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# The Icon Formation of Ruby Bridges Within Hegemonic Memory of the Civil Rights Movement

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**THE ICON FORMATION OF RUBY BRIDGES WITHIN  
HEGEMONIC MEMORY OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT**

by

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## Abstract

In 1960, when Ruby Bridges was six-years-old, she desegregated the formerly all white William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans, Louisiana. This thesis traces her formation as a Civil Rights icon and how her icon narratives are influenced by, perpetuate, or challenge hegemonic memory of the Civil Rights Movement. The hegemonic narrative situates the Civil Rights Movement as a triumphant moment of the past, and is based upon the belief that it abolished institutionalized racism, leaving us in a world where lingering prejudice is the result of the failings of individuals. Analysis of narratives about Ruby Bridges by Norman Rockwell, Robert Coles, and Bridges herself show that there is a consistent shift over time in which the icon narratives conform to and reinforce the hegemonic narrative. These icon narratives situate Bridges' story as a historical account of the past that teaches lessons of how to combat instances of interpersonal racism through kindness and tolerance, and obscures Bridges' lived experience. These reductive stories demonstrate just how powerful the hegemonic narrative is and create a comforting morality tale that pervades dominant culture and prevents us from understanding and finding ways to combat the institutionalized racism and inequality that still exists within the United States.

Keywords:

Civil Rights Movement

Memory

Ruby Bridges

Icon

Hegemony

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## Introduction

On November 14, 1960, a six-year-old African American child named Ruby Bridges and her mother walked up the steps of William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans, Louisiana flanked by four federal marshals. Before reaching the doors of the school, they had to walk through an angry screaming crowd of white people holding signs and yelling terrible slurs. For the rest of the year, Ruby Bridges would walk daily through the screaming mob and proceed into her empty classroom to be taught as the only student of her teacher Barbara Henry. Her presence at the William Frantz Elementary had sparked mass white boycott of the school. This is what the desegregation of public schools looked like in New Orleans six years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.

The story of Ruby Bridges, a young child participating in desegregation is one that has been told over and over again. Along with Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the the Little Rock Nine, Bridges' story exists as one of many of brave individuals who created change during the Civil Rights Movement. But this begs the question, what stories do people tell about Ruby Bridges? What are their main themes? Who tells them? How does the story of Ruby Bridges fit in with other stories we tell about the Civil Rights Movement? How do these stories influence the way we remember Bridges, desegregation, or more broadly, the Civil Rights Movement itself? How does the way we remember these past events influence how we interpret our society today?

I wanted to find out what the most influential narratives were about Ruby Bridges, what they hoped to accomplish, what themes they communicated to their audience, and where these authors were getting their information from. Secondary sources about memory, historiography,

and iconography helped me to situate these narratives within a larger framework of Civil Rights memory to try and determine the influence and impact of narratives about Ruby Bridges. What I eventually realized I was doing was tracing the formation of a Civil Rights icon.

Leigh Raiford writes about the use of visual icons in photography in her article “‘Come Let Us Build a New World Together’: SNCC and Photography of the Civil Rights Movement.” Raiford analyzes photographic images used by SNCC during the Civil Rights Movement as a means to communicate the goals of the group and to propose how the images can be used today to understand a vision of a more equitable and just world. Important to her discussion is the idea of icons, which are

images that come to distill and symbolize a range of complex events, ideas, and ideologies. These icons in turn become integral to processes of national, racial, and political identity formation. The repeated use of many of the more recognizable photographs of African American movements for social justice helps construct and reconstruct our collective history. They become tools to aid memory. We are invited, demanded, expected to recount and memorialize. To remember.<sup>1</sup>

Raiford writes that the SNCC photographs do not represent solely what is depicted in the image or the exact moment from which it is drawn. Rather, the photo as an icon represents ideas and events much larger than itself.

For example, Raiford uses a photograph of three SNCC activists kneeling on the ground in prayer before a



“Come Let Us Build a New World Together,” SNCC poster, 1962, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan. Photograph by Danny Lyon, courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery.

demonstration with the caption under it, “Come Let Us Build A New World Together.” Raiford

<sup>1</sup> Leigh Raiford, “‘Come Let Us Build A New World Together’: SNCC and Photography of the Civil Rights Movement,” *American Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (December 2007): 1130.

writes that the image is not just a picture of three activists praying, but symbolizes the values of SNCC like “higher morality, as evidenced by the posture of prayer, and the central role of youth as architects of an integrated future, evidenced by the lanky brown girl who occupies the middle of the frame... group-centered leadership is privileged, in which all stand, pray, and work side by side.”<sup>2</sup> This one photograph embodied multiple concepts and ideas that SNCC valued and hoped to disseminate to the public.

Raiford also writes about iconic images influencing the way that we collectively remember the Civil Rights Movement. She references the sensational photos from 1963 Birmingham of dogs and fire hoses let loose on Civil Rights protestors, and writes that “For many contemporary viewers, the whole of the civil rights movement is captured, quite literally, in the images of Birmingham 1963.”<sup>3</sup> Though the photos depict an isolated incident from a movement defined by much more than police violence against protestors, these images came to represent not just a moment from 1963, but the entire movement. Raiford then goes through SNCC’s use of photographs and proposes that they create an image of collective leadership and nonviolence that could have a different impact on collective memory of the Civil Rights Movement than the violent images from Birmingham.

As I traced various narratives about Bridges, I noticed that her role in many of these stories embodied aspects of Raiford’s definition of an icon. She served as a symbol for complex ideas, events, and ideologies such as childhood innocence, determination, kindness, and the progress of the Civil Rights Movement itself. The symbolism of Bridges as a figure then influenced national, racial, and political identity formation. Her role in creating social change

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<sup>2</sup> Raiford, “Come Let Us Build A New World Together,” 1135.

<sup>3</sup> Raiford, “Come Let Us Build A New World Together,” 1130.

during the Civil Rights Movement impacted the way that viewers understood American values. Bridges also came to represent a chapter of the forward moving trajectory of American democracy. Her icon narrative influenced collective memory of her first grade year at William Frantz Elementary as well as the Civil Rights Movement as a whole.

Memory is helpfully defined in the introduction of the anthology *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, edited by Leigh Raiford and Renee Romano. They write that memory is

the process by which people recall, lay claim to, understand, and represent the past. These memories may be personal and individual; they might be collective and widely shared. Frequently they are public as well, manifested in official monuments and documents of a state. But whether individual, collective, or official, memories of the past are not static.<sup>4</sup>

They also write that

memory consists of the subjective, selective, and potentially unreliable accounts of the past told by those outside of the academy and circulated in the media and popular culture. Popular memory of a historical event, such as the Battle of the Alamo, may bear little resemblance to the event as recounted by historians.<sup>5</sup>

Raiford and Romano highlight the distinction between personal and collective memory. Personal memory consists of how individuals like Bridges herself or a member of her family remember the 1960-1961 school year. Collective memory consists of how Bridges' first grade year is remembered within a broader public. There is also a distinction between memory and historical accounts of an event. Memory is incredibly subjective and constantly evolving. Meaning may be attached to an event that differs from a historical account of the same event. Memory of an event today may also differ from memory of that same event twenty years ago. Collective and personal

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<sup>4</sup> Renee C. Romano, and Leigh Raiford, eds, *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* (University of Georgia Press, 2006), xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Raiford and Romano, *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, xiv.



memory interact with and influence each other, particularly in the case of Ruby Bridges because she was only six-years-old when she first entered William Frantz Elementary.

To further expand Raiford's definition of an icon, I found that icons, particularly in the context of the Civil Rights Movement, often teach lessons of morality to their audience. In iconic narratives about Bridges, she often imparted wisdom about resiliency, moral stamina, and how to overcome adversity and negativity. The factual accounts of an icon's actions as well as their personality traits are often negated or romanticized in the pursuit of teaching these lessons and having these icons represent something much larger than themselves. Bridges as an icon taught these lessons often at the expense of her own complex personality.

Icons like Bridges can provide helpful ways to remember history and draw meaning from events that can be applied to our world today, but the narratives that involve Bridges as an icon often reinforce a simple and reductive view of the Civil Rights Movement. This depiction is one that the American state finds particularly useful and that has become pervasive in American culture. It does a disservice to what the Civil Rights Movement stood for and accomplished. Historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall provides a helpful analysis of this simplified narrative.

Hall published her article "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past" in the *Journal of American History* in 2005. She began the article by identifying a troubling phenomenon in collective memory of the Civil Rights Movement. She writes that

By confining the civil rights struggle to the South, to bowdlerized heroes, to a single halcyon decade, and to limited, non-economic objectives, the master narrative simultaneously elevates and diminishes the movement. It ensures the status of the classical phase as a triumphal moment in a larger American progress narrative, yet it undermines its *gravitas*. It prevents one of the most remarkable mass movements in American history from speaking effectively to the challenges of our time.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Hall, Jacquelyn Dowd. "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past." *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2005): 1234, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3660172>.

Hall identifies what she calls the “classical Civil Rights Movement” that began with the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 and ended with the Voting Rights Act of 1965. She believes that the dominant narrative of the classical movement often oversimplifies the goals of the Civil Rights Movement. It makes it seem as if the movement aimed and succeeded to abolish acts of wrongdoing against individuals based on race and takes away from the radical vision of a redefined America that activists organized around. Most significantly, the dominant narrative situates the movement as a triumphant moment of the past. This view prevents the issues and ideas of the movement from being seen as part of an unfinished struggle for justice that is still relevant to our times.

In the article, Hall aims to “make civil rights harder. Harder to celebrate as a natural progression of American values. Harder to cast as a satisfying morality tale. Most of all, harder to simplify, appropriate, and contain.”<sup>7</sup> Hall creates a re-telling of the history of the Civil Rights Movement that traces the roots of what became the classical movement throughout the twentieth century to show that it did not stand alone in its time but was a part of a long progression of activism. She believes that understanding and embracing a fuller history of the Civil Rights Movement both within and without its classical phase will help to bring clarity and understanding to how we can address remaining structures of racism in the United States.

Hall highlights the radical goals of the classical movement that are often missing from the contemporary narrative. For instance, she writes that “True integration was and is an expansive and radical goal, not an ending or abolition of something that once was - the legal separation of bodies by race - but a process of transforming institutions and building an equitable, democratic,

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<sup>7</sup> Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement,” 1235.

multiracial, and multiethnic society.”<sup>8</sup> Desegregation was not just about having racially diverse classrooms, but about changing the entire education system itself. Desegregation as it played out in the 1960s was simply the first step in that process.

Hall identifies a group called “color-blind conservatives,” who ignored the radical and complex demands of the movement to fight institutionalized racism. They instead “insisted that color blindness - defined as the elimination of racial classifications and the establishment of formal equality before the law - was the movement’s singular objective, the principle for which King and the *Brown* decision, in particular, stood.”<sup>9</sup> By embracing this viewpoint, politicians were able to negate the necessity “to redress present, institutionalized manifestations of historical injustices against blacks as a group” and emphasized that the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement was to “prevent isolated acts of wrongdoing against individuals.”<sup>10</sup> This view “conformed to white, middle-class interests and flattered national vanities”<sup>11</sup> because it reinforced American ideals of individual effort and merit.

Jeanne Theoharis also writes in her book *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* about the strategic political uses of a simplified Civil Rights Movement narrative through the mistreatment of the legacy of Rosa Parks. Writing about the treatment of Parks’ story upon her death, Theoharis writes that she had become a figure “Held up as a national heroine but stripped of her lifelong history of activism and anger at American injustice, the Parks who emerged was a self-sacrificing mother figure for a nation who would use her death for a ritual of national redemption.”<sup>12</sup> With her casket put on display in the rotunda of the capitol building, Theoharis

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<sup>8</sup> Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement,” 1252.

<sup>9</sup> Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement,” 1237.

<sup>10</sup> Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement,” 1238.

<sup>11</sup> Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement,” 1238.

<sup>12</sup> Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013), ix.

writes that the government used her death as a moment to exalt the greatness of the United States and how far it had come. Here was a quiet seamstress who had been denied a seat on a bus lying in the Capitol in honor. Theoharis writes that, “Instead of using the opportunity to illuminate and address current social inequity, the public spectacle provided an opportunity for the nation to lay to rest a national heroine *and* its own history of racism.”<sup>13</sup>

Theoharis, like Hall, proposes a re-telling of Rosa Parks’ narrative that acknowledges her lifetime of Civil Rights activism that is not captured in what she calls the “fable” commonly told about Rosa Parks’ life. The Theoharis book provides a great example of how the story of an individual like Parks or Bridges can be used for political purposes to downplay the urgency of addressing problems of inequality that have plagued our country for decades.

Evaluating Bridges’ icon narrative differs from evaluating Parks’ because Bridges was a small child at the time who did not make the decision to attend William Frantz Elementary. Parks’ famously participated in the Montgomery Bus Boycott by her own volition and continued to pursue a career in activism for decades afterwards. Theoharis writes that “many interviews Parks did in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s expressed her discomfort with how she had become a symbol... because of the limited ways that people had come to understand her action and the movement more broadly.”<sup>14</sup> Parks was able to criticize the symbolic meaning attached to her actions because she was an adult and working activist during the Montgomery bus boycott. She understood the reductive nature of her icon narrative. Bridges, a small child, did not possess the same agency, intention, or understanding that Parks did and therefore has not criticized or understood her icon status in the same way. Bridges relied on collective memory of her

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<sup>13</sup> Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*, x.

<sup>14</sup> Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*, 237.

first-grade year to help her reconstruct her limited personal memory, a project Parks did not have to undertake. Regardless, Theoharis' work provides a helpful analysis of the use of individuals to perpetuate and reinforce the state-sponsored narrative of the Civil Rights Movement.

Jennifer Fuller expands on the concept of the "color-blind conservative" that Hall writes about, by applying it to the context of the 1990s as well as to a broader political spectrum than the American definition of a conservative. In her essay "Debating the Present through the Past: Representations of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1990s," Fuller argues that discussions of racial inequality in the 1990s were centered on a neoliberal ideology that "persistent racial problems such as discrimination and economic inequality are caused by personal attitudes and are not a matter of public policy."<sup>15</sup> This ideology was "endorsed by the left as well as the right," and was dependent on the "hegemonic view that the civil rights movement succeeded in dismantling racist structures and in guaranteeing equality before the law."<sup>16</sup> If one believes that systems of racism and discrimination no longer exist because of the Civil Rights Movement, problems of racism must spring from the behavior of individuals. This promotes the idea of powerful and virtuous individuals as leading the way toward this interpersonal change.

Fuller, like Hall and Theoharis, believes that ideas of interpersonal solutions to racism are dependent on a simple and largely inaccurate view of the classical Civil Rights Movement in which it accomplished its goals and allows us to live in a racism-free world. Any lingering racism is not the result of institutionalized structures but rather the failings of individuals of different races not understanding, empathizing, or being kind to each other.

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<sup>15</sup> Jennifer Fuller, "Debating the Past through the Present: Representations of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1990s," in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, ed. Renee C. Romano, and Leigh Raiford (University of Georgia Press, 2006), 171.

<sup>16</sup> Fuller, "Debating the Past through the Present," 173.

When read together, Raiford, Hall, Theoharis, and Fuller create a portrait of how the Civil Rights Movement is remembered and used today. The simplification of its goals and viewing it as a past event is not an accident or misunderstanding. It is a deliberately created narrative that is used by the state to serve neoliberal political purposes. The belief that the Civil Rights Movement solved institutionalized racism or that its goals were simply to prevent wrongdoing on the level of the individual keeps the state from confronting systemic problems of inequality that existed in the 1960s and continue to exist today.

This narrative is often perpetuated through the stories of brave individuals who fought and succeeded to eliminate racism like Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., or, as I explore in this thesis, Ruby Bridges. The mechanisms for reproducing and reinforcing this hegemonic narrative on the level of the individual comes from the qualities of an icon such as serving as a symbol, informing identity, impacting memory, and teaching moral lessons. These iconic qualities within Bridges' narratives are impacted by the existence of the dominant narrative of the Civil Rights Movement and also serve to perpetuate it.

Fuller calls the dominant narrative of the Civil Rights Movement hegemonic. By hegemonic she means that this narrative is endorsed by the ruling class and integrated into dominant culture to the point that it is accepted by subordinate classes to produce consent. Cultural hegemony is "The 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production."<sup>17</sup> The dominant group

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<sup>17</sup> T. J. Jackson Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," *The American Historical Review* 90, no. 3 (1985): 568, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1860957>.

develops a “world view that appeals to a wide range of other groups within the society, and they must be able to claim with at least some plausibility that their particular interests are those of society at large.”<sup>18</sup> These concepts and ideas are accepted into the culture of the subordinate classes. Once accepted, these hegemonic ideas “can serve the interests of some groups better than others. Subordinate groups may participate in maintaining a symbolic universe, even if it serves to legitimate their domination. In other words, they can share a kind of half-conscious complicity in their own victimization.”<sup>19</sup>

In the context of a Civil Rights narrative, Hall shows how the dominant narrative was created by “color-blind conservatives” to support a neoliberal agenda that did not necessitate confrontation of systemic inequality. This narrative suited the values of the white middle class and was accepted within dominant culture. As subordinate groups accepted and believed this narrative created by the dominant ruling group, it served to prevent subordinate groups from gaining rights and thereby actually hurt their own interests.

The authors of narratives about Ruby Bridges that turned her into an icon within this hegemonic narrative believed that they were creating narratives that celebrated a great chapter in American history and the ideal of American progress. These narratives were accepted within dominant culture because they reinforced the pre-existing hegemonic views of the Civil Rights Movement that the state created. In embracing this hegemonic narrative, the Ruby Bridges icon narratives served to prevent acknowledgement and possible action to solve systemic problems in the United States.

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<sup>18</sup> Lears, “The Concept of Cultural Hegemony,” 571.

<sup>19</sup> Lears, “The Concept of Cultural Hegemony,” 573.

My project is to trace the formation of Ruby Bridges as a Civil Rights icon and to identify how her icon narrative supports, challenges, or is informed by the hegemonic Civil Rights narrative of the state. As various narratives about her form, is there evidence of Hall's ideas of a long past, simple, successful Civil Rights Movement? Is there evidence of Fuller's ideas of interpersonal solutions to contemporary racism? Is the story of Ruby Bridges meant to symbolize larger ideas and concepts and influence collective memory of the Civil Rights Movement? When and how did Bridges become an icon and how does her icon status interact with a neoliberal hegemonic interpretation of the Civil Rights Movement?

That I chose to focus on narratives solely about Ruby Bridges as an individual in itself perpetuates the hegemonic narrative. It reinforces the idea of the Civil Rights Movement as a collection of stories about virtuous individuals rather than as a story of collective action and organizing. It was through the activism and agitation of many that Bridges was able to attend William Frantz Elementary. Resistance and backlash to her presence also extended outside of the white boycott of her school and the angry mob outside. While this collective history is not the focus of the thesis, it is worth situating Bridges within this larger historical context because, in the end, the 1960-1961 school year was the result of the work of many people.

Six years after the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education*, there continued to be no action to integrate New Orleans public schools. Black activists and their white allies pushed for an end to stalling the implementation of *Brown* in New Orleans. Black leaders organized within their communities, and white allies used their influence among the white elite to raise awareness and acceptance of Civil Rights issues. These activists, along with the NAACP, "Through



litigation and appeals... provided openings in the political structure of the South.”<sup>20</sup> These activists and the NAACP pushed for federal intervention as the state government continued to resist desegregation.

Federal Judge J. Skelly Wright was the force that finally made desegregation in New Orleans happen. His task was not easy. After months of delay from the Orleans Parish School Board, Wright finally enforced a plan that “A. All children entering the first grade may attend either the former all-white public school nearest their homes or formerly all-negro public school nearest their homes, at their option. B. Children may be transferred from one school to another provided such transfers are not based on consideration of race.”<sup>21</sup> This order is what caused Ruby Bridges to enter William Frantz Elementary in November of 1960. This step only happened due to pressure from Wright. The city of New Orleans never would have arrived at a desegregation plan on its own.

The Orleans Parish School Board was in a difficult position because the city’s white moderate elite did not endorse desegregation. The school board therefore chose to enforce token integration through difficult pupil placement exams and delay desegregation until after the school year had already begun. Using this method, “few blacks would want to integrate and whites whose schools were integrated would be less likely to leave” (Wieder 127). Bridges was one of few to pass the pupil placement exam and one of even fewer whose parents consented to send their child to a formerly white school. In the end, three black children were sent to McDonough 19 Elementary School and Bridges went to William Frantz Elementary by herself.

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<sup>20</sup> Kim Lacy Rogers, *Righteous Lives: Narratives of the New Orleans Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 34.

<sup>21</sup> Alan Wieder, “The New Orleans School Crisis of 1960: Causes and Consequences,” *Phylon* 48, no. 2 (1987): 126, <https://doi.org/10.2307/274776>.

The decision to desegregate, even on a token level, produced fierce white backlash in the city. On November 14, 1960 as white parents rushed to pull their children out of school, “Members of the Citizen’s Councils and neighborhood whites harassed, threatened, and verbally abused the black children and the few white children who remained in the schools... The next day, several thousand whites mobbed the school board’s offices and city hall.”<sup>22</sup> The mayor of New Orleans, DeLesseps S. Morrison refused to order the police to protect Bridges, the other black children at McDonough 19, or the white children who remained in the integrated schools. Judge Wright ordered federal marshals to escort and protect Bridges and the other black children. White boycotts of integrated schools endured throughout the entire year and “At the end of school year, only forty-nine white children who had been enrolled in the two white schools remained in the city’s public schools; 684 attended schools in St. Bernard Parish, and 286 received no education at all.”<sup>23</sup>

This historical context is often left out of narratives about Ruby Bridges, or mentioned only briefly. As I began to focus on the icon formation of Bridges, my attention shifted from highlighting the collective Civil Rights action within New Orleans to narratives about Bridges as an individual. Despite my shift in focus, this larger context is incredibly important and also challenges the hegemonic narrative by showing how the Civil Rights Movement was not a collection of narratives about individuals but the product of mass organizing. This larger context is important to remember but will not be addressed at length in this thesis.

My first chapter is about Norman Rockwell’s contribution to the creation of Ruby Bridges as an icon in his 1964 painting, *The Problem We All Live With*. A visual analysis of the

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<sup>22</sup> Rogers, “Righteous Lives,” 71.

<sup>23</sup> Rogers, “Righteous Lives,” 72.

painting shows that Rockwell wanted Bridges and her walk into school to symbolize desegregation as well as the general effort for racial progress in the Civil Rights Movement. The painting is also a call to action for the viewer, both through the viewer's positionality as a member of the unseen mob and through the painting's title, *The Problem We All Live With*. As the painting aged, however, it began to be seen as a part of the hegemonic Civil Rights Movement narrative. It shows that public perception of the painting differed from the intent of the creator. Rockwell wanted his painting to remain relevant, an active call to action, but later hegemonic narratives of the movement relegated the painting to being a representation of the past. Overall, it turned Bridges into a visual icon for the classical Civil Rights Movement. She symbolized larger ideas of potential forward progress, determination, and innocence.

Chapter 2 discusses the contributions of Robert Coles to the Bridges narrative through his academic work and his children's book about Bridges. In his earlier works *Children of Crisis* (1964) and *The Moral Life of Children* (1986), Coles focused on a Bridges who did not represent larger ideologies on the level of an icon, and instead focused on her actions and character. Over time, he began to identify Bridges' extraordinary moral resilience based in religious faith. He initially viewed this trait as an admirable aspect of Bridges' personality, but pushed the concept even further in his children's book *The Story of Ruby Bridges* (1995). He comes to portray Bridges as a character defined solely by her faith and the moral resilience it provided for her. In order to tailor his narrative to a child audience, Coles simplified Bridges' story and fell into many of the narrative traps of the hegemonic interpretation of the Civil Rights Movement. Through Coles' evolving personal memory of Bridges, he contributes to a collective

understanding of Bridges as an icon who represents a past movement and teaches lessons about how to face interpersonal racism with kindness and forgiveness in our hearts.

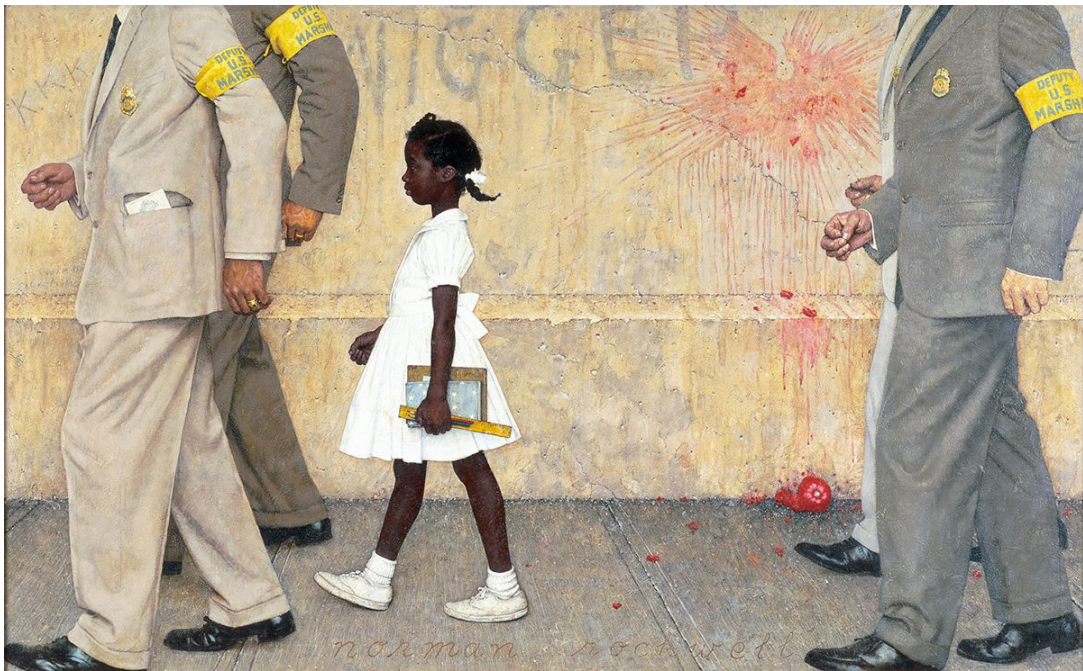
The final chapter addresses how Ruby Bridges herself tells her story over time. Bridges was a small child when she went to William Frantz Elementary and must therefore rely on collective memory to piece together her personal memory. She initially accomplished this goal by constructing a complex story that challenges the hegemonic icon narratives about her in many ways. However, the pre-established icon framework from the work of Coles and Rockwell as well as a larger hegemonic understanding of the Civil Rights Movement within dominant culture eventually influenced the way Bridges told her story. Over time, she began to conform to her narrative as an icon that Rockwell and Coles, among others, had constructed. Collective memory is so powerful and, particularly in Bridges' case, necessary, that it overpowers and influences her personal memory to fit the mold of her hegemonic icon status within dominant culture.

Bridges' icon status was collectively and deliberately constructed, and these creations were influenced by the power of the structures of memory that Hall, Theoharis and Fuller write about because they are reinforced by the state. It is easy for this hegemonic narrative to snake its way into collective memory because it is palatable, optimistic, and comforting. Even Bridges herself could not resist the hegemonic icon narrative over time even though she had previously created a narrative that resisted it.

What it comes down to is the political uses of the hegemonic narrative that Hall, Theoharis and Fuller write about. The dominant Bridges icon narrative keeps collective memory from reflecting a need to address issues of inequity that have existed for decades and continue to exist today. We would rather accept the comforting narrative fed to us that does not push us to

imagine a radically different world based upon racial justice. The Bridges icon narrative was deliberately created by well meaning actors but was also influenced by the hegemonic narrative the state endorses. The result is a powerful structure that is difficult to resist and ultimately works against our own interests.

Chapter 1: The Creation of a Civil Rights Icon in Norman Rockwell's  
*The Problem We All Live With*



Norman Rockwell, *The Problem We All Live With*, 1964, Oil on Canvas, 36 in x 58 in, 1964, Courtesy of the Norman Rockwell Museum.

Ruby Bridges' rise to icon status began with a painting. Published in the January 14, 1964 edition of *Look* magazine, Norman Rockwell's *The Problem We All Live With* depicted Bridges' daily walk into school flanked by four federal marshals. Rockwell was an influential artist known for creating narrative images that cast American culture in a relatable and positive light. His image of the Civil Rights struggle was a huge departure in theme from the trademark images of his fifty-year career. The painting served as a symbol about both the potential for and difficulty of achieving racial progress through desegregation and other Civil Rights Movement activity. Bridges' presence in the painting served as a symbol for this potential progress and her actual character or feelings were negated in the process. Rockwell criticized the state through the

anonymous and seemingly unhelpful role of the federal marshals in the scene. He intended the painting to be a call to action both through its title and from the positionality of the viewer as a member of the unseen angry mob. He wanted to create visibility for and inspire action about the issues of his contemporary moment and used Bridges and her walk into school as a symbol for that goal.

*The Problem We All Live With* prompted strong reactions, both positive and negative, from viewers who evaluated the painting based on how accurately it depicted their contemporary world. They either praised it as an impactful reflection of American society or condemned it as an over exaggeration or misrepresentation of race relations in the United States. The painting occupied icon status in the 1960s before the hegemonic narrative of the Civil Rights Movement had been created. It symbolized larger issues, intended to teach a moral lesson about political action, and spoke to aspects of national social identity, though it is difficult to gauge the level of circulation of the image or its impact on collective memory when it was first published. The role of the depiction as an icon within Civil Rights memory became more clear as the painting aged and the meanings attached to it began to change.

Over time, the hegemonic narrative of the Civil Rights Movement that Hall outlines took shape, and *The Problem We All Live With* began to be viewed as a part of that narrative. It lost Rockwell's call to action and instead became a symbol of a past historical moment that showed how far the United States had come as a nation. President Obama hung Rockwell's depiction in the White House in 2011 as a symbol of the progress the nation had made from a girl crossing an angry mob to get into school to having a black president. It was hung in O.J. Simpson's house by his lawyers as a way to demonstrate Simpson's appreciation for African American history and

his own African American identity. The painting also informed Bridges' self-identity in relation to her first grade experience as well as her understanding of collective memory of her experience.

This shift in understanding solidified Bridges and her walk into school as an icon of the hegemonic Civil Rights Movement because the painting not only symbolized larger ideas and informed national identity as it did in 1964, but also informed personal and collective and memory. The meaning of the painting changed over time outside the scope of Rockwell's intentions. Its meaning was not static because it became a part of a subjective and ever changing collective memory that was influenced by the hegemonic narrative of the Civil Rights Movement.

Rockwell's painting was inspired by a description of Bridges' walk into school in John Steinbeck's 1962 book *Travels With Charley: In Search of America*. The book chronicles his journey around the United States in 1960 with his standard poodle named Charley. Steinbeck wrote that he wanted to go on the trip because "I, an American writer, writing about America, was working from memory, and the memory is at best a faulty, warpy, reservoir... So it was that I determined to look again, to try to rediscover this monster land."<sup>24</sup> Setting out in a camper van with only his dog for company, Steinbeck wanted to rediscover the landscape and people of the United States in order to reconnect with the subject of his literary works.

Steinbeck did not find what he was hoping for. He found that the United States was not the country he once knew so well. According to Barbara Reitt, Steinbeck saw "a people unwilling to discuss politics and confront the public issues separately, a people in the grips of a

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<sup>24</sup> John Steinbeck, *Travels with Charley: In Search of America* (New York: Bantam Books, 1962), 5.



compulsive restlessness and lack of roots... but most of all a people still utterly blind to the waste and decay they themselves have wrought.”<sup>25</sup> Steinbeck found a country that he did not recognize, nor one that he wanted to reconnect with despite the original goals of his journey. He followed his carefully planned route from New York to California, but changed his plans for the return journey and made a hasty retreat east.

It was during this return journey that Steinbeck went to New Orleans. He described Bridges by focusing on how small, innocent, and afraid she looked in opposition to the angry crowd and the towering federal marshals. He writes,

The crowd seemed to hold its breath. Four big marshals got out of each car and from somewhere in the automobiles they extracted the littlest Negro girl you ever saw, dressed in shining starchy white, with new white shoes on feet so little they were almost round. Her face and little legs were very black against the white. The big marshals stood her on the curb and a jangle of jeering shrieks went up from behind the barricades. The little girl did not look at the howling crowd but from the side the whites of her eyes showed like those of a frightened fawn. The men turned her around like a doll, and then the strange procession moved up the broad walk toward the school, and the child was even more a mite because the men were so big.<sup>26</sup>

Steinbeck was struck by how young and innocent Bridges was. She was not in control of what happened to her as the federal marshals “extracted” her from the car and maneuvered her actions “like a doll”. He thought Bridges lacked agency as a small child, which emphasized how ludicrous it was to see an angry mob harassing such a tiny being.

Steinbeck focused more on the “Cheerleaders,” the main group of women who led the protests outside the school. He characterized them as angry and vile. He writes that

These blowzy women with their little hats and their clippings hungered for attention. They wanted to be admired. They simpered in happy, almost innocent triumph when they were applauded. Theirs was the demented cruelty of egocentric children, and somehow

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<sup>25</sup> Barbara B. Reitt, “‘I Never Returned as I Went In’: Steinbeck’s Travels with Charley,” *Southwest Review* 66, no. 2 (1981): 194.

<sup>26</sup> Steinbeck, *Travels with Charley*, 255.

this made their insensate beastliness much more heartbreaking. These were not mothers, not even women. They were crazy actors playing to a crazy audience.<sup>27</sup>

Steinbeck was disgusted, saddened, and appalled by the behavior of these women. He already felt disappointed with the state of America, and the behavior of the Cheerleaders only further confirmed these disappointing realizations. Not only were they anger and ugliness personified, but they had the support of the crowd and received the attention they craved. Steinbeck lamented that there did not seem to be supporters of integration there, or anyone who seemed as saddened and disgusted by the scene as he was.

Analysis of this section of *Travels With Charley* usually situates it in reference to how Steinbeck felt about the scene in the context of his whole journey and how it pushed him to return home. Barbara Reitt cites the passage about Bridges and the Cheerleaders as one of the most powerful passages in the book. But her larger point is how “Here in the South [Steinbeck] feels like an outsider for the first time on the trip, and the feeling urges him home faster.”<sup>28</sup> Robert Gottlieb makes a similar point about the passage, writing that “The horrible racism he encounters in New Orleans when a group of white women — ‘The Cheerleaders’ — scream obscene and violent words at a tiny black girl... propels him back home, sickened for his country.”<sup>29</sup> To these writers, the significance of the passage lies in how it affected Steinbeck and his disappointing discoveries about his country. While the book was popular and well circulated, certainly raising awareness about the events at William Frantz Elementary, it did not propel Bridges to icon status in the representational world of the Civil Rights Movement. What is most

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<sup>27</sup> Steinbeck, *Travels with Charley*, 256.

<sup>28</sup> Reitt, “I Never Returned as I Went In,” 196.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Gottlieb, “The Rescue of John Steinbeck,” *The New York Review of Books*, April 17, 2008, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2008/04/17/the-rescue-of-john-steinbeck/>.

significant about Steinbeck's description is the way in which it inspired what became a more iconic image, Norman Rockwell's *The Problem We All Live With*.

Before the 1964 painting, Rockwell was not known as a political artist and spent most of his career illustrating 321 covers for *The Saturday Evening Post* over the course of forty-seven years. His covers depicted an "idyllic America of wholesome holiday celebrations, sporting events, and family gatherings."<sup>30</sup> Rockwell wrote in his 1960 autobiography, "This view of life I communicate in my pictures excludes the sordid and ugly. I paint life as I would like it to be."<sup>31</sup> He acknowledged that his illustrations were comforting depictions of the America many wanted to imagine that did not necessarily match up with reality.

Rockwell's comforting and seemingly easy-to-understand illustrations led art critics to dismiss his work as simple, banal, and alien to the realm of true art. Henry Adams writes that "Probably no other artist in history has been so reviled by the intelligentsia... when Clement Greenberg laid down the laws of good taste in 1939, he made it clear that Rockwell's illustrations, with their strong narrative element, were everything that real art was not."<sup>32</sup> These criticisms often bothered Rockwell, but he also never intended for his paintings to land among the work of great artists. He considered himself to be an illustrator.

Rockwell articulated the difference between an illustrator and an artist, writing, "The modern artist and the fine arts painter have only to satisfy themselves. The illustrator must satisfy his client as well as himself. He must express a specific idea so that everybody will understand

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<sup>30</sup> Victoria Gallagher and Kenneth S. Zagacki, "Visibility and Rhetoric: The Power of Visual Images in Norman Rockwell's Depictions of Civil Rights," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 91, no. 2 (May 1, 2005): 176, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630500291448>.

<sup>31</sup> Norman Rockwell and Thomas Rockwell, "Norman Rockwell: America's Favorite Illustrator," *Saturday Evening Post* 281, no. 1 (February 1, 2009): 85.

<sup>32</sup> Henry Adams, "Rediscovering Norman Rockwell," *American Artist*, October 2002, 47.

it.”<sup>33</sup> Rockwell wanted his paintings to tell stories that his viewers had no trouble understanding. Critics gave him a hard time about his style because the belief in accessible storytelling through art was “As modern art became more abstract, a world of intermediaries developed. This led to the idea that art was not important or serious if it was easily understood.”<sup>34</sup> Rockwell’s illustrations, on the other hand, were meant to cater to his audience. They needed to be clear and easy to understand so that any viewer could interpret the image as Rockwell intended it.

Despite Rockwell’s reputation as a seemingly apolitical illustrator, he was a long-time supporter of Civil Rights and other social issues. He was a member of the NAACP, supported nuclear disarmament, and opposed the Vietnam War.<sup>35</sup> By the 1960s, as racial discord became a central focus of American attention, Rockwell departed from his usual themes to portray the race issues of the time. He felt that the problems facing the nation were large and difficult. In a 1969 interview, he said, “this country, even during the Depression, was full of hope... Now there is only doubt.”<sup>36</sup> Rockwell wanted to use his signature narrative style to bring visibility to the turmoil he saw.

As this desire grew, Rockwell began to feel unhappy at *The Saturday Evening Post* and left the magazine after forty-seven years in 1963. The magazine was in the process of rebranding to attract more advertisers and asked Rockwell to switch from his narrative paintings to portraits, a style which Rockwell felt stifled his creativity.<sup>37</sup> The *Post* also did not endorse the portrayal of black people in Rockwell’s paintings outside of performing menial tasks, and Rockwell looked

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<sup>33</sup> Rockwell and Rockwell, “Norman Rockwell,” 48.

<sup>34</sup> Laurie Moffatt, “The People’s Painter,” in *Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People*, ed. Maureen Hart Hennessey and Anne Knutson, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999), 27.

<sup>35</sup> Adams, “Rediscovering Norman Rockwell,” 53.

<sup>36</sup> Cecil Smith, “Nostalgia Isn’t Rockwell’s Bag,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 12, 1969, H19.

<sup>37</sup> Deborah Solomon, *American Mirror: The Life and Art of Norman Rockwell* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 363.

forward to opportunities to paint outside of these restrictions.<sup>38</sup> Working instead for *Look* magazine, Rockwell made three Civil Rights related paintings, *The Problem We All Live With* (1964), *Murder in Mississippi* (1965), and *New Kids in the Neighborhood* (1967). The three paintings portrayed school desegregation, the 1964 murder of Civil Rights workers in Mississippi, and housing desegregation.

Rockwell used Steinbeck's visual descriptions from *Travels With Charley* as he constructed his painting of Bridges. She appears in the painting as Steinbeck described her, wearing "shining starchy white, with new white shoes on feet so little they were almost round. Her face and little legs were very black against the white."<sup>39</sup> Steinbeck's description portrays the marshals as big and commanding, especially in contrast to Bridges. In the Rockwell painting, the marshals tower in pairs of two in front and behind of Bridges, and are so much taller than she that their heads are cut out of the frame of the painting. Steinbeck's main focus, the protestors outside the school, are not visually present in the Rockwell painting. Their presence is implied from the large print "Nigger" and "KKK" written on the wall behind Bridges and the marshals as well as the tomato sliding down the wall. The tomato seems as though it was thrown just a moment earlier and narrowly missed Bridges' head, leaving a bloody looking stain behind it. These visuals are the center of the painting, with Bridges walking off center towards the left and the marshals behind her leaving space so the viewer can see the slurs and tomato stain. The viewer cannot see the mob, but feels their implied presence around Bridges and the marshals nonetheless. Rockwell used his own creative liberties in creating a story for the viewer about

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<sup>38</sup> Gallagher and Zagacki, "Visibility and Rhetoric," 176.

<sup>39</sup> Steinbeck, *Travels with Charley*, 254.

Bridges' walk into school, but was clearly inspired by the descriptions Steinbeck had published just two years prior to the painting.

The marshals, large, powerful, and claiming to protect Bridges while simultaneously leaving her vulnerable to the mob, represent the American state. Gallagher and Zagacki write that the rather large space between Bridges and the marshals behind her suggest that “despite being charged with the mission of protecting her, they did not want to get too close to Ruby and thus become targets themselves.”<sup>40</sup> Bridges is out of stride with the others, the marshals all have their left legs forward and Bridges her right. She almost steps on the heels of the marshals in front of her “to whom she appears to be nestling up against for security, but who nonetheless seem to be cutting off her potential forward movement or escape.”<sup>41</sup> In Rockwell's depiction, the marshals are fulfilling their basic duties of protection while simultaneously leaving Bridges vulnerable to the white prejudice and violence that the mob represents. The marshals also stall Bridges' steps forward, preventing her from making progress towards the racial equality the school represents. Rockwell was not necessarily critiquing the actual marshals, but rather making a commentary on the role of the American state in Civil Rights issues. The state appeared to endorse Civil Rights, but in the end never put themselves in the line of fire to actually protect and support racial progress.

Bridges herself represents the innocence of childhood, moral purity, defiance and the pursuit of Civil Rights.<sup>42</sup> Rockwell portrays Bridges as small and childlike, highlighting the domineering presence of the marshals around her and the absurdity of the white violence and resistance that her presence provokes. Bridges shows no fear of the mob, her eyes looking

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<sup>40</sup> Gallagher and Zagacki, “Visibility and Rhetoric,” 187.

<sup>41</sup> Gallagher and Zagacki, “Visibility and Rhetoric,” 187.

<sup>42</sup> Gallagher and Zagacki, “Visibility and Rhetoric,” 185.

forward with focus and determination. She is the righteous moral actor in the scene, and the only figure whose humanity is visible on her face, particularly in contrast to the towering and anonymous marshals that surround her. Out of step with the marshals and thwarted by their resistance to protect her, Bridges nevertheless progresses towards the school, her education, and a brighter future.

Rockwell leaves the mob unseen, though their presence is strong in the depiction. The words on the wall and thrown tomato at the center of the painting make the spectre of the mob one of the main focuses of the painting. The mob's implied location is also the perspective of the viewer, implicating the viewer, particularly white ones, as a potential contributor to the violence that pervades the entire work. This implication is further emphasized by the title of the painting, *The Problem We All Live With*. Rockwell believed that desegregation and racial problems were issues everyone of all races and in all geographic regions of the United States, not just the South, should be concerned with. Rockwell necessitated responsibility and promoted visibility of a problem that he believed affected the lives all Americans.

True to his intentions as an illustrator, Rockwell created a visual symbol whose meaning was crystal clear. The marshals represented the apparent action but actual inaction of the state. Bridges represented the Civil Rights struggle, defiance, persistence, and innocence. The wall and presence of the mob implied the pervasiveness of white resistance and racism and urged the viewer to engage with racial issues and to recognize that these were issues that concerned everyone. Rockwell created an image that reflected its contemporary moment and caused the viewer to address their position within the social problems of the time. Though it was created four years after Bridges first entered William Frantz Elementary, issues of desegregation and the

Civil Rights Movement were still relevant in 1964. Unlike his past works, *The Problem We All Live With* was not a comforting depiction of America as some would like to see it, but a stirring call to action about America as it actually was.

Viewers of the painting had mixed reactions to Rockwell's new theme of Civil Rights. *Look* published two letters to the editor about the piece in the February 25, 1964 issue. Mrs. W.E. Leverett of Miami Shores, Florida wrote, "May I express my gratitude to you for putting this dastardly situation before the public eye so profoundly, and may the pathos of it affect [others] with as much heartache as it did me."<sup>43</sup> Leverett praised the emotional impact of the painting and hoped that it would help others to better understand the urgency of social problems that concerned the entire country. She felt that it was an accurate visual symbol that elicited appropriate responses of concern and sadness about issues that should be in the public eye.

Another reader, Joe E. Moore of Bedford, Texas questioned Rockwell's positionality. He wrote, "Just where does Norman Rockwell live? Just where does your editor live? Probably both of these men live in all-white, highly expensive, highly exclusive neighborhoods. Oh, what hypocrites all of you are!"<sup>44</sup> Moore believed that Rockwell had no right to make social commentary on Civil Rights issues because he probably lived in an enclave of white privilege. Moore seemed to question Rockwell's assertion that this was indeed a problem we all live with if Rockwell benefitted from his whiteness. Rockwell's positionality is a legitimate concern, but Moore's goal seemed to be to discredit the painting as a whole as well as the assertion that all Americans should be concerned and upset about Civil Rights issues.

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<sup>43</sup> "Letters to the Editor," *Look*, February 25, 1964, 12.

<sup>44</sup> "Letters to the Editor," 12.



In an article by Robert Coles about the Rockwell painting, he shared the reaction of a prejudiced father of one of the white children who went to school with Bridges. He saw the painting and said, “You look at her and you begin to feel sorry for her — a lot of people will, I’m sure. It’s not *her* we were against, you know. It’s the interference in our life by those folks up North, that’s what it was, that’s what we were saying.”<sup>45</sup> The father had previously felt anger and disdain towards Bridges and her presence at William Frantz Elementary, but the impact of Rockwell’s painting made him rethink his framing of the issue. The painting caused the man to identify Bridges’ presence as part of a larger national issue, not an issue about Bridges herself. Seeing himself as a part of the angry mob in opposition to Bridges’ childhood innocence as portrayed in the painting caused him to recognize that his anger towards Bridges was unjustified, even if his anger towards desegregation more broadly was not. The painting symbolized issues that were incredibly relevant to this man’s life and caused him to reflect on his role and position as a part of white resistance to desegregation.

Rockwell biographer Laura Claridge believes that reactions to *The Problem We All Live With* were generally positive. She writes that “black and white readers wrote to say that the painting said more than they could explain to their children or to themselves with words.”<sup>46</sup> Claridge highlights the power of an artistic depiction to symbolize and explain complex issues. Many readers felt that the painting showed something that they could not articulate through words. However, there were certainly negative responses among the positive and it is difficult to gauge whether responses were collectively positive or negative.

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<sup>45</sup> Robert Coles, “Ruby Bridges and a Painting,” in *Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People*, ed. Maureen Hart Hennessey and Anne Knutson, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999), 111.

<sup>46</sup> Laura Claridge, *Norman Rockwell: A Life* (New York: Random House, 2001), 452.

The main takeaway from these responses is that they elicited strong reactions from viewers that situated the painting as a representation of a contemporary moment that made them reflect on their national identity. Viewers reacted to the painting through a contemporary lens, and evaluated it on whether or not it accurately characterized the country they lived in. This evaluation made each viewer decide whether racial issues were indeed a ‘problem they all lived with’ or not, causing them to reflect on what challenges the nation did or did not have to grapple with. Unlike later interpretations of the painting, *The Problem We All Live With* in its contemporary moment helped viewers to better understand the country that they lived in.

Media coverage from the time did not evaluate how well Rockwell depicted contemporary American society but rather situated *The Problem We All Live With* within the context of Rockwell’s career. A *Boston Globe* article from 1966 commented that Rockwell “no longer paints those humorous and touching American scenes that made him famous,”<sup>47</sup> implying that his career since creating his three Civil Rights paintings were not as warm and idealistic as his past work. Another article wrote that “Since he left the dying *Post* nearly a decade ago, his work, (mostly for *Look* magazine) has been in the turbulent mainstream of American life, angry drawings about civil rights atrocities.”<sup>48</sup> This article sensed a tone of anger in Rockwell’s critique of American society that his past work did not. Rockwell had such a long and well-established career that *The Problem We All Live With* could not always be reviewed outside the scope of Rockwell’s past work. What they saw as most significant was that the painting did not resemble Rockwell’s cover illustrations for *The Saturday Evening Post*.

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<sup>47</sup> Jeremiah Murphy, “Rockwell Paints New Theme,” *Boston Globe*, February 16, 1966, 31.

<sup>48</sup> Smith, “Nostalgia Isn’t Rockwell’s Bag,” H19.

*The Problem We All Live With* when it was first published in the 1960s embodied many aspects of an icon while still remaining relevant to its times and challenging the viewer to reevaluate their position in American society. The painting, and Bridges herself within the it, symbolized larger issues and concepts such as racial progress, defiance, childhood innocence, white violence and racism, and the inaction of the state. It was also meant to teach a lesson, that everyone should be concerned and involved with racial issues in the United States. It negated the actual character of Bridges, what happened to her in the school, or how she got there in the first place and used her instead as a symbolic figure. The hegemonic narrative as we know it today did not exist in the mid-1960s, but Rockwell's painting still demonstrates how a depiction of the Civil Rights Movement can celebrate the potential for forward progress while still criticizing the state and the difficulty of achieving the progress activists dreamed of. The hegemonic narrative does not allow these aspects of celebration and criticism to exist together in Civil Rights narratives.

As years past, the hegemonic narratives of the classical Civil Rights Movement that Hall, Fuller, and Theoharis outline began to take shape and influence perceptions of *The Problem We All Live With*. The painting, rather than an active call to action about contemporary problems, began to represent a historical moment of the past that demonstrated how far the country had come to fix racial issues. Rockwell's depiction began to influence collective memory and understanding of the classical Civil Rights Movement within the hegemonic framework that was endorsed by the state. It also helped to shape the personal memory of Bridges herself. These shifts in understanding of the painting did not line up with Rockwell's original intentions but further propelled the image to icon status.

O.J. Simpson's lawyers used *The Problem We All Live With* as an example of African American history and identity in his trial. Before the jury walked through Simpson's house, his lawyers redecorated the house to make Simpson seem more appealing. They took away pictures of nude women and replaced them with pictures of Simpson and his family. A *New York Times* article writes that, "Then, to give Mr. Simpson's home 'something depicting African-American history,' aimed at arousing the sympathy of the mostly black jury, they brought in a Norman Rockwell 1964 painting, *The Problem We All Live With*."<sup>49</sup>

Simpson's lawyers believed that the painting was a depiction of an important chapter in African American history that informed African American identity. They put up the painting in hopes that it would resonate with black members of the jury and show that Simpson identified with his African American heritage and history. This one painting was meant to symbolize all of these things, and suggests that *The Problem We All Live With* had become a visual icon within African American culture. It was not a representation of continued problems in American society or a call to action to create change. Simpson's lawyers interpreted the painting differently than Rockwell intended and differently than viewers in the 1960s. The placement of the painting was meant to show that Simpson engaged with history.

President Obama displayed *The Problem We All Live With* in the White House in 2011. He invited Bridges to come to the White House so they could view the painting together, and remarked, "I think it's fair to say that if it hadn't been for you guys I wouldn't be here and we wouldn't be looking at this together."<sup>50</sup> Obama recognized Bridges' icon status as he referred to

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<sup>49</sup> Richard Bernstein, "Shedding Light on How Simpson's Lawyers Won," *The New York Times*, October 16, 1996, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/10/16/books/shedding-light-on-how-simpson-s-lawyers-won.html>.

<sup>50</sup> The Obama White House, *Ruby Bridges Visits with the President and Her Portrait*, last modified July 15, 2011, 0:07, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BCsJ-24MdZc>.

‘you guys,’ a collective of people that Bridges represented in that moment. He also acknowledged the importance of the collective past of Civil Rights progress that gave him the opportunity to be in the White House at all. He situated this progress as a set of achievements of the past that created the society in which he could become president. He viewed the painting as an aspect of collective memory of the Civil Rights Movement and as a symbol for the progress of the movement within the hegemonic narrative. He saw it as an aspect of American history that informed his own identity and how he was able to exist in the political sphere.

Obama’s role as president also shows that the United States government endorsed this interpretation of the painting. It resonates with the display of Rosa Parks’ casket in the Capitol building. We had progressed from a nation where a small child had to face down ugly racism just to go to school to a nation that had a black man as commander-in-chief. This forward progress made it seem as though racism had been solved as a result of the actions of people like Bridges and the Civil Rights Movement. As in the case of O.J. Simpson, *The Problem We All Live With* was not a contemporary call to action but a commemoration of a past, successful Civil Rights Movement.

The painting also informed Bridges’ personal memory and identity regarding her participation in desegregation. Though the painting was made just four years after the 1960 school year, Rockwell used his own photos of a model to depict Bridges, and Bridges was not aware that the painting existed. She reflected many years later that, “I was about 18 or 19 years old the first time that I actually saw it... It confirmed what I had been thinking all along – that this was very important and you did this, and it should be talked about... At that point in time

that's what the country was going through."<sup>51</sup> Viewing the painting for the first time confirmed for Bridges the impact of her participation in desegregation. A famous artist decided to make a rare political statement through Bridges' actions. This helped her to understand the importance of her first grade year and to situate herself as part of a larger movement.

Bridges also recognized the painting as a depiction of a past historical moment. Thinking of her own time at William Frantz Elementary as a distant childhood memory, Bridges viewed *The Problem We All Live With* as a product of that historical period and a representation of collective memory about her experience, rather than a call to action about a contemporary problem. Though her reaction was a moment of self-reflection and recognition of how she had participated in something larger than herself, Bridges' reaction also showed how the interpretation of Rockwell's painting had changed over time.

These shifts in understanding and interpretation of *The Problem We All Live With* solidified the painting as an icon. Bridges continued to symbolize childhood innocence, determination, and the progress of the Civil Rights Movement. That progress was not the hopeful yet fraught effort that Rockwell painted, but the progress of the hegemonic narrative that eliminated structural racism. The mob still represented white violence and resistance, but it was a form of ugly racism that the hegemonic narrative frames as something the nation had left behind. Simpson's lawyers, Obama, and Bridges all used the painting as an example of collective memory of the Civil Rights Movement and as a symbol for personal, racial, and national identity. The painting became iconic to the point that the media identified Bridges as "the little girl

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<sup>51</sup> "Norman Rockwell's 'The Problem We All Live With' Continues to Resonate as Important Symbol for Civil Rights," *Norman Rockwell Museum* (blog), October 22, 2010, <https://www.nrm.org/2010/10/norman-rockwells-the-problem-we-all-live-with-continues-to-resonate-as-important-symbol-for-civil-rights/>.

memorialized in Norman Rockwell's famous painting 'The Problem We All Live With'”<sup>52</sup> when writing about a children's book Bridges wrote. Rather than remembering Bridges for her role in desegregation, the article communicated who Bridges was through her connection to the iconic painting.

The presence of the hegemonic narrative of the Civil Rights Movement in later interpretations of *The Problem We All Live With* shows how powerful and pervasive the narrative is in collective memory. There is no one person who caused Rockwell's painting to become part of the reductive narrative that Hall, Theoharis and Fuller write about. It was a process that happened over time without the guidance of any individual and reflects a larger cultural understanding of the Civil Rights Movement. It is truly cultural hegemony in action. It is ironic that the interpretation of Rockwell's painting deviated from his intention when he is known as a master of creating easy-to-understand narrative images. This demonstrates the power of the hegemonic narrative to shape perceptions of the Civil Rights Movement. It became so pervasive that interpretations of *The Problem We All Live With* operated within the hegemonic framework rather than within Rockwell's intentions. Rockwell's meaning was crystal clear in its contemporary moment but the distance of time and the context of the hegemonic narrative made *The Problem We All Live With* into a historical artifact rather than a call to action to solve social problems in the United States.

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<sup>52</sup> Patricia J. Williams, "The Problem We All Lived With," *The New York Times*, November 21, 1999, sec. Books, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/11/21/books/children-s-books-the-problem-we-all-lived-with.html>.

## Chapter 2: The Shifting Meanings of Ruby Bridges in the Works of Robert Coles

During her first grade year at William Frantz Elementary and for several years afterward, Ruby Bridges met regularly at her home with a child psychiatrist named Robert Coles. He was working in the Air Force, running a psychiatric clinic at a base in Biloxi, Mississippi when desegregation in New Orleans peaked his interest. He wanted to investigate the ways in which normal people, specifically children, responded to and coped with stressful and extraordinary circumstances like desegregation. Over the course of forty years, Coles used his interviews with Bridges in two of his scholarly works, *Children of Crisis* (1964) and *The Moral Life of Children* (1986), as well as in a children's book, *The Story of Ruby Bridges* (1995). He made his way from analyzing the thoughts and coping mechanisms of Bridges to portraying her as an icon of incredible morality that falls into many of the tropes of the hegemonic narrative.

*Children of Crisis* provided an analysis of Bridges' feelings and reactions to her school environment as well as to larger issues like the meaning of race. Coles' analysis at this point in time did not frame Bridges as an icon, but rather provided a portrait of Ruby Bridges, the normal six-year-old living within extraordinary circumstances and how she reacted to her surroundings.

Twenty-five years later, Coles revisited his work with Bridges in *The Moral Life of Children* by viewing Bridges as an independent moral actor, rather than as a child affected by her surroundings. Coles focused on Bridges' strong spiritual life and how it sustained her through her first-grade year. He began to view Bridges as an admirable moral actor who possessed unique courage and stamina while she was in extraordinary circumstances. This started Coles



down the road of giving Bridges icon status as he began to believe that Bridges' behaviors and character could teach lessons about how to be a great moral actor. Rather than a normal child in extraordinary circumstances, Coles began to view Bridges as an extraordinary child. However, Coles had not yet made Bridges into an icon. His depiction of her did not impact collective memory or identity. Bridges was a complex child who possessed admirable qualities.

When he wrote his children's book *The Story of Ruby Bridges* in 1995, Coles pushed the vision of Bridges as an admirable moral character to the extreme. The Bridges in the children's book is an icon rooted in childhood innocence and religious faith who is unaffected by her surroundings and filled with forgiveness for those who treat her badly. Rather than a normal child in extraordinary circumstances who possesses admirable qualities, as she was in Coles' academic works, he eliminated Bridges' other personality traits and created a saint-like moral figure who teaches the reader simple lessons of kindness, forgiveness, and faith.

In *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, Coles situates the events at William Frantz Elementary in the past and pushes the icon narrative to line up with the hegemonic narrative of the classical Civil Rights Movement. Her participation in integration solved problems of segregation and the lessons drawn from the book are meant to be lessons of Bridges' individual character, not lessons about how concepts of desegregation or equity can be applied to our world today. In this work, Bridges is no longer the child in the interviews that Coles writes about in *Children of Crisis* and *The Moral Life of Children*, but a symbolic icon who is meant to show the reader a satisfying story of morality and resilience in the face of racism.

Coles began this narrative journey when he recognized the extraordinary push for social change in the South in the early 1960s while he was stationed at an Air Force base in Biloxi,

Mississippi. He was already a practicing clinical psychiatrist with degrees from Harvard College and Columbia Medical School. As he observed tension over racial issues, he took interest in understanding how people responded to this changing racial landscape. This was an environment in which “most people of the South - Negroes and whites alike - have experienced some of the same surprise I did, a jolting flash when one kind of world begins to collapse, another begins to appear, and it all becomes *apparent*.”<sup>53</sup> Coles believed that the racial reckoning of the early 1960s in the South was unlike any other period in the region.

Coles wondered, “Would it somehow be possible to learn about the lives - the attitudes, hopes and fears - of people experiencing this change in their communities?”<sup>54</sup> He already had background writing about children in suddenly changed and stressful situations. During his psychiatric residency, he studied the ways in which children paralyzed by a polio outbreak in Boston coped with their changed physical abilities. It was from this previous work as well as his observations about race in the South that Coles became inspired to study individuals dealing with desegregation and began the research that would make up *Children of Crisis* and *The Moral Life of Children*.

As Coles began his research, other psychological research on children and segregation already existed. *Brown v. Board of Education* had occurred just four years before Coles’ arrival in Mississippi, and had been influenced by a Fact Finding Report for the Mid-century White House Conference on Children and Youth in 1950. The report, which was comprised of the work of many psychologists, but most significantly the work of Kenneth Clark, investigated the effects of racial prejudice on the development of children. The report found that “segregation, prejudices

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<sup>53</sup> Robert Coles, M.D., *Children of Crisis: A Study of Courage and Fear* (Boston: An Atlantic Monthly Press Book, 1964), 8.

<sup>54</sup> Coles, *Children of Crisis*, 17.

and discriminations, and their social concomitants potentially damage the personality of all children - the children of the majority group in a somewhat different way than the more obviously damaged children of the minority group.”<sup>55</sup> The children of the minority group learned about their inferior social status through segregation and “often react with feelings of inferiority and a sense of personal humiliation.”<sup>56</sup> The children of the majority group were “taught to gain personal status in an unrealistic and non-adaptive way”<sup>57</sup> based on the heightened social status that segregation gave them. These conclusions were used in *Brown v. Board of Education* to show that separate was inherently unequal and that the psychology of children, white and particularly black, was negatively affected by segregation.

Coles wrote that he was also influenced by the work of Anna Freud and Erik Erikson. Anna Freud was the daughter of Sigmund Freud, and was famous for “establishing child psychoanalysis, a new method that led to greater knowledge about children, focusing on their inner emotional and intellectual lives.”<sup>58</sup> Her father had pioneered psychoanalysis for adults, and Anna Freud applied his ideas to children, establishing Coles’ field of interest. Coles admired the way in which she did her work “so simply, so directly and with a minimum of theoretical flourish,”<sup>59</sup> and looked to emulate those qualities in his own work.

Erik Erikson was a German-American psychologist whose greatest contribution to Coles’ work was the idea that “the society - not just the family, but the society - in which one grows up

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<sup>55</sup> Waldo E. Martin Jr., *Brown v. Board of Education: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1998), 143.

<sup>56</sup> Martin, *Brown v. Board of Education*, 143.

<sup>57</sup> Martin, *Brown v. Board of Education*, 144.

<sup>58</sup> Albert J. Solnit, “A Legacy: Anna Freud’s Views on Childhood and Development,” *Child Psychiatry & Human Development* 28, no. 1 (Fall 1997): 7.

<sup>59</sup> Coles, *Children of Crisis*, x.

influences the very shape and structure of one's ego and one's identity."<sup>60</sup> Instead of looking at the individual, Erikson took a social scientific approach that looked at a subject within their cultural context. As Coles investigated how children's environments affected them, he kept Erikson's ideas in mind.

Coles began his work of direct and sustained observation of individuals in significant and critical periods of history by blending techniques of clinical psychiatry and social science. The social scientist, he writes, studies Erikson's ideas of, "exactly what 'outside' world it is - the time, the place, the culture and the society - that a particular child finds at birth and learns about as he grows"; the psychiatrist, like Anna Freud "has always been interested in what goes on 'inside' others - he himself being part of *their* 'outside,' their world."<sup>61</sup> Coles wanted to do both of these things at once, studying the inside and the outside worlds of these children. He acknowledged that in studying their outside worlds, he needed to also bring himself into that analysis, as he was a part of that outside world. The reader then, never loses Coles' voice or perspective in his books, as his perspective informs the way that we will understand the outside world of the children.

Coles believed that the time and place these children were living in gave "heroic and symbolic proportions to their struggles."<sup>62</sup> Though they were ordinary individuals, they were living in extraordinary circumstances that made them into influential and important figures of a certain historical moment, icons if you will. Coles believed that heroism and symbolism came more from the circumstances these children found themselves in and the larger goals they contributed to, rather than from their character or individual actions. In *Children of Crisis*,

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<sup>60</sup> Morris Eagle, "Contributions of Erik Erikson," *Psychoanalytic Review* 84, no. 3 (1997): 337.

<sup>61</sup> Coles, *Children of Crisis*, ix.

<sup>62</sup> Coles, *Children of Crisis*, 13.

however, Coles was not interested in the iconic symbolism of the actions of these children, but rather their inner thoughts and coping methods in their extraordinary circumstances.

Studying black and white children involved in desegregation, Coles wanted to investigate “what exactly makes for survival under stress, for endurance, for courage against grim odds; indeed, for plain good health in contrast, say, to bad health and perhaps even bad ‘mental health,’ whatever that is.”<sup>63</sup> These people were not Coles’ patients because he was not seeing them in the context of a clinical practice. He therefore did not want to diagnose his subjects or focus only on what was ‘wrong’ with their mental health. Coles studied the thoughts and feelings of his individual subjects, with a focus on what allowed them to remain resilient and cope with the difficult circumstances they lived in.

Coles used drawings by the children he met with as an analytical tool to gain insight into their thoughts and feelings. He came to meetings with paper and crayons, asking the children to draw their families, their friends, their environments, or anything that interested them. He then used the drawings to create dialogue with the children about issues such as

how they regarded themselves; how they felt they were managing at school; what skin color meant to them, and to others in their neighborhood or city; why the mobs formed, and to what purpose; how they saw themselves getting along with their white or black classmates; how they viewed their teachers, and how they felt their teachers felt toward them as children, or as representatives of a race or a group of people.<sup>64</sup>

These were Coles’ main research questions, and he used the children’s drawings both as analytical objects and as tools to facilitate conversation with the children about their individual thoughts and feelings.

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<sup>63</sup> Coles, *Children of Crisis*, viii.

<sup>64</sup> Coles, *Children of Crisis*, 44.

In practice, this meant that Coles focused on understanding Bridges' inner thoughts as an individual and how they interacted with her surroundings. He had no intention of viewing Bridges as a symbol for larger issues, informing collective memory of desegregation, or teaching the audience lessons about morality and kindness. Coles simply wanted to understand how Bridges navigated her difficult and extraordinary environment.

Coles used drawings to show Bridges' inner thoughts as she grappled with the role and meaning of race in her life and the world around her. When Bridges drew white people, she drew them carefully and with great detail. When she drew black people, they were drawn smaller and Bridges used very little brown to color in their skin, though she colored in the skin of her drawings of white people. Coles asked Bridges why she drew black people so differently and she replied that, "When I draw a white girl, I know she'll be okay, but with the colored its not so okay. So I try to give the colored as even a chance as I can, even if that's not the way it will end up being."<sup>65</sup> In her drawings, Bridges engaged with how she perceived racial difference and the impacts that difference had on how people lived their lives. She understood that whiteness was tied to privilege and that blackness was not. Bridges masked the color of the black people in her drawings to protect them from the difficulties that came with being black in America.

A few years later, at age ten, Bridges began to draw black people with brown skin colored in, with just as much detail as her drawings of white people. Coles observed the difference and asked Bridges if she knew what had changed her drawing style. She replied that

Maybe because of all the trouble going to school in the beginning I learned more about my people. Maybe I would have anyway; because when you get older you see yourself and the white kids; and you find out the difference. You try to forget it, and say there is none; and if there is you won't say what it be. Then you say it's my own people, and so I can be proud of them instead of ashamed.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Coles, *Children of Crisis*, 50.

<sup>66</sup> Coles, *Children of Crisis*, 51.

Through her drawings, Bridges interacted with her own sense of identity through race consciousness. She believed that her time at William Frantz Elementary made her understand racial difference more quickly than she otherwise would have. She acknowledged that understanding this difference was inevitable but that her experiences at Frantz made her understand her own community in an abrupt way. The increased race consciousness she gained from her time at William Frantz Elementary gave her a greater sense of identity as part of the collective African American community. Coles showed that Bridges' attitude towards race changed over time. She went from protecting the black subjects of her drawings by obscuring their skin color to taking pride in her people and giving their drawings the level of attention and detail that she had previously given to her white subjects.

Coles focused only on what was going on in Bridges' mind, and how her environment had influenced her opinions. She was human in that moment, processing complex feelings and ideas and changing her mind about things over time. Coles did not write about how Bridges' opinions changed her environment, or the symbolism of her thoughts in relation to her circumstances, but strove solely to understand her thoughts and feelings as an individual. The reader gets an intimate look at the inner life of a small child. In these passages, Bridges possessed no icon qualities.

Coles showed how Bridges coped during the 1960 school year and the effect her extraordinary circumstances had on her everyday life. He writes that Bridges was never "sick" because of her experiences; meaning that she never had levels of distress that would necessitate meetings with him in a clinical setting. However, Coles still uncovered more worries and anxieties of Bridges' "unknown to the world which watched her on television and saw her in

newspapers.”<sup>67</sup> Coles knew a Bridges that was more genuine and real than the public image presented by the media. She was not an icon in his mind, she was a normal child who differed from the image that people like Rockwell or even Steinbeck got to know.

Many of these anxieties had to do with the mob that waited for her before and after school everyday. After several months at William Frantz Elementary, Bridges expressed a growing weariness about the persistence of the crowds. She said, “They don’t seem to be getting tired, the way we thought. Maybe it’ll have to be a race, and I hope we win. Some people sometimes think we won’t, and maybe I believe them, but not for too long.”<sup>68</sup> Bridges saw herself as a part of something larger, the ‘race’ she talked about. She also identified a sense of resilience, that she did not let doubt about whether the hateful mobs would ever go away keep her from feeling hopeful about the future.

Coles tried to bring the reader into his sessions with Bridges so they could meet a normal six-year-old child living in extraordinary circumstances. He showed that Bridges was not unaffected by her surroundings. She had worries and fears, she felt weary, she changed her mind about things as she learned from her environment. Coles did not use her character or worries as a way to teach lessons about defiance or moral purity as Rockwell did. Understanding her worries was simply a way to further understand her inner life and thoughts as she went through her experience at William Frantz Elementary.

Coles viewed Bridges as representative of how other children her age felt, and expanded his observations about her to form broader theories about how children responded to desegregation. Coles believed that children learned to identify themselves through their skin

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<sup>67</sup> Coles, *Children of Crisis*, 76.

<sup>68</sup> Coles, *Children of Crisis*, 49.



color within the first two to three years of their life. While there was still much that they would learn about race throughout their life, as soon as they knew “what color they possess and what color they lack, they know something more than a few facts; they know something about their future.”<sup>69</sup> A child’s race self-identification, Coles writes, was not only about knowing what race you are, but what race you are not. As Bridges drew her pictures, her portrayal of black people was influenced not only by being black, but by being not white. These children’s understandings of race told them about their roles in society and the possibilities for the future.

Coles believed that interpersonal relationships between black and white students expressed these attitudes and understanding. As children learned about what racial difference meant, they used interactions with classmates of different races to “sort out the hate and envy they have come prepared to feel toward one another, the curiosity, the interest, the confusion over the whole matter of black and white, bad and good, wrong and right.”<sup>70</sup> Coles asserted that though these children were young, innocent, and moldable, they came into their experiences of integration with preconceived notions of race. They explored and complicated these notions as the world around them changed and they found themselves living in a different reality than their parents did. Bridges’ evolution in how she drew black and white people showed the growing complexity of her understanding of race through her experience at William Frantz Elementary.

Coles believed that Bridges was a normal child in *Children of Crisis*. He used her interviews alongside interviews with many other children to form his theories. He believed that Bridges’ thoughts, feelings, and reactions to her extraordinary surroundings were typical of other children in similar circumstances and could therefore be used to speak about general theories.

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<sup>69</sup> Coles, *Children of Crisis*, 71.

<sup>70</sup> Coles, *Children of Crisis*, 61.

This was his goal in the work. He did not speak of the “heroic and symbolic proportions to their struggles”<sup>71</sup> that he identified at the beginning of the book. He sought to identify how Bridges’ environment acted upon her and how she reacted to it. In pursuing this goal, Coles showed the reader Ruby Bridges, the normal individual who was trying her best to understand her own feelings and her outside world, not an icon who symbolized larger ideas and taught lessons of morality.

Coles did not maintain an understanding of Bridges as a normal child in extraordinary circumstances throughout his other works. Over time his interpretations of Bridges’ thoughts and actions changed. With this shift, his portrayal of Bridges began to resemble an icon narrative within the hegemonic view of the classical Civil Rights Movement.

Looking back at his work twenty-five years later, Coles writes that in *Children of Crisis*, “I tried to uncover a psychology of everyday life; a psychology of turmoil and response to turmoil; a psychology of hope against hope with plenty of interludes of doubt and fear.”<sup>72</sup> After many years and two Pulitzer Prizes for other volumes of *Children of Crisis*, Coles decided to go back and reevaluate his research through a different lens. The resulting work was *The Moral Life of Children* (1986), which looked at children as independent moral actors rather than as psychological subjects affected by their outside surroundings.

Coles writes that his wife was his inspiration for changing his analytical perspective for *The Moral Life of Children*. Throughout his work on *Children of Crisis*, she wondered why he did not focus on the child as a moral actor, as she was a teacher interested in “the moral side of her students’ lives: their ideals and values; their sense of what is right and wrong, and how they

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<sup>71</sup> Coles, *Children of Crisis*, 13.

<sup>72</sup> Robert Coles, M.D., *The Moral Life of Children* (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986) 4.

state their reasons; and not least, the moral statements they make in response to what she teaches.”<sup>73</sup> Coles writes that his inclinations as a clinician drove him away from these questions of morality and towards a more critical psychoanalysis of his subjects. He saw his subject’s “psychological ways of dealing with perplexing and even dangerous circumstances”<sup>74</sup> as their moral life, rather than focusing on the actual moral ups and downs of the subjects.

With the distance of twenty-five years from his original analysis, Coles decided to go back to his interviews and ask questions like “what of the child as citizen? The child as churchgoer? The child as the law’s instrument of legal redress, as history’s fateful actor or actress?... Why not, too, think of the child as a moral protagonist or antagonist - as in the South’s racial conflict?”<sup>75</sup> Coles wanted to know how the children he interviewed thought of right and wrong for themselves, and also how those judgments affected those around them. Coles believed that there was a way to view these children as moral characters within a larger cultural and historical story, an approach he had not taken before as he focused on children’s psychological responses. He questioned his motives in his past works and criticized his judgments that the psychological responses of children to their environments were the most important aspects of their actions. The shift caused Coles to evaluate Bridges’ moral actions as motivated by her religious faith in a new light. He began to believe that there were lessons of moral stamina to be learned from Bridges’ actions. This shift in analysis put Coles on the path to turning Bridges into an icon.

Coles went back to his meetings with Bridges and provided new analysis that was absent in *Children of Crisis*. He thought about Bridges’ faith as her main moral compass to help her get

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<sup>73</sup> Coles, *The Moral Life of Children*, 3.

<sup>74</sup> Coles, *The Moral Life of Children*, 8.

<sup>75</sup> Coles, *The Moral Life of Children*, 8.

through her experience. Reflecting on her first-grade year four years later, Bridges insisted that she was

Just Ruby trying to go to school, and worrying that I couldn't be helping my momma with the kids younger than me... But I guess I also knew I was Ruby who had to do it - go into that school and stay there, no matter what those people said, standing outside. And besides, the minister reminded me that God chooses us to do His will, and I had to be His Ruby, if that's what He wanted... and I was glad I got all the nice letters from people who said I was standing up for them, and I was walking for them, and they were thinking of me, and they were with me, and I was their Ruby, too, they said.<sup>76</sup>

Bridges revealed how she saw herself as a moral actor in her first year at William Frantz Elementary School. She recognized that she did something important and extraordinary, but did not see herself as an extraordinary person. She was “just Ruby” who had found herself in an extraordinary position, the same way that Coles viewed her in his analysis in *Children of Crisis*.

Bridges' faith also helped her to situate herself in a larger context. She had normal thoughts about her family and worrying that she couldn't help them, but believed that God chose her to do something great. In that way, she was not an independent actor, but rather a follower of God doing as He wished her to do for a greater good. As Ruby performed what she believed to be God's will as “His Ruby,” she also turned into “their Ruby,” someone helping others and forging a new path. Bridges did not necessarily see herself as extraordinary, but she believed that there were forces larger than herself like faith and belonging within a community propelling her to perform heroic and symbolic acts during her time at William Frantz Elementary. This analysis provides a new dimension of admirable morality to Bridges' actions but still analyzes her thoughts within the context of her as individual in the fashion of *Children of Crisis*.

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<sup>76</sup> Coles, *The Moral Life of Children*, 9.

Bridges understood her actions as simple moral acts of God. A famous example of this was when Bridges stopped in the middle of the mob one day on her way into school. She told her teacher Barbara Henry that she had stopped to pray for the protestors. When Coles asked her why she prayed for people who were so nasty towards her, she replied simply, “I go to church... every Sunday, and we’re told to pray for everyone, even the bad people, and so I do.”<sup>77</sup> Bridges used her faith to understand why she ended up at William Frantz Elementary and to cope with the mob outside by treating them with the hope and forgiveness one gives to those you pray for. Coles believed that Bridges used her faith in God “to make an ethical choice; she demonstrated moral stamina; she possessed honor, courage.”<sup>78</sup> Bridges’ greatest motivation to get through her experience at Frantz came from her religious upbringing, and it pushed her make extraordinary moral choices. While Bridges viewed this behavior as normal, something that she did not put much thought into, Coles was in awe of her behavior and viewed it as extraordinary.

In his new evaluation of Bridges, Coles asked, “Was she not, utterly and daily, a moral figure? A person able to find a measure of moral transcendence: comprehending, through language, the essence of what a human being can manage to be?”<sup>79</sup> Coles believed that Bridges stood as an example for others to look to of how one can ground their morality simply and solidly through religious faith. He suggested that Bridges possessed a level of seemingly inherent moral strength that other children did not necessarily possess. When speaking about her faith and how she used it to make ethical choices, Coles viewed Bridges as an extraordinary moral role model. She began to embody the aspect of an icon in which the icon teaches an important lesson to the audience. This quality alone did not make her into an icon in *The Moral Life of Children*,

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<sup>77</sup> Coles, *The Moral Life of Children*, 23.

<sup>78</sup> Coles, *The Moral Life of Children*, 29.

<sup>79</sup> Coles, *The Moral Life of Children*, 9.

but it set her down the path towards becoming an icon in Coles' eyes and is a shift from his analysis of Bridges in *Children of Crisis*.

Between *Children of Crisis* and *The Moral Life of Children*, Coles showed that his perceptions and methodology in relation to his research on desegregation and his attitudes towards Bridges were part of an evolving narrative. He initially viewed Bridges as a normal child whose behavior could be used alongside research on other children to form larger psychological theories about responses to stress. In his reevaluation, Coles found Bridges' behavior more extraordinary. Her faith as her moral driver, Coles believed, was something that other people could learn from. Investigating Bridges' moral choices and motivations caused Coles to see her in a new light. This reevaluation set Coles down the path to make Bridges into a moral icon in *The Story of Ruby Bridges*.

In the 1995 Scholastic, Inc. children's book, Coles portrayed Ruby Bridges as a character with two traits: she was unaffected by her environment at William Frantz Elementary School, and she had an unwavering faith in God that allowed her to treat those who wronged her with a spirit of incredible forgiveness. This is not a book about a normal child reacting to extraordinary circumstances as in *Children of Crisis*, nor is it entirely the child with unique moral strength as in *The Moral Life of Children*. This is a different child, defined solely by her effortless faith and her lessons to stand with kindness, forgiveness, and resilience in the face of racism. Coles gives the reader these lessons while situating Bridges' story as a part of the hegemonic Civil Rights Movement narrative and influencing collective memory of Bridges' story within popular culture. In *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, Coles propelled Bridges to icon status

within the hegemonic narrative and created a morality tale about the strength of a young child who successfully achieved desegregation in her school by being kind and forgiving.

Coles used the voice of Bridges' mother to introduce her religious faith. In the story itself, Bridges' mother is quoted twice, both times to stress how the family lived their lives by trusting in God. The first quote comes on the second page. Paired with an image by illustrator George Ford of Bridges' mother tucking her children into bed, she says, "We wanted our children to be near God's spirit... We wanted them to feel close to Him from the very start."<sup>80</sup> Apart from her parents' occupations, the only detail that Coles shares about Bridges' upbringing was the importance of religion in Bridges' life, a value that her parents took great pains to instill in her and her siblings. She never knew a life that was not connected to God. From Coles' descriptions and Ford's illustration, the reader understands that Bridges came from a loving and morally religious family.

After Bridges was selected to attend William Frantz Elementary, her mother's voice came back again to share how faith in God helped the family to cope with the uncertainty of what Bridges' presence at the school would bring. Ford depicted the Bridges family sitting in church praying for their daughter. Bridges' father has his head bowed, one hand on the bible, the other resting on his forehead, clearly deep in prayer. Her mother sits in her Sunday best, eyes closed, hands spread as though she is about to clap. Bridges' younger siblings sit quietly with closed eyes, hands together in prayer. Bridges also sits with her hands in prayer, but her eyes look up toward God himself. Bridges' mother says that they prayed "that we'd all be strong and we'd have courage and we'd get through any trouble; and Ruby would be a good girl and she'd

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<sup>80</sup> Robert Coles, *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, 50th Anniversary Edition (New York, NY: Scholastic Press, 1995), 2.

hold her head up high and be a credit to her own people and a credit to all the American people.”

<sup>81</sup>Bridges’ mother’s prayer show that she understood that her daughter was embarking on a significant and potentially difficult journey. In the face of this huge task, her family looked towards God to protect and guide them.

Coles showed in *The Moral Life of Children* that Bridges was deeply driven by faith and that she used it to understand her surroundings and to find a sense of resilience. These conclusions speak to the goals of Coles’ 1989 work as he investigated the moral choices his subjects made. Coles also believed that his theories in *Children of Crisis* about children’s understandings and explorations of race contributed to Bridges’ understanding and coping during her first grade year. In *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, the only important aspect of Bridges’ character and the character of her family is their religious faith as a way to understand the world. This simplification negates Bridges’ character attributes and complex inner life in pursuit of a moral teaching goal.

The other main voice used to tell Bridges’ story is her teacher, Barbara Henry. Henry’s voice is there to show that Bridges was a happy child who was unaffected by the conditions at William Frantz Elementary. In reference to her demeanor in class, Henry says that Bridges “didn’t seem nervous or anxious or irritable or even scared. She seemed as normal and relaxed as any child I’ve ever taught.”<sup>82</sup> Henry expressed wonder at Bridges’ stamina, wondering how she did it and whether she would wear down and begin to cave under the pressure. In *Children of Crisis* Coles believed that Bridges was not overwhelmingly affected or made “sick” by her school environment, but he also showed that Bridges did experience feelings of fear, weariness,

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<sup>81</sup> Coles, *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, 5.

<sup>82</sup> Coles, *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, 8.



and doubt in relation to the conditions at her school. He chose to exclude those feelings in the children's book. Perhaps his overall conclusion was that she was unaffected to the point that it was unnecessary to present those issues to a child audience. He also could have thought that the presence of negative feelings of fear and anxiety would undermine his ability to show a child audience that Bridges was an admirable character. Either way, the absence creates a misleading portrait of how Bridges felt during her first-grade year.

Another notable exclusion in *The Story of Ruby Bridges* is Coles himself. He never mentions that he met with Bridges or that he even knew her personally. His "About the Author" section says that he wrote *Children of Crisis* and *The Moral Life of Children*, but does not acknowledge Bridges' role within those works.<sup>83</sup> I find myself quite perplexed by this jarring absence, particularly because it is such an integral part of Coles' style in his other works. The way that Coles created the narratives in his other books was by processing his thoughts out loud and making his presence in the narrative abundantly clear. Perhaps he wanted the narrative to focus on Bridges, or perhaps he did not see himself as an influential part of the narrative. This absence is further evidence that Coles chose not to tell the whole story of Ruby Bridges. He wanted to construct a morality tale about Bridges and misrepresents his own positionality in that pursuit.

The main drama of the book is the morning Coles discusses in *The Moral Life of Children* when Bridges stopped in the middle of the mob on her way into school to pray. She recounts her prayer to her teacher and Coles presents it in a poem form in the book:

Please, God, try to forgive those people.  
Because even if they say those bad things,  
They don't know what they're doing.

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<sup>83</sup> Coles, *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, 15.

So You could forgive them,  
 Just like You did those folks a long time ago  
 When they said terrible things about You.<sup>84</sup>

The poetic form that Coles used gives Bridges' prayer an eloquence and wisdom that seems to transcend her young age. We are meant to be in awe that Bridges' belief in God is so strong that it leads her to love and forgive the protestors who threaten her every single day. It seems that the reason Bridges remained unaffected by the protestors, and even treated them with the grace of forgiveness, was because of her religious faith. It is with this image of Bridges as a saint-like moral figure that the narrative ends. This event seems to be Coles' main message to the reader. If you take away anything from the book, understand that Bridges as an individual was shaped by her family's faith in God, a faith that gave her an incredible moral stamina to not only endure her experience at William Frantz Elementary, but to keep love and forgiveness for her enemies in her heart.

This scene is followed by a brief afterword that makes it clear that Bridges succeeded in her goal of desegregation. Coles writes, "By the time Ruby was in second grade, the mobs had given up their struggle to scare Ruby and defeat the federal judge's order that New Orleans school be desegregated so that children of all races might be in the same classroom."<sup>85</sup> Coles writes that not only did Bridges face down racism with grace, kindness, and forgiveness, but she also made segregation in New Orleans a thing of the past. The mob went away, the school became integrated and, as a quote from Bridges' mother at the beginning says, "she led us away from hate, and she led us nearer to knowing each other, the white folks and the black folks."<sup>86</sup> In

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<sup>84</sup> Coles, *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, 13.

<sup>85</sup> Coles, *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, 14.

<sup>86</sup> Coles, *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, 1.

this story, Bridges shows a path away from hatred and therefore a path towards a brighter racial future, one that she herself already traveled through her actions.

Bridges is a moral icon who teaches us lessons, but also shows us the tremendous racial progress already made and the racism that the classical Civil Rights Movement supposedly eliminated. It is true that William Frantz Elementary was integrated after Bridges' first grade year, but problems of educational inequality and implementation of de facto segregation endured and existed still when Coles wrote the book in 1995. For example, William Frantz Elementary is segregated all over again as white populations left the Ninth Ward for the suburbs causing the neighborhood to become majority black. This situating of Civil Rights issues as a thing of the past reinforces the hegemonic view of the Civil Rights Movement. It suggests that issues of segregation are no longer relevant in our world today because structural issues of racism were solved during the Civil Rights Movement.

If, as Coles writes, the racial problems that Bridges faced in *The Story of Ruby Bridges* were fixed by her attendance at William Frantz Elementary, then Coles must want the reader to walk away with lessons about Bridges' moral strength. When people do you wrong or when you are faced with challenges, stand strong without fear and with kindness in your heart for your enemies. Coles wants the reader to take away the simple and ethical character traits that Bridges exemplifies in this book. For a child audience, it shows the power a child like Bridges can possess both to defeat problems like racism and to treat others with kindness. The path to a just world is to not show any anger or fear for your own safety, but rather to always have an upbeat attitude and live with forgiveness in your heart. This is the neoliberal ideology that Fuller writes

about in which individual strength is portrayed as the ultimate way to defeat injustice in our world today.

In order to teach these simple moral lessons, Coles abandoned Ruby Bridges, the normal girl in extraordinary circumstances trying her best to navigate her challenging environment. Coles' attitude toward Bridges had already changed to view her as a unique person who possessed a special ability to cope with her surroundings through faith in *The Moral Life of Children*. However, Coles' discussion of Bridges' faith in his second academic work was not meant to discredit his observations about Bridges' thoughts and fears in *Children of Crisis*. He merely suggests an alternative way of viewing Bridges' actions that he had not paid attention to before. When taken together, *Children of Crisis* and *The Moral Life of Children* depict Bridges as a child trying to navigate her feelings towards her school and her environment who also had a strong moral compass from her faith. She had fears and anxieties even if she had, at times, an ability to rationalize and cope with her surroundings through faith in an extraordinary way. In the first two works, Bridges is not an icon nor a part of the hegemonic narrative.

The way that Coles refers to *The Moral Life of Children* as a direct reevaluation of *Children of Crisis* suggests that he assumes his audience has familiarity with his previous work. *The Story of Ruby Bridges* is for a completely different child audience. Coles could not have possibly expected children to have read his scholarly works, so it can be assumed that many reading the story do not have any prior exposure to Ruby Bridges as a figure. The average reader of *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, then, views Bridges as the icon Coles depicts, an incredible child who has no fears or anxieties and who uses her faith in God as her moral compass.

Reception of the book shows that others view *The Story of Ruby Bridges* as an inspirational story of the incredible character of a small child and how she used that character to defeat problems of racism. In an article in *The Reading Teacher*, Evelyn Freeman writes that “Ruby’s bravery in spite of harassment and racial prejudice is a story that will help today’s children better understand the concepts of freedom and equality.”<sup>87</sup> Freeman evaluates Bridges’ story as a triumph in American democratic ideals. She frames the story as incredibly American, the same way that Theoharis writes the state claimed Rosa Parks as an embodiment of the best of what American determination had to offer.

In the *Quarterly Black Review of Books*, Yolanda Robinson writes, “For those who have never experienced racial strife, *The Story of Ruby Bridges* will provide one more avenue to understanding its horrific influence on society. It will also provide one method and a means of defeating racism.”<sup>88</sup> The methods that Robinson writes about are the lessons that Bridges teaches about kindness and forgiveness. This view embraces Fuller’s neoliberal idea of individual solutions to racism rather than viewing *The Story of Ruby Bridges* as an example of trying to make systemic change to defeat racism.

Nancy Baumann of *The School Library Journal* called the book, “A powerful story about a child’s heroism and perseverance and an excellent history lesson.”<sup>89</sup> Baumann focuses on Bridges’ attributes of kindness and forgiveness, as well as the way that Coles provides a historical perspective of the story. This shows how Coles relegated the events of Bridges’ story to the past instead of trying to keep them relevant in a contemporary context. Any lessons drawn

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<sup>87</sup> Evelyn Freeman, “Hear My Voice - The Story of Ruby Bridges by Robert Coles An,” *The Reading Teacher*, December 1995, 327.

<sup>88</sup> Yolanda Robinson, “The Story of Ruby Bridges,” *Quarterly Black Review of Books; New York*, April 30, 1995, 24.

<sup>89</sup> Nancy Baumann, “The Story of Ruby Bridges,” *School Library Journal* 55, no. 2 (February 2009): 49, 55.

from the story are about Bridges' character, not lessons about how to combat systems of racism in our country today. These reviews all focus on the lessons that Bridges can teach to readers and the way that it depicts a past historical moment. They interpreted Bridges as the moral icon that Coles intended her to be.

*The Story of Ruby Bridges* further solidified Bridges both as a Civil Rights icon and as a part of the hegemonic narrative of the Civil Rights Movement. She symbolized morality purity and childhood innocence. She taught lessons of kindness and forgiveness as a means to withstand and triumph over racism. In the effort of teaching these lessons, her actual personality traits were negated. She impacted collective memory both of her experience and of the triumphs of the classical Civil Rights Movement and informed national identity by reinforcing the idea that American democracy always moves towards justice. These qualities supported an idea that the Civil Rights Movement fixed systemic issues of inequality and that individuals who possess admirable qualities are the key to defeating any lingering racism.

Like the Rockwell painting, the Coles narrative of Ruby Bridges changed over time and as it changed molded itself to the hegemonic narrative of the Civil Rights Movement and neoliberal ideas about solutions to still existing racism. What is different here is that the narrative changed under Coles' control rather than outside of it as it did with the Rockwell painting. Making Bridges into an icon or changing his interpretation of her actions over time are not inherently bad things, the issue is that in the process the complex child of his academic works who was doing her best to navigate her extraordinary circumstances was lost. She was replaced with a unrealistic representation of Bridges who exists to make the reader feel good and hopeful about how far our country has come from the ugly racism of the mob, and paves a way for a

simple solution to racism that does not require a restructuring of society, but simply the kindness and forgiveness of individuals like Bridges.

Coles' shift in analysis again demonstrates the pervasiveness of Hall's idea of the hegemonic narrative of the classical Civil Rights Movement. When adjusting his analysis for a child audience, Coles deferred to the hegemonic narrative even though he intimately understood the complexities of Bridges' story. In doing so, he further solidified Bridges as an icon who served to perpetuate the dominant narrative.

### Chapter 3: Ruby Bridges' Engagement With Her Narrative Within a Pre-Established Icon Context

For several decades after her first-grade year, Ruby Bridges, the person others had made into an icon, felt distant and bitter towards her time participating in desegregation. During her second grade year, she missed the special attention she had received from her teacher, Robert Coles, and members of her community. Her parents divorced from tension that began over disagreements about whether to send Bridges to William Frantz Elementary in the first place. She and her family fell on hard times and Bridges ended up being unable to attend college despite promises that her participation in desegregation would lead to greater educational opportunities.<sup>90</sup> In short, Bridges felt used. The 1960 school year stripped her of her childhood and did not deliver on what she and her family hoped it would bring.

Bridges was also unaware until she was eighteen that the Norman Rockwell painting even existed and the symbolic meaning that many in the public attached to her famous walk into school. Robert Coles had published *Children of Crisis* and *The Moral Life of Children*, but had not yet written his children's book. The icon status that Bridges would occupy over time was not firmly established to attach meaning to Bridges' actions or character. Bridges did not identify the positivity and hope in her first grade year that people like Coles and Rockwell would attach to her story through an icon narrative. She seemed an unlikely candidate to embrace her icon status and its place within the hegemonic narrative of the classical Civil Rights Movement.

In the 1990s, Bridges' youngest brother passed away, causing her to search for greater meaning in her life. By this time, interpretation of the Rockwell painting and recent release of

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<sup>90</sup> Ruby Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, ed. Margo Lundell (New York: Scholastic Inc., 1999), 56.



*The Story of Ruby Bridges* had solidified her status as a Civil Rights icon. Bridges decided that maybe there was potential for positive impact through her story. As she began to reexamine and publicly re-engage with her time at William Frantz Elementary, she found that she had a tremendous speaking platform created by the icon status that the Rockwell and Coles works had already established. People wanted to hear the Ruby Bridges story from Bridges herself, and she capitalized on this platform to tell her story and to create change within her own community.<sup>91</sup>

With her icon status, however, came a predetermined set of lessons rooted in the hegemonic narrative of the classical Civil Rights Movement such as Coles' themes of kindness and forgiveness and Rockwell's themes of determination and innocence. Bridges began to publicly re-engage with her story once this powerful hegemonic framework had already been set up and accepted within dominant culture and the icon narratives of Rockwell and Coles.

Bridges initially resisted subscribing to these themes as she processed her story for herself through her own memories as well as the memories of friends and family from the time. As she began to publicly engage with her experience, Bridges shared her positive takeaways from the 1960 school year as well as her struggles and negative feelings. This in-depth analysis of her story extended and resisted her pre-existing icon narrative to create a well-rounded account of the year itself and her feelings about it. Through her earlier narratives, Bridges demonstrated that it was possible to occupy her icon status without the hegemonic narrative of the Civil Rights Movement or neoliberal ideas about solutions to racism.

As time went on, however, the way Bridges told her story began to line up with aspects of the icon status assigned to her through the work of Rockwell and Coles, with a focus on

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<sup>91</sup> Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 56.

teaching positive lessons of interpersonal kindness to combat racism. Bridges was impacted not only by the hegemonic narrative within dominant culture like the works of Coles and Rockwell, but also by the pre-established icon narrative that provided her with a platform in the first place. Bridges wanted to focus on the positive meaning found in her story and how it could be applied to our world today. This shift led the way Bridges told her story to conform to the comfortable narrative of ugly racism being a thing of the past, with a path forward today being one of kindness and racial reconciliation on the interpersonal level along the lines of the arguments Theoharis and Fuller set out. As she spent more time in the spotlight, Bridges engaged with her story within the parameters already set by her icon status, rather than publicly using her own voice along with the voices of other involved in her story to show how she really felt during her first-grade year. The icon story was already there for Bridges to claim, and she decided to subscribe to this preset narrative rather than continue to resist the hegemonic narrative as she did in her earlier work.

Though tinged with feelings of confusion, loneliness, and fear, Bridges received a lot of special attention during her first grade year. She had extraordinary support from her community, spent time at the homes of wealthy NAACP supporters, and received gifts, toys, and letters from people around the country, including Eleanor Roosevelt. She met regularly with Robert Coles and had the undivided attention of her teacher, Barbara Henry. Bridges writes that in the first year after integration, “losing my teacher and best friend and making the change to a normal school year was very hard. No one spoke about the previous year. It was as though it had never happened. At home, there were no NAACP people coming to visit, no packages in the mail. I did

see Dr. Coles sometimes, but it wasn't the same."<sup>92</sup> While the previous year had been difficult for both Bridges and her family, she also missed the attention she had received and felt as though everyone had forgotten about that extraordinary year. This shift in attention had an impact on Bridges' understanding of her first-grade year. No adults in her life discussed her it, and it became difficult for Bridges to view her experience as an important part of a national Civil Rights Movement. All that Bridges could understand were her own negative feelings and how she felt changed after the 1960 school year.

Alongside these feelings, Bridges faced many challenges in the years after her experience and into adulthood. She writes that "When I was in seventh grade, my parents separated. I think the pressure my family was under in 1960 caused serious problems in the marriage. My parents had never really agreed about my going to William Frantz, and it put a wedge between them."<sup>93</sup> There were other factors as well around her family and money that had contributed to her parents' separation, but the tension that led to the dissolution of her parents' marriage began during the stressful 1960-1961 school year. Bridges' mother struggled to financially support herself and her children after the divorce. There was no economic safety net to help a single mother, and Bridges spent the rest of her childhood living in a housing project.<sup>94</sup>

Bridges graduated high school, but did not have the opportunity to go to college. She writes that, "My mother thought doors would automatically open for me as a result of what I had accomplished in 1960, but there was no one around to help lead me through those doors as I was led through the doors of William Frantz."<sup>95</sup> One of the NAACP's goals in integration had been

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<sup>92</sup> Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 52.

<sup>93</sup> Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 56.

<sup>94</sup> Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 56.

<sup>95</sup> Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 57.

greater access to educational resources, but Bridges had found that, despite her starring role in desegregation, she had no support to help her get to college. The imagined impact of desegregation that Hall writes about as “a process of transforming institutions and building an equitable, democratic, multiracial, and multiethnic society”<sup>96</sup> did not pan out and Bridges did not have access to educational opportunities after high school.

The difficulties Bridges faced were a result of systemic failings that the Civil Rights Movement did not resolve. There was no economic safety net for her family once they had to subsist on the income of one parent, and there was no support or easy access for Bridges to go to college. She did not reap the promised benefits of desegregation and felt as though her first grade year had taken more than it had given. All of these factors led Bridges to feel as though “my life grew away from me for a long time.” She wondered “why I had to go through [that school year] and go through it alone.”<sup>97</sup> Bridges thought that she had suffered as a result of a choice she did not herself make to participate in integration and associated her experience with negative feelings of bitterness and loss.

Bridges felt all of this without the context of her icon status to help her view her first-grade year as part of a large and influential movement. Until shortly after she had finished high school, Bridges had never seen the Norman Rockwell painting *The Problem We All Live With* which made Bridges into a visual icon for desegregation and the Civil Rights Movement more generally. Robert Coles had written *Children of Crisis*, but that did not create an ideal of Bridges as an icon. At this point in time, there was no framework outside of her own thoughts and feelings in which Bridges could view her story.

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<sup>96</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2005): 1252, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3660172>.

<sup>97</sup> Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 60.

Bridges eventually did see *The Problem We All Live With* when she was a teenager, but her feelings of bitterness persisted even as the painting helped her to recognize her place within the Civil Rights Movement. It must have been difficult for Bridges to try and reconcile her personal feelings of bitterness and regret about her experience and the difficult moments of her childhood with the message displayed in *The Problem We All Live With*. She did not feel that she was a part of a past, successful Civil Rights Movement or that she symbolized the potential for forward social progress. Her life did not represent a narrative of defeating racism and inequality through perseverance and determination. Seeing Rockwell's painting, while impactful, did not change Bridges' mind about how she felt about her first-grade year and the lack of opportunities it afforded her.

In the early 1990s, Bridges' circumstances changed as did her feelings about her experience in 1960. Her younger brother Milton was killed in a drug-related shooting, prompting Bridges to have a wake-up call. Searching for new meaning in her life, Bridges began to understand that her experience in 1960 was "meaningful and important"<sup>98</sup> and that perhaps there was a way that she could use her experience to create positive change for the world and for her own life. She decided to publicly re-engage with her story to try and discover new meaning outside of the negative feelings she had towards her story for many years.

This realization happened around the same time that Robert Coles' 1995 book *The Story of Ruby Bridges* came out. The popular book raised awareness and interest in Bridges' story and, as I argued in the previous chapter, helped to further solidify Bridges' icon status. The book provided a powerful platform for her as more people wanted to hear the Ruby Bridges story from

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<sup>98</sup> Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 57.

Bridges herself. She began to speak publicly about her experience, usually addressing a child audience. She also used the proceeds of the Coles book to establish the Ruby Bridges Foundation, which had the goal of establishing after-school programs at William Frantz Elementary to promote literacy and parent involvement.<sup>99</sup>

The most substantial engagement Bridges had with her story in the 1990s was with her book *Through My Eyes*, published by Scholastic, Inc. in 1999. Bridges used the book to process her childhood story through her own memories, the memories of those who were also important parts of the story like her mother and Barbara Henry, and outside sources like newspapers and magazine articles from that time. She relied on these outside voices and collective memory because she was only six-years-old when she integrated William Frantz Elementary. She could not possibly rely on her personal memories from such a young age to completely reconstruct her first-grade year. In the book, Bridges shows that the experience was difficult for her, and that there are still issues of racism and education inequality in our country today. Despite these sobering aspects, she also showed that her story possessed positive meaning and lessons of kindness and tolerance.

One of the most important outside voices that Bridges used to understand what happened to her at William Frantz Elementary was Robert Coles. She dedicated *Through My Eyes* “To Bob Coles, who in my mind is the vessel God used to keep my story alive.”<sup>100</sup> Bridges saw Coles’ work as a valuable resource for remembering her own experience through his detailed transcriptions of sessions with Bridges in his academic work. Works like *Children of Crisis* and *The Moral Life of Children* provided details of Bridges’ experience at a young age that would

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<sup>99</sup> Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 58.

<sup>100</sup> Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 1.

have been impossible for her to completely remember herself. She writes in the book that “It was as though Dr. Coles was keeping my story alive until I could grow up enough to tell it myself.”<sup>101</sup> Coles was the caretaker of Bridges’ story, and she saw his role in keeping her story alive as a gift from God.

Coles’ observations and writing helped Bridges to recall past experiences and to better understand how she may have been feeling way back in 1960. In a 1997 video interview with PBS NewsHour, Bridges was asked about the day she stopped in the middle of the mob. She replied, “well the story is that I prayed. And I don’t actually remember that, but it comes from the fact that my mother said to me ‘Ruby if I’m not with you and you’re afraid, always say your prayers’ ... That tells me that I was really afraid because that’s when I would say my prayers.”<sup>102</sup>

Coles’ work allowed Bridges to engage with a specific event that she had no memory of. However, she drew different meaning from the event than Coles did. Coles saw the prayer as a symbol of Bridges’ unwavering religious devotion. This devotion inspired a spirit of forgiveness within Bridges towards her tormentors, which in turn created Bridges’ incredible resilience during that year.

Bridges interpreted the prayer as a symbol of fear. She recalled that she would pray in childhood when she was afraid, after having a nightmare or when she feared punishment from her parents. Prayer, then, was still a symbol of Bridges’ deep faith that God would protect and help her when she was in trouble, and her faith certainly influenced her ability to withstand the mob outside everyday. However, Bridges believed that the prayer did not spring from a feeling of forgiveness, but from feelings of fear, conflicting with the main event Coles used to identify

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<sup>101</sup> Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 59.

<sup>102</sup> “The PBS NewsHour: A Class of One Ruby Bridges,” February 16, 1997, 4:15-4:28, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hbBkXFPnwXk>.

Bridges as an extraordinary moral actor in *The Story of Ruby Bridges*. Her personal memory related more to Coles' analysis in *Children of Crisis*. She viewed her prayer as a coping mechanism in response to her surroundings rather than as an extraordinary act of moral stamina. As Bridges began to re-engage with her experience, Coles' work created the opportunity for her to think about her feelings outside the scope of her own memory. Examples such as this of Coles' work created greater potential for Bridges to construct a full and detailed narrative about her first-grade year. The construction of her narratives upon public re-engagement were not entirely dependent on Bridges' own recollections, but used the work of people like Coles to give her story more detail and depth.

There are other details Bridges shares that are clearly pulled from Coles' work. In *Through My Eyes*, she mentions her eating troubles and how Coles speculated that it was related to a woman outside the school who threatened to poison her everyday. Bridges was skeptical of Coles' analysis, writing "I'm not sure if I was afraid [of the woman] or not. Perhaps I was just a picky eater. But in any case, once the year was over, my appetite returned."<sup>103</sup> Bridges did not remember why her eating habits changed, and looked to Coles' work for an explanation, whether or not she thought it was correct. She did not unquestioningly rely on Coles' work in constructing her narrative, but she certainly used his analysis to fill in gaps in her memory and to think about why she felt and reacted the way she did to her experience.

Almost as important as Bridges herself to the story were her parents. Bridges included a quote from her mother in the book where she described the difficult decision to send Bridges to William Frantz Elementary and the fear she felt for her daughter.

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<sup>103</sup> Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 49.



Ruby was special. I wanted her to have a good education so she could get a good job when she grew up. But Ruby's father thought his child shouldn't go where she wasn't wanted. There were things I didn't understand. I didn't know Ruby would be the only black child in the school. I didn't know how bad things would get. I remember being afraid on the first day Ruby went to the Frantz school, when I came home and turned on the TV set and I realized that, at that moment, the whole world was watching my baby and talking about her. At that moment, I was most afraid.<sup>104</sup>

Here Bridges' mother shares why she wanted to send her daughter to William Frantz Elementary and what she hoped would come of it. She and her husband disagreed about what was best, which is where the tension that led to their eventual divorce began. As we know, Bridges did not receive all that her mother hoped for her, leading to Bridges' later negative feelings. Her mother also shared her fear after sending her daughter to school because she had not been aware of how dangerous it would be, nor that her daughter would go through her experience alone. Bridges' mother's choice was brave but it was also a difficult one that she was not always confident in. It shows the fear and incredible courage that not only Bridges but also her family felt as they navigated the extraordinary year at William Frantz Elementary.

Bridges' teacher Barbara Henry was an important voice to include as well because she knew what happened inside the school everyday once Bridges got past the crowd in a way no one else did, perhaps not even Bridges herself. There is a two page letter from Henry describing the difficulties and triumphs of her year teaching at William Frantz Elementary. Henry described Bridges as "sweet, beautiful, and so brave."<sup>105</sup> She also writes that she felt alone in the school, as Bridges did. At the Frantz school, nobody "lifted a finger to make Ruby's life easier... Ruby and I were both treated as unwelcome outsiders. When I went to the teachers' lounge at lunchtime, the other teachers at first ignored me or made unpleasant remarks about the fact that I was

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<sup>104</sup> Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 12.

<sup>105</sup> Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 42.

willing to teach a black child.”<sup>106</sup> Henry showed that she loved her time with Bridges but that being at the school during that year was difficult. Other teachers looked down on her for teaching Bridges and the whole school, administrators included, made Bridges’ life harder. Henry’s account as well as Bridges’ mother account show that the 1960 school year was not a satisfying morality tale as it is in *The Story of Ruby Bridges* but a difficult experience for everyone involved who suffered consequences for doing what they believed to be right.

These voices were crucial as Bridges reconstructed her childhood memories because her mother, Henry, and Coles were all important and influential figures during Bridges’ first year at William Frantz Elementary. The use of their voices shows Bridges’ efforts to process her experience in a well-rounded way, relying not just on her rather sparse childhood memories or the icon narratives provided by Coles and Rockwell. She was also so young that others were crucial to her experience happening in the first place. Her parents made the decision to send her to the school, Henry mediated her time inside the school, and Coles wrote about her story when she was too young to write about it herself. Bridges clearly understood this collective nature of her experience and that she could not tell her story without including these other voices.

Bridges also used newspaper and magazine coverage from the period to understand public response and media coverage of the 1960 school year. There are excerpts from the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, *The New York Times*, *Good Housekeeping*, *U.S. News & World Report*, Steinbeck’s *Travels with Charley*, and the *New Orleans Times Picayune*. The book also included countless photographs from the era. All of these outside sources helped to further

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<sup>106</sup> Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 42.

supplement Bridges' memories as well as those of others to provide the context the reader needs to understand the full story of what happened.

Most importantly, Bridges brought in her own honest voice. She included personal memories from when she was six as well as later reflections on how she felt about her time at William Frantz Elementary. Bridges' voice reflected her own sense of memory and identity in connection with her first-grade year. They show not only how she remembered feeling in the moments described by Coles, Rockwell, her mother, and Henry, but also how her first grade year continued to impact her life in the years after.

Memories from when she was young often highlighted how innocent and confused Bridges felt. When she first approached the doors of William Frantz Elementary, "the policemen at the door and the crowd behind us made me think this was an important place. It must be college, I thought to myself."<sup>107</sup> Bridges did not understand the significance or meaning of why there was a crowd outside. She was a curious child who questioned her surroundings and came up with answers to those questions. Details like these allow the reader to understand what was going through Bridges' mind as she approached the school on the very first day.

Bridges also shared moments of fear from her memory. Describing the mob, she wrote, "most of all I remember seeing a black doll in a coffin, which frightened me more than anything else."<sup>108</sup> The imagery of a doll that resembled herself in a coffin was terrifying. Even if she did not understand what was happening to her or why the mob was there, there were still moments that were scary no matter what she did or did not understand. Her six-year-old mind registered and understood the meaning of the coffin and it is the detail of the mob that Bridges most vividly

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<sup>107</sup> Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 16.

<sup>108</sup> Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 20.

remembered. Details like these from 1960 allow us to understand the impact of these memories on Bridges alongside the innocence and confusion that Bridges also felt. They also challenge the icon narratives of Coles and Rockwell which reduced her character to being only defiant, brave, and forgiving.

Bridges' moments of great honesty come towards the end of the book when she shares her reflections on her first-grade year nearly forty years later. Many of the details I wrote about earlier in this chapter, her feelings of bitterness and distance that created negative feelings about her experience, come from that section of the book. She writes that "I sometimes feel I lost something that year. I feel as if I lost my childhood. It seems that I have always had to deal with some adult issues."<sup>109</sup> Bridges was only six when she first entered William Frantz Elementary, but she writes that from that moment forward she never fully felt like a child again. She mourned the loss of her innocence, and had to deal with complex and serious issues like ugly racism from an extremely young age. This part of Bridges' narrative shows how desegregation did not do what it was supposed to and that Bridges paid a price for her participation. She did not shy away in this moment from showing that her participation in desegregation was difficult for her and her family not only in that year but for many years afterward. This acknowledgement challenges the hegemonic narrative of the classical Civil Rights Movement paving the way for a racism free world. Bridges lived and struggled with the consequences of her first-grade year for many years of her life.

Bridges also acknowledged the systemic failings that continue to create problems in our world today, further challenging the hegemonic narrative of the Civil Rights Movement. Bridges

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<sup>109</sup> Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 56.

writes about how today William Frantz Elementary is underfunded and does not have enough resources unlike wealthier schools in the suburbs. She remarked, “The kids are being segregated all over again. There aren’t enough good resources available to them -- and why is that?”<sup>110</sup> This acknowledgement of de facto segregation acknowledges the processes that neoliberal solutions to racism try to justify. The hegemonic narrative and these neoliberal ideas would say that this de facto segregation exists because of the situations that black people as individuals have put themselves in. It would deny that there are institutionalized roots in the underfunding of inner city schools in contrast to well-funded schools in the suburbs.

The Ruby Bridges Foundation, founded from the proceeds of *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, was meant to help solve some of these problems for Frantz by providing after school resources. Evidence of the foundation’s work is hard to find outside of Bridges’ mentioning of the foundation in her interviews. Regardless, Bridges acknowledged the systemic failings that are still with us today even if she helped to solve problems of de jure segregation. She defied the hegemonic narrative in this moment, drawing attention to the systemic failings that the Civil Rights Movement did not resolve.

Bridges also wrote about the power she has found in her story and the way in which she used it touch the lives of others. True to her original goal upon her brother’s death, Bridges found positive meaning in her story in the way it impacted children. She ended the book with a prayer-like passage that reads, “I now know that experience comes to us for a purpose, and if we follow the guidance of the spirit within us, we will probably find that the purpose is a good one.”

<sup>111</sup> Bridges’ language here makes it clear that she had not always felt this way. The meaning she

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<sup>110</sup> Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 58.

<sup>111</sup> Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 61.

has found in her first-grade year was one that took time for her to come into and own, but she has come to see it as a meaningful experience that she was meant to have. Bridges gives us an intimate look into her process of reclaiming her story in this early narrative.

In telling her story in *Through My Eyes*, Bridges did not shy away from the realities of her experience, and showed that in order to impact history there were pieces of herself that she felt she lost. This coexistence of the positive memories alongside the negative gives this narrative a sense of reflection. The reader can see Bridges' internal process of finding positive aspects within an experience that she remembered negatively for so much of her life. Bridges wrote this book having read Coles' children's book, seen Rockwell's painting, and knowing the way the iconic visibility from those works provided a platform for her. Within this context, Bridges wanted to contribute her own voice and personal reflections alongside the collective experiences that defined her first-grade year. She believed that her individual capacity for storytelling was important and was an aspect of the her narrative that was not adequately represented in pre-existing narratives. Using her icon platform, Bridges expanded what icon status could mean, focusing not only on what her experience had to teach others or what it represented in a larger historical context, but also what her experience meant to her and how she came back to the memory of events that she had thought of negatively for much of her life.

In many ways, *Through My Eyes* is still an icon narrative. Bridges writes about the power of her story to inspire children and teach them lessons of perseverance. She impacted collective memory of her experience by contributing her own voice. She also shares how her first-grade year impacted her personal identity and how she sees her story impacting national identity in terms of how we remember the legacy of Bridges' actions. However, Bridges also extends the

icon narrative of Coles and Rockwell by self-consciously resisting erasure of her personal feelings or character in the pursuit of teaching lessons from her experience. She did not defer to the hegemonic icon narrative by acknowledging the difficult and unpleasant parts of her story and how it affected her life in the years afterward. She does not tell the story of a long past movement that solved the country's racial problems, but addresses the difficulties she faced personally as well as the continued segregation of public schools in the United States today.

Reviews of the book appreciated the way that Bridges brought in multiple perspectives to enrich her own voice. One review in *The New York Times* said, "Bridges tells the story with simplicity and elegance, her words interspersed with newspaper quotations, literary accounts and muted brown-and-white photographs. Bridges is understated about the mobs that taunted her that year, yet never sugarcoats the brutality of what she went through... The tone is utterly without sentimentality yet powerfully moving."<sup>112</sup> What made Bridges' account stand out was its use of many sources and also the way in which she frankly shared the spectrum of feelings that she had about her experience. The writer appreciated the way that Bridges did not negate her feelings or character in pursuit of teaching lessons, and that this inclusion in no way hindered her ability to teach those lessons.

Another review, nominating the book for the 2000 Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction in *Language Arts* magazine applauded Bridges' use of multiple accounts to tell her story. The nomination says, "The now-adult Ruby Bridges provides a unique perspective by telling readers what she understood and felt about the situation *then* as a six-year-old, and what she understands and feels *now* as an adult.... The supportive material adds depth to the already

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<sup>112</sup> Patricia J. Williams, "The Problem We All Lived With," *The New York Times*, November 21, 1999, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/11/21/books/children-s-books-the-problem-we-all-lived-with.html>.

engaging words of Ruby Bridges and allows the readers the opportunity to pull together the different voices telling the story.”<sup>113</sup> The reviewers felt that Bridges’ use of multiple perspectives in her own memories and feelings alongside the supplementary voices provided a well-rounded account of her story over time. The book showed the progress that Bridges made that allowed her to process and reclaim her story for herself as she would like it to be told. She did all this despite the presence of her hegemonic icon status.

Within ten years after the publication of *Through My Eyes*, a striking transformation occurred in the way Bridges spoke about her experience. She began to conform to an icon narrative that was more similar to that of Coles and Rockwell that lined up with a hegemonic narrative of the classical Civil Rights Movement. Bridges no longer spoke about her public disengagement and negative feelings towards her experience, nor did she draw upon the experiences of others to aid her personal memories. The lessons of kindness and tolerance that Bridges focused on are drawn from her personal memories from the year, rather than from her process of reclaiming her story decades later. They rely on Bridges placing herself into her six-year-old mind to portray her lessons as concepts that she learned during that year. This shift shows how over time, the way that Bridges wanted to tell her story changed. She touches upon themes of innocent confusion and loneliness when she looks back at her first-grade year. She then moves into lessons about color-blindness and how solutions to racism will be found through interpersonal connection and kindness like the neoliberal ideas that Fuller writes about.

Like the icon narratives of Coles and Rockwell, Bridges neglects certain aspects of her experience to create a satisfying morality tale. Bridges often opened her later narratives by

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<sup>113</sup> Myra Zarnowski, “Talking about Books: Outstanding Nonfiction Choices for 1999,” *Language Arts*, November 2000, 177.



talking about feelings of innocent childhood confusion and misunderstanding about why she was at William Frantz Elementary and what happened to her there. These feelings are also present in earlier narratives, but they exist alongside feelings of fear. In later narratives, Bridges does not mention feeling afraid.

Bridges says that before entering William Frantz Elementary for the first time, her parents told her “you are going to go to a new school, and you better behave.”<sup>114</sup> Bridges got into the car with the federal marshals and made her first walk through the angry mob having no idea what was going on. Instead of seeing the mob as angry and threatening, Bridges thought it was Mardi Gras, and recalled, “I’m accustomed to Mardi Gras, so I wasn’t afraid for a very long time.”<sup>115</sup> Bridges shows the innocence and confusion of a young child who did not understand the significance of what she was doing. In earlier narratives, Bridges also writes about her confusion and misunderstanding of what happened but includes context about what went into her parents making the decision and what was happening in New Orleans. In her later interviews, she speaks only of what she herself remembers, which is not understanding what was happening to her. This confusion and misunderstanding seems to have prevented Bridges from feeling afraid. She was more confused than she was scared.

Bridges also recalls feelings of loneliness as one of the most powerful memories from that year. At some point in most interviews, she says “I spent the whole year searching and looking for the kids.”<sup>116</sup> Bridges thought often of the cafeteria and the playground as places that

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<sup>114</sup> Corporation for National and Community Service, “MLK Day Legacy: Ruby Bridges,” last modified December 20, 2011, 0:21, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SKyQV0-z6HE>.

<sup>115</sup> Scholastic, “Ruby Bridges Remembers,” last modified March 23, 2012, 0:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5CgTYGI2mi8>.

<sup>116</sup> Ruby Bridges, “We Are All Going Against The Grain,” filmed April 2014 at TEDxNapaValley, video, 2:10, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lyRH\\_LK8v5c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lyRH_LK8v5c).

she expected to see other children, and that “like any six-year-old, the most important thing to our babies is having friends.”<sup>117</sup> Bridges’ main fixation was about being isolated from the other children and wondering where they were. In this feeling of loneliness also came more feelings of confusion. Bridges could tell that it was strange that she was not with other children in class, but could not figure out the source of their absence.

Solutions and reprieves from these feelings of confusion and loneliness came from her relationship with Barbara Henry, another major fixture of Bridges’ later narratives. She recalls feeling initially uneasy about Henry because she had never spent time with a white woman before. The little exposure that she had with white people was from the angry mob outside and hostile school administrators on her first day. In a 2017 interview, Bridges says that “I remember looking at her and thinking, she’s white. I had never seen a white teacher before. She looked exactly like the people outside, but she wasn’t. I always say that she showed me her heart.”<sup>118</sup> Bridges felt that she had the opportunity to see who Henry truly was, a fun and caring teacher who was her best friend that year. Bridges discovered that Henry was nothing like the mob outside and that she could not judge her in the same way that she judged the protestors.<sup>119</sup> She felt a deep connection with Henry that she used as evidence for the classic Martin Luther King, Jr. lesson of not judging someone based on the color of their skin. Bridges viewed this color-blindness as an essential component of overcoming prejudice and racism. This popular lesson of King’s reinforces neoliberal solutions to racism, arguing that the most essential aspect of King’s legacy is to be kind to each other.

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<sup>117</sup> Norman Rockwell Museum, “Freedom’s Legacy: A Conversation with Ruby Bridges Hall,” last modified February, 2019, 4:24, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BvnxYDZ4ymY>.

<sup>118</sup> The Official 700 Club, “Ruby Bridges Shares the Key to Overcoming Racism,” accessed April 14, 2019, 3:40, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SvW10\\_kvKDA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SvW10_kvKDA).

<sup>119</sup> “MLK Day Legacy,” 3:40.

Another component of Bridges anti-racism lesson comes from an anecdote she shares in nearly every interview. It was the first day that she got to spend time with the other children in the school. Bridges ran up to a little boy to play with him after months of isolation in her classroom, and the boy said, “I can’t play with you, my mom said not to play with you because you’re a nigger.”<sup>120</sup> Bridges remembers this as a major turning point in her understanding of what she had been going through. She says that this was the moment in which she understood “it’s about me and the way I look and the color of my skin.”<sup>121</sup> Bridges had remained confused and confounded about why she was alone in class, why there was a mob outside, and why she was at William Frantz Elementary in the first place. It was at this moment, Bridges asserts, that she understood that race was the determining factor in her experience during that year.

Interestingly, Bridges was not angry at the boy for his racist comment. She says that “He made it all make sense. That was an eye opening moment for me.”<sup>122</sup> After a year of confusion and uncertainty about her experience, Bridges felt that the boy was simply explaining to her what that year had been about. She says she felt grateful that she did not have to wonder anymore. Bridges also saw the boy’s comment as an example of him listening to what his parents told him to do. She says that, “if my parents said ‘Ruby don’t play with him, he’s Asian, Hispanic, Indian, Muslim, white, mixed race, Jewish, gay,’ I would not have played with him. I didn’t feel like there was anything for me to forgive.”<sup>123</sup> Bridges did not see the boy’s comment as an extension of his own views, but rather the repetition of a parent’s order from an obedient child. Bridges did not think that the boy had done anything wrong or that she should have been angry with him. She

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<sup>120</sup> Al Jazeera America, “AJAM - Ruby Bridges Interview Part I,” 2015, 5:15, <https://vimeo.com/125976358>.

<sup>121</sup> “Ruby Bridges Shares the Key to Overcoming Racism,” 3:50.

<sup>122</sup> “Freedom’s Legacy,” 6:02.

<sup>123</sup> “Ruby Bridges Shares the Key to Overcoming Racism,” 6:08.

shows a belief that racism and prejudice are simple and forgivable. The little boy's prejudice was simply a reflection of what his parents taught him.

Bridges' response to the boy's comment resonates with the themes of other icon narratives about Bridges of always remaining kind, calm, and forgiving. Unlike her earlier narratives, Bridges never says that she ever felt angry or bitter about attending William Frantz Elementary. She instead embraces the representation of herself as kind, calm, and forgiving, highlighting Theoharis' idea of Civil Rights icons used in the hegemonic narrative when they are palatable and non-threatening, not angry and bitter. Her revelation here also re-emphasizes Coles and Rockwell's idea of an admirable young child who teaches essential lessons of moral empathy for others even when they wrong you. Bridges reinforces the neoliberal idea of individual solutions to racism. All we need to do to solve racism is to stop passing on blatant prejudice to children like the boy's parents did.

This story resonates with Bridges' belief that "Our kids know nothing about disliking one another based on the color of their skin... It is us [adults], we are responsible for the hatred we see in this country today."<sup>124</sup> In the story with the boy, there is obvious evidence of parents passing prejudice onto children. The boy was not to blame, his parents were. In contrast, the relationship between Bridges and Henry demonstrates the proper way for people of different races to interact with each other by not judging based on skin color. Bridges believes that her story can teach children not to judge each other based on race and to "convince kids that you need to allow yourself the opportunity to get to know one another"<sup>125</sup> as she and Henry did. Bridges gives agency to children to fight for tolerance instead of giving into the prejudiced

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<sup>124</sup> Bridges, "We Are All Going Against the Grain," 4:44.

<sup>125</sup> "Ruby Bridges Remembers," 4:55.

lessons their parents may teach them. The purpose of telling her story is to teach these lessons of tolerance and kindness.

Bridges wants to tell her story to children similar in age to her six-year-old self. Her belief that children, as opposed to adults, have no racism in their hearts is what made her decide “that it didn’t really make much sense for me to spend my time trying to convince or talk to adults, that what I needed to do was explain to kids what I saw and how I felt, and that if I went back to being six and explained it, they would see it too.”<sup>126</sup> In placing herself back into her six-year-old memories, Bridges implies that these are lessons she learned at that age and carried with her throughout life to then share with children. To further emphasize this point, Bridges relies on the memories she has from this period rather than using the alternate sources from her earlier narratives. Relying on her childhood memories also simplifies her narrative for a child audience and negates some of her feelings, an aspect of many icon narratives like those of both Coles and Rockwell.

In framing these ideas of tolerance as lessons Bridges learned at age six, she ends her story at the end of her first-grade year. She often mentions the strange feeling of going into her integrated second-grade class, but never dives into her negative feelings towards her experience that started in the consequent years after 1960. Bridges talks about loneliness and confusion, but never feelings as extreme and bitter as those she described in earlier narratives. Bridges’ later narratives, then, lose their sense of reflection that her earlier narrative has. She also does not mention how she never enjoyed the imagined goals and benefits of desegregation that Hall outlines. The hope for a brighter, more equitable future did not pan out for Bridges and she was

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<sup>126</sup> “Freedom’s Legacy,” 8:10.

left stuck in a system that did not provide enough support for her to succeed. This acknowledgement makes Bridges' narrative lose its challenge to the hegemonic narrative and makes it seem as though Bridges' lessons of kindness and tolerance are all that can be pulled from her story.

Bridges' later narratives are a feel good story with a nice moral ending. There are feelings of her confusion and loneliness, but the little boy anecdote gets rid of her confusion and the return of the children and later integration of her second-grade class gets rid of the loneliness. Her story has a happy ending by the time Bridges is in second grade. She teaches a comfortable story that shows any remaining racism in the world can be solved by teaching children a neoliberal lesson of kindness and tolerance. In these stories, racism today exists on the interpersonal level, not the systemic level. Her later narratives embrace and reinforce the hegemonic narrative the Civil Rights Movement.

Bridges' later narratives reflect where her healing and reclaiming process has brought her, at least in a public setting. She had previously thought of her first-grade year as a negative experience, and then made a conscious decision and effort to find the positive meaning from her story. Perhaps Bridges teaches lessons of kindness and tolerance in these narratives because she wants to reclaim the positive teaching moments of her story rather than dwelling on the negative. Her negative feelings show that she also experienced trauma at William Frantz Elementary and, in the years afterward, particularly after the death of her brother. Bridges may not want to constantly relive her trauma and negative feelings towards her experience on a public platform and would rather focus on the positives. She has every right to do that and to tell her story as she pleases.

The reframing of her story to embrace the hegemonic narrative was also the path of least resistance because of the framework from her pre-established icon status by people like Rockwell and Coles. When it comes to icons and collective memory, a story of how brave and kind a small child was in the face of now-extinct ugly racism is comforting, non-threatening, and appealing. It is not hard to believe that Bridges would want her story to fall into this feel-good category. When she tells her story, she says herself that she loves the way that it inspires children and teaches them to be kind. Bridges searched for positive meaning in her story and she found it in the impact it had on children. Perhaps Bridges decided that it was easier to make this impact when she stuck to the solely the positive aspects of her story as Coles did. There isn't really any way to know for sure without asking Bridges herself.

But no matter what she chooses to do for healing purposes, authenticity purposes, or self care, what we are left with in these later narratives is a story that leaves the audience comfortable and inspired. The audience does not identify with the ugly racist mob, or the boy who uses racial slurs, they stand with Bridges. We can all feel good about the idea that all we have to do to overcome racism is be kind to each other. It makes us feel comfortable about where we are now and confident that we can easily get to where we need to be.

By not understanding the difficulties of Bridges' experience during and after her years at William Frantz Elementary and how these struggles were tied to systemic failings, there is no way to understand through her later narratives the work that still needs to be done to actually achieve a more equitable society. Through the mechanisms of an icon that Raiford explains, Bridges' later narratives can be used to endorse a neoliberal, hegemonic view of the Civil Rights Movement as outlined by Hall, Theoharis, and Fuller.

That Bridges shifts from challenging and expanding her icon narrative to later falling into many of the same traps as pre-existing icon narratives like those of Coles and Rockwell shows how powerful the hegemonic icon narrative is. Bridges knew from personal experience that desegregation did not open new doors of equality through education and that she lived with the consequences of those systemic failings for many years. In her earlier narratives, Bridges demonstrated that she was acutely aware of all that the Civil Rights Movement and efforts for desegregation were not able to accomplish. She created a narrative that acknowledged these failings while simultaneously showing the potential positive impact and reclaiming of her story. These aspects of positive and negative are not mutually exclusive. Yet the power of the hegemonic icon narrative is so pervasive that Bridges comes to attribute racism and other prejudice to the failings of individuals, not a system of inequality. The consequences of the hegemonic icon narrative are not just a misunderstanding of a person or a certain historical event. They are tied to the way that we understand, or rather misunderstand systemic issues of racism in our world today and keep us from imagining radical solutions to these pressing problems that have existed for decades.



## Conclusion

Throughout the works of Rockwell, Coles, and Bridges there is a consistent shift in narrative over time that embraces the hegemonic view of the Civil Rights Movement. This transition was neither natural nor accidental and reflects the way in which icon narratives like those of Bridges create a framework for these hegemonic ideologies to reproduce themselves. Icon narratives of Bridges that adhere to the hegemonic narrative were created once these ideas had already been embraced by dominant culture. Dominant culture impacted and influenced the narratives, and the narratives in turn were embraced within dominant culture because they reflected and perpetuated the hegemonic narrative.

In the case of the Rockwell painting, this shift towards an embrace of the hegemonic narrative happened through public perception and interpretation of his painting, rather than through Rockwell's intentions. The public had accepted the view of the Civil Rights Movement put forward by neoliberal conservatives because it flattered national vanities of progress and celebrated the American past. Once this version of the Civil Rights Movement had a solidified hegemonic status, public perceptions of paintings like *The Problem We All Live With* began to be interpreted through that lens. Though Rockwell had created a clear narrative image, his intended meaning could not overpower the perceptions of the Civil Rights Movement within dominant culture. The painting turned Bridges into a visual icon of the Civil Rights Movement within the seemingly inescapable context of the hegemonic narrative. This new meaning stripped Rockwell's painting of its call to action which would have challenged the hegemonic narrative by implying that the federal government was not doing enough to address issues of structural inequality and called the reader to engage with social issues and push for change.

In the case of Robert Coles, he changed the way he wrote about Bridges over time and in this shift embraced more and more a hegemonic icon narrative. Coles was acutely aware of the complexity of Bridges' story, the role of her family, the fear and anxieties she had, and what she struggled with, yet still manipulated her story to embrace that of dominant culture. His narrative shifted most dramatically when he wrote for a child audience. He defined Bridges as an icon characterized by her religious faith and how it motivated her to remain unaffected by the mob and to respond to prejudice with a spirit of forgiveness. In adapting his academic work into a cohesive story for children, Coles simplified his perceptions of Bridges and in doing so embraced the hegemonic narrative of the Civil Rights Movement. That writing for a child audience is what caused him to simplify his analysis demonstrates how overly simplified the hegemonic narrative is. *The Story of Ruby Bridges* reinforced the narrative of dominant culture while also solidifying Bridges further as a Civil Rights icon.

Bridges' work shifts over time as well not only because of the presence of the hegemonic narrative in popular culture but also because of the power of her pre-established icon narrative. Bridges needed collective memory to aid her recollection of her first grade year because her personal memory from such a young age was so limited. Collective memory of her experience was heavily influenced by the icon narratives from Rockwell and Coles that already existed. This influence compounded by the presence of a hegemonic narrative of the Civil Rights Movement within dominant culture created a difficult to resist framework that Bridges eventually fell into. Though she had previously created an icon narrative that resisted the hegemonic one, she later became unable to sustain this stance and opted instead to use her personal memory in a way that

simplified her own account of her story and rejected recognition of systemic failings that had caused difficulties in her life.

Her story was also particularly appealing for the hegemonic narrative because of her non-threatening status as a child. Bridges was not an angry activist marching in the streets, but an innocent child subjected to an ugly, long gone racism of the past and who transcends the morality of the adults around her to stand with kindness and forgiveness in the face of their hatred. There is no thread of anger or a feeling of injustice in the hegemonic icon narratives of Bridges, she is happy to forgive and forget as soon as individuals decide to stop with their cartoonish prejudice.

These shifts over time demonstrate the power of the hegemonic narrative to influence perceptions of individuals like Ruby Bridges as well as collective memory of the Civil Rights Movement. Rockwell, Coles, and Bridges all believed that they were celebrating the American past and presenting hopeful proposals for creating a better future. However, the hegemonic narrative, by nature, perpetuates an ideology that benefits the interests of politicians, not average people, and contributes to consent and control of subordinate classes. This particular hegemonic structure regarding Civil Rights has been implemented so successfully that well meaning actors like Coles, Bridges, and interpreters of Rockwell's work unknowingly contribute to a form of collective memory that benefits neoliberal ideologies rather than the vast audience that Rockwell, Coles, and Bridges hoped their icon narratives would teach lessons to. The result is the perpetuation of a collective historical memory of Bridges and the Civil Rights Movement that leads to complacency instead of action to fight structures of institutionalized racism and

segregation. These narratives are not just accounts of a historical event, they inform the ways that we understand our world today.

Amidst all of these hegemonic narratives, perhaps the best example of resistance to it is through the icon narrative Bridges created in *Through My Eyes*. She included the voices of others as well as outside sources to represent how her presence at William Frantz Elementary was perceived and experienced by others. She shared her memories from the year, both positive and negative, as well as her feelings about her first-grade year in the decades afterward. Bridges shared how her participation in desegregation had not benefited her in many ways, how she felt bitter about it, and where she still saw instances of segregation and institutionalized inequality in our world today. These negative feelings resisted the hegemonic narrative and challenged assumptions that the Civil Rights Movement had been triumphant and had benefited African Americans all over the country.

Bridges shared these negative feelings while also sharing that her story inspires young children and that she had found positive meaning in it and believes that she went through it for a reason. These positive and negative aspects exist together, they are not mutually exclusive as the hegemonic narrative insists. Bridges could be angry, feel bitter, wonder why she had to go through her experience, and show how far the country still had to go to solve problems of structural racism while still successfully sharing her positive feelings.

Challenging the hegemonic narrative requires recognizing the complexity of these issues and feelings like the ones Bridges shares. It necessitates recognizing that a narrative does not need to be simple or overwhelmingly positive to help us view Bridges' story or the Civil Rights Movement as an incredible moment of American history that has lessons to teach us today.

Viewing the Civil Rights Movement as part of an ongoing narrative of activism and organizing to create a more just nation, as Hall outlines in her paper, resists the hegemonic narrative and allows us to better understand our own country and what needs to be done to make it better. The Civil Rights Movement provides an inspiring example of how to organize, protest, and create action for a more just world even if the classical movement was not able to accomplish all of its goals.

Bridges truly was an incredible child who possessed admirable moral qualities. Coles demonstrated that in *The Moral Life of Children*. Her story was an incredible example of the beginnings of systemic change through the efforts of many, even if it did not accomplish the broad ideological goals of desegregation. An honest telling of Bridges' story can still be inspiring while including all of the details, positive and negative. In fact, including all of these details makes Bridges' resilience and ability to see the positive in her story all the more incredible.

Defaulting back to the hegemonic narrative, however, transforms Bridges' story from a tale of triumph and disappointment, human connection and loneliness, rejection and reclaiming into a simple morality tale suitable for young children. It reinforces a narrative of desegregation and the Civil Rights Movement that blinds us to the continuing problems in our country today and convinces us that negativity in Civil Rights narratives are just examples of past, ugly racism that our country has overcome. These narratives leave us feeling happy and proud of the progress of American democracy and do not make us think of the Civil Rights Movement as a chapter in a struggle that began long before it and continued long after it and into today.

Resisting the hegemonic narrative of the Civil Rights Movement involves recognizing it within dominant culture and educating ourselves otherwise. There is plenty of scholarship with alternative interpretations of the movement such as the the works of Raiford, Hall, Theoharis, and Fuller. Sources like these help us to analyze the downfalls of the hegemonic narrative and to recognize its uses in dominant culture. They also show us a fuller picture of all that the movement stood for, its methods of creating change, and the ways that it can help us better understand the United States and the unfinished work we still need to do today.

Icons and collective memory of the Civil Rights Movement have been weaponized by the American state to create complacency and reject agitation to address structural inequalities. But it does not need to be this way. We can recognize and reject these hegemonic narratives within dominant culture and push instead to educate ourselves otherwise and find alternate ways to understand the story of Ruby Bridges and the Civil Rights Movement as stories relevant to our times. As Rockwell originally intended in *The Problem We All Live With*, let us understand the story of Ruby Bridges and the Civil Rights Movement as an active call to action to recognize and address social problems. It is through this retelling and reclaiming that we can continue to work towards a more just and equitable world as the true legacy of the Civil Rights Movement would want us to.

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