poems of the American People*, a book of excerpts from interviews collected during his years of research, rearranged into poetry. In the introduction, he describes what he collected as “rough diamonds,” extracted from “sad to say, much that was all too drab, ugly, or tasteless.”¹¹⁷ His method was inspired by the example of William Carlos Williams, the doctor-poet-extraordinaire who had been a mentor to Coles, but in the introduction, he attributed it more directly to Ruby. Coles wrote that in his earlier interviews with Ruby, his psychiatric training led him to set “severe, maybe crippling limits on what I would allow myself to see, try to comprehend.” Coles described himself searching for signs of psychiatric distress, “evidence of anxiety, fear, anger, envy, jealousy; or the denial of those emotions; or their projection on others,” while Ruby told him about how she said her prayers with her grandmother at night, slept well, and woke up ready to “be nice to those people.” In retrospect, Coles argues, he had been blind to what she was trying to show him: “She was...a sun of sorts - warm, a central figure to her people, a cause of their growth,” he writes. “...Why wasn’t I inclined to study that psychological process, if not outright triumph?...And why, too, didn’t I heed what she *did* say, from time to time...?” Eventually, Coles writes, Ruby taught him to “relax a little,” and finally, he “abandoned a carefully rehearsed agenda and responded to *her*.”¹¹⁸ In the introduction to this volume of found poetry, Coles suggests that Ruby taught him to really listen to his subjects, so that he was finally able to hear the poetry he had now collected.

Coles would repeat the central plotlines of this narrative over the next several years: in a 1980 essay for *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Coles repeated the story he had told in the preface to *A Festering Sweetness*. But Coles continued to insist during this period that his intention in unearthing the “poetry of childhood,” as he called it, was not to romanticize the children with

¹¹⁷ Coles, *A Festering Sweetness: Poems of the American People* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1978), xvii.

¹¹⁸ Robert Coles, *A Festering Sweetness*, ” xii - xiii

whom he worked: “There is no point figuring out one more way to romanticize children,” he wrote, “make them the chaste repositories of all that is clean and uncluttered and clairvoyant...¹¹⁹ Instead, Coles insisted that he was looking for a way to pay closer attention to the “particular life” of each child he had come to know, and to listen more attentively to how they were making sense of their own world.

By 1980, Coles was beginning to argue that this process of careful listening revealed something more than a few “rough diamonds” salvaged from an otherwise uninspiring torrent of words. Instead, he reflected that he had been blind to a whole way of seeing the children he worked with, who were not simply displaying stages of development, or absorbing and reflecting the messages they received from their parents and peers, but were in fact moral actors in their own right. In short, Coles argued that he was learning for the first time to take seriously the idea that adults might not simply seek to understand and analyze children, but to learn from them. Coles suggested that this transition would free the Ruby of his earlier writing from labels he had imposed on her, to help him (and his reader) see her more completely as a human being: Ruby was, Coles writes, “what I rather drearily called her when I was first getting to know her -- a poor child of black parents, ‘culturally deprived’ and ‘culturally disadvantaged.’ (No poetry to those labels!) But she was also a caring, plucky child ... a girl who was driven as all of us human beings are to make moral sense of what takes place in this world....” And he began to see in her questions about her own experiences a “kind of continuing moral inquiry.” Taking that moral inquiry seriously might allow a “touch of grace,” he wrote, “for all of us.”¹²⁰

Coles would extend this theme even further in his next several works. In 1986, he published two books simultaneously: *The Political Life of Children*, and *The Moral Life of*

¹¹⁹ Robert Coles, “The Poetry of Childhood,” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 4.1 (1980), 6.

¹²⁰ Robert Coles, “The Poetry of Childhood,” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 4.1 (1980), 8.

Children. In the first chapter of *The Moral Life*, Coles tells an extended version of how he learned to think differently about children based on his interactions with Ruby Bridges. True to his developing interests, Coles speaks of her in explicitly moral terms: “Why not, too, think of the child as a moral protagonist or antagonist,” he asks. “Was she not, utterly, and daily, a moral figure? A person able to find a measure of moral transcendence: comprehending, through language, the essence of what a human being can manage to be?”¹²¹ Later, “Ruby had a will and used it to make an ethical choice; she demonstrated moral stamina; she possessed honor, courage,” -- and, finally, “the six-year-old, Ruby Bridges...was demonstrating moral character to the world.”¹²²

Here, then, Coles is not only interested in understanding how a child like Bridges develops a personal sense of morality -- although this is part of his interest in the larger text -- but in investigating Ruby as a model, someone who could demonstrate moral purpose to a larger audience. Gone is the aversion to romanticizing children, the hesitation towards assuming that one life, in all its complexity, could ever mean something simple or simple to articulate. Instead, Ruby became increasingly fixed in Coles’ writing as an example of honor, courage, and - soon - spiritual redemption. Over the next several years, he would tell and retell this same basic story -- Ruby teaching him to let go of his training and listen, the resulting transformation he experienced -- and along the way, its contours became increasingly well-defined. So did its protagonist, Ruby, who appeared in his writing as increasingly less of a particular, dynamic individual, and more of a touchstone -- to use the word Coles would later draw on to describe her -- that he could turn to again and again to make his point.

¹²¹ Robert Coles, *The Moral Life of Children* (Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986), 9.

¹²² Coles, *The Moral Life of Children*, 9, 29, 140.

Another story introduced in *The Moral Life of Children* would become a staple for Coles: that of Ruby praying for her antagonists. In earlier writing, Coles had portrayed Ruby as largely unfazed by the crowd she faced on the way to school, writing that she was kind to them, smiling at them. Occasionally, he had mentioned briefly that she prayed for them. But here, for the first time, he told a version of what would become for him a central parable from Ruby's life. As he tells it here, Ruby's teacher reports to Coles one day that she has seen Ruby through the window, stopping to smile at the mob on the street. She also tells him that Ruby claims to pray for the mob every night before bed. When Coles asks Ruby about it, she confirms that she prays for the protesters. When he pushes her to explain why, she states, simply, "I go to church... every Sunday, and we're told to pray for everyone, even the bad people, and so I do."¹²³ Coles uses the story here to demonstrate his own changing attitudes as a researcher. At first, he writes, he was dismissive of this information, writing it off as imitative. But in time, he would come to see the moral core of her action, and also to recognize that a religious tradition might help to explain her moral fortitude.

This is a theme that Coles develops in *The Spiritual Life of Children*, published in 1990. In this text, for the first time, Coles indicates his encounter with Ruby on the street -- not the Mississippi protest -- as the turning point in his career. "Had I not been right there, driving by the mobs that heckled six-year-old Ruby Bridges, a black first-grader, as she tried to attend the Frantz School, I might have pursued a different life."¹²⁴ After her appearance in the introduction, Ruby disappears from *The Spiritual Life of Children*. But the text - and its explicitly spiritual framing - marks an important moment in the evolution of Ruby: Coles had fully re-evaluated her

¹²³ Coles, *The Moral Life of Children*, 22-23.

¹²⁴ Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), xi.

importance in his own trajectory, and he had come to see her story as revealing of spiritual tendencies.

By the 1990s, then the shift in Coles' writing was complete: Ruby was no longer an individual child whose human complexity spilled over the boundaries of any box - scientific or otherwise - he tried to fit her in. Instead, she was a saint-like figure, a symbol of faith, courage, and perseverance, whose own highly developed moral compass at a very young age was both a marvel and an example. Coles had shifted from trying to study Ruby to trying to listen to her; now he shifted again, from trying to learn from her to using her as an example with which to teach others. In these texts, he presented Ruby's story and its value to adults. But soon, he would explicitly frame that story for children - and in doing so, help to cement Bridges herself as an individual whose value mostly lay in her experiences as a child, and in her ability to share those experiences with a new generation of children.

Ruby the Redeemer: *The Story of Ruby Bridges*

In 1995, Coles turned his attention back to Ruby in a book that brought together many of the themes he'd been developing over the previous twenty years of his life - this time, in the form of a children's book. *The Story of Ruby Bridges* was published by Scholastic Press, with watercolor illustrations by George Ford. It targeted young readers - first grade and up - and in approximately 25 pages, it told, as the title promised, the story of Ruby Bridges. Or *a* story about Ruby Bridges, more accurately - specifically, the story of how Ruby prayed for her tormentors. *The Story of Ruby Bridges* represents the apotheosis of Ruby in Coles' writing: the character that emerged in the book marked the culmination of a transformation that had been in progress since he first turned Ruby's words into poetry, from an object of research to a complex individual to a spiritual teacher and, practically, a saint. Now, he detached that character from the context of his other

work, and allowed her to stand on her own, in a medium explicitly targeting children. He also detached this anecdote - of Ruby's prayer - from all the other writing he had done about her, making this one story into *the* story that mattered, that encapsulated what she represented.

The Story of Ruby Bridges was not Coles' first children's book, nor even his first children's book about school desegregation. In 1968, he published *Dead End School*, a chapter book targeting slightly older children. *Dead End School* dealt with school integration in the North, and was, in fact, a collaboration with Norman Rockwell, who provided illustrations. The text focuses on Jimmy, an African-American boy in an unnamed big city who attends a deadeningly low-quality segregated public school, and his mother, who rallies other parents to fight for the right to bus their children to a wealthy white school across town. *Dead End School* has a happy ending, in that the family wins their fight and Jimmy ends the story attending a much better school. But the book is attentive to the complexities of the struggle: Jimmy loses friends over his choice to transfer, and remains ambivalent about whether what he has gained is worth what he has lost.¹²⁵

The Story of Ruby Bridges approaches school desegregation from a different lens altogether. Any complexity or ambivalence about the cost of desegregation is gone. In fact, the book is only nominally about desegregation at all, which is introduced only briefly, as an explanation for Ruby's ordeal. Coles provides a small amount of backstory, explaining that in 1960, black children went to separate schools and "were not able to receive the same education as the white children. It wasn't fair. And it was against the nation's law."¹²⁶ To remedy the situation,

¹²⁵ Robert Coles, *Dead End School* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1968). This book represents the only time that Coles & Rockwell worked together directly. According to Deborah Solomon, they were introduced in 1967 by Erik Erikson.

¹²⁶ Robert Coles, *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, anniversary edition (New York: Scholastic, Inc., 2010). *The Story of Ruby Bridges* has no page numbers. All quotes from the text in this chapter come from the 2010 edition unless otherwise noted.

Coles explains that Ruby was one of four children sent to two white elementary schools by a judge. This is the extent of the context Coles deems necessary for his readers to follow the story: explaining segregation is not his purpose here. In fact, his book does not even encompass the entirety of Ruby's first grade year. Instead, the book's climactic moment occurs when Ruby prays for the mobs outside the school. The rest of the story - the end of the boycott, the end of Ruby's first grade year - are tucked away in the afterword. The story ends with a transcript of Ruby's prayer for God to forgive her tormentors.

Coles is similarly brief in his portrayal of those tormentors. The protesters outside of Frantz are important to the narrative, serving as the foil to Ruby's generosity of spirit. But Coles had spent years of his life studying segregationists, and had written at length about their backgrounds, their mindset, and their motivations. He pays little attention here to these details, explaining only that "angry white people" gathered outside of the school. "The people carried signs that said they didn't want black children in a white school," he writes, "People called Ruby names; some wanted to hurt her. The city and state police did not help Ruby." This context, again, is largely a backdrop for the central focus of Coles' narrative, which is Ruby's bravery in the face of such anger. Indeed, the protesters literally fade into the background of George Ford's watercolors.

The effect is a story that is much less about school desegregation or racism than it is about courage, kindness, and faith. These themes reflect Coles' changing professional interests, but they also demonstrate how far his framing of Ruby, specifically, had shifted from the mid-1960's. Any concern about the effects of romanticizing the child he once knew is altogether absent. Instead, Ruby here is fully dressed in the mantle of heroism; Coles presents her as a shining example of moral fortitude, approaching her almost with reverence. This effect is strengthened by Ford's illustrations, with their warm pastel tones. The final illustration in the

book features Ruby alone, hands clasped in prayer, eyes turned upwards. The illustration frames Ruby from slightly above, as though the viewer is looking down on her. A soft yellow light radiates outward from her, as though she is bathed in a warm glow: she appears practically ready to ascend into the heavens.

In casting Ruby as this sort of spiritual exemplar, Coles presents her as inherently possessing the qualities of grace, courage, and faith that she displays throughout the text. Ruby never falters in *The Story of Ruby Bridges*. Although we do not see her full spiritual power until the final pages, her lack of fear and enthusiasm towards her studies are an immediate source of wonder for her teacher, Barbara Henry, who marvels at Ruby's calm and positive attitude throughout the text. Ruby's parents appear briefly in the opening pages, and are portrayed as loving and supportive, as well as faithful themselves -- they are "proud that their daughter had been chosen to take part in an important event in American history," the narrator tells us, and Ruby's mother explains that they "prayed to God ... that we'd all be strong and have courage and we'd get through any trouble..." But while the reader might assume that Ruby's faith is inherited from these examples, we never see her seek support or guidance from her family, or from her teacher. If she is ever frightened or unsure or in need of assistance, we don't see it here. Ruby does not grow in this story; it merely takes most of the book for the source of her fortitude to be revealed. The audience, then, can do little more than marvel at her, as well.

The climactic closing episode of Coles' text - the revelation that Ruby is praying for her tormentors - takes place during the school year, but the framing of this moment as the conclusion of the story suggests that Ruby is already victorious. Even though she remains alone in the classroom, the audience can rest assured that she has what it takes to overcome the challenges facing her. This victory is made explicit in the afterword, which relates the events of the rest of the year as a series of slow but steady triumphs marked by the return of other students: "Later that

year,” the afterword begins, “two white boys joined Ruby at the Frantz Elementary School.” There was a backlash, but “those boys were soon joined by other children,” and by the time Ruby was in the second grade, “the mobs had given up their struggle.” Year after year, Coles tell us, “Ruby went to the Frantz School. She graduated from it, then went on to graduate from high school.” These facts are presented as evidence that everything turned out well: joined by other students and able to continue her education, Ruby’s trials are over. The events of the end of the year and beyond are presented as details relegated to an afterword, suggesting that for Coles, the crisis and resolution of this drama all take place while Ruby is still isolated in her classroom. The return of other students and the progression to other grades mark a return to normalcy, proof that the ordeal has come to an end.

Coles excludes any information that might cast doubt on this triumphant trajectory. The white flight that left Frantz resegregated within a decade has no place in this story. The 1995 afterword of the book is completely silent on the contemporary state of Frantz; the 2010 afterword does note that Frantz is in need of a little “revitalizing,” but strikes essentially the same tone. The outcome for Ruby personally is presented as a triumph as well. In his portrayal of Ruby’s pre-integration life, Coles quotes Ruby describing her family as “poor, very, very poor,” and emphasizes that her parents have to work hard to get by: her father is a janitor, and her mother takes care of the family during the day and then works nights “scrubbing floors in a bank.” This hard-working family is portrayed as loving - the description is paired with an illustration of Lucille Bridges kissing her children as she tucks them in at night -- but Coles’ text never questions that integration was a worthwhile goal for this family. In his framing, they have little to start with, and everything to gain. Ruby, the afterword notes, graduated from Frantz, and went on to become a successful businesswoman. The 1995 edition claimed that Bridges had graduated from college, as well. This factual inaccuracy was corrected in later printings, but it

underscores that Coles either had little awareness of information that didn't fit in his upbeat trajectory, or didn't mind excluding it to make a tidier narrative arc.¹²⁷

Coles' work in *Dead End School* demonstrates that he was well aware of the sense of loss that might accompany children chosen to desegregate schools, and that the legacy of integration was sometimes ambivalent at best and painful at worst in the lives of those who lived through it. He also knew that this was true in the case of Ruby Bridges, specifically - he had written about the consequences for her family in his earlier work. His research throughout his career demonstrated that he had the knowledge and the tools to portray a much more complex and nuanced portrait of desegregation as it played out in this city and with this particular family. Of course, Coles' choice to remove all complexity in favor of this simple, triumphant story might reflect the target age level of his readers: Scholastic markets this short book for 1st through 3rd graders, making it a much shorter story than the one he had crafted in *Dead End School* (a chapter-book), for example, and for a much younger audience.¹²⁸

However, writing a book for children does not necessarily require crafting a simple or saccharine narrative out of a difficult history. As the next chapter will explore, when Ruby Bridges began authoring her own children's books, she would write a more complex version of the story for equally young children. Moreover, her first book, while still written for children, targeted a slightly older audience, allowing her to tell the story in much greater detail and with much more complexity. Coles' choices, in contrast, suggest that he either felt his audience could not handle complexity, or felt that the complexities were irrelevant to the story he wanted his audience to hear.

¹²⁷ Coles, *The Story of Ruby Bridges* (New York: Scholastic Press, 1995).

¹²⁸ "The Story of Ruby Bridges," Scholastic Press, <https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/books/story-of-ruby-bridges-the-rev-by-robert-coles/>.

Either way, the implication is troubling. Herbert Kohl, writing about the presentation of Rosa Parks to young children, argues that a complex story “deserves to be told with appropriate complexity rather than simplified or rendered innocuous,” and that “children can work through hard and painful questions of history, psychology, and culture if they are guided by a caring adult and provided with materials that challenge them.”¹²⁹ Coles’ own research - with very young children navigating incredibly difficult situations and complex issues - supports Kohl’s argument. Furthermore, Kohl emphasizes that the way stories of the civil rights movement are framed impacts the lessons children take from them. In his research on Rosa Parks, Kohl found that when children were presented with a story of an exceptional, heroic woman, they focused on her exceptional attributes: “They agreed that it took a special person to be so courageous and wondered if they would be able to muster such courage. I got the impression Mrs. Parks’s exceptional courage might be an excuse not for them to act.” Instead, Kohl argues, the story of “collective decision making, willed risk, and coordinated action ... has more to teach children who themselves may have to organize and act collectively against oppressive forces in the future.”¹³⁰

The Story of Ruby Bridges presents Ruby as a heroine for many qualities: her bravery throughout the ordeal, her attentiveness and focus and good spirits in her classes, despite being the only student. But the logic of the story suggests that what is most amazing about Ruby is her desire to forgive, and to pray for God to forgive, the people who tormented her - that, in fact, it is her faith and her forgiveness that give her the strength to focus in class and maintain a positive attitude. Bridges’ heroism rests, then, in her ability to reconcile - to see past hatred and seek forgiveness. In this way, *The Story of Ruby Bridges* was typical of civil rights narratives of the

¹²⁹ Herbert Kohl, *She Would Not Be Moved: How We Tell the Story of Rosa Parks and the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 47.

¹³⁰ Kohl, 5, 37.

1990s. Jennifer Fuller writes that the mid-90's saw a boom in media representations of the civil rights movement, many of which focused on themes of reconciliation. In the 1990's, Fuller notes, racial tensions heightened by the beating of Rodney King and the O.J. Simpson Trial resulted in a wave of cultural narratives emphasizing reconciliation, often featuring African-American women as central characters in bridging racial divides.¹³¹ Coles himself made the link between Ruby's story and the context of the 1990s when he referenced Mark Fuhrman - the Los Angeles police officer whose racist ideology had come to light during the recent O.J. Simpson trial - in a 1995 interview shortly after the publication of *The Story of Ruby Bridges*. Coles stated that he wished "that Mark Fuhrman could have seen Ruby go through that mob at the age of 6...I could only hope he would have been given some moral pause."¹³²

Coles would echo this same phrasing in 1999, in his essay about the impact of *The Problem We All Live With* - a painting which, as he described it, also had the power to give its viewers "moral pause." For Coles, Rockwell's painting of Ruby had the same power as the girl in his story - an affective power with a real potential to generate moral growth. In framing the power of Ruby's story this way, Coles makes explicit what is implicit in the book - that what Ruby has to offer readers is not simply a lesson in courage or faith under difficult circumstances, but the possibility of redemption. The lesson of *The Story of Ruby Bridges* is forgiveness - specifically, a black child forgiving her white oppressors - offered up as a model of what the nation needs. The forgiveness Ruby offers is not framed as inevitable or necessary - she does not *have* to forgive anyone. Nor is her ability to forgive a skill she develops over time. Rather, it is framed as a nearly miraculous power, inherent to her - something that the rest of us, like the other characters in the

¹³¹ Jennifer Fuller, "Debating the Present Through the Past: Representations of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1990s," *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford, eds. (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2006).

¹³² Josh Getlin, "A Profile in Courage," *The Los Angeles Times*, 11 September 1995.

story, can merely marvel at, and perhaps aspire to. If we ask - as Herbert Kohl does, in his analysis of the presentation of Rosa Parks - what this story teaches children about fighting injustice, it becomes clear that *The Story of Ruby Bridges* offers little in the way of a model except, perhaps, faith. But Ruby's faith is not for her, in the end. She does not pray for the strength to get through her ordeal, she prays for her tormentors. *The Story of Ruby Bridges* does not teach children much about dismantling oppression, then. It teaches a great deal about the value of forgiving oppressors, who, as Ruby says in her prayer, "don't know what they are doing."

Moreover, to make this the moral of the story, Coles eliminated nearly everything else - the grassroots movement that made this moment in New Orleans possible, the broad community that sustained Bridges throughout her ordeal, the costs of integration for the Bridges family, and the different kind of resilience required to navigate the long years after 1960. *The Story of Ruby Bridges* is not a book about desegregation, or about organizing against injustice. It is not a book about what caused the crisis in New Orleans in 1960, or about the effects of that crisis. It is a book about Ruby and her prayer.

These choices have a long legacy. *The Story of Ruby Bridges* was, and remains, a huge success. In New Orleans, Peg Kohlepp of the *Times-Picayune* called it an "important" and "moving" book, which children would find "empowering."¹³³ It was re-issued in 2004 and 2010; Spanish and braille versions exist. In 2019, it still sits at #13 on Amazon's list of best-selling children's United States biographies.¹³⁴ But Coles' book matters not just because it helped define the way Ruby's story would be framed, but because it helped collapse the boundaries between Ruby and Bridges herself. Importantly, Coles wrote *The Story of Ruby Bridges* without input

¹³³ Peg Kohlepp, "One Small Step," *The Times Picayune*, 12 February 1995.

¹³⁴ "Best-sellers in Children's United States Biographies," Amazon Best Sellers, www.amazon.com. Accessed 23 July 2019.

from Bridges - and, apparently, without ensuring that he got the facts of the story straight. Rather, press coverage in 1995 reported that he had not consulted with Bridges during the writing, and acknowledged some inaccuracies in the afterword of the first printing which would be corrected in later editions.¹³⁵ Despite these reports, Coles' book re-ignited interest in Bridges - and when she re-emerged into the public eye, audiences assumed that Coles' book was a factual and faithful portrayal of her life. How Coles' framed Ruby, then, became the framing of Bridges, too.

Conclusion: The Real Ruby

In Robert Coles' 1999 essay on *The Problem We All Live With*, he describes showing Rockwell's painting to Ruby herself, when it first appeared in the pages of *Look* magazine in 1964. At her first glimpse of the painting, Coles reports, Ruby asked if it was "supposed to be someone like me, maybe me?" Later, she reflected on how accurately Rockwell had captured her situation - "I sure wish I could draw the way he does! He's got it down, what's happening..." Coles writes that Ruby wrestled with the difference between this representation of her experience and documentary footage that had appeared on the news. Ultimately, Ruby decided that the news footage was "about the trouble on the street," while this painting was "about her." Using these conversations, Coles argues that Rockwell's painting was powerful because it captured something true and authentic about its protagonist. When he later worked with Rockwell, Coles writes, the artist was curious about "'the real Ruby,' as opposed to the girl he gave to all of us - though I kept telling him that he, in fact, had caught and rendered for all of us some of the 'real Ruby': after all, I had her word for it."¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Peg Kohlepp, "Making History Again," *The Times-Picayune*, 11 February 1995.

¹³⁶ Coles, "Ruby Bridges and a Painting," 105-107.

Coles implies that Rockwell's painting was merely a representation - albeit a powerful one - while the Ruby that he describes in his essay is "real." But Coles was creating a character too - grounded in a real child, but ultimately distinct from her. That distinction is rendered clearly by the way that Ruby Bridges herself has, as an adult, described her own memories of encountering Rockwell's painting for the first time. Bridges remembers her first encounter with *The Problem We All Live With* occurring not when Robert Coles discussed it with her as a child, but when a journalist showed it to her at the age of eighteen. It is possible, of course, that both versions of this story are true: that Coles showed the painting to Bridges as a child, and she simply did not remember their discussions, or the painting itself, until she re-encountered it an older age. But even so, the fact that Coles presents such a different narrative here from the one that was foundational to Bridges' own memories highlights the distinctions between Ruby as Coles presents her and Ruby Bridges herself. The two do not necessarily share the same memories, and Bridges does not necessarily interpret her experiences in the same way as Coles.

As Bridges tells it, her first sight of Rockwell's painting left her stunned: "I thought, 'Oh, my God, this *was* important. This changed our country.'" ¹³⁷ She expanded on those thoughts in a recent interview with the Norman Rockwell Foundation, saying, "I didn't realize how important that event was and that it was a part of history until that incident when he showed me the painting and said, 'This is you.'" ... So once I saw that painting I realized there was something much bigger than myself that I needed to pursue and be involved in..." ¹³⁸ Her description draws attention to how unaware Bridges was of the way her story was circulating in American culture prior to 1995. She later wrote that when *The Story of Ruby Bridges* was published, she had been out of touch with Robert Coles for thirty years, and she "wasn't very aware" during that time of

¹³⁷ Katy Reckdahl, "Ruby Bridges and Ruby Hall," *The Advocate*, 7 June 2004.

¹³⁸ Ruby Bridges in conversation with the Norman Rockwell Foundation. Undated (approximately 2017). Video provided by Norman Rockwell Foundation, September 2017.

the writing he had been doing about her, either.¹³⁹ As this chapter has emphasized, the construction of Ruby was a process that involved Ruby Bridges remarkably little. The next chapter shifts focus, to consider what the memory of integration meant for Bridges herself.

But this memory also highlights that the work of Rockwell and Coles had an impact on Bridges, too. *The Problem We All Live With* marked a decisive pivot in Rockwell's career; Coles, likewise, came to position Ruby as the crucial factor in the arc of his own work. The character they created, in turn, shaped the course of Bridges' life in important ways. Bridges described seeing *The Problem We All Live With* for the first time as an "aha moment," which helped "put her on the quest to tell her story." But for years after that encounter, she did not have an opportunity to do so. In 1995, the publication of *The Story of Ruby Bridges* marked a different turning point in Bridges' life, reigniting interest in what had become of the girl that had inspired the story. Very suddenly, Bridges had a public platform, and a national audience eager to hear what she had to say.

But when she re-emerged, she did so in the shadow of the character Rockwell and Coles had created over the course of the preceding thirty years. When Bridges stepped back into the public sphere, she did not replace Ruby. Rather, the two co-existed: sometimes peacefully, and sometimes uneasily. Rockwell and Coles had created a powerful and lasting narrative about Bridges' life. Bridges could complicate or repurpose that story, but she could not displace it entirely. Her story would be framed within the contours they had created: with an emphasis on her bravery and resilience as a child, and on the emotional impact of that bravery, especially for white audiences. Bridges would become a living symbol of progress and racial reconciliation on a national level. But that symbolism obscured the particularities of her own life, the community that

¹³⁹ Coles himself emphasizes that he continued to visit Bridges after 1960, but again, Bridges' own memories suggest that either those visits were less memorable to her than they were to Coles, or that they occurred less frequently than Coles implies.

had supported her, and alternative interpretations of why her story mattered. Its triumphant tone also relied on the erasure of Frantz from the story altogether, and the local context of New Orleans, making Bridges a national figure whose story transcended the particularities of place and time.

That framing had power, but it also had limitations - for Bridges personally, and for a vision of what racial justice in public education might look like. The next two chapters explore how the legacy of integration looks different through a focus on the two central characters elided from the dominant narrative of Ruby: Ruby Bridges herself, and the Frantz school.

Time to Take the Story Back: Ruby Bridges as Author, Activist, and Icon

Introduction: Ruby Bridges Returns

In August of 1995, Ruby Bridges and Robert Coles appeared together in a special ceremony at Connecticut College. The previous spring, Coles had been slated to receive an honorary degree from the school. But when the college's president heard him speak about Ruby Bridges - the subject of his recently published children's book - she was inspired to expand the ceremony to include them both, and to move it from the spring convocation to the beginning of the fall semester in order to, as the president put it, "bring [Bridges] into the first day of school the right way."¹⁴⁰ The ceremony featured Ruby Bridges reading Robert Coles' children's book about her to an audience of local schoolchildren, and listening, in turn, to essays those children had written about courage. When the time came for the degrees, Bridges was asked to walk alone through a crowd one more time, this one cheering and clapping in welcome. In their coverage of the event, both the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times* framed Bridges' entrance into the auditorium as a moving rejoinder to her childhood ordeal, one that brought many in the audience to tears: a ritual nod to the past that served to highlight how much had changed. Ruby Bridges was back, and her return brought her story full circle.

As the ceremony at Connecticut College suggests, 1995 marked the beginning of a dizzying return to public life for Ruby Bridges. The publication of *The Story of Ruby Bridges* did more than reify the symbolism surrounding Ruby; it thrust Bridges herself back into the public eye. After three decades out of the spotlight, Ruby Bridges was once again a public figure, in demand for events and interviews. Between 1995 and 2005, she was featured on *PBS*, *CBS*, and *CNN*, and in the pages of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Los Angeles*

¹⁴⁰ George Judson, "Child of Courage Joins Her Biographer," *The New York Times*, 1 September 1995.

Times, to cite only a few examples. She was interviewed on Oprah. She was a bearer of the Olympic torch, a recipient of the Presidential Citizens Award, the subject of a Disney movie, and an honored guest at galas in Washington, D.C.

All of this marked a dramatic departure from the life Bridges had lived prior to 1995: at the close of the 1960-1961 school year, Bridges effectively disappeared from public life. As the previous chapter explored, her image and her story continued to circulate through the works of Rockwell and Coles, but the spotlight had moved away from Ruby Bridges herself. When Bridges was in first grade, the public didn't know her name, but she nevertheless took center stage in a very public drama. Reporters had taken her photograph daily; letters of support had poured in from around the country; the NAACP made regular visits to her house. When the school year ended, it all disappeared: the mobs, yes, but also the NAACP, the reporters, the letters of support. By second grade, no one needed to protect Ruby Bridges' identity any more - in fact, no one paid much attention to her at all.

Abruptly removed from the spotlight, Bridges spent much of the next thirty-five years trying to make sense of the events of her first grade year and grappling with they meant for the rest of her life. Making sense of her past was a complicated and sometimes bitter process - because, as this chapter will discuss, the legacy of integration in Bridges' own life was itself complicated and sometimes bitter. Between 1960 and 1995, Bridges traveled a path that led her to a much more complex interpretation of her history than the triumphant narrative embodied by Ruby. But that path was largely a private one - until 1995, when it became very public. Overnight, and for the first time in her adult life, Bridges was in demand to share her own story.

But Bridges was not welcomed back into into the spotlight entirely on her own terms; rather, she was framed from the beginning as a living embodiment of the iconic figure Rockwell and Coles had created. In their coverage of the 1995 ceremony at Connecticut College, both the

Los Angeles Times and *The New York Times* paired a photograph of the adult Ruby Bridges with an image of *The Problem We All Live With*, making the connection between the woman and the painting explicit, but also linking Bridges' adult self to an imagined past. The *New York Times* article, additionally, went to print under the title "Child of Courage Joins Her Biographer" - a title that erased the boundaries between Bridges and Ruby, as well as between Bridges' adult and childhood selves. Coles was hardly Bridges' biographer. Although he had written about her repeatedly, he had only very rarely expanded that writing to include anything beyond the events of her first grade year - and, as the preceding chapter argues, *The Story of Ruby Bridges* was more a parable than an attempt to capture Bridges' life history.¹⁴¹ And Bridges, at forty years old, was no longer a child. This ceremony - one of the first major public events Bridges attended after the publication of Coles' book - thus foreshadowed what would be a consistent dynamic for Bridges after 1995: her own public presence would be conflated with Ruby, in a manner that both infantilized her adult self and tethered her value explicitly to her experiences as a six-year-old.

But if *The Story of Ruby Bridges* shaped the way Bridges re-entered public life, it also provided her with a public platform from which she could share her own story - and a national audience newly attuned to what she had to say. By 1999, Bridges had authored her own children's book - entitled *Through My Eyes* - putting her own reflections on her story and its meaning into print. And in a material way, *The Story of Ruby Bridges* also helped Bridges craft an institutional legacy: according to public statements by both Bridges and Coles, Robert Coles donated proceeds from the book to help launch the Ruby Bridges Foundation, which would become the primary vehicle for Bridges' work in public schools in her adult life. Her reemergence into public life and her work as an author and activist were all deeply intertwined, then, with the framework that Coles established for her, creating a tension between her desire to take control of the pre-existing

¹⁴¹ Peg Kohlepp, "One Small Step," *The Times-Picayune*, 12 February 1995.

narrative and her reliance on that same narrative as a defining part of her public persona. In the years that followed her re-emergence, Bridges expressed gratitude towards Coles, but she also expressed a desire to move beyond the limitations of his framework. As she put it in an interview with *Emerge* magazine in 1998: “[Coles] kept the story alive until this point . . . and now, it’s time to take it back.”¹⁴²

This chapter explores how Ruby Bridges grappled with her past in the years between 1960 and 2003. First, I examine how the years after 1960 shaped Bridges’ interpretation of her role in integration, resulting in a narrative of her past that departed significantly from the framing promoted by Coles, and opening up other possibilities for what her story might come to mean, locally and nationally. Then, I explore how *The Story of Ruby Bridges* shaped her return to the public stage, framing her as the living embodiment of an iconic historic figure. In the second half of the chapter, I engage with Bridges’ efforts to “take the story back” in her work as both an author and an activist. I focus on Bridges’ children’s book, *Through My Eyes*, published in 1999, as an example of how Bridges reframed her own history. Finally, I turn my attention to the Ruby Bridges Foundation in order to examine how Bridges translated her interpretation of that history into her work in schools in the mid-1990’s.

As an author, Bridges attempted to reframe the story of her childhood, to tell a different story about her experience of integration than the dominant narrative circulated in popular culture. As an activist, she attempted to leverage the dominant narrative itself towards her own ends, and to position herself not just as a narrator of her story, but as an actor in the contemporary landscape of education. In both spheres, then, Bridges worked to take control of the narrative of her life - to tell it her own way, to reinterpret its significance, and to use it for purposes that aligned with her own understanding of education reform and her role in it. However, as both

¹⁴² Lea Y. Latimer, “The Smallest Soldier,” *Emerge* 9.4 (February 1998).

narrator and actor, Bridges always remained tethered to the works by Coles and Rockwell that made her iconic, and to the way that they had framed her story. This dominant framing was, at various times, both a constraint on Bridges' ability to tell her own story, and a tool she utilized to her own ends. Her reliance on that framing, even as she rejected and repurposed it, highlights the dissonance between Bridges' symbolic power as a national icon of the civil rights movement, and her local influence as an educational activist attempting to enact material change in public schools.

Did It Help Me?: Grappling with the Aftermath of Integration, 1960 - 1995

In the years after 1960, while Americans around the country were reacting to *The Problem We All Live With*, and while Ruby was slowly taking shape in the writings of Robert Coles, Ruby Bridges was working to make sense of her past, too. She interpreted the meaning of her first grade year less in the context of a national civil rights movement than in the context of her own life - which continued on, of course, even after the boycotts ended and the news media turned their attention elsewhere. Tracing the period between 1960 and the publication of *The Story of Ruby Bridges* with a focus on Bridges herself highlights aspects of the legacy of integration in her own life that were elided by the works of Rockwell and Coles, and that made it difficult for Bridges to fully reconcile her message with that of Ruby when she re-emerged as a public figure in 1995. Paying attention to Bridges during this period also reveals important dynamics of a nascent public memory of integration and Bridges' role in it - less triumphant and more localized versions of what her story meant to a broader public - which were largely overwhelmed or co-opted by Coles' narrative after 1995, but which suggest alternate meanings contained within her story.

Bridges' experience of integration did not come to a halt at the end of first grade. In fact, it is misleading to suggest that the crisis of desegregation in New Orleans ended with the 1960-1961 academic year: Bridges grew up moving through a system that was undergoing a massive transformation as she progressed through each grade.¹⁴³ In comparison to her first grade year, however, the rest of Bridges' K-12 experience was relatively normal - at least in the sense that Bridges had other classmates, and she was no longer the only African-American child in the school. But because of her position in the first grade level to be desegregated, Bridges remained on the frontlines of integration throughout the entirety of her elementary, middle, and high school years. After completing elementary school at Frantz, Bridges graduated to nearby Kohn Middle School, which was still a predominately white campus. In 9th grade, she moved to Francis T. Nicholls High School, still 70 percent white at the time of her enrollment. A 2004 *Times-Picayune* retrospective on integration described Nicholls as a "powder keg" in 1970, in the midst of a contentious struggle over the school's mascot, "The Rebel," and other Confederate traces in school culture. In the end, the school picked a new mascot (the Bobcat), changed the name of the newspaper (from *The Rebel Yell* to *The Nicholls Yell*), and eliminated Confederate flags from official school decor - but the battle over these changes involved walkouts, riots, and a near constant police presence, making for a turbulent few years.¹⁴⁴ As Bridges proceeded through school, then, she did not leave integration behind - rather, the turmoil of integration defined her educational career.

In this regard, Bridges' experience was not altogether unusual. Rachel Devlin notes that many of the pioneers of school desegregation similarly found themselves perpetually on the

¹⁴³ The long-term effects of integration on the Orleans Parish School District - and on Frantz Elementary in particular - are explored in more detail in the next chapter. Here, I wish to emphasize how those effects shaped Bridges' educational experience.

¹⁴⁴ Brian Thevenot, "The McDonogh Three," *The Times-Picayune*, 16 May 2004.

frontlines of integration, desegregating one campus after another. In New Orleans, Leona Tate, Gail Etienne, and Tessie Prevost - the three girls sent to integrate McDonogh 19 in 1960 - found themselves in the same position. Their first grade experience had paralleled Bridges': they, too, had required an escort of federal marshals to walk them safely through mobs every morning, only to enter a school deserted by a white boycott. But Etienne, Prevost, and Tate had met with an added twist: after two years as an integrated campus, McDonogh 19 was converted to an all-black school, and the three girls were sent to desegregate T.J. Semmes Elementary. At Semmes, the girls faced no mobs outside the door, but they encountered an unprecedented level of hostility and outright violence from fellow students. In third grade, Tate moved to Frantz, joining Bridges, and the two continued as classmates through high school, where they were joined by Etienne.¹⁴⁵ After first grade, then, Bridges' experience of integration was, perhaps, slightly less isolated. But she and her classmates were learning, as Rachel Devlin puts it, that desegregation was "not simply an experience that one survived or did not survive - a one-time test. It was, in many ways, like learning a language or how to play an instrument: a skill best acquired through early exposure and constant practice."¹⁴⁶

Integration was not a one-time test for Bridges' family, either; on the contrary, the crisis of 1960 had a deep and long-lasting effect on her home life. Bridges' father lost his job in 1960 as a direct result of his daughter's enrollment at Frantz; in the years that followed, he struggled to regain regular work. Additionally, Bridges' parents separated when she was in elementary school; she later attributed their split to the strains placed on their marriage by the integration crisis.

These factors were compounded by other difficulties - such as the arrival of Hurricane Betsy in 1965, which flooded the family's house - with the result that her family's economic stability was

¹⁴⁵ Leona Tate, interview with author, 16 May 2018.

¹⁴⁶ Devlin, 265.

dramatically reduced: the Bridges family slipped into a new level of poverty in the years after 1960. When Bridges was twelve, her mother and siblings relocated into the Florida Housing Project, which Bridges later remembered as “big” and “cold,” with “so many strangers.”¹⁴⁷ Bridges would later describe this period as dark and difficult. She later remembered sitting on the steps of the Florida Housing Project, wondering, “Had she done something wrong? Why had God deserted her?”¹⁴⁸ Her teenage years brought their own challenges: at 17, Bridges became a mother, temporarily leaving Nicholls to attend a school for teenage parents before returning to graduate in 1972.

By eighteen, Bridges had graduated from a public school district that was now fully integrated - in fact, 1972 marked a highpoint of integration in New Orleans schools, before white flight began to rapidly re-segregate them. Bridges had played a key role in the integration of that system - but the rewards of the struggle in her own life remained elusive. She was a single mother, working fast food jobs to make ends meet. She wanted to attend college, but had no support in figuring out how to make that dream possible. She later reflected, “I was never offered any type of scholarship to go to college. Nobody thought of nurturing me. After the schools were integrated, that was it.”¹⁴⁹ In the context of Bridges’ childhood, 1960 marked the beginning of a very difficult period; not the end of it.

This is not to suggest that the events of 1960 were inconsequential for Bridges. On the contrary, the difficulty of the years after 1960 was amplified by her memories of first grade, and her vague sense that she had participated in something important and life-changing. But Bridges had little access to information that might have helped her make sense of those feelings. The key players in that drama - her first grade teacher, Robert Coles, the NAACP - were gone. Precious

¹⁴⁷ Latimer, “The Smallest Soldier.”

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

artifacts from 1960 - including a letter from Eleanor Roosevelt - were lost in the flooding caused by Hurricane Betsy. Her family did not discuss the events of her first grade year. “For a while,” Bridges later wrote about this time, “it was almost like I had dreamed it.”¹⁵⁰ Leona Tate remembers a similar dynamic in her own childhood - everyone, it seems, was trying to forget what had happened.¹⁵¹

But Bridges did not want to forget; on the contrary, she was hungry for information. She began to ask questions about her past to anyone who might be able to answer them, and to look for clues in the family’s belongings. As a teenager, she once confronted a former NAACP officer on the street, asking “why none of the children from middle-class families had joined the integration effort,” and trying to learn how she had been selected to participate.¹⁵² As I have described in the previous chapter, she later identified the moment when a reporter showed her Norman Rockwell’s *The Problem We All Live With* as a crucial clue to the importance of the events of 1960, providing her with much needed reassurance that the events that had felt so important to her had mattered to someone else, too.

As this moment suggests, reporters did occasionally track Bridges, Tate, Etienne, and Prevost down; and every once in a while, their actions in 1960 were recognized publicly. When the four girls graduated high school, Leona Tate remembers, the press briefly took interest; Bridges remembers a ceremony organized by the local NAACP from around the same time. But these moments were rare and fleeting, and while they stoked Bridges’ personal interest in her history, public curiosity about the fate of the four little girls who had launched integration in New

¹⁵⁰ Katy Reckdahl, “Ruby Bridges and Ruby Hall,” *Gambit*, 7 June 2004.

¹⁵¹ Leona Tate, interview with author, 16 May 2018.

¹⁵² Latimer, “The Smallest Soldier.”

Orleans remained low, locally and nationally. As Bridges later put it, “Nobody knew what happened to me... Nobody cared.”¹⁵³

Bridges eventually emerged from these difficult years into a more fulfilling and stable life. She embarked on a career as a travel agent in Kansas City - work that she later wrote that she enjoyed, and that allowed her to see the world. She got married and had more children, eventually returning to New Orleans with her family. But not surprisingly, she emerged into adulthood with complex feelings about the meaning of 1960 in her life. In 1983, a *Times-Picayune* article covered a local ceremony honoring Bridges, Tate, Prevost, and Etienne. According to the article, Bridges was, at the time, unemployed and involved in an anti-discrimination suit. The article quoted Bridges expressing open skepticism about whether her family’s sacrifices had been worthwhile: ““You know, it may be selfish and wrong of me. But I say to myself: Here I went through all that, and here I am in this situation,’ she said. ‘I hope our action helped others, but did it help me?’”¹⁵⁴

Bridges continued to believe that the integration crisis and her role in it had been significant - although, as the rest of this chapter will explore, what she remembered and found important from the events of that year did not always align with the way that Coles or Rockwell had portrayed it. But the aftermath of that crisis was still an open wound for her, and the feelings of frustration, confusion, and abandonment that had marked her childhood remained part of the legacy of 1960, too. Again, Bridges’ complicated relationship to her past speaks to the experience of other pioneers of desegregation, many of whom, according to Rachel Devlin, were left “angry and emotionally exhausted” in the years after the ordeal of desegregation.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Latimer, “The Smallest Soldier.”

¹⁵⁴ Marjorie Roehl, “Mob Again Gathers Around ‘N.O. Four,’” *The Times-Picayune*, 19 April 1983.

¹⁵⁵ Devlin, xxx.

For Bridges, these feelings also took shape, importantly, in a moment when no clear narrative about the crisis of 1960 or her role in it had yet developed in public memory. Robert Coles had begun revisiting Ruby in his work in 1978, transforming her throughout the 1980s and 1990s into a symbol of perseverance and faith. When a new book was published or Coles referenced Ruby in a speech, Bridges' name sometimes surfaced in the papers. But this coverage almost exclusively focused on Coles, positioning Bridges as a side-note in stories about the psychologist and his work, rather than focusing on the life of the girl he sometimes referenced. Coles' increasing interest in Ruby had not yet translated into an increased public interest in Bridges. Similarly, while the fact that a reporter showed Rockwell's painting to Bridges when she was a teenager indicates that some individuals did connect the dots between the two, there was not yet much public awareness of the link between *The Problem We All Live With* and the girl who inspired it. While Ruby was taking on increasing meaning in American life, then, Ruby Bridges herself did not yet represent anything fixed. What Bridges might come to mean, how she might make sense of her own story, and how others might interpret it was not yet settled. Indeed, the few moments in which Bridges did make a public appearance or receive press attention during the 1980s present a stark contrast with the way she was framed after 1995. Looking at these moments highlights alternate themes around which a public memory of Bridges' legacy might have coalesced.

In 1981, for example, a rare UPI article focused entirely on Bridges ran in newspapers across the country. The article highlights Bridges' decision to remove her children from public schools: "My son went to the school that I started at, and I don't like to put down public schools, but he wasn't really learning the way he should have," she said, "I put him in a Catholic school and he was so far behind he had to be tutored for a year. So now, they're all in Catholic schools." The article also emphasizes Bridges' hesitation when asked, essentially, what she would do if she

found herself in her parents' shoes. Would she send her own child to integrate an all-white school? The answer reveals Bridges' uncertainty both about the conditions under which her parents made their decision, and about whether she would make the same one: "'I probably would because of what happened with me,' she says, 'but I don't know. I don't think my mother was really aware of what she was doing. My father was constantly begging her to take me out of the school... and I'm probably more like my father.'"¹⁵⁶

Notably, the article carries no hint of the reverence with which Bridges would soon be framed in the national press. The article ran in the *Times-Picayune* under the title, "Black mom irked by school system she helped to create," and echoes the title with an assertion in the text that Bridges had "abandoned the school system she helped to create." The article thus emphasizes Bridges' role in creating an integrated system, but it does not position her as a hero for doing so. Instead, the attribution feels accusatory, as though Bridges is somehow personally responsible for the state of New Orleans public education twenty years after she was sent into Frantz. Her decision to remove her children from public schools reads, similarly, like an abdication of an unspoken responsibility. The author also asks Bridges whether she would enroll her own child in all-white school "to make a point," a dismissive interpretation of the motivations that led parents to enroll their children in segregated institutions twenty years earlier.

The article's portrayal of Bridges and of the legacy of integration makes for a stark contrast with later press coverage of Bridges, which would paint both her and the movement she represented in glowing terms. The state of public education in New Orleans in the 1990's still offered plenty of fodder for a reporter who wished to be skeptical of the results of integration - and much of the press coverage of Bridges in the years after the publication of *The Story of Ruby Bridges* acknowledged as much. But Bridges, in that coverage, was framed very differently - her

¹⁵⁶ UPI, "Black Mom Irked By School System She Helped Create," *The Times-Picayune*, 3 May 1982.

story was seen to represent the promise of an earlier era, not the challenges of the existing one. Of course, this framing grew, at least in part, from the way that Ruby's story had been detached from the specific context of integration as she became a more flexible symbol of courage and resilience. But the UPI story from 1981 demonstrates that such a framing was not inevitable. Bridges' relationship to the public system was complicated; her story could easily be used to represent the failures of that system rather than its redemption.

At the same time, however, Bridges was being hailed as a hero on a much more localized scale. In 1980, the Neighborhood Organization of Treme East presented the New Orleans Four - as Bridges, Tate, Etienne, and Prevost were sometimes called - with silver cups in a small ceremony. Three years later, the Citizens Memorial Committee arranged for the New Orleans Four to be honored at City Hall, and succeeded in designating April 18th as 'The New Orleans Four Day' in the city. Both the 1980 and the 1983 events were primarily the work of one woman: Elizabeth Rogers, a local activist and civic leader who had herself been involved in the effort to desegregate New Orleans schools. Rogers was dedicated to ensuring that the contributions of the New Orleans Four were recognized - "she wasn't gonna die until she found us and gave us the recognition we deserved," Leona Tate remembers.¹⁵⁷ She had formed the Citizens Memorial Committee and worked for years to organize a celebration for the four girls.

The commemorations that Rogers organized highlight an altogether different sort of public memory surrounding Bridges. These events were distinctly local affairs, emphasizing the importance of the New Orleans Four for the city of New Orleans - and they focused on the contributions of all four of the children who had integrated New Orleans schools in 1960, making Bridges part of a shared struggle rather than an isolated icon. The involvement of Elizabeth Rogers also cast Bridges' history in a very different light than that of Coles. Rogers was a

¹⁵⁷ Leona Tate, interview with author, 16 May 2018.

committed grassroots activist, a former labor organizer and an important figure in the struggle for civil rights in New Orleans. She believed that the girls and their families deserved recognition for their singular contributions to desegregation, but Rogers' own life and work highlighted how deeply embedded that contribution was in the lengthy efforts of a broader coalition. Rogers did not, apparently, see any problem with the way that Coles had written about Ruby - on the contrary, she invited him to be the keynote speaker at the city ceremony. Coles expressed interest in accepting, and most of the surviving planning documents for the ceremony assume the possibility of Coles' participation. But in the end, the keynote address was delivered by Dr. Clifton Johnson, director of the Amistad Center at Tulane University.¹⁵⁸ Whatever the reason for Coles' withdrawal, the substitution gave the ceremony a distinctly different flavor. The significance of the New Orleans Four was framed for the audience not by a child psychologist from Boston, but by the director of an archive specializing in African-American history located in New Orleans.

Elizabeth Rogers died in 1985, and after the brief flurry of recognition she organized, interest in the New Orleans Four once again dissipated. But her efforts to recognize the girls serve as a reminder that Bridges' history could also gesture towards a very different kind of narrative from the one that would ultimately take prominence - one embedded in the efforts of a grassroots coalition, shared by the other pioneers of desegregation and their families, and very much rooted in the New Orleans community.

But by the 1990's, that narrative was already being subsumed by the work of Coles. In 1990, the thirtieth anniversary of the New Orleans integration crisis coincided with the publication of *The Spiritual Life of Children* by Robert Coles - the book in which Coles identified

¹⁵⁸ Letter from Dr. Clifton Johnson to Robert Coles, December 17, 1981; letter from Robert Coles to Dr. Clifton Johnson, December 22, 1981; "Celebration in Honor of the New Orleans Four," Ceremony Program. Elizabeth and Walter Rogers Collection, Amistad Research Center.

Ruby for the first time as the catalyst of his career. The result was a series of reunions over the next several years: in 1991, Coles returned to New Orleans to receive an honorary degree from Tulane. In the process, he met with Bridges and gave her the hood he had just received. A photograph of the pair appeared in the *Times-Picayune*, accompanying an article that described his recent book as the “end of a quest begun 30 years ago.”¹⁵⁹ The following year, a ceremony at the federal courthouse brought Ruby Bridges together with Jessie Gryder, one of the U.S. marshals who had escorted her to school in 1960. Bridges presented him with a print of *The Problem We All Live With* - marking the first moment I have found in which Bridges was publicly linked to the painting. While these reunions could not have prepared Bridges for the level of attention that would follow the publication of Coles’ children’s book a few years later, they did indicate that she was beginning to assume a more public persona, and that the associations between the woman and the work of Rockwell and Coles were becoming stronger.

During this same period, Bridges was also re-evaluating her relationship to her own history in a much more personal way. In 1992, Bridges’ youngest brother was killed in a shooting in the same housing project where she had spent much of her childhood, and she found herself temporarily in charge of his young daughters. His death was a turning point, one that, as she later described it in her children’s book, “woke me up in a way. It made me take a long look at my life.”¹⁶⁰ Taking charge of her brother’s children also brought Bridges back to Frantz, where they were enrolled in school, forcing her to confront her past quite directly. For Bridges, exposure to the condition of Frantz in 1990 prompted her to consider how little had changed since her own childhood and what she might be able to do about it. She began to envision work more directly connected to her own past.

¹⁵⁹ Susan Larson, “The Spirit Moved Him,” *The Times-Picayune*, 19 May 1991.

¹⁶⁰ Ruby Bridges, *Through My Eyes* (New York: Scholastic Press, 1999), 57.

Within the next few years, Bridges began working as a parent coordinator in local public schools - the James Lewis Extension, first, and later Frantz - work that put her in close contact with the community, helping to build relationships between parents and their local public school. I will discuss that work in more detail later in this chapter, but two points are important here: first, that Bridges described this work as reconnecting her to a past that she had spent much of the preceding years feeling distanced from, helping her to make meaning from that past and to recover a new sense of purpose out of an old and painful history. And second, that sense of purpose was generated through her engagement in the same communities where that history had been forged. Before 1995, then, Bridges had established a framework for her own, private legacy, transforming her history into meaningful work in the present through engaging with local schools. The publication of *The Story of Ruby Bridges* in 1995, and the accompanying dizzying return to public life, amplified the process Bridges was already involved in - of making meaning from and reflecting on her past. But the book's publication also altered the trajectory of that process dramatically.

The Story Is That I Prayed: Re-Enacting Ruby, 1995-1999

When *The Story of Ruby Bridges* was published in 1995, Ruby Bridges became, quite suddenly, a national icon. This elevation to a national stage plucked Bridges from the local histories with which she had been intertwined, and placed her in an altogether new context: Ruby's story now stood alone. While the other three members of "The New Orleans Four" continued to appear in the occasional commemoration over the following ten years, they experienced very little of this national attention. In fact, the paths of the four girls were increasingly separate: Leona Tate recalls that the 1983 ceremony at the New Orleans City Hall was the last time all four were together. Their paths in public memory diverged as well: commemorations or press coverage

covering the “McDonogh 3,” as they were increasingly called, often only briefly mentioned Ruby Bridges -- and stories featuring Ruby Bridges sometimes did not mention the McDonogh 3 at all.¹⁶¹ Occasionally, Bridges used her platform to remind audiences of these other stories, attributing the difference in their experiences to Coles: in a 1995 interview, she noted, “You know, there are three other girls out there that nobody ever really talks about. But because of [Coles’] work, people remember my name.”¹⁶² But these gestures had little effect on the division of attention: Ruby remained the star of the show.

That stardom, moreover, rested on events that had occurred when Bridges was six years old - and the events that were of interest to a national audience were not necessarily the ones that stood out as particularly important to Bridges herself - or, for that matter, that she remembered clearly. In a February 1995 interview, Bridges articulated the sense of disassociation this produced: “It’s like it’s not me,” she said of reading accounts of her own childhood, “I know that I went through all this, but it’s like when somebody says you’re a hero, and you were only doing what you had to do, what you could do. And because it happened when I was only six years old, I’m still learning about what happened in those days from the history books.”¹⁶³ Frequently, Bridges was asked to reflect on events drawn from Coles’ memories of her childhood, which did not necessarily align with her own memories. In 1997, for example, Bridges appeared on *PBS Newshour*, where she was interviewed about the events of her first grade year. The host questioned Bridges about the moment central to *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, when Bridges pauses in the crowd to pray for her antagonists. “Tell me what was going on,” the interviewer prompts.

¹⁶¹ A key example of this is James Patterson’s *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy* (Oxford University Press, 2001), a prominent popular history of school desegregation. In the body of the text, Patterson does not mention Tate, Etienne, or Prevost at all. He mentions their existence only in a footnote, in which he also claims that they “did not experience the same turmoil” as Bridges.

¹⁶² Susan Larson, “Making History Again,” *The Times-Picayune*, 11 February 1995.

¹⁶³ Susan Larson, “Making History Again,” *The Times-Picayune*, 11 February 1995.

“Well, the story is that I prayed,” Bridges replies. She begins to explain the role that faith played in her family during this time more generally - but the interviewer brings her back to the specific incident depicted in *The Story of Ruby Bridges*. “So what did you say?” the interviewer asks. “Well, I actually don’t remember the prayer,” Bridges admits. “It’s in Bob’s book,” the host assures her.¹⁶⁴

This interview highlights a collapsing of the boundaries between Bridges and Ruby that was common in the years after her return to the spotlight. Bridges was inextricably tied to Ruby: she read *The Story of Ruby Bridges* to audiences around the country, becoming the living embodiment of the book’s character, all grown up. Her adult body was used to gesture towards her movements and actions as a child, as in the ceremony at Connecticut College, when her entrance into the auditorium was framed as an opportunity to re-enact the experiences of her youth, so that the audience could enthusiastically demonstrate how far the country had come since 1960. This reenactment brought many people in the audience to tears: Bridges’ adult presence moved people, just as her childhood self had, but it did so by reminding audiences of the child she had once been - or, more often than not, of the child that Coles and Rockwell had depicted. The Connecticut College ceremony was not an isolated experience: only a few months later, on November 14th, 1995, the 35th anniversary of Bridges’ first day at Frantz, Bridges was asked to re-enact her first walk to school - “several times,” according to the *Times-Picayune* coverage - for the Oprah Winfrey show, which was filming the event.¹⁶⁵ As she appeared at events and commemorations and speaking engagements around the country, Bridges became a stand-in for a past moment, endlessly repeated and rehashed to reinforce its distance - and difference - from the present.

¹⁶⁴ *PBS Newshour*, “A Class of One,” February 18th, 1997.

¹⁶⁵ Joan Treadway, “A Historic Step,” *The Times-Picayune*, 15 November 1995.

Even the long and difficult path that Bridges had traveled between the ages of six and forty had its place within this narrative frame. Press coverage of Bridges in the immediate post-1995 period often acknowledged that she had struggled after 1960. In the coverage of the ceremony at Connecticut College in 1995, for example, the *New York Times* noted that integration had created a host of new problems for the Bridges family, and that they had suffered as a result of their role in integration. The *Los Angeles Times*, similarly, noted that Bridges had “traveled a long path since celebrity first burst upon her,” that she had “two children as a single mother before turning twenty,” and that her brother had recently been murdered.¹⁶⁶ But both articles located these difficulties within a larger, more triumphant framework: Bridges had now come full circle, emerging from these personal difficulties and from her long absence from the spotlight to take up the hero’s mantle once more. The redemption promised by Ruby extended to Bridges herself: she had struggled, but now she had found new meaning. She had been lost to history; but now she had been returned to her rightful place.

But Bridges was not a perfect stand-in for the character from Coles’ children’s book, and the past she embodied could not always be so easily contained within a framework of progress, growth, and redemption. Part of Ruby’s power lay in her youth and corresponding innocence; Bridges’ adult body did not always map perfectly onto the imagined child of Coles’ creation. Children sometimes were the first to notice this. In 2000, Bridges read *The Story of Ruby Bridges* for a group of first graders in New York City, some of whom, the *New York Times* noted, were “questioning whether she was really the girl in the story.” Bridges reportedly reassured them: “‘I am Ruby, but I’m Ruby all grown up,’ Ms Bridges said goodnaturedly, ‘Watch - when you get older, you’re going to look different, too.’”¹⁶⁷ This interaction was, of course, an endearing

¹⁶⁶Josh Getlin, “A Profile in Courage,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 11 September 1995.

¹⁶⁷ Diane Cardwell, “Black Girl’s Courage in 1960 Inspires Children,” *The New York Times*, 15 Nov 2000.

moment of childhood confusion - but it also highlighted the unstable relationship between Ruby and Bridges, whose popularity relied on her relationship to the little girl from the story, even as her adult body demonstrated that she was no longer that little girl. The title of the *New York Times* article - "Black Girl's Courage in 1960 Inspires Children" - highlights the same point: the inspiration happened in the year 2000, when Ruby Bridges read the assembled children a story. But they were inspired not by forty-six-year-old Bridges, but by her six-year-old self.

This is more than a point about growing older; it is a reminder that in this dominant framing, Ruby's story effectively ended at the age of six, rendering the complexities of everything that came after unimportant. But Bridges' own experiences, accumulated over a life history that her adult body represented, were not always so easily contained within the framework of Ruby. It is difficult and complicated to parse Bridges' feelings about her new role, her relationship to Coles, or the way he had portrayed her story from the material I draw on here. I do not assume any access to Bridges' true feelings during this period - but her public statements, at the least, indicate conflicted emotions. She always expressed gratitude toward Coles for the work he had done to preserve her memory and for the public platform that his book had provided her. On the other hand, I have already noted her assertion, in 1998, that it was "time to take [the story] back."¹⁶⁸

Perhaps the best indication that Bridges felt Coles' portrayal of her story to be insufficient can be found in her own children's book, *Through My Eyes*, published in 1999. Bridges included Coles in the acknowledgements, writing that he was "the vessel God used to keep my story alive."¹⁶⁹ But the book represents a dramatic departure from the way that Coles presented her story.

¹⁶⁸ Latimer, "The Smallest Soldier."

¹⁶⁹ Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, n.p.

Reframing the Past in *Through My Eyes*

The front cover of Ruby Bridges' 1999 children's book *Through My Eyes* features a photograph of a child's face. In fact, the cover features almost nothing else *except* a photograph of a child's face; the book's title and author's name are superimposed on top of the image, which takes up all of the available space. The photograph is an extreme close-up, cropped and enlarged so that the child's features dominate the entire cover: her eyes tilted upwards, looking out to the right, and her mouth open in a smile. Picking up the book, it's impossible to know anything else about her -- what her hair looks like, what she's wearing, who or what she's looking at. We know only that she is young, dark-skinned, and smiling.

A reader might guess, on picking up *Through My Eyes*, that the face featured on the book's cover belongs to the author. And a few readers might recognize the photograph as a UPI press photo taken in 1960 of Ruby Bridges at 6 years old, standing in a doorway. It is a popular image of Bridges, although not one of the most iconic. But the extreme cropping on the cover would make the image difficult to place, even for a reader who had seen it before -- which is exactly the point. The cover image of Bridges' first published book is *not* an easily recognizable one. It is not one of the iconic photographs of the small girl walking up or down the front steps of William Frantz on her first day at school, escorted by marshals. Nor is it a reproduction of Norman Rockwell's *The Problem We All Live With*, arguably the most famous image associated with Bridges. It's not only an unfamiliar image, but an unfamiliar presentation of the book's heroine: the photograph chosen for the cover of *Through My Eyes* features Bridges not at her most stoic or serious or heroic, but relaxed, smiling, looking even slightly mischievous.

Before the reader has even opened the book, then, Bridges has announced her intention: this book will tell the story differently, presenting Bridges through a new perspective: as the title

suggests, through her eyes. Published in 1999 by Scholastic Press, *Through My Eyes* was Bridges' first published book, and accordingly, her first opportunity to literally author her own story.¹⁷⁰ Every time she sat for an interview or made a speaking appearance, of course, Bridges had the opportunity to tell her story in her own words. But a published text offered greater permanence and wider circulation, as well as more autonomy, giving Bridges greater determination over the appropriate format, structure, length, and emphasis for her story.¹⁷¹ The choices she made produced a narrative that decisively breaks away from the images and tropes that had previously defined her public presence. From the book's structure to its content to its tone, *Through My Eyes* tells a different kind of story about Ruby Bridges and about integration.

Through My Eyes shares a few important similarities with *The Story of Ruby Bridges*: both books are children's books, and both books focus on Bridges' experiences in the 1960-1961 academic year, when she was in first grade.¹⁷² But even as children's books, the two are quite different. *Through My Eyes* - 64 pages long and divided into short chapters - is a longer and more difficult text than *The Story of Ruby Bridges*. It is also, importantly, targeted at an older audience: Scholastic markets *Through My Eyes* for readers in third grade and up; *The Story of Ruby Bridges* targets first graders. These differences are small but significant, as they shaped the sort of story that Bridges was able to tell. Bridges did go on to write two books for younger children, too - but it is noteworthy that her first published text targeted an audience that allowed her to present her

¹⁷⁰ Bridges went on to collaborate with Scholastic on two additional children's books, both targeted at younger readers.

¹⁷¹ Bridges did not produce this book in a vacuum, and I accordingly do not assume that she operated with complete autonomy. Presumably, Scholastic influenced, to some degree, Bridges' authorial choices. Furthermore, Bridges worked with an editor, Margo Lundell, who is credited with compiling and editing the interviews and articles interspersed within the text, and who may also have influenced, to some degree, the book's structure.

¹⁷² It is notable that Bridges, too, focused on the medium of children's literature. Perhaps because Bridges became famous for events that occurred when she was six, her story has often been framed as about childhood and primarily of interest to children. It is interesting to consider, however, how she might have told her story differently in a book targeted at adults.

story in more depth and more detail.¹⁷³ Additionally, *Through My Eyes* is a photobook - it pairs Bridges' narrative with an assembled collection of black and white photographs, which underscore the book's basis in historical events. Coles' text is a picture book, filled with watercolor illustrations: *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, in both text and image, presents Bridges' story as someone else imagined it. Bridges, in contrast, makes it abundantly clear that the events she is describing really happened, and she bolsters her authority as a narrator by supplementing her own account with not just photographs but excerpts from magazines and newspapers, as well.

But the difference between *The Story of Ruby Bridges* and *Through My Eyes* goes beyond format, target audience, or structure. In her first self-authored text, Bridges presents a narrative worlds away from Coles' simple, triumphant framing: instead, she tells a story that is complex, confusing, and sad. She presents herself as a courageous but bewildered participant in an ordeal generated by forces far beyond her control or understanding, and highlights the profound losses she and her family experienced as a result of that participation. If Coles centers Ruby's inner reserves of faith and bravery as the key to her success, Bridges instead turns her readers' attention to the networks of support - interpersonal and otherwise - that sustained her, a framing that decisively emphasizes community action over individual heroism.

The Bigger Picture

Despite the book's title, *Through My Eyes* acknowledges through its very structure that it is impossible to tell Bridges' story through her eyes alone, or to divorce Bridges' experiences from the way those experiences were framed for the public. The text pairs Bridges' narrative with a

¹⁷³ In 2003, Bridges wrote *Ruby Bridges Goes To School: My True Story*. This text is a Scholastic Reader, part of a series of texts designed to support developing readers. *Ruby Bridges Goes to School* is designed for 1st graders, and offers a much more simplified version of the story in terms of sentence structure and vocabulary, although it retains many of the same themes and structural choices as *Through My Eyes*. Even when targeting a younger audience, then, Bridges made significantly different choices than Coles.

wide assembly of images and text, including many of the most iconic representations of her. Bridges devotes a page and a half to John Steinbeck, including a lengthy excerpt of his description of her in *Travels With Charley*. A large reproduction of *The Problem We All Live With* takes up half a page. Robert Coles merits two full pages - one devoted to Bridges' memories of working with the child psychologist, and the other to excerpts from Coles' texts and to reproductions of images Ruby drew for him as a child. Textual and photographic excerpts from national magazines and newspapers are interspersed throughout the text, and Bridges likewise acknowledges the outpouring of support her family received from around the country - a reminder that her story was a very public one from the beginning.

But these gestures towards a mediated and public version of Ruby's life make up only one narrative layer, and they are not the text's sole or even primary focus. Instead, they appear only as small pieces of a larger kaleidoscope of images and text, given no more and no less emphasis than any other. Coles, Steinbeck, and Rockwell are characters in this text, and so is the Ruby they invented - at least in the sense that the viewer has the opportunity to see Ruby through their eyes. But the central character here is not any of the famous men who shaped Bridges' story, nor is it the Ruby who appeared in the media. Instead, *Through My Eyes* largely focuses on Bridges' own voice, and her own interpretation of her experiences - even as the text acknowledges how difficult it is to separate that voice out from the flurry of images and media surrounding her.

This narrative complexity is mirrored in the structure of the text. As a photobook, *Through My Eyes* pairs Bridges' narration with a collage of photographs, images, and excerpts from magazines, newspapers, and interviews. This medium highlights the tension between an apparently authentic and isolated narrative voice, and a highly mediated, intertextual narrative,

creating a text that is multi-layered and sometimes at odds with itself.¹⁷⁴ The photobook structure also speaks to the dual purpose of Bridges' text, as she articulates it in the opening pages: to "recall how integration looked to me then, when I was six and limited to my own small world," and, as an adult, to "fill in some of the blanks about what was a serious racial crisis in the American South." Ultimately, Bridges writes, she has "tried to give you the bigger picture - through my eyes."¹⁷⁵

This expressed interest in the bigger picture itself departs from the iconic representations of Bridges' life, which tend to isolate Ruby marching up the steps to Frantz, to the exclusion of all else. In contrast, Bridges extends both the political and personal timeline of the text. Bridges includes descriptions of her life before integration, and importantly, these descriptions are warm and loving. *Through My Eyes* does not shy away from the hardships Ruby's family faced prior to 1960. Bridges' grandparents were sharecroppers, she writes, as were her parents before they moved to New Orleans to build a better life. They "didn't have much of an education, and it took everything they had to keep the family going," Bridges writes. But Bridges places the emphasis not on the material poverty of her childhood home but on its warmth. Her description is largely one of abundance and love: "We had big southern breakfasts with grits, bacon and eggs, and homemade biscuits. At night, my mother sometimes cooked New Orleans-style food, like red bean and rice or fried catfish or shrimp. For dessert, she sometimes made one of my favorites - banana pudding or sweet potato pie." Ruby spent summers on her grandparents' farm, "good

¹⁷⁴ Kate Capshaw Smith argues that the photobook is inherently "metatextual" - because it is an assemblage of text and image, it "draws attention to itself as a constructed object." As such, photobooks open up possibilities for dissonance and complexity - the words and the images on the page may not always align, for example, but may pull the reader in slightly different directions - and invite the reader to participate actively in the process of constructing meaning, of engaging with both image and text and considering how they work together. In presenting her story in the form of the photobook, then, Bridges utilizes a medium well-suited to explore complexity and contradiction.

¹⁷⁵ Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 5.

summers” when she felt “happier than at any other time of my life.” Her grandmother’s love and attention made her feel “very special.” In New Orleans, she played jacks and jump rope with friends and siblings from her block. “My world in those days was comfortable and safe,” she writes.¹⁷⁶ In including these descriptions, Bridges emphasizes that her life did not begin at six years old. And, importantly, she emphasizes that her life before integration was a happy one - a description that provides a richer portrait of Bridges’ home life, but also makes it clear that integration did not “save” Bridges or her family.

Bridges also expands the political context of her story. The text opens with images from the integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, and closes with an image of Martin Luther King, Jr. and a timeline of the civil rights movement stretching from the *Brown v. Board* decision to Dr. King’s assassination in April of 1968. Throughout the text, Bridges intersperses her own story with that of the events unfolding around her not only in New Orleans, but across the country. She profiles both Judge J. Skelly Wright, who mandated school desegregation, and segregationist governor Jimmie H. Davis, who did everything in his power to stop it. She keeps an eye on the legal battles and city-wide protests that continued to unfold throughout her turbulent first grade year. Bridges’ interpretation of her own experiences might be the focus of the text, but the narrator is invested in grounding those experiences in a much larger and more complex context.

Importantly, Bridges also highlights the experiences of other children that paralleled her own. She intersperses her own story with that of other families and children caught up in the integration crisis: she mentions the other three children - Leona Tate, Tessie Prevost, and Gail Etienne - attending McDonogh 19, and shares pictures from their experiences; she profiles two white families - the Foremans and the Gabrielles - who defied the protesters and sent their

¹⁷⁶ Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 8.

children to Frantz, and details the violence that they, too, faced. The narrative structure of *Through My Eyes* jumps back and forth between Ruby's story and these other, parallel experiences, suggesting that Bridges' story only makes sense in the context of other narratives - that one piece alone is not enough. If there is meaning, the narrative suggests, it comes from seeing how these pieces fit together, how they form a larger picture.

Similarly, Bridges portrays her antagonists clearly and vividly. In *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, the protesters serve only as a foil to Ruby's generosity of spirit: Coles pays little attention to the specific motivations or tactics of the protesters, nor does he dwell on why, specifically, Ruby had reason to fear them. Indeed, the faces, signs, and bodies of the protestors in *The Story of Ruby Bridges* are difficult to distinguish in George Ford's watercolor illustrations, and rendered less threatening in pastel hues. The protesters in *Through My Eyes*, in contrast, are anything but blurred. The book contains multiple photographs of mobs -- outside of Frantz and across the city - in stark black and white. Their signs are vivid and visible, as are their faces, sometimes contorted in anger, and sometimes smiling proudly.

These images highlight both the violence and the normality of white supremacy. In one particularly disturbing full-page image, a group of protesters poses for a picture. The group - which includes men, women, and young children, all dressed as if for church -- faces the camera directly, many of them smiling. They proudly display what they've brought with them: signs, crosses, Confederate flags, and a small, child-sized coffin containing a black baby doll.¹⁷⁷

Another photograph features a close-up of a woman who appears to be smiling as she holds up a piece of fabric stretched between her hands. A caption explains that she is threatening to strangle

¹⁷⁷ The baby doll carries particular resonances given the specific role of dolls in the research of Kenneth and Mamie Clark, which was foundational to the *Brown v. Board* decision, but black dolls also play a central role in histories of race, childhood, and representation. For a discussion of that history, see Robin Bernstein's *Racial Innocence*. For an in-depth reading of this particular image in *Through My Eyes*, see Kate Capshaw's *Civil Rights Childhood*.

her target - one of the white parents who defied the boycott - with her scarf. A third image - taking up a full page - shows three Klansmen in white robes, standing next to a massive burning cross.

These images are interspersed with Bridges' narrative descriptions, and here, too, she does not shy away from articulating the violence of the moment explicitly. She describes riots breaking out across the city, in which protesters burned crosses and threw flaming bottles of gasoline at passing cars. She repeats the language that protesters shouted at her -- "Go home, nigger," and "No niggers allowed here" - and reports that they spat at and threatened to poison her. She's clear, too, about the fear that she and her family experienced. "My grandparents telephoned ... to say they were afraid for us," she writes. "They thought my father would be lynched -- murdered by a lawless mob."¹⁷⁸

The result is a portrayal of Bridges' ordeal that underscores her bravery all the more by laying bare the level of violence she confronted, and by outlining the stakes of her actions. By detaching Bridges' story from the context of desegregation in New Orleans and nationwide, Coles and Rockwell turn her bravery into a disembodied value, a symbol that transcends the specific moment, that could have manifested anywhere and in the face of any obstacle. In contrast, *Through My Eyes* gives that bravery weight by situating it within the particularities of a specific place and a specific moment in time, by making it clear not only that Bridges was brave, but by rendering clearly what she was brave in the face of, as well as why her bravery was necessary in the first place.

Importantly, however, Bridges emphasizes that as a child, she had no real way to understand this larger context. Instead, Bridges presents herself as a passive actor without much understanding or agency in the adult world. When the city tested black kindergartners for

¹⁷⁸ Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 22, 36.

potential admission to white schools, Bridges describes her experience of sitting for the test by saying, “I was only five, and I’m sure I didn’t have any idea why I was taking it.”¹⁷⁹ When Bridges was selected to attend Frantz, the decision to attend was made by her parents without her knowledge or understanding. Prior to her first day, Bridges writes that her mother “told me I would start at a new school the next day. She hinted there could be something unusual about it, but she didn’t explain.” Bridges’ only memory from the night before her first day at Frantz is of her realization that, as she put it, “I wouldn’t be going to school with my friends anymore, and I wasn’t happy about that.”¹⁸⁰

Once the narrative moves into the whirlwind of desegregation, Bridges repeatedly emphasizes her inability as a child to process the events unfolding around her. She at first attributes the noise of the crowd outside of Frantz to a Mardi Gras parade, because “Mardi Gras was always noisy.” She can’t make out individual faces in the mob because, “I wasn’t very tall.” The beautiful school building, the policemen at the door, and the large crowd all merely lead six-year-old Ruby to conclude that the school was an important place: “This must be college,” she concludes, and later, “this must be the way it is in a big school.” After spending the first day sitting in an office, Bridges arrives home merely pleased that her new school seems easier than expected. She repeats the chant she hears from the mob -- “Two, four, six, eight, we don’t want to integrate” -- and teaches it to a neighborhood friend. “My friend and I didn’t know what the words meant,” Bridges writes, “but we would jump rope to it every day after school.”¹⁸¹

The child protagonist who emerges from these descriptions is less a hero than an unwitting actor in a larger drama. This portrayal is a striking contrast from Rockwell or Coles’ Ruby, a composite symbol of bravery and composure and an exemplar of moral fortitude. The

¹⁷⁹ Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 10.

¹⁸⁰ Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 14.

¹⁸¹ Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 15-20.

child portrayed in *Through My Eyes* is brave, certainly, but her bravery grows from innocence rather than understanding. In this portrayal, Bridges undercuts the romanticization of her bravery that so deeply infuses her iconography. She removes herself from the pedestal of child-hero, and re-positions herself first and foremost as a *child*, small, bewildered, and largely beholden to the wishes of the adults around her.

We Are Not Alone: Reframing Isolation in Through My Eyes

Perhaps Bridges' most dramatic departure from the dominant framing of her narrative is in her approach to her own isolation. Ruby's solitude is a defining feature of most retellings of her experience, a key element of the iconography that made her famous and perhaps the most heart-wrenching detail of the story of her first-grade year. The most famous depictions of Bridges highlight this isolation: one striking illustration in *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, for example, features a two-page spread of an empty classroom, with Ruby, entirely alone, seated at a desk focusing on a workbook. "So Ruby began learning how to read and write in an empty classroom, an empty building," Coles writes.¹⁸²

Bridges' strange, lonely first grade year is certainly an important part of the narrative in *Through My Eyes*, too. Crucially, however, Bridges centers loving relationships with her family, her teacher, and her larger community as key components of her ability to survive the year. In fact, one section of her book is entitled, "We Are Not Alone." In it, Bridges describes the support she and her family received from around the country - toys, books, and clothes for Ruby, and money for her parents, which was a necessity after Bridges' father lost his job. The next section, "More Support As I Go Back to School," describes a source of support closer to home: her neighbors. Neighbors guarded the Bridges' house at night, helped Lucille Bridges watch her other

¹⁸² Coles, *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, anniversary edition (New York: Scholastic Press, 2010).

children, found temporary work for Ruby's father, and helped Ruby get dressed for school. Men from the neighborhood walked beside the car that took Bridges to school every morning, "looking for trouble as the car slowly left the safety of the block." In Bridges' framing, the family was not left to face integration alone. Their physical safety as well as their material and emotional well-being was treated as a neighborhood concern.¹⁸³

Bridges' parents did not leave her to face her ordeal alone, either. In *Through My Eyes*, Lucille Bridges is an active force. She is ultimately the one who decides that Ruby will attend Frantz, convincing Ruby's more hesitant father. She is the one who communicates with the NAACP and the marshals. She is the one who issues instructions to Ruby about what to wear and how to behave. Bridges makes clear that obedience was an important value in her childhood, writing that she was raised not to question the instructions of adults. But while Ruby's parents have much more power and understanding than Ruby herself, they too are limited in their agency in this portrayal. In describing the NAACP's visit to her parents' house in the summer of 1960, Bridges underscores her family's passive role in the decision through a repeated sentence structure that presents the NAACP as a vague but insistent "they:" "They said it was a better school," she writes, "They said my going to William Frantz would help me," and, "They pressured my parents and made a lot of promises." A pull quote from Lucille Bridges that accompanies this account supports Bridges' implication that her parents did not have the full picture: "There were things I didn't understand. I didn't know Ruby would be the only black child in the school. I didn't know how bad things would get."¹⁸⁴

While Lucille Bridges is herself somewhat of an unwitting actor in this drama, then, she is nevertheless a constant and steadfast source of support for her child. Importantly, Lucille

¹⁸³ Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 38.

¹⁸⁴ Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 12.

Bridges accompanies Ruby throughout the entirety of her first two days at school. In fact, the photograph juxtaposed with Bridges' account of November 14th, 1960 shows an escort of federal marshals walking the little girl down the steps of Frantz at the end of her first day of school. It's an iconic scene, reminiscent of Rockwell's painting, except for one important difference - Ruby is walking side by side with her mother, who is firmly holding her hand. In inserting this image, Bridges forcefully reinserts her support network back into the story, providing a visual reminder that she passed through this ordeal literally hand-in-hand with her family.

The support provided by Bridges' mother is quickly supplemented by a new relationship formed with Ruby's teacher, Barbara Henry. Bridges portrays Henry as a caring, engaged adult, and describes their time together warmly. "Being Mrs. Henry's only student wasn't a chore," she writes. "It was fun and felt sort of special. She was more like my best friend than just an ordinary teacher. She was a loving person, and I knew she cared about me." Importantly, her teacher is a companion - they "did everything together," and Mrs. Henry frequently eats lunch in the classroom so that Bridges will not be alone. "Little by little," she writes, "I grew to love Mrs. Henry. We became very attached to each other." In turn, Mrs. Henry does more than provide companionship or education to her charge. She becomes an advocate for Ruby and works to improve her situation, demanding that the principal end the practice of keeping Ruby isolated from the handful of other students that were slowly returning to the school, and fighting with the administration to defend Ruby's high grades.¹⁸⁵

The importance of these relationships to Bridges is underscored by the fact that quotes from interviews with Barbara Henry and Lucille Bridges are interspersed throughout the text. Excerpts from other books, court decisions, newspapers, and magazines also make up part of *Through My Eyes*, but Barbara Henry and Lucille Bridges are the only other people allowed space

¹⁸⁵ Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 40-41.

to offer their individual perspective on the events of 1960: they become, in a sense, co-narrators of the text. Additionally, the only moments in the text in which Bridges describes a real sense of isolation come when the support of these relationships is withdrawn. When her mother informs Ruby that she can no longer accompany her to school every day, Ruby cries for the first time in the book. This fear is brief, as Bridges quickly finds reassurance in her relationship with her teacher - and, of course, her mother's support continues at home. The loss of Barbara Henry, on the other hand, creates a more permanent rupture, and generates the most dramatic expression of abandonment and isolation in the book. When Ruby returns for the beginning of her second grade year, Barbara Henry has left the school, without Ruby's knowledge. "I wanted to run down the hall and ask everyone I saw, 'Where is Mrs. Henry?' I felt very alone again. There was no one to talk to, no one to explain things. My heart was broken."¹⁸⁶

This moment of loss and abandonment, positioned at the end of the text, creates a near-total reversal of the narrative arc of *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, in which the return of other students to Frantz marks a return to normality, proof that the ordeal has come to an end. *Through My Eyes*, in contrast, undercuts the conclusion that finding white friends somehow solved Bridges' problems. In one of the book's final sections, "The End of First Grade," a half-page photographic spread shows Ruby with her five new classmates, all white. The six children are smiling and relaxed, their bodies touching: they look like friends, comfortable with one another. And yet the narrative paired with this photograph tells a very different story. Bridges shares only one anecdote related to the return of a few classmates at the end of her first grade year: a little boy refuses to play with her because, he tells her, "My mama said not to because you're a nigger."¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 52.

¹⁸⁷ Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 50.

Relatedly, the end of the Ruby's first grade year is presented not as the resolution but as the beginning of a new crisis - and one that, unlike the desegregation of Frantz, Ruby must face truly alone. Barbara Henry is not the only loss: "At home, there were no NAACP people coming to visit, no packages in the mail. I did see Dr. Coles sometimes, but it wasn't the same."¹⁸⁸ Heartbroken and confused by the disappearance of her teacher, Ruby finds no solace in the companionship of fellow students, even fellow students of color. Her funny accent - picked up from a year with Mrs. Henry, a Boston native - marks her as different, gesturing towards a more profound and permanent separation. "For months," she writes, "I tried to pronounce words the way the other kids did, but I never again sounded like everyone else in class. From second grade on, I felt different from the other kids in my class, and it wasn't just because of my accent. William Frantz School was integrated, but the long, strange, journey had changed me forever."¹⁸⁹ These are the last words in the main body of Bridges' narrative. The school is integrated, a process that required Ruby but also involved the support and love of a whole community that surrounded her. Once integrated, that community dissipates, and Ruby is left - for the first time in the text - truly alone.

Making Meaning From the Past

The effect of this narrative reversal is amplified by Bridges' afterword, "Let Me Bring You Up To Date," which portrays the aftermath of integration in her life very differently than the triumphant afterword of Coles' text. In her final chapter, Bridges charts the events of her life since 1961 -- and the more she extends her timeline, the less triumphant the narrative feels. Bridges includes her parents' divorce and attributes it directly to the experience of integration -

¹⁸⁸ Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 52.

¹⁸⁹ Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 53.

“My parents had never really agreed about my going to Frantz,” she writes, “and it put a wedge between them” - and she describes her mother’s financial struggles and her decision to move the family out of the house Bridges grew up in and into the Florida Housing Project. Her father stayed in the old family home, and Bridges’ separation from him increased her sense of isolation: “I missed him so,” she writes. Bridges’ father died when she was twenty-four, a loss that she describes only as “terrible.”¹⁹⁰

Bridges’ earlier portrayal of her childhood life and home as a warm and loving environment makes her portrayal of her post-integration experiences all the more jarring: the stability of her family life declines over the course of the text. She also emphasizes that the educational outcomes of integration were not what her family had expected, noting that she wanted to go to college, but did not: “My mother thought doors would automatically open for me as a result of what I had accomplished in 1960,” Bridges writes, “but there was no one around to help lead me through those doors as I was led through the doors of William Frantz.”¹⁹¹

Bridges never explicitly questions here whether integration was a worthwhile experience. But the end of her text is almost an exact inverse of Coles’ afterword in *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, which highlights triumph over triumph, pulling the reader to the inevitable conclusion that all the hardships Ruby endured over the course of the story were worth it. *Through My Eyes* instead presents hardship after hardship, leaving the reader to wrestle with the unspoken question: was what Ruby gained worth what she lost? Indeed, Bridges uses the language of loss in the afterword explicitly: “I sometimes feel I lost something that year,” she writes. “I feel as if I lost my childhood.”¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 56.

¹⁹¹ Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 57.

¹⁹² Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 56

These moments in the afterword underscore a sense of bitterness and grief that surfaces throughout the text, leading Kate Capshaw to describe *Through My Eyes* as a “quietly furious book.” For Capshaw, Bridges’ text engages with the triumphalist, heroic narratives that traditionally frame her story, but ultimately rejects them.¹⁹³ My own reading aligns with Capshaw’s in highlighting the ways in which Bridges reframed her story. But I also want to emphasize that even as Bridges’ story parts ways with the dominant framing of her experiences, the text and its author simultaneously remain entangled with that framing, generating an ambivalence that does not replace the book’s bitterness but sits uneasily alongside it. Importantly, *Through My Eyes* does not, in the end, reject Bridges’ childhood experiences as meaningless, despite all the ways in which it complicates and reframes those experiences. Rather, Bridges struggles throughout the text -- and, in her telling, throughout her life -- to find meaning in her story, to make sense of what happened her as a child, and why. She ultimately locates that meaning in the present, by emphasizing the work still to be done, and the ways in which she - given her background, and the way audiences respond to her story - is particularly well positioned to make an impact. But in doing so, Bridges also reinscribes several of the key tenets of the dominant framing of her narrative.

In the closing pages of her text, Bridges shifts her reader towards the present by returning to the present-day state of public education in New Orleans. Bridges’ closing thoughts on integration and educational equity, in keeping with the rest of the text, are complex: she acknowledges progress, noting that she and her husband have been “able to send our sons to integrated schools in a city that is less racist than it used to be.” But the perpetual inequities that continue to structure life in New Orleans are deeply apparent to Bridges, and deeply personal. In

¹⁹³ Katherine Capshaw, *Civil Rights Childhood: Picturing Liberation in African American Photobooks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 250.

the final pages of the text, she recounts her brother's death and her own corresponding return to Frantz where, she notes, the majority of students are now African-American. "As is true of most inner-city schools," she writes, "there's never enough funding to keep William Frantz up to current standards or even to offer the students the same opportunities they would receive in some of the suburban schools I've been fortunate to visit. The kids are being segregated all over again. There aren't enough good resources available to them - and why is that?"¹⁹⁴ Bridges does not propose an answer to this question. But in posing it, she directly asks her reader to consider the causes of segregation and inequality in public schools not in 1960, but in the present day, refusing to frame the struggle for educational equity as a closed chapter in history. And she makes clear that her own work in this struggle is ongoing, describing how the conditions at Frantz led her to launch her Foundation.

Bridges also shifts towards the present in her own life, describing her own work traveling the country and visiting schools, emphasizing literacy, reading, and education, and helping to facilitate conversations about race among children. This new trajectory, she notes, is possible in part because of the publication of *The Story of Ruby Bridges* in 1995, after which, she writes, "I became visible again to the public, and amazing things began to happen:" among them, reunions with Barbara Henry and Robert Coles, who, she writes, had been "keeping my story alive until I could grow up enough to tell it myself." She suggests that being able to tell her story for herself has allowed her to stake a claim her past: "To be honest," she writes, "I feel as if my life grew away from me for a long time....It's taken me a long time to own the early part of my life." But in the final - and still deeply ambivalent - line of the book, she claims, "I'm closer to being at peace with myself than I ever was."¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 58.

¹⁹⁵ Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 59-60.

In the closing pages of her text, then, Bridges weaves together her reflections on the contemporary state of education and her newfound ownership of her own story as the twin pillars on which she has built a new relationship to her past. In the final two paragraphs of the book, Bridges writes explicitly about her sense that she now understands what happened to her and why: she feels “carried along by something bigger than I am,” and while she was once “tempted to feel bitter” about her experience of integration, “not understanding why I had to go it alone,” she now knows that “it was meant to be that way.” This language points towards a continued lack of control over own fate: “Interest in the story keeps growing,” she writes, “and I’m not the one making it happen.” But now, Bridges seems to frame that lack of control as proof that she has an important role to play in a larger plan that is still unfolding. “In all of this,” she concludes, “I feel my part is just to trust in the Lord and step out of the way.”¹⁹⁶

This is Bridges’ most radical reframing: she insists that the meaning of her past lies less in what she did as a child in 1960 than in how those experiences set her up for the present. Bridges argues that, for all their importance, the events of 1960 were just the opening chapter: making meaning of her childhood means fulfilling the path she was set on as a child. And unlike Coles and Rockwell, Bridges insists that the meaning of her story lies not in timeless values of courage or faith, but in a continued commitment to fight for a more equitable education system - the struggle for which is not a distant bad memory from 1960 but a present and persistent problem now, today. Simultaneously, she insists that her own value lies not in what she did as a six-year-old, but in how those experiences prepared her for the work she has embarked on as an adult.

And yet, in describing this realization, Bridges shifts towards language that reinscribes her place in history as special and pre-ordained, positioning herself not just as an arbitrary pawn

¹⁹⁶ Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 60.

but a child being set on a path that she would only come to understand later. And in doing so, she also reinvests in the emotional currency of her story, writing that “People are touched by the story of the black child who was so alone.” Interestingly, this description gestures more towards the way that Rockwell and Coles framed her story than the way that Bridges herself spent the preceding sixty pages reframing it. And indeed, the framing of Rockwell and Coles appear with more prominence in these final pages than almost anywhere else in the book. Bridges includes pictures of herself with Coles at the 1995 ceremony at Connecticut College, and of herself holding a print of the Norman Rockwell painting.

None of these tensions take away from the power of Bridges’ book, nor do they undercut the ways in which she reframed her narrative and drew a different set of meanings from it. But the ambivalence of the final pages is important, because it foreshadows tensions that would continue to appear throughout Bridges’ work in her Foundation and in her later efforts to charter a school out of Frantz. As she shifted her gaze to the present, would she focus on present-day work in schools, or on telling her childhood story? If her focus remained with her story, what version of that story would she tell - one that gestured towards the complex legacy of integration she outlined in the main body of her text, or towards the emotional power of her isolated experience she highlighted in the afterword? To what degree would that choice lie with Bridges, and to what degree would it be dictated by the momentum of her own popularity- and its roots in a simpler and more palatable version of her story?

Reframing the Present Through the Ruby Bridges Foundation

If Ruby Bridges’ most radical proposition in *Through My Eyes* was to position herself as an activist in the contemporary world, her vehicle for making that claim a reality was the Ruby Bridges Foundation. Bridges’ work in schools began before the Foundation started, but the

Foundation brought institutional heft to her personal endeavors - and, increasingly, took the place of them. With funding from the proceeds of Coles' *The Story of Ruby Bridges* and a logo derived from Rockwell's *The Problem We All Live With*, the Foundation trafficked in the currency of Bridges' iconic status - demonstrating that she could leverage that status towards projects of her own, located - true to the vision she articulated in her book - in present-day activism.

But the Ruby Bridges Foundation was also haunted by the same tensions that had manifested themselves in *Through My Eyes*. While the Foundation demonstrated that Bridges could leverage her past into present-day activism, that activism would be limited to certain kinds of work and to certain geographies. The Foundation's projects were most successful when they adhered most closely to narratives that Bridges had worked to reject or at least to complicate in *Through My Eyes*. And Bridges quickly found that her work had more currency nationally than it did in New Orleans - a reflection of the way that her story positioned her in the context of a national narrative, rather than in the context of local conditions.

Bridges' impetus to work in schools pre-dated her re-emergence into the public sphere. The story of Bridges' return to work in schools was recounted over and over in speaking engagements and interviews post-1995, making it difficult to parse the original timeline. In her 1999 book, Bridges wrote that her nieces attended Frantz, and that she - feeling, as she would later put it, that "fate brought her back to that school" -- promptly began working there. Many accounts of her life before and after this date recount the same narrative, but newspaper articles from 1995 suggest that, in fact, her formal work as an adult in schools began not at Frantz but at the James Lewis Extension Middle School, where she worked as a volunteer parent teacher liaison and then as the Director of Family and Student Services. Bridges then transitioned to Frantz, but not until August of 1995 - several months after the publication of *The Story of Ruby Bridges*.

A story in which Bridges immediately returned to Frantz makes for a tidier narrative arc, but the slight shift in the timeline highlights an important distinction in the way that her work there was framed. Importantly, Bridges was working at James Lewis *before* the publication of Coles' book brought her back into public life. And if newspaper coverage of her work at the James Lewis Extension is any indication, she was also quite good at it: parents at James Lewis spoke highly of their relationships with Bridges and the impact of her work in their lives.¹⁹⁷ But because Bridges did not begin work at Frantz until *after* the publication of *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, her return to that particular school was always entangled with the growing national narrative of her childhood fame. Cameras were present on her first day of work at Frantz, part of a film crew for CBS Evening News with Dan Rather. And just days after starting her new job, she flew out to Connecticut to receive an honorary degree alongside Robert Coles. From the very beginning, then, her work at Frantz coexisted with her role as a national icon.

At first, however, the work of Ruby Bridges the icon and the work of Ruby Bridges the local school employee seemed to be in alignment. The work Bridges did as a parent-teacher liaison directly reflected themes that she would go on to highlight in her own history when she published *Through My Eyes* a few years later: the importance of community and family support in a successful education. As a director of student and family services, Bridges focused on building connections between schools and the communities they serve: "She wants parents to feel comfortable about being at the school and she wants teachers and parents to get to know each other better," the *Times-Picayune* reported on her first day at Frantz.¹⁹⁸ In interviews during this period, Bridges emphasized the connection between her past and her present work, and framed her relationships with parents and her interest in community-building as primary levers for school

¹⁹⁷ Susan Larson, "Making History Again," *The Times-Picayune*, 11 February 1995.

¹⁹⁸ Siona Carpenter, "A New Mission," *The Times-Picayune*, 31 August 1995.

improvement. “We have to get back to taking care of each other, of each other’s children,” she said in an interview with the *Times-Picayune* in February of 1995. “That’s how it was when I integrated the schools. Our whole community was behind us. Otherwise, I don’t know how my parents would have made it.”¹⁹⁹ She echoed these thoughts in August, during her first week of work at Frantz: “My main goal is to get parents to understand that it’s not just their child they should be concerned about, it’s every child. I would never have been able to go through the intense situation I did as a child if it hadn’t been every person in the neighborhood coming together.”²⁰⁰

At the same time that Bridges was establishing her place at Frantz, she was also working to get the new Ruby Bridges Foundation on its feet. Funded by the proceeds from Robert Coles’ *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, the Foundation made it possible for Bridges to translate the work she was doing on an individual level into projects with a broader reach. In the early days of the Foundation, however, it wasn’t entirely clear what those projects would be. Bridges articulated slightly different goals in different spaces: In February of 1995, the *Times-Picayune* reported that Bridges Foundation would expand the sort of work she was doing as a director of family and student services into other schools, but gestured towards broader ambitions as well, noting that the Foundation aimed to be able to “help recruit white and Hispanic students back into the public schools.”²⁰¹ In a speech at Frantz in November of 1995, Bridges stated that she intended to use her organization to push for more parental involvement in schools.²⁰² A *New York Times* article from September of the same year suggested that the Foundation would be involved in more material support for schools, but with the goal of parental involvement still in mind: during her

¹⁹⁹ Susan Larson, “Making History Again,” *The Times-Picayune*, 11 February 1995.

²⁰⁰ Siona Carpenter, “A New Mission,” *The Times-Picayune*, 31 August 1995.

²⁰¹ Susan Larson, “Making History Again,” *The Times-Picayune*, 11 February 1995

²⁰² Joan Treadway, “A Historic Step,” *The Times-Picayune*, 15 November 1995

time working at Lewis and Frantz, the article reported, Bridges had found that the “schools were too poor to provide a room, supplies, or other resources to children or their parents,” and the Foundation was started to “provide the money” to fill the gap.

But the first official projects stemming from the Foundation had quite a different emphasis: in 1997, the *Times-Picayune* profiled the Foundation’s work running an Etiquette Club at Frantz which had started in 1995, shortly after Bridges began work there. Students in the club, run by a friend of Bridges, learned manners, dining etiquette, and social skills over the course of an eight-week class, culminating in a group outing to a local restaurant. The Etiquette Club was not the Foundation’s only work at Frantz: according to the *Times-Picayune*, the Foundation also sponsored arts programming including African dance and ballet classes, and Bridges ultimately hoped to “open a center for cultural arts and social skills that would serve youngsters from around the city.” But the Foundation’s work seems to have already shifted away from Bridges’ original investment in community-building among parents and neighbors. Furthermore, the 1997 article reported that Bridges no longer worked at Frantz, writing that she now “concentrates on her foundation ... [and] keeps busy with speaking engagements, school visits, and her family.”²⁰³

Very rapidly, then, the direct, person-to-person work Bridges was doing in schools was superseded by her work running the Foundation. I do not know which work was more personally fulfilling to Bridges, or better represented her personal aspirations - but regardless, the Foundation pushed Bridges’ work in a different direction. As the Foundation took off, Bridges was no longer working directly with individual school communities at the local level. Her Foundation would continue to work with schools and children, but that work had a different focus - and it was no longer grounded in New Orleans, but quickly grew to sites across the country. Bridges increasingly played the role of inspirational speaker, traveling the country and telling the

²⁰³ Siona Carpenter, “Socially Skilled,” *The Times-Picayune*, 3 June 1997.

story of her childhood. Very quickly, then, her work was re-inscribed within the currency of her past. And the connections that she was building through that work were not necessarily local ones.

In 1999, Bridges filed the paperwork to formally establish the Ruby Bridges Foundation as a 501(c)(3). What had before been a local operation running a few programs out of one school was now an organization with national reach. The funding for this expansion was national, as well. While the Foundation's early work had been funded through proceeds from Robert Coles' book, the formal establishment of the Foundation in 1999 was made possible through donations from Norman Lear and Castlerock Entertainment, who together donated \$35,000 - the sum total of the assets listed by the Foundation in their tax filings from that year.²⁰⁴ In 2003, the Bridges Foundation established a partnership with Hewitt Associates, LLC, a Chicago-based consulting firm that bankrolled the organization's expansion into Chicago schools, ultimately providing the Foundation with over \$115,000 over the following five years. Other major funding sources included Love 4 One Another Charities - Prince's charitable organization, based in Minnesota - which donated \$21,000 to the Foundation over two years, and the Coca Cola Company, which donated \$25,000 to the Foundation in 2003.²⁰⁵ These funding sources indicate the kinds of connections and alliances the Foundation was making. The primary funding sources for the Ruby Bridges Foundation were national, with no particular ties to New Orleans. And the Foundation was not applying for federal grants, but largely seeking corporate partnerships.

The other steady source of funding for the Foundation, however, came in the form of royalties from Scholastic. The exact amount of these proceeds varied from year to year, but they were often significant - in 2001, the Foundation received \$34,827 in royalties, which was, in that

²⁰⁴ Internal Revenue Service, Form 990-PF (1999).

²⁰⁵ Internal Revenue Service, Form 990-PF (2003).

year, their only major source of funding - and they constituted the Foundation's most consistent (and occasionally, the only substantial) funding source.²⁰⁶ In a very material way, then, the Ruby Bridges Foundation relied on the market value of Bridges' story. In other ways, too, the Foundation leveraged Bridges' iconic status towards her present-day aims. The Foundation's logo featured a black-and-white outline not of Ruby Bridges herself, but of the little girl from Norman Rockwell's painting. A video produced by the Foundation in 2003 makes the connection between the painting and the Foundation even more explicit: the video opens with an image of Rockwell's painting, in color, which then transforms into the black and white logo.²⁰⁷

The Foundation's work, then, was never separate from the popular memory of Bridges; rather, it was deeply intertwined at every level with her iconic status and with the people, institutions, and imagery that had made her story famous. Robert Coles served on the Foundation's Advisory Board, as did the President of Scholastic. But it was Bridges' story that helped underwrite the Foundation, and Bridges, importantly, was always the Foundation's Chair. The Foundation's success between 1999 and 2005, then, demonstrates the ways in which Bridges was able to leverage her narrative towards work in the present, and to reclaim some material control of the use of that narrative.

The Foundation's successes, however, also demonstrated the tensions inherent in leveraging that legacy on a national stage. The Foundation's mission reflected the broadness of its goals: the Foundation "promotes and encourages the values of tolerance, respect, and appreciation of all differences through educational programs," the official newsletter explained in June of 2003. It continued: "With the belief that prejudice and racism can be eliminated, the foundation's objective is to change society, through the education and inspiration of our children." The

²⁰⁶ Internal Revenue Service, Form 990-PF (2001).

²⁰⁷ Ruby Bridges Foundation, "Ruby's Bridges Program," December 2003, uploaded by ScreenSlam, accessed through Vimeo.

Foundation's motto underscored the primary objective - to foster tolerance in children: "*We believe racism is a grown-up disease and we must stop using our children to spread it.*"²⁰⁸

These were broad goals, but it is telling that the Foundation's most successful and well-established initiative was the Ruby's Bridges program, which paired students from inner-city schools with students from wealthier suburban districts. Over the course of the program, students from partner schools were paired into pen-pal relationships, and then brought together for community service projects and educational field trips. Described in the Foundation's newsletter as a "unique, educational program which brings diverse student populations together to develop relationship-building skills, strategies for collaborative work for social change, and a robust appreciation of differences," Ruby's Bridges quickly became the Foundation's signature project.²⁰⁹ The program was launched in Los Angeles in the 2002-2003 school year with 280 students from four middle schools, and the following year, the program expanded to an additional four schools in LA as well as two schools in Chicago. At its peak, the program served 850 students in ten schools across two cities.

The Foundation's broader mission and its programmatic emphasis - as demonstrated through the Ruby's Bridges' program - aligned with Bridges' own history: her first-hand experiences, as she described them in *Through My Eyes*, taught her that racism was passed down to children from their parents, and demonstrated to her that close relationships across boundaries of race and class could be powerful and transformative. However, Bridges herself portrayed a more complicated picture in *Through My Eyes* of children, of racism, and of the ability of friendship to overcome prejudice, and she was also careful to gesture towards the systemic

²⁰⁸ Ruby Bridges Foundation, "Ruby Bridges Foundation Update," November 2003.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

inequalities that continued to structure the sorting of students into these vastly different schools to begin with.

The Foundation's own promotional materials, however, downplayed these complexities in favor of a presentation that fit securely within the boundaries of a framework of friendship and reconciliation as keys to overcoming systemic racism. The Foundation's primary work was to build individual relationships between diverse populations, and the program celebrated how this experience broke down preconceived notions the children held about each other, allowing them to learn how much they truly have in common. In a 2003 promotional video focusing on the program, children from participating schools discuss their preconceptions about their penpals for the camera; later footage shows the children filling out worksheets together that prompt them to discover both unexpected facts about their partners and unexpected commonalities.²¹⁰

This type of programming may very well have been impactful - in their 2003 newsletter, the Foundation shared that the Ruby's Bridges program had been evaluated by an "an outside, independent evaluation firm using multiple sources of data," and had "revealed positive change in students' understanding of diversity, relationship-building, and themselves."²¹¹ And certainly, the structures of the program did not preclude - and might in fact lend themselves to - building student awareness of more systemic issues of educational and social inequities. Nevertheless, Ruby's Bridges was framed, both by the press and by the Foundation itself, as a program primarily focused on building individual friendships between children as a primary lever of social change - exactly the sort of narrative Bridges herself had worked to complicate. What's more, she had primarily been relegated to the role of inspirational speaker within the Ruby's Bridges program specifically and the Foundation more broadly. And while the Foundation's successes

²¹⁰ Ruby Bridges Foundation, "Ruby's Bridges Program," December 2003.

²¹¹ Ruby Bridges Foundation, "Ruby Bridges Foundation Update," November 2003.

across the country had helped to secure Bridges' national reputation, they had not helped her build relationships at the more local level, in New Orleans or at Frantz, specifically.

At home, Bridges had more recognition than she'd received as a child and young adult: she was a regular feature now at anniversaries and celebrations of the *Brown v. Board* decision and of the integration of New Orleans schools. But in these events, Bridges remained primarily a commemorative figure, a living embodiment of a past to be memorialized and celebrated. Additionally, those celebrations highlighted the disjuncture between past and present - on November 14th of 2000, for example, the New Orleans school leaders held a re-enactment of Bridges' first day at Frantz, on the grounds of the school, using students as actors. But the demographics of the school - serving what was, by then, a 100% African- American student body - meant that black students played the role of white segregationists.

For the *Times-Picayune* reporter who covered the ceremony, this absurdity highlighted the disconnect between the message promoted at the event -- "that racism thrives only because adults teach it to children; that the bravery and sacrifice of one person can improve life for millions; that children can be heroes; that education is the ticket out of poverty" - and the realities of a re-segregated school "abandoned by suburban-bound white people fleeing federally forced segregation," a situation "too complex and deeply ingrained to be eradicated by individual bravery."²¹² The event's messaging, as it was summarized by the *Times-Picayune*, might have served as a summary of the Bridges Foundation's mission, as well - and it was a mission that, whatever its merits, was insufficient to address what was happening at Frantz, not only because of its focus on individual friendships, but because it wasn't embedded in the context of that particular school, or even running programming in New Orleans. And neither, increasingly, was

²¹² Brian Thevenot, "School Re-enacts Historic Walk - Ruby Bridges is honored for bravery," *The Times-Picayune*, 15 November 2000.

Bridges. She wasn't present at the re-enactment on November 14th of 2000, delivering instead a video message to the assembly. Her work with the Foundation took her all over the country, but it had not built her connections at home. On the contrary, it had taken her out of her direct work in New Orleans schools.

Both the geography of the Foundation's success and Bridges' role as inspirational speaker within it indicated that her power continued to rest largely in the emotional impact of her story, as a national symbol of progress and hope, and that the piece of her message that resonated most strongly continued to focus on reconciliation. But for Bridges, the dream of making an impact at home, in New Orleans, in a material way, on the grounds of the school she had once integrated, continued to occupy an important place in her vision. That vision remained, for the time being, out of reach - but as the Ruby Bridges Foundation wrapped up its pilot years, she turned her attention more fully towards Frantz.

Conclusion: Ruby Bridges and Ruby Hall

In June of 2004, New Orleans reporter Katy Reckdahl wrote a lengthy profile of Ruby Bridges for *Gambit*, a local weekly magazine. The article, entitled "Ruby Bridges and Ruby Hall" - a reference to Bridges' married name - framed its subject as a woman who had fully come into her own. Reckdahl's article charted the years between 1960 and 1995 in Bridges' life, exploring in detail how estranged Bridges once felt from her history and how difficult it had been for her to come to terms with her childhood experiences. But Reckdahl located that disconnect in the past: though a gap once existed between the famous story of Ruby Bridges' childhood experiences and the life of the woman who lived them, Reckdahl suggests, that gap had closed by the time of their interview. The article opens with a description of Bridges' first sight of *The Problem We All Live With* as a teenager. But in 2004, at the time of her interview with *Gambit*, Reckdahl notes,

Bridges had just returned from delivering a keynote address at the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Once estranged from her past, Ruby Bridges Hall was all grown up. She had tapped into the power of her own story, and was ready to transform her childhood experiences into fuel for her activism in present-day schools.

But other gaps remained. The title of Reckdahl's article refers to a distinction Bridges herself drew on to explain why her recognition on a national stage did not extend to her hometown. Reckdahl points out that no one seemed to recognize Bridges in the diner where the interview took place, and notes that while Bridges was often "flocked by autograph seekers and wellwishers" while traveling, she rarely received similar attention at home. Reckdahl quotes Bridges: "'For me, it's Ruby Bridges and Ruby Hall,' she says, shrugging her shoulders. 'When I'm here in New Orleans, I'm Ruby Hall. It's downtime for me. I can walk around here and no one knows.'" Later in the interview, Bridges expresses more frustration with the gap between her national persona and her local influence: While the Ruby Bridges Foundation originally provided programming at Frantz, Reckdahl writes, "it became clear that the foundation was getting a far better reception in other cities. 'I realized that, if I was going to do something about the sacrifices my parents had made, I had to go outside New Orleans, because no one here really embraced the story,' Hall says."²¹³

Reckdahl does not speculate on the difference between Bridges' national and local reputations - and Bridges does not explain why she believes that her story was not embraced in her hometown. But the disconnect points towards an important geographic component of Bridges' legacy. The work of Bridges' Foundation was no longer rooted in the New Orleans community; instead, the Foundation had re-inscribed Bridges as a national figure whose story resonated with audiences across the country. This positioning required detaching Bridges and her

²¹³ Katy Reckdahl, "Ruby Bridges and Ruby Hall," *Gambit*, 7 June 2004.

story from a specific local context, emphasizing the components of her story that might speak to anyone, and de-emphasizing those that required specific knowledge of the context of New Orleans in 1960. Furthermore, Ruby's emotional impact lay in her ability to generate deep emotion in audiences, and in the possibility of interracial friendship, forgiveness, and tolerance she symbolized. The Foundation had promoted these dynamics of her story, positioning Bridges as an inspirational individual, and focusing on programming that built friendship and understanding between individual children. While potentially powerful, these aspects of the Foundation focused largely on private emotion; they did not necessitate direct action or engagement with systemic issues, nor had they facilitated deep and thoughtful engagement with the particularities of any one community. The result was that Bridges was no longer deeply embedded in Frantz; her history and the history of the school had become detached.

But for Bridges, the process of finding meaning from her past had always been tied very specifically to Frantz, a place that was deeply personal to her. In her 2004 profile, Reckdahl notes that Bridges "hasn't given up on her former school," and that despite the Foundation's success in LA and Chicago, Bridges ultimately hoped to "circle back around and put it into the Frantz school." "These days," Reckdahl writes in the closing lines of the article, "when [Bridges] Hall dreams, she dreams of Frantz being built into a first-class flagship school that can attract a diverse student body. 'Then the school will be integrated a second time around,' she says."²¹⁴

In 2003, the Ruby Bridges Foundation ended its pilot phase and launched the Frantz Initiative - a project that would focus the Foundation's attention squarely on the William Frantz School. The Frantz Initiative was an opportunity for Bridges to do more than build friendships - to attempt an overhaul of a school and a neighborhood. It was also an effort to root the legacy she had built and claimed as her own in her hometown, on the grounds of the school she had

²¹⁴ Katy Reckdahl, "Ruby Bridges and Ruby Hall," *Gambit*, 7 June 2004.

integrated. But while Frantz loomed large in Bridges' personal history, the school had its own history, too. As the next chapter will explore, that history has itself been elided from Bridges' legacy - even by Bridges herself.

Famous Frantz, Failing Frantz: Marking the History of the William Frantz School, 1960 - 2005

Introduction

The spring of 2005 was a tumultuous time for the Orleans Parish School Board. On April 11th of that year, the Board held what the *Times-Picayune* described as “one of the most divisive and raucous meetings in the past decade,” and the next day, Superintendent Tony Amato resigned - after, reportedly, sitting through the meeting without speaking a single word. It had been a bad week for Amato. The contentious Board meeting had addressed a barrage of bad news, including but not limited to: revelations that the Board faced a cash shortage so dire that it had recently very nearly failed to make payroll for its more than 12,000 employees, and accusations of corruption among Amato’s staff. These charges were only the tip of the iceberg: the district’s financial problems were severe enough that in the same meeting the Board agreed to turn over the management of its finances to outside consultants, and in 2003, the FBI had opened an investigation - still ongoing - into the Board over allegations of fraud and corruption.²¹⁵

Meanwhile, the district was facing a shortage of students - enrollment had dropped by 30,000 over the previous ten years - and an ongoing academic crisis. New Orleans was consistently ranked the lowest-performing school district in Louisiana, which itself was consistently ranked among the worst in the nation.²¹⁶ These problems were not Amato’s alone: in

²¹⁵ Brian Thevenot, “Besieged Amato Calls It Quits,” *The Times-Picayune*, 13 April 2005; Martha Carr, “Plan Calls for Closing, Moving Many Schools,” *The Times-Picayune*, 27 April 2005; Brian Thevenot, “Feds Open Investigation of School Payroll,” *The Times-Picayune*, 26 June 2003.

²¹⁶ Mark Waller, “Black Students Narrow Gap a Bit,” *The Times-Picayune*, 4 March 2005. New Orleans was so accustomed to being at the bottom of rankings lists that when, in 2004, Forbes.com included the city on its list of “best education in the big cities” - a list apparently compiled with no attention to test scores - the spokesperson for the Orleans Parish School District reacted with confusion: “I’m sorry, did you say best or worst?” she reportedly responded. See “We’re Number What?” *The Times-Picayune*, 23 February 2004

fact, Tony Amato was the seventh Superintendent of New Orleans Schools in the previous ten years.²¹⁷ Nor would his resignation alone solve them. It did, however, mark the beginning of a rapid series of dramatic changes, including budget cuts and layoffs, and calls from Deputy Interim Superintendent Ora Watson - who herself would only last a year in the job - to close a number of schools as part of an effort to consolidate underutilized facilities.²¹⁸

One of those schools was William Frantz Elementary. The situation at Frantz in May of 2005 was not much better than the state of the School Board that governed it. In the 2004-2005 school year, Frantz was officially designated an “Academically Unacceptable” school, the lowest rating possible to receive, reserved for schools with a School Performance Score (SPS) of below 60 points out of a possible 200. Frantz’s SPS of 47 was not only extremely low, but had declined from the year before, earning Frantz the additional designation of a “School in Decline.” Frantz’s low numbers were hardly singular: 68 of the district’s 118 schools received an “academically unacceptable” ranking for the 2004-2005 school year. In fact, Watson’s proposal to close Frantz was not, seemingly, related to its low scores, as much as its low enrollment: in the 2004-2005 school year, Frantz recorded an enrollment of 212 students, a reduction of over 50% from the 438 students the school had served in 1997. Since that year, enrollment had been declining steadily and sometimes dramatically, including a drop of 134 students in one year alone.²¹⁹

Despite the school’s apparent problems, Frantz’s inclusion on the list of proposed closures did not go unchallenged. Toni Orrill, a candidate to represent Frantz’s district in the state Senate, spearheaded community resistance to the plan, and helped to arrange a small protest in May, featuring approximately two dozen parents, community members, and Frantz students.

²¹⁷ Brian Thevenot, “Besieged Amato Calls It Quits,” *The Times-Picayune*, 13 April 2005.

²¹⁸ Martha Carr, “Plan Calls for Closing, Moving Many Schools,” *The Times-Picayune*, 27 April 2005.

²¹⁹ 2004-2005 School Report Card for Parents, William Frantz Elementary School, Louisiana Department of Education, released January 2006; 2004-2005 School Performance Scores; Louisiana Department of Education.

Speaking with reporters, Orill acknowledged the school's challenges - including a termite infestation and "years of deferred maintenance" - but insisted that Frantz remained a source of pride for the community.²²⁰ The protest turned out to be a somewhat strange affair, however, because Frantz had been removed from the list of schools slated for closure the day before it took place. "Too bad no one notified the protestors," lamented reporter Katy Reckdahl in her coverage for *Gambit*. The change of plans had arisen from a last-minute meeting between school officials, the Interim Superintendent, and the Ruby Bridges Foundation, resulting in a "verbal agreement" to preserve the school. The tentative plan outlined in *Gambit* involved closing the school for several years for fundraising and renovation. But in 2010, the new campus would reopen, featuring a civil rights archive and museum and state-of-the-art facilities, just in time for the 50th anniversary of the integration of Frantz.²²¹

This plan, too, proved temporary: just two weeks later, the School Board officially voted to close Frantz, with no mention of any verbal agreement or future re-opening.²²² Instead, the *Times-Picayune* reported in July what seemed to be the final word: in the coming school year, Frantz students would be moved to Lockett Elementary - ironically, the school which Ruby Bridges had originally attended in 1960, before integrating Frantz - which would be renamed William Frantz, to preserve the historic name. The Frantz campus, in turn, would become a district learning center for students expelled from their home campuses.²²³ By the summer of 2005, then, it seemed that William Frantz Elementary School would survive in name only; the historic campus had seen its last days as an active elementary school.

²²⁰ Katy Reckdahl, "Frantz Escapes Chopping Block," *Gambit*, 16 May 2005.

²²¹ Katy Reckdahl, "Frantz Escapes Chopping Block," *Gambit*, 16 May 2005.

²²² Brian Thevenot, "Five Elementary Schools to Close," *The Times-Picayune*, 1 June 2005.

²²³ Brian Thevenot and Steve Ritea, "As Clock Ticks, School Plans Finalized," *The Times-Picayune*, 30 July 2005.

But in almost exactly the same moment - on June 8th, 2005, just one week after the Board voted to close Frantz - the William Frantz Building was added to the National Register of Historic Places. The Registry listing marked the end of a lengthy effort from the Ruby Bridges Foundation to secure federal recognition of the building's historical importance. It also underscored what had been a running theme in opposition to the school's closure: that the building's history and its iconic status made it worth saving. The protestors gathered outside the school in May had carried prints of Norman Rockwell's *The Problem We All Live With*.²²⁴ An editorial that ran in the *Times-Picayune* in June entitled "School is a Piece of History" cited the painting too, before arguing explicitly for the school's preservation: "Today, Frantz Elementary, like most Orleans Parish Schools, is typical of the troubles of the school system over the past decade," the author wrote. "Changes are needed, but due to Frantz's historical significance, the building should never become vacant."²²⁵

As these examples suggest, two narratives about the William Frantz School coexisted uneasily in the summer of 2005 in New Orleans: on the one hand, Frantz was a historic site, a special place deserving of recognition and remembrance. On the other hand, it was a school in crisis, with failing test scores, a shrinking student body, and crumbling facilities. On the one hand, the school had to be preserved; and on the other, the school had to be remade. The near simultaneity of the school's closure with the building's inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places presents the most visible juxtaposition of these two narratives, but each resulted from a much longer process of building, framing, and erasing the history of the Frantz school. This chapter engages with those processes, and situates them in the context of four decades of shifting education policy in the aftermath of integration in New Orleans.

²²⁴ Katy Reckdahl, "Frantz Escapes Chopping Block," *Gambit*, 16 May 2005.

²²⁵ Demetrius Corley, "School is a Piece of History," *The Times-Picayune*, 6 June 2005.

These twin framings of Frantz as famous and failing were not mutually exclusive: of course, Frantz could be *both* the site on which important historical events unfolded in years past, and the contemporary location of a struggling school. In fact, as this chapter and the next will explore, the Ruby Bridges Foundation drew on both narratives to make an argument about the school's future: Frantz's history as an important sight in the struggle for equity in public education became a symbol of the promises the school had once embodied to students of color in New Orleans. Its state in 2005, in turn, served as a symbol of what had become of those hopes, and prompted a call to remake the school into what it always should have been, to fulfill the promises of 1960. After Katrina, leaders of the Recovery School District, as well as Akili Academy - the charter school that would eventually occupy the Frantz building - would apply a similar framing, mobilizing the narrative of Frantz's role in integration, its decline, and its eventual reconstruction as proof of a new day in New Orleans.

These twin framings of Frantz are noteworthy, then, not only because they chart two sides of Frantz's long and complex history, but because of what their coexistence suggests about the relationship between the two. Neither the Bridges Foundation nor the Recovery School District engaged in a discussion of *why* the historic school had become a failing one. But as this chapter argues, the William Frantz of 1960 and the William Frantz of 2005 are intimately connected: the school as it existed in the summer of 2005 was the direct product of historical forces operating since (and before) the desegregation crisis of 1960. Highlighting the connections between these two framings demonstrates the extent to which Frantz - like many other New Orleans public schools - has always been at the center of an ongoing and shifting conversation about what equity in public education means, and how to achieve it.

This chapter focuses on two dominant historical narratives surrounding Frantz, arguing that both framings of the school - as failing, and as historic - constitute an interpretation of

Frantz's history, and each navigates the role of integration in that history, whether by commemorating it or erasing it altogether. I begin by placing both of these moments in the context of a brief history of the school and the district between 1960 and 2005, situating Frantz in the middle of the broader forces shaping education in New Orleans and across the country in the post-integration period. Then, I investigate how Frantz came to be seen as a failing school by 2005, as well as the process by which its integration history came to be officially recognized, focusing on the school report cards from the Louisiana Department of Education from 1997-2005, and the Ruby Bridges Foundation's application to the National Register of Historic Places, respectively.

Finally, I argue that while both framings of Frantz made claims on Frantz's future, both also work to obscure a richer history of the school, one built around the daily experiences of Frantz families and faculty and the Ninth Ward community. This chapter does not rectify that erasure: I focus here on official archives and the narratives they create, and accordingly, the voices and perspectives of the Frantz community are largely absent. But in focusing on these dominant narratives, I hope to highlight that absence, and to emphasize its importance: in making claims to Frantz's history so detached from the experiences of the Frantz community as it existed in 2005, both framings of Frantz - as famous and as failing - helped pave the way for a future William Frantz School in which that community had no voice at all.

“A Great School Again:” Frantz from 1937 - 1960

Since her return to the public spotlight in 1995, Ruby Bridges had tied the process of making meaning from her own history to her present-day work in public schools. That vision - especially as it was enacted through her Foundation - encompassed public schools around the nation, but for Bridges, making an impact at Frantz, on the grounds of the school so connected to her own past,

held a special and specific importance. Frantz often appeared in Bridges' writing and in her speeches as a symbol of how much work was still to be done, and when she articulated her vision of the future of public education, she often tied that vision to what the future might hold for Frantz. In *Through My Eyes*, for example, Bridges highlights the irony of a contemporary Frantz where most students are poor and African American, and where once again students are denied access to "an equal opportunity to fulfill their hopes and dreams and enjoy school the way I did." Then she turns to the future: "I believe we must turn inner-city public schools into great schools," she writes. "The Frantz school should become a great school again."²²⁶

Bridges' assertion that the Frantz school was once a great school - let alone that it was a place she enjoyed - is perhaps a surprising categorization of the site of such a painful childhood experience. In fact, it seems to contradict her own descriptions of the school, as a place where she found refuge in a warm classroom with a welcoming teacher, but otherwise met with isolation, mockery, and outright hostility from other faculty, staff, and students. Bridges' characterization of Frantz therefore gestures towards the complexity of assessing the quality of a school. What makes a "great" school? The academic performance of its students? The qualifications and experience of its faculty? The resources and opportunities it provides? The sense of community it cultivates? These questions lay at the heart of the school desegregation movement and of the struggle for equitable public education in the United States, because the pursuit of racial justice through public schools is historically intertwined with an investigation of the factors - both measurable and intangible - that determine the quality and value of an education.²²⁷ The history of

²²⁶ Ruby Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, New York: Scholastic Press (1999), 58.

²²⁷ These questions were explicitly debated in many of the court cases that led to *Brown v. Board of Education*. Consider, for example, the court's finding in *Sweatt v. Painter* in 1950 that the University of Texas Law School could not provide an equitable educational experience for African-American students simply by creating a separate law school, even if that new school had equitable resources, because "the University of Texas Law School possesses to a far greater degree those qualities which are incapable of

New Orleans public education, like the history of public education around the country, can be read through the lens of an unfolding, shifting, but persistent conversation about equity and excellence and the relationship between the two, and that conversation hinges on an assessment of school performance, as well. Focusing on the Frantz school - and its role in New Orleans desegregation - illuminates the stakes of this conversation in relation to school desegregation.

In her description of Frantz, Bridges suggests a narrative of decline: the school was once great, but had deteriorated over time. But the history of Frantz suggests a more complex narrative. In fact, the school Bridges desegregated in 1960 never had much of a reputation for greatness. Built in 1937, the William Frantz School was constructed to serve the white children of a working class, immigrant community in the Upper Ninth Ward. Speakers at the building's dedication in 1938 described the new school as a "fortification against encroachments of those terrible foreign 'isms,'" and a place where children will learn to "repel foreign efforts to destroy our country."²²⁸ But the school built to "Americanize" the children of this neighborhood suffered from overcrowding almost as soon as construction was completed. In 1938, the year of the school's dedication, press coverage cited the building as capable of accommodating 560 students.²²⁹ This number proved optimistic. Decades later, in 1983, the Orleans Parish School Board would recalibrate its metrics for calculating building capacity: under the new definitions, the Frantz building was designated as having a "true program capacity" of 400 students, and a "worst case capacity" of 525.²³⁰ It's easy to imagine, then, that the school had been packed in the years before

objective measurement but which make for greatness in a law school. Such qualities, to name but a few, include reputation of the faculty, experience of the administration, position and influence of the alumni, standing in the community, traditions, and prestige."

²²⁸ "Dedicate School As 'Protection' for Democracy," *The Times-Picayune*, 6 October 1938.

²²⁹ "Dedicate School As 'Protection' for Democracy," *The Times-Picayune*, 6 October 1938.

²³⁰ New Orleans Public Schools Department of Planning, "The Utilization of Public School Facilities, Annual Report: 1982-1983," 20 August 1983, Box 7, Office of Planning, Orleans Parish School Board Collection, University of New Orleans.

integration, with enrollment hovering around 560, and peaking at 613 in 1957.²³¹ And by 1960, Frantz was already suffering from a lack of adequate funding or attention to facilities. As early as 1940 - only three years after the school was built - members of the Frantz School Cooperative Club formally approached the Board with the request that “sufficient funds be provided the schools,” warning of “a shorter school term, lack of necessary equipment, poor types of teachers..., [and] cheaper and dangerously constructed school buildings,” among other dangers.²³²

These conditions were typical of those encountered by the children of white working class and immigrant families in New Orleans; in fact, the Frantz School was built in a moment when the mediocrity of New Orleans public schools was very much in the spotlight. The quality of white public schools in New Orleans had been a subject of some concern for most of the 20th century. In 1909, a national report on the state of public education - *Laggards in Our Schools* - found that New Orleans schools ranked among the worst in the country, with only a quarter of white school children completing elementary school (the report’s authors focused only on white schools in New Orleans, which added to the embarrassment of city officials, as *Laggards in Our Schools* found that New Orleans white schools were outperformed by black districts in several other big cities).²³³ This report spurred a period of growth and reform for white schools - but in 1938, when New Orleans school officials commissioned a new report by an independent evaluator, the resulting Grace Report found that the vast majority of New Orleans schools had not fundamentally changed since the days of *Laggards in Our Schools*.

While white public schools were in need of improvement, the conditions at these schools paled in comparison to those faced by black children in the neighborhood and throughout the city.

²³¹ Directory of the Public Schools of New Orleans, La., Session 1957-1958.

²³² ‘Sufficient Funds Asked for Schools,’ *The Times-Picayune*, 7 December 1940.

²³³ Devore and Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools*, 141.

Unlike *Laggards in Our Schools*, the Grace Report turned its attention to the state of public education for black children in New Orleans, as well, and found a “wide gulf in educational opportunity dating far back into the history of the state and region.”²³⁴ As the Grace Report suggested, the education system in New Orleans had been built on the exclusion and systemic neglect of black children. In 1900, the New Orleans School Board had limited black public education to fifth grade. Black community leaders spent nearly the next two decades fighting simply for the restoration of secondary education, and a single high school - McDonogh 35 - was eventually created for black students in 1917.²³⁵ Despite this minimal expansion, schools serving black children remained so intensely overcrowded that many implemented a “platoon” system - whereby students attended school part-time, in shifts. Facilities, moreover, were in complete disrepair. Badly needed new facilities for black students were built only rarely, and met with intense and often violent protest from the white community.

As was the case nationally, the local desegregation movement in New Orleans was born out of generations of resistance to these conditions. In New Orleans, this movement coalesced around A.P. Tureaud, the civil rights activist and star lawyer for the local NAACP, who filed suit against the Orleans Parish School Board in 1952. The lawsuit was suspended temporarily in anticipation of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling - but in 1955, Tureaud reopened the case to push the local district to take action in response to *Brown*. In 1956, Judge J. Skelly Wright of the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans ruled in Tureaud’s favor, and mandated that New Orleans begin to desegregate its public schools. It took four more years of delays, but on November 14th, 1960, Bridges, Etienne, Prevost, and Tate took the first steps towards the desegregation of the system.

²³⁴ Quoted in Devore & Logsdon, 176.

²³⁵ Devore & Logsdon, 179. Black secondary education was restored through eighth grade in 1914, and through high school in 1917.

But in the months leading up to November 14th, 1960, the Orleans Parish School Board did not prioritize sending six-year-olds Ruby Bridges, Leona Tate, Gail Etienne, and Tessie Prevost to desegregate schools with excellent academic programs. Nor, for that matter, did they attempt to place the girls in schools where they were likely to be welcomed or supported. In fact, historians of the New Orleans school crisis agree that by nearly all measures, William Frantz Elementary School, in the Upper 9th Ward, and McDonogh 19, just across the Industrial Canal in the Lower Ninth were, as Liva Baker puts it, “the worst possible choice of schools from which to launch racial desegregation.”²³⁶ Frantz and McDonogh were within 3 miles of each other, making it easy for opponents to concentrate their protests; both were also in close proximity to St. Bernard Parish, which served as the home base of Leander Perez, the inflammatory leader of the segregationist resistance. And both schools served working class communities in some of the poorest areas of the city - a choice that Adam Fairclough argues “put the entire burden of accepting a hugely unpopular social change on badly educated members of the white working class.”²³⁷ Parents at Frantz made their intention to resist desegregation clear even before the names of the selected schools were released: members of the White Educational Association met at Frantz in August of 1960 to preemptively discuss their options in the event that desegregation came their way.²³⁸

In the months preceding desegregation, progressive white activists in the wealthy Uptown neighborhood advocated the use of several schools in their own neighborhood - schools with good reputations, and faculty and parents supportive of integration. Lusher and Wilson Elementary Schools were both operating below capacity, and were willing to desegregate. In fact, the PTAs at both schools formally petitioned the Board for the opportunity to launch the city’s

²³⁶ Baker, *The Second Battle of New Orleans*, 379.

²³⁷ Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 251.

²³⁸ “Segregational Group to Meet,” *The Times-Picayune*, 2 August 1960.

process of desegregation. But the Board insisted that the schools had been selected based on the objective screening measures of their pupil placement plan. Out of 135 applicants, only five African-American girls had been deemed acceptable by the Board's rigorous selection process (one of whom withdrew) - and these girls were within walking distance of McDonogh and Frantz. Additionally, and importantly, the Board intentionally selected schools with lower achievement levels among white pupils, operating under the assumption that black children would struggle with the transition more in schools with high-achieving white peers.²³⁹ At Frantz and McDonogh, the five chosen applicants ranked above the average achievement level of the white pupils. The fact that these schools did *not* have a reputation for academic excellence made them, in the eyes of the Board, an ideal choice.²⁴⁰

Bridges came to Frantz from nearby Lockett Elementary, built in 1934, only a few years before Frantz. Lockett had been cited in the Grace Report as one of four elementary schools for black students that could be considered to be in "fairly good" condition - but only by comparison to the remaining twenty one elementary schools, which the report cited as in such poor repair that they were essentially "shelters in which children may be collected for a minimum of academic instruction."²⁴¹ Lockett had small classrooms, bad lighting, and floors in poor condition in 1938 - conditions that had surely only deteriorated by 1960. Nevertheless, Bridges herself describes her kindergarten year at Lockett with warmth in *Through My Eyes*: "I loved school that year," Bridges writes, "and my teacher, Mrs. King, was warm and encouraging," and reminded Ruby of

²³⁹ The belief that black students would not be able to hold their own amongst high-achieving white students, and that they would be damaged by the experience, underscores the assumptions of black inferiority and its relationship to a damaged or vulnerable black psyche which framed the desegregation movement as it was implemented by white-led institutions.

²⁴⁰ Liva Baker, *The Second Battle of New Orleans*, pp. 377-378.

²⁴¹ Quoted in Devore & Logsdon, 212.

her grandmother. “School was far away, but she always had “lots of company for the long walk.”²⁴²

For Bridges, as for so many black students and families, integration represented a fight for equitable resources, a fight to attend schools closer to their homes, and a fight to dismantle an ideology that rested on the denial of black citizenship. It did not necessarily represent a flight from inadequate teachers or school communities - and, in fact, the closure of many black schools and the firing or reassignment of many black faculty members as integration progressed constituted a deep loss for many black communities. These losses have been central to ongoing conversations about the costs and gains of integration as a strategy for pursuing racial justice through public education, and they raise difficult questions about how to measure the value of a school.²⁴³

Bridges’ desegregation of Frantz speaks directly to the complexity of answering these questions. In walking through the doors of Frantz - which, as a child, looked so grand to her in comparison to Lockett that she felt sure it was a college - Bridges undoubtedly took a major step towards a more equitable system, one in which African-American children had increased access to the facilities and resources available to white children. But Frantz’s own history indicates that the Board quite purposefully did not grant black children access to the best of the city’s schools, in terms of facilities or academic performance. What’s more, the qualities that had made Lockett a warm and encouraging environment, and the community that surrounded Bridges there, were lost to her when she moved to Frantz. Of course, integration would radically change the Frantz community, and over the course of the next several decades, a new school community would be

²⁴² Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 10.

²⁴³ See, for example, the work of Vanessa Siddle-Walker, including “Value Segregated Schools for African American Children in the South, 1935-1969: A Review of Common Themes and Characteristics,” in *Review of Educational Research* 70.3 (2000), and Adam Fairclough’s “The Costs of *Brown*: Black Teachers and School Integration,” *The Journal of American History* (June 2004).

constructed there. Integration changed Frantz, but it did not end the struggle for an equitable education in New Orleans. Rather, the official integration of New Orleans schools marked the beginning of a new phase of that struggle, one defined by white flight, on the one hand, and by federal funding, on the other.

Flight and Funding: 1960 - 1983

After the dust from the integration crisis settled, the Frantz building remained more or less the same - overcrowded, and in need of repair - but the demographics of the students filling the building were rapidly changing. At Frantz, as across the district, white flight would demonstrate the mutability of white strategies of exclusion, and herald the beginning of a steady drain of resources away from the newly integrated public school system. But in the years immediately following integration, Frantz also reaped the benefits of federal legislation which sought to eradicate inequality through providing a network of support to low-income and minority children: and which saw schools as central to this process.

Integration resulted in white flight at Frantz, but not instantly. The number of black students at Frantz rose slowly for a few years after 1960, and then dramatically. In the 1965-1966 school year, the average black membership at Frantz was 75 students. In the 1966-1967 school year, that number jumped to 438. White membership followed an inverse pattern, dropping from 377.8 students in grades 1-6 in 1965 to 174 in grades K-6 the following year. But while the demographics of the school flipped, Frantz still retained a racially mixed student body through the 1960s.²⁴⁴ By 1975, however, Frantz served a student body that was 98% black.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁴ Annual Statistical Report, Part I, 1965-1966, Annual Statistical Report, Part 1, 1966-1967, Box 2, "Finance and Planning," Orleans Parish School Board Collection, University of New Orleans.

²⁴⁵ "It's All Over But the Shouting," *The Times-Picayune*, 14 January 1975.

These numbers reflect larger trends in the district, which experienced increasing white flight as integration proceeded over the next fifteen years. The immediate effects of desegregation were minimal: because J. Skelly Wright had only mandated the desegregation of one grade at a time, because the Board's rigorous pupil placement program severely limited the number of black students eligible to transfer to a white school, and because the Board continued to operate a dual district system, in which most schools were segregated. Over the next several years, however, the process accelerated. In 1963, the Board eliminated the dual district system for first graders. In 1965, a new federally mandated desegregation plan laid out the gradual elimination of the dual district system for all grade levels over the next several years, establishing a single, unitary system by the 1969-1970 school year.²⁴⁶

As the effects of integration increased, so did white flight - but not overnight. Dire predictions notwithstanding, white enrollment in New Orleans elementary schools declined by less than 1,200 students districtwide in the 1961-1962 school year. And over the next several years, white enrollment actually increased slightly, to a high of 39,314 white students in 1964-1965. After this year, white enrollment began to decline, but the process was relatively slow - in 1969-1970, the first year of a unitary school district at all levels, white enrollment had decreased by 13% since 1960. In 1970, however, more substantial and rapid white flight began: over the next ten years, the system lost over 20,000 white students, and by 1980, the district was 84% black.²⁴⁷

Based on this data, historians of the New Orleans public system Donald DeVore and Joseph Logsdon attribute meaningful white flight not to student desegregation alone but to the integration of faculty. Faculty integration had begun in 1966, but proceeded slowly until 1970 -

²⁴⁶ DeVore & Logsdon, 264.

²⁴⁷ DeVore & Logsdon, 255, 264-266.

and then accelerated rapidly, so that all school faculties were desegregated by the mid-1970s. The uptick in pace was due in part to the end of the “voluntary” phase of faculty desegregation - in 1972, the Board began using administrative transfers to achieve greater levels of integration. That August, nearly 20% of the entire New Orleans teaching staff was transferred to new schools - and between the end of the 1971-1972 school year and the beginning of the 1972-1973 term, the district lost 4,000 white students, the greatest single drop since the beginning of integration.²⁴⁸

Amongst these changing demographics, many New Orleans schools remained desperately overcrowded. In part, the crowded conditions were due to a surge in black enrollment, which had soared, increasing by over 50% in the decade after integration. Especially in the mid-1960s and early 1970s, before white flight took off, this increase in students led to an all-time high in public school enrollment of just over 111,000 - 20,000 more students than the district had served before integration.²⁴⁹ The enrollment numbers at Frantz reflect these trends.

With the exception of the boycott years, Frantz had always been crowded, and in the years after integration, the situation got worse. Between 1963 - the first year that Frantz’s enrollment returned to typical levels, following the boycotts - and 1983, Frantz’s annual membership averaged 534 students. On three occasions, Frantz’s annual membership surpassed 600 students, with 635 students enrolled at the start of the 1966-1967 school year, 627 in the 1968-1969 school year, and an astounding 758 students enrolled at the beginning of the 1974-1975 school year.²⁵⁰ In 1970, the District announced a plan to bus 200 Frantz students to a separate elementary school to relieve overcrowding, but the long-term effects of this move were

²⁴⁸ DeVore & Logsdon, 265 - 268.

²⁴⁹ DeVore & Logsdon, 265.

²⁵⁰ Directories, New Orleans Public Schools, 1963-183, Boxes 8-12, “School Directories,” Orleans Parish School Board Collection, University of New Orleans.

minimal.²⁵¹ In 1983, the school was still overcrowded, and the district once again took steps to reduce overcrowding in Ninth Ward elementary schools by moving sixth grade students from elementary to middle schools. The 1983 reconfiguration was born, in part, out of the district's recent reassessment of the capacity of its school buildings. Using these adjusted terms, a School Profile from the 1983-1984 school year cites Frantz's "worst case capacity" at 525 students, but its "true program capacity" at 400 students.²⁵² Frantz had not enrolled fewer than 400 students since the boycott over integration.

But while Frantz was overwhelmed with students, the school also benefited from a new set of resources with which to support them: the post-integration period brought a significant influx of federal funding and programming. The legislation stemming from Lyndon Baines Johnson's Great Society - including the Civil Rights Act and the Economic Opportunity Act in 1964 and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965 - unleashed a flood of funding, grants, nonprofits, and programs that together constituted a federal network of support for low-income children, part of a new federal vision for public schools as crucial levers for social equality. Court-mandated integration was part and parcel of this vision, and in the years after 1965, increasingly intertwined with it, as continued federal funding required compliance with integration mandates.²⁵³

Frantz benefited directly from this new network of support. 1965 brought Project Head Start to 3,500 New Orleans children for the first time, including students at Frantz.²⁵⁴ In the same

²⁵¹ "New Public School Busing Districts Announced," *The Times-Picayune*, 18 March 1970.

²⁵² New Orleans Public Schools Department of Planning, "The Utilization of Public School Facilities, Annual Report: 1982-1983," 20 August 1983, Box 7, Office of Planning, Orleans Parish School Board Collection, University of New Orleans.

²⁵³ For more on the effects of Great Society programs on New Orleans, see Kent Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises: Poverty, Citizenship, and the Search for the Great Society* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007).

²⁵⁴ "N.O. Head Start Classes Begin," *The Times-Picayune*, 22 June 1965.

year, funding from Total Community Action, Inc. made Project Pre-Kindergarten possible - a program that dovetailed with Head Start to offer additional support for young children. The classes offered at Frantz filled so quickly that additional families were placed on waiting lists.²⁵⁵ In the same year, Frantz began offering Reading-Enrichment-Recreation (RER) summer programming, funded through Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.²⁵⁶ 1965 also saw the launch of a pilot program bringing guidance counselors into elementary schools - a program again funded through the ESEA. Frantz was one of two New Orleans elementary schools chosen to pilot this program, and the counselor hired at Frantz - Myrtle Guenther, who had already amassed thirty years of experience as a teacher at Frantz - saw immediate positive results, telling newspapers that suspensions were down, a change that she credited to the program.²⁵⁷ At a conference of the Louisiana Guidance Association in 1966, Guenther told the audience that she believed "little real progress in reducing the numbers of ... academic failures, school dropouts, and delinquents" was possible without the sort of work of addressing students' social and emotional needs made possible by the guidance program.²⁵⁸ The existence of the guidance program was itself material proof of an era in which Guenther's beliefs were mirrored by federal policy.

These programs did not transform Frantz. In August of 1983, the Orleans Public School Board Division of Planning, Testing and Evaluation produced a profile of Frantz. It revealed a school that was, as always, overcrowded - with enrollment at 465 in the 1982-1983 school year, the building's utilization level was considered "critical," a situation that by the Department of

²⁵⁵ "Project Pre-Kindergarten Opens with 778 Students," *The Times-Picayune*, 14 March 1967.

²⁵⁶ "Applications Will Be Taken: Reading, Recreation Program Set for Summer," *The Times-Picayune*, 22 May 1967.

²⁵⁷ "Helping Students at an Early Age," *Sunday Advocate*, 13 February 1966.

²⁵⁸ "Guidance Counselor Lauds Aid to Elementary Child," *The Morning Advocate*, 3 March 1966.

Planning's own memos was likely to harm the educational effectiveness of the school.²⁵⁹ The 465 students at Frantz, moreover, were packed into a building with no air-conditioning.²⁶⁰ 35% of the families in the attendance zone were considered low-income, and the profile noted that according to City Hall's "Blight Index," the surrounding Florida neighborhood was considered "endangered" - or "below the city average and in need of services." The school's test scores were middling - over the last five years, the school's students had ranked, on average, in the 5th stanine nationwide.

But these issues - facilities in need of repair or modernization, desperately overcrowded classrooms, unimpressive test scores, and a substantial proportion of high-needs students - were the same issues that plagued New Orleans schools district-wide. Nor were they particularly new to Frantz, which had been struggling with similar issues for years. And the report also provided glimpses of a school that was doing something right, even with the challenges highlighted by the profile: student attendance was averaging 93%, and in the 1982-1983 school year, Frantz had reported zero long-term suspensions, zero expulsions, and zero drop-outs. In 1983, Frantz may not have been a great school - at least, in the sense that it was not producing outstanding test scores - and it was certainly a school facing significant challenges. But neither did it stand out as unusually troubled in the context of its district.

But by 2005, when Frantz faced closure, the school's failure was well-documented by a barrage of metrics recorded by the state and the district. The 2005 report card sent home to parents reflected the results of shifting conditions in New Orleans schools in the 1980s and 1990s. It was also the product of two decades of a strengthening accountability movement in public

²⁵⁹ New Orleans Public Schools Department of Planning, "The Utilization of Public School Facilities, Annual Report: 1982-1983," 20 August 1983. UNO files.

²⁶⁰ School Profiles: 1983-1984, Frantz Elementary School, Division of Planning, Testing, and Evaluation, New Orleans Public Schools, n.d.

education, which quickly superseded the Great Society's emphasis on social welfare and support networks for low-income children as the dominant vision for how to improve public schools.

From Equity to Excellence: *A Nation at Risk* Hits New Orleans, 1983

The seeds of the educational accountability movement in Louisiana were visible as early as the 1970's, a decade in which the state took steady steps to increase the quantity and the stakes of standardized testing, in response to a growing national anxiety about the state of schools. In 1977, Louisiana passed the Public School Accountability and Assessment Act, which mandated competency testing for all students in specified grade levels, and created statewide minimum standards in reading, writing, and math. In 1979, the Competency-Based Education Law created the Basic Skills Test (BST) to measure minimum competency testing at all grade levels. Erica DeCuir identifies the BST, first administered in the 1981-1982 school year, as the first high-stakes test in Louisiana, because student scores were, for the first time, a significant criterion in determining student promotion to the next grade level.²⁶¹

That the rising interest in testing and accountability coincided with the decade following integration is no coincidence. In fact, Louisiana's testing history had always been tied to race and, specifically, integration: standardized testing had been a crucial component in the district's pupil placement program in the 1960's, a measure explicitly designed to limit the number of black students applicable to enter white schools. Standardized tests had been used to minimize the impact of integration, and in the years after integration, testing again surfaced as a way of responding to anxiety about the quality of a public school system that was now integrated. DeCuir has traced the relationship in the 1970's between a growing public perception of low-quality

²⁶¹ Erica DeCuir, "The Louisiana Educational Assessment Program: Implications for Students and Schools," *Curriculum and Teaching Dialogue*, 16.1-2 (2014), 36-37.

schools, a rising number of black high school graduates in the post-integration period, and an influx of legislation surrounding testing and accountability: “A sharp increase in black high school graduates was viewed suspiciously,” she writes, “...because Black’s standardized test scores often still lagged behind White scores.”²⁶² The resulting fear of so-called “social promotion” - the idea that students were being passed onto the next grade level despite not learning the material - helped fuel an interest in standardized testing programs that could more objectively measure what Louisiana students were learning. Importantly, such concerns rarely explicitly referred to race; rather, they were articulated through an amorphous concern about standards and rigor.

In 1983, these amorphous concerns - in Louisiana and around the country - were suddenly and dramatically amplified to a fever pitch by the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, which education historian Diane Ravitch describes as the “all-time blockbuster of education reports.”²⁶³ Produced by the National Commission on Excellence in Education - appointed by President Ronald Reagan’s Secretary of Education - the report was first released on April 26, 1983, and created an immediate firestorm across the country. The response was generated by the report’s alarming findings and provocative framing - that America’s schools were in crisis, threatened by what the authors described as a “rising tide of mediocrity,” and that this crisis was so severe as to constitute a threat to national security: “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today,” the Commission asserted in the introduction to the report, “we might well have viewed it as an act of war.”²⁶⁴ The report’s recommendations to address this crisis were wide-ranging, but they centered around raising

²⁶² DeCuir, “The Louisiana Educational Assessment Program: Implications for Students and Schools,” 35.

²⁶³ Diane Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 24.

²⁶⁴ National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (April 1983).

standards: developing more rigorous curriculum and graduation requirements, raising expectations for student performance, and implementing more rigorous achievement-based testing. Broadly, the Commission argued, the country needed to shift the conversation away from competency and towards “excellence.”

Importantly, the report made no specific mention of integration. Like many other major federal education reports and initiatives, *A Nation at Risk* was framed as part of a conversation about improving the state of the nation’s schools in order to ensure an excellent education for all students. But the Commission’s lack of attention to integration, support for low-income and minority students, or increased federal programming and funding as key pieces of that conversation was telling. The report’s emphasis reflected a shift away from equity as a guiding principle and towards excellence as a framework through which to discuss the state of the nation’s schools. To get better schools, the report argued, we need more rigorous schools. Unspoken in the report was the assumption that in expanding educational opportunities to more Americans, the country had also lowered the bar. Now, it was time to raise it again.

The aftershocks of *A Nation at Risk* were felt immediately in New Orleans, as in the rest of the nation. The findings of the report made the front page of the *Times-Picayune* on April 27, 1983, and continued to generate regular local press coverage, forums, and follow-up reports well past the anniversary of its publication the following year. The report set the terms of the debate not just nationally but at the local level for years to come - the effectiveness of the school system, and any proposals to change or improve it, were discussed within its framework. And in New Orleans, as elsewhere, the publication of *A Nation at Risk* immediately turned attention toward the state of the local school system.

On the 28th of April, 1983, the *Times-Picayune* editorial board ran a piece urging parents and the public to demand that local school boards get on board with the report’s

recommendations. “School boards and public school administrations are creatures of the public, and if they do not lead, they should be led,” the editorial asserted.²⁶⁵ In June, the Urban League of New Orleans focused their annual meeting on the report. The public event featured a keynote address from Xavier University president Norman Francis - a member of the commission that published *A Nation at Risk* - as well as panels featuring local school leaders, including the deputy superintendent of schools for Louisiana, and the assistant superintendent for New Orleans Public Schools.²⁶⁶

New Orleans school officials - perhaps anxious to lead rather than to be led - quickly launched their own initiatives to take charge of the conversation, forming a task force to study the state of education in New Orleans, and hosting a series of public forums about the report and its implications for local schools.²⁶⁷ In coverage advertising the forums, *Times-Picayune* reporters spoke with Pres Kabacoff, education committee chairman of the Metropolitan Area Committee - who explained that the goal was widespread public conversation: “We hope that it will be read and discussed at breakfast, around the water coolers, on the buses and the streets of the metropolitan area,” Kabacoff said. To further this goal, the *Times-Picayune* printed the full text of the report as a “public service,” in the days before the forums. But the framing of this conversation in the *Times-Picayune* also gestured toward the relationship between fears about declining school quality and integration: “Community support is needed to dispel the perception that academic weaknesses in the public schools result from problems associated with integration, poverty, or other sociological factors,” the newspaper stated, paraphrasing Kabacoff.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁵ *Times-Picayune* Editorial Board, “A Nation at Risk,” *The Times-Picayune*, 28 April 1983.

²⁶⁶ “Urban League Plans Meeting,” *The Times-Picayune*, 19 June 1983.

²⁶⁷ “N.O. educator pushed for reform before it was the thing to do,” *The Times-Picayune*, 10 August 1983.

²⁶⁸ Rhonda McKendall, “N.O. Civic Leaders Pound the Drums for Public Schools,” 24 August 1983.

The NOPS forums - entitled “Responding to the Challenge” - spanned multiple days and included a wide range of panelists and speakers - school principals, area superintendents, school board members, teachers, parents, representatives from the Louisiana Department of Education, the local teachers’ union, and local community groups. After all the hype, though, public involvement was less robust than school officials might have hoped. The *Times-Picayune* reported that “attendance ...would have been sparse if it had not been for more than 5,000 teachers and other school system employees who were required to attend.” The low community turnout might have reflected the decision to hold the forums on weekdays, as at least one participant pointed out to “thunderous applause.”²⁶⁹

Regardless of the cause, the makeup of the audience highlighted a disconnect between the focal points of *A Nation at Risk* - and, accordingly, the NOPS forums - and the concerns of classroom teachers. While some of the issues and proposed solutions suggested by teachers aligned with those in the report, teachers repeatedly emphasized “low pay, crowded classrooms and unruly students” - a different set of concerns than the report’s “rising tide of mediocrity.” They pushed back against merit pay and instead advocated for “radical increases” in salaries and the funding available to schools. Union staff assistant Rosalind Jackson argued, “It is pure folly to believe that meaningful changes can be made without added resources.”²⁷⁰

This divergence highlights an important point: there was wide agreement in New Orleans among parents, teachers, and district leaders that local schools needed improvement. The NOPS forums, additionally, reflected a sense of enthusiasm about the nearly unprecedented public attention to and conversation around the state of public schools - the district was eager to capitalize on that attention, to generate a broad base of support and a public commitment to

²⁶⁹ Rhonda McKendall, “Educator Slams Easy Textbooks,” *The Times-Picayune*, 30 August 1983.

²⁷⁰ Rhonda McKendall, “N.O. Teachers’ Leader Faults Merit Pay Idea,” *The Times-Picayune*, 31 August 1983.

improving the local system. In fact, district staff had been working since before the publication of *A Nation at Risk* to develop a long term plan in the service of an ambitious goal: to make Orleans Parish the best school district in the nation by the year 2000.²⁷¹ The planning documents used to create that long-term plan, as well as the district response to *A Nation at Risk*, reflect not just a sense of crisis, but of possibility: the district was primed for big-picture planning, and seemed enthusiastic to find public attention aligning with that goal. But the response of teachers to the forums indicates that there was less agreement about what was needed to improve public schools - higher standards, or more resources?

While *A Nation at Risk* shifted the conversation decisively towards curriculum and standards, this focus was not necessarily or fundamentally incompatible with a conversation about race, equity, and resources; such concerns were muted but still present at the Responding to the Challenge forum. Attendees of the forum received a pamphlet which included the “commonly held beliefs” of the New Orleans Public School District, intended to guide discussion during the forum as well as the future direction of the school system:

- “1. Our school district can become the best or one of the best school systems in the country.
2. Every student in our school district is entitled to the quality of education as good as or better than students in any school district in the country.
3. All of our students have dignity, worth, and equality as human beings. Some are less fortunate than others, but no one is better than anyone else. We can’t tolerate, nor will we knowingly tolerate, social, racial, ethnic, sex, or religious biases. Our behavior will indicate this.
4. Our students have the ability to learn and will learn, grow, and develop if we provide them with appropriate opportunities.
5. Our mission is to deliver an effective educational program to all of our students. Anything less is unacceptable in our profession. In serving our students we are serving our community and ourselves.
6. We will work together as professionals. That is why we believe in each other and are willing to work through problems we encounter.

²⁷¹ Kenneth J. Ducote, Speech to the Board: March 15, 1982, Box 6, Office of Planning, Orleans Parish School Board Collection, University of New Orleans.

7. We cannot and will not tolerate prejudice or discrimination within our school system. It is morally wrong, educationally unsound, and in direct violation of both the spirit and the letter of the law.”²⁷²

The first page of the pamphlet emphasized that the “ultimate goal” of the New Orleans Public School District was “excellence,” language that aligned directly with *A Nation at Risk* - and the guiding beliefs listed above reflected that focus, too. But the language of inclusiveness remained prevalent here, too - the district’s guiding principles suggested that a vision of excellence should not preclude a vision of equity. Of course, *A Nation at Risk* was framed within the language of equity, too - by raising standards, the report suggested, we could provide an excellent education for all children. Over the next twenty years, the policies stemming from *A Nation at Risk* in Louisiana would mimic this rhetoric, framing high-stakes testing and accountability as a way of ensuring a quality education for all children. But the emphasis had shifted: instead of ensuring equity in access and resources to pave the way to excellence in education, federal and state policy now moved to ensure excellence - increasingly narrowly defined in terms of test scores - in education as a way of creating equity.

A Rising Tide of Testing: The Emergence of Accountability, 1986 - 2001

The Responding to the Challenge forum highlights a moment in which *A Nation at Risk* had generated significant energy, but it was not clear yet how that energy might manifest as policy. The first local policy responses to the report came in the form of graduation requirements: in January, the New Orleans School Board announced plans to toughen high school graduation requirements, and state-wide graduation requirements were raised by the Louisiana Board of

²⁷² “Message to Our School District,” in New Orleans Public Schools. Responding to the Challenge: New Orleans’ Commitment to National Goals, Box 20, “Constance Dolese,” Orleans Parish School Board Collection, University of New Orleans.

Elementary and Secondary Education in February.²⁷³ But quickly, high-stakes testing and related accountability measures gathered momentum, and ultimately, they became the defining policy response to perceived mediocrity. In Louisiana, the centerpiece of the accountability movement was created in 1986, when the state legislature replaced minimum-competency testing with the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) - the statewide standardized assessment program that would ultimately form the backbone of the state's accountability movement.

LEAP was an assessment program with wide reach: the program mandated criterion-referenced assessments in kindergarten, third, fifth, seventh, and eleventh grade, as well as national norm-referenced assessments in at least three grade levels.²⁷⁴ The LEAP assessment, furthermore, stressed mastery over minimal competency, raising the bar for what students were expected to know. Lastly, the LEAP program required that student performance on these tests should be a key factor in determining their promotion to the next grade level - although it allowed for the consideration of other factors. In 1990, in fact, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education made passage of the 11th grade exam - which they renamed the Graduate Exit Exam, or GEE - a graduation requirement. Accordingly, LEAP was already high-stakes for students, although schools were not yet penalized if their students did not perform well.²⁷⁵

That changed in 1996, under the administration of a new governor, Mike Foster, and two of his appointees to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education: Leslie Jacobs and Paul Pastorek, both of whom built reputations as architects of the accountability movement in Louisiana and would later become central figures in the state takeover of New Orleans schools

²⁷³ Rhonda McKendall, "Tougher Graduation Rules Backed by School Board," *The Times-Picayune*, 11 January 1984; "Education on the Front Burner," *The Times-Picayune*, 2 February 1984.

²⁷⁴ Criterion-referenced assessments test students on their mastery of learning standards; norm-referenced tests assess students on their performance in comparison to other students - in this case, around the country.

²⁷⁵ Erica DeCuir, "The Louisiana Educational Assessment Program: Implications for Students and Schools," 40.

after Hurricane Katrina. In 1996, Governor Mike Foster developed an education reform package which would, for the first time, assign schools a School Performance Score (SPS) as a means of providing an “annual quality rating.” The SPS system was not the first attempt to rate schools: since 1990, the state had provided annual school report cards that provided the public with information about a school’s performance - including test scores, attendance and dropout rates, class sizes, and a slew of other information that might be used to put together a picture of a school’s quality. But the 1996 SPS system, for the first time, wrapped those factors up into one number, that could be used to easily compare the quality of schools - and based that number almost entirely on LEAP scores.

At the same time, Foster charged that LEAP assessments were not rigorous enough, and moved to redesign the program. The new test, named LEAP for the 21st Century (or LEAP 21), was not only more difficult, but much higher stakes: fourth and eighth graders that did not pass the reading and math portions of the test would be automatically retained. LEAP 21 was first administered in 1999: approximately one third of Louisiana students failed the tests in their first two administrations.²⁷⁶ Foster’s SPS system had more teeth, too, with rewards for schools with high scores and sanctions - which might include closure, take-over by the state, or student transfer to better performing schools - for those schools with repeated low scores.

In New Orleans, these reforms were always viewed through the lens of race. In his 1996 election campaign, Governor Foster had been endorsed by David Duke, and had run on a campaign to end affirmative action, reduce welfare, and toughen criminal justice laws.²⁷⁷ Foster’s background added to the sense by many African Americans that LEAP reforms were intentionally targeting low-income students of color. In fact, parents in New Orleans formed the Parents for

²⁷⁶ DeCuir, 41.

²⁷⁷ Erica DeCuir, “Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP): A Historical Analysis of Louisiana’s High Stakes Testing Policy,” PhD Dissertation (Georgia State University, 2012), 84.

Educational Justice organization in response to LEAP in 2000, and filed suit against BESE (ultimately unsuccessfully). Not surprisingly, architects of the new LEAP pushed back, insisting that these policies were in fact designed with equity in mind - a means of raising the bar for all New Orleans students. A closer look at the impact of these policies at Frantz, however, reveals that these policies not only failed to improve New Orleans schools on the metrics which they measured - they also locked those schools into a trajectory of failure that became harder and harder to escape from.

Failing Frantz: The Frantz Report Cards, 1997 - 2005

At the time of its closure in 2005, Frantz had been an active elementary school for sixty-seven years, and the school had been shaped by decades of shifting education policy, federal and local. Only seven of those years are captured by the official Louisiana Department of Education annual report cards which remain accessible for the school, but those seven report cards document what the accountability movement looked like for Frantz. More accurately, they demonstrate what Frantz looked like during those seven years if viewed through the logic of accountability. An examination of the official report cards for Frantz sheds light not only on how accountability quantified and qualified a particular school, but also highlights the mutability of accountability itself: the metrics, labels, and definitions changed rapidly between 1997 and 2005. But the effects on Frantz were clear: by 2005, Frantz had emerged, clearly and quantifiably, as a school in crisis.

While Foster's new accountability plan was underway as early as 1996, the first SPS scores for Louisiana schools were not released until 1999, as they were built on two years of data. Looking at Frantz's report card from the 1997-1998 school year, then, provides a glimpse into what sort of information was provided to the public before the accountability regime fully

coalesced. As in previous report cards, the 1997-1998 report did nothing more and nothing less than provide parents, administrators, and the public with a variety of data about the school.

For Frantz, some of that data was grim. By the 1997-1998 school year, students were already facing a barrage of testing, although the new and more challenging LEAP exam had not yet been rolled out. Still, Frantz students could expect to be tested almost every year, with reading level assessments in 2nd and 3rd grade, LEAP tests for 3rd and 5th graders, and the national Iowa Tests in grade 4. Frantz fell short on every assessment. Nearly 70% of 3rd graders were reading below grade level. LEAP passage rates were dismal: the school's highest passage rates (50% of 3rd graders passing language arts) fell well below the districtwide passage rate of 73%. But there were bright spots on the report card, too: the school's attendance was above 92%, and 66% of teachers held an advanced degree, compared to 41% of teachers across the district.²⁷⁸

Most importantly, the 1997-1998 report card explicitly framed all of this data as merely informative, reminding parents and community members that such statistics were not able or intended to paint a complete picture of a school. In fact, the report card went out of its way to emphasize that the information provided was only a partial glimpse into what was happening at Frantz. The first paragraph on the report card read:

*“This School Report Card gives important information about your child’s school. Remember, every school is different, with its own special strengths and needs; therefore, the School Report Card cannot tell you everything. It can, however, show you several things happening at school that affect your child’s education. We urge you to find out more about your school from its teachers and its principal.”*²⁷⁹

By the 1998-1999 school year, no such disclaimer went home with report cards. Moreover, for the first time, the disparate pieces of data on the report card were wrapped up into a

²⁷⁸ 1997-1998 School Report Card for Parents, William Frantz Elementary School, Louisiana Department of Education.

²⁷⁹ 1997-1998 School Report Card for Parents, William Frantz Elementary School, Louisiana Department of Education. Italics added.

School Performance Score (SPS). 10% of a school's SPS came from attendance, but the remaining 90% came from test scores: 30% from the Iowa tests, and 60% from the new LEAP 21 tests. A warning on the report card informed parents that in the following school year, 4th and 8th grade students who scored an "unsatisfactory" on the test would not be promoted. This warning must have loomed large at Frantz, where passage rates on the LEAP 21 exam were abysmal: 67.9% of students received an "unsatisfactory," the lowest possible score, on their ELA exam, and 76.8% in math.²⁸⁰

Under the new SPS system, all of this data could now be gathered together in a single number, and a corresponding label. With a score of 24.7 out of a possible 200, William Frantz School was in the lowest possible category, officially an "academically unacceptable school." Importantly, though, Frantz had plenty of company in this category: 50 schools in the district, or 49% of all district schools, were considered academically unacceptable. In fact, all but twelve schools in the district were labeled either "Academically Unacceptable" or "Academically Below Average;" only one school gained the label "School of Academic Distinction." Along with its first SPS score, Frantz was assigned goals: to achieve an SPS score of 100 by 2009, and - more immediately- an SPS score of 39.2 by 2001.²⁸¹

The following school year, Frantz was roughly on track to meet this goal. The 1999-2000 report card recorded an SPS score of 30.5 - a modest improvement, but one that put the school just shy of halfway to its two-year goal. Frantz had also slightly improved its attendance rate (94%), and had obtained slightly higher LEAP scores: this year, only 55.4% of Frantz 4th graders scored an "Unsatisfactory" in ELA, and 69.2% in math. Already, however, the metrics were

²⁸⁰ 1998-1999 School Report Card for Parents, William Frantz Elementary School, Louisiana Department of Education.

²⁸¹ 1998-1999 School Report Card for Parents, William Frantz Elementary School, Louisiana Department of Education.

shifting: for the first time, social studies and science were added to the LEAP 21 test, although the scores from these two exams did not, at first, count towards the school's SPS score. They were, however, factored into a new baseline score, to be used at the beginning of the next accountability cycle.²⁸²

The 2000-2001 school year marked the end of Accountability Cycle I, and at first, things seemed to be moving in the right direction for Frantz. With a 44.1 SPS score, the school had exceeded its growth goal, earning a "Recognized Academic Growth" label. The new baseline score of 36.3 (based on a combined score from earlier SPS scores) bumped the school up into the next performance category: "Academically Below the State Average." Frantz's LEAP scores were creeping upwards, as well: the "unsatisfactory" rates in ELA were down to 46.8%, and 64.9% in math. These numbers were still troubling, but Frantz was progressing, according to the benchmarks the district had set.²⁸³

Even by the end of this first cycle, though, a close look at the data makes it difficult to declare with certainty whether these improved numbers reflected improved instruction at the school. The school had lost students: the report card registers a student body of 350, 69 students fewer than the year before. Fewer students sat for the exams, too: in 2000-2001, only 30 5th graders took the Iowa Test, compared to 52 the year before.²⁸⁴ Significantly different numbers of students sitting for exams could influence score results in a number of ways. Was Frantz really improving students' skills in reading and math, then, or merely learning how to produce better scores? More broadly, if the student body was changing significantly from year to year, to what

²⁸² 1999-2000 School Report Card for Parents, William Frantz Elementary School, Louisiana Department of Education.

²⁸³ 2000-2001 School Report Card for Parents, William Frantz Elementary School, Louisiana Department of Education.

²⁸⁴ 2000-2001 School Report Card for Principals, William Frantz Elementary School, Louisiana Department of Education.

degree were changes in scores reflective of improved instruction, and to what degree did they merely reflect a student population in flux?

At the end of Accountability Cycle 1, Frantz received a new goal: to increase its SPS by another 15.1 points by 2003. But by the next year, the early progress the school had demonstrated was slowing. In 2001-2002, Frantz's SPS jumped up 4.5 points - well shy of the half-way mark. This increase was based almost entirely on a higher attendance index; in 2001-2002, Frantz's average daily attendance was 97.4%. However, the high attendance rates also gesture towards a troubling situation: the school was hemorrhaging students. Frantz's report card lists a student enrollment of 216, meaning that the school had lost two hundred students over the course of the preceding two years.²⁸⁵ With the exception of a slight boost the following year (up to 274), enrollment numbers would continue to hover around 215 until the school's closure.

The drop went unexplained on the report, but enrollment numbers across the district had been declining steadily and steeply since 1995, a trend that regular *Times-Picayune* articles on the subject attributed to low birth rates, movement out of the city, and low confidence in the public school system. The 2001-2002 school year, in particular, had seen a dramatic jump in the number of students leaving Orleans Parish and enrolling in adjacent Jefferson Parish.²⁸⁶ As enrollment directly affected funding, a shrinking student population was cause for serious alarm across the district. Beyond the financial repercussions, enrollment numbers also served, as a *Times-Picayune* article from 2000 put it, as a "barometer of the community's health:" low enrollment indicated a shrinking population in the city at large, with young residents leaving the city and fewer families

²⁸⁵ 2001-2002 School Report Card for Parents, William Frantz Elementary School, Louisiana Department of Education.

²⁸⁶ Chris Gray, "Orleans Schools Lose 1,600 students," *The Times-Picayune*, 5 October 1999; Mark Waller, "N.O. area schools still losing students," *The Times-Picayune*, 1 October 2000; Mark Waller, "Student Migration to Jeff Parish Spikes," *The Times-Picayune*, 26 February 2001.

moving in, which in turn indicated a weak labor market.²⁸⁷ This context suggests that the steep decline in enrollment at Frantz not only reflected district trends, but was intertwined with broad, deeply entrenched challenges across the city - but none of this context was considered or explained on the report cards.

Low enrollment districtwide may also have reflected the results of accountability itself. The state's accountability system technically allowed students to transfer out of chronically failing schools beginning in the fall of 2001. In practice, however, the Orleans Parish system had too few high performing schools to begin with, and many of its schools remained overcrowded; the district, responding to these conditions, argued that the transfer provision was impossible to execute.²⁸⁸ The escape clause in the Louisiana accountability system was given new teeth with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in January of 2002, which similarly mandated a transfer option for families whose children attended chronically failing schools. But by the time those transfers began, Frantz's scores were just barely high enough to avoid triggering mandated transfer - until 2005, when the school's scores might have resulted in transfers, had it not closed. It's unlikely, then, that the sharp decline in enrollment at Frantz reflects transfers mandated by law.²⁸⁹

Regardless of the cause, however, the steep decline in student population highlights a key aspect of the school report cards and the logic of accountability more broadly: in the span of two years, Frantz had lost approximately 50% of its student body. Surely, such a dramatic change had an equally noticeable effect on the daily life of the school, for the remaining students, and for the faculty and staff. The change indicated profound and troubling transformations in the school and the district more broadly. But the report card offered no explanation, reflection, or even

²⁸⁷ Mark Waller, "N.O. area schools still losing students," *The Times-Picayune*, 1 October 2000

²⁸⁸ Bruce Alpert, "School Transfer System Ailing in La," *The Times-Picayune*, 14 May 2001.

²⁸⁹ Aesha Rasheed, "School Transfers Discussed Today," *The Times-Picayune*, 6 September 2003.

acknowledgment of this shift. The data was presented as though it had no bearing on the other metrics measured, as though the number of students in the school was merely a neutral fact, and not a crucial clue without which it would be impossible to make sense of what was happening at Frantz, and why.

The passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in January of 2002 brought changed language to the 2002-2003 report cards, and slightly different reporting requirements. Schools were now ranked according to a five star system. Schools that failed to meet the required SPS score for a one-star rating could be given the label “Academic Warning,” but the name of the lowest category - “Academically Unacceptable” - remained the same. The cut-off scores for each category had changed, too: Academically Unacceptable schools now included any school with an SPS lower than 45; the cutoff had been 30 since the system was initiated. In fact, the entire system looked a little different now: beginning in the 2003-2003 school year, the two-year Accountability cycle was phased out, and a one-year cycle phased in. For the first time, too, schools failing to meet their growth goals would be placed in School Improvement (SI), a system with four categories, from SI 1 to SI 4, designating the amount of support (and oversight) the school would receive. Frantz was placed in SI 1.²⁹⁰

Frantz’s SPS of 46.5 that year fell short of the 15.1 growth target, earning the school a “Minimal Academic Growth” label and placing it in the “Academic Warning” category. But while these ratings remained low, the school’s test scores were mysteriously transformed. Over 30% of students were receiving a score of Basic or above in each of the four LEAP 21 tests, putting the school on par with or above the district average for each test, and representing an average 20% increase from the previous year’s scores. Tellingly, the school’s Iowa Test scores -

²⁹⁰ 2002-2003 School Report Card for Parents, William Frantz Elementary School, Louisiana Department of Education.

which compared the students to national norms - did not reflect a comparable increase, suggesting that the increase in scores indicated nothing more and nothing less than students' ability to pass the LEAP tests; not a dramatic increase in their math and reading skills in comparison with other students across the nation.²⁹¹ Such a dramatic fluctuation, likewise, points to the danger in equating a school's test scores in any given year with its overall quality: scores can change, for a host of reasons, that may or may not reflect on the quality of instruction happening inside classrooms.

In 2003-2004, Frantz remained in "Academic Warning," and - with an SPS score that had grown only 1.9 points - kept its label of "Minimal Academic Growth." LEAP scores were down from the previous year's peak, although they still remained higher than the school's previous record. 28% of Frantz students scored a Basic or above in ELA, 20% in Mathematics, 26% in Science, and 36% in Social Studies. These scores put Frantz closer to the range of district scores, although still significantly below state averages. Iowa Test percentiles were on the rise, with Frantz in the 31st percentile in Grade 3, and the 30th in Grade 5. On the whole, then, Frantz's 2003-2004 report indicated continued progress, albeit small and slow. The tiny SPS score increase belied the fact that Frantz's test scores were markedly improved from five years earlier, even if they remained low. I have already qualified the utility of using test scores as a metric for measuring quality, but these scores were, after all, what the accountability system deemed important. By the system's own logic, Frantz was getting somewhere.²⁹²

But the difficulty in tracking what all these numbers meant is reflected on the 2003-2004 Principal's Report Card, which lists "Major Accountability Changes" for the school year. The list

²⁹¹ 2002-2003 School Report Card for Parents, William Frantz Elementary School, Louisiana Department of Education.

²⁹² 2003-2004 School Report Card for Parents, William Frantz Elementary School, Louisiana Department of Education.

includes a confusing jumble of changes and adjustments covering seven major bullet-pointed items, including changes in definitions for growth labels: literally, then, the meaning of the words used on the report was in flux. Principals were instructed to look at the “definitions” section for further information. In the following year, another full page of the Principal’s Report Card was required to list another set of major changes to the accountability system.²⁹³

In the 2004-2005 school year, on the eve of the hurricane, Frantz’s SPS score had decreased from the previous year, making it officially a “school in decline.” The school had been bumped to a more intensive School Improvement category: SI 2. With an SPS of 47.0, Frantz was once again an “Academically Unacceptable School,” but this category had now absorbed the pre-existing Academic Warning category to include all schools with an SPS below 60. Under the metrics used in the first year of the accountability system, Frantz would have been considered an “Academically Below Average School.” While Frantz’s SPS score - still derived from the same components - remained very low, the school had nearly doubled the score it first received. With the exception of Math (where LEAP scores increased by 9%), LEAP scores were grim: only 12% of students scored a “Basic” or above in Science and Social Studies, down from 26% and 36%, respectively, the year before. Iowa Test percentiles were down from the previous year. This, then, was the school the Orleans Parish School Board voted to close in June of 2005: the report card painted a clear picture of a school that was failing its students.²⁹⁴

I have included the results of these report cards in detail because this bombardment of data highlights how confusing and complex the accountability ratings system was in the pre-Katrina era, and how difficult it is to glean meaningful information from that system. Even over

²⁹³ 2003-2004 School Report Card for Parents, William Frantz Elementary School, Louisiana Department of Education.

²⁹⁴ 2004-2005 School Report Card for Parents, William Frantz Elementary School, Louisiana Department of Education.

the course of a few years, the accountability ratings system changed incredibly rapidly - not just in what it required from schools, but in how it defined key terms, in what it measured and how, and in how that information was translated into categories used to make sense of the quality of a school. This system, constantly in flux, makes it difficult enough to meaningfully compare the results of one report card to another. The shifting demographics of a school like Frantz - with a rapidly shrinking student population, and with unexplained but significant differences in the number of students sitting for an exam from year to year - only add to the difficulty.

Despite the difficulty of culling a meaningful comparison from this data, the SPS score attached to each report card did just that, distilling all of that information into a number, and attaching that number to a label (itself rapidly changing) which purported to provide for the public a clear description of a school's overall success or failure. For Frantz, that label was negative from the beginning, and remained that way. But the shifting categories attached to each SPS score make it easy to miss an important fact - that Frantz was, in fact, raising its score over time, albeit slowly and not necessarily steadily. The rules of the game were constantly changing, but Frantz was nevertheless playing it, and seeing some small results. A different system might have highlighted that progress - but the shifting definitions of failure instead obscured it.

Importantly, the SPS scores did more than attach a label of failure to a school - they built a history of failure around that label. The amount of data publicly recorded and released with each year's report card accumulated, creating an extensive paper trail recording, with apparent objectivity, the school's failure to provide an adequate education for its students, year after year. Of course, what these labels - and the data compiled in each report card - exclude is as important as what they quantify. No metrics attempted to calibrate less tangible factors associated with a school's quality - parent or student satisfaction, for example, teacher turnover rates, extracurricular opportunities for students. No information compiled in each report helped to

provide context for a school's score - the condition of its facilities, the state of the district's finances, the concentration of poverty in the neighborhood. No longer history of the school, of course, was provided - the kind of history that might have shown the forces that produced a school like Frantz over decades. And after the 1997-1998 academic year, no disclaimer insisted that no number could adequately sum up a school; summing up the school was exactly the point.

By 2005, then, it was easy to point to Frantz as an example of a failing school, to read the documentation that objectively demonstrated consistent failure, and to identify the school as one in need of saving, without providing much information about why, or gesturing in any meaningful way to what the school might need to succeed. The Ruby Bridges Foundation was one of many groups who, over the next several years, would leverage that picture of Frantz to justify the need for intervention. But the Bridges Foundation was interested in situating their intervention in an altogether different history of Frantz - one not included on any of the state report cards.

Famous Frantz: Marking Frantz's History with the National Register of Historic Places

The Ruby Bridges Foundation did not push back against the portrayal of Frantz as a failing school. Rather, since her return to public life in 1995, Bridges had repeated the same basic tenets of an argument that she echoed across interviews and speaking engagements: Frantz was in trouble, and it was her mission to fix it. How exactly to do so remained unclear: as discussed in the last chapter, the Bridges Foundation had started with programming at Frantz, but that programming had died out, and after it did, the Foundation no longer had much of a formal presence at the school.

Beginning in the early 2000s, however, that basic premise began to coalesce around a vision of what a future Frantz could be: "a first-class flagship school that can attract a diverse student body," as Bridges put it in her 2004 interview with *Gambit*, or "a model school, one

children of all races would want to attend,” as she described it in a speech at Teachers College in the same year.²⁹⁵ This vision slowly took on more concrete form; in the months before Katrina, Bridges was speaking with some regularity about a re-integrated school with a social justice focus, on a beautifully renovated campus complete with a civil rights library and archive. All of this became crystallized into what the Ruby Bridges Foundation referred to as the “William Frantz Initiative” - their second major project, after completing their pilot phase in 2003. If the vision was clear, however, the logistics of how to convert it into a reality remained somewhat hazy.

That began to change when Bridges visited Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Central, the site of the Little Rock desegregation crisis in 1957, had raised, according to Bridges, \$23 million for the school by having the building declared a National Landmark. Bridges later remarked in an interview that the visiting Little Rock gave her the idea that “if they can do that there, I can do it in New Orleans.”²⁹⁶ Central High School had been declared a National Landmark in 1982; the money Bridges references came from through the Save America’s Treasures grant, a federal grant program with significant funding available for National Landmark properties or properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places at the national level of significance. According to the American Architectural Foundation, Central High School in fact received over \$28 million through this grant program in 2001.²⁹⁷

The Little Rock example points to several important facets of historical preservation: first, that several tiers of historical importance, as it is officially recognized by the federal

²⁹⁵ Reckdahl, “Ruby Bridges and Ruby Hall;” “Building Bridges,” News, Teachers College Columbia, www.tc.columbia.edu.

²⁹⁶ Sue Strachan, “Ruby Bridges,” 1 October 2010, www.myneworleans.com.

²⁹⁷ “List of National Historic Landmarks by State,” National Park Service; “Save America’s Treasure’s Grants,” National Park Service; “Treasure Map: Mapping the Impact of Save America’s Treasures,” American Architectural Foundation.

government, exist. Properties can be listed on the National Register of Historic Places at either the state or the national level of significance. National Landmark status -- a higher level of historic significance - is applied more selectively: there are 94,000 properties in the National Register of Historic Places, compared to 2,600 Landmarks. Nor are these the only possible designations: Little Rock Central High School is both a National Historic Site and a National Historic Park, both of which indicate an even more selective tier of historical importance.²⁹⁸ Second, an official designation of historical importance can be monetized. The designation itself does not necessarily guarantee funding, but it makes properties eligible for grants such as the Save America's Treasures program. Seeking a designation of historical importance, then, can be both a highly symbolic quest and a highly pragmatic one.

Although Bridges and her team discussed eventually seeking National Landmark status, they began at the level of the National Register of Historic Places. Although the register is national, nominations are handled at the state level - in the case of Louisiana, by the Division of Historic Preservation (LDHP). The nomination process is complex enough to warrant a flowchart on the LDHP website, but it can be broken down into four major steps. First, interested parties submit an eligibility questionnaire to the LDHP, which then sets out to determine whether the property in question meets the requirements for the National Register: a property must be at least fifty years old, and "retain enough of its original architectural design and materials to properly reflect its reason for and period of significance." Most importantly, the property must be historically significant, which the NHRP defines in the following ways:²⁹⁹

1. Association with a significant event or pattern of events in local, state, or national history.
2. Association with the lives of persons significant in our past whose contributions strongly impacted local, state, or national history and can be identified and documented.

²⁹⁸ Devlin, *Remember Little Rock*, 149.

²⁹⁹ "National Register," Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation, www.crt.state.la.us.

3. Embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values...
4. Archaeological potential to yield information important in prehistory or history.

If the Louisiana Department of Historic Preservation determines that the property in question meets these requirements, the applicant can proceed to step two: completion of a lengthy nomination packet. Once the packet is complete, the DHP can set a date for step three, a presentation to the Louisiana National Register Review Committee. If this hearing is successful, the nomination is sent on to the national level, where the National Register committee of the National Parks Service will make a final ruling.

After all this trouble, the benefits of belonging to the National Register are, arguably, limited. The Louisiana DHP website tries to dispel misconceptions about what a Register listing means: the Register does not restrict the use of properties, legally obligate anyone to preserve the property, prevent the sale of the property, require upkeep or maintenance, or guarantee funds for restoration. As it turns out, properties listed on the National Register don't even receive a plaque (although owners of said properties are eligible to purchase them). Owners of National Register properties can apply to receive tax credits and grants for rehabilitation and preservation, and they may be provided some measure of protection and support if the property is impacted by a federal initiative. As the Louisiana DHP website puts it, the National Register provides a "moral obligation, although not a legal one, to preserve the property." And, importantly, a listing indicates "recognition" that a property has significance in national history.³⁰⁰ Being listed on the National Register means that your property mattered to the history of the country, that it held - and still holds - national significance.

³⁰⁰ "National Register," Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation, www.crt.state.la.us.

These intangible benefits are a significant draw for many applicants. Donna Fricker, a former National Register Coordinator with the LDHP who worked on the Frantz application, explained in a 2018 interview that in her experience assisting people with the application process, “if they’re not interested because of the tax benefits for commercial properties, they’re interested in it for the honor and the distinction,” and because the more people recognize your property, “the better chance it has of being saved.” Fricker reiterated that being listed does not provide a legal obligation to preserve the property -- but, she noted, “we have found over the years that the psychological impact has a positive benefit towards the long-term preservation.”³⁰¹

Bridges worked on the National Register application process with Jerry Pavlon-Blum, a teacher in New York City who had met Bridges when she visited his school. According to Pavlon-Blum, he had promised to work with Bridges to design a project through which he and his students could support Frantz. At first, they discussed a project of beautification - helping to build new gardens at Frantz, for example - but it quickly became clear to Pavlon-Blum that Bridges had a more significant intervention in mind. Ultimately, Pavlon-Blum helped Bridges to coordinate the National Registry nomination, which he described as a way of protecting the school. Frantz was, he said in a recent interview, “completely vulnerable,” a condition he tied to the lack of awareness of the school’s history: he remembered realizing in the early 2000’s that “there’s nothing protecting the school, and no legality at all, and no recognition.” He wanted to help “cure the school,” as he described it, and he saw the Registry listing as a way of doing so.³⁰² Pavlon-Blum’s description highlights a frustration that Bridges had articulated since the 1960s - that the history of integration in New Orleans was largely not recognized in the city itself. It also gestures towards an important point: that for the Bridges Foundation and their allies, “curing the school”

³⁰¹ Donna Fricker, Interview with Author, 7 September 2018.

³⁰² Jerry Pavlon-Blum, Interview with Author, 10 January 2019.

was not unrelated to recognizing the school's past. On the contrary, the two were deeply intertwined: fixing Frantz, securing a different future for the school, started with securing recognition of the school's history.

The Ruby Bridges Foundation took its first steps towards a National Registry listing in 2002, when Jerry Pavlon-Blum reached out to the National Parks Service for advice on the process, and was directed to Donna Fricker, then a National Register Coordinator with the Louisiana Department of Historic Preservation. After initial conversations with the Foundation, Fricker moved forward with the nomination packet. At the time, in-house free preparation of nominations was standard practice, a public service offered by the office in order to make the complicated nomination process more accessible to more people. The Foundation supported along the way - Fricker met with Bridges, and Bridges herself met with Anthony Amato, then-Superintendent of New Orleans Public Schools, whose permission as owner of the building was required - but Fricker herself researched the school and articulated a case for its significance.³⁰³

The case presented by the nomination packet weaves together the history of desegregation with the emotional power of Ruby Bridges. On the one hand, Fricker positions the 1960 New Orleans integration crisis in the context of other crisis points in the history of desegregation and the civil rights movement. She argues that New Orleans should be listed with Little Rock and Birmingham, and that Frantz should be listed with Central High School, the University of Alabama and Ole Miss, as the sites of "critical confrontations" of the civil rights movement. Fricker noted that "historians consider the New Orleans crisis to be a major example of the southern counterinsurgency known as massive resistance. And massive resistance is clearly

³⁰³ Donna Fricker, Interview with Author, 7 September 2018.

a national[ly] significant phenomenon in the history of school desegregation.”³⁰⁴ In making this case, Fricker draws on historians, citing Frances M. Wilhoit’s *The Politics of Massive Resistance*, Robert Crain’s *The Politics of Desegregation*, Jack Bass’s *Unlikely Heroes*, J.W. Peltason’s *Fifty-Eight Lonely Men*, and James T. Patterson’s *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy*. She grounds this broader national history in the specifics of events as they played out in New Orleans by retelling a history that involves Ruby Bridges, but that centers the forces that surrounded her: Judge Skelly Wright’s legal back and forth with the Orleans Parish School Board, the NAACP, the machinations of Leander Perez and his segregationist movement, and the cheerleaders who obeyed his call.

But the other primary thrust of Fricker’s application moves away from the political impact of the events at Frantz in 1960 to focus on their emotional impact: and in this argument, Bridges takes center stage. Frantz matters, the nomination argues, because Bridges matters -- and Bridges matters because of how the nation reacted to her, and what she has come to symbolize. To make this argument, Fricker draws on a very different set of sources, citing *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *The Nation* as examples of the national reach of this story, and focusing extensively on Steinbeck, Coles, and especially Rockwell as examples of Bridges’ symbolic power. In fact, Robert Coles and Richard Robinson, CEO of Scholastic, both wrote letters to Donna Fricker in support of the nomination. Both letters echoed the themes Fricker herself wove into the nomination: Frantz mattered because of Ruby, and Ruby mattered less because of what she did than because of what she represented.

Coles, in his letter, provides an overview of his own history with Bridges and his writing about her, but spends a full paragraph describing Rockwell’s painting as “one of his most famous,

³⁰⁴ “National Register of Historic Places Nomination,” 22 April 2005, William Frantz School file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.

most powerful, and most enduring works.”³⁰⁵ Robinson, in turn, writes of Scholastic’s interest in Ruby Bridges as the “virtually universal icon of school desegregation,” a status he attributes mostly to images of her: “Whether one looks at the actual photographic images, the famous Rockwell painting (or the reproduction), or the cinematic image in the Disney movie *Ruby Bridges*, the scene is compelling in its historical accuracy and its dramatic association with the U.S. Supreme Court’s order to end separate and inferior education, and the subsequent civil rights movement.” Although other similar scenes played out across America, he adds, “it is the powerfully dramatic picture of little Ruby Bridges bravely entering William Frantz School in the face of taunts, chants, and vile epithets that the public is likely to remember and be inspired by.” “Needless to say,” he closes, “we believe it is entirely fitting and sincerely endorse the listing of the William Frantz School in the National Register of Historic Places.”³⁰⁶

The Problem We All Live With also became particularly central to the argument for Frantz’s significance at a *national*, rather than state, level. In a letter to Superintendent Anthony Amato early in the process, in fact, Fricker makes this explicit: “we hope to be able to document national significance for the school,” she writes, “based on the iconic Norman Rockwell painting of Ruby Bridges.”³⁰⁷ In the final application, Fricker emphasizes massive resistance as well, but Rockwell still plays a major role: Fricker devotes nearly a full page to the painting’s creation and reception, and includes the full text of Chester Martin’s letter to Rockwell as an example of the work’s impact. “*The Problem We All Live With* is not a little known painting stuck away at the Norman Rockwell Museum,” Fricker writes at the close of the section. “It has become a

³⁰⁵ Robert Coles to Donna Fricker, 12 March 2003, William Frantz School file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.

³⁰⁶ Richard Robinson to Donna Fricker, 12 March 2003, William Frantz School file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.

³⁰⁷ Donna Fricker to Anthony Amato, 3 November 2004, William Frantz School file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.

powerful, recognizable image of the Civil Rights Movement...Linda Pero, the director of collections at the Norman Rockwell Museum, indicated that in the twenty years she's worked there, it is easily the single most requested painting for reproduction."³⁰⁸

Fricker needed to hammer home the Rockwell painting, because the only problem she foresaw for the application lay in the amount of time elapsed between the nomination and the historically significant event. The case for Frantz's significance rested on its involvement in the 1960 New Orleans integration crisis. In 2005 - the time at which the nomination packet was submitted - the event in question was 45 years old, five years shy of the 50-year cut off. To list a building for historical importance dating back less than fifty years, applicants needed to demonstrate "exceptional importance." Fricker accomplished this by making the link between Ruby Bridges and the broader civil rights movement explicit. "Perhaps the best argument for 'exceptional importance,'" she writes, "rests on the historical force which the Frantz desegregation represents: the Civil Rights Movement. No one would dispute that this extraordinary movement is of 'exceptional importance' in American history."³⁰⁹

In April of 2005, Fricker submitted the nomination and wrote to Bridges that "the die has been cast." She expressed some caution about the outcome, writing that given the "rigorous" review for national significance and their bid for exemption from the 50-year cutoff, she couldn't be sure what would happen.³¹⁰ But her concerns proved unwarranted: Fricker's nomination passed through the process with flying colors, and the school was added to the National Register of Historic Places on June 8th, 2005. The inclusion marked an important victory for Bridges and

³⁰⁸ "National Register of Historic Places Nomination," 22 April 2005, William Frantz School file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.

³⁰⁹ "National Register of Historic Places Nomination," 22 April 2005, William Frantz School file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.

³¹⁰ Donna Fricker to Ruby Bridges, 22 April 2005, William Frantz School File, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.

the Foundation. The listing covered the school in the blanket of Bridges' own national iconic status, extending some of the symbolism that she embodied to include the grounds of the school on which her story had unfolded. It officially tethered her story to New Orleans, staking a claim to her importance in her own city. And coming, as it did, mere weeks after the Orleans Parish School Board had voted to close Frantz, the Registry listing provided some measure of protection, an official recognition that the school's history was significant, which might be leveraged in further discussions about the future of the school.

But the National Registry listing also highlighted that for Bridges - and for the arbiters of historical importance at the federal level - the only history that mattered at the Frantz school was the history of 1960. The fate of the school after that turbulent school year was not included in the National Registry, not part of the legacy of why the building mattered to the country's history. This exclusion is perhaps not surprising - after all, as Fricker's concerns make clear, only events occurring more than fifty years in the past are generally deemed worthy of National Register inclusion. And, only for a very discrete moment in time did the Frantz school become the center of national attention: what happened after 1960 felt, in comparison, like decidedly local history. But a wider lens from the application might have highlighted a different and more complicated legacy of the effects of integration and white flight - no less significant for being less triumphant, and all too familiar on a national scale. Such a longer history might also have highlighted the connections between the past and the present, gesturing towards the way the contemporary Frantz school was not merely an ironic symbol of continuing inequities, but a product of a long and complicated push and pull between the forces of equity and exclusion, in which integration was a crucial juncture, but not a final punctuation mark.

But the Bridges Foundation was not interested in telling that kind of history. Just as it had for Bridges personally, moreover, linking the Frantz school to a national story about integration

simultaneously disconnected the building from other, more local histories. Neither the Foundation nor Donna Fricker, for example, moved to articulate Frantz's importance to the neighborhood, or to the city. Again, such a move would have been counterproductive in a bid for a listing at the level of national importance. But the importance of that listing for the Bridges Foundation underscores the type of recognition they sought, and the type of history that best supported their future projects and their vision for the future of the school. Highlighting the importance of 1960 to the exclusion of all else helped the Bridges Foundation make a stronger claim to the school, as the events of 1960 revolved around Bridges in a way that no other moment in the school's history did.

Finally, the Bridges Foundation's bid for a National Registry listing required some degree of collaboration with the district, but it involved almost no collaboration with the existing school community. According to Jerry Pavlon-Blum, this separation reflected an important part of Bridges' personal philosophy: that any effort to mark Frantz's history or to remake Frantz would not happen locally, but would require outside forces: it would have to "happen outside of here and be imposed," as he put it.³¹¹ Bridges had and would continue to express similar sentiments for years. For Bridges, marking the Frantz school's history was not about preserving the school as it existed in 2005. It was about harkening back to the school's past, in the service of a very different future.

Conclusion: Obscuring Frantz

In August of 2005, the arrival of Hurricane Katrina put an end to any pre-existing plans - from the district, from the Bridges Foundation, or from anyone else - for Frantz's future. The work of the Bridges Foundation to secure a National Registry listing for Frantz was not fruitless; on the

³¹¹ Jerry Pavlon-Blum, Interview with Author, 10 January 2019.

contrary, that listing was instrumental to the future of the Frantz building. But it did not save the school. The proposal to rename Lockett Elementary was dropped, whether because of the storm, or the National Registry listing, or both: in the years to come, the Frantz building retained its original name. But Frantz Elementary, already officially closed before the storm, did not reopen. If there was any hope that the district's plans might be reversed again, those hopes were dashed by the damage done to the building, as well as by the state takeover of the majority of Orleans Parish schools in the aftermath of the storm.

But Katrina did more than seal Frantz's fate. The storm also erased much of what remained of Frantz's material history - and substantial portions of the district's history, too. The records of the Orleans Parish School Board are preserved at the University of New Orleans, where they constitute one of the largest archives of a public school system in the nation. That archive requires five football fields of storage space to hold documents spanning 170 years, and it exists largely due to the work of one man: Al Kennedy, former employee of the Orleans Parish School Board, and a history instructor at UNO.³¹² Kennedy took an interest in preserving the history of the district when he happened across what appeared to be a very old photograph tossed in the trash while at work one day. When he learned there was, effectively, no system of preservation in place at all for such documents, he began one - and in 1983, he facilitated an agreement between the School Board and UNO, designating the university as the official repository for the Board's records.³¹³

That agreement resulted in the preservation of a massive amount of material which would likely have otherwise been destroyed in the storm. Even so, Katrina made its mark. At the time of

³¹² "Earl K. Long Library Houses More Than 100 Years of New Orleans Public School History," University of New Orleans News, 28 March 2019, www.new.uno.edu; "Orleans Parish School Board Honors UNO Faculty Member," University of New Orleans News, 23 May 2013, www.uno.edu

³¹³ Al Kennedy Interview with Author, 12 September 2018.

the storm's landfall, Board documents dating approximately through 1998 were housed at UNO. More recent documents remained on School Board property, awaiting inspection from district lawyers before they were made available to the public. These documents were flooded during the storm; Kennedy himself rescued as many of them as possible in the following years, entering abandoned and water-ravaged buildings in hazard gear to do so.³¹⁴ The storm, combined with the effective dissolution of the Orleans Parish School Board post-2005, resulted in an archive that essentially ends in the late 1990's. More documents exist in storage somewhere, awaiting entry into the archives, Kennedy says, but it's not clear when - or if - they will be processed.³¹⁵

But the most substantial damage caused by Katrina reflects the ways in which the archive was always already incomplete. While the official agreement between UNO and the Orleans Parish School Board designated specific protocols for the transfer of official Board documents, it did not detail any specifications regarding the files of individual schools. A few schools did turn over their files for storage at UNO; most did not. At many Orleans Parish schools, then, countless records, files, photographs - the accumulated detritus of life in a school - disappeared with the storm.³¹⁶ There is a William Frantz file in the UNO archive, containing all that remains from the school's sixty-eight year history: it consists of 4 documents, easily housed in a single manila folder.

There are other places to trace Frantz through the archive beyond this single folder: in Board meeting minutes, in the files of various administrators; in attendance books and directories. The most substantial record in the physical archive relating to Frantz lies in the files pertaining to integration - of which there are many. And, of course, a digital record remains of data gathered

³¹⁴ "UNO Library Collection of Orleans Parish School Board Records Celebrates 30 Years," University of New Orleans News, 2012, www.uno.edu.

³¹⁵ AI Kennedy Interview with Author, 12 September 2018.

³¹⁶ AI Kennedy Interview with Author, 12 September 2018.

and stored by the Louisiana Department of Education - data mostly pertaining to test scores and demographics, including the school report cards detailed above. Frantz has not disappeared altogether from these official records, then, but the materials that are easiest to access are those that reinforce the narratives that this chapter has explored: of Frantz's brief intersection with national history, and of its failures, as calibrated and recorded by the state.

There is little left in these official spaces that might tell a different kind of story, but what does remain is a suggestive reminder of the tasks and concerns that make up daily life in a school. One of the documents in the Frantz file at the UNO archives is a school handbook from 1984, filled with school policies, grading scales, an invitation to join the PTA. The front page is stamped with a black and white sketch of an eagle. "Home of the Golden Eagles," it reads. The back page contains the lyrics to the Frantz school song.³¹⁷ The 11 page document serves a reminder that for the six decades that it existed, the William Frantz school was not just a famous school or a failing school - it was also a space filled with children, who broke the dress code, brought home assignments, had tardy slips signed by parents, gathered in assemblies to sing the school song, maybe wearing the school colors - sky blue and gold. I do not know whether these children were happy or well-educated during their time at Frantz - or both, or neither. I do not know what Frantz meant to them, whether their families were satisfied with the education they received within its walls, what they might have suggested should be done to improve the school. I do not know what the history of Frantz might look like through their eyes.

Of course, the answers to these unknowns exist in the memories of the students who attended the school and the faculty and staff who worked there. I have not undertaken an oral history of Frantz for the purposes of this chapter, but I do not intend to suggest that the voices and

³¹⁷ William Frantz School Handbook, 1984, "William Frantz School," Orleans Parish School Board Collection, University of New Orleans.

experiences of the Frantz community are impossible to access. On the contrary, building such an archive is a crucial next step suggested by this chapter. But importantly, the Frantz community itself was also scattered by the storm, by the closure of the school, and by the firing of Orleans Parish teachers. The storm and its aftermath resulted not just in a closure of a school but in the dissolution of a school community - and that, too, has helped to bury certain histories, making them harder to hear over the comparative clamor of test results, SPS scores, annual progress reports - or, for that matter, over the story of 1960, always readily on hand.

In May of 2005, at the protest over the closure of Frantz, state Senate candidate Toni Orrill said that the school's history had been a source of pride for the community. "Ruby's story is part of the bones of that school," she said, "it's part of the spirit of that school and that community."³¹⁸ In *Ghosts in the Schoolyard*, Eve Ewing details the 2013 school closings in Chicago and their impact on school communities. She writes that the stories of school closings are "mourning stories, which makes them ghost stories."³¹⁹ The final chapter of this dissertation returns to the Frantz building and the way that the story of Ruby Bridges factored into debates about its future. In the conclusion to this dissertation, I consider how Ruby's story haunts the school as it exists today. But the Frantz community is the real ghost in this story, and it haunts the remainder of this dissertation. I turn next to tracing competing visions for the Frantz School in the post-Katrina period. Those visions weighed Frantz's history very differently, and proposed very different understandings of what a great school housed on the Frantz site might look like. But both proposals were predicated on the erasure of Frantz as it had existed before, with little consideration of whether those visions aligned with those of the students, families, and faculty of

³¹⁸ Katy Reckdahl, "Frantz Escapes Chopping Block," *Gambit*, 16 May 2005.

³¹⁹ Eve Ewing, *Ghosts in the Schoolyard* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 153.

the former Frantz school, or spoke to the history they had built daily in the decades between 1960 and 2005.

Fighting for Frantz’s Future: The Ruby Bridges School for Community Service & Social Justice, and the Place of the Past in Post-Katrina New Orleans Public Education

Introduction: Frantz, Abandoned

In July of 2006, Donna Fricker sent an email to Valerie Gomez, Historic Preservation Specialist with FEMA, asking about the status of the William Frantz School. Nearly a year had passed since Hurricane Katrina had devastated the city, and Fricker was still enmeshed in the process of following up on local buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places, checking on their condition, learning what she could about their future, and ensuring that the FEMA officers in charge of their repair were aware of their historic status. Among the buildings on her list was William Frantz Elementary School, which had been added to the Register only two months before Katrina made landfall. “I did [Frantz] for the National Register a couple of years ago at the national level of significance for its Civil Rights history and have been worrying about it since Katrina,” Fricker wrote to Gomez. “I keep noticing it is not in any of the lists of schools that will be re-opening. Know anything?”³²⁰

Gomez’s response was prompt, albeit vague. “FEMA is funding to have the [Frantz] school restored to its pre-disaster condition,” she wrote. “It is not one of the high priority schools, so when the work will begin, I really couldn’t tell you.” She assured Fricker that the FEMA Project Officer working on the building was aware of Frantz’s National Register status, and that all repairs would be completed using in-kind materials, as per FEMA regulations for historic properties. But she cautioned that no timeline was in place for these repairs: “Given the great numbers of OPSB facilities and lack of student enrollment, many schools are still sitting

³²⁰ Donna Fricker to Valerie Gomez, 17 July 2006. William Frantz School file, LDHP.

abandoned. I do not believe there are any long term plans in the works yet for the reopening of the schools that are not on the high priority list.”³²¹

Six months later, Fricker wrote to Gomez again, still seeking information about Frantz. This time, she was given the contact information of John Taylor, the FEMA Project Officer assigned to the school. “They’ve been changing so much lately, that I wasn’t sure who was handling this particular school until he emailed me regarding the cafeteria building,” Gomez noted in her reply.³²² I don’t know whether Fricker ever got in touch with John Taylor, but in June of 2007 -- now nearly two years after Katrina -- Fricker was still trying to track down information about Frantz, which had not yet appeared on any re-open lists. By then, she was in communication with a different FEMA point person - Eric McAfee - who was, in turn, trying to track down the appropriate contact from Alvarez & Marcel, the consulting firm making assessments for the school district, to answer his questions. According to McAfee, there was “virtually no chance for demo” of the Frantz Building, but if Fricker learned anything more concrete from him, no record of it remains in the files of the Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.³²³

As the two-year anniversary of Katrina approached, then, the William Frantz building remained vacant, with no clear plans in place for its future. The situation at Frantz was hardly unique: the New Orleans Public School system remained in near total disarray. In the months after Katrina, the *Times-Picayune* reported that 47 of the district’s 117 schools were “severely

³²¹ Gomez to Fricker, 17 July 2006. William Frantz School file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.

³²² Gomez to Fricker, 23 January 2007. William Frantz School file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.

³²³ Pat Duncan to Donna Fricker, 11 June 2007. William Frantz School file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation. Fricker retired in August of 2007, and during a 2018 interview, she told me that she spent the last two years of her career “joined at the hip with FEMA, whether I liked it or not.” When I suggested that it seemed difficult to keep track of who was in charge of what during these two years, she laughed, and said, “Don’t get me started.”

damaged, many beyond repair,” and another 38 were moderately damaged. In other words, over two thirds of the district’s buildings needed significant repair.³²⁴ FEMA money was available to rebuild the school system - but deciding what to do with that money -- which schools would be torn down, which would be repaired, where new buildings would be built, and in what order -- proved to be an enormously complicated and lengthy process. Starting in 2007, work began on a School Facilities Master Plan (SFMP), which would ultimately determine which buildings would be demolished and which would be refurbished, and would establish a priority order and timeline for construction. The SFMP would be released in 2008, but even that document would prove to be only a tentative and controversial blueprint for the fate of New Orleans school buildings in the years to come. Small wonder, then, that in 2007, Donna Fricker could not get a straight answer about when - or if - Frantz would re-open.

But the uncertainty surrounding the future of New Orleans public school facilities paled in comparison to the uncertainty surrounding the schools that would occupy them. In the months after Katrina, New Orleans was not just rebuilding its school buildings; it was creating an entirely new school system. The Recovery School District had taken charge of all but a handful of schools, had fired the pre-existing faculty, staff, and employees, and had made it clear that they had no intention of repairing the old system. Instead, they intended to create not just a new district, but a new *kind* of district: a “portfolio” system, populated largely by independently-operated charter schools, which together would constitute a new marketplace of education in New Orleans.

In other words, New Orleans would be getting a whole new set of new schools. Which schools would exist, and where; what kind of schools, exactly; who would operate them; how many would be needed - these questions were very much in flux in the years after the storm. But

³²⁴ “Schools in Disarray,” *Times-Picayune*, 20 November 2005.

the erasure of the pre-existing system was framed by advocates of choice in New Orleans, by their allies around the country, and by national press coverage, as an unprecedented and exciting opportunity to build something new. As Walter Isaacson - chief executive of the Aspen Institute and, at the time, Chairman of the Board of Teach for America - put it, “The old Orleans Parish School Board ran one of the worst districts in the nation, and it has now effectively been abolished. ” In its place, he argued that “innovative schools” should be allowed to “blossom” - in fact, he suggested they were already blossoming: “Eager local principals are getting to run their own schools, and education innovators who want to show what they can do ... are rushing in to seize the opportunity.”³²⁵

One of those education innovators was Ruby Bridges. The takeover of New Orleans public schools threw the pre-existing plans of the Ruby Bridges Foundation into chaos - any tentative agreements negotiated with the Orleans Parish School Board before the storm were now, effectively, void. At the same time, however, it opened up a new path towards the goal that Ruby Bridges had articulated in *Through My Eyes*: to make the Frantz school a “great school” again. Frantz had been closed a few months before the storm, although the school’s 2005 SPS score would have made it eligible for takeover under the post-Katrina benchmarks regardless. Abandoned before the storm, and seriously damaged by both wind and flooding during the hurricane, the historic building now simply sat vacant - another facility available to eventually be refurbished and re-opened as a charter. Faced with this new situation, the Ruby Bridges Foundation quickly began re-organizing around a new goal: to charter a brand new school - the school that Bridges had always envisioned - out of the Frantz building. To do so, the Foundation had to develop a proposal that would garner approval from the new power brokers in New Orleans.

³²⁵ Walter Isaacson, “Go Southeast, Young Man,” *The New York Times*, 8 June 2006.

In some ways, the Foundation was a good match for this new world: Bridges, at least as she had articulated her vision publicly, shared the Recovery School District's assessment of the shortcomings of the pre-existing system. And Bridges was deeply invested in what the Recovery School District articulated as its long-term aims: to create better schools for the children of New Orleans. But Bridges' vision of how to accomplish that goal departed dramatically from that of the Recovery School District and the architects of education reform in New Orleans. Her Foundation generated a holistic, community-oriented approach to education reform, premised on the notion that great schools cannot be created in a vacuum but must be grounded in communities and in local history, and doubling down on community development and integration as crucial pieces of the education reform puzzle. This vision, of course, was derived directly from Bridges' own experiences as a child, and her interpretation of what those experiences meant.

The Ruby Bridges Foundation submitted an unsuccessful application to charter a school out of the William Frantz building in 2008. When that application was denied, the Foundation regrouped, hired a marketing firm, and spent two years revamping their vision, looking for funding and supporters as they prepared to try again. In the interim, however, another school - Benjamin Mays Academy - was granted permission to move into the Frantz Building. Mays never completed that move: after demonstrating poor performance, the school's charter was revoked. But by that time, Bridges was no longer actively pursuing a charter for the Ruby Bridges School. In 2013, Frantz finally received a new occupant: Akili Academy, which remains housed at Frantz today.

This chapter situates the Ruby Bridges Foundation's vision for the future of the Frantz building in the context of post-Katrina New Orleans education reform, through a close reading of three documents: a draft of the Foundation's unsuccessful 2008 charter application, Akili Academy's successful charter application from the same year, and the Foundation's White Paper,

developed in 2010, which updated their proposal for the Ruby Bridges School. Using these documents, I explore where the Bridges Foundation's proposal for a school fit in the landscape of a privatized, pro-charter educational landscape, and I examine how that landscape shaped both the application and its outcome. Comparing the Bridges Foundation's proposal - in its 2008 and 2010 manifestations - with that of Akili Academy provides insight into the competing visions for the future of New Orleans education in 2008, and helps to shed light on why Akili's vision ultimately found a home in the Frantz building, while the Bridges School does not exist at all.

The Bridges Foundation imagined a future school grounded in a particular place and its particular history, and committed to the themes contained within that history: social justice, community, and integration. That vision, as this chapter will show, was fundamentally incompatible with the template of education reform in post-Katrina New Orleans, as it was articulated by Recovery School District leaders, and as it was embodied by schools like Akili Academy. That the Bridges Foundation's vision found no place in the Recovery School District highlights the limits of Bridges' ability to translate her history into the foundation of an active school. It also raises crucial questions about power, access, and inclusion in the contemporary landscape of education in New Orleans.

A Tragedy and an Opportunity: The Landscape of Post-Katrina Education in New Orleans

While the New Orleans school takeover is frequently linked to Hurricane Katrina, the seeds of that takeover predate the storm. In 2003, the state Legislature passed Act 9, creating the Recovery School District (RSD), a state-run school district, and granting that district the right to take over schools deemed "Academically Unacceptable" - those with a School Performance Score (SPS) of below 60 - for four or more years. Although the RSD only took over a handful of schools in the following years, the legislation set the stage for a broader state take-over. The seeds of

privatization were present, too: in June of 2005, the Orleans Parish School Board entered into a memorandum of understanding authorizing the state to manage the district's massive deficit. The state promptly contracted that management out to a private accounting firm, Alvarez & Marcel, which in turn suggested the privatization of key elements of the school district's operations, including food services and transportation.³²⁶

Privatization and state control did not begin with Hurricane Katrina, then. But in the aftermath of the storm, the state Legislature swiftly took dramatic steps to build an altogether new system, in which privatization and state control were not growing trends but core, foundational principles. First, though, a path had to be cleared for this new system. Two steps made this possible: the state take-over of nearly all New Orleans schools, and the mass firing of the faculty and staff who had taught in them. In November of 2005, the Louisiana Legislature passed Act 35, a piece of emergency legislation which dramatically redefined the power of the state to take over schools. Act 35 made it possible for entire districts to be "in crisis" and eligible for take-over if they had 30 or more failing schools, and simultaneously raised the bar for a failing score, from 60 to 87.4. As a result, the number of New Orleans public schools eligible for takeover rose from 13 to 107. Overnight, the Orleans Parish School Board lost control of all but a handful of its schools; the majority were transferred to the control of the state-run Recovery School District (RSD). Only a few weeks later, arguing that the existing contract with the teachers' union was rendered null by the dissolution of the old district, the RSD fired 7,500 teachers and employees.³²⁷

By December of 2005, nearly every piece of the pre-existing school system had been dismantled: the buildings were damaged, the schools were closed, and the teachers were gone. So were many of the students, many of whom had not yet returned to the flood-damaged city. For

³²⁶ Kristen Buras, *Charter Schools, Race, and Urban Space* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 38.

³²⁷ Buras, 45-47.

advocates of the new system, New Orleans was now a blank slate on which to build an entirely new school system - and reformers, innovators, and opportunists of all kinds were descending on New Orleans to participate in building it. As Walter Isaacson put it in his 2006 op-ed - entitled "Go Southeast, Young Man" - "for anyone with ambition and civic spirit, there is no better place to be, nor better time to be there, than New Orleans now."³²⁸

This call extended beyond education: according to Isaacson, President Bush himself said that if "he were young and looking to make his mark or make money, he would move to New Orleans."³²⁹ But there was particular urgency and excitement around the need for what Isaacson called "education innovators." Anyone who wanted to be part of this unprecedented experiment in building a better, more equitable system was encouraged to move to New Orleans and get involved. A 2008 *New York Times Magazine* article highlights the sense of excitement surrounding this narrative: in "A Teachable Moment," Paul Tough interviews Tiffany Hardrick and Keith Sanders, co-principals of a new charter school in New Orleans, who had moved to the city after the storm: "It was hard to leave Memphis, they told me," he writes, "...but they couldn't resist the pull of New Orleans." He quotes Sanders: "How often do you get a chance to contribute to something like this?" Tough goes on to summarize the trend that Hardrick and Sanders were part of:

"From across the country, and in explicit numbers, hundreds of ambitious, idealistic, young educators ... have descended on New Orleans, determined to take advantage of the opportunity not just to innovate and reinvent but also to prove to the rest of the country that an entire city of children in the demographic generally considered the hardest to educate - poor African-American kids - can achieve high levels of academic success."³³⁰

Tough's article highlights the sense of mission driving the influx of educators to New Orleans, and the degree to which that mission was framed in terms of educational equity. It also

³²⁸ Walter Isaacson, "Go Southeast, Young Man," *The New York Times*, 8 June 2006.

³²⁹ Walter Isaacson, "Go Southeast, Young Man," *The New York Times*, 8 June 2006.

³³⁰ Paul Tough, "A Teachable Moment," *The New York Times Magazine*, 14 August 2008.

calls attention to the influx itself: the sense that anyone who wanted to be part of this mission could come to New Orleans and get involved. But in practice, not all reformers were equally welcome in this “blank slate” of a city. Rather, the architects of the new system were looking to build something quite specific. The Recovery School District and its supporters were explicit about their intention to promote an aggressive pro-charter agenda as the mechanism through which to improve New Orleans schools. This agenda was presented partly as a matter of logistics: the RSD believed that contracting with charter operators would be the fastest way to get an entire school system up and running. However, the RSD’s reliance on charter schools also reflected its broader philosophy. The architects of the new educational landscape in New Orleans were explicit in their intention to build a decentralized, market-based system, with maximum freedom for school operators, and minimum interference from a central government bureaucracy. New Orleans schools would thrive on choice and competition: high quality schools would survive and thrive; low-performing schools would be closed, and new ones would open in their place. In the end, this competitive market would ensure that only the best schools remained.³³¹

The logistics of transformation, not surprisingly, were quite a bit more chaotic than this rhetoric might suggest. Leadership of the new system was in constant flux; the process of applying to operate a charter school in Louisiana was enormously complex, and in the years after Katrina, the procedure for applying was itself undergoing rapid changes and standardization. The bulk of charters authorized to operate in New Orleans in the years after Katrina were Type 5 charters - schools operating under the oversight of the Recovery School District, as opposed to independently or under the oversight of the Orleans Parish School Board. Type 5 charter schools

³³¹ For examples of the principles guiding the New Orleans education reform movement, see the Bring New Orleans Back Commission’s report, “Rebuilding and Transforming: A Plan for World-Class Public Education in New Orleans” (January 2006), New Schools for New Orleans, “New Orleans-Style Education Reform: A Guide for Cities” (2012), or the Cowen Institute’s annual report, “The State of Public Education in New Orleans” (June 2007). See also, Paul Tough, “A Teachable Moment.”

in New Orleans operate under a contract with the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE). Today, the process of applying to operate a charter school in the state of Louisiana remains lengthy and complex. Interested applicants are required to submit a letter of intent and undergo a review of eligibility, as well as a Due Diligence review that includes background checks on applicants and performance reviews on all related schools, nonprofits, or organizations before even being cleared to submit an application. The applications themselves are reviewed by a team of local, state, and national evaluators; those evaluators pass on a recommendation to the BESE, which then authorizes or denies the application. From 2006 until 2013, these teams were assembled and managed by NACSA, the National Association of Charter School Authorizers.

But this process was still being codified immediately after the storm. In 2006, only one Department of Education employee - with support from NACSA - made recommendations about charter applications, and application lengths ranged from 100 pages to over 3,000.³³² Starting in that same year, NACSA worked with the Department of Education to overhaul the process, including the addition of outside evaluators, and over the next several years, worked to “demystify the process for applicants and to provide more clearly stated expectations regarding timeline, rigor, and rules.”³³³ In its own reports, NACSA acknowledged the barriers to a successful application, noting that not all applicants have the resources or the time to navigate the complex and lengthy application process. Eventually, NACSA and the Department of Education would make greater community engagement in charter management more of a priority, hosting

³³² Whitney Bross & Douglas Harris, “Technical Report: How (and How Well) Do Charter Authorizers Choose Schools?” Education Research Alliance For New Orleans, 10 November 2016, 7.

³³³ National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA), “NACSA Case Study: Great Expectations in New Orleans,” 7.

application boot-camps open to anyone in the community.³³⁴ But these events were not yet available in 2008.

It was in this context that the Ruby Bridges Foundation set out to charter a school out of the William Frantz building - through a process that was complex, confusing, and constantly changing, and with few codified structures in place for support or guidance. Additionally, navigating the new landscape of New Orleans education was only one of Bridges' concerns: the years after the storm were chaotic for Bridges on many levels. Bridges' own home was badly damaged in Katrina - and then, only a few months after the storm, her oldest son was murdered in New Orleans, a loss that Bridges later described as "the hardest thing she had ever faced."³³⁵ While navigating these enormous personal losses, Bridges also was faced with what seemed, at first, like the destruction of the goal she had been working towards for some years: Frantz was boarded up with four to five feet of water damage, and for years, there was little information about when or if the school might be repaired. Her friend and collaborator Jerry Pavlon-Blum described this time as one of "extreme misery," "exhaustion," and "political chaos."³³⁶

And yet, the new charter-based system also offered a path - however tentative and confusing - towards realizing the dream that Bridges had been developing since 1999. The release of the first draft of the School Facilities Master Plan made it clear that Frantz would not be demolished, but instead would be majorly renovated over the next several years as part of Phase 1, the first and most urgent phase, of construction.³³⁷ While that project would take several years - ultimately, construction did not begin at Frantz until 2010 and was not completed until 2013 - it was clear that the Frantz building would survive, ensuring a possible home for a future Ruby

³³⁴ NACSA, "NACSA Case Study: Great Expectations in New Orleans," 11.

³³⁵ "Ruby Bridges on Faith, Forgiveness, and Racism," Bwog: Columbia Student News, 25 February 2012.

³³⁶ Jerry Pavlon-Blum, Interview with Author, 01.10.19.

³³⁷ "School Facilities Master Plan for Orleans Parish," August 2008.

Bridges School. In the years after the storm, the Bridges Foundation turned its full attention towards the goal of making that school a reality.

The Ruby Bridges School: Centering Social Justice in Education Reform

In the years after the storm, the Bridges Foundation assembled a proposal to operate a Type 5 Charter School - to be called The Ruby Bridges School - in the Recovery School District, with a proposed opening date of August 2010. They submitted that proposal to the Louisiana Department of Education in October of 2008. The analysis that follows focuses on a draft of that application, as well as the evaluation the Foundation received. Sections of the application are missing from that draft - including details of the proposed Board of Directors, and the budget and funding plan; it is also possible that changes were made to the remaining sections before the Foundation officially submitted the proposal. The draft, then, is not a complete reflection of the final, polished vision of the Ruby Bridges School as it was proposed to the Department of Education. However, the draft, which contains over 50 pages of material, fully fleshes out the core elements of the vision Bridges had been developing for a decade: to build a new and better Frantz, with a curriculum built around history, social justice, and community service, and with a new dedication to integration and educational equity.³³⁸

The proposed Ruby Bridges School would be governed by a Board of Directors which would include Ruby Bridges herself. Bridges never intended to serve as principal of the school: the application makes clear that the Board planned to hire a principal and an administrative leadership team who would be responsible for the day-to-day operations of the school. The application was also designed in collaboration with individuals with significantly more

³³⁸ The version of the draft on which this analysis is based was obtained through Ken Ducote, who worked with Bridges on the development of the proposal.

experience in school leadership and planning than Bridges herself. As required by state law, the application included three teachers with a local license on the proposed governing board: Ken Ducote, Mary Laurie, and Alice Thomas - all veteran educators and school leaders in New Orleans who also represented a diverse coalition of interests and expertise.³³⁹ Ken Ducote had worked in the Orleans Parish School Board Department of Facilities and Planning for over twenty years, and was at the time consulting with the Recovery School District on the development of the School Facilities Master Plan. Alice Thomas was the founder and president of the New Orleans Center for Development and Learning, which since 1992 had provided professional development for teachers in New Orleans public schools, focused particularly on those working with high-needs students. And Mary Laurie, who had served as principal of a local public elementary and middle school before the storm, had been principal of the O. Perry Walker High School - now operated by Algiers Charter School Association - since 2005. As this coalition suggests, the proposed Board of Directors for the school would tap into the expertise of the pre-Katrina education landscape, but had ties to the new world, as well.

But despite this broader coalition, the proposal for the Ruby Bridges School clearly hinged on Ruby Bridges herself. From its opening pages, the Foundation frames the opportunity to revitalize Frantz as the machinations of fate. The application opens with a quote from *Through My Eyes*: “I don’t know where events will go from here, but I feel carried along by something bigger than I am. For a long time, I was tempted to feel bitter about the school integration experience, not understanding why I had to go through it and go through it alone. Now I know that it was meant to be that way.”³⁴⁰ These opening lines introduce a defining characteristic of the

³³⁹ Ruby Bridges Foundation, Application to Operate a Type 5 Charter School [draft], Submitted 10 October 2008; Type 5 Charter Schools Application Evaluation Summary 2008, Louisiana Department of Education.

³⁴⁰ Ruby Bridges Foundation, Application (2008), 3.

Foundation's application: an emphasis on a school run by Bridges as the natural, pre-ordained conclusion to a journey that began when she was only six years old. "Ruby's history is prologue," the application states, reframing her historic steps as a child as the beginning of a larger mission, not yet completed: "Throughout this proposal," the authors write in the opening lines, "one will see several pictures of undaunted courage. Collectively, those pictures demonstrate the tremendous courage it took for a six-year-old black girl to walk up the steps of the William Frantz Public School...One will also see, quite clearly, that same courage refocused over 40 years later on making the site of her historic experience a new model for what can be right in this nation."³⁴¹

Given this history, the application insists that Ruby Bridges herself is the only possible leader for the future Frantz School: "There is only one person, one entity that can make the rebirth of William Frantz School the historic place it must be," the application insists. Ruby's vision, the application emphasizes, is grounded in her unique history, and "no one but Ruby Bridges" can make that vision a reality.³⁴² Importantly, Bridges' expertise here is framed not in terms of her experience in education, but in terms of her personal history, her relationship to national history, and her relationship to this particular space. The Foundation's application, then, explicitly linked a vision of the future Ruby Bridges School to Bridges' own history and emphasized that the vision for Frantz's future emerged from those experiences.

Accordingly, the school proposed within the pages of the application speaks directly to that history, emphasizing social justice as the "overarching principle and wellspring of the school's culture and curriculum," as the application puts it. The Foundation's definition of social justice came from Rahima Wade's *Social Studies for Social Justice*: "the process of working toward, and the condition of meeting, everyone's basic needs, and fulfilling everyone's potential

³⁴¹ Ruby Bridges Foundation, Application (2008), 3.

³⁴² Ruby Bridges Foundation, Application (2008), 3.

to live productive and empowered lives as participating citizens in our global community.”³⁴³ At the proposed Ruby Bridges School, this commitment to social justice manifested particularly clearly in two areas: students would learn about social justice through an innovative history curriculum, and they would see the pursuit of social justice modeled in their school community.

The school community itself was also key: a sense of a school as a shared endeavor was fundamental to the Foundation’s vision, built even into the core values: “By creating a collaborative, critically-thinking learning community that embraces differences and welcomes all stakeholders, a school can create empowered students and make a difference towards a socially just world.” Realizing this vision, the application asserts, would require “the substantial and direct commitment and involvement of all stakeholders (students, teachers, parents, support staff, and community.”³⁴⁴ The Foundation’s application stresses that staff members at the school will be “meaningfully and actively involved in decision-making processes,” that instructional staff will comprise majority membership of committees that determine curriculum and instruction, and that teachers will assist in developing an annual Professional Development plan.³⁴⁵ Teacher evaluation, the Foundation proposes, will involve instructional coaches and master teachers who will provide “non-threatening” and “confidential” feedback to teachers. Furthermore, the Foundation proposes providing financial assistance and support to faculty and staff at all levels looking to advance their certification, seek advanced degrees, or pursue National Board Certification.³⁴⁶ Such material investment in teachers indicates a desire to cultivate a committed, long-term faculty community.

³⁴³ Ruby Bridges Foundation, Application (2008), 4.

³⁴⁴ Ruby Bridges Foundation, Application (2008), 7-8.

³⁴⁵ Ruby Bridges Foundation, Application (2008), 5, 32.

³⁴⁶ Ruby Bridges Foundation, Application (2008), 32-33.

Parents and community members were included in the envisioned community, as well. The application promises that parents will be included “categorically” in conversations surrounding student expectations, student discipline, and school improvement.³⁴⁷ Furthermore, the Foundation proposes an open-door policy towards parents and community members at the school - who will be encouraged to observe and volunteer in classrooms - plans to cultivate relationships with civic groups and local organizations to provide extracurricular programming, and envisions parents and community members serving as coaches and club sponsors. The application emphasizes the need to treat parents as “collaborators in the educational process,” and details the responsibility to “forge a partnership with all families in the school, not simply the most readily available.”³⁴⁸ This emphasis spoke directly to Bridges’ own experiences working as a parent-teacher liaison, and reflected the emphasis she had placed in *Through My Eyes* on the importance of her own community - including neighbors, parents, and teachers - in supporting her through her first grade year.

While a robust school community and the pursuit of social justice were intertwined in the Foundation’s application, the explicit teaching of social justice manifested primarily through the history curriculum. In most subjects, the core curriculum envisioned is traditional, drawing heavily on the Louisiana Comprehensive Curriculum, and proposing to implement textbook-based curricula commonplace in elementary schools throughout the country. But the application’s description of the proposed history curriculum at the Ruby Bridges School feels distinctly different. In the teaching of history, the Ruby Bridges School proposed an “ambitious innovative curriculum.” First and foremost, this curriculum will not rely on textbooks, which the application authors note are “susceptible to societal pressures” and “lead students to believe there is only one

³⁴⁷ Ruby Bridges Foundation, Application (2008), 5.

³⁴⁸ Ruby Bridges Foundation, Application (2008), 36, 39.

true and accurate account of past events.” Instead, students at the Ruby Bridges School will be “encouraged to construct their own history” through a close reading of primary sources, with an explicit focus on social justice. History teachers will “serve as the facilitator and guide,” and grades “will not only assess factual knowledge, but also the process by which students ‘reconstruct’ textbook history.” In their study of this curriculum, students will acquire advanced and complex skills, including: “understand the importance of perspective and context,” “use evidence to check the validity of a source,” and “synthesize, or see themes and patterns.” In addition, the application notes that the Ruby Bridges School intends to pay special attention to the history of minority groups, and suggests that the history curriculum will be embedded into interdisciplinary units.³⁴⁹

The authors note that such a curriculum is ambitious, and accordingly, they include a plan to support teachers in the process. Professional development will include the study of such texts as Rahima Wade’s *Social Studies for Social Justice*, David Kobrin’s *Beyond the Textbook: Teaching History Using Documents and Primary Sources*, and Sam Wineburg’s *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*. The application notes that the Ruby Bridges Foundation had already secured a partnership with two historians from the *American Institute for History*, as well as with the *Freedom Writers Association* and *Facing History and Ourselves*. Furthermore, the Foundation had tentatively established partnerships with both Scholastic, Inc. and Columbia University to create a “student historian’s guidebook” to help both students and teachers navigate this ambitious curriculum.³⁵⁰ Clearly, the Foundation had developed this curriculum thoughtfully, and in partnership with a broad support network.

³⁴⁹ Ruby Bridges Foundation, Application (2008), 14.

³⁵⁰ Ruby Bridges Foundation, Application (2008), 16.

Ultimately, the Foundation’s application suggests that the proposed history curriculum spoke to the core values of the school: “Through thematic literature and primary documents, and source based accounts; history teachers at the Ruby Bridges School will provide students an in-depth, challenging, and meaningful learning experience while modeling democratic living,” the authors write. “Indeed,” the application continues, “the entire structure of social studies instruction and student/teacher interaction at the Ruby Bridges School will serve as a manifestation to the students of a collaborative, functional, and socially just mini-society.”³⁵¹ For the Bridges Foundation, teaching history in a thoughtful, critical, and collaborative learning environment formed the foundation from which a more equitable educational future in New Orleans might be built.

In addition to this curricular emphasis on social justice and history, the Ruby Bridges Foundation planned to develop a Civil Rights Library and Archive within or close to the school. “Not only will this facility serve to house primary documents and other sources that tell the story of the Civil Rights Movement,” the application states, “the library will also host guest speakers (national and local), symposia, workshops, and celebrations, and sponsor community activism projects. A full-time curator and librarian will be employed, with both historian and librarian credentials.”³⁵² According to the application, the Ruby Bridges Foundation had already been in touch with administration and staff at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute about assisting in the development of such a facility.

The library is mentioned only briefly in the application, although the Ruby Bridges Foundation had been talking about this idea in the press for years beforehand. Nevertheless, the proposed library stands as an example of what makes this application distinctive and also,

³⁵¹ Ruby Bridges Foundation, Application (2008), 16-17.

³⁵² Ruby Bridges Foundation, Application (2008), 17.

perhaps, of its most serious shortcomings. The plan to develop a state-of-the-art library and archive is ambitious, and not particularly fleshed out: only passing mention is made to how to create or staff such a facility, how it would operate, how it would interact with the school, and perhaps most pressingly, how to fund such an operation. And yet, in proposing such an idea, the Ruby Bridges Foundation also demonstrated the scope of their plans for the Frantz School. For the Bridges Foundation, a Civil Rights Library and Archive was part of their vision for a great school and an excellent education: students deserve not just an academic but a world-class archive just next door. To include such a proposal in an application for a school suggests a re-imagining of what a school can be, what the 9th Ward community has a right to ask for or expect.

For the Bridges Foundation, then, community and history were at the very heart of the school, not supplementary to but deeply entwined with their vision of social justice and the pursuit of equity. But their vision extended beyond the school, too. Placing a Civil Rights Archive next door to the school would do more than provide students with access to state-of-the-art resources; it would put the Frantz School on a larger map, as well, making the surrounding area a potential destination for both researchers and tourists studying the civil rights movement. The proposed Civil Rights archive serves as a reminder that for the Bridges Foundation, building a model school was fundamentally intertwined with the study of the past. But it also serves as a reminder that the school was tied in to a separate but related goal for the Foundation and for Bridges personally: to secure institutional recognition of the importance of the history that had unfolded on the grounds of the Frantz School.

Not surprisingly, given these goals, the Foundation made clear from the opening pages of the application that this proposal was designed explicitly and intentionally around the use of the Frantz Building. Frantz was not the top choice, or the best choice for the Foundation - it was the only choice. While the application addresses issues of education and equity in New Orleans

more broadly, the Foundation's vision was predicated on Ruby Bridges enacting change on the grounds of the school she once integrated. The school had to be at Frantz, and Ruby Bridges had to lead it.

And yet, in emphasizing Bridges as a singular figure, uniquely positioned to complete the work of revitalizing Frantz, the application flattens Bridges' personal history into exactly the sort of simplified narrative that she complicated in her own 1999 children's book. The application claims, for example, that as a six-year-old child, Bridges "single-handedly initiated the desegregation of New Orleans Schools," a claim that not only erases Leona Tate, Gail Etienne, and Tessie Prevost from history, but also flies in the face of the central premise of *Through My Eyes*: that Bridges was able to succeed through the support of others. Similarly, the Ruby Bridges presented here is important less for her tangible impact on New Orleans public education than for her iconic status as a national symbol of integration. In addition to being "forever immortalized in Norman Rockwell's easily recognizable painting 'The Problem We All Live With,' the application notes, Bridges' "profile as a leader in the Civil Right [sic] Movement has gained prominence in recent years." As evidence, the application includes the publication of *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, *Through My Eyes*, and the 2000 Disney movie *Ruby Bridges* - again, locating the proof for Bridges' importance almost entirely in the national circulation of her story.³⁵³

A similar framing applies to the application's treatment of the Frantz building. To make the case for the importance of Bridges' symbolic return, the application links Frantz to the broader story of Ruby Bridges, drawing on the emotional power and symbolic resonance of this story to argue for the importance of the school and the building. Norman Rockwell's *The Problem We All Live With* becomes a touchstone for this argument. There are "few images of the Civil Rights Movement more easily recognizable" than Rockwell's painting, the authors claim,

³⁵³ Ruby Bridges Foundation, Application (2008), 9, 51-52.

stating explicitly that the building in the painting is William Frantz. The authors identify Frantz as the “third player in the indelibly etched image of integration” - after, according to the application, Ruby Bridges and Rockwell himself. The application argues that Frantz deserves attention and recognition, just as both Rockwell and Bridges received Presidential Medals. Bridges already started this work, the proposal notes, when she worked to designate the building as a National Historic Landmark, a designation that the application treats as settled proof of the building’s importance: “There had to be objective, incontrovertible support linking the Frantz School with the Civil Rights movement in the nation’s consciousness,” the application states. “The State of Louisiana agreed that the Frantz School is deserving of this recognition.”³⁵⁴

If the approval of the National Register committee wasn’t enough, the application cites Scholastic as another arbiter of historical import. The application notes that images of the Frantz building appear on the back cover of Bridges’ autobiography *Through My Eyes*, as well as *There Comes a Time: The Struggle for Civil Rights*. Both books are published by Scholastic - which, the application concludes, has “identified the school as an ‘icon’ of desegregation.”³⁵⁵ In fact, this section of the application is essentially an extended quotation of the letter Scholastic CEO Richard Robinson wrote to Donna Fricker in support of the Frantz National Register nomination. Whether the authors drew from this specific letter or solicited another one for this project, the use of Robinson’s language is clear: the authors quote him for a full two paragraphs.

But while Robinson’s 2003 letter to Fricker focused on the import of Bridges herself, the language in the proposal shifts the focus to the school. In his 2003 letter to Donna Fricker, Robinson wrote that Scholastic sees “the image of Ruby Bridges entering William Frantz School as the virtually universal icon of school desegregation.” He continued, “Even though similar

³⁵⁴ Ruby Bridges Foundation, Application (2008), 52.

³⁵⁵ Ruby Bridges Foundation, Application (2008), 52.

scenes occurred for many years across America, in countless schools and colleges, large, small, rural, and urban, it is the powerfully dramatic picture of little Ruby Bridges bravely entering William Frantz School in the face of taunts, chants, and vile epithets that the public is likely to remember and be inspired by.”³⁵⁶ In 2008, the Ruby Bridges Foundation application paraphrases the same idea, but shifts the focus to the school itself: “Similar scenes occurred for many years across America; but it is William Frantz School that the public remembers.”³⁵⁷ In other words, Frantz becomes a stand-in for Bridges.

Relatedly, the explanation of the school’s importance here is almost entirely visual - it is *recognizable*, from reproductions of famous images that include the school - and, inevitably, Bridges herself. “[T]he school’s facade is synonymous with school integration and the civil rights movement of the 1960’s,” the application states. The emphasis on the facade again returns us to the recognizable appearance of the school, rather than to the events that unfolded around it. Similarly, the application states, “Any internet search of Ruby’s name inevitably includes images of the school she integrated. Hundreds of teacher sites, from Harvard University to Honolulu Public Schools, include her story and pictures of William Frantz School...”³⁵⁸ Likewise, while the application seems to quote from Donna Fricker’s earlier work on the National Register application, gone is any reference to the political history of desegregation that Fricker included in her application. Frantz’s import rests here not on its association with desegregation and massive resistance, but on its symbolic value in American memory as the backdrop to a number of recognizable and emotionally resonant images.

³⁵⁶ Richard Robinson to Donna Fricker, 12 March 2003, William Frantz School file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.

³⁵⁷ Ruby Bridges Foundation, Application (2008), 52.

³⁵⁸ Ruby Bridges Foundation, Application (2008), 8.

Framing Frantz in this way presents a number of problems - including that the building was not, in fact, a National Landmark, as claimed in the application, nor was there evidence that Norman Rockwell specifically intended Frantz to be the setting of *The Problem We All Live With*. But the larger loss came not from these errors, but from the missed opportunity to claim a different sort of history for Frantz - or, for that matter, for Bridges -- to situate the building in the history of the neighborhood, the community, or the city, to insist that the building mattered not just because of Bridges, and that Bridges mattered not just because of what she symbolized for the country, but that both mattered because of the roots that connect the events of 1960 inextricably to the present day. Despite the insistence on the importance of the Frantz building in the application - and despite the insistence on community and history as fundamental values guiding the proposed school - both the Frantz School and the Upper Ninth Ward remain largely absent in this application. If the authors had an intimate knowledge of the present-day conditions of the neighborhood, or the community that had until a few years before made up the William Frantz Elementary School, they did not emphasize that knowledge.

This absence feeds a related tension in the application, stemming from the proposed student body of the school. Importantly, Bridges' vision for a revitalized Frantz always included a re-integrated student body. The history embedded in the Frantz Building and reflected in Bridges' own experiences is the history of integration and re-segregation, and part of the Ruby Bridges Foundation's commitment to that history - part of the "coming full circle" envisioned by Bridges - involves a continued commitment to the integration of the school. Bridges had spoken openly and explicitly about her commitment to this goal for years; in the 2008 application, however, that commitment is muted, reflected mostly in the language of diversity: "The school will strive for

ethnic, gender, and socio-economic diversity at all levels,” the application reads. “A preeminent goal of the school is to replicate, on a small scale, the diversity of our nation.”³⁵⁹

At the same time, the Foundation emphasized the importance of building a school in the Frantz Building to serve the 9th Ward Community, specifically. “The school’s primary target population,” the application states, “is the elementary school children of the Upper Ninth Ward of New Orleans.” And, later, “the founders of the Ruby Bridges School unreservedly embrace the concept of a community elementary school.”³⁶⁰ In this way, the school is deeply attached to a particular place and its accompanying history. But simultaneously, the application embraces the language of school choice, so foundational to the charter school movement: “[T]he Founders believe that it is imperative to the success of the school, both locally and nationally, that the Ruby Bridges School be a true school of choice,” the application states, “open to all kindergarten through eighth grade students in the greater New Orleans area.”³⁶¹

The application brushes off these tensions by suggesting that the school can achieve diversity *through* choice - that through “vigorous and energetic promotion” of the school all over town, the school can recruit a diverse applicant pool and, eventually, a diverse student body.³⁶² But this proposed solution belies deeper contradictions in the application, not unrelated to the absence of the present-day Frantz or the surrounding community in its pages. At the time of its closure, Frantz was an entirely re-segregated school, serving a student body that reflected the demographics of the surrounding neighborhood and gestured toward the white flight that had left the entire New Orleans public system largely devoid of white students. A school dedicated to

³⁵⁹ Ruby Bridges Foundation, Application (2008), 17.

³⁶⁰ Ruby Bridges Foundation, Application (2008), 17, 34.

³⁶¹ Ruby Bridges Foundation, Application (2008), 34.

³⁶² Ruby Bridges Foundation, Application (2008), 35.

servicing the students of the Ninth Ward in 2008 would not be an integrated school, at least not without intentional steps to recruit and retain a diverse student body from other parts of the city.

At face value, the new school system in New Orleans offered a way out of this conundrum by presenting a system built around choice: students could now apply to any school in the city. The Foundation's application, too, gestured towards this solution. Yet this system was inherently at odds with a vision of a neighborhood school, rooted in a particular place and its history. Furthermore, as I will explore more in the following section, the pursuit of integration was in no way a core value of the new system: most of the New Orleans charter schools were, in fact, explicitly designed to serve exclusively low-income students of color.

These contradictions point toward the fundamental tension at the heart of the Bridges Foundation's 2008 application: ultimately, the Foundation's vision of social justice, education, and the relationship between the two was deeply at odds with the vision actively promoted by the leaders of the New Orleans charter-based system. In trying to fit their vision into a model of choice, the Foundation flattened that vision - and also failed to market it effectively, as the evaluation indicated.

The Foundation received an "unsatisfactory" rating from the NACSA evaluators. The evaluators commented on a lack of specificity and detail throughout the application which, despite the "number of great ideas" contained in the proposal, raised questions for the reviewers about the efficacy of the proposed program. The evaluators also raised questions about the financial sustainability of the school. These problems might have haunted the Bridges Foundation no matter what type of school they proposed. But, importantly, the reviewers also pointed towards exactly those elements of the school that diverged from mainstream education reform philosophy as weaknesses in the application. The evaluators noted that they had "concerns and questions" about how to "quantify" the social justice component of the curriculum, which, as they

pointed out, is a “major thread in the overall design.” Furthermore, the reviewers noted, “the facilities plan does not contain any contingency in the even [sic] the building the developers are targeting is not available.” In their summary comments they again pointed towards the emphasis on Frantz as a weakness, noting that “questions about...the availability of the facility,” created doubt about whether the school could succeed.³⁶³

But this was exactly the point for the Bridges Foundation: the school could not be successful in another facility, because the specifics of *this* facility - its history, its connection to the organization in question, its location in this particular neighborhood - were part of the Foundation’s vision, part of their plan for how to make a successful school. They weren’t interested in creating a school in a vacuum.

Akili Academy & Standardized Charter Reform

Just how out of sync the Bridges’ Foundation was with the landscape of education in New Orleans in 2008 is made apparent by looking at an application that succeeded. In 2008, the year that the Ruby Bridges Foundation submitted their charter application, the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) also received an application from a man named Sean Gallagher to operate a Type 5 Charter School in New Orleans that he intended to name Akili Academy.³⁶⁴ Gallagher’s application was granted, and Akili Academy opened in the 2008-2009 school year, with a kindergarten and first grade, and plans to add a grade level every year. In 2013, after five years in portables, Akili Academy would move into the William Frantz

³⁶³ Type 5 Charter Schools Application Evaluation Summary 2008, Louisiana Department of Education.

³⁶⁴ In a 2009 interview with Columbia News21, Gallagher said that he had wanted to choose a name for his school that tied into the neighborhood where it would be located, but this proved impossible, since he did not know in advance where the school would be. Ultimately, he chose the name Akili on the suggestion of a member of his school development team, who told him it meant “knowledge” or “wisdom” in Swahili. In the interview, Gallagher said, “I just thought, what a cool thing to call a school. It pops. It’s good for marketing... You can see on our signs, it’s a really cool looking word.”

Building, becoming the building's first occupant since 2005. By that time, Sean Gallagher had returned to his hometown of Philadelphia, transferring Akili to the leadership of charter operator Crescent City Schools, and Ruby Bridges was no longer pursuing plans to operate a school out of the Frantz building.

Gallagher couldn't have known in 2008 that his school would one day occupy Frantz, and the two applications were not explicitly competing for the same space. Nevertheless, one application was successful, and the other was not - and five years later, it was Akili Academy and not the Ruby Bridges School that celebrated its first day in the newly-refurbished historic property. What's more, Akili Academy - as it was envisioned in Gallagher's 2008 application, and as it manifested as a functioning school - modeled the characteristics of the education reform movement in New Orleans at every level, from the broadest educational philosophy of its leadership to the details of its daily schedule and student conduct policies. This close alignment is due, in part, to the fact that Gallagher's application was developed with the support and coaching of some of the key players in the education reform movement in New Orleans. Akili's application, then, not only offers a glimpse into the particular school that ultimately came to occupy Frantz; it also sheds light on the educational vision that was being actively promoted and supported by the Recovery School District during this time period.

The driving force behind Akili Academy was Sean Gallagher himself. The proposed principal of Akili Academy and the President of the Board of the eponymous nonprofit in charge of the school's management, Gallagher was a poster boy for the kind of leader that the Recovery School District was looking for. Originally from Philadelphia, Gallagher was part of the wave of "educational entrepreneurs" that descended on New Orleans in the years after Katrina. He brought with him a significant track record in urban charter education, as both a teacher and a school leader. After seven years teaching in North Philadelphia, Gallagher developed what his

2008 application described as a “strong desire to influence the reform of public education beyond the confines of his classroom.” He became a founding teacher at Mastery Charter High School in Philadelphia, and then moved to administration, serving as the Vice Principal of Independence Charter School. By the time of his move to New Orleans, Gallagher could reasonably claim to be, as the application described him, an “experienced urban educator committed to delivering strong student achievement.”³⁶⁵

Prior to 2008, all of Gallagher’s experience came from outside of New Orleans - but he did not arrive in the city or begin the process of applying to run a charter school on his own. On the contrary, Gallagher was deeply embedded in the networks and organizations reshaping education in New Orleans, long before he ever submitted an application. Notably, Gallagher was a 2007-2008 Building Excellent Schools Fellow. A nationwide organization dedicated to developing urban charter school leaders, Building Excellent Schools describes itself as “rooted in the very beginnings of the charter school movement,” and steeps its participants in the core tenets of the education reform movement, including: accountability, measurable academic goals, data-driven instruction, extended instruction time, and high expectations for student achievement and behavior.³⁶⁶ Gallagher’s resume, included in the application, describes the Fellowship as a “12-month, full-time, comprehensive training program that prepares dedicated, hard-working, and talented individuals to design and open academically excellent charter schools.”³⁶⁷

Additionally, the application notes that Gallagher worked closely with New Schools for New Orleans throughout the application process. Founded in 2006, New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO) is dedicated to charter school development at all levels - the organization describes itself as making “strategic investments of funding, time, and expertise in high-impact

³⁶⁵ Type 5 Charter School Application of Akili Academy of New Orleans, Inc (2008), 4.

³⁶⁶ Building Excellent Schools, www.buildingexcellentschools.org.

³⁶⁷ Type 5 Charter School Application of Akili Academy of New Orleans, Inc (2008), 96.

organizations to help improve the city's schools."³⁶⁸ In practice, NSNO actively recruits and trains potential charter school founders, leaders, teachers, board members, and investors, while simultaneously developing research and marketing material related to charter schools and the broader education reform movement.

Being embedded in these networks had no small impact on the potential success of Gallagher's application and of his school. As a BES Fellow, Gallagher had access to extensive and intensive professional development and coaching to prepare him both to submit a successful application and to run a successful school. Gallagher spent the 2007-2008 academic year "visiting and deeply studying over 30 high-performing urban charter schools." Staff at BES and NSNO worked with Gallagher on key pieces of his application, including developing the school's proposed budget.³⁶⁹ Gallagher received training on best practices with regards to the operation and management of a high-performing charter school, including "governance trainings" for his whole Board through both BES and NSNO. The support offered by these networks promised to extend beyond the application process, as well: in his application, Gallagher indicated his intention to ensure that both his Board and his faculty took full advantage of future professional development opportunities offered by both organizations.³⁷⁰

This sort of training and support ensured that Gallagher would successfully navigate the complex charter application process, would submit a strong, detailed, and polished application, and would enter his first year as the head of a new school well prepared for and well supported in his new role. But beyond the logistical and financial support offered by these organizations, Gallagher's involvement in Building Excellent Schools and New Schools for New Orleans

³⁶⁸ New Schools for New Orleans, www.newschoolsforneworleans.org.

³⁶⁹ Type 5 Charter School Application of Akili Academy of New Orleans, Inc (2008), 5, 147.

³⁷⁰ Being a BES Fellow meant access to funding opportunities, as well: in his application, Gallagher notes that his fellowship made Akili Academy eligible to apply for a \$250,000 start-up grant funded through the Walton Family Foundation.

offered him something less tangible, but just as important: Gallagher was steeped in the ideology and practice of the charter reform movement, and he gained access to a network of people deeply embedded in the new educational landscape of New Orleans. Perhaps before he began his fellowship, but certainly by the time he was done with it, Gallagher was fluent in the language of education reform as it was envisioned and implemented in New Orleans in 2008. He knew the metrics by which his application would be judged, he knew what kind of applicant the Louisiana BESE was looking for, and he knew how to paint a picture of a school that would legible to the people in charge.

In his 2008 application, Gallagher described the core philosophy of Building Excellent Schools as rooted in academic achievement: “Building Excellent Schools holds the core belief that academic performance drives every element of a school...[and] further believes that the only legitimate measure for a school’s performance is the academic achievement of its students.”³⁷¹ A great school, in other words, is nothing more and nothing less than a school that delivers quantifiable academic results. Gallagher’s commitment to this philosophy is apparent on every page of his application, which proposes a school embodying the core tenets of the charter school reform movement. Akili Academy, as it was envisioned in the application, would be a prototypical no-excuses charter school, a paradigm of data-driven instruction, measurable results, and a highly-structured, accountability-driven culture.

Akili’s philosophy is perhaps best summed up by the school’s core values articulated in the application:³⁷²

1. All students can learn, regardless of background.
2. Great teachers and great teaching are essential to student academic success.
3. A highly structured, focused, and accountable school culture drives student achievement.
4. Data analysis drives effective instruction.

³⁷¹ Type 5 Charter School Application of Akili Academy of New Orleans, Inc (2008), 96.

³⁷² Type 5 Charter School Application of Akili Academy of New Orleans, Inc (2008), 6.

Every aspect of Akili Academy, from its daily schedule to its curriculum implementation to its school culture, was envisioned to be efficient, standardized, and focused on academic achievement. Even at the level of language - Akili's approach is described as "rigorous," "unrelenting," "intense," and "uncompromising" - the application indicates a very different vision of a school than the Ruby Bridges Foundation's application, with its emphasis on community and stakeholder participation.

In terms of curriculum and instruction, the application emphasizes a "highly organized, structured, and systematic approach to instructional delivery."³⁷³ The structure relies on incredibly standardized content delivery: in Gallagher's vision, every step of instruction could and should be precisely replicated to ensure that every teacher delivers the same content in the same way to all students in the school. All teachers in the school, the application promises, will set up their blackboards in exactly the same way, will implement the same systems for "non-instructional activities" (students handing in homework, for example, transitioning between classes, or hanging up their coats) and will deliver lessons in sync with other teachers of the same subject or grade level. The ultimate vision described here is synchronized and standardized: "At any given point of the school day," the application promises, "an observer will be able to see the same instruction, in a specific content area, delivered in the same method by all teachers across the same grade and subject."³⁷⁴

True to Gallagher's stated belief that the academic achievement of students is the only legitimate measure of a school's success, the school he designed left little room for anything other than academics. The application promises a "a highly structured learning environment marked by limited distractions and efficient use of time and resources," an "unrelenting" focus on literacy

³⁷³ Type 5 Charter School Application of Akili Academy of New Orleans, Inc (2008), 9.

³⁷⁴ Type 5 Charter School Application of Akili Academy of New Orleans, Inc (2008), 9.

acquisition, an extended school day and year, curricula proven to lead to “dramatic academic gains,” and a “data-driven, direct instructional environment.” The daily schedule, which begins at 7:30 and ends at 4:00pm (or 5:00, for students in the “Extra Help Homework Club”), eliminates nap time for kindergartners and builds in only 10 minutes a day for exercise for K-3 grade, plus a PE period twice a week. 4th and 5th graders have no exercise break at all, and their lunch and PE periods are combined into one 45 minute block.³⁷⁵

The expectations for teachers are equally rigorous. The proposed teacher contract offers no personal or sick days to teachers, insists on an annual contract, and details expectations of working extended hours. The application repeatedly emphasizes the importance of hiring excellent, dedicated teachers, committed to the school’s mission and willing to rise to the demands of teaching at Akili. But there is little emphasis on the autonomy of those teachers. As noted, instruction at Akili is designed to be standardized, with little room for teacher input or adjustment. Professional development, while built regularly into the schedule, is envisioned as a top-down exercise: topics will be selected by the Associate Director of Curriculum and Instruction, and instructional methods will be explicitly taught to teachers. A great deal of space in the application is dedicated to oversight for teachers, but any discussion of teacher-led professional or curricular development is entirely absent - a far cry from the Bridges Foundation’s insistence on teachers as meaningful stakeholders in the school.³⁷⁶

Parents, too, are relegated to a background role in this vision, despite a verbal recognition of their importance. The application promises a meeting between parents and the school’s principal after their child enrolls, as well as a Family Orientation, which includes the signing of a Family contract. Parental involvement at home is not only recognized as important but,

³⁷⁵ Type 5 Charter School Application of Akili Academy of New Orleans, Inc (2008), 7, 52-53.

³⁷⁶ Type 5 Charter School Application of Akili Academy of New Orleans, Inc (2008), 41-42.

apparently, required: “All parents will be required to participate in their child’s learning,” the application promises, “by ensuring that their son or daughter has an appropriate area in which to study and is able to do so relatively free of distraction.”³⁷⁷ Parents are also expected to sign off on a homework tracker, and the application promises weekly communication between teachers and parents about each child’s performance, as well as three required in-person conferences per year. And yet, despite the school’s stated mission to serve a low-income, high-needs population, there’s notably little discussion of how the school will connect with low-income parents, work around these parents’ schedules, support these families, or ensure that parents find the school and staff open and accessible.

Where Bridges envisioned as a school as a community, built through the meaningful participation of all stakeholders, Gallagher was laser-focused on the academic achievement of individual students. To foster that academic growth, Gallagher envisioned a school culture for students that is explicitly designed to be “highly structured, strongly academically focused, and imbued with a sense of personal and collective responsibility.” Akili promises to explicitly teach and reinforce character traits to their student body, who will in turn develop “an inner core of universally accepted values,” including determination, responsibility (“Make no excuses. You are the person ultimately accountable for your success.”), excellence, discipline, respect, and manners. All of this will be underscored by a “strict” Code of Conduct: “Students will benefit from the explicit teaching of acceptable behavior, positive behavior will be recognized consistently, and having immediate and clear consequences for seemingly minor infractions will guarantee that major infractions are minimized.” The school staff is encouraged to “sweat the small stuff,” a guiding principle which the application justifies by explaining that “if students operate in an environment in which they know clearly what is expected of them and they

³⁷⁷ Type 5 Charter School Application of Akili Academy of New Orleans, Inc (2008), 65.

understand that at any time they do not meet expectations it will be noticed and there will be immediate consequences, they will embrace and embody those expectations.”³⁷⁸

Just as content delivery is standardized, so, too, are expectations for student behavior. Like any no-excuses charter school, Akili Academy is premised on the insistence that all students can and will meet expectations, academic and behavioral, regardless of the particularities of their background, regardless of what obstacles they must overcome to do so, regardless of the factors that make them irreducibly distinct human beings. In fact, holding the students with the most obstacles accountable to the same standards as everyone else is exactly the point: “In order to succeed in college and in life,” the application states, “students must also be capable of handling life’s obstacles and challenges in ways that are constructive. This is most powerfully true for the most disadvantaged students, as they will have to overcome multiple challenges on their way to college.”³⁷⁹ This is the promise of Sean Gallagher’s school: that in this highly structured, highly standardized environment, any student willing to make the commitment to the school can achieve great things. It’s also an insistence that drowns out everything else - individual student needs, anything other than a strict focus on academic gains, any definition of academic achievement that cannot be quantified and measured.

The “no-excuses” mentality that suffuses Gallagher’s application stems directly from the school’s mission and its envisioned student body. Akili Academy is explicit about its intention to serve a population that is, as the application describes, “predominately African-American, predominantly poor, and ... desperately in need of strong educational options.” This target population is not mere chance - it is the school’s “considered intention” to serve “At Risk” students, and “every element of the school’s designed [sic] is based on its proven capacity to

³⁷⁸ Type 5 Charter School Application of Akili Academy of New Orleans, Inc (2008), 55-58.

³⁷⁹ Type 5 Charter School Application of Akili Academy of New Orleans, Inc (2008), 57.

improve the academic achievement of students fitting the ‘At Risk’ category, therefore the school will make special efforts to ensure that its enrolled student body is significantly ‘At Risk.’”³⁸⁰ In other words, serving low-income, high-need, students of color is precisely Gallagher’s goal. For Gallagher, serving this target population is a mission, derived from the grave inequities that pervade the nation’s public schools. “We believe that all students deserve the opportunity to be prepared to succeed academically in college,” the application asserts. “This success should not be predicated on receiving a private school education, nor should it be limited to public schools within affluent neighborhoods.”³⁸¹ As this passage suggests, Gallagher’s educational philosophy is - like the broader charter school movement - articulated as social justice work. All students deserve an excellent education, the application asserts, regardless of where they come from.

Gallagher takes the latter part of this framing quite literally, as any interest in where his students might, in fact, come from is absent from the application. New Orleans itself is barely a presence in this application. The history of public education in New Orleans is given two sentences: “The need for outstanding public schools in New Orleans predates the devastation caused by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Like most large cities in the United States, New Orleans students living in poverty, particularly students of color, have had no choice but to attend schools that demonstrate chronic underachievement on statewide and nationally-normed assessments.”³⁸² As the above excerpt suggests, the application repeatedly emphasizes the idea that the needs of low-income, under-served students from around the country are essentially interchangeable. To “conquer the challenge” of working with a target population devastated by “the tragic effects of Hurricane Katrina and the disorienting nature of ongoing recovery efforts,” the application states, the school founders have “custom-designed a comprehensive academic program using the best

³⁸⁰ Type 5 Charter School Application of Akili Academy of New Orleans, Inc (2008), 15, 19.

³⁸¹ Type 5 Charter School Application of Akili Academy of New Orleans, Inc (2008), 55.

³⁸² Type 5 Charter School Application of Akili Academy of New Orleans, Inc (2008), 5.

practices of some of the urban charter schools from across the nation that serve and succeed with a population nearly identical to the one served by Akili Academy.”³⁸³

My point is not to denigrate Gallagher’s use of research from around the country, but to underscore how little the specificities of New Orleans, let alone particular neighborhoods within the city, enter into this application. The lack of emphasis on place suggests that familiarity with a particular community or a particular neighborhood was not a prerequisite for Gallagher or for the BESE, who ultimately granted his charter. In fact, it would have been difficult - and perhaps damaging - for Gallagher to foreground the specifics of a particular neighborhood in his application, because he did not know where his school might be located. This uncertainty was not a setback for Akili’s Board, for whom a determination to be successful regardless of location was an important guiding principle. The application states that the Board is “committed to serving New Orleans children regardless of where in the city they may live,” and “to being open, flexible, and willing to move to wherever there is a useful facility and more importantly, a population of children who will benefit from the educational and other programmatic offerings of the school.” For the purposes of the application, the Board identified two school facilities in Mid-City with the right amount of space to serve Akili’s anticipated needs, but they emphasized their preparedness to “either co-locate with another charter school on a temporary basis, or occupy seats in the various modular buildings that the RSD may make available.”³⁸⁴

This, in fact, is exactly what happened - Akili spent five years in portables before finding a permanent home in the Frantz Building. Even when the facility was granted to Akili, the availability of a permanent building was the important point to the school’s leadership - not

³⁸³ Type 5 Charter School Application of Akili Academy of New Orleans, Inc (2008), 2.

³⁸⁴ Type 5 Charter School Application of Akili Academy of New Orleans, Inc (2008), 147.

which building, or where.³⁸⁵ For Gallagher and his Board, the whole point was to create a standardized blueprint for a successful school that could be implemented anywhere, with any teacher, and with any individual student. This portability echoed the school’s “no-excuses” philosophy - it’s not about where you are, it’s not about the particularities of your situation, it’s about the individual school, teacher, or student.

Reframing the Vision: The Ruby Bridges School for Social Justice and Community Service

While Akili was getting started in portable buildings, the Bridges Foundation was back at square one. Receiving an unsatisfactory evaluation did not put a halt to Bridges’s dream to charter a school out of the Frantz building, nor did it fundamentally alter the vision for that school. But, after the 2008 application was rejected, the Bridges Foundation spent the next three years working to reframe, polish, and generate support for that vision. The Foundation began working with a consulting firm, Ragusa Consulting, which helped Bridges launch a new national media blitz over the next several years, raising her national profile. As part of this campaign, Ragusa helped to coordinate the display of *The Problem We All Live With* at the White House, resulting in Bridges’ meeting with President Obama to discuss the painting.³⁸⁶

At the same time, Bridges and the Foundation began working on securing both support and funding specifically for the envisioned school. As part of this effort, the Foundation developed a white paper in 2010, entitled “Realizing the Dream: Community Development Through Education,” that updated the 2008 vision for a school - now named the Ruby Bridges School for Social Justice and Community Service. While the central tenets of the vision remained

³⁸⁵ Kate Mehok, Interview with Author, 17 May 2018.

³⁸⁶ “The Ruby Bridges Foundation,” Ragusa Consulting, www.ragusaconsulting.com.

the same, by 2010 the White Paper had learned how to market that vision in the language of community development, framing their commitment to a particular school and a particular neighborhood within a discourse that overlapped with the world of charter-based education reform.

The 2010 White Paper does not shy away from an attachment to Bridges' personal history. But it also shifts the presentation of that history, with the ultimate effect of presenting the proposed school less as a pet project for Bridges or a divinely-ordained mission, and more of a community development project thoroughly grounded in local history. The White Paper includes a brief history of Bridges' pre-integration life, and a much longer history of New Orleans desegregation itself, focusing not just on Bridges, but on massive resistance, the White Citizens Council, the Cheerleaders, and the logistics of the pupil placement plan that so severely limited the number of eligible African American students. Additionally, the application includes a summary of Bridges' life after integration that does not shy away from the hardships she faced. The inclusion of this history shifts the framing of Bridges' early life. Like the 2008 application, the White Paper emphasizes that her actions as a six-year-old are relevant to the proposed future school. But unlike the 2008 application, the White Paper works to highlight that 1960 was only a partial victory. Bridges' story helps to underscore this central point: that while integrating Frantz was a crucial step, it wasn't enough. Massive inequities and injustices remain, at the level of the school and the neighborhood. Understanding the history, the application suggests, should therefore renew the readers' commitment to continuing the struggle.³⁸⁷

In the White Paper, the Foundation did not budge on its emphasis on Frantz. The White Paper is clear that the Foundation's vision remains to house a school in the Frantz building, and

³⁸⁷ The Ruby Bridges Foundation, "Realizing the Dream: Community Development Through Education." The Foundation's White Paper is undated, but events referenced within the application suggest an approximate date of 2010.

again offers no possibility of an alternate space or a contingency plan in the event that the building is unavailable. But the White Paper does reveal an interesting shift in the Foundation's emphasis on Frantz: here, the authors lay out a much longer history of the school, starting with its creation in the 1930's and moving beyond the desegregation crisis of 1960 to detail the effects of white flight on the community. The White Paper recounts the history of New Orleans desegregation, sketching out the contours of massive resistance and the machinations of Leander Perez and the White Citizens Council. The historical importance of Frantz here, then, does not rest entirely on its visual association with Ruby Bridges, as it did in the 2008 application. In the White Paper, as in the application, Frantz is a symbol, but here the building stands not just as a symbol of the triumphs of Civil Rights but of "the inequity in New Orleans, both before the storm and during the city's recovery."³⁸⁸ "The history of William Frantz reflects the larger changes that have occurred in the city of New Orleans over the last fifty years," the authors argue, "The school, once an example of successful integration, became segregated again - this time for black students only."³⁸⁹

This framing attaches the building's symbolic importance not just to a triumphant past but to an ongoing problem, marking a clearer and more urgent need for intervention. Simultaneously, it mobilizes the story of Ruby Bridges for emotional impact, but it moves beyond that story, too, resting the case for Frantz less on the personal history of one woman and more on the particular history of a school and a neighborhood around it. In a more significant adjustment, the White Paper roots the history of the Frantz building firmly in the history of not just the Upper Ninth Ward, but the specifics of the Florida Neighborhood, the community

³⁸⁸ The Ruby Bridges Foundation, "Realizing the Dream: Community Development Through Education," 5.

³⁸⁹ The Ruby Bridges Foundation, "Realizing the Dream: Community Development Through Education," 17.

immediately surrounding the Frantz building. “Meaningful community development begins with an understanding of the history and character of the place,” the white paper argues, before providing a detailed history of the Florida Neighborhood.³⁹⁰ The history that follows begins with the area’s origins as a cypress swamp and moves through the Great Depression and up into the present day, including the history of the neighborhood’s most notorious housing development, the Florida Development. The picture of the neighborhood that emerges is both vivid and far more complex than in the 2008 application.

In painting this picture, the Ruby Bridges Foundation lays out a strong argument that educational inequity is inextricably tied to broader systemic inequities and rooted in the particularities and complexities of specific neighborhoods. This argument indicated a dramatic divergence from the vision articulated by the Recovery School District and schools like Akili, which did not necessarily dismiss the effects of poverty on student achievement but insisted that student achievement could be attained despite these effects through, basically, sheer force of will.

Because the 2010 White Paper is more explicit in its framing of Frantz as a symbol of continued educational inequity, the authors are well-positioned to make a strong commitment not just to diversity, but to integration. In fact, an entire section of the White Paper is dedicated to exploring the “Continuing Legacy of Segregation,” in which the authors detail the level of segregation in pre- and post-Katrina New Orleans schools, arguing that the “overlapping problems of racial and socioeconomic segregation lead to one conclusion -- a half-century after *Brown*, separate is still unequal. With so much attention focused on transforming public education in New Orleans, there has been virtually no discourse on the issue of segregation.”³⁹¹

³⁹⁰ The Ruby Bridges Foundation, “Realizing the Dream: Community Development Through Education,” 14.

³⁹¹ The Ruby Bridges Foundation, “Realizing the Dream: Community Development Through Education,” 13.

The White Paper does not shy away from a continued commitment to integration, either, citing the research demonstrating the academic and social benefits of integration, both for individual students and for the whole nation. From the opening pages of the White Paper, the goal of the founders is framed explicitly in terms of integration: “The Foundation’s primary initiative is to create a high achieving school in the William Frantz Elementary building that will serve as a model for integration and equity in education,” the White Paper states. And, “The Ruby Bridges Foundation proposes an entirely new vision for creating a racially and socio-economically integrated school that would also serve as a community center.” How they would achieve this goal, however, remains unclear. As in the 2008 application, the White Paper states that the school will be a school of choice, open to all New Orleans students. As for how to ensure that the student body is diverse the White Paper offers only this: “RBS will encourage a diverse mixture of students ... to apply for admission.” The White Paper also notes that inter-school partnerships and distance learning models will be used to increase the students’ exposure to a diverse range of populations.³⁹²

But while the White Paper did not solve the tensions between an integrated student body, a community school, and a school of choice, it did make a much clearer case for the need to deeply embed a school in the surrounding neighborhood. In the White Paper, the Foundation details all the ways in which the Ruby Bridges School of Community Service & Social Justice would be an anchor for the community. “RBS intends to weave a safety net so tight that all students are provided with the opportunity to fulfill their dreams,” the application states. That safety net included assisting families with medical, vision, and dental care, providing free counseling not just for students but for their families, offering classes in child development to

³⁹² The Ruby Bridges Foundation, “Realizing the Dream: Community Development Through Education,” 5, 14, 17.

parents “long before their children enroll in school,” and providing a summer camp so that children have year-round access to the opportunities and resources offered by the school.”³⁹³

This shift justifies a broader adjustment towards the language of community development, allowing the organization to continue its insistence on the importance of place, but to ground that insistence in a framing that might sell in the nonprofit world. Between 2008 and 2010, it seems, the Ruby Bridges Foundation had found a language for what they were trying to do that would be legible to the power brokers at the Recovery School District. In framing its project as community development work, the Foundation tapped into rhetoric that was in vogue not only in national education reform circles - due largely to the recent success of Geoffrey Canada’s Harlem Children’s Zone, which the Foundation specifically referenced in the application - but fit into the patterns structuring change in the Upper Ninth Ward, where a slew of nonprofits were remaking the neighborhood. Furthermore, the Foundation repeatedly articulated their desire to partner with other nonprofits operating in the area, including most notably the Musician’s Village, a project developed by Brad Pitt’s Make It Right Foundation.

The 2010 White Paper suggested that the Bridges Foundation was not budging from the central tenets of their proposed school - an emphasis on social justice and history, an insistence on an integrated student body and a school rooted in the specifics of a particular neighborhood. But they had found a new, more polished way to market that vision. And according to Ken Ducote, who worked with Bridges on the application, she was busy meeting with potential supporters and funders during this period, including New Schools for New Orleans.³⁹⁴ But nevertheless, in January of 2012 the Recovery School District made a cursory announcement that

³⁹³ The Ruby Bridges Foundation, “Realizing the Dream: Community Development Through Education,” 19, 20.

³⁹⁴ Ken Ducote in conversation with author, 14 September 2018.

the Frantz Building would be the future of home of Benjamin E. Mays Charter School, once construction was completed in 2013. The news was a deep blow to Bridges.³⁹⁵

Benjamin E. Mays never completed the move. In January of 2013, Mays lost its charter. But by this time, Bridges was no longer actively pursuing a charter of her own -- the assignment of Frantz to another school seems to have been the final blow. In the summer of 2012, Akili Academy was transferred to the control of the Crescent City Schools charter network, and under the management of this new operator, the school moved into the brand new, fully refurbished Frantz building in the fall of 2013. The school hosted a ribbon cutting ceremony in September, in collaboration with the Recovery School District, in which multiple speakers gestured toward the history of the building and the courage of Ruby Bridges. Representatives from the Ruby Bridges Foundation were present, including Ken Ducote -- but Ruby Bridges herself did not appear. In his remarks to the assembled students, Ducote said, “You’re going to hear us talk a lot about history and the significance of Ruby’s contributions...but the history I want you to think about this morning is the history you will create.”³⁹⁶ That history would take place in the William Frantz Building - its name still displayed on the building’s facade - but Bridges herself would not have an active role in creating it.

Conclusion: The Inevitable City

In 2014, Scott Cowen published a book entitled *The Inevitable City: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and 10 Principles of Crisis Leadership*. Cowen - President of Tulane University until 2013 and head of Mayor Ray Nagin’s education committee that spearheaded reform efforts after the storm -- had been a key player in the reconstruction of the New Orleans public school system

³⁹⁵ Ken Ducote, Interview with Author,, 14 September 2018; Jerry Pavlon-Blum, Interview with Author, 10 January 2019.

³⁹⁶ “Akili Academy Hosts Ribbon-Cutting Ceremony,” akiliacademy.org

in the aftermath of Katrina. His book was part memoir, part history, and part leadership manual - and while Cowen acknowledges that not all aspects of the recovery in New Orleans were perfect, *The Inevitable City* ultimately champions the approach that he spearheaded.

Cowen opens his chapter on education, titled “The Problem We All Live With,” with Ruby Bridges - specifically, with a meeting between Cowen and Bridges. Cowen does not date the meeting with Ruby, as he refers to her throughout this chapter, but he describes its purpose: “She wants me to help her charter William Frantz Elementary as the Ruby Bridges School of Community Service & Social Justice, with a curriculum focusing on history, civil rights, and civic engagement,” he states. The meeting, then, took place sometime after Katrina, and sometime before Bridges stopped fighting for her charter school. Cowen goes on to tell the story of Bridges’ history as a pioneer of integration and her efforts through the Ruby Bridges Foundation to stop the spread of racism, emphasizing that the adult Bridges remains committed to integration. “I’m beginning this chapter with Ruby and her vision of integrated schooling,” he writes, “because her story contains both the problem and, ideally, the solution.” The problem, he goes on to explain, is continued segregation by race and class that traps students in low-performing schools. The solution, it seems, is charter schools.³⁹⁷

Cowen goes on to recount the reconstruction of the New Orleans public school district, to explain the principles that guided that reconstruction and the choices it required, and to spotlight the tensions that remain in the system as it has been reconstituted. One of those tensions, he acknowledges at the end of the chapter, is the lack of integration. “In New Orleans,” Cowen argues, “demographics and recent history work against integration, but the facts speak loudly. And Ruby Bridges speaks loudly too: Bringing diverse people together, she argues, nourishes growing minds.” Cowen’s solution to this tension, to the degree that he suggests one, is more

³⁹⁷ Scott Cowen, *The Inevitable City* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 70.

charter schools: he points to an RSD charter that boasts an integrated student body, 50% African American and “the remainder largely white,” as an example of how charter schools might incorporate integration more meaningfully into their vision for the future. Acknowledging that the school in question is still new and therefore “an experiment,” Cowen writes that it is nevertheless, “a sign of the strength of the new educational vision in New Orleans, where autonomous schools can create agendas that reflect a community’s wishes.”³⁹⁸

Cowen thus opens with Bridges and returns to her very briefly at the close of a chapter that argues that charter schools can be the solution - or at least a key part of it - to the most intractable problems of public education. He uses Bridges’s history to represent those problems and their deep history in New Orleans, and he uses her “vision for integrated schooling” as an example of the future. But despite explicitly acknowledging that Bridges asked for his help in chartering her school, Cowen never mentions that the school does not exist, that Bridges’ application was denied, that her vision of integrated education and social justice was rejected, in part because it was considered impractical and difficult to quantify. *The Inevitable City* was published in 2014, by which time Akili Academy was already housed in the Frantz building. Cowen knew this, or at least someone who worked on the book did: a footnote acknowledges Akili’s presence in the building. While the exact date of the meeting between Bridges and Cowen remains unspecified, the Bridges Foundation’s charter application was denied in 2008, and by 2014, Bridges had already halted efforts to try again. Whether Cowen knew what had become of Bridges’ dream while writing the book, or whether he never bothered to find out, his inclusion of her here as an implicit endorsement of his vision is misleading at best and manipulative at worst.

Chapter Four of *The Inevitable City* highlights the ease and even callousness with which Bridges’ vision and her history could be co-opted into the service of the new system in New

³⁹⁸ Cowen, 90-91.

Orleans, even as Bridges herself was excluded from it. Nor was *The Inevitable City* an outlier: when Akili moved into the Frantz building, national and local press coverage in New Orleans echoed Akili staff in linking Bridges' history to the mission of the school, without mentioning Bridges' own failed attempt to charter a school out of the same building.³⁹⁹ *The Huffington Post*, in an article entitled "New Life for the School Where Ruby Bridges Made History," quoted Kate Fuselier - an employee of Crescent City Schools, the charter network which by 2014 operated Akili - describing the importance of the school's history: "[Our connection to this history] is very important to us," Fuselier said. "We recognize the symbolism of us returning these children to that school."⁴⁰⁰ A WWNO story struck a similar note: "Principal MacFeters [of Akili Academy] says the building's history is an important reminder for her school. 'We think about how far New Orleans schools have come, but still how far we have to go.'"⁴⁰¹

As these examples make clear, Bridges remained an emotionally resonant symbol in the educational landscape of post-Katrina New Orleans, and her story was frequently referenced - by Akili staff, by journalists, by advocates of the new system - as an example of, as Julie MacFeters put it, how far New Orleans schools had come, and of the ongoing struggle for more equitable schooling in New Orleans. But when Bridges herself attempted to translate the lessons of her history into the creation of her own school - when she attempted to move from the position of

³⁹⁹ It may not have been widely known that Bridges had submitted an application, or that it had been rejected. But Bridges had been talking openly about her plans to charter a school out of the Frantz building for years. Her vision, at least, was public, making the lack of commentary on what had become of it after Akili moved in notable.

⁴⁰⁰ David Robert Weible, "New Life For the School Where Ruby Bridges Made History," *The Huffington Post*, 13 March 2014.

⁴⁰¹ Eve Abrams, "Akili Academy Finds a New Home in a Historic, Renovated Building," WWNO, www.wwno.org.

symbol of the history of New Orleans education to an active leader in its present - she found, as she put it in an interview with the Norman Rockwell Foundation, “a lot of doors closed.”⁴⁰²

I don't know what kind of a school leader Bridges would have been, whether her experiences would have translated, with the support of her Foundation and broader team, into an excellent school or not. But the vision promoted by the managers of choice in New Orleans presented, in theory, a landscape of healthy competition and experimentation, where innovative new ideas for schools would be allowed their chance, and schools that could not prove themselves would be weeded out. This, in fact, was the fate of Benjamin E. Mays, the charter school which received the slot in the Frantz building, but never moved in: its charter was revoked due to poor performance. But Bridges' experience demonstrates that not all experiments were allowed to compete in the first place. And while the Bridges Foundation application was not flawless, the example of Mays belies the idea that charter authorizations or rejections are purely a reflection of merit or a necessarily accurate predictor of future failure or success. What's more, Mays received the coveted Frantz building while Bridges was still in the process of revamping her proposal. If flaws in the original application were the only barrier to Bridges' charter, her commitment to improving and responding to feedback might have met with more support. Instead, that process was truncated by the offer of the building to Mays.⁴⁰³

If Bridges were an isolated example, the fate of her charter application might do little more than shed light on the potential and limitations of her particular vision. But, importantly, her experience fits into larger patterns in the contemporary education reform movement in New

⁴⁰² Ruby Bridges in conversation with the Norman Rockwell Foundation. Undated (approximately 2017). Video provided by Norman Rockwell Foundation, September 2017.

⁴⁰³ To the RSD leadership, the offer to Mays might not have been seen as a rebuff to Bridges - who, after all, could still submit a proposal for a different building. But, as this chapter has demonstrated, Frantz was an inextricable part of the vision for Bridges. That she was, perhaps, expected to detach her vision from that particular location is an indication of how incompatible that vision was with the Recovery School District in the first place.

Orleans, where decisions about charter authorizations, charter leadership, and charter staffing have demonstrated a preference for outsiders. Many veteran New Orleans educators have struggled to find a place within the new system. While Teach for America recruits were assigned to New Orleans in droves, sent to meet the needs of a district allegedly facing a teacher shortage, veteran New Orleans educators who applied for jobs in the new system often struggled to find work.⁴⁰⁴ “They wanted anybody but the teachers who were there before,” one veteran teacher reflected.⁴⁰⁵ The racial dynamics of these patterns are clear: the teaching force in New Orleans prior to Katrina was 71% African American; in the years after the storm, those numbers dropped to below 50%.⁴⁰⁶ Adrienne Dixson notes that the mass firing of African-American teachers post-Katrina constituted the “most significant loss of black teaching talent since the landmark *Brown v. Board* decision” - a reminder that school reform movements have resulted in the exclusion of black educators before.⁴⁰⁷

Community members and veteran educators who attempted to charter their own schools have faced similar struggles. In 2015, Adrienne Dixson and Kevin Lawrence Henry, Jr. published the results of their research on African-American community leaders and veteran educators who applied for charter authorization in the years after the storm, finding a pervasive belief among the applicants that their experience and their ties to the community were seen as weaknesses in the authorization process. These patterns lead Dixson and Henry and others to conclude that access to power remains “elusive” for African-American communities in New Orleans charter schools.⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁴ Buras, 137, 141. Buras writes that this experience was “near-universal” among the veteran teachers she interviewed.

⁴⁰⁵ Corey Mitchell, “Death of My Career: What Happened to New Orleans’ Veteran Black Teachers?” *Education Week*, 19 August 2015.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁷ Dixson quoted in Mitchell, “Death of My Career.”

⁴⁰⁸ Adrienne Dixson and Kevin Lawrence Henry, Jr., “Locking the Door Before We Got the Key,” *Educational Policy* 30.1 (2015).

The same dynamic can be found in the location and density of the schools that, as Walter Isaacson put it, “blossomed” after the storm. Kristen Buras has traced patterns of school closures and openings in the years after Katrina: she concludes that “schools are most sparse downtown where the majority of black students reside.” Drawing on this data, Buras argues that “the geography of where schools will be landbanked, demolished, or built are connected to elite conceptions of a less populous city,” and a wealthier, whiter one.⁴⁰⁹ Accordingly, when Scott Cowen writes of “the new educational vision in New Orleans, where autonomous schools can create agendas that reflect a community’s wishes,” it is worth asking what kind of community he imagines.

It is not a simple matter to place Ruby Bridges in this landscape. Bridges is a crucial figure in the history of New Orleans, an individual with a long track record of advocacy surrounding public education, and a woman whose life is deeply embedded in New Orleans schools. But she is not a veteran New Orleans educator, exactly. In some ways, the work of her Foundation aligns her more closely with the neoliberal model of community development led by private entities that was in vogue in New Orleans in the years after the storm - what Cedric Johnson calls “grassroots privatization.”⁴¹⁰ But Bridges’ inability to charter a school suggests that she did not fit comfortably in the education reform community, either: she was not embedded in the right networks, and her model of school reform did not match the vision - ultimately quite a specific one - promoted by the Recovery School District. Her proposed school was deeply attentive to New Orleans history, and it suggested that a great school required an engagement with place and with the past. The logic that dismissed this vision as impractical is, I argue, the same logic that refuses to recognize and empower veteran educators: it has little use for history,

⁴⁰⁹ Buras, 57.

⁴¹⁰ Cedric Johnson, “Introduction,” in *The Neoliberal Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, Late Capitalism, and the Remaking of New Orleans* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xxxii.

for experience, for community knowledge. It is invested in remaking community; not building from existing ones.

Conclusion: Akili Academy

If you were to visit the William Frantz Building in the Upper 9th Ward of New Orleans in 2019, you would find a structure that speaks to the changes the building and the neighborhood have seen. If you approach from Alvar Street, moving North, you'll come first to the building's southern facade - and if you already know something of the building's history, you'll recognize it immediately, from every photograph of Ruby Bridges walking up the steps to her first day at school. The southern facade, formerly the main entrance to the school, looks exactly as it did in November of 1960, with an "eye-catching," stylized Art Deco pavilion - as Donna Fricker's application to list the building on the National Register of Historic Places describes it - and the name William Frantz Public School still prominently displayed over the recessed double door.⁴¹¹ Even if you did not know the building's history, you'd have an opportunity to learn: a double-sided Louisiana historical marker outside the southern entrance alerts visitors to the building's role in local and national civil rights history.

If you alert the staff that you've come to the building out of interest in this history, they might take you on a short tour of the most relevant spots on campus: to the statue of Ruby Bridges in the courtyard, or up to the classroom where she spent her first grade year. Marked by a plaque at the door, "Ruby's Room" - still an active classroom - is also reconstructed to look much as it would have in 1960, and framed pictures of and quotes from Ruby Bridges are arranged around the walls. The southern wing, which was once the entirety of the school, retains the feel of an older building, with smaller hallways and fewer windows, and it's easy to imagine - in fact, your tour guide may prompt you to do so - what it might have felt like in these halls in 1960, to a six-year-old girl who passed through them in near-complete isolation. If you're lucky, your host

⁴¹¹ "National Register of Historic Places Nomination," 22 April 2005, William Frantz School file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation, 3.

will let you leave through the southern entrance, opening the heavy doors so that you can, for a moment, walk where Ruby Bridges herself walked, nearly sixty years ago.

But the southern entrance is no longer the main entrance to the school, and if you continue up Alvar Street, you'll encounter an altogether different animal. The southern wing of the building is an outlier: the rest of the structure is a thoroughly modern construction of concrete and glass, with stretches of floor-to-ceiling windows. Here, too, the name William Frantz School remains displayed on the wall, but underneath these words a large banner proclaims the building's current occupant: Akili Academy of New Orleans, part of the Crescent City Schools charter network. The inside of the building reflects this tension, as well: with the exception of the historic southern wing, the rest of the campus, with its gleaming floors, its central courtyard and Dr. Seussian playground, feels very new. The existence of this sparkling, modern campus is explained - somewhat - by two plaques outside the new front door. One marks the original construction of the building, in 1937. The second marks the building's reconstruction, in 2013, and offers this brief explanatory note:

“On August 29, 2005, William Frantz School was destroyed by floodwaters from the levee breaches during Hurricane Katrina. The government of the United States funded the rebuilding of this school. The citizens of New Orleans thank all Americans for supporting the children of this great city.”

The two plaques standing side-by-side gesture towards the seemingly peaceful co-existence of past and present at the Frantz building. The old school is joined symbolically and architecturally to the new; historical markers acknowledge the building's past, while state-of-the-art facilities signal a school remade for the modern era; the building has a new occupant, but the historic name remains. But the juxtaposition of past and present signals as much about what is erased at the Frantz building today as what is remembered, eliding the broader history of the Frantz school as well as papering over the more recent struggle to stake a claim to this historic space and to

determine the course of its future. The markers of the past at the Frantz building today, in fact, are themselves the product of this struggle.

When the Frantz building was slated for occupation by Benjamin Mays in 2012, the efforts of the Ruby Bridges Foundation to pursue a charter out of the building effectively ended. Those efforts had not come cheap: according to their tax filings, the Foundation spent over \$64,000 on legal and consulting fees between 2008 and 2012. What's more, in the years after Katrina, the Foundation appears to have become increasingly focused on its goal of chartering a school, to the exclusion of its other programs. While Bridges was involved in other projects - including an annual Book Festival co-organized with Cheryl Landrieu, the wife of the mayor - the Frantz project had eclipsed all others in importance. The Foundation had not included program expenses in their tax filings since before the hurricane, and had stopped receiving funding from Hewitt - the company that had been underwriting the expansion of the Ruby's Bridges program into Chicago - in 2007.⁴¹² Occasional references to the Ruby's Bridges program still appear in interviews with Bridges, but if the program continued past 2004, the first year of its expansion into Chicago, its operations have become difficult to track.

When the charter bid fell through, the Foundation turned its attention instead to the work of marking the past at the Frantz building. This endeavor was a natural extension of the Foundation's work to list the building on the National Register, a process that had already shaped the present-day appearance of the school. As the Registry listing stipulated that the historic portions of the building be re-built using in-kind materials, the Recovery School District could add on to the historic southern wing, but could not destroy or remake it entirely. A piece of the building's 1960's appearance - and thus, a reminder of the history of that moment in time - would remain, regardless of what else changed. But the Foundation also worked to ensure that this

⁴¹² Internal Revenue Service, Form 990-PF (2008-2012).

history would not just live on in the building's architecture, but would be explicitly articulated and recognized. Accordingly, the Foundation worked to install the historic marker that stands outside of the school, as well as the photographs, quotes, and plaques that mark "Ruby's Room" inside the building.

But the capstone of this project was the statue of Ruby Bridges to be installed in the courtyard of the Frantz building. Entitled *Honoring the Power of Children*, the bronze statue is the work of California-based sculptor Mario Chiodo, and is in fact a casting of a twin statue: Chiodo first sculpted Bridges as part of a massive bronze monument in downtown Oakland depicting twenty-five humanitarians and "changemakers," entitled *Remember Them: Champions for Humanity*. *Remember Them* was typical of the way the story of Ruby Bridges was mobilized in American culture in the late 90's and early 2000's. It also represents a dramatic turning point in the career of Chiodo, a commercial artist who abruptly changed directions in the aftermath of the September 11th, 2001 attacks, dedicating himself to art that "might transform negativity in the world by focusing on positive aspects of humanity," as his website describes it. His first project in the service of this goal was the *Remember Them* statue, which he intended to highlight "the astounding altruism that is possible in mankind."⁴¹³ Chiodo selected twenty-five figures from around the world who had sacrificed for a larger cause - and in order to emphasize that "change can come from anywhere," as he put it, he wanted to include a child. He picked Ruby Bridges - a figure with whom he was familiar because of the Norman Rockwell painting.⁴¹⁴ Once again, then, a version of Bridges inspired by an iconic representation of her was drafted into the service of a broad narrative about sacrifice, courage, and determination, regardless of the specificities of

⁴¹³ "Mario Chiodo's vision for the Freedom March of Art," Freedom March of Art, www.freedommarchofart.com.

⁴¹⁴ Mario Chiodo, Interview with Author, 26 October 2017.

individual context - and that narrative was itself mobilized in the service of national healing in the aftermath of 9/11.

And yet Chiodo's representation of Bridges in *Remember Them* features several key differences from the way Rockwell and Coles had depicted her. Importantly, after deciding to include six-year-old Ruby in the monument, Chiodo reached out to the adult Bridges directly, and according to the artist, he worked with her in the process of creating the statue. Perhaps as a result of this collaboration, Chiodo's Ruby is smiling, a choice that aligns her more with the cover image of *Through My Eyes* than with the Ruby of *The Problem We All Live With* or *The Story of Ruby Bridges*. Chiodo says the choice to depict Ruby as a smiling child was a natural result of spending time with the adult Bridges, who, he said, was "always smiling," and of listening to her describe her childhood experiences. It was also, however, an intentional gesture to portray Ruby as a "normal, real girl - happy and all that" - even in a monument of literally towering heroes.⁴¹⁵

Years later, when Bridges decided to commission a statue for the Frantz courtyard, she reached out to Chiodo. The Frantz statue is a casting of the figure of Bridges in *Remember Them*, but as an isolated work, it speaks more directly to her status as a child hero, a theme emphasized in its title: *Honoring the Power of Children*. From the front, Ruby appears to lean against a staircase - suggesting the front steps of the Frantz school - but the staircase doubles from behind as a bookcase, filled with larger-than-life books, all with titles suggesting biographies of other child heroes: Malala Yousafzai, Ryan White, and Anne Frank are included here, as are the Little Rock Nine and the McDonogh 3. A final book stands immediately next to the figure of Ruby: the title reads *Through My Eyes*.

While *Remember Them* featured the same bookcase theme, the titles of the books arranged around Ruby are different here, and the choices highlight Ruby in the context of other

⁴¹⁵ Mario Chiodo, Interview with Author, 26 October 2017.

child heroes. Some of those children faced very different struggles than Bridges, but the inclusion of the Little Rock Nine and the McDonogh 3 position Bridges' story in a larger narrative of desegregation, both locally and nationally. And the inclusion of *Through My Eyes* in the statue insists on the primacy of Bridges' own version of her narrative - as does her choice to commission a statue which, while tied to more iconic representations of her, speaks to her own agency and influence, as well. While the logo of the Ruby Bridges Foundation stemmed directly from *The Problem We All Live With*, the representation of herself that Bridges chose to place on the grounds of the school she integrated was not a reproduction or a print of Rockwell's painting, but a statue created by an artist who had known her as an adult and collaborated with her directly.

In commissioning this statue for the grounds of Frantz, then - and in installing the historical markers and photographs that dot the grounds - Bridges staked a claim to the Frantz building, insisting that her story and her history could not be erased from this space, even if she would not ultimately be granted control over the school's future. Furthermore, Bridges and her Foundation organized the installation of these markers of history, as well as designed the ceremony and celebration that marked the statue's installation on November 14th, 2014, the fifty-fourth anniversary of the integration of Frantz. And yet, the statue serves as a reminder of the limitation of Bridges' control of that narrative, as well. As the statue's title - *Honoring the Power of Children* - reminds us, the power ascribed to Bridges here centers, as always, on her childhood self, and on the power of her memory. As an adult, Bridges had perhaps gained increasing control over the presentation of her history, but this power had translated only tenuously into her adult projects and investments - leaving her with a statue of her childhood self on the grounds of Frantz, but no leverage in the future of the school, no place in the school for her adult body, except as a commemorative figure.

The double-edged nature of the statue installation is highlighted by its financial costs. Between 2014 and 2015, the Bridges Foundation spent at least \$79,006 on the Frantz statue and the installation of plaques at the school, a figure that likely does not account for the full cost of these projects.⁴¹⁶ This amount exhausted the remaining funds of the Foundation, which ended 2015 with \$1,362 in assets. Ruby Bridges herself seems to have personally bankrolled some of these final expenses, contributing over \$13,000 directly to the Foundation in 2015.⁴¹⁷ In a very material way, then, the statue at Frantz cost the Foundation everything they had left. The Ruby Bridges Foundation has not filed a 990-PF form since 2015, nor does it continue to operate a website. The Foundation's Facebook page has not been updated since 2014. Ruby Bridges herself continues to appear at speaking engagements and events around the country, and her Foundation is often referenced at these events. The Foundation may still continue to operate, then - but as of 2019, it has at the very least entered a period of comparative hibernation.

Certainly, Bridges herself is still an active public figure, and by all accounts she is still envisioning new directions that her future work might take - including an international summer camp or a learning center for adults.⁴¹⁸ The life and work of Ruby Bridges is still very much in progress, making it impossible to declare this history complete, or predict the future paths of the individuals or institutions which are the focus of this dissertation. But regardless of what the future might hold for Bridges or her Foundation, the installation of the statue marks a clear endpoint to one phase of the Foundation's life, and - for now, at least - to Bridges' dream to charter a school out of the Frantz building. Perhaps a new chapter in Bridges' relationship to the building or the school that occupies it is yet to unfold: but at present, Bridges has very little

⁴¹⁶ Internal Revenue Service, Form 990-PF (2014, 2015). In 2013, the Foundation also spent \$53,064 on unnamed "special projects," which may also have been related to the commissioning of the statue.

⁴¹⁷ Internal Revenue Service, Form 990-PF (2015).

⁴¹⁸ Ruby Bridges in conversation with the Norman Rockwell Foundation. Undated (approximately 2017); Jerry Pavlon-Blum, Interview with Author, 10 January 2019.

interaction with Akili Academy. In a 2018 interview, the CEO of Crescent City Schools, Kate Mehok, reported that the school would like to cultivate a stronger relationship with Bridges - but whether that relationship will develop, or what form it might take, is a matter of speculation.⁴¹⁹

For now, then, what remains on the school grounds are markers and statues that commemorate a moment in history, with little trace of the woman who lived that history or who ensured the placement of these reminders. For those familiar with the struggle over the Frantz building, or with Bridges' long and complex relationship to her own history and to this school, these markers serve as a reminder not just of the 1960-1961 school year, but of everything that came after, gesturing towards the dissonance between the presence of Bridges' memory and her absence in the present-day school. But for most viewers, these statues and plaques conjure up no such complicated history, nor do they point to any disconnect between past and present. On the contrary, whatever the intentions behind the statue's commission, *Honoring the Power of Children* now fits into a landscape that can easily be read as an endorsement, a link between the message of Ruby Bridges and the mission of the school. At the unveiling ceremony in 2014, Akili principal Allison Lowe linked the work of her charter school directly to the legacy of Ruby Bridges. The Akili website highlights the school's historic home. If you visit the school today, it is Akili staff who will show you up to Ruby's room or out to view the statue in the courtyard. As discussed in the preceding chapter, Akili did not seek out the Frantz building specifically, nor was its history necessarily an important selling point for the leadership of the school or its operator, Crescent City Schools. Nevertheless, by sheer benefit of occupying the space, the school is spatially positioned as the heirs to Ruby's legacy.

And in that landscape, Ruby's legacy becomes distilled down to her courage and resilience as an isolated individual, leaving behind alternate interpretations of her history, of the

⁴¹⁹ Kate Mehok, Interview with Author, 17 May 2018.

kind foregrounded by Bridges in *Through My Eyes*, that focus on community organizing as a tool to resist systemic racism. Gone from her legacy, too, is a definition of social justice in education that emphasizes integration, along with all that integration could potentially imply - a discussion of systemic issues, questions of equity in resources and access to those resources, a consideration of how the community that surrounds a school affects its students - leaving only choice and an ethic of individual effort behind. The Ruby that emerges here in the end, is a familiar one, aligned with a long legacy of representations of Ruby Bridges from Norman Rockwell's 1963 painting onward.

Just as importantly, framing the charter movement in New Orleans as the next phase of a struggle begun during the civil rights era relies on an erasure of local history. Historian and former New Orleans Public Schools employee Al Kennedy argues that based on the rhetoric of charter school reformers, "one could reasonably conclude that, prior to 2005, public education in New Orleans had no history."⁴²⁰ For the architects of post-Katrina school reform in New Orleans, Katrina marked a blank slate, a new beginning. To the extent that the years between the 1960s and 2005 in the history of New Orleans public education entered into this framework, they did so only as an unmitigated failure, from which nothing useful could be learned or salvaged. The pre-Katrina system, in this framing, represents the problem, the status quo against which reformers rebelled: educators in this system, then, could not be framed as allies who themselves fought to deliver on the promises of the civil rights era under challenging conditions for decades before the arrival of the new education reformers.

All of these trends are apparent at Akili today, where the presentation of history on campus highlights a link to the story of six-year-old Ruby while avoiding the complications

⁴²⁰ Al Kennedy, "The History of Public Education in New Orleans Still Matters," University of New Orleans History Faculty Publications (2016), 1.

embodied by the adult Bridges and her own plans for the space, and erasing altogether the history of Frantz between 1960 and 2005. Situating this simultaneous historical erasure and mobilization in a longer historical trajectory, as I have done in this dissertation, adds to the literature surrounding the civil rights rhetoric of the charter reform movement by revealing the present-day landscape of Akili to be neither natural nor inevitable, but the result of a lengthy contestation over historical narratives and historical spaces. Tracing the trajectories of Bridges and Frantz between 1960 and 2005 reveals the process by which certain narratives about both the person and the school were fostered and others foreclosed, paving the way for the positioning of Akili relative to this history today. Engaging with that process reminds us that the adoption of civil rights rhetoric by charter schools like Akili is only the latest chapter in a history that has its roots in the work of white liberals like Norman Rockwell and Robert Coles, who helped to detach their interpretation of figures like Bridges from the particular contexts, concerns, tactics, and goals of the 1960s and highlight instead more universal, individualized values -- thus helping to make their meaning more malleable, and more available to be drafted into the service of a wide variety of causes.

Untangling the contested historical narratives at Akili also reinforces that this process does not necessarily hinge on the motivation of the particular actors involved. Questions of motivation matter - but regardless of intention, these contestations over history reveal, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot said they would, the workings of power. Whose story - whose interpretation of the past - is valued, circulated, reinforced? Who has access to the resources and institutions and platforms that make their narratives readily accessible to a broader public? Who controls not just the markers of a historical site, but the space itself? Similarly, regardless of intention, these contestations over history empower some actors, some causes, some policies, while effectively silencing others. This dynamic is reflected in the case of Bridges as an individual, who was granted a public platform through the power of the story of her childhood, but who was unable to

leverage that currency into school leadership in the contemporary landscape of New Orleans education. But, more broadly, it is reflected in the presentation of no-excuses charter schools in a market-based, decentralized system as a cure-all to the problems of New Orleans public education.

As many scholars have emphasized, the struggle to desegregate public institutions was never waged in the service of integration for its own sake: the goal was never merely for black children to sit next to white children in classrooms. It was, instead, a struggle for access to resources, and a struggle to dismantle a system of oppression. It was, likewise, not a battle waged solely through the actions of individuals, no matter how brave or inspirational those actions may have been - it was a struggle sustained through grassroots organization and community mobilization over the course of generations. Privileging a narrative that de-emphasizes these aspects is not merely a shallow reading of a rich history: it is a missed opportunity to engage with that history in a way that might open up alternate paths forward in the ongoing struggle for equity in education. As Kristen Buras argues, advocates of charter reform in New Orleans who pin the blame for the struggles of pre-Katrina public education on ineffective teachers, corrupt officials, low expectations, and a bloated bureaucracy turned to solutions that matched the problems they had identified: a mass firing of veteran teachers, a turn towards a privatized and ostensibly more efficient and flexible system, a “no-excuses” mantra, an influx of new leadership. A different reading of that history - one that positioned the state of pre-Katrina New Orleans public education as the symptom of a disease with much deeper roots - might have suggested a different set of solutions. For Buras, accordingly, the fact of white supremacy in the history of public education in New Orleans is “not a minor point - it is the crux of the matter.”⁴²¹

⁴²¹ Buras, 23.

Here, too, looking closely at the case of the Frantz school and its relationship to Akili Academy is instructive. While Akili promotes its association with the civil rights history of the Frantz building, it promotes no such association with the history of the William Frantz *school* post-1960. No marker on the campus reveals anything about what happened at Frantz in the years after integration, about what this school community was like in 2005, about the students, faculty, and staff that spent their days here, about what happened to them after the school was shut down. Beyond its location in the Frantz building, Akili has no apparent ties to the pre-existing Frantz school. What benefit would Akili - part of the system marketed as a rebirth for New Orleans schools - gain from emphasizing a link to a school portrayed as a classic example of the failures of the pre-existing system?

But has Akili delivered on the promise of a new day for New Orleans students? Akili received an SPS score of 62.6 for the 2017-2018 school year, a score which earned the school a letter grade of C.⁴²² These letter grades - ranging from A to F - have been in place since 2011. The 2017-2018 SPS score is Akili's first under a new scoring formula, under which 75% of SPS scores are derived from student performance on the LEAP 2025, the newest manifestation of the state standardized testing system. 25% of a school's SPS score, however, is now derived from student progress on exams over the course of a year, regardless of starting point.⁴²³ Under this new system, schools are assigned a numerical value between 0 and 150. Any school with a score lower than 50 is assigned an F.

What does this mean for Akili? A 62.6 earns the school a C - a middling grade, slightly lower than the district average. But a further breakdown of the school's SPS score indicates a more complicated picture. Akili's students are performing poorly on their state tests: on this

⁴²² Louisiana Department of Education, Akili Academy of New Orleans, www.louisianaschools.com.

⁴²³ Louisiana Department of Education, "School Performance Scores," 26 October 2018, YouTube video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rISG0gCP0Y4&feature=youtu.be>

metric, Akili earned a score of 45.3 and an F ranking. When it comes to student improvement, however, Akili is exemplary, earning a 96.6 and an A letter grade. So while Akili students struggle on their exams, the school successfully helps its students to improve. On the other hand, additional data included in the annual report card (although not calculated as part of the school's SPS score) raises alarm bells: 23% of Akili students received out-of-school suspensions in 2017-2018. Because of this number, Akili is listed as a school in need of "urgent intervention"-- a label attached to schools, the state website tells us, with a suspension rate that doubles the national average for three consecutive years. Akili also has a teacher retention rate of 58%, well below the district average of 71% and the state average of 87%.⁴²⁴

How you interpret the quality of education at Akili, then, depends greatly on the data to which you ascribe the most value: is Akili a failing school because its students perform so poorly on state standardized tests? Is it an excellent school because low-performing students demonstrate significant academic gains during their time at Akili? What does Akili's high suspension rate and high teacher turnover rate suggest about the culture and learning environment at the school? To what degree does that information color our understanding of the school as an excellent or failing institution? Does the combination of these factors average out - as the SPS score suggests - to a C?

Interpreting the data for one year, then, is complicated enough. Trying to compare Akili meaningfully to Frantz - or, for that matter, to Akili's own performance in previous years - is even more complicated, given the rapid rate of change in the metrics by which both schools were evaluated. From 2013 to 2017, SPS scores were calculated on a scale of 0 to 150, with a "F" grade cut-off of 50: a scale similar to the one currently in place. However, SPS scores during this

⁴²⁴ Louisiana Department of Education, Akili Academy of New Orleans, Academic Performance, www.louisianaschools.com.

period were calculated almost entirely based on student performance on state exams and student credit accumulation: the “student progress” measure now calculated as 25% of the overall score manifested at the time as “bonus points” - up to 10 - available to schools whose students demonstrated substantial growth. Prior to 2013, SPS scores were calculated on a scale of 0-200, with student attendance factored into the final calculation, no “student progress” measure, and a failure cut-off score of 75.⁴²⁵ Akili received a score of 62.6 in 2017-2018, a 70 in 2016-2017 and a 71.6 in 2012-2013, but as these scores reflect three different scoring systems, breaking down whether the school has improved, declined, or remained stagnant requires significant number crunching and interpretation.

If you extend the frame backwards to the pre-existing system, the comparison becomes even trickier: the entire student population of New Orleans underwent major shifts after Hurricane Katrina. Many families left and never returned. Furthermore, in the old system, Frantz was a neighborhood school, serving students residing in its assigned district. In a charter-based system, Akili serves students from all over the city who have chosen to apply to Akili Academy. What does it mean, then, to compare performance under rapidly shifting assessment metrics that measure schools serving two potentially very different student populations?

What does emerge clearly from this soup of data is a portrait of a school that serves a student body made up entirely of low-income, students of color: exactly the students that founder Sean Gallagher indicated he wanted to provide with an excellent education. Akili students have, since the school’s inception, performed poorly on state-wide exams in New Orleans, and they continue to do so. What you make of this fact depends on a host of other factors, including how you interpret and value other pieces of data available about the school, and the degree to which you believe student performance on state-wide exams reveals something meaningful about a

⁴²⁵ The Lens NOLA, “How to Understand School Performance Scores and Grades,” www.thelensnola.org.

school community in the first place. I do not mean to suggest that nothing useful can be gained from a deep dive into the data surrounding Akili or Frantz or any other school. Rather, I intend to highlight that despite the surface-level simplicity of an SPS score which appears to provide an easy comparison between all schools in the state over time, the data collected and recorded about schools under accountability systems offers an inherently selective and complicated portrait of any educational community, and the labels and rubrics and other meaning-making devices ascribed to that community are neither permanent nor necessarily intuitive.

Importantly, these issues would have been very familiar to faculty and staff at Frantz - a school which, by 2005, had seen the comings and goings of multiple major shifts in education reform movements, from the rise and fall of LBJ's Great Society to the standards movement and its eventual absorption into the accountability movement. The faculty at Frantz in 2005 had been working through nearly ten years of rapidly changing accountability measures, attempting to meet a bar that was constantly moving, to produce dramatic results in difficult circumstances. What might a school reform movement look like that engaged with this history, that claimed this legacy as its own, and that worked from within it to build something new? Instead, the mass firing of veteran educators in New Orleans resulted in what Al Kennedy describes as a "lobotomy of sorts" - a dismissal not just of personnel but of the "living memory of the schools." Likewise, Kennedy argues the clean-up of damaged school buildings in the aftermath of the flood resulted in a different kind of historical erasure: "careless and clumsy contracted clean-up crews moved through public school buildings," he writes, "...recklessly throwing away old correspondence, historic photographs, paintings of the people after whom the schools were named, scrapbooks of school histories, yearbooks, and so much more. The community's past became landfill debris."⁴²⁶

⁴²⁶ Kennedy, 4.

This dissertation provides a close look at the process by which a school community's past becomes not only erased but replaced by a national civil rights memory that obscures more than it reveals. But the focus on Ruby Bridges in this dissertation also complicates a simple narrative in which charter school reformers pervert some version of civil rights memory that is otherwise pure, true, and untouched. As Trouillot argues, no historical narrative - even those constructed with the intention of telling the story the "right" way - exists in a vacuum. All historical narratives require choices, omissions, and selective interpretations, and even those actors who intend to fill gaps and correct erasures in dominant narratives must do so within parameters largely defined by the dominant narrative itself and the power structures that created it. By highlighting the ways in which a civil rights icon has contested and mobilized the historical narratives emerging from her own story, this project gestures towards the ways in which Bridges, Frantz, and Akili are all entangled in a process of grappling with the memory of the civil rights movement and its legacy for public education - a memory that is multi-faceted and capable of mobilization for contradictory aims.

Bridges' efforts to mobilize the power of her memory reinsert the question of agency into this process, demonstrating that Bridges was not merely an unwitting actor in the work of men like Rockwell and Coles, but a self-conscious shaper of her own legacy, as well. Bridges mobilized that legacy for very different purposes than Rockwell or Coles, and her reading of her own history led her to a very different vision of what the future of public education might look like in New Orleans. And yet Bridges, too, erased a longer history of the Frantz school from that vision; Bridges, too, predicated that vision on outside intervention rather than a school rebuilt from within the community; Bridges, too, reified the image of herself as a larger-than-life child hero even as she attempted to move beyond it.

I read these choices as the product of tensions deeply embedded in the story of Ruby Bridges and in her relationship to it, between the radical potential contained within her history and the cultural heft of the nationally circulated version of that story, with its promise of a national platform, institutional support, and funding for her adult work. Bridges did not choose to become the national icon that she did, nor did she have input into the way her story was constructed on a national stage for most of her life. But as an adult, she attempted to work within the consensus memory of her narrative while redirecting it toward different ends. When she attempted to leverage the resources generated through these power structures in the service of a local education project, she encountered their limits.

In delineating those limits, this dissertation helps to extend and connect the work of scholars who have engaged with both the legacy of integration and the contemporary charter school movement from a critical race lens. Bridges' history is a microcosm of the dynamic of interest convergence Derrick Bell points to within the integration movement more broadly, in which gains for African Americans are granted only when and to the extent that these gains align with the interests of white communities. Bridges' individual history reflects this process: her influence as an educational activist hits its limits when it begins to conflict with the interests of white education reformers. Likewise, Bridges' inability to secure a charter, as discussed in the previous chapter, reflects the power differentials highlighted by Dixon, Buras, and others: despite the social justice framing of this movement, black communities have little power or influence within it. This individual story also gestures towards a broader dynamic within the field of civil rights memory, in which the narratives of the civil rights era with the most cultural purchase are those that align mostly clearly with the interests of white moderates. The limits of Bridges' ability to rework her story or to gain purchase within the world of post-Katrina education reform as an actor rather than an emblem, viewed from within this framework, reflect the ongoing relationship

between race and power -- both in the realm of cultural memory and in the more material impact of that memory enacted as policy.

But this dissertation points not just to the limits, but also to the costs of the particular path Bridges navigated: not only because her ability to shape her own legacy was constrained by larger power structures, but because in working with the consensus memory of her narrative and the institutions that gave rise to it, more radical interpretations of Bridges' history and its mandate for the present were, repeatedly, compromised. Whether by choice or as an inevitable byproduct of her particular path to fame, Bridges became increasingly embedded in national, privatized networks and ideologies that constrained her ability to cultivate an approach to education reform deeply rooted in the community surrounding the Frantz School. These networks and ideologies did not yield the results she had hoped for - but they also prevented her from developing a different kind of relationship to the Frantz school or to her own history.

A different path is suggested by the work of another member of the New Orleans Four who, not being swept up in the tides of national memory in the same way as Bridges, found some of the routes that Bridges followed blocked, but others open. In some ways, Leona Tate, one of the three little girls who integrated McDonogh 19 in 1960, has led a very different life from Ruby Bridges: no Rockwell painting was associated with her image, no renowned psychologist wrote a children's book about her, and no explosion of interest in the 1990s catapulted her onto talk shows or national media. In recent years, Tate - along with Gail Etienne and Tessie Prevost, the other two girls who desegregated McDonogh 19 - has seen a long-overdue resurgence of interest in her story. But for most of her life, Tate has lived firmly outside of the spotlight. Today, you can often find her at the Lower Ninth Ward Living Museum, a small museum and community center located in the Lower Ninth Ward, where visitors can learn about the history of neighborhood, and where local children can come after school to get help with homework or to

participate in clubs. Tate volunteers at the Museum a few days a week, sitting behind the desk and signing visitors in. She does not advertise her own role in the history that is presented inside. In a 2018 interview, she told me that visitors will occasionally figure out who she is anyway, matching her to the photographs on the walls.

Despite their different trajectories, Tate and Bridges have in many ways followed parallel paths: Tate, too, has worked to keep the memory of her childhood experiences alive, to bring attention to the fate of the school she integrated, and to make meaning from a difficult past. Like Frantz, McDonogh 19 - located across the Industrial Canal in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans - was damaged by Hurricane Katrina and never re-opened after the storm. Tate founded the Leona Tate Foundation for Change in 2009, worked to secure a listing for McDonogh 19 on the National Register of Historic Places and to install historical markers outside of the campus, and is determined to see the school building become a useful site for the community. A January 2019 profile in the *Advocate* frames Tate's mission in terms that will sound very familiar to anyone well-versed in the work of Ruby Bridges: "Tate believes that McDonogh 19 was important then [in 1960] - and that she can help spur future change, using the school as a base." In recent years, Tate has begun to see the fruits of her labor pay off: in 2017, the Leona Tate Foundation received a \$500,000 grant from the National Parks Service to transform the McDonogh 19 building into a museum and interpretive center focused on desegregation and civil rights. That grant provided the seed money for what is now a \$14 million renovation project, which entails not only the museum construction, but the conversion of the top two floors of the school into housing units for low-income seniors.⁴²⁷ It seems, then, that Tate is poised to achieve

⁴²⁷ Katy Reckdahl, "Leona Tate Helped Desegregate Schools; Now, She Wants Others To Learn that History," *The New Orleans Advocate*, 2 January 2019.

something very similar to what Bridges dreamed of: to convert the site of her old school into a center that will not only serve her community, but keep the history of the space alive.

Tate and Bridges followed different paths in pursuit of related goals, but those paths were pre-determined, at least in part, by forces outside of their control. Tate's successes gesture toward the power of an approach to historical preservation and present-day advocacy that is rooted within local communities, that grows slowly out of local, small-scale projects. Such a path was perhaps never possible to Bridges, always trailing the weight of a nationalized narrative. But Tate's work serves as a reminder that other possibilities, other ways by which to cultivate the memory of desegregation and explore its legacy, remain. She suggests the possibility of what a more localized memory of the 1960 integration movement might look like, and of the power that memory might hold.

The different ways in which the memory of desegregation might be mobilized by education reform movements are as important to consider now, in 2019, as ever. The election of Donald Trump in 2016 changed the calculus of the conversation surrounding neoliberalism and charter schools: the Trump administration has aggressively pursued the advance of charter education across the country, but under an administration actively rolling back civil rights protections for students, the thin redefinition of civil rights rhetoric still attached to this advance becomes even more apparent. Conditions on the grounds of New Orleans have shifted, as well. In 2016, the Louisiana state legislature began the process of returning New Orleans schools to local control, to be overseen by the Orleans Parish School Board rather than by the state-run recovery school district - and as of July of 2018, all New Orleans schools are once again under the control

of their local school board.⁴²⁸ But reunification does not imply a retreat from charters: the charter schools remain, although their governing authority has shifted yet again.

In the midst of these changing conditions, the memory of Ruby Bridges continues to pop up. In 2017, cartoonist Glenn McCoy published a cartoon reworking Norman Rockwell's *The Problem We All Live With*. In the place of Rockwell's little girl, McCoy placed Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, who has aggressively advanced a pro-charter agenda under the Trump administration. Where Rockwell's painting displayed the initials "KKK," McCoy's villain is the NEA - the National Education Association - and while Rockwell's little girl passed by racial slurs, DeVos walks past a wall scrawled with the word "conservative."⁴²⁹ McCoy's cartoon generated an immediate backlash - but it is the predictable culmination of a long process by which the memory of the civil rights movement in general and Ruby Bridges in particular has been claimed by an increasingly large variety of groups, with contradictory aims and political standpoints.

But McCoy's cartoon is not the final word on Ruby Bridges, and the return to local control in New Orleans is likely not the final word on New Orleans public schools, either. The struggle to achieve equity in public education in New Orleans, and around the country, is ongoing. How we engage with the history of that struggle will define the direction of its future.

⁴²⁸ Jessica Williams, "As of Sunday, All New Orleans Public Schools Are Once Again Under a Single Board," *The New Orleans Advocate*, 30 June 2018.

⁴²⁹ Greg Topo, "Provocative Cartoon links Betsy DeVos and Ruby Bridges," *USA Today*, 15 February 2017.

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