Teaching about race and social action by ‘digging up the past’: the Mary Turner project

Mark Patrick George and Dana M. Williams

Abstract

This paper explores how incorporating localized historical acts of racial injustice into Sociology courses can have a variety of pedagogical and social impacts. The use of one such event, the 1918 lynching of 13 people in South Georgia, led to the formation of the Mary Turner Project (MTP). We document the organization’s work as well as its impact on students and the region, as seen through the lens of public sociology. The MTP installed an official road marker to memorialize the lynching, intervened in a campus controversy involving the Confederate flag, hosted numerous commemoration events, and did classroom-based research and hosted community discussions on lynching and slavery in the local area. Drawing from organizational documents, the paper explores how ‘digging up the past’ and the experience of the MTP may serve as a model for critical sociologists who teach courses on social inequalities and want to make those courses more applicable to people’s every day lived experience.

Introduction

The story of the Mary Turner Project (MTP) exemplifies how incorporating local, historical social injustices into sociological courses can serve as pedagogical and mobilizing mechanisms for students and communities alike. It also demonstrates how raising awareness about unacknowledged injustices can provide sociologists and instructors of sociology with one avenue to make sociology applied and more ‘public.’ The analogs between past injustices and the contemporary inequality present become clearer when people dig into the past and discover practices which created and perpetuated current day injustices. The act of bringing sociological insights to non-sociologists or to participate in community activities as a sociologist, as the MTP did, are characteristics of ‘public sociology,’ a critical, externally focused praxis advocated by certain sociologists (Burawoy 2005). This paper explores the efficacy of using intimately and locally relevant racial history to motivate student interest and community activism in racial justice work. Most sociological pedagogy that engages students outside the classroom is either formulaic service learning with a local nonprofit organization or a one-time ‘experiential learning’ assignment. Instead, we advocate students...
‘dig up the past,’ thereby discovering real-world connections to course subject matter, sit-
tuating themselves socially and politically in respect to their local communities, and acting
as sociologists outside of the academy.

At a university in deep, South Georgia, the MTP started organically when undergraduate
sociology majors in an upper-division ‘Race and Ethnic Relations’ sociology course were
exposed to the story of Mary Turner. Over half of Sociology majors at Valdosta State are
African-American, and the class itself was a mixture of both black and white students (and
a majority black). The instructor – as well as this paper’s other author – are white males,
who also identify as anti-racists. To instigate what can be a difficult discussion about the
US’s racial history, especially in a multi-racial classroom, students were assigned to read
historian Christopher Meyers (2006) article entitled ‘Killing Them by the Wholesale: A
Lynching Rampage in South Georgia,’ which documented the horrific 1918 lynching of
Turner. Meyers’ analysis explained how the murder of a local white farmer – known for
his use of the debt peonage system and abuse of black workers – resulted in a weeklong,
white-led killing spree in Brooks and Lowndes counties. That ‘lynching rampage’ (Meyers
2006) claimed the lives of Mrs. Turner, her unborn child, her husband Hayes, and at least
10 other African-Americans.

In addition to being astonished that these events occurred just miles from their university,
students were further shocked to learn that Turner, 21 years old and 8 months pregnant at
the time, had been burned alive and brutally eviscerated by the white mob. Student alarm
peaked when they learned that Turner had been brutalized because she had ‘objected’ (2006)
to the murder of her husband Hayes who had been lynched the prior day. As NAACP inves-
tigator Walter White (1918) documented shortly after Turner’s murder, she was lynched
because she had ‘outraged’ local whites by her ‘unwise remarks’ threatening to ‘swear out
warrants’ for those responsible for her husband’s death.

Exposed to this gruesome saga and the fact that many mob members were identified
by name – yet all went unpunished for their crimes – students in the class were stunned.
Students could not fathom how such an act could take place, how it could go unpunished,
and how it happen so close to their current home. Students from Lowndes and nearby
Brooks counties were especially indignant that they had no knowledge about the long legacy
of lynching and racism that is part of the region’s history. As one of those students put it,
‘how do we not know about this?!?’

A core group of five students insisted to know more about what happened. They also
felt they ‘had to do something’ about this lost history and the unpunished crimes that were
committed. To meet this demand and their insistence, one of the authors agreed to meet
with the group outside of class to strategize about what ‘might be done.’ It was from that
and subsequent meetings that the Mary Turner Project was born.

Numerous theoretical ideas were embodied in this organization and our analysis of
its efforts, which connect intimately to both empowered, experiential student learning,
and active, applied sociology. Freire (1987, 125) advocated a praxis-based learning, which
consists of both reflection and action. Theory illuminates praxis, which ultimately helps to
transform the world. While many college classes involve reflection, they rarely also involve
action. Also, while much social change work emphasizes action, the role of reflection is typ-
ically downplayed. Thus, the most complete, effective, and transformative kinds of learning
involves reflection and action.
Engaged pedagogy argues that education should be the practice of freedom (hooks 1994). Teachers and students need to be present in their own lives and communities, be open to other ideas in order grow, and must think critically in order to be free. Such self-actualization promotes well-being and encourages empowerment (p. 15). Unlike much formal education where students are conceptualized as inert objects that may be manipulated by instructor designs, engaged pedagogy believes that learners must find their own place in the world and struggle with ideas in order to pursue freedom.

Whereas much sociology instruction aims to impart knowledge (and sometimes skills) to students, little formal education in sociology focuses on the extra-academic application of sociology. Organic public sociology includes the efforts of sociologists to put reflexive sociological knowledge into practice in non-academic settings. Burawoy (2005) advocates for working with and within various ‘publics’ (e.g. neighborhoods, workplaces, churches, and labor unions.), often aligning with social movements. As most sociology teaching emphasizes training students to be professional sociologists, which few become (as most sociology majors do not become sociology teachers themselves), organic public sociology aims to utilize sociology strategically in everyday settings. We used these ideas of praxis, engaged pedagogy, and public sociology in the unfolding design of, practice with, and later reflection on the MTP.

What follows are some of the highlights of the MTP’s actions and impact. We seek to explore how blending community action and popular education with socio-historical knowledge in local settings can enhance both knowledge and action. The information provided on the MTP’s campaigns is not exhaustive since many activities have been omitted for the sake of space. After discussing some of the MTP’s work, we provide a brief analysis of the organization’s pedagogical and social impact. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of how the MTP might serve as a model for mobilizing students and communities around submerged and overlooked social injustices and/or atrocities.

**What the MTP did**

After two months of meeting together, the initial group of students had grown, decided on a group name, collectively developed a mission statement, and identified core goals of the project. During this time, they had also brainstormed a list of small and more ambitious projects. Thanks to the graciousness of historian Christopher Meyers, who shared many of his primary research documents with the group, MTP members also had more detailed information about the 1918 lynchings. Consequently, they began to grasp the enormity of the practice of lynching in the region, the reality that ‘there were more lynchings in Brooks County than any other county in Georgia’ (Meyers 2006, 219), and that ‘the festival of violence’ which was lynching was one of the earliest forms of organized ‘terrorism’ (Tolnay, Deane, and Beck 1996, 788) in the US.

Self-defined as ‘a diverse, grassroots collective of Valdosta State University students, faculty, and local community members … committed to racial justice’ (Mary Turner Project 2007), members decided that the MTP should educate others about the region’s lynching legacy. The MTP also wanted to expose ‘the presence of racism, the multiple forms of racism, and the effects of racism, so that [they] may become involved in eliminating racism’ (Mary Turner Project 2007).
MTP members first created physical and digital media about Turner’s saga. They hoped that such media could be used to ‘get the word out’ and to inform people locally and nationally. In fact, after the group’s first three meetings, a website had been collectively designed and launched. A pamphlet outlining the events of 1918 had also been completed, and was circulated on campus and in the broader community. Lastly, students also began a MTP Facebook group to announce meetings, MTP events, and recruit others into the organization.

With these educational and promotional items in circulation, it was not long that more new faces began showing up at MTP meetings and attendance ranged from 5 to 30 people at any given meeting. It was also at this point that local community members occasionally attended meetings, usually as a result of having read a MTP pamphlet or visited the group’s website. Within six months of the MTP’s inception, descendants of Mary Turner and Walter Harris1 (another of the 1918 lynching victims) had learned about the MTP and attended MTP meetings. These visits were poignant and profound for participants due to several reasons. First, an otherwise abstract, historical account of crimes committed against faceless victims came to life as family members shared what they knew. Visits also provided students with the opportunity to hear, and feel, firsthand how victims’ families had been impacted by the events of 1918 and how they had re-told this history through the generations. Lastly, these visits provided the MTP the opportunity to share missing information with families, augmenting their understanding of what had actually occurred to their relatives. In turn, the ability of the MTP to provide page upon page of historical descendants of the Turners, as well as the descendants of other lynching victims, assisted them in piecing together their collective history as a family. As a great-nephew of lynching victim Mary Turner shared,

“My family is very grateful for the work of MTP and excited to maintain a link to acknowledge the past and provide necessary work in healing and moving forward beyond racism. [We are] looking forward to the great work anticipated from the MTP.”

Getting the word out and educating various publics

With assorted media developed, the organization began identifying public venues to share the Turner story. Since many places in the Deep South tend to actively deny past injustices, the MTP’s strategy was to publicize and educate others in the region about its legacy of racial terrorism. To do this, two members also began conducting additional research on other Lowndes County lynching victims and the larger legacy of Georgia’s lynching history (Brundage 1993). Those data were used to expand and augment information provided on the MTP website.

MTP members strategized about how to engage with different public constituencies, such as the local university community, the city of Valdosta, as well as solicit support from area civil rights groups. At Valdosta State University, MTP members staffed informational tables at numerous campus events to engage other students at the university. At those tables they disseminated MTP literature and engaged others about the region’s racial history. Each of these social arenas provided students with an opportunity to interact with others directly about the region’s history of racial terrorism.

To engage the broader VSU community, members presented their research at the university’s Council for Undergraduate Research’s annual symposium. At that symposium, a multiracial team of four MTP members shared the story of Turner, discussed the work of
the project, and fielded questions from students, university administrators, and community members in attendance.

A few months later and after a number of discussions at MTP meetings, the same team decided to formally share information with the Valdosta City Council at their weekly meeting. MTP members hoped that city officials might proactively about engage with this local history – specifically, the group hoped that the Council would support the creation of a lasting monument acknowledging the region’s racial legacy, such as a monument or park.²

With those goals in mind, in October 2008, and accompanied nearly 70 other VSU students and community members, the team presented the story of Mrs. Turner to the Mayor and Council members. In that presentation, students highlighted the lynching legacy of Lowndes County and what had happened to Mrs. Turner. They also provided Council members with information packets and suggested that the community had the opportunity to be a national model for racial justice and racial reconciliation. The group suggested that one way the City might accomplish would be through publicly acknowledging its legacy and through the creation of a commemorative park or permanent monument to the victims of 1918. City officials looked visibly startled by the presentation and presence of so many students and community members. Instead of showing interest and stating ‘the city doesn’t sponsor memorial parks or markers,’ officials suggested that students meet with the city planner and local historical society director to discuss what might be done. More discussion of those meetings appears later in this paper.

A final noteworthy public presentation involved MTP members sharing their work at the state convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). As the SCLC was an organization founded in 1957 by Dr. Martin Luther King and other black ministers, MTP members hoped to not only share their research and what they had learned about lynching in the region, but also to raise funds for one of their more ambitious projects, a permanent marker that would memorialize the lives of those murdered in 1918. With that goal in mind, four members of the organization attended, and spoke about Mary Turner and the work of the MTP. There they shared data about Georgia lynchings and fielded questions from attending civil rights veterans. As a result of that presentation, the elder civil rights veterans of SCLC were so excited to see young people engage in the history of race relations that they raised $1,300 for the historical marker.

‘We need something permanent’: telling the world what happened here

After meeting with City officials, the City planner, and local Historical Society Staff, MTP members were confronted with the disappointing reality that they’d get little support from official leaders in the community. Based on this conclusion, the group decided to explore the possibility of getting the Georgia Historical Society (GHS) to erect a marker acknowledging the lynching victims of 1918. Having seen such a marker near campus, one describing the history of a local park that was ‘sponsored by the City of Valdosta,’ one MTP member, a local community member took the lead on finding out what was required by the GHS.

The rationale for establishing a historical marker developed from a number of discussions in MTP meetings and the shared belief that such a marker should be public, permanent, and serve a variety of other functions. First, a marker would symbolically force the State of Georgia, on some small level, to acknowledge and recognize the lynchings of 1918 thus legitimizing their lives to local citizens. The group felt this was important given that the State
of Georgia, particularly then-Governor Hugh Dorsey, refused to investigate or prosecute known lynch mob members involved in the deaths of Turner and the other victims of 1918. Second, the marker would be an enduring, physical reminder for the local community and visitors to the region that these events did in fact occur, that the lynching of Mary Turner was more than mere legend, and that real lives were lost. In turn, it would potentially spawn both formal and informal, public and private discussions about the region’s history among the local residents. Or as Julie Armstrong explains in her text *Mary Turner, The Memory of Lynching*, ‘historical markers ensure that the landscape and the people who inhabit it can no longer claim to suffer from amnesia or use “not knowing” as an excuse for not talking’ (Armstrong 2011, 193). Third, such a marker would be an educational tool to offer a brief history of the 1918 lynchings and Georgia’s lynching legacy, effectively educating all who came in contact with it. Historical markers are objects of struggle in present-day social conflicts over how to remember the past (Alderman 2012; Schriffin 2001).

After learning that a formal proposal process awaited and that the GHS required groups to raise $1,500 in matching funds for markers that were approved, interested MTP members drafted the formal proposal and raised funds for the marker. This work involved: (1) drafting a formal proposal and justifying to the GHS why the marker was worthy; (2) negotiating with the GHS the text that would be included on the marker; (3) securing permission from the Georgia Department of Transportation to place the marker safely near the roadside; and finally, (4) raising the remainder of the $1,500 dollars required by the GHS for the monument’s costs. Although various MTP members played different roles, all members were involved in the process either directly or indirectly, including MTP supporters who were part of the MTP email list. At each step of the process, information and feedback was garnered from members. Members fundraised and participated in determining what the marker text would say, a challenging process that took nearly 10 months of negotiations with the Georgia Historical Society. In the end, the historical marker process was completed in January 2010, and the marker was formally installed and dedicated that following May 2010 during a half day commemoration program and shared meal with a multiracial, multigenerational crowd of nearly 150 people in attendance (Ramos 2010).

**Engaging contemporary racism: displays of the confederate flag on campus**

As the MTP educated the public about the region’s legacy of racial terrorism, various local and national issues emerged that the group felt it could not ignore. The MTP attempted to address noteworthy issues linked to its mission of ‘eliminating’ all forms of racism, especially contemporary racism’s new ‘colorblind’ forms (Bonilla-Silva 2007). These issues included the use of the Confederate flag by white fraternities, and the political climate surrounding the campaign and election of President Barack Obama.

Like many southern universities, the Confederate flag can be seen on or near Valdosta State University’s campus. At VSU, the symbol is regularly displayed on students’ vehicles and at white fraternities. Some fraternities also regularly celebrate the ‘Old South’ week. During those occasions, fraternity brothers outfit themselves in Confederate uniforms, attend traditional ‘Southern’ balls with local southern ‘belles,’ and generally romanticize what they consider to be southern culture and ‘southern heritage.’

Although the university is multiracial and professes to encourage ‘diversity’ and difference, students and local citizens of color are regularly exposed to the Confederate flag and
other emblems tied to white southern identity, symbols that also have a long history of use by white supremacists, racial segregationists, and other groups. However, the experience and interpretation by people of color of these symbols is often fundamentally different from that of whites (Holyfield, Moltz, and Bradley 2009).

Given these uses of the Confederate flag, the area’s legacy of lynching, and the reality that VSU is a racially and ethnically diverse university, MTP members wanted to ‘do something’ about the use of this symbol and the hostile climate it created for many students and local residents of color (Dickson 2009). MTP members decided to focus on one fraternity near campus that regularly displayed the Confederate flag on a site students and citizens of color routinely passed, and decided to organize and sponsor a public forum on the history, use, and contemporary meaning of this symbols.

In turn, the MTP held a forum entitled ‘Heritage, Hate, or Fear: A Community Discussion about Southern Symbols and Their Meaning’ whose goal was to publicly hear local fraternities explain the reasons for their use of the Confederate flag. The MTP also wanted to hear what university administrators and faculty knew and thought about such symbols. More specifically, the MTP wanted local fraternities to publicly discuss why this symbol was important to them and exactly how it reflected their ‘southern heritage.’ The MTP invited fraternity leaders, faculty members and university administrators capable of participation in this discussion about the flag. MTP faculty advisors also contacted the national office of the offending fraternity to learn the organization’s official position on the symbol and to invite representatives to participate in the forum. Fraternity members and university administrators declined to participate in the forum. Nonetheless, on 29 September 2009, nearly 200 students and community members assembled to discuss the use of the flag, what constituted ‘southern culture,’ and how both are experienced differently depending on one’s age and race (Pinholster 2009).

At the forum, a panel comprised of a Civil War historian, a sociologist, political scientist, the University’s ‘diversity’ representative, and a student leader discussed these issues, fielded questions, and helped facilitate a collective discussion (Pinholster 2009). Additionally, and in lieu of their participation, one fraternity issued a ‘letter of apology’ (Pinholster 2009) stating they regretted any harm their use of the flag may have caused. This letter came after the fraternity’s national office ordered them to desist from displaying the flag or have their charter immediately revoked.

Given the turnout and level of discussion at the first forum, this mode of raising awareness, and public dialog and education seemed effective. Consequently, the MTP organized another forum in 2010 aimed at addressing the political climate of the day, specifically the hostile and at times racist rhetoric that surrounded the election of President Barack Obama. In fact, earlier during the 2008 presidential campaign tensions on Valdosta State’s campus were often tense to the point Administrators organized a campus event to discuss the topics of racial inclusion and tolerance on campus (Pinholster 2010). Although this election supposedly marked the end of the racial divide and marked the beginning of a ‘post racial society’ (Bonilla-Silva 2015), in South Georgia the election revealed the persistence of that divide in stark terms. The official VSU event in 2008 was in response to an assortment of racist Facebook comments circulated among and between university students regarding the then-presidential candidate.

Noting those exchanges, the climate in classes, on campus, and in the community, the MTP organized a forum entitled ‘Exploring the Political Climate since the Election of
President Obama’ in March of 2010. At that public event, representatives from local political parties, university faculty, and local civil rights leaders discussed the treatment and discourse surrounding the election of the US’s first president of color (Pinholster 2010).

‘How about a day of remembering?’ Commemoration ceremonies

One of the more impactful accomplishments of the MTP involved its work organizing and holding commemoration ceremonies for Mary Turner and the other victims of the 1918 lynchings. In addition to fundraising for the events, during the springtime of 2009, 2010, 2013, and 2014, the MTP held those ceremonies near the site of Mrs. Turner’s murder. After numerous discussions and much planning, the organization decided that such events would (1) be a historic model for reconciliation and how different races can come together to constructively confront their collective past, (2) invite the broader community to get involved, and (3) symbolically provide some semblance of a ceremony for victims who were denied formal burial ceremonies when they were killed.

More than 150 people attended each multiracial event. For the first commemoration, people first gathered in a nearby community center to share a meal and listen to the reflections of Turner family members and the descendants of other lynching victims. After eating southern cuisine, attendees and victim’s descendants shared their thoughts, poetry, and singing. Students from the MTP also spoke about the work of the project and why they had organized the events.

After eating and spending time together, the group departed (under the loom of a dark, stormy sky) in their cars to a site near Mrs. Turner’s death on the Little River, the official border of Lowndes and Brooks counties. Since the slow-moving motorcade was escorted by a local deputy sheriff, it resembled a traditional southern funeral procession to onlookers and passing motorists. Because of that, and in accordance with southern tradition, oncoming traffic pulled over onto the shoulder of the road to show their respect and condolences (Poling 2010). As one attendee put it, ‘Mary Turner was finally getting her long overdue funeral.’ Once at the site, local black and white clergy shared their thoughts and brief prayers for the victims of 1918. Turner family members also spoke. Then, MTP members read the names of those killed as the group had a moment of silence and reflection. The 2014 commemoration was scheduled to coincide with the Turner family’s annual reunion.

Generating popular awareness, digitizing the US slave census and talking about slavery

Before detailing the pedagogical and social impacts, one final accomplishment of the MTP is worth noting. The organization has served as a resource to contemporary descendants of Mary Turner and the families of other Georgia lynching victims. Due to the MTP’s formation and given Dr. Christopher Meyers’ willingness to share his research, the MTP was able to convey the documentary record to the Turner family. The gaps in the family’s oral history, passed down for generations, were filled, creating a more complete chronicle of what had unfolded in 1918.

The MTP has also been repeatedly contacted by website visitors who want assistance in finding out what happened to their ancestors who are also lynched. Given that there are more than 3000 known black lynching victims during this time period, the MTP has served
as a resource to those families seeking information. At times, students have conducted that research, usually by accessing local newspaper articles and other relevant texts at VSU’s library and archives, and at the area’s Historical Society. As a result, the MTP has been able to assist those families in better understanding their ancestor’s experiences. For example, the following email is from a lynching descendant:

To whom it may concern, I was bouncing around in Wikipedia and I found your website on Mary Turner. I was shocked to see information on [a 1930 lynching victim in Thomas county, GA] who happens to be my Great Grandfather. I had heard the story given through my family, but when I saw his name on your list on the Mary Turner page it sparked me to find even more info in the internet (which I was surprised to find) so I understand the entire situation about him. Thank you for including his name on your list…and thank you for what you are doing.

A final MTP project illustrates how to engage in meaningful public sociology within a classroom and a community, to connect the US’s racial past to the present. Since its founding, the MTP had encountered people who were interested in its historical research, especially on lynching. Some also expressed dismay that comparable historical research was not available on individuals involved in US slavery. For example, many black MTP and community members regularly expressed frustrated that they could not as easily trace their family histories prior to the American Civil War, accessing available genealogical research, like whites could. Whites also regularly stated that they did not know whether any of their ancestors had owned slaves (and most simply assumed they did not). When asked ‘but have you ever checked if your family owned slaves?’ most whites could not honestly say they know for certain.

Thus, the MTP worked to have students in Race and Ethnic Relations sociology classes begin work on making slavery records more publicly accessible. The US Census Bureau documented slave ownership in 1850 and 1860, recording not only the names of slave owners and the numbers of slaves they owned, but also limited socio-demographic information about each slave (sex, age, and color). The Slave Census Schedules are available in poorly scanned PDF formats on archive websites and via non-free, subscription-based website services like Ancestry.com. However, no free, searchable databases of these censuses exist. The MTP decided to begin the task of digitizing these files for the purposes of allowing interested individuals to research their family histories and for social scientists to more closely examine the institution of slavery (Oglesby 2014).

While two previous classes had experimented with digitization efforts, a third class began the bulk of this work. Students focused upon counties in Southern Georgia in the 1860 schedule and were assigned counties to digitize – some were assigned counties at random, while others worked on counties that they grew up in or had prior knowledge of. Some counties had so many slaves (e.g. Chatham county had 191 pages of data) that the work was split among five students, while others were relatively small and students digitized more than one county.

Students digitized the data in the charts of the Slave Census Schedules and entered it into spreadsheet files. Once in these files, the data would be searchable. By the end of the semester, students submitted their digitization work and data on over 68,000 slaves living in 20 South Georgia counties had been completed by students. Although this data is not the majority of the slaves in south Georgia – and only a small minority of the nearly four million enslaved throughout the United States – a mere two dozen students were able to generate an impressive result (approximately 15 percent of Georgia’s enslaved) in a single
semester. The MTP has reached out to its supporters and other organizations to encourage them to digitize schedules from their home counties – at present dozens of other counties in Georgia have been or are in the process of digitization by supporters of the project.

The practical benefit of this growing data-set is important, as stated above. But, an equally important benefit was for the lives of individual students, particularly consciousness-raising. Students reported shock at how many people were owned by some whites (some whites owned many dozens of black people, some owned hundreds). Other students were surprised by how young (or old) some of the enslaved were – the Slave Census reported the number of months for babies who were under one year of age. And, the ‘color’ of slaves was also troubling for many students, as slaves marked ‘mulatto’ may have been the offspring resulting from systematic slave-owner rape. Students expressed feelings of sadness and overwhelming from the work, but also a sense of determination and satisfaction that their efforts could have an impact upon how future generations understood slavery or used the data. One student remarked that this may be the first time that some of these black people were going to be publicly recognized (albeit anonymously and posthumously). Lastly, many students were also shocked to learn that many streets, roads, and buildings in assorted Georgia communities currently bear the names of prominent slaveholders.

Building on its campaign to digitize the Slave Census, the MTP organized a public forum at VSU to share the progress of its work and some preliminary analysis, and to more publicly ‘face up to’ slavery and discuss it openly. Panelists (including a student and MTP member from the aforementioned class) were invited to address the question of the present-day legacy of slavery. A standing room-only crowd of over 160 people attended, listened to the panelists, and then had a long public question and answer session. Multiple students from the Race class also spoke at the forum, speaking passionately and intelligently about slavery, how the work in the class made them feel, and sources of persistent racial inequality. The MTP prepared a brochure for attendees that included statistics on slavery in Georgia, as well as historical research on the origins of county, street, and building names throughout the region and their connections to slavery (e.g. all the adjacent Georgia counties to the MTP’s home county either were named after slave owners or those who were vociferous proponents of it).

The Slavery Forum may have been the first time any US community sat down to consider the legacy of slavery upon its history and present circumstances. The multi-generational and multi-racial attendees and the dialog they generated serve as an example of how it is possible to constructively organize a community, learn more substantial and crucial things about one’s racial history, and pedagogically anchor that process within the sociological tradition (especially of public sociology).

**Pedagogical impacts of the project**

Given its plethora of proactive engagement strategies, the MTP has had a substantial pedagogical impact upon college students. First, the MTP served as a protracted space for students and community members to honestly discuss racism and race-related matters over time. Given the history of race in America, few such sustained opportunities exist for individuals to both discuss and work together across racial lines (Jacobs and Taylor 2012). As an all-volunteer, multiracial, multigenerational collaborative that included faculty, students, and local community members, the MTP served that purpose as participants discussed...
historical and contemporary racism and completed projects together. Consequently, discussions at meetings ranged from students’ individual perceptions and experiences of ‘racism on the VSU’s campus’ to ‘structural racism’ and ‘the mass incarceration of men of color in the US.’

Second, participation in the MTP essentially humanized the topic of racial injustice for students by making it local and personal. Mary Turner’s saga also made class material related to racial injustice ‘come to life.’ It did that as students grappled to come to terms with the region’s racial history and rectify it with their preconceived notions about the area and its place in American society. Students became aware that overt racial atrocities like lynching occurred to thousands of real people in communities just like their own. It also made them aware that a majority of those brutal crimes went unpunished, are omitted from the history curriculums of American schools, and are now largely forgotten, denied, and or erased. Consequently, the work of the MTP localized and humanized the discussion of racial injustice, because – instead of talking abstractly about historical atrocities ‘somewhere else’ – it revealed such phenomenon in students’ own ‘backyard.’

Third, and in addition to making course material relevant, the work of the MTP afforded students a place and context where they could apply classroom knowledge to ‘the living community’ (Jakubowski 2003, 24) as they carried out MTP activities and events. Thus, the MTP employed Paulo Freire’s (1987) notion of ‘praxis,’ which held that the oppressed must ‘struggle for their liberation together with those who show true solidarity, [and] must acquire a critical awareness of oppression through the praxis of this struggle’ (Jakubowski 2003, 36). As a space and collective where learning ‘went beyond the text’ (Jakubowski 2003, 24), the MTP essentially fueled an ‘engaged pedagogy’ (hooks 1994) as students became empowered through praxis and community engagement. The MTP did that as students learned about the region’s legacy of racial terrorism, strategized on how to address historical amnesia and/or denial surrounding that legacy, planned and took strategic action, and then reflected on the impact of their activities.

Furthermore, the MTP’s willingness to ‘dig up the past’ and confront others about it placed students and community members ‘in history’ by connecting them to it, and offering them the opportunity to ‘make history’ instead of being passive bystanders. MTP members regularly exposed and proactively engaged others about the area’s history, ongoing incidences of racism, and organized multiracial events to commemorate past atrocities. In sum, the MTP provided students with an opportunity to address past injustices and affect their immediate world instead of merely being overwhelmed by it (Davis 1992).

Fourth, as participants carried out the work of the MTP, they were confronted with the ongoing racial divide and the reality that race still ‘matters’ (West 1993) in the twenty-first century. In fact, participation in the MTP revealed the strained nature of race relations, as students attempted to carry out the group’s mission. The MTP encountered various expressions of racial avoidance, colorblind racism, and denial. These experiences occurred as MTP members shared the Turner story with those around them, as the group approached the city for assistance, as they engaged relevant issues in the aforementioned forums, and as they negotiated the content of the historical marker with the GHS. Students quickly learned that people who wish to break the silence that surrounds and stifles the history of racial terrorism are viewed suspiciously. For example, one member of the MTP described how she was particularly ‘surprised’ she was when her pastor wanted to know ‘why in the world’ she would want be part of such an organization. Other students, of all races, also
encountered awkwardness, silence, and defensiveness when they shared the story of Mary Turner with friends, family, and local community members.

In addition to experiencing resistance from individuals in their lives, MTP members encountered similar opposition from assorted institutional players. For example, when the MTP hoped city leaders would be proactive about the region's past and the heinous crimes that had gone unpunished, instead of interest and inquisitive questions about this local history, MTP members were met with silence and defensiveness. After the group’s presentations to the City planner and local Historical Society director, they experienced similar paternalism, discovered the abundant history of racial terrorism is omitted at the local historical society, and were told ‘things had gotten much better’ by its white director.

When discussing white fraternities’ use of racist symbols with university administrators, MTP members were confronted with trepidation and defensiveness. In addition to declining to participate in the Confederate flag forum, and instead of discussing those symbols’ impact on students and citizens of color, school administrators instead verbally emphasized the importance of not ‘attacking’ or ‘humiliating’ any white fraternity members that might participate in the forum. Lastly, students also witnessed the struggle over what histories are told and who gets to define history. This occurred in a number of ways for students as they engaged others about the events of 1918, as local media covered MTP events, and as the organization tried to get the state historical society to erect a marker memorializing the lives lost.

As a consequence of the four preceding pedagogical impacts, a final and cumulative impact involved students’ acquisition of a sense of agency and leadership gained from their involvement with the MTP. Given the nature of the organization’s work (and although individuals’ level of involvement range from active leaders to distant supporters on emails lists and its Facebook Group members), a number of students evolved into skilled speakers and leaders of the organization. That evolution occurred as they learned how to engage others and present MTP information to both formal and informal audiences. It’s crucial to note that presenting information about the lynching legacy is not an easy or casual task, particularly in the Deep South. Nonetheless, in each interaction, and although students sometimes stumbled or failed to have an answer to a question, they persevered, regrouped, and continued on. Speaking events forced students to hone their public speaking skills as they presented research on the 1918 lynchings and fielded questions that ranged from inquiries into these events to queries about ‘why talk about this now?’

**Social impacts of the project**

In addition to impacting students intellectually and emotionally, the MTP also had a number of notable social impacts on the local community. As an organization that worked within the multi-racial environment of south Georgia, MTP members behaved as public sociologists who aimed to engage various publics (e.g. neighbors, voters, liberal social movements, alumni, and others) with sociological insights, such as the socio-historical impact of race relations generally, and slavery, and lynching specifically.

First, the project forced the local community to confront its history of lynching and infused that topic into the public discourse. Countering the tendency for many in the region – particularly whites – to want to ignore or forgot ‘the past,’ the MTP proactively ‘outed’ the area’s long history of racial terrorism. Thrusting lynching history into the public arena
occurred through the establishment of a physical marker that both marks the reality of racial terrorism and educates those who read it. Thus, the MTP countered the silence that has historically surrounded such events. Also important were education and public awareness raising efforts, its website, public events, and engagement with the local press. As a result, the personhood of Mary Turner and the other victims of 1918 are in the consciousness of the local community today.

Second, the MTP modeled how multiracial groups can constructively and proactively work together to not only face the often painful realities of their shared past, but reconcile it on a micro-level. Events like the commemoration ceremonies served as a source of healing as well as acknowledgment to the lives that were unjustly taken in 1918. The MTP modeled that people from different races and generations can proactively and productively engage their shared history. In short, the MTP served as a model for race relations reconciliation and it provided a context to discuss what had previously been an unspeakable event.

A third social impact of the MTP’s work involves its engagement white racial hegemony as it relates to things such as racist symbols and everyday racist rhetoric. In short, by publicly engaging topics like the use of the Confederate flag and other current events, the MTP countered ongoing dominant hegemonic narratives related to white southern culture and the personhood of President of Barack Obama. Consequently, the usually unchecked use of symbols and discourse many experience as racist can be confronted and alternative narratives articulated.

A fourth social impact was the MTP’s ability to bridge the gap that sometimes exists between the academy and broader public. Academic scholarship often has difficulty percolating into the public consciousness. Equally often, academics often have a disinterest in speaking to audiences outside of universities. The MTP challenged this insular orientation by first conducting research, engaging the public about that research and other race-related issues, and holding public events. As an organization composed of many sociologists, the MTP also made sociology ‘public’ because it became ‘the vehicle of a public discussion about the nature of U.S. society – the nature of its values, the gap between its promise and its reality’ (Burawoy 2005, 7), particularly in terms of the region’s white supremacist legacy. Sociological insights about inequality, the dynamics of social inertia, and strategies for social movements and social change were used by the MTP for the purposes of engaging with wider ‘publics’ and helping to influence progressive change.

‘Digging up the past’ as a ‘critical’ pedagogical strategy?

In a region of the US with an atrocious racial history and where race relations are consistently and continuously strained, the MTP has done much to demonstrate what can happen when students and communities learn about their collective past. The experiences and work of the MTP also counteracts the tendency for sociology classes focused on areas of social injustice and ‘social problems’ to simply fill students with ‘gloom and doom’ (Johnson 2005, 44) by focusing on students’ ability to impact their social world. Importantly, the MTP created its own avenues for action, which offered opportunities to both ‘do something’ and speak out for justice. In particular, the MTP dramatically illustrated how utilizing local histories, as they pertain to unaddressed injustices, can catalyze both students and communities. Unlike somewhat formulaic, premeditated service learning projects or experiential modalities that some students encounter during their college careers, the MTP organically evolved without
any preplanned framework and was largely shaped by student participation. That evolution, MTP activities, and its achievements nonetheless present a possible model for others who teach inequality courses and who want to make those courses more applied in focus and style. The MTP’s experiences demonstrate the power of local and relevant course material. In other words, ‘digging up the past’ illustrates to students that the inequalities and injustices they study are not always the abstract realities of some faraway place. Those problems are often in their own backyards, if they take the time to look. Interested instructors may wish to do some preliminary research before their courses on potential subjects that intersect with both local events and class material, and then introduce this research to their classes. Subjects that find the strongest collective resonance with students may by appropriate things to pursue in ways similar to the MTP.

Noting these outcomes, the MTP may serve as a model for how instructors of sociology might make sociology ‘public,’ relevant, and more applicable to daily life – as opposed to a discipline that ruminates upon a plethora of social problems, without clear avenues of collective redress. The MTP’s work motivated students beyond a cerebral understanding to social action and community service, embarking upon a public discussion of the past’s connection to the present – in many ways, the MTP forced such a discussion as it went about its evolving work.

In turn, and though social contexts vary, the MTP’s experiences demonstrate how the use of local histories related to injustice can be incorporated into course content and used to motivate students to action, thereby functioning as both praxis and engaged pedagogy. The work of the MTP also demonstrates how sociologists and their students can impact their social context and the discourse of communities by serving as a resource and bridging the gap between the community and the academy, as advocated by organic public sociology. As a pedagogical and social action methodology, we argue sociology instructors can do this by

1. Identifying relevant local or regional injustices that have received inadequate attention or recourse.
2. Infusing the event(s) into course curriculum.
3. Providing time for student to collectively discuss their thoughts and feelings about the event.
4. Asking students to brainstorm about what might be done to rectify said matters to the degree they can be.
5. Serving as a resource (intellectually, socially, and politically) for students who choose to act to address injustices.

We argue that digging up the past is not only an inspiring and empowering experience for students, but it also serves as a practical strategy for learning sociological ideas and how to act as sociologists. In a country fraught with submerged injustices of varying scales, American sociologists and instructors of sociology have endless opportunities to dig up the past, and then unleash their eager students upon this past as those students seek to improve the world they will inherit.

Notes

1. Pseudonym.
2. The City has a Confederate soldier statue at the Courthouse, and numerous parks bear the names of prominent slave–owners and segregationists.
3. Many US universities' fraternities and sororities are exclusive and segregated by race, especially in the South (see Ray 2013; Ray and Rosow 2012).

4. Burawoy (2005) argues that one of the first ‘publics’ for academic sociologists to engage with are their own students.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**References**


