NARRATIVES OF THE PAST IN COMTEMPORARY URBAN POLITICS: 
THE CASE OF THE BOSTON DESEGREGATION CRISIS

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by

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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Urban sociologists have increasingly recognized the cultural aspects of urban politics, which are performances rich with symbolic meaning. However, more work needs to be done to integrate the cultural politics of urban politics into our understanding of how power operates in the city. Through this research I explore one thread of the fabric of symbolic meaning as it operates in urban politics: remembering cultural trauma, asking: What role do memories of the past play in contemporary urban politics? To answer this question, I consider how Boston’s tumultuous and violent school desegregation crisis in the 1970s is remembered and contested in urban politics in the city today. Through engaged ethnography and interviewing I focus on two parallel, overlapping processes: a city-led initiative to change how students are assigned to schools, and a grassroots community project to remember and learn from Boston’s Busing/Desegregation crisis.

Using an interactionist framework which understands social action to be a product of performances rooted in place, shared pasts, and relationships, I describe the meaning of this particular cultural trauma in the city today and how it is used as a component in enacting power and making change. First I ask how actors in the policy-making process remember and use cultural trauma in the process of policy construction. I argue that past cultural trauma is used as a point of comparison to the present in order to make the case for present policies. Furthermore, actors in the policy-making process rely on cultural discourses to construct their understanding of the relationship between the past a past cultural trauma and the contemporary city. I then ask what role remembering plays as the process of policy making unfolds. I find that in the policy making process remembering and forgetting the past are components of a strategic performance structured to enact, as well as contest, policy. Finally, I broaden the arena to consider the grassroots politics of remembering in contrast to the institutional policy-making context, asking what role grassroots efforts at remembering play in the larger field of urban politics. I find that grassroots organizations use remembering not only as a strategic tool for policy change, but as a
source for knowledge production and an opportunity to not just contest dominant narratives but to alter them. Specific to this case, I argue that to understand student assignment reform in Boston – its processes and outcomes – we must understand both the history of the city’s school desegregation crisis and how this crisis is remembered today. The case of student assignment reform in Boston suggests that public remembering is a critical component of the cultural politics of the city, with real meaning for how the city is constructed and power is enacted. Ultimately I argue that remembering is a place-based performance embedded in power dynamics which can be used to legitimize and challenge policy.
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INTRODUCTION

The sociological eye searches for patterns – for systems, for hierarchies, for classifications – which help us to make sense of the world. The sociology of place can be tricky in this way – while places certainly have similarities and differences that can help us classify the world, they also have histories, unique paths of development, critical events that shape them and make them distinct from any other place. Urban spaces are no exception to this. Sociologists have in many cases successfully demonstrated that cities are places significant in the social order – places that structure social relationships. There are patterns of differentiation across cities in a global order (Sassen 1991) and there are patterns within cities of social organization, of racial and class stratification, of access to power and decision making (Massey and Denton 1993). But cities also have their particularities that make them different – their own histories, identities, and lived realities. As geographer Doreen Massey (2005) argues, spaces are not just made up of pasts that are buried and done; they are the result of multiple histories that are still being made.

What sense are scholars to make of the particularities of cities? One option is to ignore the individual character of a place – looking for the patterns in spite of these peculiarities. Another is to turn towards them – to take seriously the histories of places to understand how life is shaped within them and indeed across cities. This work takes the latter approach, understanding the city as a place that is shaped by national and global forces which makes it comparable to other cities, and at the same time with a unique development which interacts with these larger forces to have its own particular lived realities that need to be understood on their own terms. Ultimately the unique history of a place matters – it shapes the way groups interact, the way social inequality is spread across the landscape, how policy is constructed.

One such particularity I believe to have considerable impact in how cities develop is what sociologists have termed a ‘cultural trauma’: an event which dramatically disrupts a place – it’s functioning, it’s patterns, its identity. On a national scale these traumas are well documented. It
is not surprising that the Holocaust or the bombing of Hiroshima, for example, have had major impacts on Germany and Japan – on their peoples, cultures, and on their governance. It is not just that these events have impacted life when they occurred, but that they continue to have an impact through time. They have become a part of the memory of the place. But it is not only at the national scale that traumatic events happen: cities have their own traumas which presumably impact governance, but how? This is the central question of this work: what roles do memories of past traumas play in contemporary urban politics?

In Boston, the case on which this research is built, nearly forty years have passed since a major cultural trauma shook the city – the desegregation of its public schools. In the spring of 1974, a federal judge found that the Boston Public Schools were intentionally segregated and laid out a plan to bus students to schools in different communities to achieve a racial balance. Protests and counter-protests erupted, and for over two years institutions (primarily city government, the police, and the schools), neighborhoods, and activists in the city were embroiled in often violent conflict over school desegregation. The desegregation of Boston’s schools brought to the fore deep underlying tensions in the city around race, class, community, democratic governance and equitable access to resources. Eventually the crisis subsided, yet many of the issues underlying it remained unresolved. As I shall argue, desegregation constituted a lasting crisis not just because of the severity in which it challenged urban institutions and communities at the time, but because it challenged the very identity on which the city was built.

Boston is a significantly changed city since 1974. Years of development and gentrification have reshaped its demographic landscape. Mortality, migration and immigration patterns mean that many of Boston’s residents have no individual or family memory of school desegregation in the city. At what point does the memory of such a crisis begin to fade? Begin to no longer matter to the lived reality of a place? And if the memory of this crisis persists, then why and how does it
do so? There are many ways the memory of a crisis might shape the city long after the initial ramifications have passed – through how different demographic groups understand and use the city for example, or how memories of the crisis has shaped residential patterns over the past forty years.

Here I look to the political realm as an arena which shapes the city. Assuming urban governance and contestation matter to the lived reality of the city and its residents, how does memory operate within this realm? How are politicians, the media, community advocates, and other participants in policy making guided by memory and how do they use memory to inform and shape policy? Through this work I make three overarching arguments about the role of remembering cultural trauma in urban politics. First, at the most basic level, we must recognize that social memory matters to how politics are enacted in the city. Memory should be understood as a component of the cultural politics of the city - an element of meaning making in the city which then impacts how policy is conceived of, constructed, and implemented; ignoring this micro-sociological level of policy construction in the city leaves us blind to a critical social force shaping place. Second, my argument isn’t simply that memory matters, it is also about how memory matters: I argue that remembering is a performance embedded in power dynamics which can be used to legitimize and challenge policy. The negotiation of narratives of past trauma in the political arena is a contentious rather than pluralistic process reflective of competing discourses about the contemporary city. Finally, memory matters to urban politics even when it is not directly aimed at policy change. Grassroots organizations use narratives of the past for other reasons than to affect a certain policy, including to generate knowledge and spread that knowledge through a pedagogical practice.

The Symbolic Politics of the City
Contemporary theories of urban politics tend to focus on the structural and relational forces shaping these politics to the exclusion of meaning-making processes such as remembering. Macro-level approaches detail urban politics by looking at a constellation of social forces involved in the social production of space, often emphasizing the role of powerful economic and political actors seeking particular ends (Castells 1977, Gottdiener 1985, Sassen 1991). Studies of urban politics in the tradition of regime theory focus on actors at the level of the city, giving deep historical accounts of the particular coalitions of business interests and policy makers that drive urban development (Stone 1989). Regime theory does not, however, make space for contemporary meaning-making processes underlying those histories, instead focusing on the relationships and interests of urban elites (Stone 1989, Orr 1996). This tradition extends into the literature on urban education politics. In his study of regime politics in urban education in Baltimore, for example, Orr (1996) maps out the actors and relationships involved in school reform, giving a detailed historical context. However, the ways that people understand schooling in relationship to Baltimore’s history and the role that understanding plays in coalition building are absent (see Henig et al [1999] for a comparison across cities).

The study of symbolic meaning has not been completely absent from urban social theory and empirical research. In their work on ‘growth machines,’ Logan and Molotch (1987) argue that cities have ‘use values’ for their residents, and that sentiment and symbolic meaning are key components of contestation in cities with pro-growth regimes, which only think in terms of the city’s exchange value. Manuel Castells (1983) argues in *The City and the Grassroots*, urban social movements do not only material but also symbolic work, challenging urban meanings in struggles around local politics, identity and issues of collective consumption. From this perspective, various civic groups and grassroots organizations with policy agendas also engage in the cultural politics of contesting meaning. Meanwhile urban ethnographies such as Mario
Luis Small’s *Villa Victoria* (2004) or Andrew Deener’s *Contested Bohemia* (2012) explore the contexts of meaning making and contestation over urban neighborhoods.

Other empirical studies set out to directly address the role of culture in the politics of the city, such as McCann’s (2002) exploration of the role of meaning making in local economic development processes. Contemporary studies focus on discourses in urban politics, particularly the role of neoliberal ideology in urban policy (Hankins and Martin 2006, Lipman 2011). The neoliberal politics of the city entails building coalitions to support the implementation of specific policies that support privatization and decentralization, such as the growth of standardization and privatization. These are built around a logic of accountability and choice – a new common sense of the city in every aspect, from economic development to education. Neither the logics of growth or neoliberal privatization have marched uncontested through cities and urban school systems, though they may have formed the dominant discourse (Brown 1999, McCann 2002, Lipman 2011). These narratives do not go unchallenged; instead the dominant discourse is continuously remade and challenged through a discursive struggle over meaning and values (McCann 2002).

At the same time, scholars focused on race in cities have argued that regime theory must explore the symbolic dimensions of meaning making surrounding race, racism and privilege (Reed 1999, Horan 2002, Kraus 2004). Most notably, Reed (1999) explores the political constraints placed on Black politicians due to beliefs about a dangerous and culturally deficient black urban underclass. As Horan (2002) argues, if it takes race seriously, regime theory must integrate discourses beyond that of pro-growth ideologies to understand the city and its politics.

While there is a growing interest in the meaning making as an element of city governance, a stronger framework is needed to incorporate the role of symbolic meaning into the study of urban politics. In a 2007 essay in *City and Community*, Michael Ian Borer argues
that one problem is that the dominant paradigms in urban theory have largely focused on urbanization to the exclusion of urbanism – “the way of life in cities” (173). Borer presents a framework an ‘urban culturalist perspective' with six domains of research, including ‘place-based myths, narratives, and collective memories’, about which he argues: “A foundational cornerstone for this domain of the urban culturalist agenda is the notion that social, public, collective memories are “stored and transmitted” in and through places. As such, narratives about past occurrences in particular places help shape the identity of the place and the people who use it, care about, or are affected by the decisions made about and to it” (186). Borer does not, however, locate the study of urban politics within this culturalist perspective, and as Gans (2007) points out, does not extend an analysis of power through his framework. For Gans, the idea of a culturalist perspective once again creates a divide between structure and culture that is not useful. This debate over the relationship between culture and politics is, of course, not new. In the social movements literature, Francesca Polletta (1999) offers a fruitful approach to incorporating an understanding of culture in the study of politics: that we view all politics as having both structural and cultural dimensions. From this perspective political claims are not only strategic, based on needs and relationships, but also structured by symbolic meaning and available narratives (Olick and Levy 1997, Alvarez et al 1998).

In exploring urban politics, I approach politics broadly, following Birkland’s (2001) definition in his work on public policy, as “the various ways in which power is exercised in the everyday world and how that power is used to allocate resources and benefits to some people and groups, and costs and burdens to other people and groups. “ A critical task of an urban culturalist perspective that integrates power is to more fully elucidate the cultural politics of the city as a ‘set of discursive and material practices in and through which meanings are defined and struggled over, where social norms and values are naturalized, and by which ‘common sense’ is constructed and contested” (McCann 2002:387). This approach to understanding urban politics
conceptualizes culture as an essential component of power in the city, creating space to explore the role of remembering as a process of meaning making in policy construction and contestation. It is my argument that part of this discursive struggle in the cultural politics of urban education occurs through competing narratives of the city’s history. A stronger understanding of memory can help elucidate the workings of urban politics.

**Locating Memory in Urban Politics**

Studies of social or collective memory focus on memory as a social process not based solely on recollections rooted in individual experiences, but also on what we learn from others (Schudson 1989, Schuman and Scott 1989, Zerubavel 1996). Story-telling is thus a central part of the construction of shared memories of the past. These narratives are not, of course, constructed in a vacuum: people tell stories and understand the past in relationship to the cultural discourses that are available to them (Schudson 1989, Somers 1994, Ewick and Sibley 1995, Polletta 2006). Nor are these stories simply reflections of the past and present narrative; remembrances of the past also actively shape how we understand the present and act within it (Olick and Levy 1997, Ewick and Sibley 2003). While some studies of social memory show how narrative can be used to build consensus, others have focused on how it can be a site of considerable contention as the past is used to define the present (Zerubavel 1996, Olick and Robbins 1998). Studies of social memory at the national level, such as remembrance of the Holocaust in Germany or Hiroshima in the United States and Japan, show that in the case of an event which forms a collective trauma (where legitimating narratives/social identities are disrupted [Olick 1999, Saito 2006]) contestation is likely to be especially high and can have a significant impact on national politics.

A growing body of work explores the relationship between narratives of the past and the construction of place directly (Massey 1995, Hayden 1995, Blokland 2001). In her theoretical
piece “Places and their Pasts” Massey (1995) argues that places are articulations of spatial relations that are set in time as well as place. The past makes the present in both embodied forms (the built environment) and unembodied forms (memory), but the present also makes the past – social relationships dictate which narratives are emphasized and which are discredited.

Empirical work, focused primarily on the UK, has begun to affirm the interconnection between place, memory, narrative and social relations. In his study of an inner city London neighborhood May (1996) shows how people construct their sense of place in relation to race, class and national identity. He finds that people from different economic class backgrounds draw on different pasts which inform their understanding of the present and future. Mah’s (2010) more recent study of industrial ruination in another British city, Newcastle upon Tyne, focuses on ‘living memories’ of events that have not yet found closure. She argues that collective memories are social reconstructions of the past and thus spaces not just where there is difference, but spaces of active contestation around social relations. Like May, Mah found that memories varied by class. Through her work on memory in a coal mining village in Northern England, Degnen (2005) lays out a comprehensive model of social memory which includes three dimensions: time, space and relationality. Degnen argues that places not only evoke the past, but in these histories people tell stories of how the webs of relations that exist within a place have come to exist.

This theoretical and empirical work suggests that people use stories of the past to discuss and contest the meanings of place and that race and class identification are significant in the construction of social memory. While set in an urban context, however, this work on historical memory does not directly address how the construction of memory impacts the urban terrain. At the same time, not all inquiry in the tradition of urban sociology takes place seriously. In some work place is non-existent; in many others it is merely a backdrop – an interesting
ethnographic flourish which enables thick description or an element to be explained away as a hindrance to the goal of generalization. In a 2000 review, Thomas Gieryn identifies three “necessary and sufficient features” of place for sociological inquiry: geographic location (a unique spot in the universe); material form (physicality); and investment with meaning and value. The latter is what turns ‘space’ into ‘place’ from Gieryn’s perspective. There are many ways to argue with Gieryn’s conceptualization of place and its relationship with space: from the perspective of my research I am concerned with what I see as a gaping hole in his definition: temporality – the understanding that places exist in time and are constantly changing, being made and remade.

In much urban theory the way people remember and use history – the meaning making associated with the temporality of a place- is missing. A notable exception to this is the literature on gentrification, where many studies explore symbolic meaning and narrative as components of urban change at the neighborhood level. Questions of public discourse are prominent in this literature, where studies have shown how narratives of a place and its past are constructed to serve market interests. This can occur by constructing a place as an urban frontier to be claimed or reclaimed from the forces of disorder (Smith 1996, Deener 2012). Nostalgia for a romanticized urban past and a search for the authentic place also fuel gentrification projects (Zukin 1989, Lloyd 2006, Brown-Saracino 2009). These narratives of urban space serve not only as justifications for middle-class displacement of the poor, but as sentiments to be exploited by real estate and commercial interests. These works vary in the emphasis they put on the role of discourse in gentrification; taken together, however, they show the central role of narrative and the collective remembering of places in the urban production of space. Stories of a place and its past are often not without contestation from those already living in the neighborhood, but narratives themselves have uneven power in the public imagination.
which can directly impact which needs of a neighborhood are met (Blokland 2009). Narratives of the past are thus central rather than peripheral to power relations, enabling political and economic action.

Finally, memory work is not just a political activity that occurs within urban institutional politics, but also from without. Scholars working with a broad array of conceptual tools (frame, schema, ideology, story, discourse, narrative) have begun to elaborate how social movement actors make meaning in order to influence policy and win people over to alternative viewpoints. A significant literature has developed on ‘framing’, whereby social movement actors actively produce meaning through the creation of collective action frames that define injustices and attribute blame (Benford and Snow 2000). In the current dominant paradigm of social movement theory, framing features as the main conceptualization of the cultural work of movements. An alternative perspective looks at social movements and movement organizations as knowledge producers, and seeks to understand how and to what end social movements produce, process and disseminate knowledge. I argue that remembering the past is one such process of knowledge production, and through this study seek to position this knowledge production in the urban context.

To this point I have drawn on a number of literatures and theoretical perspectives to discuss what work exists that can help us conceptualize the role of remembering in urban politics – regime theory, gentrification, social memory and place, and social movements. The commonality amongst these literatures is that they each address in some way the themes of power, politics, and contestation, in ways that may or may not directly address urban politics, but are all directly applicable to this topic. Each uses a variety of variables to describe the role of culture (narratives, frames, discourses, memories, etc.). For the purposes of this research, I view social memory as one element of the cultural politics of the city. Memory is enacted through
story telling or narrative (I use these terms interchangeably), and has a close relationship to broader cultural frameworks for making meaning, or discourse. I explore this relationship between social memory as a narrative of the past and discourse more closely in chapter two. This framework – social memory as an element of the cultural politics of the city – is, however, incomplete.

In order to understand how social memory impacts the urban terrain it is not enough to understand that remembering occurs, we also must conceptualize how remembering occurs in urban politics. The literature on social memory emphasizes that remembering is an active process through time. The research on memory in place envisions this process as across groups over time through everyday interactive practices. Memory talk occurring in public and private spaces creates and recreates narrative of the past alongside understandings of the present. But how does ‘memory talk’ occur in the arena of urban politics – an arena where interaction is both formal and informal, and in which power dynamics must be taken into account? Interactionist understandings of the relationship between culture and structure can contribute to how we understand memory specifically, and cultural politics more generally in a local context such as the city.

**A Sociology of the Local**

The emphasis on interaction through a metaphor of performance is not new to sociology. Goffman’s dramaturgical method (1959) has proved useful across the discipline, including urban ethnography – in works such as Elijah Anderson’s (2000) *Code of the Street* and Mario Luis Small’s (2004) *Villa Victoria*. Recent theoretical work in the sociology of culture has shifted the concept of performance from the moment-by-moment interaction to situate it in a social structural analysis, such as Eliasoph and Lichterman’s (2003) “culture-in-interaction,” Alexander’s (2004b) “cultural pragmatics,” and Fine’s (2010) “sociology of the local.” This
evolving tradition of analysis emphasizes that culture, rather than existing solely in people’s heads, is accomplished through processes of interaction and performance which are embedded in a pre-existing social cartography of power relations. In this tradition, “culture is less a tool kit than a storybook” (Alexander 2004b:568).

For the purposes of theorizing memory in urban politics, Fine’s approach is perhaps most useful, as it creates a space for both time and place. His “sociology of the local” argues for re-centering the importance of local social contexts in constituting social worlds and enacting social structures. The building blocks for a local approach to sociology, Fine argues, are arena (the setting – place), relationships, and shared pasts (time), all of which together enable social action, which he conceptualizes as performance. In other words, the performances of everyday life which continuously reconstitute our social structure are set in place and time and based on a set of social relationships. Unlike Eliasoph and Lichterman, who position politics as outside everyday interaction, Fine locates politics directly in the sociology of the local, pointing out that policy decisions are often not made by individuals in isolation but through webs of interaction. Fine goes on to argue that we need a sociology that can see the dynamics by which such decisions are made. Of course regime politics are a component of this interactional web – the relationships between government and business interests built on a progrowth ideology, but, as I have argued, the cultural politics of cities extend beyond regimes. Conceptualizing urban politics as a performance of social relationships that are set in place and time creates a space for us to understand how memory might matter to policy-making.

Drawing on the work of Gary Alan Fine to construct a ‘sociology of the local,’ I argue that social memory in urban politics is not only interactional but a critical component of performance. With an emphasis on place, relationships, and time, this conceptual framework provides a powerful framework to understand memory in urban politics – we can see more
clearly that it matters, and how it is used and contested., as well as broaden the scope of what political remembering might look like. In each chapter I explore how Boston’s school desegregation crisis is remembered and contested, how these memories are performed.

The Case: A Contemporary Context for Remembering

In order to understand the role of remembering in urban politics this study explores the contemporary context in which school desegregation is remembered in Boston. Specifically I analyze two parallel processes in the city: a city-led effort to reform how students are assigned to schools in the city, and a small non-profit project to remember and learn from Boston’s school desegregation crisis. Both of the distinct (though at times overlapping) sources of data for this study provide evidence of the need for places to reckon with their past cultural traumas as a part of the processes of political claims-making and contestation. The city government process to reform how students are assigned to schools represents an institutional context in which the historical path is highly relevant, while the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project (BBDP) represents a grassroots call to revisit the past in order to redefine the present and future of the city. Happening at the same time, these two projects circulate in the larger arena of the city-helping to define and redefine the meaning of the cultural trauma of school desegregation, while at the same time defining the identity and directions for change in the contemporary city.

Throughout my analysis, I treat student assignment reform as a public policy process – an instantiation of what I refer to as institutional politics, as it occurs within the realm of formal city government. Public policy processes, however, are not limited to formal actions within city government, but instead are comprised of “individual, group, organizational, or government activities that, for better or worse, influence our lives through creation and implementation of public policy” (Birkland 2001:5). As such, any given policy-making process consists of a set of actors, contexts, events and outcomes (Weible 2014). Though not a policy-making process, the
Boston Busing Desegregation Project (BBDP) shares these characteristics, although its outcomes are less bounded by a specific end. The BBDP is thus conceptualized as both an actor within the student assignment reform process (though a minor one) and as a process to itself. In describing these dual cases here I give the general context surrounding them both (with a deeper description in chapter one) as well as a basic outline of the actors, events, and outcomes. In chapters two through four I give more detail to how these elements came together in relation to the social memory of Boston’s school desegregation crisis.

In a nation where local control and funding of schools has long been the rule, the question of where students attend schools is a deeply political one, intertwined as it is with fundamental questions of race, class, residence, and the allocation of resources. With the landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, race became the centerpiece of urban public school student assignment in the United States for most of the latter half of the twentieth century, with desegregation as a primary goal. School desegregation was not a single moment in time that can be marked by *Brown* however— it was a long, contentious and ultimately incomplete process that occurred in city after city, often accompanied by violence and always raising questions of race, class, equity and democracy (Orfield and Eaton 1996, Talbert-Johnson 2000, Guinier 2004). Struggles for racial equity in education intensified in Boston after *Brown vs. Board*, but did not fully come to a head until nearly 20 years later, when federal judge W. Arthur Garrity ruled that the elected school committee was deliberately maintaining a segregated school system. Among many other remedies, Judge Garrity ordered a system of busing students across neighborhood lines to racially balance schools in a city with high residential segregation. This system of school desegregation was framed within a racial binary of black and white in which Latino and Asian families found themselves caught, and to which
they immediately reacted with legal action and political protest (Melendez 1981, Liu, Geron and Lai 2008).

Nationally today the educational politics of school assignment have shifted away from racial integration and towards a market-oriented, ‘race-neutral’ politics of choice (Apple 2006, Lipman 2011). Considerable research has gone into how parents choose schools and the role of those choices in restructuring the city (Holme 2002, Renzulli and Evans 2005, DeSena 2006, Sikkink and Emerson 2008). Student assignment does not, however, begin with parental choice – the choices available to parents are structured through assignment policy. While the ideal of an educational marketplace where parents choose may be gaining ideological steam, ‘choice’ has not replaced other modes of school assignment wholesale – it continues to compete with both neighborhood schools (Pride and Vaughn 1999) and racial/ socioeconomic diversity as goals for assignment.

In Boston, the political landscape for these policies has shifted considerably. In 1989 the city voted to shift its school committee from an elected body to one appointed by the mayor, resulting in strong mayoral control over the Boston Public Schools. In that same year, fifteen years after the desegregation crisis, the BPS implemented a new student assignment process, effectively putting an end to all parts of the court’s desegregation order except one – the provision that at least 25% of BPS teachers should be black. The new student assignment process, “The Controlled Choice Plan”, split the city into three large zones and assigned students to schools in those zones based on proximity, sibling attendance and racial composition of the zone. Proponents hailed the new plan as an end to unnecessary busing, while critics cited fears that the schools would resegregate (Wen and Sege 1989).

By 2012, the three-zone system was still in place with an important exception: in 1999 a federal court had ruled that the BPS could not use race as a basis for school assignment – the racial composition component of the lottery algorithm was removed (Borda 2006). This ruling
was one in a nationwide federal shift towards colorblind legal policies which viewed race-conscious government policies with suspicion (Diller 1999). In Boston, this meant racial desegregation was officially off the table in school assignment from a legal perspective. The tumultuous history did not fade away so easily however, and would continue to have an impact in the urban politics of school assignment.

Early in his career former Boston Mayor Thomas Menino (who held the office from 1993 through the end of 2013) pledged that he would reform the city’s school assignment system to make it less confusing and to get students to schools nearer to their homes. In 2004 the Mayor and then School Superintendent Thomas Payzant put together a committee to reform school assignment headed by Ted Landsmark, best known in Boston as the African American man in an iconic photo depicted being stabbed with an American flag by ‘anti-busing’ protestors at city hall. Placing Landsmark at the head of this committee was a highly symbolic move – school assignment would be reformed under the watchful eye of one of the anti-busing movement’s most prominent victims. The committee, however, ultimately recommended that no overhaul of the three zone system be made due to a lack of quality educational options across Boston’s neighborhoods. They noted in their recommendations that “even though the city has changed dramatically, given Boston’s history of segregated schools and busing, [a ten zone assignment model] would have opened old wounds for many of Boston’s older residents, creating much divisiveness throughout the city” (Gonsalves 2004).

In 2007, Dr. Carol Johnson was appointed Superintendent of the Boston Public Schools; she led another failed attempt at reforming school assignment in 2009. This time several very prominent organizations dropped out of the process, including the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice, the American Civil Liberties Union, and the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights under Law of the Boston Bar Association. In an open letter these organizations
criticized the Boston Public schools for not taking community concerns into account and, among other things, called upon the schools to engage with partners in the city to “directly address the lingering effects of school desegregation in Boston” (Chirichigno et al 2010). Just as in the previous process, those involved in closely crafting the school assignment policy suggested that the city’s school desegregation crisis history prevented a dramatic change. The five zone plan recommended during this process was ultimately dropped, and no attempts were made to follow this recommendation.

By 2012, the demographics of the city and its school system had changed significantly since Boston’s school desegregation crisis. According to census data, in 1974, about 16.3% of Boston’s population was black, and 1.9% was classified as some other race (Asian, etc.). Data on the Latino population (collected for the first time in 1970) puts their numbers at roughly 2.5%, though this is likely an undercount. In all, nearly 80% on Boston’s population was white, non-Latino (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1975). Students of color were a higher proportion of the school system, however, with blacks making up nearly 35% of the student body. By 2012, Boston’s population had become significantly more diverse at 47% white, non-Hispanic, 18% Hispanic or Latino, 9% Asian, and 24% Black (US Census 2010). The school system had an even greater proportion of students of color, with only approximately 13% classified as white, 40% as Hispanic, 35% as Black, and 9% as Asian (Boston Public Schools 2014). With Latinos students surpassing Black students, the racial binary originally conceived under desegregation was more destabilized than ever. It was in the context of this changing tapestry, that in his 2012 State of the City speech, Mayor Menino announced once again that he would be working to reform school assignment, with a goal of “adopt[ing] a radically different student assignment plan – one that puts a priority on children attending schools closer to their homes” (Menino 2012).
In March of 2012, the BPS announced the formation of an External Advisory Committee on Improving School Choice (EAC). In an editorial after the announcement of the committee, the Boston Globe heralded the make-up of the committee as ‘promising’ for ‘finally getting the job done’, noting that “nineteen of the 27 members belong to racial or ethnic minority groups. There’s a good mix of talent from universities, foundations, and business” (Harmon 2012).

Indeed, the appointed committee was racially diverse (though with Latinos and Asians underrepresented in proportion to BPS students) but largely hailed from the higher end of the socioeconomic strata. Based on information provided by the BPS about each member, nearly three-quarters of the EAC occupied top positions in universities, foundations, the school system, or private enterprise- a stark contrast to families in the BPS, where over three-quarters of students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Several others represented leadership in relation to the Boston Public Schools. Just a few members had no other credential for participation than their status as a parent or student. Overall, the committee constituted a diverse cross-section of the upper strata of Boston’s non-profit and governance sectors.

Over the next year, the EAC met regularly both as a full committee and in subcommittees, to define parameters, review options and gather community feedback. Due to public meeting laws in Massachusetts, all of these meetings were public and had a regular audience of city officials, BPS employees, and concerned citizens. In the summer of 2012 the work of the EAC proceeded on three fronts divided into subcommittees: Community Engagement, Data, and Defining Quality and Equitable Access. Community engagement was run mainly by the Boston Public Schools, which was able to devote staff and resources. The community engagement subcommittee worked to advise the BPS as the engagement process, which in the summer involved holding community forums at BPS schools across the city to ask parents what worked and didn’t work about the then-current assignment system, and what
changes they might like to see. In an effort of transparency, the Boston Public Schools also made available a large amount of raw data on student assignment available to the EAC and public. The EAC subcommittee on data set about the task of analyzing and making plain this raw data, though much of this work was also done again by the BPS itself. Finally, the defining Quality and Equitable Access subcommittee set out to create a definition for quality and equitable access and to work with the BPS to understand what measures might be available for these variables as new plans for student assignment were created and analyzed.

While the EAC went about this work, the Boston Public Schools hired a consulting firm to create a set of proposed models for student assignment. At the end of September in a BPS middle school cafeteria, the BPS presented these models to the EAC and the public. They proposed 5 options, all but one of which centered around a zone model for student assignment which broke the city down into zones and assigned students who lived in those zones to schools in those zones based on a lottery. The model that was already in place was a three zone model – the BPS proposals broke these down into 23, 11, 9, and 6 zones. The fifth alternative proposal was a neighborhood school model where students would simply attend the school closest to their homes. In their presentation of these models, the BPS focused largely on how each one would impact school diversity and reduce transportation costs. All of these models focused on the elementary school level; the BPS also included in their proposals zones specifically for English Language Learners and a feeder system for middle schools. The high school system was not addressed in this process.

After the presentation of these models the work of the EAC shifted to analyzing and discussing these specific models. At the same time, the BPS began holding another round of community feedback sessions around the models. Others in the community, dissatisfied with the BPS, began designing their own proposals for student assignment and in October, the EAC held
a meeting to directly hear these proposals. One, presented by City Councilor John Connolly, chair of the council’s education committee, gained considerable media attention, but it was another, presented by graduate student Peng Shi that garnered the most interest with the EAC. Instead of zones, Peng Shi’s ‘home-based’ plan focused on giving families a list of possible schools based on their address. Ultimately, the BPS agreed to work with Shi and his advisors at MIT, giving them the data to develop a full proposal based on EAC feedback.

More community feedback sessions ensued, as well as community pushback to delay a planned vote on assignment models in December of 2012, the deadline set by Mayor Menino. After hearing from the EAC the Mayor agreed to extend the timeline. Finally, in February of 2013, the EAC voted to recommend one of the ‘home-based’ assignment models to the Superintendent which focused on the schools within a mile of the students’ home, with provisions for more options based on school quality as measured by test scores. The vote was nearly unanimous – only two of the voting members voted against the models. The superintendent then recommended this plan to the school committee. In March the Boston School Committee voted 6 to 1 to approve the superintendent’s recommendation, thus, as The Boston Globe put it, “scapp[ing] a school assignment plan developed under court-ordered desegregation almost a quarter century ago and embrac[ing]a new system that seeks to allow more students to attend schools closer to home” (Vaznis 2013).

At the same time that Boston was reforming its student assignment process, a small grassroots project was exploring the legacy of school desegregation in the city. The Boston Busing/Desegregation Project was initially established by a small community organizing organization, the Union of Minority Neighborhoods, as a ‘truth and reconciliation project’ around ‘busing’ in Boston. The Union of Minority Neighborhoods initiated the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project because it identified a need: through its organizing efforts with
Black parents in the public schools and through cross-racial mass incarceration reform work, they found that the issue of Boston’s school desegregation crisis continually re-surfaced. The organization believed healing work in this area would help address issues of race inequity in the city and would open avenues for further organizing.

During late 2011 and through 2012 the Project showed a film it commissioned with stories of school desegregation across Boston and its suburbs. At the same time the project became involved with a small community coalition concerned about the city’s effort to reform school assignment. It also held a series of events with panels on the history from multiple racial perspectives – Black, Asian, Latino, and White – and in 2012 released a report on its learning from its first full year in operation. This report, entitled “Can We Talk about Equity, Access, and Excellence?” identified race and class excellence, democratic access, and struggles for equity in urban institutions as the major themes running from Boston’s school desegregation to the present. The BBDP then used a 2012 gathering to build a community time line spanning from the 1800s to the present with an emphasis on school desegregation. The timeline included significant events in 'the struggle for equity, access, and excellence' as well as events from the personal lives of program participants. By 2013, the project was using the film, the timeline and another representation of the history – an excerpt from the PBS documentary Eyes on the Prize on school desegregation in Boston – as prompts for its story circles which asked contemporary residents of Boston to reflect on the meaning of this history today. At the same time the project was recording stories from individuals who experienced school desegregation with the goal of building an online archive.

By mid-2014 the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project had held over 70 separate conversations about the school desegregation crisis and its legacy, engaging face-to-face upwards of a thousand individuals in the greater Boston area. Having built this base, the project
began to focus on narratives of the crisis as its 40th anniversary approached. In June, the project held an unofficial hearing on the legacy of school desegregation to commemorate the 40th anniversary of Judge Garrity’s order. The hearing was hosted by several city council members and attended by over 100 people. In September of 2014 the project released its second major report, Unfinished Business: 7 Questions, 7 Lessons, and announced a partnership with WGBH and the Schuster Institute at Brandeis for a yearlong exploration of desegregation history. After the release of this report the BBDP also set a new goal of using what it had learned to help groups interested in equity, access, and excellence in the city develop their race and class literacy — a language and analysis for talking about issues of race and class in the city.

Through its unique combination of public history and dialogue, the BBDP has worked with a cross-section of Boston that represents, it claims, those who hold the values of equity, access, and excellence in the city. The Project itself represents a grassroots call to not only revisit and retell history, but to use Boston’s school desegregation crisis as a platform for discussion of contemporary issues it has identified as root problems: race and class inequity, access to democratic decision-making, and excellence in urban schools and other institutions. A project of knowledge production and interrogation, the persistence of the BBDP suggests the salience of the cultural trauma of school desegregation in understanding and acting within contemporary Boston.

Though I am interested in memory, and the memories I draw on are from a rich and fascinating time in Boston’s history, this research is primarily a study of the contemporary city and its politics defined broadly as “the various ways in which power is exercised in the everyday world and how that power is used to allocate resources and benefits to some people and groups, and costs and burdens to other people and groups” (Birkland 2001). The two processes I selected to make up the case for this research are instantiations of how remembering can occur
within the contemporary politics of the city. The first, the process to reform student assignment in Boston, was constructed with little reference to history: it was a political process designed to address a perceived problem in the city – a confusing and complicated assignment system. The second, the Boston/Busing Desegregation Project, was constructed in a way to directly address the historical echoes of a crisis as they impact the city today. By combining and exploring these cases in depth, I was able to explore the rich and multi-faceted dynamics of urban remembering.

**Method**

The study of narratives was for a time out of fashion in sociology – taken to be the rather unscientific work of the humanities (Somers 1994). In the past twenty or so years, however, sociologists interested in culture, history, and memory have come to take the stories people tell as an object of serious study of how people construct their reality (Sewell 1990, Somers 1994, Olick and Robbins 1998, Polletta 2006). Research on narratives of public memory often explores official commemorations – planned, public representations of the past, or everyday memories as told in interviews or casual, private-sphere conversations (Olick and Robbins 1998; Degnen 1995). The latter approach – observing the private, day-to-day processes of discourse can also be found in studies of race and racism, particularly in Nina Eliasoph’s work on ‘Everyday Racism’ (1999). She studies two different civic settings, and finds in both that there is a front stage performance in group settings of racism governed by specific rules of behavior, even where there is antiracism back stage in small conversations among a few individuals. My research extends the work on both everyday remembering and everyday racism from the private sphere into the public sphere – not only through looking at planned public presentations, but through looking at the performance of policy making and activism as interactional, performative accomplishments.
This research takes an extended case method approach as described by Burawoy (1998), using ethnographic methods of participant observation and semi-structured interviewing in order to “extract the general from the unique” (5). Ultimately, I explore local political processes in order to expand our understanding more broadly of the role of remembering in urban politics. Participant observation within the Boston Public Schools’ public process for reforming school assignment allowed me to observe contemporary urban politics and governance in action. Participant observation from within the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project allowed me to view alternative acts of remembering and to explore memory as an end in itself. Meanwhile, semi-structured interviews focused on the stories that people tell, the meaning they make out of those stories in the context of the city, and how they connect those stories to their actions. By threading ethnography and interviews together, I explore the full complexity of social remembering as a political process in the urban context.

**Design/Questions**

This research is designed to answer three main questions through ethnography and semi-structured interviews: What is the relationship between past cultural trauma and how actors in urban policy construction understand and act in contemporary urban politics? What role does remembering play in the urban political process? What role do grassroots efforts at remembering play in the larger field of urban politics? In this section I briefly describe the rationale behind each question and the data used to answer the question. In the following sections I then go into detail about my data collection methods.

1. **What is the relationship between actors' remembrances of cultural trauma and their approach to urban policy making?** Studies of social memory suggest that we use the past to explain and contest our social reality; they also suggest that people understand the past through the discourses and needs of the present. I explore the narratives of the
past of local policy makers and community advocates in order to elucidate the balance of these processes in the context of urban policy making. Through semi-structured interviews with participants in the process to reform student assignment, I ask how participants understand the city and its history, and how these understandings relate to how they approach the policy of student assignment. Interviews with participants provide access to the inner-workings of the process and their thinking as they approach it.

2. **What role does remembering play in the urban political process?** While individuals involved in political processes have their own understandings and narratives of the past that may impact how they approach policy making, policy-making is a collective rather than individual endeavor. As a collective endeavor it occurs through interaction, which can be observed as a public process. This study looks at how cultural trauma is enacted in public trauma in order to understand the role of memory in the larger process of policy making. To this end, I engage in participant observation of an entire process to reform student assignment, from initiation to completion. As a part of understanding this public process, I also analyze public meeting minutes and print and radio news reports. This ethnography of a political process allows me to observe how history was deployed, contested, and avoided as policy was constructed.

3. **What role do grassroots efforts at remembering play in the larger field of urban politics?** Studies of urban politics often describe relationships and coalitions, but there is still much to be understood in the dynamics of these relationships in the city. This research conceptualizes the field as urban politics as broader than institutional politics of city governance, and including grassroots actors working to impact the institutional realm and also create social change at the level of the city. In other words, I argue that to more fully understand the role of memory in urban politics we must consider the
activities of actors outside of the institutional arena. To explore the role of grassroots efforts in remembering, I conducted an ethnographic study of the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project. This includes participant observation, as well as an analysis of the documents produced as a part of the public performance of the BBDP including reports and blog posts.

*Ethnography*

As an exercise in reflexive social science, I approached this ethnography through full engagement in the political process in the tradition of activist ethnography (Smith 1990; Hale 2006). The confluence of the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project and the city’s initiative to reform its student assignment process provided a rich context for active participation and observation in both institutional and grassroots politics.

The narratives and counter narratives of school desegregation history I explore take place within a contemporary politics of place; they are not separate, but told in relation to each other in the context of a public process of policy-making which is not framed as being directly about history. It is thus critical to understand how memory occurs in this public process through careful observation and through analysis of public documents and media associated with the process. I attended 32 meetings related to school assignment, including community meetings, External Advisory Committee meetings, and Boston School Committee meetings over a 12 month period – taking detailed hand written field notes which were later transcribed and cross-referenced with official meeting minutes. These meetings and events enabled observation of three critical elements of the policy-making process. First, I was able to experience planned and official representations, through speeches by public officials and the design and presentation of information intended for the public (flyers, handouts, presentations by experts, etc.). Second, I was able to witness the deliberative process of a body of citizens tasked with making a policy
recommendation. Finally, I was able to participate in the community engagement component of this process and to experience firsthand community perspectives and reactions throughout. My observation of each of these components focused on the presence and absence of Boston’s school desegregation history in the broader context of the policy-making process.

My entry point for access to the student assignment reform process was as a citizen; my entry point for access to the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project was as a steering committee member and then as an employee. I began working for the BBDP officially in August of 2011, while the planning for this project was still in its nascent stage and the student assignment reform process had yet to be announced. I was approached by the executive director of the Union of Minority neighborhoods to work for the project as someone who may be able to help the project connect to Boston’s white communities. My role there was as a ‘project coordinator’ – a position that included such diverse duties as community outreach, coordination of the BBDP’s story collection project, and facilitation of the organization’s communications strategy. I continued to work in this role though August of 2014. Through the work of this project I had the opportunity to hear the narratives people construct to learn how actors use these narratives to influence urban politics, and to observe and reflect upon the strategies and challenges the BBDP faces as it used narrative as a tool for social change. The participant observation data for the purpose of this research covers the time period of September 2011 through April of 2013, a time period overlapping and slightly extending beyond the student assignment reform process. Participant observation data includes field notes of both public events and meetings of the organization as well as the day to day workings of the organization. Field notes were hand

1 Due to public meeting laws, members of this body were limited to one-on-one conversations outside of official meetings. Certainly some of the work that went into this policy occurred behind the scenes, but, as I confirmed in my interviews with EAC members, much of the work was done in the public eye because of this limitation. In my interviews, EAC members frequently bemoaned the inability to discuss the process in small groups privately in order to work through their own thoughts and the thoughts of others.
written and later transcribed, with particular attention to the deployment and contestation of memory.

Both the student assignment reform process and the BBDP produced significant documentation throughout the course of their work. In addition to my own observation and note taking, I treated this documentation as texts which provided additional understanding about the role of memory in each of these processes. The EAC process was publicly documented through meeting minutes, handouts, and PowerPoint presentations at all meetings and events. These documents provided further insight into where memory arose (and did not arise) throughout the process, and were analyzed to this end. The Boston Busing Desegregation Project produced blog posts and public reports as a part of its communications. These documents provided insight into the evolving thought and strategy of the project, and were analyzed to as a documentation of the strategy of remembering.

Finally, I tracked media coverage of both the student assignment reform process and the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project during the period of my participant observation. For the purposes of the student assignment reform process, local news media were considered a set of actors in the arena of assignment reform politics. For the purposes of the BBDP, local news media articles about the project were considered as a component of BBDP strategy and public reception. New pieces considered for both components were drawn from four local outlets: The Boston Globe (the city’s major daily), the Bay State Banner (a local newspaper reporting on issues of interest to Boston’s black communities), the Dorchester Reporter (Boston’s largest neighborhood based weekly newspaper), and WBUR (the local radio affiliate of National Public

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2 Public access to these materials was available at the time of data analysis through: https://drive.google.com/folderview?id=0B0y9JF1wAc-rT3RInV9jcmljMm8&usp=sharing
3 Boston Busing Desegregation Project Blog: BBDProject.org
4 The Boston Herald, the city’s other major daily, did not have adequate coverage of this process for inclusion in this study.
Radio\textsuperscript{5}. These media outlets were selected as a cross section of Boston’s media outlets and because they covered either the BBDP or student assignment reform on at least three occasions through the course of the year.

\textit{Semi-Structured Interviews}

Through my ethnography of the EAC and BBDP processes I explore the public presentation use of memories of the past; Semi-structured interviews provide insight into the discourses and thought processes of those active in institutional and grassroots politics. This allows for a richer understanding of the thought processes behind the public performances, as well as a contrast between private beliefs and public actions.

I interviewed participants in both the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project and the Boston Public Schools’ school assignment reform process to understand participants’ narrative of the past and how they related those narratives to the present and their work. I conducted 30 interviews in total, 10 with leadership in the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project and 20 with participants in the BPS’ school choice process. The latter set of interviews included 10 interviews with External Advisory Committee members (out of a total of 24) and 1) with outsiders involved in the school assignment reform process (individuals and organizations who have no formal decision making capacity in the process but are attempting to impact it). All EAC members received an interview request, with the exception of the two students who were too young to be eligible and the one EAC member closely involved with my research. Twelve agreed to an interview with me, but due to scheduling and logistical issues, 10 were ultimately interviewed. The other two groups were more indeterminate, so I used a purposeful sampling method – inviting individuals to interview who were, based on my observation, deeply involved in the work. Ten of the 12 community advocates I requested interviews with responded agreed to

\textsuperscript{5} See Appendix for full listing of newspaper articles analyzed for this research
participate, and 10 of the 11 Boston Busing/Desegregation Project members. These high response rates are likely due to the fact that I conducted the interviews towards the end of my time in the field (in the summer of 2013, after the EAC process completed), and thus had already developed strong relationships with the members of each group. As the chart below suggests, my interviews were relatively age diverse, fell upon a black/white binary and not class diverse. Though I do not have exact numbers, it is very likely that this reflects the diversity of the field I drew from, which is largely made up of professionals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee Basic Demographics</th>
<th>EAC members</th>
<th>Community Advocates</th>
<th>BBDP members</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age Range</strong></td>
<td>34 – 61</td>
<td>29 – 66</td>
<td>44 – 71</td>
<td>29 – 71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/Mixed Race</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Class</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Middle Class</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Class/Poor</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Work</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional – higher ed</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional – Business</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is important to note here the lack of ethnic diversity within my sample and the impact this has on my analysis. My sample largely falls along the lines of a black/white polarization that was at the heart of school desegregation policy as it was initially conceived and which has been a critical component of Boston politics. This is partially due to the composition of the groups I sampled from, which themselves represent this racial polarization. Latinos and Asians are underrepresented on the EAC, in the particular alliance of community advocates I participated
in, and in the leadership of the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project. Even within my sampling there was likely self-selection – with (African American) blacks and whites perhaps responding to the frame of school desegregation more strongly. Latino and Asian groups, however much they have been excluded from the narrative of school desegregation, however, had their own role to play in the crisis and continue to be highly impacted by the policies of that era, whether new immigrants or not. Indeed both of these ethnically diverse groups had their own interventions into the student assignment policy making process and may very likely have had their own narrative of school desegregation, which is not reflected in this research. This is a methodological and analytical limitation of this research which I continue to discuss throughout.

The semi-structured interviews were designed to explore the narratives actors have of school desegregation in Boston, how these narratives relate to their understanding of urban boundaries and the political terrain, and how they used these narratives to understand and act within their own work. The interview began with basic demographic questions, allowing people to self-identify their racial identity, class position, age, and neighborhood – all aspects that the literature suggests are important. The interviews went on to explore individual beliefs about race, class, and politics in the city, and then asked them to relate their own personal understanding of Boston’s 1974 school desegregation crisis. Interviews with EAC and community advocates concluded with a discussion of their analysis of the school assignment reform process, while interviews with BBDP members asked them to reflect on the work of the project and their role within it. Throughout, participants were asked to tell their own story, make connections and suggest meaning through open-ended questions (Weiss 1994). All of the interviews were face-to-face, and were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

Data Analysis
Data analysis was ongoing and simultaneous with collection, following a cyclical method as described by Creswell (2007). Analysis was thus driven by the processes of immersion, coding, memoranda writing and categorization, allowing for themes and analysis to arise directly out of the data. Interview data was coding separately from the remaining data, though themes that arose in interview data were used to inform the remaining coding. The computer program Atlas TI was used to organize materials and facilitate the coding process. The data analysis for this research was iterative, beginning with an open-coding process, followed by a more specific focus on three elements: narrative, meaning-making, and action. In these analyses I listened for absences or avoidances within the data as well, asking not only ‘what is said?’, but also, ‘what is being left unsaid?’ as avoidance is a theme that arises in both the literature on social memory (Olick and Levy 1997).

Practical and Ethical Challenges: Confidentiality and Researcher Positionality

Two central issues arose in the collection, analysis and reporting of data for this study which had both practical and ethical implications: the question of confidentiality for research subjects and the question of researcher positionality. Here I describe how I approached each throughout the research process and reflect on the impacts of each on the data as it is reported in this work.

The first critical question an urban ethnographer must address in terms of confidentiality is whether to mask or reveal the city in question. This was a question I addressed early on in the study rather than at the point of reporting, as I wanted to be able to share my decision with my participants. Masking the city in which this process took place was certainly a possibility, but one I decided would have created the illusion of confidentiality, rather than actually increasing it. Given the timing of my study and the location of my university affiliation during this time, the reality is that anyone familiar with Boston would have identified it easily.
Masking the city would have meant withholding crucial details about the political process, which is central to this study. By revealing the city I am able to give a thick description of the city’s history, development, and processes.

This is not, however, a study only of the city, but of actors within it. By revealing the city, which is relatively small and in which many of the actors described know or are at least aware of each other, it becomes easier to identify the participants in my study. From one perspective, this may not be a major ethical issue – all of the people interviewed in my study and the people I worked with and observed were participating in very public processes and as such were, in a sense, acting as public figures. I had two reservations about this argument, the first ethical and the second practical. First, my research revolves around a public trauma which still, it is my argument, remains controversial as it touches on persistent fault lines around race, class, and governance. Part of what I’m doing is asking people to reveal how they think about and feel about this sensitive topic within a highly charged political environment, where reputation is extremely important. As a researcher I want to take as many precautions as reasonable to allow people to speak freely without fear that it will impact them more broadly in any area of their life. This is, of course, practical as well – I want people to feel they can be as honest with me as possible.

Revealing the city has thus meant taking extra steps to protect the confidentiality of interview participants. Much of the steps around confidentiality that I took during the data collection phase were standard and in line with the institutional review board – keeping private the names of interviewees, informed consent, de-identifying interview data in transcriptions, etc. In reporting the data however, I have been careful to mask identities, sometimes at the expense of giving a full picture of my data. This is particularly the case for my demographic data, where I have not given exact professions, or even full racial identifications. For example
reporting the particular type of business someone owned would make it immediately obvious to anyone with knowledge of the city who this person is. Likewise there were some people who identified their racial identity in such a unique way that again by reporting this it would be obvious to many who this person is. In quoting, I have identified the race, gender, and profession of the speaker only where it was critical to the point being made. Nonetheless, as I discussed during the informed consent process with interviewees, Boston politics are relatively small and close knit. I have done my best to mask the identities of participants, though of course some readers may jump to their own conclusions.

In terms of my ethnographic data, confidentiality has been much less of an issue. My ethnographic data largely concerns public processes in which people speak with the expectation by being heard (and often recorded) by others. This includes comments at public events, speeches by political figures, and reports in the media. In these cases I have fully identified individuals. I have, however, been cautious in reporting certain BBDP data, especially at events which were open to the public, but at which people shared very personal stories that they may not have expected to go further than the room. In any event, the details of those stories were often not germane to my research. I chose in these instances to take field notes about the events, but not to record the particulars of the personal stories people reported.

My impulse to protect confidentiality is informed primarily by my stance as a researcher, but also by my own positionality. Any researcher engaging in participant observation has to make choices about where on the spectrum s/he will fall from passive observer to full participant. I approached my participant observation for this work as a fully activist ethnographer, meaning I was engaged in political advocacy in the settings of my ethnography. I was an employee of the Boston Busing Desegregation Project during the time of my participant observation, working to form and forward the ideas of the organization. I was also a parent who
would be directly impacted by student assignment reform, as my daughter was set to enter the school system the year this change was scheduled to take place.

There were both benefits and challenges to my dual position of activist and researcher in the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project. In this role, I was immersed in issues central to this research and had the opportunity to develop rapport with key players. I gained considerable knowledge about the issues under study here from a community perspective, and my work as an activist pushed me to consider the questions that arise in this research from both a theoretical and a practical perspective. Because the BBDP itself engaged in knowledge production and, indeed, did its own theorizing, I benefitted from engaging with the theoretical underpinnings of this work with activists outside of the academy. This gives me background knowledge about and direct access to the inner workings of activism related to memory, strategy, and the urban terrain that I could not have had any other way.

As a researcher I also faced challenges in my participation as an activist and employee. Participation can make observation difficult: as an activist and an employee for the BBDP I had to work ethically and as a researcher I had to be aware of the choices I was making as an employee and activist and the ways that they might limit my research. I did not feel pressure to exclude or be loyal to the organization in reference to my dissertation – in general I felt significant support. At the same time, this uncritical support left me without externally imposed boundaries between my research and work – these I navigated on my own. When I was working, I could not focus on field notes rather than getting involved in a critical conversation or providing support to facilitators at an event. A key way that I managed this conflict was through developing the trust of my co-workers who were aware of and supported my dual roles. I structured my research in such a way that I was careful not to be evaluating the project itself, as this would have created significant tensions in my role as an employee and with my co-workers.
Instead my main thrust in the ethnographic work was to understand the strategies and challenges of the BBDP, something I could in fact only do adequately from a position within the project. Nonetheless, as an employee of the organization, I did not always completely agree with strategies and choices of the group and sometimes came into conflict with co-workers and the members of the volunteer-led steering committee. I was careful to note and be reflexive about these conflicts in my field notes, which allowed me to be conscious of my own feelings as I engaged in the analysis.

Fortunately, the goals of the BBDP are in many ways aligned with my work as a researcher. In terms of human subjects, the BBDP is very concerned with building trust and maintaining relationships and is thus as equally if not more protective of the people it works with than academic standards require. The BBDP is interested in maintaining an openness and self-reflective process, which aligns with my goals as a researcher. In many ways I saw my commitment to rigor and reflection as a researcher as a benefit to the BBDP. On the other hand, I benefitted as a researcher from being involved in the BBDP because I had access to the everyday workings of this project in a way that would be impossible to achieve as an outsider. My work as an activist and a researcher informed each other.

I made specific choices in the design of the research to not put myself in the position of evaluating the very work I was doing; because I was interested in the logic and strategy of the project, however, I had to confront my own logics and strategies along the way. Much of this analysis has come in the form of looking at BBDP writing, which I often had a hand in penning. Yet I can say confidently that the analysis, strategizing and even writing of the BBDP was never my own, it was always a collaborative process informed heavily by the multiple, strongly opinionated leaders in the project. It would, in fact, be specious to claim any of the work of the BBDP as my own. Due to this, I do not treat this as an auto-ethnography. In my writing I refer
to the BBDP as a unique entity/actor, independent of any of the logics of the individuals, including myself, involved, when describing the public performances of the organization (through statements, reports, etc.). At the same time, I do refer to myself or the group when referencing internal thoughts and processes.

As an activist-ethnographer I approached Boston’s student assignment reform as a process that could be known through the experience of engaging it (Smith 1990). I participated as both a parent whose child was preparing to enter the Boston Public Schools, as a member of the Boston community concerned about its schools, and as project coordinator for the Boston Busing Desegregation Project. Wearing these multiple hats, I spoke frequently at meetings, which allowed me to get to know the EAC members, as well as other parents and community advocates who engaged with the process. I found, consistent with the literature on activist ethnography, that working from within each of the perspectives I was able to more fully see the complex relationships and dynamics of a public process that involved significant community involvement and contestation (Juris and Khasnabish 2013, Hale 2006). As a frequent audience member, who was in fact being spoken to directly as a constituent, I was sensitive to the performances and their underlying meaning in a way someone without a stake in the process may not have been.

At the outset of my participant observation in the student assignment process, I did have some concern about whether my activism would compromise my relationships with the multiple parties involved. I had strong opinions about student assignment from both sociological and personal perspectives. Would something I said alienate an EAC member or community advocate in a way that they wouldn’t want to talk to me later through an interview? Would they find me to be on an opposing ‘side’ to them and therefore distrust my research? Ultimately I decided to pursue a strategy of full engagement. Rather than alienating people this allowed me to develop
relationships and enter dialogue. When I did set up interviews, I can’t be sure that some people didn’t decline because of who I was, but I do know some people whose opinions differed dramatically from mine agreed to interview with me, with some even suggesting they hoped for an opportunity of mutual understanding and dialogue. As with the BBDP, despite my activism I do not feel I impacted the field significantly in a way that would compromise the analysis of this work – the politics of the city involves too many simultaneous moving forces for a single voice testifying at hearings and speaking at meetings to alter its processes dramatically.

As a white person approaching this process from working within an organization focused largely on black/African American communities, however, this research is certainly skewed towards an exploration of the black/white binary of student assignment in the city. Though the BBDP worked hard to include Asian and Latino voices, these relationships were tenuous, reflecting larger political inter-racial and inter-ethnic tensions in the city. Both Latino and Asian activists, as well as other immigrant groups including Haitians and Cape Verdeans, have expressed feeling excluded from political dialogue in the city, and have worked hard to build their own points of political access rather than being lumped together as people of color with African American groups (Uriarte 1993, Liu et al 2008). This exclusion was certainly a factor in the school desegregation crisis itself, which may continue to affect how these various communities related to each other, and to institutional politics in the city. Because I did not gain the access to these communities from my position, this study speaks more to the black/white binary politics of school desegregation and runs the risk of perpetuating the exclusion of other voices. At the same time, the black/white politics of how school desegregation is remembered is a critical dynamic about which this study can tell us much; I work to minimize the exclusion of others where possible by including what I did hear from other voices. Ultimately, however, more research is needed into these groups’ experiences to paint of fuller picture of the dynamics of remembering in urban politics.
By doing this research as both an activist and a researcher I am not only be able to give a ‘thick description’ of Boston’s school assignment reform process and the Boston Busing Desegregation Project, I am also be positioned to identify and critically consider the work of the BBDP and school reform actors from an ethnographic perspective, though only from the perspectives I engaged (Juris and Khasnabish 2013). Furthermore, my ongoing relationships in both of these fields have encouraged me to both be cautious in protecting the identities of participants and true to the on the ground experiences of urban politics and remembrance in the city.

Logic and Organization

While many urban theorists recognize that the structure of urban governance has a cultural component, there is much work to be done to build out an urban theory of culture in urban politics. Multiple literatures – particularly social memory, cultural politics, and social movements – have insights applicable to this task. This research brings these insights together within an interactionist framework in a case study of the role of remembering cultural traumas in contemporary politics. Three interrelated questions guide this work: What is the relationship between actors’ remembrances of cultural trauma and their approach to urban policy making? What role does remembering play in the urban political process? What role do grassroots efforts at remembering play in the larger field of urban politics?

To answer these questions I have engaged in an ethnography of two concurrent processes in Boston: a process of city government to reform how students are assigned to schools and a grassroots non-profit led process to make meaning from the city’s history around school desegregation. I use these two processes to explore how the cultural trauma of school desegregation that occurred in the mid-1970s in Boston is remembered and used in the policy-making process. This ethnography allows me to interrogate remembering as a public
performance. In addition, qualitative interviews with participants in these processes provide insight into the understandings and thought processes of actors involved. I find that there are competing narratives of school desegregation that revolve around defining a relationship between the past and the present in order to make claims on policy. Narratives of the past impact how actors approach policy, but through a lens of contemporary discourses about the city. These narratives are used, avoided, and contested strategically by actors in the policy process in a field of power relations. Alternatives to this kind of strategic remembering include processes of knowledge production to make sense of the present based on the past.

In the first chapter, I draw on Alexander et al.’s (2004) concept of cultural trauma to frame the social and narrative contexts of the school desegregation crisis in Boston. I start with a description of social and geographic context of the crisis, followed by an exploration of how the crisis has been told using Alexander’s cultural trauma as a framework. I conclude by describing how the contemporary context and debates are related to the school desegregation crisis. Throughout, I argue that the crisis over school desegregation disrupted Boston’s identity as a liberal and egalitarian city, and thus remains a contentious narrative laden with meaning about the state of equity in the city today. This chapter not only gives the context and history required to understand the data presented in the following chapters, it also elaborates on the arena in which the performances of politics takes place.

In the second chapter I take on the first question of my research, what is the relationship between actors’ remembrances of cultural trauma and their approach to urban policy making? I explore through interviews with participants in the process to reform student assignment what narratives they have of the past and how these narratives inform their approach to policy. I find that EAC members and community advocates draw on a similar narrative of Boston’s school desegregation crisis. However, they narrate a relationship between the past and the present in
very different ways, reflecting discursive differences about the present rather than the past, particularly in regards to the state of race and racism. These shared and contested pasts relate directly to divergent policy approaches – enabling within group cooperation but also illuminating conflicts across groups with different ends. Drawing on the social memory literature I argue that remembering in urban policy is an active process through time and place, and that the relationship between past and present is particularly salient in urban politics with direct implications for policy making.

While Chapter 2 focuses on the individual accounts and narratives of actors, chapter 3 focuses on how these narratives are used in the process of policy making. This chapter addresses my second question, what role does remembering play in the urban political process? Through an ethnography of the student assignment reform process I draw on the public statements and deliberations of political actors, the media, and community advocates to explore how Boston’s school desegregation crisis was both remembered and forgotten in the public process. Here I show that the narratives described in the previous chapter did not have equal performative power – that we cannot consider only the shared and conflicting pasts in the performance of politics, but also the relationships that these denote. Remembering and forgetting the cultural trauma of school desegregation were critical components of the student assignment process that was actively performed by EAC members, school officials, and the media in such a manner that marginalized other points of view. Through this lens we can see how political power in the city is enacted through a place-based process of social memory. In this case meaning making about race and racism in student assignment policy are central to this process of remembering.

In chapter 4 I turn to the Boston Busing Desegregation Project to ask, what role do grassroots efforts at remembering play in the larger field of urban politics? To answer this question I explore the rationale and the strategies of the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project
in using contemporary stories of Boston’s school desegregation crisis to understand the present. Like participants in the student assignment reform process, the BBDP is interested primarily in the relationship between the past and the present. Rather than framing this relationship strategically, however, the BBDP approaches the past as a source for authentic knowledge production about the present which is focused on difference and multiplicity rather than uniformity. Ultimately I argue that when we take the grassroots politics of meaning contestation alongside the institutional political maneuvering of school assignment reform, we can see that the persistence of the impact of cultural trauma of school desegregation on a larger scale, as well as alternative ways to approaching this trauma in the arena of urban politics that emphasizes knowledge production.

Finally, in the concluding chapter I bring together the arguments of the preceding chapters to contribute to an increased understanding of the role of culture in urban politics. I argue that recognizing and more fully integrating the performative aspects of urban politics, alongside its structures and relationality, reveals further dimensions of the operation of power in the urban field. Further I argue that remembering the urban past and relating that past to the present is a critical element of meaning-making practices in politics. I go on to suggest areas of further research in the realm of memory, urban cultural politics and power.
CHAPTER 1: THE BOSTON SCHOOL DESEGREGATION CRISIS AS CULTURAL TRAUMA

This study is premised on the idea that the desegregation of Boston’s schools, a crisis which peaked nearly forty years before my research was conducted, constitutes a ‘living memory’ (Mah 2010) which is still highly contested in the city of Boston. But why, as sociologist Vera Zolberg asks, “do some pasts have a persistent capacity for creating contention” (1998: 565)? A growing body of research suggests that collective trauma is a useful conceptual frame for understanding the persistence of certain pasts even where there is, as is not uncommon, considerable resistance to remembrance (Rogers, Leydesdorff, and Darson 1999; Alexander 2004a; Nytagodien and Neal 2004).

In this chapter I use Jeffrey Alexander et al.’s (2004) framework of cultural trauma as a roadmap for understanding the social and narrative contexts of Boston’s school desegregation crisis and as a tool for telling a baseline story of the crisis itself. I begin by exploring the city’s identity and its social geography as a context in which to understand the desegregation crisis. I then shift to an exploration of how the story of the crisis itself has been told, first through previous narratives, and then through my own, using Alexander’s elements of cultural trauma as basis for the narrative. Finally, I describe the contemporary context and debates in relation to the school desegregation crisis. Throughout, I argue that the crisis over school desegregation disrupted Boston’s identity as a liberal and egalitarian city, surfacing issues of race, class, and power which continue to be raised in the city today. The crisis has become a persistent reference point for these issues, and thus remains a contentious narrative laden with meaning about the state of equity in the city today. As such it is a critical component of the setting in which the performance of urban politics takes place.

Identity Crisis: Trauma as Disruption
In their work, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, Alexander, Eyerman, Giesen, Smelser, and Sztompka (2004) explore lay and theoretical approaches to understanding some events as traumatic for societies. They argue that while these approaches often naturalize trauma, finding the trauma inherent to the event itself, a sociological approach understands that defining an event as a trauma is a social process. Furthermore, the process of trauma definition occurs largely in relation to how much the event call into question the group’s collective identity. As Alexander (2004a) explains, not all major disruptions, even ones in which many individuals may experience psychic trauma, reach the status of collective trauma. To become a cultural trauma, he argues, a cultural crisis must occur in which a group not only experiences pain, but in which the core identity of the group is shaken. A cultural trauma, in other words, occurs when an event dramatically disrupts a group’s narrative of itself (Olick 1999b, Saito 2006).

Cultural trauma, then, is intimately bound to narrative. The collective trauma becomes a part of the mnemonic community (Zerubavel 1996, Olick and Robbins 1998) to be remembered and confronted as culturally significant long after those who directly experienced it are gone; Hiroshima is a part of the story of Japan, for example, and the Holocaust a part of the story of Germany. The identity of a place is always in flux – always being negotiated through interaction, never one thing, always many (Massey 1995). A cultural trauma causes a shift in this negotiation, introducing new elements which refuse to be ignored and therefore must be incorporated or explained away.

Boston’s desegregation crisis fits Alexander et al.’s definition of a cultural crisis well: the city’s identity as a “cradle of liberty,” a center of abolitionism, and a bastion of northern liberalism was shaken to the core when rocks flew at young black children on school buses and protestors landed on the suburban lawn of a federal judge. This case also raises some interesting questions about cultural trauma which remain to be explored in more detail –
particularly around power and place. Alexander et al.’s focus on collective identity leads to an emphasis on damage to a cohesive identity, and how that cohesive identity becomes restored. Alexander argues that cultural traumas “broaden the realm of social understanding and sympathy,” because the process of defining a trauma involves larger identification with the victim. Often, however, the identity of a place is defined by those in power, while there is in reality plurality and conflict below the surface. The negotiation of the identity of any place is embedded in relationships of power, where some narratives of trauma are affirmed by the dominant group and others rejected. As I show in this chapter, Boston’s school desegregation crisis did cause a crisis to a collective identity of the city, but there are multiple and competing trauma narratives which point to underlying unresolved conflicts in a stratified city. The collective identity may be reaffirmed, but this identity remains highly contested. From the perspective of an interactionist, local sociology, school desegregation is a part of the shared past that enables social action in the city, but as a cultural trauma it has also wound its way into the arena itself – become a part of the setting of the city in which the performance of politics occurs.

The case of Boston’s school desegregation crisis also provides an opportunity to consider the role of place in the study of trauma with intentionality. Studies of cultural trauma have largely focused on national-level events, with little reference to place other than the nation as a backdrop. The Troubles in Northern Ireland (Dawson 1999), the Holocaust in Germany (Olick and Levy 1997), the bombing of Hiroshima in Japan (Saito 2006), Slavery in the United States (Eyerman 2004) and the Rwandan Genocide (Bilali and Volhardt 2012) have all been studied as cases of cultural trauma, with the collectivity defined as the nation. But it is not only the nation that can have its identity disrupted; cities too have critical events which fundamentally challenge their narratives: imagine the Great Chicago Fire or the New York City Draft riots in the 19th century; the Montgomery Bus Boycott or the Columbine Massacre in the 20th century;
September 11th in New York City, New Orleans’ Hurricane Katrina, or the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in the 21st century. Furthermore, cities (and nations) are not mere containers for trauma – all traumas happen in place, and as such are shaped by and continue afterwards to shape the social geography of the place. We can thus theorize how the Montgomery Bus Boycott or September 11th, for example, changed and continue to resonate in their respective cities.

Throughout this chapter I use Alexander at al.’s framing of a cultural trauma as a disruption to collective identity as a guide to detail the context of the city and the crisis itself, but with particular attention to the two issues raised here: the contested nature of the trauma and the social geography of the city in this contestation. In the following sections I give some context to the collective identity of Boston and then turn to the city’s social geography at the time of the crisis before delving into the contested narratives of the trauma itself.

Identity Interrupted

As a cultural trauma, Boston’s school desegregation crisis remains a critical point of tension and claims-making about the city’s identity. ‘Busing’ has become a part of the city’s mnemonic community, a reference point for a city which struggles to shed an image of being parochial and racist. But the story of ‘busing’ or desegregation is not told in just any way: it is ‘path dependent’ (Schudson 1989; Olick and Levy 1997) on the stories of the city that have been told before and how the story has been continuously constructed since the event originally occurred. To understand the impact of this history today, then, we must know a little more about how Boston had been defined and redefined before and after school desegregation. As I have already mentioned, Boston’s identity as a liberal, abolitionist city is critical to understanding the impact of the desegregation crisis. In addition, the continuous recreation of
the city through a “New Boston” narrative provides insight into both the reaction to the school desegregation crisis and how the story has been told in its aftermath.

Three components of Boston’s identity that developed during the city’s early history would later frame the cultural trauma of school desegregation in the 1970s. The first identity is as the ‘cradle of liberty’ for the nation. Boston’s role in the revolutionary war against the British is a considerable source of pride and storytelling in the city. These stories – the Boston Massacre, the Boston Tea Party, Paul Revere’s Midnight Ride, among others – emphasize a city with an irrepressible spirit, bent towards freedom and equality. This narrative is further reinforced by Boston’s identity as a stronghold of the abolitionist movement of the early 19th century through the civil war. The story of Boston as center of northern resistance to slavery stresses a commitment to freedom for all and a racially egalitarian city. At the same time as the abolitionist movement was taking its root, Boston’s elites were working to establish Boston as a cultural center. The “Athens of America” reputation that the city developed in the early and middle half of the 1800’s again focused on Boston as being at the heart of a nation’s political and cultural development (O’Connor 2001).

These three identities – as the cradle of liberty, as the center of abolitionism, and as the Athens of America – combine to paint a picture of a city that is committed to political freedom, is cultured and refined, and is on the forefront of racial equity. Of course, other stories can be told as well – of wars against Native Americans, for example, or the marginalization and discrimination towards Boston’s black population, or the cruel elitism of Boston’s ‘Brahmin’ population against ethnic minorities – which might lead to a very different understanding of the city. But these are nonetheless among the primary narratives that formed the city’s identity at the time that school desegregation occurred, and would be shattered in a very large public way when resistance to school desegregation surfaced in 1974. Before we can get to this story,
however, it is equally important to understand the city narrative of renewal that developed in the post-civil war era and continues today. This ‘new Boston’ narrative may have been disrupted by school desegregation, but just as importantly, it has been a narrative frequently called upon to repair the identity of the city in the aftermath of the trauma.

Boston has been trying to remake itself since at least the beginning of the twentieth century, but the story of the New Boston can be traced even earlier to anxieties about a growing and changing city at the end of the 19th century. An 1873 letter in *The Boston Globe* entitled “New Boston” raised concerns over city’s ability to handle such fast growth administratively after the annexation of three neighboring towns – Brighton, Charlestown, and West Roxbury (Boston Globe 1873). Letters in 1875 and 1876, “Old and New Boston” and “Old and New Boston – the Two Species,” respectively, focus less on physical growth and more on population growth and change – outlining anxieties over the loss of the traditions of an old guard as the city transformed to a bustling metropolis (Boston Globe 1875; Boston Globe 1876).

At the beginning of the twentieth century a group of businessman and other pro-growth elites in the city transformed this anxiety of a changing city into a story of opportunity and hope which persists to the present. Formed in 1909, the Boston 1915 committee originated as a reaction to the Irish machine politics which had come to dominate the city and operated largely through a system of patronage and graft which disadvantaged business. Prominent business leaders came together to develop a plan to modernize the city and rationalize its politics. The main organ of this movement: a regular paper called “New Boston,” which ran from May 1910 until the end of 1911 with the express purpose of reporting the successes of the Boston 1915 movement. Heavily influenced by the positive futurism of the Chicago’s World fair in 1893, the Boston 1915 organizers held several fairs aimed at envisioning this new Boston as a modern efficient city. A critical component of this vision was the rational urban planning approach that
would come to be the hallmark of other cities like New York under Robert Moses. The towns surrounding Boston, however, balked at efforts to include them in planning efforts due to fear that the city would annex them, a problem which eventually caused the Boston 1915 movement to lose steam and fall apart (Heath 1998; Dash 2015).

The Boston 1915 did have one significant political success before its demise – a change in the city charter toward a strong mayoral system which was intended to weaken the powerful ward boss system that had developed. This shift did not have the intended effect, however. Instead it was used to consolidate Irish machine control over the city, whose reputation for political corruption only deepened over the next 25 years (Heath 1998). The narrative of renewal appears to have gone underground only to resurface in the 1940s when mayoral candidate John B. Hynes promised to reform the rampant corruption of the political machine and usher in a 'New Boston' in both practice and national reputation (O'Connor 2001). The allure of Hynes' New Boston must have taken hold, despite his failure to fully deliver, because the narrative continued to resurface. The next two mayors – John Collins and Kevin White - used the phrase as their rallying cry for urban redevelopment, even after the disastrous bulldozing of the working class West End so famously chronicled by sociologist Herbert Gans. If for Hynes the New Boston was about ending political corruption, for Collins and White it was also about modernizing downtown and bringing economic development to the city center, just as the Boston 1915 movement had endeavored to do so many years before (O'Connor 2001).

While White focused on downtown, however, the neighborhoods exploded. School desegregation brought to public attention much more than Boston's rampant racism. It also opened up a machine based on ethnic solidarity and white privilege that Hynes had never expelled from city government, particularly on the elected school committee and city council, and exposed the poverty of Boston’s neighborhoods black and white alike in the shadow of
downtown’s new skyscrapers. The New Boston, it turned out, still had a lot of the old. Of course, the intense racism and poverty of the city was no secret to the people of color or the low income people who experienced them every day. Nonetheless, as Boston’s fractures came to a head, the collectivity that constituted the city was forced to grapple with its identity in a way it didn’t when these tensions simmered just below the surface.

**Boston’s Social Geography at the Time of the Crisis**

Boston’s social makeup and organization are critical not only to how the crisis unfolded, but also to how the crisis is remembered and understood in the contemporary context. In order to understand how school desegregation became a cultural trauma and how that trauma is remembered and contested today, we must first explore the urban terrain. In particular, here I explore the demographics of the city at the time of the crisis, the neighborhood structure of the city, and the role that schools played in within this structure.

School desegregation occurred during a period of population decline and economic hardship in the city. Boston reached its population peak in 1950 at just over 800,000 people, a result largely of robust European immigration in the early 20th century. Though school desegregation is often blamed for white, suburban flight in the city, the trend actually began in the 1950s just as it did across the country (O’Connor 2001). At the time of school desegregation in 1974 the suburban shift was already in full effect, with the population reaching its low point of 560,000 in 1980 (Melnik 2011), before beginning a slow and steady increase that has continued to the present (the 2010 census estimates Boston’s population at nearly 620,000 [United States Bureau of the Census 2010]). While the population declined, Boston, like cities across the nation, struggled as high inflation and an economic depression set in. Meanwhile, federal funds for many of the urban renewal projects that had been planned in the 1950s and 1960s dried up, leaving neighborhoods struggling with a housing stock in disrepair (O’Connor 2001).
The school desegregation crisis also occurred in the context of changing racial and ethnic demographics in the city. Boston’s African American population had been slowly but steadily on the rise throughout the mid-twentieth century due to the great migration. Though still relatively small, this population had become increasingly politically relevant through the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and 70s. At the same time immigration patterns shifted with a rise in Central American and Caribbean immigrants, as well as Puerto Rican migrants. Nonetheless, at the time desegregation occurred, Boston was still largely a white city, with a growing black minority and smaller ethnic enclaves of Latinos and Asians. Students of color, however, made up a larger proportion of the school system, including a 35% black student body.

Despite being largely a white city for all of its existence since its founding through school desegregation, Boston was not necessarily homogeneous or harmonious. It’s geography of neighborhoods as competing ethnic enclaves was critical to school desegregation, the crisis over school desegregation, and how the story is told today. Up to the early 19th century Boston was a small city of largely Anglo-Saxon protestant stock with a small African American population segregated in part of the city’s Beacon Hill section. Throughout the 19th century the city grew rapidly in both size and population through landfill projects, the annexation of neighboring towns, and European immigration, especially from Ireland. The old guard “Boston Brahmins” worked hard to retain power, including controlling housing construction so that the poorer Irish and other immigrants could only live in certain sections of the city (O’Connor 2001, Newman and Holton 2006). The new immigrants brought new political styles, adopting the ward system to meet the needs of their constituencies through patronage politics (O’Connor 2001). By the early 20th century, when Boston hits its population peak, the city consisted of a center and a patchwork of ethnic enclaves, each with its own political networks. This trend continued
through the mid-twentieth century, though the end to the ward system consolidated power in the hands of the mayor.

Schools played a critical role in neighborhood politics and the politics of the city. Without the ward committee system, the school committee became an important avenue for gaining political influence. Meanwhile schools themselves became critical bargaining tools in urban renewal projects, with neighborhoods looking to get modernized facilities as a part of any renewal plans (Cronin 2011). School attendance was by neighborhood, but it was also kept racially segregated by the all-white, mostly Irish American school committee. As was shown in the court desegregation order, black students living close to white schools would be bussed further to black schools and vice versa (Morgan v. Hennigan 1974). Furthermore, while conditions in all of the schools were less than ideal, exposes such as the Jonathan Kozol’s (1967) *Death at an Early Age* highlighted how schools for students of color were extremely resource-deprived – with students sharing decades-old books in overcrowded classrooms.

By the time school desegregation occurred in 1974, Boston’s neighborhoods were deeply entrenched in a system of race, class, and power politics. Influenced by the civil rights movements and other social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, many of Boston’s neighborhoods had been politically activated/united through collective efforts to negotiate urban renewal (Vrabel 2014). South Boston, a poor, white, and mostly Irish neighborhood (though also home to many other white ethnicities) is perhaps most remembered in the city for its opposition to busing and school desegregation. Several other mostly white neighborhoods would also play a role in the citywide ‘antibusing’ movement, including Charlestown, East Boston, parts of Dorchester and Hyde Park. West Roxbury, a more suburban-style neighborhood on the edge of the city was also mostly white and antibusing/desegregation, but was more affluent and therefore had a different response (Formisano 1991). Less has been
written about the pro-busing/desegregation movement. Certainly it had its heart in Boston’s black community – Roxbury – though it was at the same time more geographically diffuse - with individuals from across the city coming together to support school desegregation.

The largely Chinese Chinatown and the diverse black/Latino South End also had complicated relationships to school desegregation due to many different positions on both desegregation and busing in these neighborhoods. Chinese families who had recently negotiated with the city for a new school building in Chinatown, found themselves in the position to be bused to the white Irish ethnic enclave of Charlestown, with little communication in their native language or support for bilingual education services. Chinese families organized a boycott that lasted for nine days until their demands around student safety and services were met (Liu et al 2008). Nonetheless, throughout the desegregation process, Chinese youth often found themselves embroiled in the racial strife of the city, facing tensions with white and black students alike. Latino families and activists were no strangers to education politics in the city and state, having fought for and won bilingual services the several years before desegregation. Garrity’s order initially neither took into account the needs of bilingual students, nor the complex racial identification of Latinos, where both phenotypically white and black children might reside in the same family. An activist organization was formed, El Comite de Padres pro Defensa de la Educacion Bilingue, which sued for violation of bilingual education laws. El Comite was subsequently added as a plaintiff in Morgan V. Hennigan, where it remained critical actor for the remainder of the court’s intervention (Melendez 1981). Like the Chinese community, however, Latino youth still found themselves caught in racial strife as they were bused out of their communities. Despite their active involvement in the desegregation crisis in the city, both of these communities are largely excluded from the prevailing narratives of desegregation, which is most often told as a black/white, Roxbury/South Boston conflict.
Remembrance of school desegregation, both in how it unfolded and how it is remembered is very much intertwined with the social geography of the city, both as it was then, and how it is today. As I shall show in the following sections, the story of the crisis is a story of political power and social movements at the intersection of neighborhoods, race, and class. Indeed each of these elements is at various times code words for each other fraught with meaning that only someone knowledgeable about the city’s history and demographics can pick up on. Before we turn to the contemporary understanding of the crisis, let us first explore how this story has been structured over time.

**Boston’s School Desegregation Crisis: An Evolving Narrative**

From a sociological perspective, any attempt to tell the story of school desegregation is a process of representation that occurs in a social context, in which certain elements are included, others excluded. When we commit to one narrative, we necessarily leave out others. Studies of social or collective memory focus on memory as a social process not based solely on recollections rooted in individual experiences, but also on what we learn from others (Schudson 1989; Schuman and Scott 1989; Zerubavel 1996). Story-telling is thus a central component of the construction of shared memories of the past. Stories of the past actively shape how we understand the present and act within it (Olick and Levy 1997; Ewick and Sibley 2003). These narratives are not, however, constructed in a vacuum: people tell stories and understand the past in relationship to the cultural narratives that are available to them in the present (Schudson 1989; Somers 1994; Ewick and Sibley 1995; Polletta 2006).

While some studies of social memory show how narrative can be used to build consensus, others have focused on how it can be a site of considerable contention as the past is used to define the present. Memories are shaped in the context of contemporary social dynamics of power and stratification - they are used both to legitimate these dynamics and to contest them
Because memory is socially constrained, however, interested actors cannot reconstruct the past in any way that serves their needs. These 'mnemonic battles' take place within the context of pre-existing histories and cultural narratives (Schudson 1989; Zerubavel 1996; Olick 1999a). Events which precipitated a large scale change in the social order thus provide particularly fertile ground to explore such contestation. These social traumas can challenge collective identity and are not easily integrated into the dominant social narrative (Olick 1999b; Nagel 2002).

Recognizing the variable and contentious nature of social memory can make it difficult for sociologists to tell a story, especially a history which we cannot claim through ethnographic expertise. And yet, though this is not in fact a study of history, some context is required. I must say something about the history of school desegregation itself before I can explain how this history is remembered and mobilized in the contemporary city. In order to tell this story it is important to first understand the context of how the story has been told before. I will then proceed to use the conceptual framework of cultural trauma to define the multiple elements of this highly contentious history.

The most well-known telling of Boston's school desegregation crisis history is undoubtedly J. Anthony Lukas' (1985) Pulitzer Prize-winning Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families. A journalist, Tony Lukas spent several years combing the historical record, interviewing actors, and developing an ethnographic rendering of three demographically distinct Boston families as the crisis developed (Hancock 2014). The result is an impressive tome weaving together history with personal story that recounts nearly a decade of struggle in the city, starting with the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and concluding with the white flight that marked the 70’s and 80’s in Boston. At the same time the book explores the impact of school desegregation on families and neighborhoods through the
stories of the Divers, a liberal middle class family living in Boston’s South End, a diverse inner city neighborhood, the Twymons, a low-income black family living in Boston’s mostly black community of Roxbury, and the McGoffs a low-income white family living in the poor white neighborhood of Charlestown. The work is heavy on human interest, with deeply detailed renderings of each of these families set alongside in-depth explorations of five white powerbrokers in the city (school committee member Louise Day Hicks, Federal Judge W. Arthur Garrity, Catholic Cardinal Humberto Medeiros, Boston Globe Editor Thomas Winship, and Boston Mayor Kevin White.)

In the final pages of the book Lukas captures the views of the middle class white family he traced as they move out of the city:

...in the wake of King’s assassination, [Colin Diver] and Joan had addressed their professional careers and personal lives to the racial crisis, in particular to the Kerner Commission’s solemn warning that we were becoming two societies, one white and one black. As the decade wore on, Colin came to perceive the ‘American dilemma’ less in purely racial and legal terms, more in class and economic terms... Eventually, he believed, the fundamental solution to the problems of a city like Boston lay in economic development...

Lukas’ depiction of Colin Divers’ beliefs about race and class in the city as he prepared to make a move to one of Boston’s wealthy suburbs, tracks the argument that arises through the development of the book – that the battle over school desegregation was largely a crisis in class relations, with well-intentioned wealthy whites imposing a solution to segregation on poor whites and blacks. Lukas doesn’t explicitly deny racism or make it secondary – he acknowledges the racism of the anti-busing community, but at the same time emphasizes their reaction to having a legal remedy imposed by outsiders who do not understand the city. This narrative of a class based struggle is also reinforced through his focus on contrasting the power struggles of the wealthy with the experiences of everyday families.
Published in 1985, more than ten years after the crisis reached its peak with a federal court order and subsequent enactment, many felt that *Common Ground* was the comprehensive story of ‘Boston’s busing crisis’ – a punctuation mark on a painful city history. Kai Erikson wrote in a New York Times review of the book in 1985 that “This is a huge and marvelous work, many years in the making. It has the feel of a project that simply grew until it had almost taken on a life of its own - ideas generating ideas, information creating information, the study itself maturing according to a calendar of its own devising. That J. Anthony Lukas could master so much material and make such good sense of it is one of the book's marvels.” This assessment has withstood the test of time. A recent retrospective in *The Columbia Journalism Review* provides a glowing assessment: “Anthony Lukas was a perfectionist in a world that is far from perfect. Common Ground is probably as close to that ideal as journalism can get” (Hancock 2014).

While *Common Ground* may have come to rest as the dominant scholarly narrative of Boston’s school desegregation crisis, it has not been without significant detraction from multiple perspectives. In her unpublished manuscript, *The Black Educational Movement in Boston*, well-known black Boston activist Ruth Batson (2001) proclaims that by excluding black community leadership from any significant role in the story, Lukas erased Black Boston’s history:

One of the most devastating and distorted views of Boston public school history was the publication in the 1985 of the book *Common Ground* by J. Anthony Lukas...JOHN ANTHONY LUKAS STOLE OUR MOVEMENT... In spite of all his accolades and skills as a writer, Lukas does a shoddy job of portraying the true desegregation era in Boston. It seems to matter little that the contributions of black activists were minimized, omitted, or reported negatively in Mr. Lukas’ book. The book completely leaves out the struggle that was carried out for so many years by black activists in Boston. When the book was first published, many of us who had labored long and hard in the battle for educational equity felt as if we had been cut off at our knees.

Scholars have also pointed out that *Common Ground* and other master narratives have excluded the struggles of Asian and Latino communities (Rodriguez 2001; Liu et al 2008). Meanwhile,
white families who stayed in the city through desegregation also feel their perspective was left out of the story. Through an oral history project at Suffolk University, one woman commented: “We felt that the book focused on the negatives not the positives, and tragically, the couple that were touted in the South End, the Divers, Joan and Colin Diver, took their kids out of school. And my point was, why didn’t you find somebody who kept their kids in the school because you’re giving a very lopsided view of many of us who struggled and had to compensate” (Hardenbergh 2006). Finally, Robert Dentler, who worked closely with Judge W. Arthur Garrity to construct the federal court order to desegregate Boston’s schools, had his own critique, arguing that Lukas’ book focuses on Garrity’s choices without fully digging into to the city’s entrenched political culture: “This is storybook stuff... It was fashioned locally as part of the means for exculpating Bostonians from the implications of their own uncompromising commitments to the status quo. Lukas serves as the chronicling outsider who collects, sifts, and weaves a more complete fabric of exculpation out of the stuff of these local legends” (Dentler 1987).

Another widely read full length monograph on school desegregation, Boston Against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s by Ronald Formisano (1991), focuses even further in on the antibusing movement in Boston. Formisano makes the argument that the reasons for the antibusing movement were more complex than just an issue of class antagonism and that ultimately we must understand the crisis at the intersection of racism and class inequities. As a narrative of school desegregation, however, Boston Against Busing suffers a similar problem though it tells a different narrative than Common Ground: it focuses on the white resistance to busing to the exclusion of multiple other stories. Historian Jeanne Theoharis takes on Boston Against Busing as another in a larger genre of works devoted to white
resistance to busing: “This literature naturalizes, rather than investigates, why racism becomes the chosen response for many political alienated working-class whites” (Theoharis 2003:140).

**The story today: Multiple and Competing Narratives**

In her essay *Places and their Pasts*, Geographer Doreen Massey (1995) suggests that one way to address the problem of a narrative that tell a seamless story is to add our own different narrative to the fold. This is Formisano’s (1991) approach in *Boston Against Busing*, where he deliberately provides us with an alternative story to *Common Ground* that is meant to stand alone. Massey goes on however, to argue that a more radical history of place would involve “a way of understanding which, in the end, did not try to seal a place up into one neat and tidy ‘envelope of space-time’ but which recognized that what has come together, in this place, now, is a conjunction of many histories and many spaces.

Massey speaks of the histories of places, but I argue the same is true for events, which are, of course, contextualized within places. Though at first Boston’s school desegregation may appear to be a singular series of actions and reactions, a radical history of this era would recognize the multiple histories that fed into and out of that event. Many authors have added their own piece to this, to help build this more comprehensive, yet radical, history including Batson (2001), Theoharis (2003), MacDonald (2007) and Green (2000) among others. Additionally, another line of historical works such as King (1981), Cronin (2011) and Vrabel (2014) contextualize desegregation within education and activism in the city. Though I would like to give a ‘radical history’ of school desegregation, I am afraid the multiplicity it requires leaves me without the space. This work is not first and foremost a history of school desegregation in Boston, and my field work has not been in the historical record. I will have to offer instead what Beth Roy (1999), in her work on memories of the desegregation of Little Rock High School in Arkansas, refers to as a “base-line narrative” told “not because it is the ‘true’
version, but because it is the one most likely to resonate with the reader's own recollections” (p.6).

In his work on cultural trauma, Jeffrey Alexander (2004a) outlines several elements of trauma narrative which I use here as a roadmap in constructing a narrative to guide us through the rest of this work: *the nature of the pain, the nature of the victims, and attribution of responsibility*. In other words we must know what pain was experienced, who experienced the pain and who caused the pain. In addition, Alexander argues that we must also understand how the victims are reacted to by the larger audience in the construction of a trauma narrative. Using these elements I construct here not a history, but a story stitched together from many smaller stories I heard through the course of my fieldwork, a base-line narrative of Boston's school desegregation crisis which allows for multiplicity and contestation.

*The Nature of the Pain:* The first element of a trauma narrative is a basic description of what happened. Here, at the very beginning of the story we must deal with a critical question, ‘What was the nature of the pain of Boston’s school desegregation crisis?’ only to find that this is indeed a highly contested element. The master narrative, the most commonly told narrative I encountered in fieldwork and media research, frames the nature of the pain around ‘busing.’ This is a story that starts in the summer of 1974, when a federal court judge, W. Arthur Garrity ruled that the Boston Public Schools (BPS) were deliberately, *de jure*, segregated by the Boston School Committee, and laid out a court-ordered plan to desegregate the city’s schools which included busing students across neighborhood lines in order to racially desegregate the schools. By the fall of 1974, when school desegregation began, several of Boston’s traditionally white neighborhoods, including most famously South Boston, had launched a full on resistance to what they termed ‘forced busing,’ which included rallies, marches, the stoning of school buses, and a school boycott. Inside the schools racial tensions between students flared, leading to fights
and even small riots. Despite this resistance, school desegregation proceeded with the support of city government under the watchful eyes of ‘the judge’, who retained control of the BPS for several years. During this time white flight from the school system made desegregation obsolete, rendering busing a failure. The narrative of busing, as described above, is often told to be a story of class antagonisms, with the wealthy liberal elite imposing a legal remedy on poor blacks and poor whites while they escape either through private schools or suburban residence.

An alternative narrative to ‘busing’ frames the nature of the pain of school desegregation around racism. This story starts many years before 1974 (though perhaps much earlier) with the Boston School Committee resistance to and circumnavigation of efforts to secure an education for black students (and other students of color) at the very least equal to those of white students in Boston. This resistance to quality education for black students led the NAACP to file a lawsuit which resulted in a court order, but only after years of struggle by activists trying alternative tactics. The story of white resistance to desegregation (and flight from the school system) remains much the same in this narrative, but the emphasis is not in the failure of a social policy, but in the trauma of intense racism which hindered the success of a social policy. Of course there are also many variations to the class/race, busing/desegregation narratives which seek to acknowledge the complexity and intersectionality of these issues.

The Nature of the Victims and the attribution of responsibility: As Alexander acknowledges, the elements of trauma narratives he presents are not, in reality, linear, but instead intertwined and “continuously cross-referential” (2004:12). It is nearly impossible to separate the nature of the victims and the attribution of responsibility in telling Boston’s school desegregation crisis. This is because each victim implies a different attribution of responsibility and vice versa. There are three main victims that surface in narratives of the school desegregation/busing crisis: blacks, poor whites, and Boston’s neighborhoods. Blacks are framed to be the victims of either poor
whites (in the busing narrative), or a system of white supremacy (in the racism narrative). Poor whites and Boston’s neighborhoods are both framed to be the victims of either the federal government and Judge W. Arthur Garrity in particular or the Boston area’s ethnic elites (the upper-class ‘two-toilet’ Irish along with White Anglo Saxon Protestants) in general.

Each of the victims named above features in different variations of the ‘busing narrative’ of Boston’s school desegregation crisis. For some, the victims of the story are Boston’s black population at the hands of white aggressors who resisted ‘busing.’ Buses full of black students were stoned, homes were firebombed, and racist epithets were hurled with impunity, all by an aggressive racist populace which reared its head against busing for desegregation. Meanwhile a complicit political power structure sat idly by, tepidly calling for peace, but refusing to give either outright support for school desegregation or outright condemnation for antibusing activities.

For others those very aggressors were the victims of the story. Busing, in this telling, was a civil rights issue for the poor, with its resisters using the tactics of civil disobedience learned directly from the Civil Rights Movement. Despite this resistance, poor whites were forced by elites who didn’t understand their situation to go to schools outside of their neighborhoods, with the collusion of a repressive police force. The media exacerbated the situation by focusing on and sensationalizing violence to the exclusion of reporting the grievances of law-abiding citizens. Meanwhile the education that poor whites received in their own neighborhoods wasn’t significantly better than those received in other neighborhoods, and no education was improved through the tactic of busing.

Another version of the busing narratives focuses on the harm busing did to communities as whole entities. Under this telling the racism of poor whites is sometimes downplayed and a geographic story of neighborhoods is told instead, where protestors were expressing a desire to
retain schools that were directly related to their physical community. The victims are sometimes also extended to be all of Boston’s neighborhoods, which are framed as being racial/ethnic enclaves equally disrupted and torn apart through a project of elite social engineering.

Sometimes the attribution of blame in the ‘busing narrative’ focuses almost solely on W. Arthur Garrity, the federal court judge from Wellesley, one of Boston’s wealthiest suburbs. Garrity is alternatively seen as well-intentioned or vindictive, but in either telling he was an outsider who constructed a plan for a city he couldn’t understand. A more systemic analysis focuses on antagonisms between an oppressed Irish underclass at the hands of White Anglo Saxon Protestants at the turn of the twentieth century which later evolved into a two-tiered class system amongst the Irish, pitting the working classes (living in isolated enclaves like South Boston) against the “two-toilet” or “lace curtain” Irish (living in in the suburbs or in certain neighborhoods of the city, but sending their children to catholic schools). This systemic version of class antagonisms focuses on how the power structure ignored the needs of poor communities and refused to address the issue of segregation themselves.

In the racism narrative, the victims of the school desegregation are, not surprisingly, Boston’s black community and other communities of color. Unlike in the busing narrative however, the attribution of blame focuses both on anti-busing protestors (who are held culpable for their own racist actions) and on the systems of white supremacy which enabled an inequitable system of education before, during, and after school desegregation. In this story the school desegregation was a crisis in racial (and intersecting class) relations in Boston that could only be interrupted (however imperfectly) by intervention from the federal government. Even in this narrative, the dominant story is typically framed within the binary of black and white. However, other communities, particularly Asian and Latino, have their own narratives of
desegregation which center on the dispersal of their communities and a lack of attention to their specific needs, especially in terms of bilingual education,

*The Relationship of the Victims (and Aggressors) to the Wider Audience* Alexander argues that the resonance of a cultural trauma over time, and its relationship to the present, is mediated in part through how the victims are constructed vis-à-vis a broader audience. In this case, the construction of both the victims and the aggressors in relation to the city today has significant implications for how the trauma is related to the present in the city, a topic I will continue to turn to in further chapters. The ‘busing’ narrative at its broadest constructs the city itself as a victim to outside aggressors. Within the city it is thus conceived as a trauma, but also as an aberration from the past which need not be continually addressed. If we were all victims, than we need not address the issue of aggressors. Even where poor whites are conceived of as the aggressors, they are told to be gone from the city – either as an older generation who has aged out or a group who ultimately participated in white flight after losing the battle against busing. From the more systemic perspective of the racism narrative of the crisis, however, desegregation remains imminently relevant to issues of equity and access facing the city today. These two relationships to history will be taken up in closer detail in chapters two through four of this work.

Alexander’s framework for cultural trauma is a useful guide for drawing out each element of the trauma narrative. To understand Boston’s school desegregation crisis we must understand how the pain, victims and aggressors are understood and related to a larger audience. However, although Alexander does allow that trauma narratives are often contingent and polarizing, his framework does not take this fully into account. As we can see there is no singular trauma narrative of this crisis, but rather multiple, overlapping, and at times competing elements of this story.
The Contemporary Context of a Historical Crisis

As a cultural trauma which surfaced inequities previously hidden beneath the surface, Boston’s school desegregation crisis has become a critical point of comparison for the contemporary city. How the city has changed since the 1970s is a point of debate that is laden with meaning about the urban identity. The ‘new Boston’ narrative continues to be relevant to how the story of the past is told and understood. Nonetheless, as the remainder of this work argues, debates about similarity and difference to that era to continue to have salience, particularly along the axes of race and class dynamics and school quality in the city.

While school desegregation challenged the ‘new Boston’ narrative, this narrative has continued to play a role in the urban identity after the crisis. In 1985, ten years after school desegregation, Raymond Flynn, a man once known as a 'moderate' in the anti-busing movement, was now mayor, and the 'new Boston' had taken on a new dimension: the narrative now included a Boston beyond racism and violence. In a 1985 forum at the John F. Kennedy Presidential library on the then recently published Common Ground, Flynn re-fashioned the 'new Boston' as the 'real Boston' – one that did not need to relive the history, but one which needed to find its 'common ground' as a city of neighborhoods in order to move forward. Even in his rejection of the new/old dichotomy, Flynn reinforces it - arguing for change and renewal for the city to meet its fullest potential (Forum on Common Ground 1985).

One hundred years since New Boston magazine chronicled efforts to rationalize the city, all the elements of the 'new Boston' as a discursive struggle are still evident in contemporary Boston politics – the city continue to be defined by the presence or lack political transparency, how friendly it is to businesses and innovation, and how diverse and tolerant it is. Contemporary examples can be found in media, city government and civic society. In the city’s recent mayoral election to replace a twenty year incumbent, Globe columnist Joan
Venocchi one again tried to reframe the narrative, this time as about class divisions in the city: “Forget about new Boston versus old Boston. The real issue is rich Boston versus poor Boston and whether the next mayor cares enough to do something about it” (Vennochi 2013). For others the New Boston is about racial diversity and leadership. The city government’s Office of New Bostonians focuses on the needs of the city’s large and diverse immigrant population. Much has been made of Boston becoming a ‘majority-minority’ city, though others point out that the halls of power remain increasingly white (Mohl and Herman 2013). Meanwhile, a recently formed “Future Boston Alliance” bemoans the city’s lack of commitment to its creative class, arguing that Boston will become a world-class city only when it embraces innovation and the arts, and better supports its young urban professionals (Future Boston n.d).

The crisis over school desegregation disrupted the narrative of Boston as a city of high culture committed to freedom and racial equality. It also disrupted the narrative of a ‘new’ city that was modern, rational, and politically transparent. To repair this disruption – to hold onto the image of a liberal, egalitarian city, the crisis itself has become a part of the new Boston narrative. The city remains on the verge of new-ness – always almost diverse, cutting-edge, and transparent. The new Boston is defined vis a vis the old which in turn yields a prescription for what lies next. The old Boston – racist, corrupt, parochial – needs deep introspection and full reform, while the new Boston - tolerant, transparent, innovative – need only be tweaked to continue its march towards progress. This is where the discursive struggle lies over Boston’s identity today, and a critical context in which to understand how the story of school desegregation is understood in the contemporary city and how it is used in urban politics.

Each side of this equation, of course, can be supported by facts. A 2011 report from the Metropolitan Area Planning Commission on the state of equity in metro Boston highlighted many of these seeming contradictions (Arcaya and Grogan 2011). Contemporary Boston is
indeed significantly more diverse than Boston in the 1970s, at 47% white, non-Hispanic, 18% Hispanic or Latino, 9% Asian, and 24% Black (US Census 2010). Within these broad racial groupings exists considerable ethnic diversity, including, for example, Haitian, Dominican and Vietnamese families – some new immigrants and others who have begun to build generations within the city. However diversity is not equal to integration, and both regional and within-city numbers suggest that Boston continues to rank high in segregation among US cities (Arcaya and Grogan 2011). This segregation extends into Boston’s schools, where only approximately 13% are classified as white (McArdle, Osypuk and Acevedo-Garcia 2010). Overall Boston Public schools have improved in both resources available to students and on measures of academic achievements (including graduation rates and testing scores). Despite this improvement, an achievement gap between persists across both racial and class lines, which some scholars nationally have reframed as an opportunity gap.

Finally, the economic status of the city had changed significantly with its move towards development of a high tech and knowledge economy. The benefits of this economic improvement have not been spread equally, however. Gentrification is an issue in many of Boston’s neighborhoods, including South Boston, which remains a mostly white neighborhood, but is now home to a wealthier population, and Roxbury, which has remained the heart of Boston’s black community but is also diversifying due to gentrification. Other neighborhoods have undergone a more complete overhaul since the 1970s, such as Hyde Park, which was then mostly Irish American and is now considerably more diverse, including a sizeable population of Haitian immigrants.

There is no question that Boston has changed since the 1970’s, but there is plenty of room for debate about the quality of that change and what problems persist in the city. Facts about increasing diversity, educational achievement, and economic development support beliefs
about a city changed for the better. From this perspective, one of the major hurdles is for Boston to change its reputation for being racist and unwelcoming in the 1970s. Facts about segregation, achievement/opportunity gaps, and gentrification support beliefs about persistent inequities. From this perspective, the city needs to continue to work on and take equity issues seriously.

**Conclusion**

When a city is defined against its past, then history becomes a critical component of the urban narrative. We need a collective understanding of what we were in order to define what we are not. Naming a place-based event as a cultural trauma provides a conceptual framework for understanding why this past must be continuously reckoned with as a part of the urban political process. As I have shown above, the narrative of Boston’s school desegregation is a highly contested story situated within larger discursive debates over the city. Though the collective identity of Boston as a liberal, egalitarian city was certainly disrupted, narratives of who was ultimately traumatized and by whom are still unsettled. As we shall see, this contestation extends forward to the present as contemporary actors work to make sense of the present through the past.

Boston’s school desegregation crisis has thus worked its way into the city’s identity – something to be defined against and negated in the search for newness. As a cultural trauma, school desegregation is not merely a historical curiosity of 40 years ago, it is an event dense with symbolic meaning - a flashpoint of social struggles in the city that both pre- and post-date the actual crisis. In the framework of a local sociology, the school desegregation crisis is not simply a history, but an ongoing element which makes Boston as a place today and thus component of the arena of urban politics. In urban politics, the result is a question of the relevance of this history which belies a strategy for the present and future: are racial inequities relevant to the city today? Because school desegregation was a cultural trauma which dramatically raised this
question, issues at the intersection of race and class (especially in education) in the city today demand a story of contemporary inequities that reckons with Boston’s school desegregation crisis. How this story is told has a meaningful relationship to the claims that follow. In the chapters that follow I explore how in the case of the student assignment reform, defining the past is part of a process of setting a table for change, as well as contesting this change.
CHAPTER 2: MAKING MEANING FROM CULTURAL TRAUMA

“The history is still here. The history is present” Monica informed me in a conversation about the role of race in Boston’s student assignment system (Interview May 2013). Monica asserted this with a confidence that comes with years of experience, having been present for school desegregation crisis in 1974 and having closely followed Boston’s most recent process to reform student assignment. She does not need William Faulkner (“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” [Faulkner 1950]), nor Maya Angelou (“History, despite its wrenching pain cannot be unlived…” [Angelou 1993]), because she has lived the past and sees its continuity into the present with a vivid clarity that she finds to be undeniable.

Not everyone involved in Boston’s student assignment reform process felt the same way, however. In a separate conversation, Peter, who was on the recent city’s External Advisory Committee (EAC) tasked with reforming student assignment to schools in Boston, responded to the idea that some people felt Boston’s desegregation history had a role to play in the policy making process: “I spent a lot of time saying ‘get over yourselves’ in my head. ‘You’re really talking about twenty years ago? Thirty years ago?’ It’s really not relevant today. Just not relevant” (Interview April 2013). For Peter, who can also remember school desegregation, looking to the past was a distraction from the pressing issues at hand in the present. This is a point he returned to repeatedly, and with confidence equal to Monica, throughout our interview.

From a sociological perspective, one could argue that Monica and Peter’s disagreement about the contemporary relevance of the cultural trauma that was school desegregation in Boston is already settled. There is a large body of literature focusing on the role of social memory which supports Monica’s point: that through both historical contingencies and processes of meaning making, remembering the past is an essential component of making sense of the present. Yet despite calls for a historical turn, inquiries into the role of the past remain
largely confined to the study of social memory, with those studying urban political economy and urban policy construction for the most part uninterested in the impact of meaning-making through history on cities. Furthermore, Peter marshals some persuasive evidence to support his perspective: “In terms of your topic having started with these long conversations about race and difference, I want to point out it was never a major conversation at the end,” he tells me (Interview April 2013). From my ethnographic eye, I must concede Peter’s point: school desegregation history, and the issues of race equities it raised, was not in fact, a source of major public conflict in Boston’s process to reform student assignment, where it had been before. As I shall show, on the other hand, understandings of the relationship between the city’s past and present did underlie basic policy disagreements.

We cannot, then, take it as a given that history is present in urban politics, either from the standpoint of the literature or in this case specifically. Research on social memory points us to two questions which we must answer in order to determine the role of remembering. First, was the past relevant to meaning-making about the present, and second, was the past used as a tool to make claims in the present? I take on the first question in this chapter, exploring how participants in the process of student assignment reform understood the cultural trauma of school desegregation and its relationship to the present, and how they used this understanding to frame their approach to student assignment reform policy. In the next chapter I delve more deeply into the instrumental use of the past to accomplish and contest policy-making. If we envision urban politics as performance enabled by arena, shared pasts, and relationships, then this chapter explores those shared pasts: how actors in this performance think about cultural trauma and perceive the relationship between this trauma and their beliefs about what policy should be enacted. The next chapter addresses the relationships in this performance directly – how these actors use the past directly in the policy-making process.
I find that, reflecting the divide between Monica and Peter above, depending on their position in the process participants had very different approaches to the relevance of Boston’s cultural trauma to contemporary student assignment policy. Underlying this fundamental disagreement is a set of beliefs about the present and its relationship to the past, reflecting broader discursive divides in the city about the ‘New Boston,’ particularly in regards to racial equity in the city. While the two groups discussed here, EAC members and community advocates, each had their own shared pasts, there was contestation between them. Participants did not report spending a considerable amount of time exploring or debating the historical contingencies of trauma that have shaped the present. Yet my interviews reveal that beliefs about the relationship between the past and present, filtered through discourses of race and racism, contributed to their beliefs about contemporary policy.

**Remembering the Past in the Present**

One of the central preoccupations of social memory studies has been with the durability and malleability of the past. How do memories of the past shape our actions in the present? How do actors in the present use the past as a tool for their own needs? What is the relationship between these two processes? Scholars observing the field of social memory studies have generally identified two approaches to the construction of social memory. The ‘presentist’ approach emphasizes the construction of the past through a lens of the present – either as a tool to serve contemporary needs or as a process of meaning making about the past through contemporary discourses and experiences. The ‘continuity’ approach, on the other hand, emphasizes how the past shapes how people understand the present, either through historic unfolding of events or through the meaning attached to a specific time, place or event. In practice, these processes are complex, intertwined and bound to power relationships - and thus useful conceptual tools for understanding remembering in urban politics.
Olick and Robbins (1998) identify two forms of presentism in social memory studies – instrumental and cultural. Instrumental presentism imagines social memory an entrepreneurial endeavor by those in power to (re)tell the past in a manner that serves the needs of the present, calling to mind Soviet efforts to rewrite history in accordance with ideology or the Orwellian ministry of truth (Schudson 1992). Olick and Levy (1997) suggest two ways that politicians use the past to serve political claims-making: as prohibition and as a requirement. In other words, politicians leverage the past and tell it in a way to say why something cannot or must be done. This use of the past is calculated and rational – applied when needed and abandoned for other strategies when not working.

Cultural presentism, on the other hand, emphasizes that meaning making about the past occurs in contemporary contexts through cultural frameworks. In his Philosophy of the Present, George Herbert Mead (1959) argues that we understand the past only in relation to the present, and thus “the materials out of which the past is constructed lie in the present.” Maines, Sugrue, and Katovich (1983) argue Mead’s theory is an effective tool for analyzing power relations, which often don’t include an understanding of how the past is used as a tool for social control and contestation. Foucault’s (1977) conceptualization the relationship between power, knowledge and memory also operates in this vein. For Foucault, power is inseparable from discourse, which structures knowledge, and with it, memory. Counter-memory is thus an important tool for resistance, as it challenges dominant discourses and power relationships.

Culturalist approaches have documented how a variety of discourses shape social memory and are also countered. In her exploration of Israeli collective memory, for example, Yael Zerubavel (1995) argues that Zionist discourses have shaped memories of the landscape to largely erase Palestinians, and also how those memories have come to be challenged within Israeli society through alternative views. Brodnar (1992) argues that cultural leaders, grounded
in the interests of large institutions and the status quo, draw on patriotism to shape commemoration in the United States, while defenders of vernacular cultures focus draw on their own subcultural frameworks, which may complement or conflict with patriotism, to shape memories. In both cases, dominant discourses have powerful political sway in shaping social memory, but must also contend with counter-memories.

In reaction to presentist theories of social memory, some scholars have argued that the past cannot be recreated in whatever manner suits the needs of the present. Schudson (1989) theorizes three constraints the past places on the present, each of which also relates to similar theories of continuity in social memory studies: the structure of available pasts (path dependence of memories), the structure of individual choice (lessons of the past), and intersubjective conflict (competing memories).

For Shudson the structure of available pasts, the way the story has been told before, matters to the present. Olick (1999a) builds on this idea of the path dependence with the concept of memory genres, arguing that we do not understand the past anew from the present – we remember it in light of the ways it has been remembered before as in scholarship, written histories, and public commemorations. We also remember previous events in a new light based on subsequent events (Cunningham, Nugent, and Slodden 2010). In an investigation of American memories of George Washington, Schwartz (1991) argues that though memories of Washington did change over time to support the needs of the present, previous remembrances also persisted.

Schudson’s second constraint focuses on lessons we take from the past either directly through experience or as part of what Eviatar Zerubavel (1996) terms “mnemonic communities.” In his 1992 book on the collective remembering of Watergate, Schudson builds on this idea by emphasizing a continuity from past to present, arguing that the way the social
memory shapes peoples action in the present has been understudied. Throughout the book Shudson identifies moral lessons that Watergate had for both the realms of journalism and politics that people continue to draw on in the present. Olick and Levy term this aspect of social memory as ‘mythic,’ showing how the past reaches into the present in politics as both a taboo – what cannot be done – and as a duty – what must be done. In addition, there is a social psychological literature following Mannheim’s theory of generational effects, which looks at how individuals from different generations remember events differently, suggesting that time and experiences play an important role in memory, rather than solely the present context (Schuman and Scott 1989). Finally, Schudson’s third constraint is intersubjective conflict – that others may be trying to reconstruct the past in different ways. This constraint has been more thoroughly theorized in terms of power relationships as counter-memory, which I have already discussed above.

The debate over how much the past can be remade in the image of the present brings to light the processual nature of social memories. As both Schwartz (1991) and Olick and Levy (1997) argue, social memory requires a theory which recognizes the ways that social memories impact our actions and the ways we work to shape memories to suit the needs of the present. Olick and Levy thus conceptualize social memory as “an active process of sense-making through time.” So how does this process of sense-making occur within urban politics – where webs of relationships and strategy drive policy-making? Particularly in the case of a policy that references a cultural trauma – one which has shaken and reformed the identity of a city - we can expect that remembering will have a role to play. To understand how social memory operates in urban political processes, however, we must also add to this a theory of place.

**Remembering in place**
If remembering the past is a process of both social understanding and contestation, then how does this process shape cities as large and complex sites of social organization? Rich empirical research on contested memories of major events at the national level are most prominent in social memory studies, e.g. the Holocaust in Germany (Olick and Levy 1997) or the bombing of Hiroshima in both Japan in the United States (Saito 2006) – but various scholars have also begun to look at more localized processes of memory and contestation and to focus specifically on place as a conceptual component of remembering. Studies set in places as diverse of Newcastle, England (Mah 2010), Beirut, Lebanon (Nagel 2002), and Louisville, Kentucky (K’Meyer 2012) demonstrate the ways in which people challenge the accepted histories of place and construct alternative narratives to make the case for social change in the present.

While one body of work on place and memory focuses on spaces of official memory, such as commemorative sites, a growing body of literature drawing largely on the geographical traditions of Massey and Harvey locates emplaced remembering in everyday practices. The turn towards locating an emplaced memory in the everyday is deliberate – a reaction to a bias towards official commemoration throughout social memory studies which tends to view memory as a top down process originated by the state (Degnen 2005). In Britain scholars such as Degnen (2005) and Mah (2010) have documented the rich living memories of place that are constructed while playing card games or chatting in cafes as residents locate each other and the world around them through complex stories of the past. May (1996), meanwhile, connects the construction of identity through place-remembering with global processes of race and class in London. These approaches envision memory as an active process of sense-making about social relationships that happens through time AND place.

This focus on the everyday, however, has been understudied as a direct element of urban politics. This is not to say that memory has been completely excluded – as I discuss in the
introduction, studies of the cultural processes of gentrification and implementation of neoliberal policies have explored remembering as a project of symbolic meaning making in place to support urban policies (Zukin 1989; Smith 1996; Wilson 2004). Such research, however, tends to take a macro-sociological perspective, offering a birds-eye view of how policy is made through the actions and public statements of power players. Such studies suggest a relationship between cultural discourses in the city and remembering, with a focus on the instrumentality of remembering as a way to enact/reinforce policy. As Ellen Berrey (2005) argues in her study of diversity discourse, however, these studies imply that discourse belongs to the political elites, particularly politicians and business coalitions, without investigating how discourse plays out in every day politics. By taking a more on-the-ground perspective of the perspectives of those crafting policy, I aim to look at the role of remembering itself not as a by-product of other social practices, but as a practice in and of itself which impacts how policy-makers approach their work in the first place.

Nonetheless, there certainly is some research in the urban sociological tradition that point to the role of remembering in the everyday performance of politics. In her study of neighborhood gentrification, Blokland (2009) found that historical narratives are central to place-making, impacting how a neighborhood is defined and thus what resources it is able to access. In the New Haven neighborhood she studied, long-time Italian Americans (even those who no longer lived in the neighborhoods) and more-recent gentrifiers emphasized a diverse and vibrant neighborhood with a strong ethnic heritage, which ignored the role and position of their poor black neighbors. Excluded from the history and narrative of the neighborhoods, those residents found it harder to have their needs met through city and social services. Other urban ethnographies also touch on how the past of a neighborhood is re-constructed as it changes (Lloyd 2010, Deener 2012), but do not explore processes of memory directly in how policy is
made. Mario Luis Small’s (2004) study of Villa Victoria shows that narratives about the neighborhood contributed directly to neighborhood participation and varied by cohort – older individuals ‘frame’ the neighborhood differently than younger ones based on their understanding of Villa Victoria’s history. Small’s work explores narrative in a relatively limited context: the impact of cohort on neighborhood participation, but has larger implications. While work on gentrification suggests how narratives are constructed which support elites, Small’s work suggests that narrative and memory are important factors at the grassroots level. More work needs to be done to specify the role narrative plays both across neighborhoods in complex urban systems, and across demographics, including, race, class, and cohort.

Taken together, the literatures on everyday remembering in place and memory construction in urban processes such as gentrification suggest that a focus on place and remembering in urban politics is an area ripe for further empirical research. My research brings this work together to argue for an emplaced understanding of social memory processes in politics, so that we can better understand how local history and culture shape urban policy making. In this chapter I focus on the remembrances of actors within the policy-making process through two groups – the committee members tasked with making policy and the community advocates who participated in this policy making process. I ask how actors in urban politics remember past cultural traumas and what the relationship is between their remembering and their approach to policy making.

First, I discuss the cultural trauma narratives of the school desegregation crisis each group tells. I then take each group in turn to describe their understanding of the relationship between the past and the present, and how this impacts their approach to policy. Finally I connect the meaning-making processes back to the social memory literature to show that participants used cultural discourses of the present to frame a relationship between past and
present. Throughout, I explore how narratives of place factor into these processes of remembering and meaning-making.

**Narrating the Past: Bad Problem, Bad Solution**

In the first chapter I explored scholarly narratives of Boston’s school desegregation crisis, and recounted the crisis from the perspective of a cultural trauma. In order to understand how participants in the student assignment reform process understood and used Boston’s school desegregation crisis, we must understand *their* narratives of that history. At an individual level narratives of this history are more fractured, less complete than the story I stitched together from multiple narratives. In this section I explore the meaning that two groups of participants in the student assignment reform process make of Boston’s school desegregation crisis: members of the External Advisory Committee, which was tasked with making a policy recommendation around student assignment, and community advocates who participated in the EAC process of public meetings and community hearings. Each of these groups ultimately had different approaches to student assignment policy. Here I explore whether these differences related to differing understandings of the cultural trauma of the school desegregation crisis.

In my interviews with participants I asked them about their own personal experience with the crisis, what they knew about the crisis (and how they learned it), and what story they would tell to someone unfamiliar with the history. Though participants varied widely in their experiences and knowledge of the details, some underlying themes emerge across the stories into a common ‘Bad Problem, Bad Solution’ narrative. This narrative emphasizes that race-based inequities in the Boston Public Schools were a serious problem, but that the court-ordered school desegregation that was enacted in Boston as a solution to this problem was also problematic. Although ‘Bad Problem/Bad Solution’ was consistent across my interviews with
EAC members and Community Advocates, instructive differences also emerged, especially in their identification of villains and heroes in the story. EAC members tended to focus on the school committee and leadership in the city, and how their role in perpetuating the inequities which ultimately brought school desegregation. Community advocates, on the other hand, focused on the parents and activist organizations that fought educational inequities in the years leading up to school desegregation. In this section I further elaborate on the ‘Bad Problem, Bad Solution’ narrative and the crucial differences in emphasis among participants.

In their exploration of the role of the Holocaust in German politics, Olick and Levy (1997) found that public narratives of specific events were characterized by an absence of actors, vague terminology, vague references to what happened, and pervasive qualifications about how everyone suffered. Though my interviews were private, I found a similar trend among my respondents, even those who clearly had deep knowledge of the era and even experience. This is not to say a generational gap was not evident: those old enough to remember school desegregation were definitely more detailed in their accounts. In general, however, when I asked what their story of the school desegregation crisis in Boston would be to someone who did not know the history, participants were quick to jump from narrative of the past to meaning making in the present. Take this narrative, for example:

I would honestly have to say that...I would just say...my knowledge would be...there were people who were invested in ensuring that their kids had access to the best schools in their neighborhoods and that other kids or the people didn’t have the same rights to access or they had the same rights to access in their own neighborhoods and that it was perfectly fine to keep the status quo the way it was, because they didn’t want the quality of their school to be affected by the type of kids that would come there if the movement succeeded. There was a lot of anger, passion, mistrust. I would say underhanded dealings and violence and vitriol around the rhetoric around race relations. (Interview April 2013)

This speaker, who claimed to have studied and read about this history, avoids naming actors – villains, heroes, or victims of the story, in a way that seems purposely vague – seemingly to avoid invoking conflict too directly. The speaker chooses to speak in terms of neighborhoods
rather than race; though they spoke clearly about race in other contexts in my interview.

Instead, the speaker moves quickly to the impact of the crisis on the city’s reputation:

It was a very ugly period in the city that up until today has positioned Boston in a very negative light and to this day Boston is paying for that and has paid for that. ‘Cause when you look at other cities where this might have happened, the perception of African Americans specifically and others, Boston is the poster child for sort of the school desegregation topic. It might have happened in other cities it didn’t have the national attention and wasn’t as profound as it was in Boston. So when you look at what people outside Boston, and even inside Boston, think of this city, they have long memories and they remember what happened. I think that is how I would characterize it without knowing all the details of the central strategy issues around it. (Interview April 2013)

Within this framework, however, two clear elements of a narrative about school desegregation emerge. The first is that inequities in the city’s education system were a major problem in the city leading up to desegregation. Many participants framed these as racial although some, like the above speaker, were vaguer – reflecting a colorblind tendency to avoid talking about race. Vague language around race and neighborhood furthermore perpetuates the exclusion of more diverse experiences of school desegregation, including those of Latino and Asian descent, as the master narrative presume a black/white binary.

The second element of the narrative is that school desegregation as it was enacted was a mistake. For some, desegregation itself was not the right track, and for others it was Boston’s specific desegregation plan that specifically was the problem. This ‘bad problem, bad solution’ narrative was relatively consistent across the EAC members and community advocates I interviewed, as well as across race and generation. Consider, for example these two narratives, the first from a white EAC member, and the second from a black community advocate:

Where it went wrong was that we had a school committee that devoted all the good resources, all the money, all the building repairs, all the text books, and all the best teachers to the schools in the white neighborhoods. And the remainder, whatever was left, was for the schools in the black neighborhoods. And we had a federal judge that asked a school committee to do something about that. And by the time some period of time had passed he was begging the school committee to do something about this -to get him off the hook if for nothing else. But we had a committee unfortunately who decided
to make a career out of saying no to a federal judge. They were stirring up emotions with their constituents and turning this into a ladder for their own careers. Finally the judge...I’m oversimplifying obviously...but finally the judge said ok if you won’t do this then the only way I can ensure that there is equal access to resources is by putting them all in the same buildings, then you can’t discriminate against the schools in the black neighborhoods. That’s busing. I have often said that the need for a remedy is undeniable. Judge Garrity had to do something; he should not be criticized for doing something. He had no choice; the school committee gave him no choice. Having said that, the remedy was not... it just didn’t do any good for the city, the schools, or anybody. I don’t want to second guess; I don’t pretend that I could have come up with a more clever or productive remedy than Garrity. I don’t know...but clearly the remedy was a disaster. There is no getting around that. But the need for a remedy was undeniable. (Interview April 2013)

We need equal resources to fund the schools in Roxbury and Dorchester [Boston’s traditionally black neighborhoods], not to send kids on... why are we spending money to send kids on buses to these other schools that aren’t better schools... And again I’m not - I think diversity is very important, but I don’t think there was anything in and of diversity that would lead to improving school quality, particularly because there was no intentionality around respecting people’s cultures. It was just this huge experiment that we’re just gonna throw them together and the schools will be better - or now you get to go to a school where the money was going. I mean they had to stop funding the schools that way anyway. I’m still at a loss. I think that answer to the problem that we were dealing with was not the right answer. And it’s not that I’m against desegregating the schools, it just it didn’t... what did it get us? And the real issue is you had folks on the school committee and the city council who was just racist who were like, “Nope, here’s where we’re putting our resources and the rest of you can fend for yourselves. Then you had the white flight, schools closing... (Interview August 2013)

In each of these cases the speakers focus on the problems of resource distribution by the school committee as the problem, but conclude that busing was not an appropriate solution. In all of my interviews with EAC members and community advocates, only one person, an advocate, affirmatively asserts that school desegregation was the right solution. Though the advocate acknowledges the problems people faced during desegregation, they conclude, “But I think it was worth it for what we were able to accomplish. I think the whole experience really... It opened the district up” (Interview May 2013)

Despite the common overarching narratives across these interviews, there are definitely some differences in emphasis. As already mentioned, some people were willing to name race and racism directly, while others told colorblind narratives that only vaguely alluded to it. Likewise, some focused on inter-ethnic and inter-class conflict where others didn’t. These
differences in the narratives, however, come across only subtly. The most striking difference is in context: community members tended to focus more on the parents and community advocates fighting inequity leading up to desegregation, where EAC members began the story at the court order. In the narrative of the community advocate above, for example, they spend significant space elsewhere in their story on the role of black parents and community elders in efforts leading up to school desegregation, including the creation of community schools in Boston’s primarily black neighborhoods. In contrast, the EAC member makes no mention of these struggles.

Community advocate and EAC member differences in their narratives of the school desegregation crisis correlate with their different positions within the organizational and power structures of the city. At first glance the groups appear similar – on the large part highly educated professionals – many participants worked in Boston’s non-profit sector. EAC members, however, tended to lead or have high up positions in large organizations. Some community advocates were also executives, but of much smaller organizations. Most of the community advocates I interviewed worked in advocacy organizations or organizations interested in community development, while few EAC members were advocates. All of the EAC members had at least a college education, while some of the community advocates had only a high school diploma (though most had graduate degrees). In sum, though nearly all participants described themselves as ‘middle class,’ EAC members tended to work in larger, more powerful organizations (universities, hospitals, business), while community advocates worked and volunteered with small, grassroots advocacy and community-based organizations. This division appears directly related to their different orientations to the context of school desegregation.

As I discussed in chapter one, one of the major critiques of “Common Ground,” the Pulitzer Prize-winning, widely read book on school desegregation, has been that it left out the
struggles for educational equity leading up to desegregation, particularly the work in the black community. The interviewees who I spoke to who provided this perspective did not appear to have gleaned this knowledge from scholarly critiques however, but either from their own experiences, through their participation in the black community, or through their own educational advocacy work. For the community advocates, as we shall see in the next section, they were drawing on a history in which they see their own lineage – a struggle for educational and racial equity. For the EAC members, this was by and large, not a piece of the story which they either knew, or deemed critical to its narrative. The EAC members saw that there were racial inequities along school and community lines, but did not recognize the community struggles against those inequities. The few exceptions on the EAC – those who did recognize the community context – also worked in non-profit community-based organizations close to the grassroots. Though the EAC members and advocates draw on the same narratives, this is a significant divergence that continues into their meaning making about the relationship between this history and the present – to which we now turn.

**Breaking with the Past, Moving Forward: EAC narratives of Past and Present**

Research on social memory tends to focus on how a particular past is remembered. In my interviews, on the other hand, participants made meaning not based solely on their understanding of the city’s history, but through constructing a relationship between that history and the present. In the next two sections I explore what common meaning EAC members and community advocates, respectively, made out of this relationship and how it relates to their approach to student assignment policy.

Like Peter, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, many of the EAC members felt Boston’s school desegregation crisis of the past was irrelevant to the present. However, they in large part arrived at this conclusion in my interviews with them not out of a failure to see any
relationship between the past and present, but through a careful meaning making about the relationship between that history and the present. Three common threads run through EAC members’ narratives of this relationship. First EAC members compared race and class relationships in the past to race and class relationships in the present and found race relations to be much improved, but class relations to be troubling. The second common thread is an understanding that because of the school desegregation crisis some people don’t trust the school district, but that this belief is misguided. Finally, their assessment of school desegregation as a failure and the present as improved is directly related to their approach to school assignment reform in the present – that the city is ready to make a change towards ‘closer to home’ school assignment. Taken together, these three strands represent a belief of a city that is ‘moving forward’ which fits into the larger narrative of a ‘new Boston’ as discussed in chapter one, and also illuminate the role that colorblind ideology plays in this narrative.

Race and Class Relationships

A colorblind narrative that emphasized moving forward through improved racial relationships and the need to shift focus to thinking about class was common in my EAC interviews. In nearly all of my interviews with EAC members, when I asked about contemporary race relations in the city (before we began talking about the school desegregation history) participants went directly to a comparison with the past: though there are still problems, race relations in the city are significantly improved from the 1970s. Many, furthermore, went on to argue that class was the more critical contemporary social division in the city. This assessment was true for both black and white participants, though black participants were less likely to discard race altogether. Consider, for example, this EAC member, who identified as black:

I think there are still issues related to race that have yet to be resolved. But I think it is not as open as it once was. I think the main issue is related to how things break down along class lines and the fact that different racial groups fall into those class categories
much more significantly today than even in the past. You don’t have as much open racial animosity but you have a class structure where half the world doesn’t know how the other half lives. (Interview April 2013)

For many on the EAC, due to the improvement in race relations in the city, school desegregation was a completed past - something that is perhaps important as an item of history, but which had no bearing on their present task. The three people I interviewed who self-identified as white, as well as several other people of color, all expressed a feeling that both race and Boston’s history of school desegregation were not important for their contemporary work on student assignment, and that student assignment should be planned and implemented in a colorblind manner – without reference to skin color. Whites tended to express this perspective from a more explicitly ‘post-racial’ perspective that the racial problems of the past are no longer a contemporary issue. A white EAC member commented on what he saw as a ‘colorblind’ process:

I had people warn me: ‘Oh my God, this is going to be potentially explosive. Don’t you know this is the third rail of Boston politics? It’s race.’ And I disagreed. I said ‘I don’t think so…I think we are a different city now and again we are a younger city...with different attitudes’ and I was right. Going to the EAC I just saw it was just completely. There were color blind people for the most part, they really were. (Interview April 2013)

Like Peter, this respondent depicts racialized conflict as a thing of the past; they viewed the EAC as a colorblind body to which that history was no longer relevant. Another white EAC member, also viewed the history of desegregation as irrelevant to the present task, but felt that they were in the minority on the EAC as someone not approaching the task from a perspective of race:

It didn’t take long at all before someone said ‘this is about race and busing’ and I was actually shocked. I was like ‘no it shouldn’t be about race and busing.’... Once you make it a racial issue, your judgment for the better of the entire city is just done - now you are just representing a small group... It’s a different city. We are dealing with Asian populations we are dealing white populations we are dealing with black populations. We are dealing with socio-economic aspects. There were so many different pieces that to bring it down to that it was...in my opinion you miss the point. (Interview May 2013)
For this participant talking about school desegregation (busing) meant talking about race – which from his colorblind perspective indicated a bias with no place in the process of deciding how students should be assigned to school. This view also arose several times in committee meetings when white committee members raised concerns as to whether it was legal for them to be discussing race in their consideration of school assignment.

The narrative of busing as a white/black problem only reinforced the view of school desegregation as irrelevant to the present. The speaker quoted above draws on a narrative of diversity to talk about the present – in this case by inserting Asians into the present – to say that the contemporary city is too different to have a serious discussion about what happened in the past. This narrative both excludes the ways that the school desegregation crisis may have impacted these diverse communities in its wake, as well as their own real relationships to this history.

*Misplaced Distrust of the District*

The second element in the common narrative of ‘moving forward’ among EAC members is an assertion that some people did not trust the Boston Public Schools due to the school desegregation crisis, but that this mistrust was borne from the trauma of the past rather than rooted in the reality of the present and therefore misguided. This element arises directly from the first – if racial relationships have improved significantly, then trauma is the only reasonable explanation for why others do not see these improvements. This belief allowed EAC members to discount voices who raised issues of inequities. At one extreme of this perspective were EAC members who pathologized those who they viewed as too traumatized by the past to be objective, such as this black EAC member:

I think I kind of felt fortunate to not be carrying that wounding because I think it would have been hard to focus on the task. And if I did have more direct connection to that
piece of Boston's history I'm sure the EAC process would have felt long or longer, I'm sure it would have felt painful, more painful, and I'm sure I would have felt more strongly that we weren't addressing the quality issue enough. I think I would have carried that a lot more. And I completely understand that and I think that would have been my demand if I had experienced it firsthand. But, coming a little more from the outside and just from a very logistical standpoint I think it's productive that the assignment piece is settled or at least has a framework so now everything moving forward can be very clearly about quality. (Interview April 2013)

One Latino EAC member I interviewed even went so far as to describe certain individuals as having post-traumatic stress d(disorder):

I think a lot of people who survived [school desegregation] have PTSD. I would say that the post-traumatic stress is so vivid in the minds of who I call the grandmothers of today - the African American grandmothers - that much as I'd like to move on from it and say it's a new day and its 2013 and lets move past it, with a deep bow of respect to that time let's move on, I have to acknowledge that to some people it really is PTSD and they can't move on 'cause it's really too painful. (Interview April 2013)

Other EAC members focused less on trauma, but still saw a misguided distrust of BPS based on the past, including this black EAC member:

Part of the issue is lack of effective communication, lack of... understanding from the other side, or openness to at least believe. I think part of it is historical. You know, how many times was it said, “We heard this so many times. You promised to do this and you never did it.”? So there is a lot of mistrust of the city; there is a lot of mistrust of the BPS system. (Interview April 2013)

This idea of mistrust for the system despite significant change came up in all of my interviews with EAC members.

A Policy that Moves Forward

The final common element in the EAC narrative of moving forward is a belief that contemporary student assignment policy must separate itself from the trauma of the school desegregation crisis. For many EAC members ‘moving forward’ meant breaking with the past. Peter, the black EAC member quoted in the introduction, was most vocal on this as he continued his point:
I felt focusing on the Boston history detracted from our ability to focus on really understanding the current problems and the immediate useful solutions. Not ignoring the clear inequities – we have them because we screwed up before, why would I go back to look at previous screw ups. We had to commit to going forward. Make sense? (Interview April 2013)

Peter’s beliefs about the importance of this history are directly tied to his beliefs about racial equity in contemporary society – his comment suggests he believes there is racial inequity today, but that it is a result of past actions, more than contemporary race relations; because we cannot change this history, exploring it is irrelevant. This break with the past was crucial for many EAC members who were looking to enact the mayoral mandate of schools ‘closer to home’ – what some called neighborhood or community schools. Because neighborhood schools had been inequitable prior to school desegregation, a point which they all concurred on, one had to understand the present as changed to advocate for a policy change in that direction.

To be clear, not all EAC members were completely committed to breaking with the past. One EAC remember that I interviewed stood out as being very clear about a continuity between the city’s past and present especially in regards to race relations, a perspective which, it was clear from watching the process, several other EAC members held. Nonetheless, this EAC member that I interviewed in particular was satisfied with the outcome of the process, a view they held by making a slightly different link to the past. They argued that neighborhood segregation is and has historically been the root of the problem of race relations in the city, which is a residential rather than school-based issue. The EAC was thus limited, from this perspective, in dealing with issues of school segregation and had a mandate to do what it could to fix a failing system. Another EAC member also saw some importance in reckoning with the past and struggled with it:

On the one hand it’s a fear of spending way too much time rehashing this sense of the past, and on the other hand was a fear of not talking about it and ignoring it, because then we could fall prey to the same mistakes again. It’s balancing the two and saying you know how much is enough to talk and discuss and rehash desegregation and the effects
that it had and the lack of access to opportunity and quality and all that, versus taking a
fresh look and asking people to be - which is a lot to ask - to be open to the idea that this
group could potentially not have any agenda around the school assignment and is purely
‘let’s try to come up with the best system we could possibly come up with given the
constraints that we have as a city, given the constraints of geography, the constraints of
politics, to make it a better system than what we have. And for me personally I took that
to heart, so it was my job is to determine (a) is the current system viable and we all agree
that it probably wasn’t as viable as it could have been, but (b) more importantly, can we
come up with something that is better. Not best, but better. And that was always kind of
like in front of my mind and weighed heavy on my conscience. (Interview April 2013)

This EAC member, like many of the community advocates I will discuss below, ascribed a value
to the idea that we have to understand the past in order to not make mistakes in the present.
Ultimately, however, they joined their fellow EAC members in a presentist, progress oriented
approach to policy making which was intentionally distanced from Boston’s school
desegregation trauma.

The EAC members I interviewed were guided by a narrative of progress – that the city
and school system have changed significantly since Boston’s school desegregation crisis – and a
corollary belief that those who did not see this progress had their judgment clouded by history.
This understanding of the relationship between the past and present was directly linked to their
approach to policy, which can be summarized as ‘moving forward’ – a phrase I heard repeatedly
during the EAC process and in my interviews. Though many of the EAC members argued for the
irrelevance of the past to their work on student assignment moving forward, they at the same
time relied on a specific understanding of the relationship between the past and the present in
their approach to policy making. All protestations to the contrary, school desegregation was a
critical component of their narrative that supported policy change. A diverse group of
individuals with diverse beliefs, experiences and understandings of Boston’s school
desegregation crisis, they generally coalesced around a belief that the city – it’s school system
and it’s race relations - had improved significantly enough from that time period that they had
in a sense a mandate for change: to reduce ‘busing’ – a leftover from desegregation, across the city. Many of the community advocates that engaged with the process drew very different lessons from history. It is to them I now turn.

A Continuity of Experience: Community Narratives of Past and Present

While the EAC members by and large embraced a narrative of progress in the relationship between the past and the present, the community advocates I interviewed argued for an alternative narrative of continuity from past to present. Like the EAC members, they saw school desegregation as a failed project, but took a different lesson: the inequities in the system weren’t fixed then and thus persist into the present. Three common elements of this narrative of continuity thus dispute the moving forward narrative of EAC members. First, community advocates focus on problems of racial equity that persist today. While these inequities may have changed form, they have never truly been addressed. Second, in counter to EAC arguments that they were too mistrustful of the system, the advocates felt that efforts by EAC members and others to look past this historical legacy resulted from a misunderstanding (or willful ignorance) of the systemic nature of race and class inequity. For the community advocates, this continuity between past and present brought them to the conclusion that school assignment was the wrong issue, and that the committee should instead be looking to increase quality as a route to equity.

Persistent Inequities

In my interviews with community advocates, there was generally a sense that things have changed significantly since school desegregation, but their emphasis was more often on persistent problems they viewed as extending from school desegregation. They also tended to see the gains from that era in racial equity and race relations as surface level or exaggerated.
One black community advocate argued that the lack of overt tensions made it easier not to look below the surface, as well as pointing out how a narrative of diversity in the present is used to smooth over patterns of disparity:

I think we've come a long way. That being said, I think we have a long way to go. So we've made, I think, on surface a lot of strides. [We are] still so far in terms of who gets the short end of the stick, whether its issues around jobs, whether its issues around housing, whether its education which is huge. Just looking politically, in that you still make history as the first black woman on the city council, Ayanna Pressley, or the fact that there was an op-ed in the paper yesterday that Boston is one of very few major cities that hasn't had a black mayor or a woman mayor or a person of color mayor period... We call ourselves progressive, this is the birthplace of freedom and democracy, and we still haven't cracked those eggs. And then education... is a period where you see a lot of those disparities. So we have a long way to go and I think for the most part people can get along and feel good about knowing and being friends with people from other races and cultures and there's all - its way beyond black and white now - there's just so many other folks and it makes it so we can all feel good about that, but I think it's still very difficult to dig down deep. On the surface I think everyone's fine, everyone's friends, but to have the harder conversations around race, class, privilege - people don't want to. (Interview August 2013)

Community advocates saw a continuity from Boston's school desegregation history to the present not just in terms of the trauma of individuals and communities involved that some EAC members emphasized, but also in terms of the social relationships and material realities of race and schools in the city. For several of my interviewees, this continuity originated long before school desegregation – an understanding that relates to their narratives of community struggles for education preceding actual desegregation. As one white community advocate put it:

I think it's a second generation, now third generation who have stories from that era. I think it's interesting because the Latino population has a whole different take on the schools without that history of passion and fear and anger. I think it's also the era and the history of racism in this city. It's a whole combination - since then, before then, and then. All those things have impacted. It's not like things suddenly got better. (Interview May 2013)

Not all of the advocates I interviewed saw the relevance of the past so clearly. One white advocate in particular came from a colorblind perspective and spoke from a 'moving forward' narrative:
I think there are certain groups and certain people that no matter what is put on the table at school committee or other places are always going to bring up the racial segregation piece until – I don’t know how to change that. I can’t even fathom how to even think that. Because I think, honestly, I think people’s identities are based on it or group’s identities are based on it, and until we stop identifying ourselves based on one thing, you have a problem because then how do you move forward? (Interview November 2013)

This advocate did, however, think that patterns of inequity persisted, but argued that the shift had been from race-based discrimination to discrimination based on language and disability.

The community advocates took a very different lesson from what many (though not all) saw as the failed project of school desegregation: the problems that precipitated school desegregation had never really been fixed. As one advocate put it:

I mean certainly we are better now than we were then. But I mean part of it is they just started measuring stuff. And then even then it’s long and slow, incremental stuff. Again when I look at it I see lo and behold our schools still are largely segregated and you know for many of those kids they are not getting what they need. So what did we really accomplish with that? Because ...there was no, I will say on the record, there was no thought. The people were thrown: ‘The busses are here. Here is the bus stop. Go.’ There was no ‘How we are gonna deal with this?’ (Interview August 2013)

This advocate started with the premise that things had changed, but then deconstructed that premise, concluding with the inadequacy of desegregation as it was enacted.

**Others’ Misguided Belief in Progress**

The second element in community advocates’ narrative of the relationship between past and present stands in direct contrast to the EAC members’ narrative – community advocates felt not only that there was a continuity in problems of equity in the city, but that the belief in progress was strongly misguided. Several of the advocates I spoke to were acutely aware of the perspective of EAC members that the city had changed and that school desegregation was thus irrelevant to contemporary school assignment. One advocate I spoke with characterized the
EAC’s position directly in terms of the new/old Boston “With the EAC it’s ‘well that was the old Boston things are different now.’ It’s ‘we’re a city that values diversity, we’re a city where we are one’” The advocate goes on to conclude, “I think there was this image which I don’t think is the true reality” and then to deconstruct the idea perpetuated by the superintendent that school segregation is irrelevant (Interview May 2013). The advocates countered the EAC idea that they were misinformed in their distrust of the system; instead arguing that it the EAC’s ignorance of the past didn’t allow them to see the complete picture:

[the EAC] was like, Why are we even talking about school desegregation? What’s the point? This is student assignment for today... I wish there was more background and conversation about desegregation and even about the other student assignment processed - the 2004 and one before that before that. It’s strange there wasn’t a conversation about what worked and what didn’t work. I felt like we were missing a major aspect of the equation, like how do we solve for x if... we're not even looking at what worked and what didn’t work As someone who is not native to Boston at all I get that it definitely has shaped education in Boston and if you're changing the model that was established during that time then there should be more conversation about what that was about and how do we make sure that we’re still addressing quality and integration, right, because that still is a big thing as well that’s important, at least to me, but not to everybody... I think it's just a lack of understanding of the history and what it represents, and I think for people who have been around education and have seen the changes and the lack of, it's an essential part of the conversation and I can't say that I really know it. I do understand that there was segregation, there was forced integration and that the issue was also about quality. (Interview May 2013)

This framing, even from the advocate’s own self-assessed limited understanding of Boston’s school desegregation points to the very different assumptions about history working among the advocates – that it was a resource to be drawn from – and conclusions based on this assumption – that increased access to educational quality was a bigger issue for the city to deal with than student assignment.

Policy Approach – Wrong Question, Wrong Answer

The final element of the common community advocate narrative relates to the policy conclusions they drew based on their belief in a continuity of equity issues. The community advocates I spoke with drew several policy conclusions based on their perceived lessons of
school desegregation. For several advocates this lesson of desegregation as a failed experiment involved a complex understanding of race, class, and residential segregation in the city that perpetuated inequities, and made integration in schools more important than ever. As one advocate argued:

I think that our schools are more segregated now than they have been in the last forty or fifty years and I think that’s a function of, I think it probably comes out of, class first because schools are tied to neighborhoods, so wealthier neighborhoods have wealthier schools. So it’s also tied to race. I also think it’s partly because I see schools as such an opportunity for our world to educate students around race and class. And it’s a lost opportunity if you have segregated schools. And I think what it does is it actually perpetuates racism because it means that our children don’t know kids outside their own classes and races. So it’s partly a lost opportunity around race and class. (Interview May 2013)

Others indicated the need for deeper conversations around the role of education in society and the role that race and racism play in the city of Boston, with a general sense that the EAC was having the wrong conversation: “And it’s not about algorithms, and it’s not about Court Street, you know? And I just feel like there’s so many more important things that we should be focusing on” (Interview August 2013). Mostly, however, they all coalesced around the idea that the EAC should be focusing on school quality rather than student assignment, or “rearranging the deck chairs on the titanic” as I heard advocates repeatedly refer to it. Like EAC members were skeptical of their motives, they felt that many EAC members had a fundamental misunderstanding of the situation. One community advocate who experienced school desegregation summed up this argument thus:

But the leadership whether at the city level or the EAC who were just proponents of neighborhood schools didn’t seem to get the importance of quality or equity. That was really concerning. There was a huge empathy gap. And it was almost I felt at times that people were perceiving outside pressure or the folks who were promoting quality and equity as just being agitators or just being knee jerk reactionary. Just, ‘What is the problem? Don’t you see the schools are getting better?’ .... It’s worrisome to me because I have felt like as somebody who has gone through, I feel like we have come so much further along than that. And then when I hear certain things being said and I see certain attitudes were playing out at the meeting then I am feeling like ‘Oh my god, we haven’t come a long way.’ I’m sitting here feeling, as someone who lived it as a kid went through
that, I was on the frontline of it. I’m feeling like we’ve come a long way and here we are and great, and then I hear certain things and it’s like whoa! (Interview August 2013).

For this advocate, like many of the others, school quality was the fundamental issue EAC members should be facing, a lesson they took directly from history.

Like the EAC members, the community advocates I interviewed were a diverse group with diverse interests and perspectives. They too, relied on a specific perspective about the relationship between past and present to frame their approach to how policy should be made: they saw a continuity of inequities that had yet to be addressed and centered around the failure to provide students of color with access to quality schools. This assessment drew on a race-conscious perspective which was cross racial among my interviewees: they saw student assignment as a question of race-based policy. There were, not surprisingly, a couple of outliers to these particular arguments that fell along racial lines – one black advocate had a more positive assessment towards school desegregation, while one white advocate sought a more colorblind approach to contemporary policy making. All, however, felt the EAC should have taken a more direct role to addressing quality issues in the schools rather than focusing solely on student assignment, though that was their charge. For the community advocates, history taught them that student assignment was the wrong question, and the wrong answer.

**A Relationship to our History: Making Meaning about the Present**

I started this chapter by asking whether narratives of the past impact how actors approach an urban policy making process. My interviews with EAC members and community advocates involved in student assignment reform in Boston demonstrate that Boston’s school desegregation crisis did play a role in how participants in the process approached student assignment reform. Though many EAC members felt the past was irrelevant to their work, my interviews with them also suggest that Boston’s history of school desegregation was a critical
component in framing the present as ripe (or not) for assignment reform. The social memory literature suggests a dynamic relationship between past and present, in which the memories of the past constrain the present and the actors remember the past in ways useful to the present. My interviews support this general dynamic, but also illuminate particular dynamics of the relationship between past and present in urban politics. Specifically, Boston’s student assignment reform process suggests that we pay particular attention not so much to how the past is told in the present, but how the past is related to the present. This relatinality is guided by discursive constructions of the present rather than the past, and is critical to understanding conflicting beliefs about and approaches to policy.

As I showed in the beginning of this chapter, one of the primary questions of social remembering involves the extent to which the past is malleable or durable. Schudson’s theory of the durability of the past in shaping the present is further illuminated in these interviews. For EAC and community advocates alike, the collective trauma of school desegregation continues to appear to matter to education politics in Boston, even to those who think it has little relevance, and they continue to draw lessons from this history. Certainly there is also some malleability to how the past is remembered. In this case variations in remembering seem to track to participants’ position in the process: EAC members were more likely to remember the desegregation crisis from the perspective of the institutional politics and legal issues involved, while community advocates traced the crisis through its community context. Just as striking, however, is the similarities between the two groups’ overarching narratives; both generally described the same problem – inequitable distribution of school resources due to racism – and expressed dissatisfaction with the solution of school desegregation.

In Boston’s school assignment reform it was not so much variations in the narrative of the past that was related to variations in policy approaches, but how each group constructed the
relationship between the past and the present. Actors in the process of school assignment reform largely drew on a common narrative of the past, and yet there were two significantly different narratives of the present in relationship to the past focused whether the problems at issue during Boston’s school desegregation crisis had been solved or not. The EAC members tended to argue that Boston was completely changed (in line with the common cultural discourse of a ‘New Boston’), while community advocates focused on continuing problems. Both groups were aware of the other’s positions, and felt (at least in their interviews with me) compelled to address it. In the next chapter I will address how this conflict was dealt with in the public process. Here I raise it to argue that the different framings of the relationship between the past and present could not be constructed completely for the actors’ own purposes – they had to acknowledge and explain the conflicting constructions of others.

The lessons that actors took from this process did not, however, appear to follow a straight line of continuity from past to present, but instead were framed through a presentist perspective. One dominant strain of this literature in social memory studies focuses on how actors reconstruct the past to serve their needs in the present. The reconstruction of the past as a tool for the present does not appear instrumental in my interviews: the common narrative among each group suggests neither group is reconstructing the past itself, since they are very much in conflict in their diagnoses of the present and approaches to policy. However, each group does construct the relationship between the past and present differently. These different reconstructions in turn support conflicting policy approaches. For the EAC members it is because race relations have changed and the schools have progressed that a policy change is not only possible, but required. For the community advocates on the other hand, it is because there are still racial inequities and schools are still struggling that a focus on student assignment is the wrong direction. The question thus arises, are the actors in this case engaging in an instrumental
rationality in constructing a relationship to the past? Are they making claims about how different (or not) the present is in order to support a specific policy decision? I do not get this sense from my interviews – participants in neither group seemed to be starting from a perspective of building an argument towards a specific policy. Even on the EAC, where members took seriously their mandate from the mayor for ‘closer to home’ only a couple of the people I interviewed focused on a need for neighborhood schools. Most seemed genuinely interested in finding a policy that would work, rather than shaping an argument for a particular policy. This is not to argue that the instrumental use of the past or its relationship to the present was completely absent from the student assignment reform process – I will discuss this more detail in the next chapter on the performance of politics – but only to say it did not appear to be a driving force in the collective remembering and meaning making processes of participants in the process.

If instrumental presentism is not at work in how these actors shaped the relationship between the present and the past, then cultural presentism most certainly is. As EAC members and community advocates discuss the relationship between past and present, they are presenting a diagnosis of the present that is a process of meaning-making filtered through their own discursive frameworks which are situated in place. These discursive frameworks in turn, and the relationship to history within them, produced a truth which allowed the actors to dismiss alternative viewpoints.

The dominant discourse the EAC members draw on to understand the present is a narrative of progress – of forward movement and development which is an imperative for the future. The roots of this discourse are deep – with global, national, and local dimensions. Progress is a critical component of the grand narrative of modernity - of the progress and development of mankind through scientific rationalism and the accumulation of knowledge
(Lyotard 1984, Massey 2005). Indeed, many EAC members I interviewed discussed the task at hand – coming up with a new student assignment system - from a rationalist perspective of working through the large amount of data available to them to find the best possible solution, as critical part of the forward motion. At the same time, progress also is a particularly American story, with roots in manifest destiny and the frontier of the United States (Cronon 1991). These grander narratives of progress, however, are reproduced in place. As I discussed in Chapter 1 this idea of a city improving, developing, and being remade has its own particular local meaning and history. In the early 21st century, the ‘new Boston’ is a Boston that is at the same time both freed from its historical legacy of corruption – evident in EAC members’ focus on transparency in both data and decision-making- and the racism that became visible in Boston’s desegregation crisis – evident in EAC members’ focus on a colorblind process.

Colorblind discourse is well situated as both a component of a larger narrative of progress, and has its own place-based meaning related to Boston’s history. Proponents of a colorblind perspective minimize the impact of racism, which they conceive as largely interpersonal, and attribute any differences in achievement to cultural deficiencies (Brown et al 2003; Bonilla Silva 2006). If the dominant narrative of race relations in the United States is colorblindness, it stands to reason that our understanding of the history of race relations in the US would be constructed through this lens. Indeed, both theoretical formulations and empirical studies suggest contemporary colorblindness is often defined vis-a-vis the previous epoch: conservatives and liberals alike condemn Jim Crow, direct discrimination, and the overt racism of the past in favor of the contemporary era of equal opportunity for all (Carr 1997; Bonilla-Silva 2006; Gallagher 2003). The Civil Rights Movement plays a critical role from this perspective: the project of civil rights is viewed by many whites and some people of color as a complete one – the movement was successful and brought increased equality (Brown et al 2003). Furthermore,
colorblindness engenders a particular approach to the nation’s racial history – because civil rights were achieved, ‘the past is the past’ – it is neither necessary to talk about nor make policy based on this history (Bonilla-Silva 2006). A narrative of progress – from racism to harmony, from inequity to equal opportunity – is an essential component of the colorblind ideology.

The EAC emphasis on increased diversity and improved racial relations is highly consistent with this colorblind discourse. The white EAC members I spoke with were explicit in their colorblind argument that racism and segregation in Boston were simply no longer at issue. Many of the people of color were more ambivalent about the continued existence of racial divides. At the same time, they emphasized improvement and forward motion – their colorblindness was on a whole more aspirational. Regardless, almost all of the EAC members I interviewed framed present racial relationships in contrast to the past, a situation which they used to explain the need for policy change around student assignment, and to de-emphasize the role of race within that policy. A narrative of the lack of diversity in the city then as compared to the present reinforced this belief, furthering an exclusion of Asian and Latino stories of the desegregation crisis. While the EAC members I interviewed discussed Boston’s school desegregation crisis as irrelevant to their work, it was through a lens of progress and colorblindness which used this history as a contrast to the present. Their color-blind discourse was thus framed by place – Boston’s school desegregation crisis was a necessary component of understanding the progress the city had made.

Omi and Winant (2009) argue that the Civil Rights Movement and new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s spurred a paradigm shift which introduced race-consciousness to politics in the United States. Even though the political context has shifted significantly from that time, they argue, race conscious politics have had a lasting impact. The community advocates I interviewed largely approached student assignment reform from this
tradition by emphasizing racial inequities in educational opportunity and achievement, and the need for race-based approaches to policy to ameliorate these inequities – though still largely within a black/white binary. The relationship between the past and present was an integral part of this perspective: Boston’s school desegregation crisis served as an example of how racial inequities have not been addressed and continue to persist. Again, place was integral to their construction of this race-consciousness. From a color-blind perspective, school desegregation can be viewed as a failed policy because it was race-based. From a race-conscious perspective, school desegregation was not well-implemented or supported and thus not an appropriate remedy in practice. Despite changes in racial patterns in the city, therefore, students of color continue to receive inadequate educations.

The community advocates use this evaluation of the relationship between past and present to argue that student assignment is embedded in a racial context which cannot be properly addressed apart from working to improve school quality for students of color. It is important to note here that many of the EAC members I interviewed also felt that BPS needed to address school quality. Because of the perceived improvement of schools however, they did not view student assignment and school quality as connected issues. Several expressed the sentiment that they were helping to get the student assignment issue out of the way in order to make way for future work on school quality. Furthermore, consistent with a color-blind approach, they did not generally couch quality issues in racial terms.

The discursive divides between community advocates and EAC members allowed each side to dismiss the other. In their interviews with me, the community advocates did not reject the narrative of progress that I heard from EAC members outright. They did, however, subtly contest it, arguing that there was an underlying and systemic continuity in social relations. More explicitly, on the other hand, they rejected a color-blind analysis of the present in favor of
a race-conscious approach. For the EAC members, a strong relationship to Boston’s school desegregation reflected a past trauma or some other pathological relationship to history rather than a serious challenge to their perspective. For the community advocates, a lack of race-consciousness reflected an inadequate understanding of a long history of racial inequity in education.

The contrast in how members of the EAC and community advocates involved in the student assignment reform process understood the relationship between the past and present brings both the role of discourse in political meaning making about the past and the role of shared pasts in how politics are performed into sharp relief. Each group relied on similar narratives of Boston’s school desegregation crisis, but relied on conflicting discourses about the relationship between that history and contemporary social relationships. Each group in turn used this construction of the relationship between past and present as guide for policy making. Furthermore, we can see the role that place plays in structuring those discourses. Progress, colorblindness, and race-consciousness all have national and even global dimensions – but they are expressed in certain ways in relation to Boston’s unique history.

Conclusion

The literature on social memory studies suggests a dynamic relationship between past and present. I have set out in this chapter to illuminate some of these dynamics in how actors approach urban politics. First I asked, how do actors use the past to make sense of the present? To understand how actors use the past to make sense of the present, we need only imagine that Boston’s school desegregation crisis had never happened. Without this crisis, actors would not have this history as a source of comparison for the present in making their case for contemporary policy approaches. The crisis as a cultural trauma has held this history in urban memory, so that EAC members can use difference to advocate change and community advocates
can use similarities to advocate for an alternative approach to student assignment policy. While studies of social memory focus on lessons from the past in the present, this case suggests that the construction of the relationship between the past and present is a critical process in how actors think about urban policy. My interviews show that the context of this history is a rich source of meaning making for the present.

Second, I asked how do needs and frameworks of the present shape how actors in urban policy making remember the past? As I have shown, the two sets of actors I interviewed drew on a similar narrative of the past to come to very different conclusions. They have a shared past, which as we shall see enables common performances within each group, but also conflicts between the two groups. This process occurs because actors are drawing on different discursive constructions of the present rooted in place in taking lessons from the past. It is thus the relationship between the past and the present that actors filter through the needs and frameworks of the present. I did not find that this filtering was instrumental. Certainly the actors I interviews came to the process with their own goals based on their roles – for one group to make a reform, and for the other group to act as watchdogs in this reform process – yet, neither EAC members nor community advocates appeared to shape the relationship between past and present specifically to meet their own policy ends. Rather, cultural frameworks guided how the actors understood this relationship. Each group drew on different discourses of race and racism to construct the present and its relationship to the past. EAC members drew on a dominant narrative of colorblindness, while community advocates generally worked from a race-conscious perspective. The power dynamic here is not so evident from interviews, where each individual from each group are on equal footing to state their case. When I turn to the performance of this process in the next chapter, I will draw out these relationships further.
Finally I asked how these dual processes of remembering shape actors’ approach to policy-making. As I have shown, remembering the past was a critical framing for each group’s approach to student assignment policy. EAC members like Peter constructed a narrative of progress which framed the present as so changed from the past as to necessitate a policy change and to enable a policy move in the direction of assignment policy prior to desegregation. Community advocates like Monica, on the other hand, constructed a narrative which emphasized a continuity of problems from past to present, and argued that student assignment had not and would not address the root of those problems. In each case remembering the past led directly to a policy conclusion, while negating the opposing point of view.

Through exploring the role of remembering in urban politics we can view social memory as an active process of sense-making through time AND place. The actors in this community process of policymaking relied on a shared past and used their own discursive frames to understand it and to make policy. In this chapter I have shown their understandings and approaches to policy making. In the next chapter, I explore the presence and absence of the past in the process of policy making, and in the outcome of the policy.
CHAPTER 3: THE PERFORMANCE OF REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING

On a bitterly cold December evening in 2012, a group of about twenty mostly black and white protesters gathered in front of ‘Court Street’, the central offices for the Boston Public Schools (BPS). At the encouragement of event organizers, the protesters, heavily clad in their hats, coats, and gloves, began to circle in a traditional picket line. A regularly scheduled meeting for the Boston School Committee was about to begin, and the protestors had come to express their objections to a new student assignment plan that was in the process of being formulated. They held signs reading ‘NO to Boston’s Resegregation Plan’ and ‘Demand Equal Quality Education.’ On the bullhorn, a woman led the assembled crowd in a chant: “We’re fired up, can’t take it no more. We ain’t going back to ’74.” Shortly thereafter, a man took the microphone to rail against the current state of educational quality in the city, arguing that the situation for black families is very much the same today as it was when Boston’s schools were desegregated in 1974 - they have low quality educational opportunities in their neighborhoods. Throughout the evening, Boston’s violent 1974 school desegregation was a consistent reference point for the state of racial equity in contemporary school assignment.

Inside, the warm, dimly lit school committee chamber began to fill with faces mostly familiar to each other – BPS employees, people who work in the mayor’s office, and long-time education activists. The meeting began with little reference to the protest outside – school assignment reform was not on the evening’s agenda. In her regular report to the committee, however, School Superintendent Carol Johnson, a black woman who had come to the city relatively recently, took on the protestors’ complaints line-by-line, dismissing any notion that school officials are attempting re-segregation, and argued that the Boston of today is very different from the Boston of 1974.

Three months later, the Boston School Committee was preparing to vote on a proposal for student assignment reform brought to them by the superintendent based on
recommendations for an external advisory committee. The protestors were back with a slightly larger group, this time waving signs that said “No to Racism in Education” directly in the hearing room windows, while inside community members sat shoulder to shoulder waiting for their chance to testify on the proposal. Two themes ran through these testimonies. The first was a question of compromise: whether neighborhood residents would have preferential access to the schools closest to them or not. The second theme was a plea for the school committee to stop the vote, and to refocus on building quality schools in all neighborhoods in the city before reforming student assignment. Threaded through these testimonies were passionate arguments about race, class, neighborhood and education through time in Boston. In the final community testimony of the evening, a fiery reverend promised “people will rise up” if the Boston Public School Committee went ahead with its plans, which would have a disproportionate impact on Black and Latino students. Ultimately, however, these pleas fell on deaf ears: later that evening, the school committee approved a new system of school assignment in Boston, reducing the size of its large zones originally created to encourage racial diversity, with a goal of sending kids to schools closer to their own neighborhoods. The reverend’s uprising never came – a year later the new plan was implemented without incident.

Nearly forty years had passed since Boston’s tumultuous and violent school desegregation crisis, and school assignment had been reformed several times since 1974. As evidenced in the vignette above, narratives of that history were very much present, and at times contested, in the contemporary politics of this reform, yet these concerns appeared to have little impact on decision-makers. From a policy making perspective, student assignment shifted from a racially-charged issue based on a traumatic history to a largely technical issue of sorting students to schools. How did this shift occur? The protests and community testimonies that occurred throughout the process suggest this is not simply a case of ‘time healing all wounds.’
But how were the concerns brought by community advocates about race and quality education through the lens of history sidestepped in the policy-making process?

In this chapter I argue that to understand how student assignment reform was accomplished in Boston, we must understand its cultural politics – the meaning-making and symbolic reasoning embedded in the year and a half long process that led to a school committee vote. To fully explore these cultural politics we need to understand urban politics as a performance, and locate remembering, as well as forgetting, as performative tools. As I shall show, strategic remembering and forgetting the cultural trauma of school desegregation were critical components of the student assignment process that was actively performed by EAC members, school officials, and the media in such a manner that marginalized other points of view. Through this lens we can see how political power in the city is enacted through a place-based process of social memory. In this case meaning making about race and racism in student assignment policy are central to this process of remembering.

While the previous chapter focused on the social memories of school desegregation vis a vis individual accounts of participants, this chapter draws on an ethnographic rendering of the public process of reform. I view the public statements and deliberations of various actors, including the mayor, school superintendent, External Advisory Committee, Boston Globe and community advocates as both texts and performances in order to argue that memory is crucial to the cultural politics that shapes and is shaped by the city. To build this argument I begin by more deeply exploring the current literature on urban politics, culture, and memory.

**Meaning Making Through Performance in Urban Politics**

Studies of urban politics today often focus on the relational aspects of political and business coalitions in ‘urban regimes.’ Theorists focusing on the cultural aspects of politics, however, suggest that political claims are not only strategic, based on needs and relationships, but also structured by symbolic meaning and available cultural narratives. A critical task of an
urban culturalist perspective that integrates power is to more fully elucidate the cultural politics of the city as a ‘set of discursive and material practices in and through which meanings are defined and struggled over, where social norms and values are naturalized, and by which ‘common sense’ is constructed and contested” (McCann 2002:387). This approach to understanding urban politics conceptualizes culture as an essential component of power in the city, creating space to explore the role of remembering as a process of meaning making in policy construction and contestation.

As I have shown in previous chapters, participants in the policy-making process bring constructions of the past and its relation to the present with them which shapes their thinking and direction on both how the process should proceed and what the appropriate outcome is. Furthermore these memories both shape and are shaped by discursive constructions of social relations in the present. The cultural politics of policy construction, however, does not end at the meanings that people bring with them. Memories are also constructed through interaction within the political process, and are performed as a part of the process in order to accomplish policy. Forgetting, likewise, is not simply a lack of remembrance, but an active process of erasure. Forgetting may occur for a variety of reasons, from fear of/ discomfort with bringing up possible conflicts to a genuine belief that the past is irrelevant. Regardless, it is conceptualized here not only as an absence, but as an often strategic choice. While individuals draw on larger cultural narratives to understand the relationship between the past and present, they draw on these narratives publically in ways that are largely strategic – it is in political performance that the instrumentalist understanding of social memory becomes relevant.

As Alexander (2004b) argues, a convincing performance in a complex and differentiated society is the “social process by which actors display for others meaning of their social situation.” Fine argues that these performances take place in the contest of a common arena, shared pasts, and a set of relationships. To this point I have explored the arena of the city and
the meaning people make of the shared past of school desegregation. In the previous chapter I showed the themes that stretched across individual understandings of the relationship between the school desegregation crisis and the present to form two common narratives – of continuity and of progress. In this chapter I show how those narratives were performed in the public process of student assignment reform through a set of relationships. I argue that public acts of remembering and forgetting by the media, politicians, and EAC members in their various arenas (print and radio, public forums, and semi-public meetings) are processes through which meaning is made surrounding student assignment reform which enables certain courses of action and forswears others. These acts of memory are neither homogenous (not all actors remember the same way or follow a singular script), nor enacted towards the same ends (some speak to constituencies, while others are working to build consensus), nor uncontested (community activists are present to challenge acts of remembering and forgetting), yet they are consistent enough to enable a redefinition of the situation from “we can’t go there” to “we’re past that.” (Olick and Levy 1997). Furthermore, the redefinition of the relationship between past and present is embedded in power relations – both in the positionality of participants and in the cultural cache of the narratives they adopted.

**Student Assignment Reform: Performances of Remembering and Forgetting**

In this section I present a chronological narrative of public instances of remembering Boston’s school desegregation crisis within its 2012 – 2013 student assignment reform process in order to illustrate the performative nature of memory in urban politics. These memories are enacted by politicians, school officials, the media, and community advocates, and carry forward the narratives established in the previous chapter of change and consistency of race and neighborhood relations in the city. The material presented in this section is grouped into overlapping time periods which represent general stages of remembering/forgetting through the
process. In the following section, I will discuss the social meanings that derive from these processes of remembering, and how those meanings are related to policy options and decision-making.

Convening a Process for Reform: January to March 2012

From the very outset of the school assignment reform process, there was a question as to what role the history of school desegregation in Boston would play in the city’s process to reform school assignment. In his 2012 State of the City address that Mayor Thomas Menino announced his intentions to reform student assignment: “I’m committing tonight that one year from now Boston will have adopted a radically different student assignment plan – one that puts a priority on children attending schools closer to their homes.” Boston’s troubled history with student assignment was conspicuously absent from this announcement, evident even in Menino’s use of “schools closer to their homes” rather than “neighborhood schools,” which might evoke the pre-desegregation era. Instead, Menino focused on two points to make the case for reform: First, he signals a ‘new Boston’ narrative, claiming that school quality had increased significantly over the past twenty years (the duration of his time in office). Second, he argued that the system as it stood was confusing and inhibited community. This case only makes sense from a historical perspective, however – it anticipates an argument that students in certain segregated neighborhoods don’t have access to quality schooling and thus need the opportunity to be bused elsewhere.

Immediately following the State of the City, others did bring the historical significance of Boston’s school desegregation crisis into the conversation, again in service of a new Boston which needs change to move forward. The Boston Globe applauded Menino’s announcement as a ‘welcome signal,’ and drew on the past to make the case that the current system was not serving its intended purpose:
The current system, which divides Boston into three vast residency zones and places students in schools distant corners from their homes, has its origins in the desegregation crisis of the 1970s and is the result of decades of effort to promote equity in schools. In practice, though, it promotes confusion among parents, long commutes for many students, and tens of millions of dollars of extra spending on buses. (*The Boston Globe*, 2012)

The editorial went on further reject any discussion based in the past, setting the stage for conflict between civil rights activists and reformers: “Some civil rights activists fear that any change to the status quo will bring back the injustices of an earlier era. Yet Boston needs a way forward, not an endless refighting of the battles of the past.” City Councilor John Connolly, head of the education committee and soon-to-be mayoral candidate, also used the frame of newness while pre-emptively critiquing those who would draw on the past. In an article in a local community newspaper on Menino’s announcement for reform, the councilor was quoted discussing the mayor’s proposed committee:

> I think too often this is a policy debate between two sides fighting about forty years ago and not about a new generation of Bostonians who can do better,” Connolly said. “I’m really hoping that it’s a task force that reflects a generation of Bostonians who know we’re better than our past and I hope it’s a truly independent task force. (Dumcius 2012)

The councilor here again normalizes desegregation history as an issue the impacted only blacks and whites, but also draws on frustration with this binary in a ‘new’ Boston to make his case. The early announcement of student assignment reform was thus marked by two public performances of memory. The first, employed by the mayor, was avoidance – not relating this policy reform to the cultural trauma of the past. The second, employed by the news media and a city councilor, was to raise the past only to pre-empt any connection to it. Both strategies fit into the larger narrative of a new Boston – the first by assuming the irrelevance of the past and the second by using the past to reinforce change.

The latter approach continued in the media when Mayor Menino announced the names of the External Advisory Committee two months later. Globe editorialist Lawrence Harmon used
a narrative of progress to emphasize the irrelevance of Boston’s busing crisis after the formation of the EAC was announced:

In 2004, Menino chose Theodore Landsmark to head the school assignment committee. The specter of busing floated over the hearing rooms in 2004. This time around Menino has chosen Hardin Coleman, the dean of Boston University's School of Education, to head the committee. In Boston for only four years, Coleman said he hopes to provide “fresh eyes to a decades-old problem” The 1974 federal desegregation order that mandated widespread busing of students expired long ago. Federal Judge W. Arthur Garrity won’t be walking through that door folks. In a city where nine out of ten students are minorities the sensible goal now should be to ensure high quality schools that children can reach on foot… [The new committee] should step forward boldly, untethered to the flawed policies and practices of Boston’s past. (Harmon 2012)

Harmon’s editorial comments here exemplify a specific relationship to the past: the city has changed (African American men in charge of committees, majority-minority students, a narrative of diversity in the present) and thus any reflection on or even nod to the past is inappropriate. As student assignment reform approached, Boston’s school desegregation crisis was being raised only to mark it off as something unnecessary to address.

At the first community engagement meeting of the process in March, 2012, however, it appeared as if an understanding of Boston’s school desegregation crisis may indeed play a significant role. State Representative and black historian Byron Rushing addressed an audience of parents, advocates, and BPS staff in a school auditorium, with the members of the EAC sitting on a stage behind him. After giving a history of race and school assignment beginning in 1849 and ending with school desegregation in the 1970’s, Rushing concluded:

What can we do? We cannot fear the bad news of the story. We cannot ignore the bad news of the story. The decision was in 1974. That was 38 years ago. How many parents in Boston are not 38 years old yet? So there is a whole population of people who only hear about this, who don’t have it in their own memory. But then, how many people in Boston are over 38 years old? The first piece of anything we do like this has to begin with people connecting on the memory, connecting on the history, coming to a consensus on what happened. Maya Angelou has it correct: ‘History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived. And if faced with courage, need not be lived again.’ (clapping from audience) So to do this recalling, we must confront first and admit our lack of consensus about education. (speech given 03/10/2012)
To kick off the community engagement process in such a way, with Rushing’s clarity about the role of memory and history in relationship to the present, with the EAC sitting behind Rushing, and with Mayor Menino’s support, appeared to signify that Boston’s desegregation history would play an important role as the city addressed how school assignment should be revised, through a narrative of continuity between past and present. Further, the location of this performance was significant – it was at school in the heart of Roxbury, Boston’s historically Black community. This manifestation was reinforced by a March 2012 handout from the Boston Public Schools’ communications department giving a timeline history of student assignment which began with Plessy vs. Ferguson (the Supreme Court case which upheld separate but equal segregation policies) ran through the school desegregation crisis and into contemporary policy. This flyer was handed out at the community engagement event and was another indication that the past would be present in this policy-making process.

Dominance and Contestation of the New Boston, April 2012 – January 2013

As the process advanced however, a different reality materialized. Over the summer at community conversations across the city and at EAC meetings, the history of school desegregation never made it onto the agenda. In June, the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project held an evening event reflecting on this history and its connection to contemporary education policy specifically for members of the External Advisory Committee, but only six of the twenty-four person committee made appearances, and the event was not discussed at any EAC meetings. At the end of the summer, Mayor Menino again delivered the message that the past was irrelevant in a community meeting in his home neighborhood of Hyde Park: “this is about the future, it’s about the future of the Boston Public Schools, it’s not about the past. We could sit here and argue about what happened in the past – uh-uh, it’s not gonna work. It’s about our young people, that’s why I’m so engaged.” In his previous speech Mayor Menino had not
mentioned the history of school desegregation, and here he signaled that he felt the history had no place in this process.

So how did the EAC process go from appearing to be steeped in history to one which is future-oriented and where the past is marked as off-limits? The answer to this lies partially in the EAC itself. As Isabel, an active EAC member, told me:

[Another member of the EAC] and I met with the Superintendent and [some of her staff] to get to know each other for a session and [we] were very vocal we are not doing this based on history. We are moving ahead, it’s a new day... [Neither of us] are from here. We want to bow with respect to the history but let’s move on. Whereas [the BPS staff members we met with] absolutely didn’t want anything to do with that. They wanted very much to have history in the forefront and make it be basically the base from where we were starting. And we fought back on that politely and gently. (Interview April 2013)

Arthur, another EAC member, spoke about the presentation from Representative Rushing, which he had missed: “I guess his speech generated a bit of controversy and he talked about that early history... I think some people were not happy with the fact that he referred back to that very early history” (Interview April 2013). Arthur goes on to say he can’t quite recall, but he doesn’t think it was EAC members who expressed unhappiness about this. Regardless, between these comments and the mayor’s apparent lack of support, it appears there was some push back on taking a historical perspective and talking directly about the city’s school desegregation history.

The September 2012 presentation of possible new models⁶ for student assignment once again raised public discussion, and with it, further performance of history. Just before the models were released, in a local newspaper editorial, Councilor Connolly once again alluded to

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⁶ The Boston Public Schools hired professional consultants to design new models for student assignment based on the work of the EAC. The consultants presented a set of models based on the three zone model the city already had in place. The new models split the city into anywhere from 6 to 23 zones. Students living in those zones would have a set of choices for them to rank in a lottery. After the consultants presented their models, the EAC also held a session in which citizens presented their own ideas for student assignment. Notable among these were a presentation from City Councilor John Connolly and an MIT graduate student. Ultimately the proposal the EAC adopted was based on the work of the MIT graduate student. This model still relied on a lottery, but without zones. Instead families are provided with a list of options based on distance from their residence, school quality and school capacity.
Boston’s school desegregation crisis, but this time to make against a student assignment lottery: “Many view this issue as the most deeply divisive debate in Boston, given the pervasive inequities across our school system and the historical link to Boston’s painful school desegregation” (Connolly 2012.) Connolly’s tone has moderated here – rather than writing off history as irrelevant he uses this framing to make a case to focus on school quality and neighborhood schools. This new approach in a citywide rather than local newspaper occurred as rumors of his impending mayoral candidacy approached – it was perhaps an attempt to gain foothold with a new constituency – Boston’s African American community, while still ultimately embracing a new Boston narrative with wide appeal. This tact was not without pushback however – a letter to the editor from a parent activist critiqued Connolly’s focus on neighborhood schools, concluding: “There is nothing ‘transformative’ about a return to inequitable, racially isolated neighborhood schools” (Battenfeld 2012). This small exchange illuminates the larger role of Boston’s traumatic past – as a performative tool it was used to make a case both for and against policy change.

During this crucial period, leadership continued to emphasize the new Boston narrative through educational progress made since school desegregation. At the presentation of possible models for a new school assignment process (a month after Menino gave his speech in which he dismissed ‘the past’), Superintendent Johnson called upon the history of school desegregation:

As we embark on the choices we have as a community, we cannot forget the sacrifices and determination of many who came before us to address the issues of excellence and equity... We won’t forget the hard won 1954 Supreme Court decision or the tumultuous events in 1973 and 1974. Many in our community do remember. Teachers like Phyllis Ellison Feaster who was then a student at South Boston high school but now teaches at the Roosevelt K-8 School in Boston. Or others like Suzanne Lee, Carmen Pola, or Mel King, who are still actively involved in our community. This is Boston’s legacy and we cannot ignore it or dismiss its significance... The Boston of 2012 is very different than the Boston of 1849, the Boston of 1954 and the Boston of 1974. We are different in three different ways: our diversity, our quality and our process.
By using this history to talk about how different the contemporary city is, Dr. Johnson reinforces a narrative of diversity and progress. Interestingly, however, by invoking Suzanne Lee, a prominent activist in Boston’s Chinese community, and Carmen Pola, a well-known Latina activist, she does so without completely excluding Latino and Asian experiences in desegregation. In reporting on the proposed model, the Boston Globe also emphasized progress from ‘the 1970’s’, while continuing to question the logic of the contemporary system.

With the announcement of the models community activist concern began to slowly mount. The Coalition for Equal Quality Education, a small coalition held a public meeting which alleged BBDP plans to ‘resegregate’ the schools and to maintain them as separate and unequal-language which suggests regression rather than progress. Another coalition – the Community Coalition for Equity, Excellence and Engagement (which included the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project) advocated for learning directly from the history, including the cultural trauma of Boston’s desegregation crisis in an October 2012 press release:

In fact, we are students of history. If the purpose of history is to inform the road map we create for our future, then it is clear to us that the lessons of Benjamin Roberts in 1849, the Boston busing/desegregation crisis of 1974, and the failure of school assignment processes in 2004 and 2009 have fallen on deaf ears both in City Hall and here at the Boston School Department. For if they understood those lessons, they would realize that today’s struggle is not about busing children or breaking the city into zones…. What parents of all backgrounds are still asking for today is quality schools in every neighborhood…not school assignment!

In December of that year the CEQE also held the protest described in the opening vignette of this chapter. In each case of public communication, the activists take the idea of progress being advocated by city leadership and reframe it, arguing that a move towards neighborhood schools is a move backwards rather than forwards.

In his January 2013 State of the City address, Mayor Menino heralded the progress of the EAC, promising a conclusion in the near future. In this speech, unlike the one a year before, he couldn’t avoid history altogether and instead responded directly to activist concerns:
To those who are understandably wary of the city’s history around school choice, recall the words of Representative and historian Byron Rushing. In a Roxbury auditorium last March he said, “To get this right we are not going back to anything. We are creating something new.” Let us stay focused on moving forward.

The subtext here, which I will address more directly in the following section, is critical: Rushing is a Black Representative and historian and Roxbury is Boston’s historically Black neighborhood – Menino has signified race without naming it and is clearly speaking to Boston’s Black community and activists to assure them they don’t have to worry about the history of Boston’s school desegregation crisis.

*Leaving History Behind: October 2012 – March 2013*

As the EAC’s work drew to a close, Boston’s school desegregation crisis fell off the agenda completely – and when it did arise the narrative of progress was only reinforced. The first draft of the EAC recommendations memo to the superintendent makes no reference to the 70s, but does recommend “we acknowledge the failed logic that leads to busing within a small urban district” (EAC draft memo dated 10/23/2012). Minutes from the meeting where this was initially presented state that ‘concerns about the memo’s statements regarding busing’ were a central part of the discussion surrounding the recommendations (EAC meeting minutes dated 10/23/2012). The language was eventually discarded and replaced with a more direct reference to the history of school desegregation:

The EAC’s assessment is that the use of busing across wide geographic areas as a primary strategy for student assignment has limited strategic purpose in Boston’s contemporary context. The data assembled by the EAC shows that busing is neither counteracting historical race and class inequities, nor is it counteracting current inequities... At best, busing may be helping to promote diversity in neighborhoods in Boston that remain racially and/or socio-economically segregated. However, given Boston’s changing demography since the desegregation era – and its emergence as a far more diverse city in many respects – busing may not have the import that it once did as a tool for advancing diversity, inclusion, tolerance, and equitable educational outcomes. (EAC draft memo dated 11/29/2012).

When this provision of the memo was discussed by the EAC during one of their regular meetings in January 2013, again there was controversy over the characterization of busing, both from the
committee and in community comment. Rather than come to a consensus on the historical legacy of school desegregation, the committee decided to strike any reference to the history, including changing the word ‘busing’ to ‘transportation.’ This history of school desegregation was effectively erased from the contemporary school assignment reform.

At the same time, this erasure was not complete, as historical lessons and comparisons continued to surface. In a Boston Globe article published in January, just as the EAC was erasing history from its recommendation memo, columnist Adrian Walker raised the intertwined issues of race and historical narratives directly in the work of the committee:

[I]n Boston, "school assignment" is really a polite term for busing. Busing, in turn, is a code word fraught with fears of racism and inequity, fears borne of decades of proven racism and inequity. "My biggest fear is that the committee itself will break down along racial lines," Nucci said. "Because if that happens, we're done." That concern was confirmed by another member of the committee... "Everyone is concerned about this," the member said. "There are people who believe if children in Roxbury don't continue to have access to schools outside of Roxbury they will not have access to superior schools. Those are the people who will vote for little or no change.” (Walker 2013)

Walker gives us a rare look into the racial politics of the work of school assignment reform. His article suggests significant anxieties over race in the context of a history of racial inequity and racism, where most other public representations of the work of the committee glossed over these issues.

A racialized split on the EAC never materialized however, though several Black and Latino EAC members did raise concerns over racial and ethnic segregation in the city through the course of the work of the committee. In late February of 2013 the EAC voted nearly unanimously to recommend a new student assignment plan in Boston. The new plan was seen by many to be a compromise, as it did not involve neighborhood schools but did reduce the area of options from which parents could select. Though the history of the school desegregation crisis was rarely addressed openly by the committee, the Boston Globe editorial staff implied fears from this era had played too much of a role in the committee’s compromise:
The advisory committee's decision to put so much emphasis on current school ratings weakened this process from the start. It reflected the understandable, but increasingly outmoded, concern that students will be forced to attend poorer schools simply because of where they live. But at a time when all Boston students have potential access to charter schools and citywide schools, when most minority students can apply to go to suburban systems through the METCO program, and when all students in chronically underperforming schools have a right to slots in higher-performing schools via the federal No Child Left Behind law, fears of students being left without adequate options shouldn't drive the entire process. *(Boston Globe 2013)*

Again, the Globe emphasized progress in making a case for neighborhood schools, which activists would mark as a step back.

After the EAC made its recommendation, the Boston School Committee (BSC) was tasked with voting on the new policy. At the presentation on the new model to the BSC, Superintendent Johnson made an impassioned speech steeped in history, delving into the controversy of 1974 perhaps more than any other public speech since the process had begun: “Many also look back at 1974 here in Boston and have divergent thoughts about what change brought then. It as an attempt to open new doors for our children, but played out as a painful chapter in our city’s history, in part because of how change was achieved” *(Superintendent Johnson, 2/27/2013).* As in speeches, she emphasized the wrongs of the past to compare them to a diverse and transparent present. Community activists and advocates who spoke at the BSC hearing prior to their vote largely disagreed with Johnson, however. Between the three opportunities to speak to the school committee prior to their vote on the new model many focused on a narrative of continuous racial inequity rather than progress, often either implicitly or explicitly referring to Boston’s desegregation crisis.

On the evening of March 13th, 2013 the school committee voted to accept the new model of student assignment. The Globe announced after the vote that “The Boston School Committee, in a momentous vote Wednesday, scrapped a school assignment plan developed under court-ordered desegregation almost a quarter century ago and embraced a new system that seeks to allow more students to attend schools closer to home” *(Vaznis 2013).* Now that the process was
completed, the Globe no longer shied away from historical detail, painting a broad picture of race in student assignment reform processes since school desegregation and noting activist concerns about the continuity of inequities: “In his ruling in 1989, Garrity said he doubted school officials would manipulate the assignment system to resegregate schools. Decades later, concerns over desegregation and too few quality schools still remain” (Vaznis 2013). The article concludes by discussing the various voices at the BSC vote that were opposed to a change in policy based on a deficit of quality schools. As described in the opening vignette for this chapter, the advocacy to ‘increase quality before reform’ based on a narrative of continuity from past to present fell largely on deaf ears as the school committee, after listening to an evening packed with this kind of testimony, voted 7 to 1 to accept the new model.

**Story and Meaning in the Performance of Reform**

Both the EAC and the Boston School Committee were able to vote for a new student assignment plan with relative ease despite community opposition due in part to a new story being told about the present, and it’s relation to the past. This story was performed by public officials, EAC members and the media in a variety of settings throughout the student assignment reform process. The dual processes of remembering and forgetting Boston’s cultural trauma of school desegregation were an essential component of telling this story. By performing a new relationship between past and present, actors made meaning about race, place, and progress which enabled student assignment reform.

Public officials and the media generally used Boston’s school desegregation crisis as a marker to signify progress in Boston from racism and racial inequity towards colorblindness and increased equity. Mayor Menino, City Councillor Connolly, and Superintendent Johnson each emphasized a changed city in speeches and media interviews at some point in the process, and the Globe editorial staff also repeatedly emphasized change and progress. But what exactly was the nature of this progress? Rather than directly explicating the progress that had been made,
these actors used school desegregation, sometimes directly and other times indirectly, as a code to signify progress in race relations, racial segregation, and educational quality. Furthermore, though the general message was similar, this coded language varied both by the race and location of the speaker.

Where school desegregation was raised publically, racial segregation or racism were rarely spoken about directly. Instead, code words such as ‘desegregation,’ ‘equity,’ and ‘civil rights’ clue the reader or listener with background knowledge about Boston’s 1974 crisis into the a discussion about race. Sometimes the language would be even more vague, as when Connolly referred to ‘two sides fighting about forty years ago,” when Menino said it wouldn’t work to ‘sit here and argue about the past,’ or when the Globe casually references how different the city is today from the 1970’s. Bound up in each of these statements is derision towards past conflicts over race and racism and a belief in a new and more diverse but unified Boston.

Because school desegregation and student assignment is in large part a conversation about the city’s geography, part of the case reformers needed to make was that the city was no longer racially segregated, and that racism was no longer a problem in Boston’s neighborhoods. References to school desegregation again provided an opaque way to discuss the racial make-up of the city – particularly by raising Boston’s most traditionally segregated communities that were involved in school desegregation. When Superintendent Johnson referred to a teacher from South Boston, she signified the white community that had protested during school desegregation. Likewise, when Mayor Menino referred to what Byron Rushing said in a ‘Roxbury’ auditorium, he signified he was talking about what was said in the black community where school desegregation was also most contentious. This was not just a pro-reform tactic. When an advocate questioning the plan raised the options of a student in West Roxbury, Boston’s wealthier white neighborhood, whose residents were largely seen to be exempted from the problems of the school desegregation crisis, to the options of a student in Roxbury, she
evoked past conflicts as much as present. In none of these examples did the speaker mention race, but through drawing on particular neighborhoods each one brought forth past conflicts, either to emphasize change or to suggest similarity.

Just as race and place are intertwined in thinking about Boston’s past, so are they intertwined in how school desegregation is called forth in the present. When the Boston Public schools kicked off its community engagement process in a Roxbury school, black Historian Byron Rushing was invited to speak and Mayor Menino sat on the stage as he spoke, a tacit endorsement of his narrative of history, which Menino would use later in his 2013 State of the city address. This speech is a particularly adept negotiation of Boston’s racial politics on Menino's part: by calling on the neighborhood traditionally seen as the heart of Boston's black community he signifies he is sensitive to race-based issues. Furthermore, he implies that the preeminent black historian in Boston has given his blessing for change and endorsed a narrative of progress, though the quote is cherry-picked from a larger context in which Rushing made a more nuanced argument for learning from the past. On the other hand, when Menino spoke in his home neighborhood of Hyde Park, a traditionally white neighborhood with a growing population of Haitian and other immigrants who would not necessarily have their own relationship to the school desegregation crisis, he made no such references – instead simply stating that it was unnecessary to fight about the past. Remembering school desegregation was highly emplaced from a community perspective as well – it was at the many community forums in Roxbury that school desegregation came up in community comment, where it was rarely raised in other neighborhoods.

Not only was remembering the past an emplaced performance, it was also highly racialized. Amongst the major actors in the reform process, the three that spoke in most detail and with the most reflection were Black – the Superintendent in several speeches about the process, State Representative and historian Byron Rushing in his speech at the start of the
process, and Adrian Walker in his Boston Globe article about race and the EAC. Each of these performances paid homage to the past even where they endorsed a narrative of progress. White actors such as Mayor Menino, John Connolly and Globe editorialist Lawrence Harmon, on the other hand, emphasized a clean break Boston’s school desegregation crisis – an unnecessary distraction from the present. In community feedback sessions it was black community members who raised Boston’s school desegregation crisis through their personal narratives as well. On the EAC, school desegregation was rarely talked about publicly, but when it made its way briefly into the memorandum it was at the hands of a Black person on the EAC. A notable exception to this pattern was in the organizing space of community coalitions, where both white and black members spoke on Boston’s history of school desegregation at rallies and through press releases – again largely to the exclusion of Asian and Latino voices and relationships to the past.

If remembering was emplaced and racialized, then so was forgetting. Boston’s school desegregation crisis was rarely raised in community sessions in Boston’s traditionally white neighborhoods, or in its immigrant communities. Meanwhile, Boston’s white politicians raised school desegregation only to suggest that we actively forget it. As my interviews suggest, the racial politics of remembering on the EAC itself were complicated, but it was the white actors who were least likely to raise this history. In fact, during conversations where the racial equity impacts of various plans were raised, several white EAC members suggested it may not be legal for them to even talk about race. This reluctance to talk about race forestalled any conversation about Boston’s troubled racial history in student assignment.

Of course it was not only whites who opted not to discuss this crisis – many people of color in both the EAC and the education advocacy community also chose not to connect school desegregation to the current reform process. The EAC’s removal of any reference to Boston’s school desegregation history from its memorandum to the Boston school committee represented perhaps the most public act of forgetting and was an interracial activity, at least through silence
which suggested tacit agreement. The section was at once equivocal and controversial – suggesting both that the three zone plan could be helping to continue to desegregate the school system and that the Boston had made significant progress in diversity since the desegregation era. By connecting to the present, this section used Boston’s desegregation crisis to raise a critical issue facing the EAC – the racial equity of student assignment. Rather than confront this issue head on, the EAC quickly struck any reference to school desegregation in its memorandum. In not grappling with this past, the EAC could solidify its own legitimacy – as a body working to reform a confusing and cumbersome system in a changed city, rather than as one confronting issues of racial equity in the city’s schools and its neighborhoods.

From within a narrative of progress towards a colorblind society, thinking and talking about the intense racial conflict of school desegregation that occurred 40 years ago is neither necessary nor useful. The relevance of this history was negated through the dual strategies of avoiding the past and emphasizing progress and diversity. In the public performance of its duties, the EAC focused on progress and dropped discussions of history where they might lead to tensions around issues of race. At the same time, city leadership, especially the Mayor and Superintendent made little reference to any historical racial conflict, while emphasizing change and improvement. Yet, there were tensions and anxieties about talking about desegregation history on the EAC, and at the same time, both the Mayor and the Superintendent did subtly talk about race – not through the language of race, but by highlighting specific individuals and neighborhoods understood to represent particular racial groups. Watching the public process of school assignment reform unfold, one gets the sense that a careful balance is being struck between talking and not talking about race. Remembering Boston’s school desegregation crisis played a critical role in this striking this balance – where this contentious history was raised it, was generally only raised to emphasize progress since that era. This specific narrative of
progress served dual purposes to legitimize the need for reform and to suggest that race was an unnecessary factor for consideration in student assignment reform.

Discussion and Conclusion: Place, Race, and Progress in the Performance of Memory

Sociologists of memory have documented how everyday remembering occurs within the context of contemporary social relationships such as race, class, and gender. Furthermore, these relationships, and the memories they engender, must be understood in the context of time and place (Massey 1995, Degnen, Mah 2010). Like processes of everyday remembering, political remembering is embedded in social relationships which are in turn embedded in power relationships. In the case of remembering Boston’s school desegregation crisis, race and place were deeply intertwined – people raised neighborhoods through a lens of history in order to say things about race relations in the city, often without ever mentioning the words race or racism. Boston’s school desegregation was, in this regard, a useful tool for talking about the emplaced nature of race in the city indirectly. Furthermore, the nature of who talked about this history, and where it was talked about was also highly embedded in social relationships. Black actors tended to draw on a historically rich narrative, while whites were more likely to negate the history altogether. The same time remembering itself was emplaced, and much more likely to occur in the black community.

Not only is political remembering embedded in social memory, it is at once both instrumental and cultural. As Schudson has argued (playing on Marx) “People and organizations and nations do make their own past... but they do not do so in conditions of their own choosing, with materials of their own making, or even with their memories acting entirely under their own volition” (1989:107). We can certainly add cities to Schudson’s list. As I have shown, remembering Boston’s school desegregation crisis takes place within the contemporary contexts of race and neighborhood in the city. It is not, however, so much the facts of these race and
neighborhood relationships that guided remembering as the resonant discourses around these social relations. The exclusion of Latino and Asian communities’ relationships to desegregation despite their active impact in the process, for example, reinforces a narrative of a new diversity and the irrelevance of past trauma. Overall, the construction of Boston’s desegregation crisis as a contrast to the contemporary city served to reinforce the identity of a tolerant and diverse city.

A color blind narrative of progress was not new for the city of Boston, though it has perhaps intensified along with gentrification. In this sense remembering the school desegregation crisis was, as many scholars have argued social memory to be, path dependent – it relied on past constructions of both the event and the city through time. Boston has certainly been understood to be racist, segregationist, and unequal, narratives many of the protestors and community advocates relied on. Yet these narratives were seen to be an old story of Boston, not fitting in to the idea of a New Boston marked by progressive change, and thus easily dismissed by politicians and the media as irrelevant.

From within the social and discursive contexts of Boston, however, it is clear that remembering and forgetting are instrumental for public actors. Mayor Menino chose when and where to remember, and consistently kept any discussion of the past to a minimum. Superintendent Johnson, on the other hand, chose a different strategy, though to the same end – she did not pursue a strategy of avoidance through forgetting, but instead made strong historical arguments to demonstrate difference in the city. Both tactics appeared to be deliberate in using the past to make a case for policy change. The activists and community advocates also appeared to be strategic in their use of the past - some spoke of resegregation and chanted “We ain’t going back to ’74” as a mobilizing force for people outside the process, while others were more guarded or indirect about drawing on the past, often when speaking inside institutional arenas. In their work on Germany, Olick and Levy (1997) describe efforts in German political culture to move beyond the Holocaust as a defining identity of the nation against which politics
must be measured. Similar processes appeared to be occurring in Boston, as actors limited the
arenas in which school desegregation was spoken about and focused on positive comparisons.

Forgetting as well as remembering has strategic value in urban politics. Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger (2010) argue that collective silence is a powerful way that groups address their collective pasts. They identify two types of silence, overt and covert. Overt silences occur when actors leave out relevant histories completely, as the EAC did in its policy memorandum. As my interviews show, on the EAC there were a variety of approaches to understanding Boston’s school desegregation history, but many endorsed a narrative of progress and change as a foundation for their participation in student assignment reform. Yet publicly, they worked to minimize discussion of the past, choosing to avoid possible conflict over the meaning of the past for their work rather than affirm mutual agreements. Covert silences, where only certain parts of the past as remembered, also occurred in the student assignment reform process. Racism and segregation were rarely mentioned by politicians or the media – instead vague references to conflict and inequity serve to distance the city from its identity as racist and unwelcoming. Silence around the Chinatown boycott of desegregation or the role of Latino activists in fighting for bilingual education served to mark off these populations as disinterested in the past.

The strategic mobilization of Boston’s school desegregation crisis suggests that remembering is a tool of the cultural politics of the city used to enact policy. The cultural politics of remembering in the city are situated within larger cultural discourses - in this case around progress and colorblind approaches to policy. Boston’s school desegregation crisis serves as a plastic, flexible concept that can be used upon to draw upon multiple meanings and goals in the contexts of education politics in the city. In her study on the symbolic politics of diversity in a Chicago neighborhood, Ellen C. Berrey (2005) found that “discourse about diversity can both illuminate and veil fundamental disagreement over race, class, and development in cities today” (144). In Boston, remembering school desegregation provided the same flexible meaning which
allowed actors to use a similar language from which disparate meanings emerge. Local actors, including politicians, media, citizens committee members, and community advocates drew on Boston’s violent school desegregation crisis as a point of comparison in order to make meaning about the present. For advocates of reform, talking about Boston’s school desegregation crisis was a way to show the city was changed and thus ready for reform. Raising the crisis was also a way to talk about and negate the role of race and racial segregation by neighborhood in contemporary student assignment reform. As a cultural politics, remembering is also a tool for contestation. In Boston, community advocates challenged the meaning of Boston’s school desegregation crisis history, arguing that that history should make the city more sensitive to issues of race and equity rather than less. For the reformers raising the past was useful only insofar as it signified change; for the advocates, raising the past signified parallels to the contemporary city.

The cultural politics of remembering, and the corollary processes of strategic forgetting are enacted through performance by local actors in various arenas – including at community meetings, in local news media, and at regular institutional forums. This ability to perform the past in service to the present is unbalanced and reflects power relationships in the city. Though the Boston Public Schools and the city presented the student assignment process as one of transparency and community input, this was not a case of pluralism – multiple interest groups advocated on an even field. Throughout the process, politicians and official committee members had nearly unlimited stage time to make their points and craft their messages. Likewise editorialists and reporters had significant newspaper space to present a relationship between past and present. Community advocates, on the other hand, invariably had two to three minutes, often timed, at hearings and meetings and the short space of a letter to the editor to state their cases. As participant myself in many of the community processes I often felt the frustration of voicelessness that came with watching a school committee or EAC meeting and being unable to
engage in the conversation. When I did have the opportunity to speak it was in a long line of others and received no other response than the nodding of heads or blank stares. Certainly community voice had influence in the process over time, but community advocates had significantly less space to engage in the cultural politics of remembering and forgetting with such little time to make any point at all. The performance of memory occurs not in a pluralistic context of multiple engage voices, but in a complex, conflictual context of unequal voice and power based on the structure of urban politics.

By conceptualizing the cultural politics of memory as an emplaced performative process, we can see the power dynamics of voice and voicelessness in legitimizing policy processes and outcomes. Reform advocates used Boston’s desegregation crisis to legitimize the need for reform of a system that was meant to meet the needs of a changed, post-racial city. This relationship to the past not only signified the need for reform, but for some pointed to a specific policy direction – a system of neighborhood schools that could only be possible in a city where race and place inequities were insignificant. Community advocates contested this narrative of the relationship between the past and the present, arguing the struggles for racial equity in place persist in the city. The changed city, however, was the dominant narrative. This contestation was not over the facts of the city – specific numbers which either side could have marshaled about segregation, diversity, etc. It was over telling a new chapter in the memory of Boston’s school desegregation crisis and its meaning in the present.
CHAPTER 4: OUTSIDE OF THE POLICY PROCESS – AN ALTERNATIVE PERFORMANCE

Although the policy-making process of student assignment reform represented a new chapter in meaning-making around remembering the school desegregation crisis in the city, it was certainly not the final word. In December of 2014, almost two years after student assignment policy was voted on and just over forty years after the school desegregation crisis began, Boston was selected as one of 100 cities to receive a “Resilient Cities grant” by the Rockefeller Foundation. While most cities focused more on environmental or economic issues of resiliency, Boston was one of the few to focus on a social issue: race and class inequities in the city (Paiste 2014). The basis for its claim that race and class are pertinent issues on the city: the lingering effects of the school desegregation crisis. In a press release, Mayor Martin Walsh, elected in 2013 to replace Mayor Menino, evoked a narrative of continuity: “The long-term impacts of the busing era are still felt in Boston today, and we know that we still see segregation in our neighborhoods and gaps in social outcomes for people of color in areas such as education, public health, and economic security” (City of Boston 2014).

A month later, in his state of the city address, Mayor Walsh (2015) personalized his reasoning for the grant: “I know from my own life that you can’t move forward unless you reach out and deal honestly with the past. The truth is that when it comes to race and class, Boston has a lot of unfinished business. We must not be afraid to talk about it.” This particular statement piqued the interests of the organizers of the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project, which had been engaged in several years of work grappling with the legacy of this crisis. Earlier in the year, the BBDP had put out a report that represented the culmination of its listening and learning projects up to that time: Unfinished Business: 7 questions, 7 Lessons. In it the BBDP detailed what it had learned about the links between the desegregation crisis and the contemporary city.
From the BBDP perspective, Walsh “name checked” the project’s report *Unfinished Business* without consultation. BBDP staff member Steve McDonagh responded strongly the next day through the project blog:

Walsh touts his relationship with Rockefeller over acknowledging the work of BBDP and the YWCA, among others, while still using the language of those groups. This is erasure. His comments (and the initiatives he’s speaking about) overwrite the contributions made, and labor performed, by organizations led by women and people of color in favor of the new programs of his administration (which have no track record). This is not nothing. This is, and long has been, critical work in maintaining the system. Crossing out smaller groups is an effort, conscious or not, “intentional” or not, to retain and increase control of the narrative around racism and class in Boston. By co-opting not only the language and the concepts but also the process, the City and its partners can limit the questions and shape the conclusions drawn, while also appearing responsive publicly.(blog post, 1/15/2015)

For the BBDP, distrust in governmental institutions working to address issues of race and class is deep-seeded and historical.

Whether Mayor’s use of the term ‘unfinished business’ was intentional or coincidental, the focus on dialoguing about the past as a way to make progress around race and class equity from both the BBDP and the city is significant for understanding urban politics as a field for meaning contestation as much as for making policy. Up to this point I have focused largely on the institutional politics of student assignment reform as a window into the role of memory in urban politics. But remembering and even contestation through remembering do not happen only within institutions. Grassroots efforts at engaging cultural traumas occur outside of the constraints of institutional norms and goals, and there are thus many ways grassroots organizations might attempt to use historical narratives to make change. In this chapter I use the case of the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project to focus on one such strategy: the use of storytelling about a cultural trauma as a strategy for community-based knowledge production to create a vision for change. At the same time, as the above exchange suggests, the work of grassroots organizations is not separate from institutional politics or even the policy-making
process – the politics of telling the story of a controversial past circulates between the grassroots actors and institutional ones.

Throughout its operation the BBDP (including myself, as a BBDP staff member) was very aware of the institutional politics of race, class, and remembering the past, and even at times participated in these politics – testifying on student assignment policy before the school committee, for example, or holding an unofficial hearing on the legacy of desegregation in the city hall chambers. In large part, however, the BBDP approached the politics of remembering in ways that stand outside of the institutional arena of urban politics. A traditional study of urban politics could not fully account for these activities of the BBDP, but when we view urban politics from the perspective of the sociology of the local, the role of the BBDP becomes more evident. Operating in the same broader arena as the process to reform student assignment – a city grappling with a cultural trauma – the BBDP is a part of the web of relationships and memories which circulate across the city. Its performance of the past however, is built on an alternative set of values.

In this chapter I describe the BBDP’s performance of the past in more detail and situate the activities of the organization within the larger political field. I give a chronological accounting of the activities of the BBDP with an emphasis on how it engaged this past cultural trauma. I argue that the BBDP is best understood as a grassroots project of community knowledge production, rather than a systematic investigation into the history as one might expect from an academic context or the instrumental use of the past to effect policy as one might expect in the contexts of institutional politics. Finally, I situate the grassroots politics of the BBDP vis a vis institutional politics of policy making. I argue that the community based knowledge production of BBDP represents an alternative approach to the performance of the
memory of a cultural trauma, but that both approaches operate within the same larger field of the city.

**Producing Knowledge about the Past: A Performative Genealogy**

*Origin Stories*

I first heard about the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project as an idea at the kitchen table of the executive director of the Union of Minority Neighborhoods. “We’re going to do a truth and reconciliation project around busing in Boston,” he proclaimed over dinner. I was struck by the idea because I grew up hearing about desegregation as a Boston resident and Boston Public Schools system, but even more so because as an adult in my daily life in the city I so often heard people blame ‘busing’ for whatever they diagnosed to be the city’s main problem – poor education, residential segregation, racism, white flight, gentrification etc. I asked him to let me know what came of it, and, when I heard they were funded for the project I promptly sent a list of videos I’d compiled for lecturing about desegregation in my classes.

The bulk of the funding of the project from its initiation through the period of this research originated from the Andrus Family Fund, a small family foundation operating out of New York. One of Andrus’ areas of philanthropy was ‘community reconciliation’ projects which focused on identifying and addressing community-based conflicts. Many of these projects were framed as truth and reconciliation commission (TRC) projects addressed at race-based conflict – including, for example, a TRC on residential segregation in Detroit, Michigan and A TRC on race relations in Durham North Carolina. Andrus provided the Union of Minority Neighborhoods with six month planning grant followed by several full years of funding to join this small but growing cadre of groups working to address historical narratives as a critical component of making change in the present.
The first work of the BBDP as a part of the planning grant was to reach out to people UMN had worked with to ask them if and why they thought it would be important to revisit Boston’s school desegregation crisis. They arrived at five critical reasons:

1. *To address trauma and injury,*
2. *To explore history to better understand and address current conflicts and problems,*
3. *To get marginalized voices and taboo topics into today’s public education dialogue,*
4. *To help communities learn their own histories and then to forge a collective story of Busing/desegregation in Boston,*
5. *To challenge leadership in Boston to acknowledge the traumas of desegregation and to address the lingering effects on individuals, the Boston Public School system and the city.* (BBDP 2011)

Threaded through these motivations we can see the initial impetus towards a grounding of history in the present. In addition, a strategic focus was beginning to develop on understanding the discourse of busing/desegregation, particularly in the impulses to bring in marginalized voices, forge a collective story and struggle for an acknowledgement of that public story.

With support of the Andrus foundation, the project also brought Eduardo Gonzalez, sociologist and director of the Truth and Memory project at the International Center for Truth and Justice, to speak to its learning network (volunteers and program participants) about truth and reconciliation projects around the world. Speaking to an audience of about thirty in a sunny law school classroom in July 2011, Mr. Gonzalez began his presentation by interrogating the nature of truth as a social, political, and psychological construct, arguing that there are always multiple truths that are a function of position, power and experience. At the same time, Gonzalez went on to argue, truth-seeking as a tool is always performative – while we may acknowledge the multiplicity of truth behind the scenes, truth and reconciliation processes seek to reconstruct THE truth, though in reality such processes often only reduce the lies which can
be told about an event. Gonzalez ended the day by discussing best practices of truth and reconciliation practices and urging the BBDP to become clearer about what it expected to accomplish and why people should become involved.

What narrative, then, would the BBDP construct about Boston's school desegregation history? What story would it tell from this past? What lies would it debunk? Meeting notes and my observations suggest that the BBDP took seriously the suggestions of Eduardo Gonzalez about both multiple truths and the need for performance. Within months, however, we decided to drop the language of 'truth and reconciliation' and adopt a new tag line: truth, learning, and change. Ultimately, the BBDP chose its own path rather than that of traditional truth-telling processes (setting up an independent commission, soliciting stories and issuing recommendations), which focused more on a narrative of the relationship between the past and the present then on a reconciliation of the past itself, but was no less performative.

By the time I came to work for the Project in August of 2011, it had begun to form an origin story rooted in past organizing efforts of the Union of Minority Neighborhoods that would be a crucial part of this narrative. I do not say ‘story’ as in something that was not true – I do in fact feel this story is an accurate representation of reality – but as in a narrative that became relatively uniform across tellers as we repeated it regularly at events and in writing. This origin story, told here in the Unfinished Business report, reflected the organization’s orientation towards history:

When the Union of Minority Neighborhoods (UMN) began the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project, we were not thinking that the 40th anniversary of school desegregation was just four years away. UMN was doing CORI (Criminal Offender Records Information) reform with people from economically marginalized communities and public education organizing with Black people. Stories and feelings about that era kept coming up. We weren’t historians. We just wanted to understand why this history seemed to be keeping so many stuck and what we could all do about it (BBDP 2014).
Another piece of this narrative stemmed from that initial information gathering: “As we’ve listened to other voices, we’ve been told again and again that as we look to the past the project must be relevant to present challenges facing public education and the city” (Bivens, Doran, and Lindsay 2012). We continuously reiterated this origin story as a way to anchor the project to the present and to make the case to our audiences that our work was not looking at history simply out of interest, but because real organizing efforts had signaled a need. It was this concern for practicality that infused the BBDP approach to history. As time went on, the BBDP ultimately framed expanding the story of desegregation as a direct goal:

**Greater awareness of a more inclusive story about our past: the history that led to and followed Boston’s busing/desegregation crisis.** This is shaped by previously excluded or marginalized voices and highlights the trauma and impact of the era that continues to exist in the city. It also includes public acknowledgement of an inclusive history. (BBDProject.org, nod)

The narrative of school desegregation – the way it was told and retold would remain an abiding interest throughout my time working with and following the project.

In keeping true to this perceived charge, rather than tell a new or different truth about Boston’s school desegregation history, much of the focus of the Project has been to grapple with the relationship between that history and the present, much like the actors in the student assignment reform process. In building this analysis the BBDP has constructed a wholly different narrative – a narrative of the present, through the window of the past. In order to understand why and how the BBDP constructed such a narrative it is first important to understand it’s assessment of the role of history and its assessment of the arena in which it operated. The Project argues in its blog, statements, and reports that the deck is stacked against a serious historical remembrance, citing a culture of silence and a tendency towards historical amnesia in both the broader country and specifically in Boston. In many ways this is the beginning of its narrative: in a culture of forgetting, remembrance is viewed as a liberatory act. The present is thus constructed from the beginning as a problem to be solved. In response to
such a context, the BBDP continuously justifies its approach; in the process of this justification historical investigation appears as almost a panacea – through looking back we can correct past mistakes, heal individual and collective traumas, better align with our values, understand the present, and make better choices for the future. Where the culture of Boston rejects history, the BBDP embraces it as essential to social change.

The project was also clear from the beginning about the relationship between received wisdom and the mechanisms of power. Many of the steering committee members I interviewed framed this in terms of challenging a “master narrative”:

It's not just the, you know, like the – it's like the master narrative. It's not like we're creating one more master narrative because the idea of a master narrative I think is flawed. So for people to somehow be able to interrogate the assumptions that, well, this is the real deal as it's a static something. Then I think that we undercut the potential of the program and the project to deconstruct the master narrative without trying to replicate the notion of master narrative. (Interview, June 2014)

Challenging this ‘master narrative’ of busing/desegregation in all its many layers – including who is included/excluded from the story, what time frame the story is told in, who the heroes and villains are in the story, and what the impacts were – is viewed as a way to challenge power and question assumptions about the present:

[The BBDP has risen] some awareness that there is a narrative and some assumptions and the power that that narrative has over how we think about community and education and racism... I think it shifts the power – it’s an interesting power shift in that institutions don’t control the narrative, but the people can control the narrative through the telling of their own stories and building some sort of mutual understanding about, you know, this is what’s important to me, and this is what’s important to you, and we might learn that we care about the same things, and how can we use that to shift the narrative away from, you know, I’m more deserving then you or you are a threat to me to well what is the real threat here. (Interview, December 2013)

For the BBDP, challenging this narrative through an alternative/expanded narrative was viewed as a way to challenge and shift power.

The Boston Busing Desegregation Project’s relationship to history in many ways bears a striking resemblance to work of Michel Foucault on genealogy. In his 1977 work *Discipline and
Punish: the Birth of the Prison, Foucault addresses the question, ‘why write a history of the prison?’: “Simply because I am interested in the past? No, if one means by that writing a history of the past in terms of the present. Yes, if one means writing the history of the present” (31). At the Boston Busing Desegregation Project similarly set out to write a history of the present, arguing in a report we published on our first phase of work, “any attempt to look back to learn from Boston’s history – the busing/desegregation crisis and its impact, as well as what led to it – must be for the purpose of better understanding and addressing today’s challenges” (Bivens, Doran, and Lindsay, 2012:4). Indeed the philosophy behind the BBDP’s approach to the past tracks very closely with Foucault’s framing of his genealogical method.

This focus on the story of school busing/school desegregation suggests a further parallel between Foucauldian genealogy and the BBDP’s approach to understanding history. Discourse is central to Foucault’s genealogical method. For Foucault, tracing the historical development of discourse which functions in the present as given knowledge is a means for unveiling “the polymorphous techniques of power” (Foucault 1978: 11). In his history of sexuality, for example, Foucault (1978) challenges widespread assumptions about the “repressive hypothesis,” arguing that discourses of sex and sexuality are tools of power used to organize and control the body. His interest is in locating and challenging the production of discourse as unchallenged knowledge. The BBDP likewise seeks to challenge a discourse about desegregation it sees as unchallenged.

Though there is no evidence that Foucault directly influenced the project, his work on genealogy provides an interesting conceptual framework for the approach to history for grassroots organizations in the city looking to make social change. Ultimately, however, the BBDP was not an academic project, and thus departs from Foucault in its method. Where

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7 I include myself in this assertion. Though I was familiar with the work of Foucault at the time of my work on this project, it was not until I began writing about the project that the parallels were pointed out to me. It is, however, likely that the tradition of left and radical politics which influenced the project shares an epistemological lineage with Foucault.
Foucault tracked the development of discourse over time, the BBDP critiqued discourse but went on to build a strong analysis of the lessons of the past for the present. Because social change is so essential to the BBDP agenda, it is the relationship to history that is critical, rather than the history itself. A careful analysis of how the Project diagnoses the connection between school desegregation and contemporary social relations in their literature suggests four key relationships with distinct purposes:

1. *Comparing past and present* – A comparison between contemporary social relations and structures and those during school desegregation is made, largely to evaluate the present – are we better off? Worse off? In what ways?

2. *Identifying Root Causes* - similarities and differences between the past and the present are analyzed in order to identify the root causes underlying both contexts, with the ultimate goal of naming and addressing the underlying problem – How are problems of the past similar to problems of the present? What are the underlying causes of these problems that need to be addressed?

3. *Attributing Cause and Effect* - Past acts are used to explain the present situation. What happened in the past to create the current situation?

4. *Searching for Guidance*: An evaluation of past mistakes is made in order to find guidance for contemporary situations? What mistakes were made in the past? How can we make different choices in the present?

Through an exploration of these relationships between the past and the present the BBDP does construct some narrative of the past, but more striking is the narrative of the present that emerges. The BBDP set out to construct this narrative through an extended period of listening and information gathering across Boston’s communities.

**Expanding the Narrative through Stories across Difference**
Before gathering information, however, the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project went about the work of building a base of people who knew about and supported the project. The Union of Minority Neighborhoods had traditionally focused its efforts on working with people of color in the city, particularly the black community, and thus that’s where its main networks resided. For this project, however, the executive director was firm that it would include “la de da de everybody” - meaning people from across racial groups, neighborhoods, and political perspectives. He hired a project director, who brought on a strategic planning consultant, and together they built a structure and vision for the project. Ultimately, the project director and I formed the core staff of the project which gave us strength in talking across the black/white binary but provided a challenge in building strong relationships with Boston’s immigrant, Latino, and Asian communities, as mistrust across racial/ethnic lines continues to be an important element in Boston politics and activism.

Though they originally had envisioned more layers, ultimately the project structure included a steering committee which provided and monitored the direction of the project, and a ‘learning network’ which consisted of an informal membership base committed to supporting the project and learning about the school desegregation crisis era. At the time I began working with the project, the main goal of our small staff was to build networks, spread the word about the project, and continue to develop a plan for the work of the project moving forward based on what we heard from various communities. The BBDP’s main tool for this task: *Can We Talk? Learning from Boston’s Busing/Desegregation Crisis* (Mercer 2011), a film commissioned directly by UMN’s executive director.

*Can We Talk?* consists of a clips of interviews with a variety of actors in Boston’s school desegregation crisis, from students to bus monitors to politicians to police officers, discussing their experiences and what they believe we can learn from those experiences. It largely portrays an African American perspective on desegregation (though not wholly, other voices are also...
included), a fact which we as BBDP members were acutely aware. Often when we presented the film we were careful to explain that the film represents some stories from the era rather than a full spectrum and that we were showing it in order to encourage people to add their own perspectives to the chorus. Nonetheless, as the film was shown around the city, in churches, workplaces, community centers and even schools, it often elicited strong reactions from audience members – who interpreted the message of the film in a variety of ways. Ultimately the film was shown in over 40 venues to an estimated 1000 people over the course of a year, before the BBDP shifted strategies from sharing the stories of a few people to gathering the stories of many.

The impetus towards storytelling for the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project lay not only in addressing a master narrative that reinforced power structures, but in the overlapping goal of including diverse voices to expand this narrative:

The “master narrative” about this era minimizes and excludes the stories of many communities. We must collect more stories of individuals and histories of communities in order to gain a systemic understanding of the era for the diversity of the people, then and now, whose interests converge around wanting equity, access, and excellence for all.

(Bivens, Doran, and Lindsay 2012)

This drive to include previously excluded voices rests on a belief that social position matters to how people understand and tell truths. Following its work to establish the roots of the project through the film screenings, the BBDP embarked on an extended period of story collecting through multiple strategies – in discussions at ‘cultural convenings,’ an oral history-style interviewing project, and, as its main method, story circles.

The initial interest of the BBDP in story positionality was framed around bringing in “marginalized voices” and geared specifically towards considering the stories of different cultural or racial groups. This interest was spurred in part by critiques of the Pulitzer-winning
Common Ground by Ruth Batson (2001), Jeanne Theoharis (2003), and others which focused on how this dominant story erased the voices of the Boston’s Black community and leadership. It also was spurred by hearing voices from all of Boston’s major racial groups – Black, White, Latino, and Asian – that said their community’s story was not fully understood. An initial strategy of the group based on this analysis was to pull together ‘cultural convenings,’ – spaces for each racial group to explore their own histories. The strategy was laid out as a part of series of steps in the groups’ initial “key findings “ report (BBDP 2011):

**Phase Two: Each cultural community understanding its own story.** Because some who were traumatized said they would first need to tell their stories in their own cultural group, we believe it is important to focus first on supporting each cultural community to better understand its own story, before bringing different cultural communities together to search for a deeper understanding of Boston’s collective story. In addition to individuals sharing their personal stories/trauma, this phase will include learning about:

- The different histories that shaped people within each racial group
- How those different histories shaped the responses of subsets within each racial group to busing/desegregation as well as opportunities for these different subsets following busing
- The condition of these different subsets today; and developing solidarity within each racial group to stand for improving opportunity for all.

While here the language shifts between culture and race, the BBDP ultimately committed to thinking along the lines of race explicitly.

Throughout its work the BBDP continued to think and collect stories along the lines of racial groups; its oral history story collection, for example, focused on balancing interviews across racial lines. At the same time, the project also identified other positions from which to think about narratives of desegregation in order to reckon with the full complexity of social relations in the city then and now in terms of race, class, gender, neighborhood, and generation. In our report on the first year of film screening, we (Bivens, Doran, and Lindsay 2012) gave the following examples:

- The story of what was happening in Boston’s Latino/a and Asian communities
- The story of those who went through school desegregation (especially young men during that era – we have heard more from women)
- The story of communities as viewed by the people who lived in those communities, including the story of South Boston from a South Boston perspective (many originally from this neighborhood feel it has been misrepresented)
- The story of those who were committed to making school desegregation work, before, during AND after the crisis
- The story of schools that didn’t experience violence

As this list suggests, the BBDP saw stories from people in different social and situational positions as necessary to build an expanded story of school desegregation.

The Boston Busing/Desegregation Project engaged in two types of story collection which reflected the project’s concerns with listening to marginalized voices across social positions. The oral history interviews collected by the project were focused on stories of people who directly experienced Boston’s school desegregation crisis. All interviews were conducted by an individual of the same racial group as the interviewee, using a semi-structured format which included questions about experiences and lessons from that era. The BBDP aimed to complete interviews with a diverse group across racial lines, but in the end mostly engaged black and white participants, likely for two reasons. First, the Latino and Asian populations in the city during that time were much smaller; after 40 years the pool of people to draw from who experienced desegregation and still lived in the city was likely very small. Second, the project did work to build relationships with Latino and Asian communities – this was a persistent discussion at planning and steering committee meetings – but continued to struggle in this area, due to issues of time and trust building. The interview project began in September of 2012 and had largely wound down by the end of 2013 (though interviews continue occasionally at the time of this writing.)

While the interviews were aimed at people who lived in the city at the time of desegregation, the story circles were aimed at people who lived in the contemporary city. In January of 2013, the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project held the first in a series of story circles in a church basement in one of Boston’s neighborhoods. As the evening began BBDP
staff, myself included, busied ourselves hanging a well-worn community timeline of school desegregation - major legal, social, and political events threaded with personal stories of BBDP community members printed on sticky notes hanging tenuously on several large sheets of butcher paper. Meanwhile a couple of church staff members set up a table, brought out plates and silverware and brewed coffee and tea, while participants began to drift in, setting an array of hot dishes for a potluck meal on a cold night on the table. Dinner was eaten amid quiet small talk amongst congregants of the church, Boston Busing/Desegregation Project staff and volunteers, and a few newcomers who had received information about the event but belonged to neither the church nor the BBDP. As dinner wound down I pointed people towards markers and sticky notes, asking them to review and add to our ever-growing community timeline. A few people circled the room, markers in hand, while others cleaned up from dinner or sat at the tables and continued to chat, until finally the BBDP project director called on everyone to join a circle of chairs set up in the auditorium adjacent to the kitchen area.

Once the circle was formed, a facilitator with significant experience in this method of storytelling, asked each participant to take a moment and look around the circle, make eye contact with others, and reflect upon how they were feeling to be in that space. A group of twenty-five people had gathered on that evening. The group appeared to be mostly white, over the age of 50, with a good proportion of lifetime Boston residents, but this was certainly not the rule – there were blacks, Asians and Latinos present, young people, and relative newcomers to the city as well. After this group tentatively gazed around at each other, the facilitator then gave a short preface about listening and being present in one another’s stories before laying out the ground rules. Each person had two to three minutes to introduce themselves and tell a story from their life that thinking about Boston’s school desegregation crisis and the community timeline brought up for them. We would proceed in a circle, there would be no ‘crosstalk’ – listening only, no response, and each person had the option of passing, and speaking later if they
chose. After everyone spoke there would be an opportunity to discuss the themes we heard across the stories. The result was a rich tapestry of stories and connections across experiences, social positions, and generations. Once everyone had told their individual stories, people in the room began to respond to one another and to develop themes they noticed across difference – including as varied topics as turf, tribalism, culture, and student assignment politics. When I left at 9:30, a half an hour after the event was scheduled to end, the circle had dissolved but small groups around the room animatedly continued the conversation. Story circles like this one were set up with civic organizations, schools, churches, and workplaces across the city and even into the suburbs. Participants in these circles were diverse across race, age, experience, neighborhood, and social class, and told a wide variety of stories about experiences generally related to race, class, residence, and education.

The story circle described above is an inefficient method for a systematic investigation of the history of school desegregation in Boston – it results in a hodge-podge of experiences over a wide span of time rather than a singular narrative. Nor does storytelling of this kind entail direct political advocacy for a specific policy change. The BBDP’s story circles were instead intended to be a step in a process of community building, learning and narrative change. Rather than try to construct a new singular narrative paralleling the master narrative of school desegregation and busing, the BBDP set out to collect as many stories as it was able to trouble this master narrative. The perceived need to connect past and present was one driving force behind this story collection – the project set out not to do archival research but to connect how people understood this history and people’s contemporary experiences in the city. A belief about positionality – that people with particular experiences based on their social positions -also drove a focus on collecting stories from as many vantage points as possible.

**Policy Engagements**
At the same time that the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project was introducing itself across the city through *Can We Talk?* and then settling into its story collection process of interviews and circles, the student assignment reform process was occurring. Before student assignment reform began, the Project had an uneasy relationship with the city government, with rumors reaching our ears occasionally that Mayor Menino was less than enthusiastic about the project and had discouraged people from becoming involved. While, these were only rumors, the fact remained the mayor never did meet with the BBDP despite repeated requests and in an October 2011 *Boston Globe* article about the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project, Menino simply commented that he didn’t think that history should be revisited.

When the mayor announced a new process of student assignment reform to bring students “closer-to-home,” it sparked an ongoing discussion amongst staff and the steering committee about the project’s relationship to city government and public policy that never fully resolved itself. Instead there remained ambivalence throughout the student assignment process about what role the project might play. The overarching feeling was that while the connections were clear between school desegregation history and contemporary student assignment, the project was in a phase of listening and gathering information. After the fact, I heard the project director say on multiple occasions that we just weren’t ready to be doing that kind of advocacy—we were still learning. I regularly attended meetings of the External Advisory Committee and followed the process closely as a researcher, but rarely spoke or engaged at these meetings from a BBDP perspective. I say ambivalence, however, because this didn’t mean the BBDP disengaged completely—there were several junctures at which the Project did enter into the realm of institutional politics.

The first task of the EAC was to set about defining its task and gathering information. Some of this information included looking at data about the then current student assignment system, but it also included talking to parents and communities about their visions for student
assignment. The BBDP saw this as an opportunity and began collaborating with the Boston Public Schools to put on a program for the External Advisory Committee rooted in its work. Held in a hall owned by the Episcopal Church in June 2012, the Boston Busing Desegregation worked to put on a program that was educational and conversational, and rooted in both past and present. The program consisted of a dinner, an excerpt of *Can We Talk?*, six panelists speaking about equity past and present in the Boston Public Schools, and an opportunity for small group conversations. Planning for and setting a date for the event in collaboration with the BPS became complicated, however, and in the end only five EAC members were present, plus a smattering of others invited by the BBDP. The evening ran smoothly, but this small turnout from the EAC suggested to myself and others in the Project a lack of interest from the EAC and a lack of impact based on our efforts.

Later that summer the Union of Minority Neighborhoods began hosting a small group of community activists that came together to form the “Community Coalition for Equity, Excellence, and Engagement” (CC EEE) to monitor and work to influence the student assignment reform process. The group included many of the advocates who followed the student assignment reform process from beginning to end as described in previous chapters. In early October the group held a press conference calling for the city to slow down its process and switch the focus from student assignment to building a plan to provide quality education in school across the city. The BBDP also put out its own statement outlining three lessons it felt that the city could take from Boston’s school desegregation crisis: “any conversation around school assignment should be historically rooted,” “school assignment is intricately connected to questions of the equitable distribution of resources and quality schools across the city,” and, finally, “discussions around school assignment must involve stakeholders in a real and meaningful way. This means privileging the voices and participation of those who will be most impacted: the families who do not have the resources to send their children anywhere but the
Boston Public Schools” (Boston Busing/Desegregation Project Press Statement, 10/04/2012).

Like the BBDP itself, however, this coalition never fully coalesced around a strategy to impact student assignment, and thus largely served as a forum for information sharing and discussion between individual organizations.

Towards the end of the student assignment process, the coalition worked with an expanded number of groups to put together an additional advocacy statement submitted to the Boston School Committee entitled “No More Broken Promises.” In this statement the signatories, including the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project, argue that the Boston Public Schools have broken promises to devote educational resources to increasing quality in low-income neighborhoods where primarily people of color reside. They demand a delay of implementation of the “closer to home” assignment plan until “there is evidence that a proportionate number of high performing schools and seats are available in all parts of the city” (Statement submitted to Boston School Committee, 3/13/2013). Other groups that had worked with the coalition also had specific policy goals, like ending a particular piece of the plan they felt would concentrate neighborhood advantage and disadvantage further or halting the policy change altogether.

Though the BBDP participated with these groups, often advocating within the coalition for a strong eye towards history, it never took up its own advocacy on a particular policy position. When the BBDP executive director and I sat down to craft a statement from the BBDP specifically to present to the school committee, we found ourselves a bit at a loss about what to say on behalf of the organization. We each had our own strong opinions on what the school committee should do, but felt that the BBDP, as an organization in a process of listening and learning, could only share what it had learned and heard that had relevance to the contemporary student assignment process. As an organization devoted to hearing multiple stories and perspectives on history and its relation to the present, we had difficulty translating that multiplicity into a specific advocacy position. Ultimately, our final statement encouraged the
school committee to act in a way that aligned with the values of race and class equity and
democratic access and excellence rather than furthering paths to privilege, but without
providing a specific policy path. We viewed this statement as a support to others advocating for
specific policy changes related to these values. This, ultimately, was the BBDP engagement in
the policy-making process – and a key component of its narrative - a reiteration of the
importance of recognizing student assignment as a process of the distribution of resources
grounded in values as a critical lesson from the past.

**Pedagogical Aims**

Both the BBDP involvement in the student assignment and the story collection process
were learning experiences for the organization. Staff and the steering committee spent many
long hours reflecting on learning from these processes as the Project figured out its next steps.
The BBDP had collected a vast amount of information and done a lot of learning which it worked
to share with others through reports and community gatherings, but how to move forward in
expanding the narrative of this history and making that narrative useful in service to present
inequities. Collecting stories was in part an organizing tool – a way to build a base of people
across the city who were personally invested in the project by drawing them in through telling
their story – but it was also an attempt to build a knowledge base deemed absent due to the
predominance of a master narrative of the past. In this sense, the Boston Busing Desegregation
Crisis saw story collection through a pedagogical lens, as a way to learn about history, draw out
lessons from it and engage others in an analysis of the power relations in the city. Though
tentative in this mission at its start, the BBDP became increasingly committed to its role as
pedagogical, in the sense of learning with and educating others about both history and its
relation to the present.

As previously suggested, the Union of Minority Neighborhoods framed its interest in the
busing/desegregation crisis not in its particularity, but as one crisis in an ongoing struggle over
race, class, and the distribution of resources. In its early Key Findings report, the BBDP drew directly from literature on radical pedagogy to explain its intent:

In looking for a way to tap into and understand that energy, or what popular education theorist Paulo Freire would call a generative issue, UMN has begun investigating using a Truth process in Boston: a community-driven process of telling, sharing, and learning from stories across differences to co-create the history of busing and Boston school desegregation and invite more communities into current attempts to improve the school system. (BBDP 2011:3)

This document is replete with references to learning as both a strategy and a goal, including the adoption of the tag line ‘for truth, learning, and change,’ and the commitment to building the base for the project as a ‘learning network’ committed to working towards increased understanding together.

Though it’s initial conception of a ‘learning network’, never fully panned out, the BBDP continued a commitment to learning, despite pushback as suggested in our Report on Phase One: “More than one person has suggested to us that to keep saying the project is about learning can sound patronizing but nothing is farther from our intent” (Bivens, Doran, and Lindsay 2012:5) This report is an intent to synthesize a year’s worth of learning by BBDP staff and volunteers through reading, talking to people about the project and discussions at film screenings. At over 30 pages, it represents an in-depth analysis of past and present in the school system and city intended to educate others from a grassroots rather than academic perspective:

“This is not an academic research report. It is an organizing resource for and an invitation to more and more of the people, institutions, and communities of Boston committed to equity, access, and excellence in our schools and our city. Learning together permeated all parts of the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project. Learning together is a process of engagement. It involves discovering who we are, where there are places of mutual interest, and identifying our shared desire and action for change.”

As alluded to in this passage, the main thrust of the BBDP’s report on the first year is to make the case for three themes connecting past to present – race and class equity, democratic access to resources and decision-making, and the ongoing struggle for excellence in urban education.
The BBDP emphasized its role as a learning project not just through story circles and reports, but also through periodic gatherings, bringing its network together to think and analyze together. In one 2012 event, over a hundred people gathered for a workshop on listening across difference with scholar and project advisor Beth Roy. After the release of the year-one report the BBDP once again it’s network to report on the report and ask participants to vision/prioritize for the project. Later in 2014, after it’s interviewing and story circle project was well underway the BBDP held a public event entitled “Can We Listen?” for participants to hear stories, learn from the project and strategize. This event followed an intensive data analysis project in which a small group of volunteers located themes within its interviews and story circles within and across racial groups. Several months later the project held a more targeted event in which they recruited grassroots community leaders across racial groups (but again, mostly black and white) to focus on using these themes to build leadership around equity, access, and excellence. Each of these gatherings was pedagogical in nature – reporting what the BBDP had learned and creating space for the co-creation of knowledge and understanding.

The BBDP also engaged in institutional politics in the city from a pedagogical standpoint. As described above, it’s approach to the student assignment reform process was ultimately pedagogical, though tentative. As the project advanced this work became more strategic. As we entered 2014, the fortieth anniversary year of school desegregation, the staff and steering committee spent time deliberating on what commemoration activities would tell a narrative which emphasized lessons from Boston’s school desegregation crisis. We were concerned at that point with a narrative that would distance the city from its past and only emphasize improvements (like the new Boston narrative described in chapter one) and wanted instead to emphasize the continuity of community struggles (as the advocates described in chapter 2 did, though through a broader lens than student assignment end educational equity). In May of 2014 the Union of Minority Neighborhood was instrumental in encouraging two city councilors to
introduce an official resolution to honor the achievements of *Brown vs. Board of Education* on its 60th anniversary. Three white city councilors declined to support this resolution, causing a small backlash across the city as represented in the press. Rather than castigate the city councilors, however, the BBDP saw their reaction as an honest reflection of the current state of affairs in the city:

Those at BBDP who’ve been listening to stories, histories and legacies of the busing/desegregation era were not entirely surprised by the anxiety this Brown anniversary raised given that it comes just weeks before the 40th anniversary of Boston’s court-ordered desegregation. We agree that the two cannot be conflated. At the same time, most of us know that Brown is in a process of being dismantled in what one writer described a couple years ago as Brown devouring Brown (and the feast continues)...We encourage residents in these councilor’s districts (and that’s everyone for Councilor Murphy – he’s citywide) to let them know your story and what you feel and think about their votes. We look forward to continuing to engage together the dialogue surrounding these potent anniversaries and take this time to renew our commitment to fulfill Brown’s and Morgan’s (and Robert’s and Plessy’s et al’s!) quest for justice. (Donna Bivens, blog post, 5/23/2014, bbrproject.org)

In the end, the BBDP built on this to address city government directly by hosting a panel and testimony event in the City Hall Chambers entitled “The Boston Desegregation Decision 40 years later.” This event, which was held near the anniversary of the federal court order to desegregate BPS, featured two groups of speakers – one focused on connecting to the history and impact of desegregation, and one focused on lessons for the present.

In September of 2014, at the anniversary of the beginning of desegregation, the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project released another report – this time much shorter (at 9 pages) – entitled “Unfinished Business: Seven Questions, Seven Lessons, Linking Boston’s Busing/Desegregation Crisis to Struggles for Equity, Access, and Excellence for All in Boston Today.” After a brief introduction, again emphasizing the report as a result of mutual learning, each question is presented, followed by an analysis of past and present, and concluded with a lesson for the contemporary city. This report was the most comprehensive attempt at a narrative of the relationship between past and present. This narrative, like that of the community
advocates, focused on a continuity of problems, but with a considerably more in-depth and nuanced analysis of how people in the contemporary city understand and experience the past in their everyday lives. Through their analysis of past and present the BBDP builds a narrative of entrenched and systemic inequities which persist from past to present. From this perspective, the question is not whether desegregation succeeded or failed but how it disrupted and enabled power relations.

With this report the BBDP continued to embrace a more intentional pedagogical strategy; while still emphasizing co-learning, the project formally adopted goals which put it into the position of educator in the wake of this report: working to develop curricula around the report and to bring people together for education on race and class literacy. This new goal reflected the general tenor of the report as well as one specific question, “Was it (the school desegregation crisis) about racism or was it about class?”, answered, “We need race and class literacy.” The report explains:

When the larger context of racism and class stratification is unexplored, we cannot fully understand the legacy of school desegregation today. Furthermore, we have a limited vocabulary to talk about racism and class stratification in our city. Many people don’t know how to have these conversations and are uncomfortable when these topics come up. However, the problems in our schools are not separate from the intertwined issues of race and class at large in our city. We cannot address them separately. (BBDP 2014)

The BBDP began its official focus on race and class literacy just as I ended my tenure there and also as a new mayor was settling in (Mayor Walsh began his first term of office in January of 2014). To date this focus on race and class literacy has entailed partnering with community organizations, particularly organizations the BBDP had already worked with in the past, to have discussions about race and class using the school desegregation crisis as one of the foundations for the conversations. This strategy, again, is aimed not at policy change, but is nonetheless a political action in the city focused on building understanding and knowledge production.

**The Boston Busing/Desegregation Project as Grassroots Knowledge Production**
To this point I have given a largely chronological description of the activities of the Boston Busing/Desegregation project, with a focus on its goals and strategies in remembering the past. Now I shift to understanding the work of the BBDP in relation to the larger question of this work, about the role of memory in urban politics. To address this, I must first contextualize the work of the BBDP in larger sociological theory about narrative and contentious politics. Though the BBDP itself did not constitute a social movement nor is it representative of a specific movement, it is in the social movements literature that I find the relevant conceptual aides to understand its activities as a political actor in the city using remembrance as a tool for change.

In the study of social movements, a ‘cultural turn’ has brought considerable interest in the use of narrative. The social movements literature has paid particular attention to how activists attempt to ‘re-frame’ issues, alter ideologies, and create new identities (Melucci 1985, Snow et al 1986, Oliver and Johnston 2000). New Social Movements theorists in the 1980s first brought narrative into social movement studies by arguing that movements had become about struggles over meaning as much as struggles over resources – especially identity based struggles connected to race, gender, sexuality, etc. (Melucci 1985). At the same time in the United States theorists began to explore how activists ‘frame’ issues – to draw in supporters and make the case for their particular cause (Snow et al 1986). Political Process Theory, the dominant paradigm in social movement studies in the United States, continues to draw on framing to theorize the cultural activities of movements geared towards achieving particular political objectives. From this perspective, part of social movement work is to create a narrative of their cause that aligns with individual interpretative schema. The goal of constructing this narrative is to encourage movement support and participation (Snow et al. 1996).

In her work “It was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics” Francesca Polletta (2006) argues that scholars of political process focus on stories as a source of positive emotional
identification, without heed to the possibility that emotional identification may not lead to action, and that stories may actually discourage emotional identification. Polletta analyzes storytelling as a political tool, coming to the conclusion that the use of narrative can be both subversive and hegemonic, depending on context. When activists use story to gain political ends, Polletta argues, they face two overlapping obstacles. First, the cultural cache of a given narrative is embedded in power relationships—certain stories are more likely to have credibility and authority than others. Second, the legitimacy of story varies by context—in some arenas story may be an acceptable form of argument where in others story is met with skepticism. For these reasons, according to Polletta, stories can be at times a help and at others a hindrance for activists looking to make social change.

Francesca Polletta focuses specifically on the use of story as a strategy to make political change. Her warnings about the limitations of story suggest that the use of narrative to make change may be more fraught than activists recognize. Certainly the BBDP faced these challenges—the project was trying to tell a nuanced story aimed towards systems change which varied considerably from the 'master narrative' of progress. The Boston Busing/Desegregation Project, however, uses story not gain to support for their organization or to achieve a specific political end. Instead story is viewed as a means to open up discourse around this cultural trauma and its relationship to the present. The BBDP adopts story as an epistemological tool—as a way of generating knowledge, and as a pedagogical practice—as a way of building shared analysis and understanding. For the BBDP, the struggle for meaning over history is the central activity of the organization, rather than an aid to specific policy or other agenda. When it did briefly enter the institutional arena of student assignment, the Boston Busing/Desegregation drew on its own analysis of the relationship between past and present without referencing personal stories, and at the same time knowing full well its narrative would not be well received.
To understand the BBDP approach to storytelling, we cannot look to the political process literature, as Polletta positions her work, but to theories of the struggle over meaning through knowledge practices. Foucault’s assessment for the need of a genealogical method which constructs a ‘history of the present’ resonates with the BBDP’s assertion that any excavation of history needs to be conducted in service to social change work in the contemporary city. Thus the production and diffusion of knowledge the past which contests mainstream discourse, or a master narrative, is viewed as central to any change agenda towards ‘equity, access, and excellence’ rather than as partial or peripheral.

An alternative understanding of culture in social movements has followed the New Social Movements tradition more closely through the lens of ‘cultural politics.’ Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar (1998) argue that social movements are often ‘wars of interpretation’ as much as they are struggles to achieve material demands, while struggles for the democratization of social relationships (in terms of race, class, gender, etc.) are as political as they are cultural. Cultural politics thus focus on the legitimations of inequality and struggles over meaning related to these power relationships. Where social movement theorists in the traditions of political process and resource mobilization have focused on movement outcomes as attaining gains within the political system (McAdam et al 1996) this perspective suggests movement success can be found through destabilizing dominant discourses. The impacts of social movements are not simply in their material outcomes, therefore, but in their ‘knowledge practices’, whereby they create and diffuse new meaning and understanding (Conway 2006, Casas-Cortes et al 2008).

Through its focus on marginalized stories the BBDP is implicitly making an epistemological claim about the value of situated knowledge. The concept of situated knowledges spans a variety of social movements, but is perhaps most developed in the feminist literature on standpoint theory – which argues that any given group’s location in hierarchical
power relationships leads to shared understandings and challenges for that group. Furthermore, the production of knowledge is located with these power relations – thus knowledge is never purely objective and value-free – it must be interpreted as emerging from within a particular set of power relationships (Haraway 1988). Particia Hill Collins (1998) argues this theory was had a particular draw for black feminists, who could connect the theory to movements for racial solidarity. Hill Collins goes on to argue that situated knowledges can be used not only for the purposes of building in-group solidarity but as a starting point for intersectional/coalitional work. In their focus on stories, particularly across racial groups, but also in terms of neighborhood and class, the BBDP worked to critique the received knowledge of busing/desegregation through stories located across positions of a racialized power structure. Feminist standpoint theory helps us to understand this insistence on story not as a naïve one that doesn’t recognize the limits of story in a political arena, but as a radical epistemological choice. The enactment of this epistemology is a prefigurative approach which seeks to create knowledge about history, not for instrumental means but as a basis for the construction of a vision for change in the present and future.

The BBDP drive towards story collection was not solely about making its own internal connection between past and present, or validating and building a narrative of the past from multiple perspectives. It was also a pedagogical project, in which stories were used as the basis of knowledge production to inform strategies and organizing for the future. The Boston Busing/Desegregation Project continuously used the stories it collected as tools for reflection, learning and education, through both reports and community gatherings, in order to better understand the present, particularly in terms of power relationships and functioning, and to help build a strategy for action. In her thinking on knowledge and social movements, Janet Conway (2004) argues that pedagogy as a process of knowledge production is inherently a project of cultural politics – “a purposeful intervention in the shaping of knowledges and
identities for a political project and constitutive of a permanent process of ongoing cultural transformation” (70). A Freirian approach to pedagogy is aimed at unmasking power relations in society through a praxis of action and reflection built on generative themes (Freire 1970). By framing school desegregation as a generative theme, the BBDP set the stage for a cultural politics through pedagogy, which it then reinforced through a series of events and activities aimed at educating and engaging communities to understand the relationship between past and present in order to understand power in the present.

The epistemological and pedagogical drives of the BBDP were intertwined to create a process for knowledge production and use. The activities and writings of the BBDP, along with my interviews with BBDP members and my own experiences and observations within the organizations all suggest that the BBDP adopted story telling as a strategy because it saw the generation of knowledge from multiple standpoints or positions within the social relations of the city as critical to a radical reconstruction of the narrative about the desegregation crisis and its relationship to the city. The central focus for seeking out multiple standpoints for the BBDP was race – but the organization also sought stories of difference along class, generational and neighborhood lines among others. The BBDP worked to analyze individual stories of past and present to build a rich tapestry for in order to analyze for cross-cutting themes. Rather than seeking to build a singular narrative as an alternative to a master narrative, the BBDP sought what could be learned from multiple and competing narratives across individuals and communities.

**Alternatives to Policy in Urban Politics**

My exploration of the role of memory in urban politics in previous chapters has focused largely on groups working directly to effect student assignment reform – what I have referred to as institutional politics. I have explored multiple different actors interacting in a common field
with relatively defined roles and hierarchy, e.g. the mayor, the superintendent, the EAC, and community advocates. Bringing the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project into this analysis is less straightforward. The BBDP did in fact also enter this field as a relatively minor player, working with a coalition of other groups and at times testifying before the EAC and school committee. However, most of the work of the BBDP operated in a separate but overlapping field I am defining as grassroots politics – politics that are local and community driven, outside of traditional politics. My exploration of this history in relation to school assignment policy may have been complete without an in-depth exploration of the work of the BBDP. However, I have chosen to include the BBDP as it represents an alternative approach to history from the institutional politics I traced, and thus a fuller picture of remembering as a political act in the city.

In the policy making process, remembering was largely instrumental - a carefully crafted performance by multiple and competing actors that for some was hegemonic and others subversive. The Boston Busing/Desegregation Project also framed its remembrance as instrumental at times - as a tool to understand the present rather than as an end in itself. Nonetheless, this was an intentional remembrance - one where the cultural trauma of desegregation in the city took center stage and then was taken apart from multiple angles. The performance of this history occurred through public engagement in co-creating a new history and understanding - through film, story circles, interviews, and events meant to draw people living in the city into the process. The Boston Busing Desegregation Project itself was careful and cautious of how it performed the past - we were always very conscious about what we said and how we said it could be understood from multiple angles. But this particularity did not come from a place of wanting to make a specific policy case or paint a specific image, but to create a space that was broad enough for multiple narratives to converse and learn across space. The
BBDP created space for multiple performances and for a different kind of performance - one which didn't just advocate a specific point of view, but one which advocated listening to and learning from multiple points of view. What makes the performance of the past different from that within the policy process is its dual emphases on multiplicity and knowledge production.

The BBDP’s knowledge is consciously constructed through an analysis of history and story to generate an alternative understanding of the contemporary city which emphasizes entrenched inequities. But what role does this type of work play in the larger arena of urban politics in the city? This is a tricky question to answer from a research perspective. The BBDP was a small project in a relatively large city. Even if I had set out to document its impact, which I did not, this would have been nearly impossible, at least on its own terms: narrative change is likely a slow and amorphous process, difficult to track without the benefit of many years of hindsight. However, when we broaden the arena from student assignment policy to urban politics more generally we can see student assignment reform and the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project as two instantiations of remembering a cultural trauma in urban politics. These instantiations signify the role of Boston’s desegregation crisis as a cultural trauma in the city - it is a living history, consistently creating contention that impacts both how public policy is made and how groups and individuals in the city understand the city and act within it.

These performances of memory also overlap in the arena of public politics - of the assertion of the values on which power is enacted and challenged and circulates. Thus when Mayor Walsh references the "unfinished business" of school desegregation we can see the multiple layers of meaning beneath his speech even if we can’t divine its intention. Whether the process of building race and class equity through city-led dialogue will amount to real change is certainly highly suspect. Yet, whether a tentative nod to the BBDP or a co-optation of their
work, it is clear that the narrative of continuity circulates alongside a dominant narrative of the new Boston as a contestation to it, and that this narrative of the past has meaning in the city in how people work to understand and address inequity.
CONCLUSIONS

Cities are critical spaces of social organization on an increasingly global scale. One task of sociologists and other urbanists is to continue to unpack how this social organization functions to bring to light the powerful social forces at play in structuring cities. It is in this context that I have considered cities as spaces dense with symbolic meaning. This symbolic meaning is not just a part of the everyday realms of the people living there; it is also a mechanism through which power operates in the city. Through this research I have worked to elucidate one thread of the fabric of symbolic meaning as it operates in urban politics: remembering cultural trauma.

In order to demonstrate the role of remembering in urban politics, this research asked three main questions. First I asked about how actors in the policy-making process remember and use cultural trauma in the process of policy construction. This question was framed with the hypothesis that one role symbolic meaning plays in urban policy is through the process of collective remembering. At the same time, remembering is not only a private act, but a public one as well. I thus also asked what role remembering plays in the process of policy making itself. Finally, the symbolic politics of the city is not confined solely to the policy making process. As a contrast to institutional processes, my third question asked about the role of grassroots remembering.

To answer these questions, I have considered a particular resource, education, and how that resource is distributed, through assigning students to school. Though student assignment is a technical issue, it is also one with a long and troubled history in the United States. In Boston, as with many other localities across the United States, student assignment is closely associated with the violent and tumultuous desegregation process that occurred in the city in the mid-1970s. Exploring a contemporary process of student assignment reform, coupled with a
grassroots process of remembering this cultural trauma has allowed me to consider the symbolic politics in direct relationship to how policy is made and how this is related to larger questions of collective consumption in the city.

In this final chapter I revisit each research question I laid out in my introduction to discuss what contribution this research has made and explore its implications. I start by synthesizing my findings across these questions. I then go on to discuss the theoretical contributions of these findings and to explore their practical implications. Finally I discuss recommendations for future research that can build on this study and address its limitations.

Findings

Question 1: What is the relationship between actors’ remembrances of cultural trauma and their approach to urban policy making?

Social memories are narratives – stories of the past that inform how we think about the world; in this case I expected that the social memories of a cultural trauma would inform how people think about and act in the city. Indeed, I found a common overarching narrative of the school desegregation crisis among participants in the student assignment reform process. This narrative of a “bad problem, bad solution” recognizes problems of race and racism in the school system prior to school desegregation (the bad problem), while at the same time argues that school desegregation did little to resolve this problem (the bad solution). There were certainly some variations to this narrative among participants in this research and there are certainly multiple other narratives of this history that circulate in the city – as evidenced in the work of the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project. Nonetheless, the general thrust of this narrative was present in most of my interviews.

This finding, essentially that 40 years after school desegregation in Boston those deeply involved in the city’s politics share a common social memory of desegregation, is not in and of
itself surprising. What is surprising is that this common social narrative was shared across two groups of participants with remarkably different beliefs about and approaches to student assignment policy in the city. The first, members of the committee to reform student assignment saw it largely as a technical issue that needed to be disposed of before addressing larger questions of equity in the city. The second, a group of community advocates engaged in the reform process, saw student assignment itself as an issue of race and class equity. At face value then, it seems there is little relationship between remembering the past and contemporary approach to policy.

Instead I found a different narrative related to Boston’s school desegregation to be significant in how actors approached policy: a story not just of the past, but of the relationship between the past and the present. Committee members engaged in policy making relied on an understanding of change between past and present to frame how they approached student assignment reform: they tended to view the present as significantly different than the past, and used this understanding to advocate for policy change. Community advocates, on the other hand, tended to view a continuity of problems from past to present, an understanding which they used to advocate for an approach to policy which reckoned with past policy choices rather than separating from them. Ultimately, I found that past cultural trauma is used as a point of comparison to the present in order to make the case for present policies.

The next logical question is to ask why there was a variation in narratives of the relationship between past and present amongst community advocates and committee members. The beginning answer to this question based on my research is that actors in the policy-making process rely on cultural discourses to construct their understanding of the relationship between the past a past cultural trauma and the contemporary city. In this case discourses around both race and the contemporary city appeared to shape actors’ narratives. EAC members emphasized a colorblind society in the context of a narrative of progress towards a more
equitable city. Community advocates, on the other hand, contested this dominant narrative, arguing instead for a continuation of problems related to racism and equity in the city that remained unsolved from the past into the present. I did not find that the relationship between past and present was purely instrumental for actors in this process – they did not appear to tell a story about differences and similarities to the past solely in order to make a case for a particular policy approach. However, they did use contemporary cultural discourses to shape their understandings of the relationship between the cultural trauma of desegregation and their present task, which in turn shaped how they thought about policy-making.

**Question 2: What role does remembering play in the urban political process?**

Actors may have different approaches to policy based on how they relate the present to past cultural trauma, but these approaches still have to be enacted in the political field in order to be realized. While I found that actors were not purely instrumental in how they narrated the past-present relationship, I also found that in the policy making process remembering the past is a component of a strategic performance structured to enact policy. EAC members, community advocates, politicians, school officials and the media all used the past as a tool to make a case and to speak to particular constituencies. Furthermore, forgetting past cultural trauma is a critical corollary to remembering in the urban political process – it can be as strategic to not talk about past cultural trauma as it can be to talk about it.

By understanding remembering as a strategic performance in politics, we can situate it within a field of power relationships. Certainly the EAC members had more institutional, formal power to enact their version of student assignment change than the community advocates had. But this institutional power had not always translated into policy change in the past, as two previous processes of reform had brought about little change. I argue that by relying on dominant discourses of race and the city enabled them to carefully contain past conflicts over
the cultural trauma of school desegregation while at the same time making a particular case for policy reform. Community advocates did not have the same platform for speech, and were relying on contested narratives that did not resonate as easily. In short, the cultural politics of remembering are a critical component of urban policy making where a cultural trauma has significance.

**Question 3:** *What role do grassroots efforts at remembering play in the larger field of urban politics?*

While my first two sets of findings focus specifically on policy making, the cultural politics of remembering also take place outside of the arena of institutional politics. Remembering within institutional politics is narrow and structured by the field. Community advocates can use memory to contest dominant narratives, but this is structured by their opportunities to speak and how their audience (policy makers) responds. In this setting the use of memory is constrained, particularly by dominant cultural narratives. However, grassroots organizations not only use remembering as a strategic tool for policy change, but as a source for knowledge production and an opportunity to not just contest dominant narratives but to alter them. In this case, the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project did engage to some extent in the student assignment reform process, but also saw its goals as much broader than that – to tell, as Foucault might put it, a ‘history of the present’ – which could inform contemporary understanding and organizing efforts. Like actors within the policy-making process, the BBDP was also interested primarily in the relationship between past and present, but worked to uncover and present this in a structured way.

Though the BBDP is a relatively small project in the field of urban grassroots politics, its work has significant implications for our understanding of the cultural politics of the city. In particular, this case suggests that remembering a cultural trauma can be instrumental for the
purpose of policy change, but it can also be epistemological and pedagogical as well. These latter two approaches are not separate from urban politics but can be a strategic component of them. The BBDP saw knowledge production and sharing as a critical element of making long term grassroots change in the city. This work is difficult to measure up against a short term policy process. Regardless, it is clear that this cultural trauma continues to circulate through the multiple political arenas of the city, acting as a conduit for how actors think about and work to construct the city.

Theoretical Contributions

This project was framed as an inquiry in urban sociology, and in this section I discuss how this study contributes to our understanding of the city from an ‘urban culturalist perspective’ (Borer 2007) which integrates an understanding of power. Ultimately I argue that a local sociology which emphasizes politics as performance provides a useful conceptual framework for interrogating the politics of the city. At the same time, I have drawn on insights from several other literatures including social memory, racial ideologies, and social movements, which this research in turn makes contributions to.

In order to construct research around the crisis of school desegregation in Boston, I framed this crisis as a cultural trauma – a major disruption to the city which called into question its identity. Understanding an event as a cultural trauma requires not only defining how it has disrupted the cultural identity, but also understanding the narrative work done to repair this work. Much of the work on cultural trauma has focused on national or other group identities rather than cities. My findings, however, suggest that cultural trauma is a useful tool for the urban sociologist’s repertoire. These types of trauma often raise deep underlying questions about power and the distribution of resources in the city, and thus continue to arise long after the particular problem has healed or shifted. Thus identifying a cultural trauma can help us zero
in on critical issues of contention in the city that are likely to continue to arise. Furthermore, identity repairs also can tell us something about how power in the city circulates – ‘new narratives’ meant to restore identity are as likely to be contested as narratives of the event itself. From this perspective, then, urban identity is not simply a regional peculiarity, it is a signpost that can help us decode power and conflict on the urban terrain.

My findings further reinforce the concept that the cultural politics of the city are inseparable from the structure of the city. Certainly national and global forces are at play in Boston. It is a city facing increasing investment of capital and gentrification which has a development pattern which fits it into a larger mega-region of the northeastern United States. At this scale the politics of where students are assigned to school may seem miniscule. Yet Boston is also a political entity unto itself, with particular patterns that differ from other areas in the mega-region and cities across the country. The cultural trauma of school desegregation, as I have shown here, continues to impact how the city is structured and play a role in its politics regardless of, as well as in relation to, other factors. Thus, while the mayor made it very clear he desired a return to neighborhood schools, he could not simply direct a policy change. A new relation to the past had to be carefully constructed alongside the progrowth regime politics of public/private relationships that the sociological literature tells us much more about.

In order to conceptualize how the cultural politics of the city operate in conjunction with social forces, I have argued for an interactionist approach which focuses on how the situation is defined and redefined generally in politics, and the role of remembering particularly within that interaction. In particular, Gary Alan Fine’s framework of a “sociology of the local” is well-suited to application to both politics and memory. As I have shown arena (in this case politics), actors (politicians, media, community members), and shared past (Boston’s school desegregation crisis, the continued emphasis on a new Boston), are all elements which worked together through performance to enact both school assignment reform and the contestation to this
reform. This interactionist approach to urban politics sheds light on how policies are actually made in the everyday which have a significant impact on the social organization of the city.

Furthermore, when we broaden our understanding out from the particular institutional politics of student assignment reform, the work of grassroots groups also fits into this framework as an additional actor or set of actors perhaps working at cross-purposes to the institutional field but nonetheless involved in defining/redefining the situation in this case how the crisis of school desegregation is remembered and understood. Despite this not being a study of a social movement per se, insights from the study of movements were useful, particularly in regards to understanding the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project as an actor in urban politics. It is impossible to fully understand the work of the BBDP from within the traditional framework of the urban politics, but it is not quite a social movement either. In the social movements literature, the concept of ‘contentious politics’ has recently been used to bridge politics and movements (Tarrow 1998). I believe this research offers further evidence of the fruitfulness of incorporating and understanding of contentious social change efforts into a broader understanding of the city.

As I have described above, the sociology of memory is another area of research that can contribute to our understanding of the city. At the same time, this study has particular implications for that literature on its own. There, scholars are working to understand the balance between the relationship between social memory and the present. One strand of research emphasizes how the past is understood through the needs and perspectives of the present, while another emphasizes how memories of the past shape action in the present. My study shows elements of each of these perspectives, which, as Olick (1999b) argues, are really quite interrelated. The base line narrative of the cultural trauma of school desegregation that actors in urban politics draw on represents a path of remembering 40 years in the making which, I argue, is very difficult to ignore though many actors argued in one way or another that
it was inappropriate to discuss that history in the present context. Indeed, student assignment reform will add to how this history is remembered in the future, as will a variety of other as yet unforeseen developments in the city.

At the same time, I found evidence of both cultural and instrumental presentism at play in the narration of the past, with the emphasis of all parties involved on telling a story of a relationship to the present. Several interlocking cultural narratives were at play in how this relationship was understood, including grand narratives of progress and modernity, national narratives of colorblindness, and place specific narratives of renewal. While individual actors did not appear to be constructing a specific story of the past support their own beliefs in the present, these cultural narratives certainly impacted how they understood and used the past in the present. On the political stage the past was indeed instrumental, as politicians and others tried to make their case and speak to particular constituencies. These findings underscore the need to understand social memory as variable and dynamic – how people remember is different privately and publicly. My research builds on the work of Olick (1999a) to suggest that political remembering requires its own focus, and that the narration not just of the past, but of the relationship between the past and the present is significant to the processes of social memory. Furthermore, urban political remembering is emplaced remembering, but it is neither ‘everyday’ as other scholars of place and memory have focused on, nor embodied as those studying memorials and other sites of commemoration have emphasized. Political remembering is, as scholar Talja Blokland (2001) has suggested, ‘unembodied’ remembering.

Finally, my research also builds on work in the study of race, specifically racial ideologies in the United States. Michael Omi and Howard Winant point (2009) out that efforts to lessen racial inequality persist in social movements around a variety of issues across the United States, including struggles around education, mass incarceration, and housing, perpetuated by people of color and their white allies. They challenge us not to end the story with a colorblind ideology,
but to continue to explore struggles over the meaning of race in both everyday interaction and social institutions. If the past is used to legitimate colorblind ideology, then it is also used to contest it. Urban politics is one such institution in which we can find contestation over ideologies of race. Bonilla-Silva’s (2006) exploration of the colorblind, post-racialism of ‘Obamerica,’ (the election of a Black president) looks more at how politics impacts ideology than vice-versa. Others have worked to make race central to regime politics and with it explore the symbolic dimensions of meaning making surrounding race, racism and privilege (Reed 1999; Horan 2002; Kraus 2004). This study suggests that colorblindness, as well as the contestations of colorblindness, are critical components of the cultural politics of the city. Furthermore struggles over race and racism in the past are tools in the construction and contestation of colorblindness in the present. Research that incorporates an understanding of both politics of a black/white binary in the city alongside broader narratives of race and ethnicity in the construction of colorblindness will only strengthen this area of scholarship.

In bringing insights from the study of social movements, race, and memory into our understanding of the cultural politics I have worked to build on our understanding of the city at the intersection of place and time. Cities are spaces rich with symbolic meaning — places of imagined heritages, symbols of hope or despair, sites of struggle over equity with long histories — that can exist only in the moment, but arise through the confluence of people and events over long periods of time. The meaning making processes of cities cannot go unattended to as power and politics shape the lives of the people who live there, without us risking ignorance to a significant dynamic at play. I have argued that not only would student assignment reform in Boston have played out very differently if the cultural trauma of a violent struggle over school desegregation had never occurred, but also if it were not so persistently remembered and used as a point of meaning making. Ultimately any study in the politics of the city must take into account its past and its meaning making processes around this past.
Future Research

As the theoretical contributions of this research touch on a broad range of areas of sociological study, so there are several different directions for future research. I begin by discussing research that could address some of the limitations of this study. To do this, I identify comparative and longitudinal research which can contribute to a variety of theoretical strands discussed above, including urban sociology, social memory, and social movement research. I conclude with a brief discussion of the direction I aim to go in for my own research.

Focusing on the memory of the school desegregation crisis in Boston within a particular political process allowed me to go into considerable depth around the city, its history, and contemporary politics. At the same time, exploring the practices of memory of the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project allowed for comparison to an alternative approach. Nonetheless, further comparison could help to both confirm and elaborate the processes I have identified. Research in cultural trauma and remembering particularly across cities will help to identify what the unique processes are that occur in a particular city versus what is more generalizable across cities. Time and again through the course of my research I heard people talk about the character of Boston itself as a reason for its particular approach to the past. This reasoning relies on particularly local explanations – Boston’s puritanical past – and more regional ones – a certain northeastern sensibility of moving quickly without looking back. Comparison to other cities would help to illuminate this issue. How do memories of cultural traumas play out in the politics of other cities? Is there a difference across economic organization, size, nation, stage of development?

Within-city comparison could also be fruitful across two variables – cultural trauma and type of political process. In my study I focus on the memory of a particular cultural trauma in the city. Studying multiple traumas in the same city would deepen our understanding of the
processes of remembering. Is there something about particular traumas that suggest particular paths of remembering within urban politics? Or do the political processes of remembering stay relatively similar regardless of the trauma at issue? Furthermore, my study focuses on a very particular type of political process in which a committee composed of citizens made recommendations to elected officials. At other times, policy may be made more internally - how might this impact remembering? During the course of my study, for example, the city council in Boston went through a redistricting process which was somewhat controversial and raised issues of race, class, and neighborhoods which evoked Boston’s school desegregation crisis. This process involved debate and negotiation within the city council and may have had different processes of remembering.

Another area of research that could build on and strengthen this work is research across time. In the field of social memory, researchers have shown how memories change over time and are path dependent. Political remembering could be directly situated within this work – both looking back and looking forward. One thing I wasn’t able to say from my study was how school desegregation has been remembered in Boston’s politics over time? How was it remembered in 1985, 1995, 2005? How has this remembering changed over time and how does each process of remembering impact the next. In this study I argue that politicians and other actors were working to establish a narrative of relationship between past and present which emphasized change and improvement. How will this narrative impact policymaking the next time the issue of student assignment arises in the city? Will the demographic impacts of the new system affect this? Will other cultural developments, such as the growing ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement impact how this history is remembered and this narrative is received? There are also implications for research on cultural trauma in cities that is time-sensitive. Research that captures cultural trauma in the present and follows it forward to the future could be really impactful on our understanding of the dynamics of trauma, cities, memory, politics and social
change. In Boston, for example, research could explore if and how the recent Boston Marathon bombings become a cultural trauma. Or in Baltimore, we might follow closely how the protests and riots over the death of Freddie Gray in police custody is framed and then remembered in politics through time.

Finally, my research raises questions about the role of cultural politics of education in the contemporary city which I most interested in developing moving forward. Through pursuing this study, I have come to see education politics as a critical component of the American landscape in which struggles for equity and democracy are rooted. The fundamental questions of how we allocate educational resources as a society – from how tax dollars are allocated across the urban/suburban landscape to the role of white privilege and systemic racism to what role private corporations should play in public education - speak to larger questions of equity, democratic governance, and citizenship. Such questions are not abstractions; they are questions that people in cities across the country – politicians, family members, educators and students - grapple with every day. My research has illuminated the role that symbolic meaning around race, class, and place can play in these struggles. Here I focused on memories of the past. Moving forward I aim to explore these cultural politics from a more presentist perspective – focusing in particular on contemporary trends in education policy such as privatization and testing. How do the cultural politics of race, class, and place impact these policy initiatives? How are they used in contestation? Ultimately, I aim to build a research agenda based on understanding these struggles for educational equity and how they are connected to larger social forces shaping American cities.

**Implications for Practice**

Despite its focus on a policy making process, this research was not an investigation into the policy of student assignment itself. Instead, I can speak only to some particular aspects of
how policy is made and contested, and how grassroots groups can use remembering. For policy
makers, this research can provide insight into their own practice, and provide a platform to
think about how they may use the past both intentionally and unintentionally. For citizens
involved in policy making and other change-making activities, this research can help them to be
more intentional and strategic about how they think about and use history.

During my interviews with EAC members and community advocates, many expressed a
sense of bewilderment over the reasoning and conclusions of those they perceived as disagreeing
with them. They often used the same language, buzzwords such as equity, quality, and access,
but because they did not have access to the underlying discourses of the other, particularly in
regard to race, history, and the city, they did not perceive the divide they were talking across.
Part of what social movements and grassroots organizations sometimes do is to make plain the
hidden discourses of those they disagree with and work to develop alternative discourses. A
genuine dialogue about student assignment as an issue of values and resource distribution
rather than just a technical problem in this case would have required mutual understanding
across discourses about race and racism, history, the contemporary city, and even the role of city
government. In many instances, my interviewees expressed a desire to gain this type of
understanding.

Yet the goal of the student assignment reform process was not to create genuine dialogue
about or critically assess the role of assignment in the city. It was a process initiated by a mayor
in a city with strong mayoral control with a clear goal to make a change to student assignment –
specifically to send students to school closer to home and save money on transportation (though
this latter goal fell off the table as the process progressed and it became clear savings would be
minimal). Actors in this process acted within the context of these politics – for politicians this
meant selling their viewpoint while pleasing constituencies, for EAC members this meant
working to get the job done, and for community advocates it often meant raising questions that
appeared to them to fall on deaf ears. It is in this context that the history of school
desegregation crisis was used as a tool by multiple parties to make a case for change. Those with
more power in the situation also tended to draw on discourses with cultural purchase – the idea
of progress from the past and working towards a colorblind society. Contestation of these beliefs
with a focus on the continuity of problems – regardless of the facts marshaled in either direction
– was a hard case to make.

As Francesca Polletta (2006) argues that activists have to be cautious in how they draw
on narrative, so do they have to be cautious and thoughtful about how they draw on
remembering the past to make their case. Even as activists are cautious, however, cultural
trauma is not easily avoided even when it was not strategic – many of the people I interviewed
claimed the past was irrelevant and it was clear from following the process that avoiding the past
was strategic for many actors. Nonetheless, this cultural trauma continued to surface
throughout. As this study shows, telling the past is a lot more than an instrumental activity in
the urban arena. For individuals it truly was a process of sense-making which contributed to
how they saw the present. As the Boston Busing Desegregation Project shows, remembering the
past need not only be a defensive posture, it can also be an intentional source of inquiry in order
to understand the present. Although those with more power and more mainstream views may
have greater purchase on using the past to their advantage, this does not mean grassroots
groups don’t use the past in other, equally strategic ways – in this case as both an
epistemological and pedagogical tool. As cities continue to grapple with cultural trauma –
Boston itself has recently received a grant to host dialogues around race and the city’s history -
there is possibility in taking a more intentional approach to history alongside recognizing the
communicative divides which inhibit this. Policy makers and activists alike can only benefit
from recognizing how they are using and can use historical narrative and discourse in the
process of policy construction. This would be an important first step in bridging a
communicative divide which presents as a different interpretation of historical and contemporary facts, but in large part has deeper discursive underpinnings.

**Conclusion**

Change is constant in cities – populations migrate and emigrate, development trends come and go, capital circulates in and out, political regimes rise and fall – and yet despite all of this turmoil, the city is never quite made anew. Cities are products of long histories that are often etched into the landscape through its boundaries, its demographics, and its political economy. The past of a city lives not just in its impacts at the time; the past also serves as a reference point, an often inescapable source of meaning that continues to impact how people act in the city in the present. The past holds sway, while at the same time people in the city use the past as a starting point for making change. This, I have worked to show, is as true as it is in urban politics as it is in any other facet of urban life: remembering is an embedded part of the cultural politics of the city that continuously structures and restructures the urban environment. It is easy to see politics as pragmatic – a series of deals between individuals in power that are pushed by larger national and global forces. Certainly this is a critical dynamic shaping the urban terrain, but the reality of cities is also messier than this. Politicians and other in power contend not with a clean slate but with a place in which many actors are making meaning and working towards multiple purposes. Often time narratives of the past may be at their disposal to work toward specific ends, but as those ends are contested, so are their narratives.

In Boston, the crisis of school desegregation – a violent, tumultuous time in the city which surfaced critical issues around race, class, and the equitable distribution of resources – continues to reverberate, even as its story changes and new relationships are constructed to it. Interrogating this cultural trauma and how it is deployed within the institutional and grassroots politics of the city unveils new dimensions of politics as well as the continued dynamics of these
issues which brought about the trauma in the first case, here those questions of equity around race, class and schooling. Other cities have other traumas and other traumas surface different issues, but regardless, investigating these traumas are a way into understanding the dynamics of power and change for researchers, policy makers, and activists alike.
## APPENDIX A: NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>1/18/2012</td>
<td>A new school-assignment plan requires forceful leadership</td>
<td>Boston Globe</td>
<td>Editorial</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>1/19/2012</td>
<td>Menino Pledges: Students to get schools ‘closer-to-their-homes’</td>
<td>Dorchester Reporter</td>
<td>Gintautas Dumcius</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>3/3/2012</td>
<td>Finally, Getting kids off the bus</td>
<td>Boston Globe</td>
<td>Lawrence Harmon</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>3/11/2012</td>
<td>City School Inequalities highlighted at forum</td>
<td>Boston Globe</td>
<td>Lisa Kocian</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>4/30/2012</td>
<td>40 years later, Boston looks back on busing crisis</td>
<td>WBUR</td>
<td>Delores Handy</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>8/06/2012</td>
<td>Parents Speak up on school wants: Hub officials hope to fix choice process</td>
<td>Boston Globe</td>
<td>Stephanie Ebbert</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>9/19/2012</td>
<td>Real Reform in Student Assignment Lottery</td>
<td>Boston Globe</td>
<td>John Connolly</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>9/20/2012</td>
<td>Connolly: A missed opportunity</td>
<td>Dorchester Reporter</td>
<td>John Connolly</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>9/24/2012</td>
<td>5 new plans to assign students: City ideas focus on proximity of homes to school</td>
<td>Boston Globe</td>
<td>James Vaznis</td>
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<td>Wanted: school assignment pan without winners, Losers</td>
<td>Boston Globe</td>
<td>Mary Battenfeld</td>
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<td>11.</td>
<td>9/25/2012</td>
<td>Plans upend school assignments</td>
<td>Boston Globe</td>
<td>James Vaznis, Travis Andersen</td>
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<td>13.</td>
<td>10/11/2012</td>
<td>Community Voices: BPS must not ignore racial segregation</td>
<td>Bay State Banner</td>
<td>Shelley McDonough, Kimelberg and Chase Billingham</td>
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<td>14.</td>
<td>10/21/2012</td>
<td>Tackling the puzzle of busing and schools</td>
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<td>Coalition says plans mean ‘re-segregation’</td>
<td>Dorchester Reporter</td>
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<td>16.</td>
<td>12/6/2012</td>
<td>Solutions needed to combat inequality in Boston schools</td>
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<td>1/14/2013</td>
<td>Test time for school panel</td>
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<td>18</td>
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<td>School plans teak status quo, when bold change is needed</td>
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<td>School choice overhaul OK’d: Boston to end decades-old assignment zones in 2014</td>
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<td>4/4/2013</td>
<td>BPS needs bold approach to ensure quality schools</td>
<td>Bay State Banner</td>
<td>Kelly Bates</td>
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REFERENCES


