

Chapter 38

The Street Politics of Jackie Smith

John Paul Jones III

... genealogical practice transforms history from a judgment on the past in the name of a present truth to a "counter-memory" that combats our current modes of truth and justice, helping us to understand and change the present by placing it in a new relation to the past.

Jonathan Arac, *Postmodernism and Politics*, p. xviii

On April 3, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., together with Jesse Jackson and Ralph Abernathy, arrived in Memphis, Tennessee to lend their support for striking garbage workers. They stayed at the historically Black Lorraine Motel, located adjacent to the city's Black business district on the outskirts of downtown Memphis (Figure 38.1). The next day, while standing on the balcony outside his room, King was shot down by a bullet fired from across the street. The instant was captured in a famous Joseph Louw photograph (Figure 38.2), an image that immediately became an emblem of the 1960s. Today, the Lorraine is both a shrine to the fallen civil rights leader (Figure 38.3) and the site of the nation's first civil rights museum.

The transformation of the Lorraine took many years. Following King's death, it continued to operate as a motel, but not surprisingly, it drew more curiosity seekers than guests. By the 1970s it was a run-down building badly in need of repair, an embarrassment for the city of Memphis not unlike Dealy Plaza was for Dallas. In the early 1980s, a local Black official, D'Army Bailey, and the mayor of Memphis, Dick Hackett, put into place a fundraising project to save the Lorraine. By the late 1980s, the nonprofit Lorraine Civil Rights Museum Foundation had assembled some nine million dollars from the City of Memphis, Shelby County, and the State of Tennessee, as well as from various private sources. The renovation project involved removing one wing of the old motel to create a portion of the museum (Figure 38.4), while preserving the wing containing King's room, number 306.

Inside the main area visitors are treated to a short introductory film, to traveling galleries celebrating African-American contributions to art, education, and science,

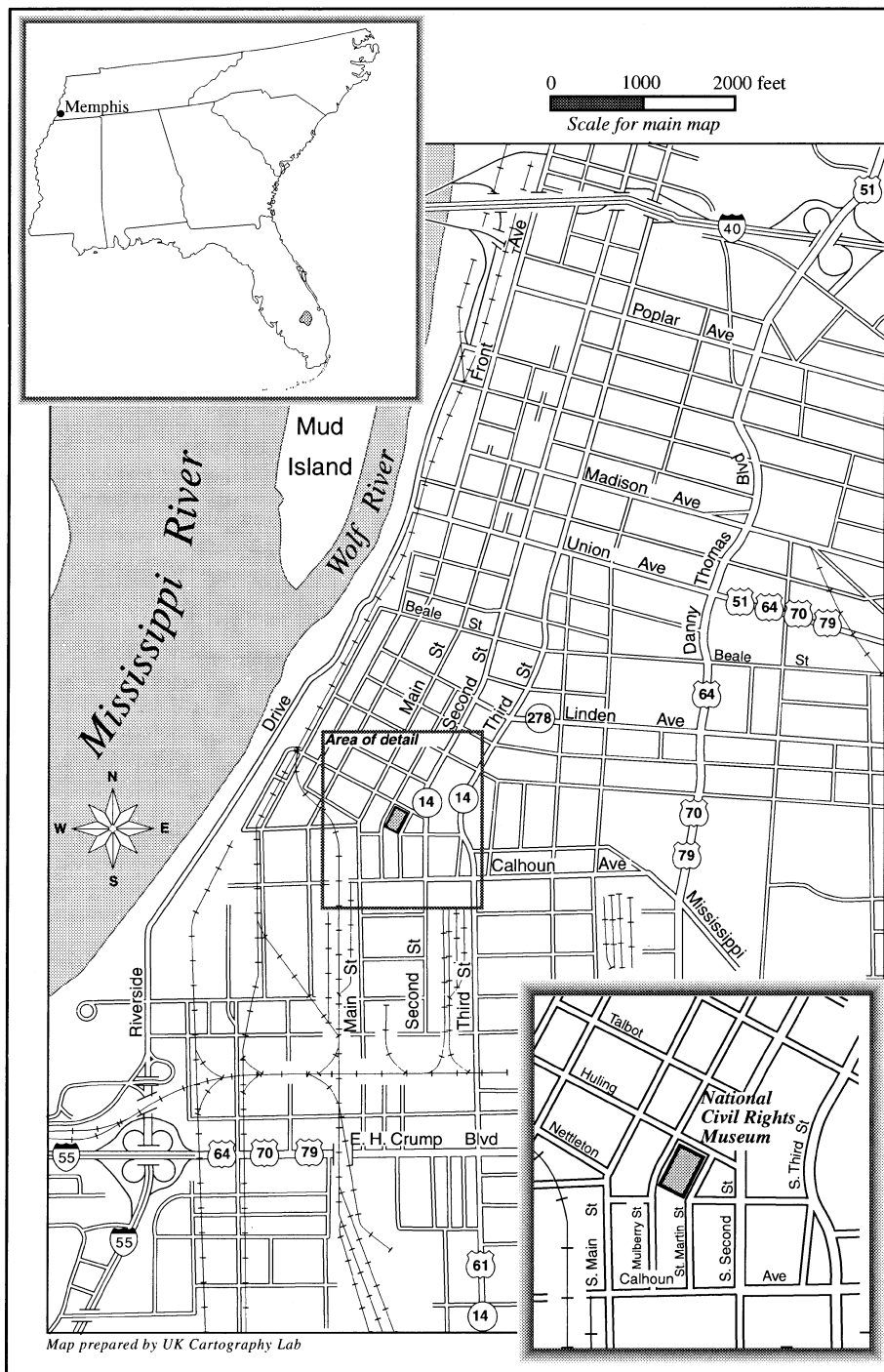


Figure 38.1 Location of the Lorraine Motel, site of the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee



Figure 38.2 King's assassination at the Lorraine. Photo by Joseph Louw/LIFE Magazine
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Figure 38.3 Historical marker describing the significance of the Lorraine Motel



Figure 38.4 The National Civil Rights Museum. At left is the entrance to the museum

and to displays recounting the history of the US civil rights movement. The showcase of the museum is a series of hands-on exhibits combining audio, video, and interactive audience participation. These cover the Montgomery bus boycott, the court case, *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the desegregation of Little Rock's Central High School, the March on Washington, and the Memphis garbage strike. Visitors can also view the site of King's death, either from the brick-inlay courtyard below the balcony, complete with historic automobiles of King's era (Figure 38.5), or from room 306, faithfully redecorated to represent the way it was when King spent his last night in the Lorraine.

The National Civil Rights Museum attracts some 100,000 visitors annually. One year, while on a visit to Memphis, I too planned a visit. Rounding the back of the Lorraine on foot from downtown Memphis, I suddenly and unpreparedly confronted the balcony, a site intertextually linked to Louw's famous photograph. In the stillness of that moment I noticed a woman (Figure 38.6), Jacqueline Smith. She struck a discomfiting presence across the street from the museum, sitting on a tattered old couch, with handmade placards in protest of what she called the "Civil Wrong Museum." Rather than continue into the museum, I crossed the street to talk to her, asking about her protest. Thus began a series of visits I have made to the Lorraine over several years, never once violating her request that I boycott the museum. This chapter is about her story.



Figure 38.5 The balcony outside the preserved wing of the motel. The automobiles reference the cars captured in Joseph Louw's photograph (Figure 38.2)

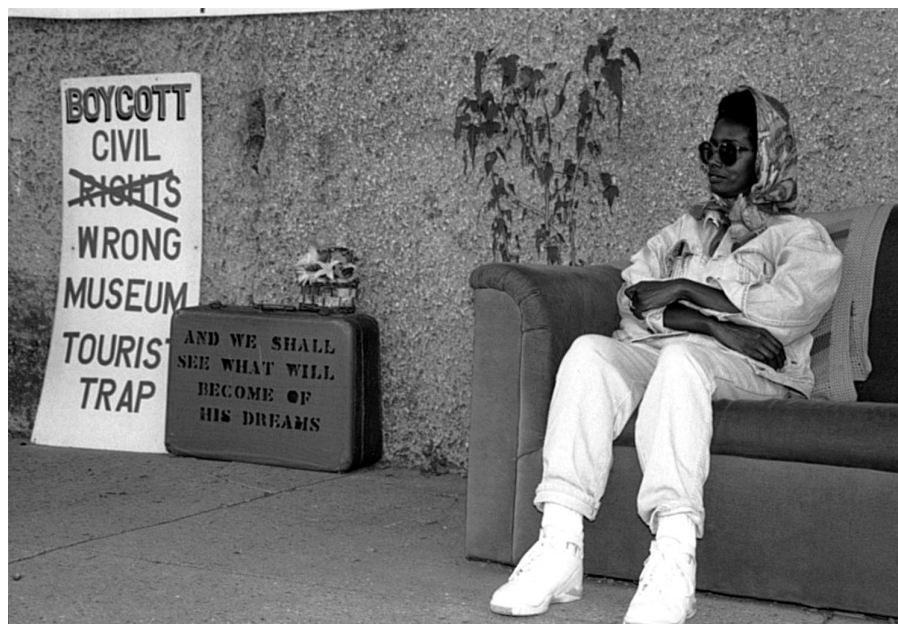


Figure 38.6 Jacqueline "Jackie" Smith protests the Lorraine's transformation into a museum

Jackie's Protest

Jackie's protest operates at several levels. Listeners – at least those who cross the street to talk to her, for she is under a court injunction not to disrupt the museum's operations – will first learn that she is against the use of the site as a civil rights museum. For her, civil rights is an ongoing, everyday struggle that must be practiced (Figure 38.7); it should not be petrified, canonized, and memorialized in a series of interactive exhibits. Jackie believes that a civil rights museum is an all-too-comforting experience for visitors, implying that civil rights were won with desegregated buses, schools, and lunch counters. Among his other writings, as a rationale for her protest, Jackie points to King's final sermon, in which he rejects eulogies and awards, affirming instead actions such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and counseling those in prison. Jackie maintains that the Lorraine should be used in ways consistent with King's philosophy, particularly by helping those living in the deteriorated community in which it is located, which she notes is characterized by unemployment, poor housing, drugs, and crime. Accordingly, Jackie maintains that the Lorraine should house a homeless shelter, a medical clinic, a job-training center, and a drug rehabilitation facility. Jackie goes on to record the rationale for her protest:

That's why I'm protesting...that would be the main reason and the fact that the way King said he wanted to be remembered is simply being ignored in favor of bricks and mortar, lifeless, been set up and done for appearances, does not solve the social problems, does not get



Figure 38.7 Jackie asks Memphis residents and visitors to boycott the museum

to the root of our problems, and that's what King was all about, he was about serving humanity, and helping, that was his basic philosophy and I don't see that being focused on. All I see being focused on is how many tourists did we get, how much money did we make, what is the tally, that's what I see, the bottom line, somebody sitting back trying to make a dollar.... I just think the reason for having a museum at the site of Dr. King's death for educational purposes lacks substance because we have a run-down neighborhood, poverty, homelessness, crime, drug abuse, all these ills that plague our society. I just feel that those problems are more important because we need to be trying to eradicate them.

Those who linger to speak with Jackie can also hear her offer a detailed political-economy critique of land development in the area around the Lorraine. She cites explicit and de facto redlining, castigates the nearby gated communities alongside the Mississippi river that house such luminaries as Memphis's favorite daughter, actress Cybil Sheppard, and laments the use of the Lorraine by the city's White establishment as a stimulant for gentrification. As Jackie notes, "Blacks have lived and operated business in this area for years. Now they want to tear the buildings down and replace them with high-rent apartments they know we can't afford." "Where are we supposed to go?" she asks. Tracing a story common to many US cities, Jackie offers that the Lorraine's development "is just a ploy to get the Blacks out of the neighborhood. It's one of the biggest landgrabbing conspiracies. It's urban renewal, all over again, but now it goes by the name of gentrification." Jackie will also hold forth about the 1979 strategic plan that still guides changes in the built environment around the hotel. The plan predicted that rising rents would substantially alter the neighborhood's racial composition:

They [urban planners] predicted that by year 2000 there would be only 21 percent of African-Americans in the area even though at the time that they wrote the report there were 79 percent African-Americans in the area. And within that report they had the number of condominiums and townhouses they had planned on building and they had how much they would cost, and so the report was broken down to income levels, and see by that they made their prediction that there would be only 21 percent African-Americans in this area, because they know we can't afford the apartments and townhouses and condominiums that they built. And so that's how they came up with the figures, and I'm telling you, you've probably gone around and looked around for yourself and you see all the new apartments that have sprung up and they look like they've been here for years but they have not, they've been building on them now since the early eighties. So it's not a matter of my thinking, it's a matter that we know for sure what has taken place in this area, and we had... neighborhood meetings with some of the planners of this area and they just simply told us what was going to transpire in this area. And so that's when I began to speak out against what was going on because, hey, Dr. King was assassinated here. I mean you going to mistreat the poor people that live down here, you going to push them aside in order to gentrify the neighborhood? And that's exactly what they're doing.

Finally, Jackie offers a cultural critique of the museum. She protests turning King's death site into a "partyhouse" by the city of Memphis. Who, she asks, would organize champagne brunches and courtyard dancing (Figure 38.8) in such a sacred space? She protests using the Lorraine to attract tourists to Memphis, and its emergence as an obligatory stop for conventioners (Figure 38.9), some of whom are treated to black-tie galas under the balcony of room 306. She critiques the interactive exhibits



Figure 38.8 The museum is a site for some of the city's cultural events

as a form of entertainment inappropriate for the Lorraine; she argues that everything one could learn in the museum – and more – is already contained in the public library; and, noting the lack of historical authenticity of the museum's exhibits, she laughs at the pilgrims who throw themselves in a fit of emotion on the automobiles under the balcony, cars in which King never actually rode:

Well one thing I see is that the Lorraine is being separated from its history. They are trying to turn it into something that it was not and I think that's a mistake. I think the Lorraine should be set up to deal with today's problems, to deal with today's discrimination, crime, poverty and that sort of thing. But they have turned the Lorraine into just another place for entertainment, parties. I don't think it's right to turn the death site of Dr. King into a place to party. I really think that that's wrong. He didn't come here to die, so why should somebody take death and capitalize off of it and turn that site where he died into a place to party? To me that is totally wrong, distasteful, and I don't think that is the proper way to honor the memory of a man like Dr. King.

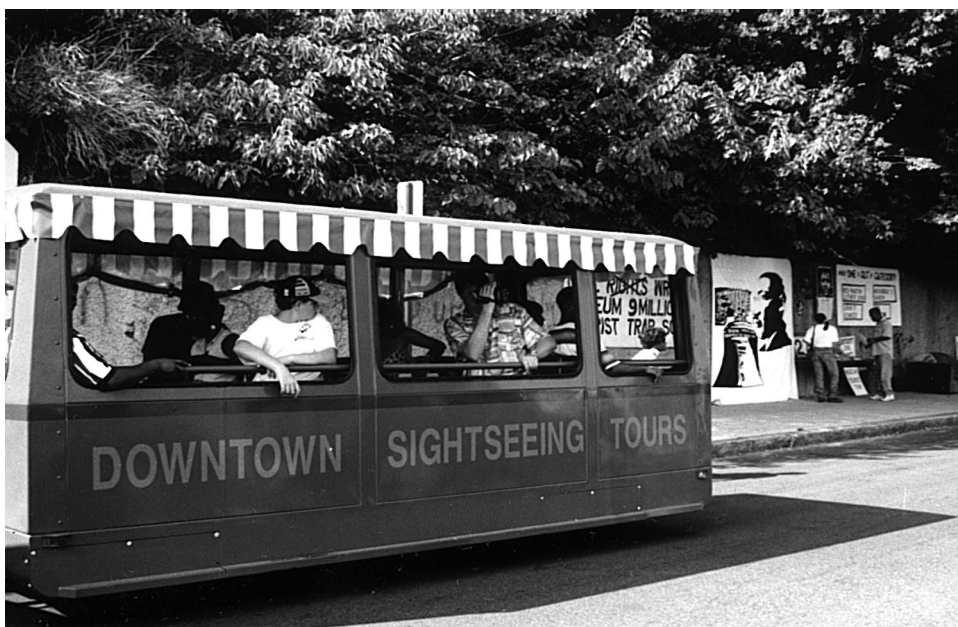


Figure 38.9 The street between Jackie and the museum is regularly traversed by vehicles, such as this one, carrying tourists

What is most remarkable about Jackie's protest is its duration. Jackie was the night manager and the last resident of the old Lorraine Motel. In January 1988, the building was condemned for the museum project, but she locked herself in her room and refused to leave, even after the water and electricity had been turned off. She and the local government entered into a 50-day siege that ended when Jackie was forcibly evicted from the building on March 2, 1988. She was deposited on the sidewalk outside the Lorraine, and from that moment forward, day and night, she has been living in protest outside the museum, a large sign recording the number of days (Figure 38.10). Not the weather, harassment by local officials, nor racist acts against her life, have deterred her. She turned 47 years old when the protest entered its eleventh year, but through my various visits I have never heard her express any doubt about her actions; as she puts it, "I am too stubborn to give up."

As a result of her everyday presence, Jackie has herself become an institution, even, a tourist attraction in her own right (Figure 38.11). Some visitors will stop to hear her story for the first time, but summer in Memphis is the site of scores of reunions among African-Americans whose families extend from Chicago to the lower Mississippi delta, and both the museum and Jackie have become an annual affair for many of these families. Local friends and neighbors will also drop by frequently.

Street Politics

Jackie's protest encourages a range of reflections relevant to the nature of politics, space, and memory. Traditionally conceived by urban researchers in electoral and

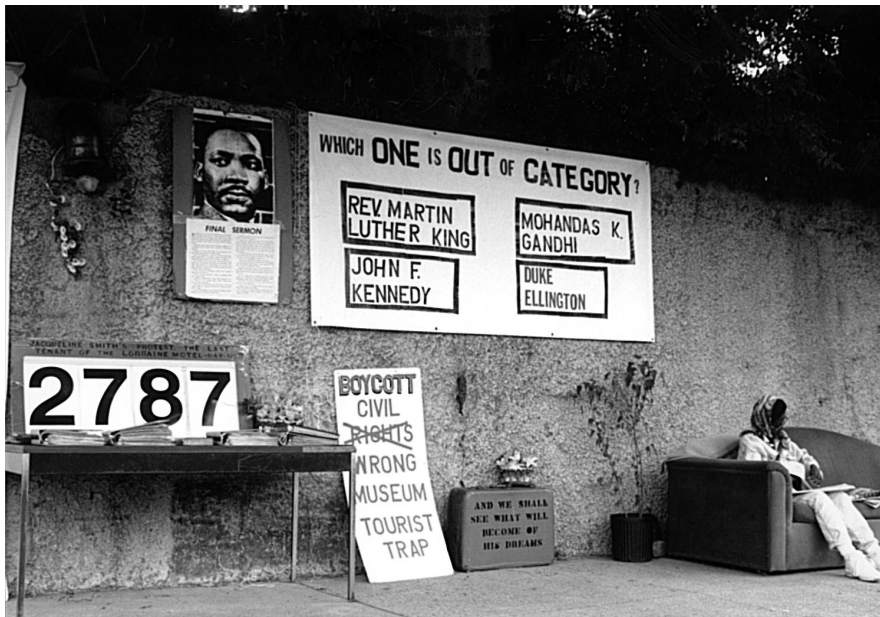


Figure 38.10 The sign records the number of consecutive days Jackie has protested. This photograph was taken in 1995. As of this writing, she is still there



Figure 38.11 Memphis visitors inquire about the protest

institutional terms, politics for Jackie emerges from, and is practiced at, a deeply personal level. Her vigil sharply contrasts civic and personal politics, effectively demonstrating how the strategies of capital and state institutions can be countermanded, if not overturned, by the persistent, everyday tactics of those located on the margin. Jackie thus reminds us of other “bottom up” urban politics, including the protestations of graffiti artists, parade and carnival demonstrators, and alternative media activists. And yet, unlike many of these forms of protest – but like King himself – she explicitly taps a reservoir of religious discourse, demonstrating its critical resourcefulness over and against the secularized discourses of the state. In opposition to the language of community development espoused by city officials, planners, and developers, Jackie poses deconstructive-style questions: What precisely is meant by “community,” or by “development”? Defined by and for whom?

In another vein, Jackie reminds us of Henri Lefebvre’s admonition that space is never neutral, but is a product literally filled with ideology. Seeing the Lorraine in these terms enables us to understand Jackie’s protest as “spatial praxis” – a specifically geographic form of political action. On the one hand, the target of her protest is the Lorraine, and through this site she makes connections to the wider spaces of Memphis that the museum fails to serve. On the other hand, her continuous spatial presence across the street from the Lorraine illustrates that her chosen forms of protest – witnessing, testifying, and vigilance – are themselves deeply geographic practices; in other words, the “eye of power” has location and direction. Jackie’s protest also tells a story about the “social construction” of history, by which is not meant that history is in the mind, but that it is only available to us through socially mediated forms of experience and interpretation. In this space in particular we learn that the social authority to determine what will be history, and how it will be honored, is typically bound to the state apparatus, as it is with so many memorials, museums, and state-sanctioned parades. But through Jackie we equally learn that no commemoration is ever fully sealed, since no history is ever without subjects who experience, interpret, and learn from it differently. Jackie shows us, in other words, that the Lorraine is not a tombstone. Her presence taps a surplus of meaning that exceeds the authorial intentionality of Lorraine’s creators. It is in fact this excess that enables and makes meaningful her spatial praxis, for she demonstrates that for both space and history, as in all things political, there is always the potential for reinterpretation, and hence always a potential oppositional moment.

Finally, in asking Memphis visitors to make a choice between her activist vision for the Lorraine and the institutionalized memorialization of civil rights put forth by the museum’s curators, she implicitly poses the question: “what does it mean to be political?” I have listened as scores of visitors have interacted with her, with this question just below the surface. Some will side with the museum, and encourage Jackie to find more productive pursuits for her energies. Others will applaud her vision and offer both moral and, occasionally, material support. And I have struggled with both responses: how can one measure Jackie’s vision for the museum over and against its arguable educational benefits, which include the visits of as many as 50,000 school-age visitors each year? One answer to this question is to conceive of the productive politics of this space as located in the street that separates Jackie from the museum, that interstitial space that juxtaposes and puts into sharp relief one version of African-American history to another. On the one hand is an

attempt to preserve the memory of civil rights so that the struggle is not forgotten; on the other hand is Jackie's effort to activate that memory for the unfinished project of civil rights. Seen in this way, perhaps visitors like me return to Memphis because of the dialectical and co-constitutive tensions produced by the structure of the Lorraine and Jackie's critical presence. And, perhaps Jackie's legacy will be, if not the transformation of the Lorraine, more critical reflection on the politics that reside in this and other spaces of memory.

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