

# "The Thousand and One Little Things that go to Make up Life": Civil Rights Photography and the Everyday

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# “The Thousand and One Little Actions Which Go to Make Up Life”

## *Civil Rights Photography and the Everyday*

Sara Wood

Charles Moore’s photograph of a beauty shop, taken in Clarksdale, Mississippi, in 1963, offers a glimpse of Vera Mae Pigee with one of her clients, a quotidian moment captured in the salon mirror (fig. 1). The seated female customer reads the papers she holds while Pigee talks and works on her hair; both are focused on the tasks at hand. The mirror that reflects their interaction offers viewers the illusion of encroaching on a private but familiar daily encounter: the sociable routines and habits of the beauty shop. The use of the mirror and the multiple frames of Moore’s composition point to more complex readings of the salon space, and a more nuanced reading of the work Pigee is carrying out there.<sup>1</sup> The wider context of the civil rights movement is hinted at by the presence of the poster hanging above the mirror with its call to “STOP POLICE BRUTALITY” by electing Pigee’s fellow Clarksdale activist Aaron Henry as governor in the Freedom Vote campaign. The poster features a photograph of an African American protestor who has been knocked to the ground while a policeman and dog stand ominously close. Such scenes of direct confrontation between nonviolent activists and armed police would by 1963 require no further context to be understood as representations of the civil rights struggle. However, Moore’s photograph of Pigee instructing her client on the voter registration process while working on her hair presents another image of activism—less iconic but no less significant. In visual terms, Pigee and her customer sit so comfortably within a scene of everydayness that their activism is, as the historian Françoise N. Hamlin suggests in her interpretation of this image, “effectively masked.” Other photographs Moore made at Pigee’s salon show her leading an after-hours voter registration class, using documents like the one her customer reads in the chair to prepare citizens for the ballot. The work carried out in the salon is at once that of the skilled beautician and dedicated community organizer.<sup>2</sup>

The pivotal and multifaceted role that photography has played in the civil rights struggle is widely acknowledged and well documented. Images taken by professional photographers, journalists, and activists proved vital in communicating the political spirit of the movement, exposing the violent entrenchment of segregationists and mobilizing financial support. Many of the photographs focused on the violence meted out against African Americans, from the shocking images of the brutalized body of the murdered teenager Emmett Till published in 1955 to photographs of attacks on civil disobedience activists over the following decade. For the news media, these images became what the gallerist Steven Kasher terms the “most valuable of photographic commodities.”<sup>3</sup> In light of their influence, many of these photographs have secured a central place in the collective visual memory of the

Matt Herron, *Rural Life*,  
Canton, Miss., August 15, 1965.  
Photograph © 1976 Matt Herron/  
Take Stock/The Image Works



1 Charles Moore, *Registering a Voter*, 1963. Photograph. Charles Moore/Premium Archive/Getty Images

1960s. Some of the most well-known images in this regard—both in terms of the violence they captured and the impact they had on public consciousness—were taken by Moore while he was on assignment for *Life* magazine in May 1963 covering the Project C (for “confrontation”) campaign in Birmingham. In a photograph entitled *Man Confronts Police Dog*, a member of Eugene “Bull” Connor’s police force attacks a marcher with one arm raised as if to strike while pulling a leashed dog toward the young man’s body (fig. 2). The protestor struggles to remain on his feet, waving a jacket in an attempt to draw the dog’s jaws away from him while a woman strides past the melee, alert to the scene she is witnessing. Images like these exposed the terror activists faced and influenced public opinion in support of civil rights legislation. At the same time, they established a series of tropes that tied civil rights activism to a particular context of violence and resistance.

A recent critical turn led by the photography historians Leigh Raiford and Martin A. Berger has drawn attention to the ways in which this relatively small selection of pictures has obscured the breadth and variety of the visual culture of the civil rights movement. Raiford asserts, “almost the entirety of the civil rights movement is captured, quite literally, in the photographs of Birmingham 1963.”<sup>4</sup> Without denying the importance of these images, Raiford and Berger have questioned the primacy of such depictions of white aggression and black victimhood in photographic representations of the movement and their role in convincing white viewers of the righteousness of the cause. These scholars have proposed that the use of these images tends to fix ideas of what valid political action by African Americans looks like. They argue that interpreters of civil rights photography need to consider a more varied, contested, and radical repertoire of black political resistance. Berger’s exhibition and

accompanying book *Freedom Now! Forgotten Photographs of the Civil Rights Struggle* have refocused attention on images of African American protestors fighting back and on a wider range of acts of political agency and celebration exercised by women and children. This call for a “new canon” of civil rights photography, “to offer a fuller account of the actions and aspirations of the activists themselves,” in Berger’s words, also mirrors the broader move within civil rights historiography away from a focus on a handful of male leaders, events, and legislative acts toward a more inclusive and nuanced appreciation of the diversity of its participants and their activities.<sup>5</sup>

These debates have highlighted the dominance of certain types of images and the problematic ways in which they have come to stand in for the movement as a whole. This essay examines an underrepresented but rich strand of civil rights photography that explores the relation between activism and everyday life. These images and their attentiveness to familiar subject matter and lived experience stand in marked contrast to the spectacle of violent confrontation and huge crowds at key historical events.<sup>6</sup> The photographs that document the day-to-day work of African American activism in the South, focusing on its more abstract aspects and the quiet acts and slow, sometimes laborious, processes that it entailed, have not yet been given the attention they deserve. As a consequence, viewers have become well versed in seeing civil rights activism





2 Charles Moore, *Man Confronts Police Dog*, May 3, 1963. Photograph. Charles Moore/Premium Archive/Getty Images

racial inequality remained an unavoidable experience of everyday life. Countless indignities, such as inferior provision, refusal of service, and the signs posted in public sites designating separate facilities, marred routines of travel, work, consumption, and leisure. Writing in his landmark study *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903, the scholar and activist W. E. B. Du Bois identified the importance of understanding the “ferment of feeling” in the South, describing it as “the atmosphere of the land, the thought and feeling, the thousand and one little actions which go to make up life.”<sup>7</sup> For Du Bois, segregation’s rootedness in the actions of daily experience was the basis of its effectiveness in keeping black and white citizens from engaging with one another. If the most routine activities necessitated an encounter with Jim Crow, repetition ritualized the inequality that the system codified. It is unsurprising that these daily activities also grew to be the locus for acts of noncompliance. As segregation became established, efforts to resist it emerged in everyday spaces. In *Right to Ride*, historian Blair L. M. Kelley uncovers a history of African American boycotts against segregated conveyances that date back to the turn of the twentieth century. These little-known campaigns, which predate the boycotts of the civil rights movement by fifty years, were evidence of a long-standing fight to “defend black citizenship and protect the dignity of everyday life.”<sup>8</sup> Historian Robin D. G. Kelley has also traced the “hidden transcript” of “daily acts of resistance and survival” performed by members of working-class black communities in the Jim Crow South in the 1930s and 1940s. In his detailed analysis of recorded public order incidents on Birmingham’s segregated buses during these decades, Kelley recovers black passengers’ responses to the persistent, and often injurious, ill treatment they suffered. Their acts ranged from verbally and physically confronting whites and removing segregation signs to more subtle tactics such as protesting a driver’s racist behavior by repeatedly ringing the stop-request bell. These actions were intended to “roll back constraints, to exercise power over, or create space within, the institutions and social relationships that dominated their lives.”<sup>9</sup>

The more widely reported activism of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s also emerged in these and other quotidian sites. From the boycott of Montgomery’s buses in 1955 to the lunch-counter sit-ins that swept the South from 1960 onward, key campaigns coalesced in and around the places where the daily indignities of segregation were most

through exceptional events, but an understanding of its connection to everyday life has remained more elusive. This essay will examine photographs that were taken by freelance journalists for such activist organizations as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) or within broader recording efforts such as the Southern Documentary Project. Intimately tied to grassroots organizing, these photographs show how the struggle for freedom was rooted in everyday life and vice versa.

In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the prodigious array of postemancipation legal restrictions and social codes known as Jim Crow segregation ensured that



- 3 Gordon Parks, *Untitled*, Shady Grove, Ala., 1956 ©Gordon Parks Foundation. Courtesy of Gordon Parks Foundation. Photo: Gordon Parks
- 4 Danny Lyon, *Stop Segregation Sign*, 1963. Photo: Danny Lyon/Magnum Photos



keenly felt (fig. 3). Civil rights activists engaged segregated space on new terms through withdrawal—in the case of boycotts—or by purposeful occupation during sit-ins, pray-ins, and Freedom Rides on public transportation. These actions enabled protestors largely excluded from other forms of political participation to disrupt the routines in which segregation and inequality were rooted and undermine the semblance of compliance. In 1964 Martin Luther King Jr. highlighted the importance of this history of meaningful disruption as he sought to explain what appeared to some outside observers as the movement's sudden and surprising emergence. Invoking the idea of a mass political awakening through a vision of everyday life interrupted, King wrote: "Sarah Turner closed the kitchen cupboard and went into the streets; John Wilkins shut down the elevator and enlisted in the nonviolent army; Bill Griggs slammed the brakes of his truck and slid to the sidewalk."<sup>10</sup> The closed cupboard, the grounded elevator, and the halted truck dramatize the link between noncompliance with the status quo, as represented by such mundane tasks, and fully fledged protest. King's allusion to work stoppages, a tactic that was more commonly associated with the labor movement, also located civil rights protests within an established tradition of organized direct action in which a purposeful, collective interruption of daily life could be recognized as a political act.

The ordinary moment arrested and transformed by political activism can be found throughout the archive of civil rights photography (fig. 4). The sit-ins proved to be a particularly fruitful subject within this genre. The student-led movement began in February 1960, when four African Americans from the Agricultural and Technical College of North Carolina took seats at the segregated Woolworth's





5 Fred Blackwell, *Sit-in at Woolworth's Lunch Counter*, Jackson, Miss., May 28, 1963. © Fred Blackwell. Photo: Fred Blackwell

lunch counter in Greensboro. When they were denied service, they refused to leave. Although, as historian Taylor Branch observes, “similar demonstrations had occurred in at least sixteen other cities” in the previous three years, they had not achieved the same “catalytic effect anywhere else.”<sup>11</sup> As the historian Clayborne Carson argues, the sit-in movement “offered an almost irresistible model for social action” for the thousands of young people it attracted.<sup>12</sup> Participating in a sit-in was at once both a practical and a highly symbolic act that was particularly effective in exposing the dynamics of segregation. By making the modest request to be served at a lunch counter alongside whites, the protestors simultaneously made visible the restrictions imposed on their daily lives and enacted a demand for change. As the veteran activist and organizer Ella J. Baker famously remarked at the time, the student

sit-ins were “concerned with something much bigger than a hamburger,” as part of a more expansive political strategy to “rid America of the scourge of racial segregation and discrimination—not only at lunch counters, but in every aspect of life.”<sup>13</sup> The vision of participatory citizenship that the protestors were fighting for could, at least in part, be measured by the very different “everyday” that they were seeking to bring about through desegregation.

Some sit-in photographs did capture the drama of the event and achieved iconic status as a result. Fred Blackwell’s famous photograph of a sit-in at the Woolworth’s lunch counter in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1963 captures three activists—Anne Moody, Joan Trumpauer, and John Salter—surrounded by a mob of hostile whites who douse them with sugar and ketchup (fig. 5).<sup>14</sup> Its depiction of a confrontation between determined nonviolent activists and resistant white protestors is characteristic of the canon of civil rights photography. Yet, while Blackwell’s photograph portrays a scene of heightened conflict—even though the more aggressive physical attacks on these activists occur outside its frame—it also attests to the underlying threat of force that pervades everyday life. Much of the drama of the photograph derives from the composure of the activists who manage to enact a kind of performance of normality while a group of mainly high school students crowd and jeer behind them. Their poise is visible not only in their body language but also in the way that the sugar poured over them remains settled in their hair and in undisturbed heaps on their arms and in the folds of their clothing. The ketchup stains on their clothes and skin give the disturbing impression of blood, compounding the sense of menace. The odd spectacle of commonplace items turned to vicious ends amid the mundane surroundings of the restaurant points to the “everydayness” of racist violence; it was not limited to flashpoints created by activism. The generic quality of these material objects in the midst of this escalating threat contributes to a scene of rupture; the banal details of the signage and the iced drinks dispenser are at odds with the impending violence. As the sociologist Andrew Smith writes of the segregated South, “There could be no ‘merely’ mundane or everyday experience when a core part of the modality of racism involved the potentially violent regulation of ordinary encounters, relations and practices.”<sup>15</sup> This phenomenon becomes apparent in Blackwell’s photograph, as ordinary citizens

defend white privilege in one of the spaces in which it was exercised every day. This photograph has become justly famous for its portrayal of bravery in the face of danger, but its details and mood, its rootedness in the ordinary, also offer a sense of how force regulated the “Southern way of life” in the moments outside protest.

In some instances, the sit-ins resulted in police arrest or, as in Blackwell’s image, prompted attacks from white bystanders. However, in many other cases, a different kind of confrontation developed between the occupying students and recalcitrant management. As Elizabeth Abel notes in her rich analysis of what she terms the “political theater” of the sit-ins, such demonstrations could, and often did, become lengthy standoffs. The time that passed during the sit-in provided demonstrators and photographers with the opportunity to craft highly nuanced “co-construct[ed]” images, showing the “discipline and dignity” of smartly dressed protesters in self-contained poses, undertaking quiet study as they waited. As a result, Abel argues, the photographs became “products of a sustained collaboration between highly self-conscious, mostly Southern students in command of the image they wanted to present and equally self-conscious, mostly Northern photographers who embraced their role as producers of visual meaning.”<sup>16</sup> This kind of protest offered a form of accessible direct action that held a particular appeal for a younger generation who was tired of slow progress and unfulfilled promises of desegregation. Yet, there was something of a paradox in the fact that these protests, which had come about precisely because of a defiant refusal to wait any longer, often involved protracted periods of waiting. As a result, the sit-in posed challenges for the still photograph: at times, the action bore few visible signs of the struggle, urgency, and confrontation that animated it. Photographers had to find a way to draw out the profound implications that lay within this occupation of everyday sites. For their part, activists developed expressive strategies that drew on expectations of, and familiarity with, the norms of the spaces in which the sit-in was staged. These communicative gestures played an integral part in conveying the spirit and significance of what was taking place.

One such example of these complex creative strategies can be found in Danny Lyon’s photograph of a sit-in by members of SNCC at a Toddle House restaurant in Atlanta in 1963 (fig. 6). Lyon joined SNCC as a photographer in 1962 and went on to record direct-action campaigns in Georgia and Mississippi. The Toddle House sit-in occurred while SNCC staff and supporters took a break from a meeting held nearby, and, in Lyon’s own estimation, the pictured participants included some of the most experienced and “effective organizers in America.”<sup>17</sup> This particular image, one of a series taken by Lyon during the protest, uses the sit-in’s relative lack of drama—its resemblance to the familiar sight of people at a lunch counter—to dramatize the action that is taking place. The photograph shows a group of young activists seated at the counter and others standing at the windows. There are no explicit references to the sit-in itself; the closest we get to a political message are the words “We shall overcome” that are just visible on the SNCC badge worn by Carver “Chico” Neblett, seated closest to the camera. In Lyon’s framing of the image, the words are not a prominent feature; they are one detail in the broader context of the scene and are even partially obscured by the smoke rising in the foreground. However, badges of the same design appear on the lapels of two of the other activists sitting at the counter, tracing a visual connection that hints at their shared purpose. The activists fill the diner, appearing relaxed but alert as they smoke and talk. Judy Richardson, one of the three demonstrators in the foreground, appears to look up from, or pass on, the newspaper that she holds. On the one hand, these leisurely activities signal the subjects’ claim to the space they occupy; they are actions associated with belonging and ease, of killing time, even of relaxation. On the other, they highlight the notably absent rituals of eating and drinking, which the diner exists to serve. From Lyon’s position, the long, empty





6 Danny Lyon, *SNCC Staff Sit-in at a Toddle House*, Atlanta, Ga., 1963. Photo: Danny Lyon/Magnum Photos

countertop reaches into the background, menus remain in their holders, and the cakes displayed on top of the glass cabinets are untouched. In many cases, the activists deliberately position themselves away from, or adjacent to, the counter, emphasizing their conspicuous *nonconsumption*. Some sit with their backs turned away from the homely emblem of the mosaic-tile house on the restaurant's rear wall (while the Toddle House employee, whose white hat and shirt can just be seen in the background, appears to retreat toward it). Together, the activists occupy the empty counter, taking the designated place of the patron but making clear—through their gestures and body positions—that the privilege of service does not extend to them.

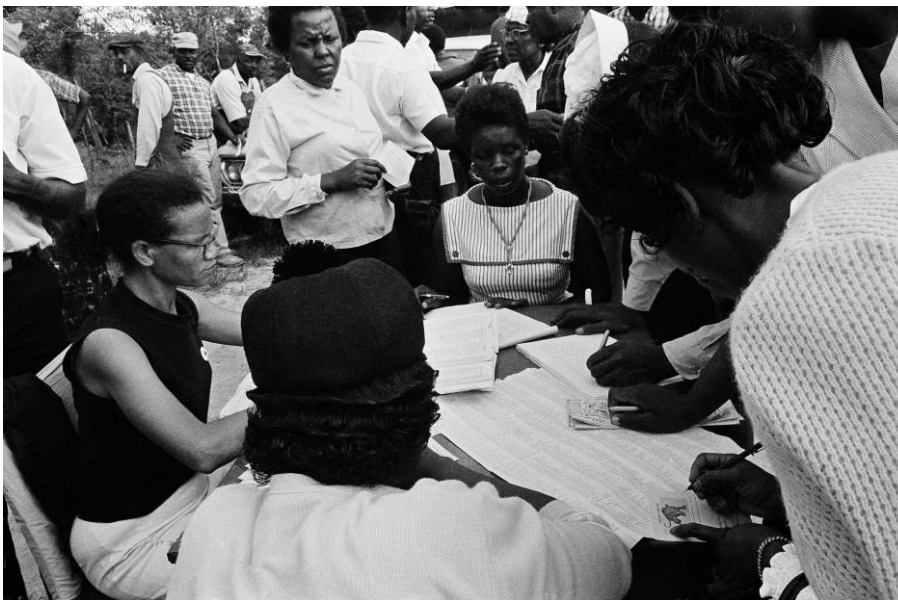
Lyon and the SNCC activists enact what, at first, appears to be a quotidian scene, but where it deviates from this initial impression, a more complex portrayal of the sit-in emerges. As the demonstrators halt the daily rhythms of commerce and consumption with their transgressive presence, they draw attention to the ways in which segregation shapes daily life. At the same time, the sit-in also becomes an opportunity to stage a different version of an everyday, characterized by racial integration and participation in self-initiated political action. This aspect of the photograph reflects what Raiford observes as a core value of SNCC images: to communicate a “transformative vision of the world it inhabited and strove for.”<sup>18</sup> Lyon’s perspective from his position at the end of the counter emphasizes the connections between the organizers. The view along the length of the counter allows us to see the similarities, such as the mirroring of the positions of the young man and woman seated at the back of the line who turn their faces toward

the windows. There are also similarities in dress, as a number of activists adopt the unofficial uniform of denim workwear worn by some SNCC field secretaries to reflect their grassroots-organizing principles. The incorporation of these details accentuates the group dynamic. This offers an interesting contrast to some of the earlier examples of sit-in photographs that Abel examines. Arguably, the same focus on “discipline and dignity” is also evident in Lyon’s photograph but on different terms. The SNCC activists place more emphasis on the political spirit that joins them in communal purpose than projecting an image of respectable model citizenship. In the instances where they face away from the counter to engage in conversations with one another, the restaurant stools—designed for a self-contained and solitary diner—are turned, literally, to very different ends. As the historian Richard H. King observes, “self-respect, autonomy, power, and participation in community action” were central to SNCC’s “political vision.”<sup>19</sup> By staging a scene in which the lunch counter is first exposed as a site of exclusion and then redefined (albeit temporarily) as a desegregated space of communal activism, the demonstrators enact a version of daily life that they are seeking to bring about. In this example, an image that initially appears to offer a sense of ordinariness works to subvert this impression and recast it as a highly distinctive, politically aspirational moment. One of the most striking aspects of the photograph in this respect is Richardson’s gaze, which appears to be directed back at Lyon’s camera. Her steady, impassive look suggests her ease with the presence of the photographer and signals her recognition that the scene warrants the attention of the camera and, by extension, the photograph’s viewers. As the literary theorist Rita Felski observes, “everyday life is typically distinguished from the exceptional moment” such as “the battle” or “the extraordinary deed,” but in this and many other civil rights photographs, there is a concerted effort to show how these apparently contrary qualities were bound together in movement activism.<sup>20</sup> Lyon’s portrayal of the sit-in locates the extraordinary deed firmly within the everyday, recasting it as the ground on which the freedom struggle is waged.

For many movement participants, the desire to transform daily life was not restricted to exposing and overturning the mechanisms of segregation, although that remained a vital practical goal. Participation in grassroots organizing also provided a means to forge new political identities that SNCC saw as vital to achieving freedom in the long term.

Activist photographers, many of whom were affiliated with SNCC, sought to represent the newly visible consciousness that the movement engendered, especially in the ways it manifested itself in ordinary contexts. This impetus shaped the work of Lyon, Matt Herron, Rufus Hinton, Clifford Vaughns, Julius Lester, Bob Fletcher, Maria Varela, and Tamio Wakayama, among others.<sup>21</sup> The archive of images created by these photographers documents a wide range of activism, focusing on demonstrations large and small that took place in the African American communities of the South. Varela joined SNCC in 1963 and developed an interest in photography while

7 Maria Varela, *Lowndes County Freedom Organization (Black Panther) Primary*, Lowndes County, Ala., 1966. Photograph © 1976 Maria Varela/Take Stock/The Image Works







8 Maria Varela, *Mississippi Delta Poverty Series*, Rosedale, Miss., 1967. Photograph © 1976 Maria Varela/Take Stock/The Image Works

she could not find in the “published world.”<sup>24</sup> In an image taken in 1966, Varela depicts activists immersed in the task of administering a primary (fig. 7) for the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, a third party formed in 1965 to represent the interests of the county’s black voters. Here, a number of women seated at a small table watch over the process as party members fill out ballots. The photographer’s proximity means the frame is filled with people, although most are not identifiable because they are facing away or are cropped. Hands holding pens or paper or in the act of writing become the focal point of the image, conveying a sense of collective industry.

Varela’s image of a Freedom Democratic Party handbill posted on a gate in Holmes County, Mississippi, in 1967 is a further testament to the organizing spirit within southern communities that were working to transform the conditions of their daily lives (fig. 8). The image shows a printed handbill urging members of the community to “Help Elect A Negro Sheriff.” The primary message of the handbill is just legible, but the measured distance

researching and organizing literacy projects to support voter registration efforts in Alabama and Mississippi. After moving to Tougaloo, Mississippi, in 1965 to continue her work, Varela decided to learn to take pictures herself to reduce her reliance on other SNCC photographers.<sup>22</sup> In 1964 Herron founded the Southern Documentary Project (SDP), a team of photographers initially tasked with covering that year’s Mississippi Freedom Summer activities, followed by a more expansive brief to record the changes taking place in the South. The SDP worked closely with SNCC and provided basic photographic training for members at a studio Herron had set up in New Orleans. Varela spent a week there in 1965 learning to shoot and print images for her SNCC projects. Herron was strongly influenced by the photographs taken under the auspices of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) and particularly the work of his mentor Dorothea Lange, who served as an adviser to the SDP in its early stages.<sup>23</sup> Varela recalls that Herron’s studio was filled with WPA photographs of dust bowl refugees and migrant workers that she initially “attempted to disregard,” as she was interested in producing practical organizing materials, but “in the darkroom, these ghostly silvery images challenged me to see differently.” This change of perspective resulted in photographs that were “useful in books and filmstrips but also created a record of the practical work and resistance events of these times.” After this training, Varela went on to work with movement participants and supporters to create documentary photographs that “showed black people taking leadership to change their communities” that



and oblique angle of the photograph forsake detail in order to present the sign as it would have been discovered by those passing by. The viewer, like the handbill's target audience, is hailed by the heading "ATTENTION." The text clarifies what is at stake in participating in these elections by prefacing its directive with the rousing declaration that "For The First Time In History, Black People Can Bring Freedom To Holmes County In 1967." Freedom is imagined here through both participation in the vote and the removal of local white law enforcement that posed such a threat to African American communities. This message of self-determination becomes inseparable from the handbill's appearance as a sign of a newly visible political consciousness in the landscape.

The absence of a human subject invites the viewer to read this landscape as, in W. J. T. Mitchell's words, "a focus for the formation of identity."<sup>25</sup> The sharpness of the foreground highlights the crossbeams and jagged tips of the gateposts, which form an imposing barrier to the open, sunlight-dappled land beyond. The handbill's message holds even greater weight, as the pointed, uneven stakes of the gate—forming shapes reminiscent of Klan hoods—suggest a space forcefully closed off and guarded. Yet the gate also remains a potential point of entry, and Varela's image does not resolve this tension. Instead, it allows the strident message of political participation to articulate the possibility of finding freedom in the most formidable environments. In this light, the unfinished, hand-hewn posts might stand in for the absent community itself. Here, it is possible to trace a connection to the visual grammar of earlier documentary photography projects by such FSA photographers as Lange and Walker Evans, in which architectural details, such as the bare wooden clapboards of homes, signified the poverty experienced by rural workers and their exposure to the vicissitudes of their environment. In Lange's photograph *Sharecropper's Cabin and Sharecropper's Tool*, taken in Mississippi in 1937, the subjects and their labor, though not directly depicted, are evoked through the textured grain of the weather-beaten wood of the house (fig. 9). Reading Varela's image through this longer tradition of documentary photography, the vernacular quality of the gate might also testify to the robust self-sufficiency



9 Dorothea Lange, *Sharecropper's Cabin and Sharecropper's Tool*. Mississippi, June 1937. Nitrate negative. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C., LC-DIG-fsa-8b32020

of this delta community. Varela's photograph conveys a sense that this political spirit, which had long been present but not always visible, was now an established feature of the landscape, inseparable from the everyday context. For photographers like Varela, documenting the transformative effects of civil rights activism was often closely aligned with a commitment to the principles of grassroots political organizing. By 1962 voter registration campaigns had become a major focus for civil rights groups, particularly in the Deep South, and the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), formed in Mississippi in 1961, reorganized in 1962 to unite efforts of, among others, SNCC, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), local chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), headed by King. Their cooperation culminated in the Freedom Summer Project in 1964.<sup>26</sup> In states like Mississippi, where the threat of violence and economic reprisals had historically kept black citizens disenfranchised, increasing the numbers of African Americans on the electoral rolls offered the best strategy for long-term political change. As Carson observes, SNCC field secretaries "became increasingly effective as community organizers," as they focused on gaining "the trust and support of local black residents" for their registration projects.<sup>27</sup> Since its inception, SNCC had avoided the hierarchical and charismatic leadership models that dominated more established civil rights groups; this approach extended to their work with the communities they were seeking to mobilize. SNCC activists who believed that leadership should be fostered from within embedded themselves in communities and worked to gain trust and understanding. Encouraging individuals to participate in the risky and difficult voter-registration process required civil rights workers to develop an intimate understanding of the lives of those they were seeking to organize, and to make that process meaningful to them.

These dynamics can be seen in the photographs that recorded voter registration drives across the South. Herron's photograph *Rural Life* depicts CORE activist C. O. Chinn Jr. visiting a woman in her home in Canton, Mississippi, to encourage her to register to vote (frontispiece). On this occasion, Herron was officially on an assignment for a magazine, and accompanying Chinn presented "a relatively rare opportunity" to "gain access to a lot of people's homes." Yet his decision to take more photographs than would be necessary for the client and "document as much of the neighborhood" as possible was motivated by a recognition that "the pictures would have a value far beyond the assignment itself."<sup>28</sup> At this point in time Herron and other activist photographers would often fulfill paid assignments for news publications while documenting the movement; this allowed them to take surplus images that were not bound by the requirements of news publications. When Herron organized the SDP in 1964, he found it difficult to raise the initial funding he needed. He eventually secured an agreement for modest financial support with Howard Chapnick at Black Star picture agency. Chapnick brokered a deal that gave Black Star the right to market the work and *Life* magazine the "first look" (right of first refusal) as well as a guarantee the photographers would be "available if *Life* needed us on short notice," Herron recalled.<sup>29</sup> This strategy to subsidize documentary projects while on paid assignments to take marketable photographs may have resulted in a rich cross-fertilization between these genres, but, as many of the photographs from Freedom Summer show, it also had the effect of carving out a space for images that appear remarkably free from the demands of the news cycle.

As discussed above, in 1964 Martin Luther King presented political activism as arresting the routines of everyday life, but here they are synchronous. Chinn stands a short distance behind the unnamed woman as she presses clothes, and her labor continues despite his presence. Although the woman carries on ironing, she clearly engages with the young activist, returning a direct look that affirms her interest. The framing of the

image points out the terms of the relationship between the subjects within this space. The activist's position, standing to one side, indicates a tacit understanding that he must make himself part of the working order of her home if he is to be granted access. The theme of work is central to the scene, and the image demands that we see the potential political transformation taking place here as a shared task. The photographer's position—behind the two main subjects—allows the grassroots-organizing encounter to be seen within the context of the domestic interior. In the foreground, a pressed shirt is folded neatly among other laundered items in an immaculately kept room. The status and definitions of work and home are already in flux, as it is not clear whether the woman has taken in the laundry to earn money or if it is part of the labor of her own home. The angle of the shot encompasses as much of the room as possible, including the woman's reflection in the dressing table mirror and a doorway offering a view into the room beyond. As the activist, the photographer, and, by extension, the viewer encroach on this typically private space, the pivotal act of voter registration becomes entwined with the details of the woman's daily life. The woman is occupied with one task while she is being asked to take on another.

The potential for political change in this encounter is contingent on a mutual understanding of the work that both subjects have to do. This is apparent in the way that they collaborate on this act of image making. Chinn's entry to the woman's home must have been disruptive, but she resumes her task while he begins his, both with an awareness of the photographer and what he is also seeking to accomplish. The subjects pictured are not well-known leaders but, rather, individuals engaged in essentially bureaucratic but potentially transformative work. Although it would be easy to interpret Chinn's presence as the catalyst here, charging the domestic scene—which has all too often been characterized as a space remote from politics—with political possibility, the photograph resists this reading. As bell hooks has argued, African American women have long been those responsible for constructing the “homeplace” as a site of resistance “where all black people could strive to be subjects” and be “affirmed” in a space away from “racist domination.”<sup>30</sup> In Herron's photograph, the bed, the dressing table mirror, and the open doorway triangulate the woman's position; she is depicted at the center of this home and so is the labor she invests to maintain it. It is precisely because it will be the woman herself who will ultimately have to assume the risks of registering to vote, that the photographer represents this scene of activism as a mutual undertaking between her and Chinn. Thus, the image signals that her domestic chores are part of a broader spectrum of “invisible” labor in which she is engaged. Herron's photograph, like Varela's, is purposefully understated, documenting the confrontations with inequality that took place in the quiet, slow, and often unacknowledged work of the everyday. Activist photographers developed strategies to represent the day-to-day efforts of voter registration or organizing Freedom School classes using the subjects and signifiers of the quotidian. Like the sit-in, these forms of activism offered little in the way of visual drama to highlight the danger, bravery, and profound political import of the participants' actions. Instead of attempting to dramatize the mundane, photographers often accentuated prosaic tastes to highlight their role in effecting long-term change. Herbert Randall was a freelance photographer in his native New York City when the SNCC field secretary, Sandy Leigh, invited him to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, to photograph the Freedom Summer Project in 1964.<sup>31</sup> The photographs he took of voter registration drives, Freedom School classes, and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) campaign display an intense focus on the practicalities of the project. Many of the images feature individual named participants, often pictured in close-up, absorbed in regular but crucial activities; they read, discuss, rest, listen, sing, meet, learn, teach, and wait. In one series, young men



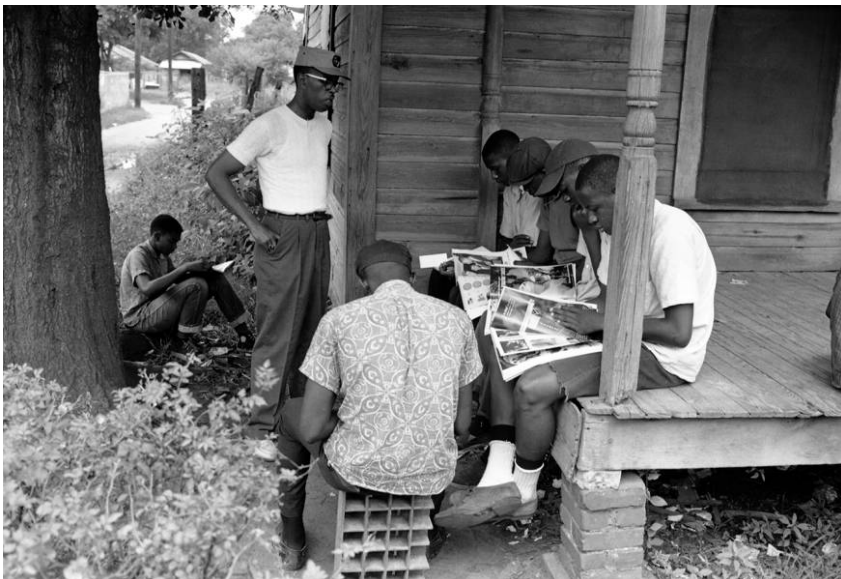
10 Herbert Randall, *Group Reading "Ebony" on the Porch*, Hattiesburg, Miss., 1964. Herbert Randall Photographs Digital Collection, University of Southern Mississippi Libraries ©Herbert Randall

11 Herbert Randall, *"Ebony" Magazine in Freedom School*, 1964. Herbert Randall Photographs Digital Collection, University of Southern Mississippi Libraries ©Herbert Randall

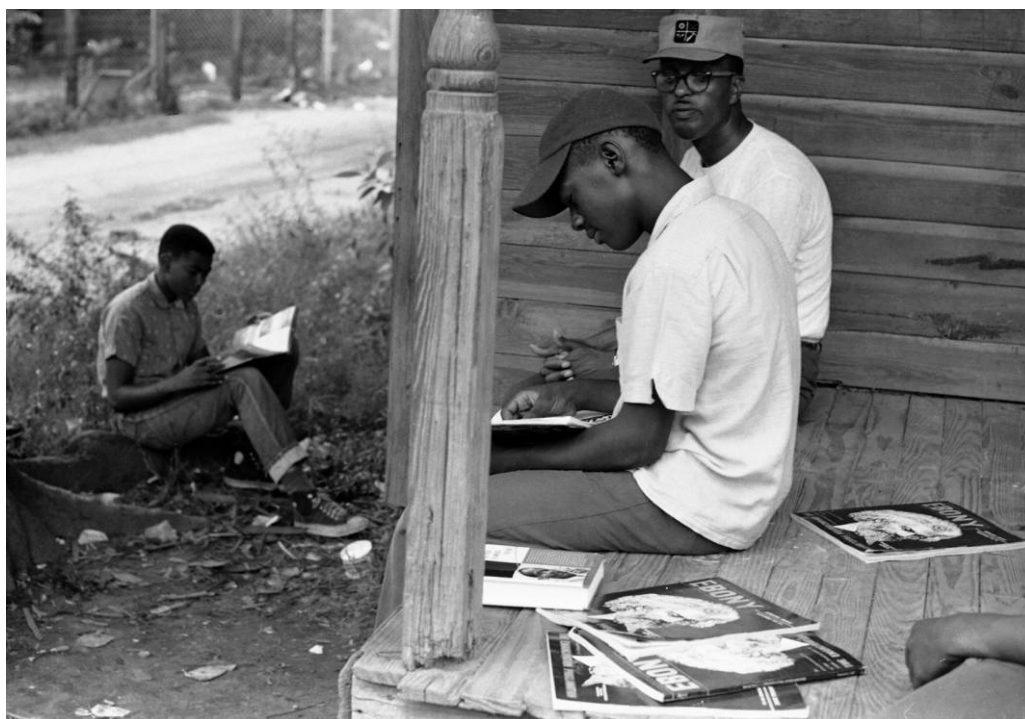
are depicted on a porch reading *Ebony* magazine as part of a Freedom School class taught by the activist Arthur Reese (figs. 10–12). SNCC field secretary Charles Cobb devised the Mississippi Freedom School model in late 1963 to address the bias and failings of the segregated education system; during the summer of 1964 the Freedom School students received instruction in voter registration and supplementary lessons on subjects intended to foster pride in African American history.<sup>32</sup> Outside the institutional structure of the notoriously unequal southern school system, these lessons repurposed sites such as the beauty shop, the church, the community hall, or the porch with the aim of nurturing leadership by teaching their students to see their lives and immediate surroundings from a new perspective.

In one image from Randall's series, a group of young men sits with their heads bowed in concentration; they carefully read the open magazines spread across their laps (fig. 10). *Ebony* had launched in Chicago in 1945 as a mass-market magazine on the model of *Life*

but with a specific mission to "mirror the happier side of Negro life—the positive, everyday achievements from Harlem to Hollywood."<sup>33</sup> As the photography historian Maren Stange observes, in its early years, the magazine "deployed photography that would not only uphold familiar codes of journalistic objectivity but also detach images" of African American life "from the familiar markers of degradation, spectacle, and victimization to which they had always been linked if represented at all." Although *Ebony* had plowed a narrow furrow in terms of how it envisioned success measured by "sanctioned symbols of class respectability" and largely individual "achievement," as the civil rights movement gained support among its predominantly middle-class readership, its focus shifted more consciously to representing the movement.<sup>34</sup> Randall's photograph shows the students reading materials that reflect a positive view of African American life and the historical changes of which they, and the Freedom School, are a part. In contrast to the ordered rows of desks in the conventional classroom, four of the students line the porch while one sits on an upturned crate and another sits on the grass a short distance away. The ad hoc nature of the lesson taking place on the sociable space of the porch has clear resonances with portrayals of more leisured reading. Another photograph from the sequence shows a young man resting on his elbow with the magazine open on the floor in front of him; a portrait of John F. Kennedy is visible on the pages he studies so intently (fig. 11). In a third image from the same



- 12 Herbert Randall, *Arthur Reese with Freedom School Students Reading "Ebony" Magazine*, Hattiesburg, Miss., 1964. Herbert Randall Photographs Digital Collection, University of Southern Mississippi Libraries © Herbert Randall



group, multiple copies of the special issue of *Ebony*, released in September 1963 to commemorate the one-hundredth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, are stacked on the porch beside the students. The fanned-out covers feature a striking black-and-white image of the nineteenth-century abolitionist, writer, and statesman Frederick Douglass, who is identified in the feature article as the “father of the protest movement” (fig. 12). His iconic portrait at first appears to contrast with the everyday setting of the class, but the portrayal of the young men absorbed in their reading locates them within a longer history of activism linking literacy and freedom that is exemplified in the figure of Douglass.<sup>35</sup> This group of readers is acquiring a different type of literacy—the ability to read their world through the expanded context of the civil rights movement, an established history of protest, and *Ebony*’s take on the positive achievements of African American life. Rather than presenting these scenes and routines as remote from the turbulent currents of history, the attentiveness of Randall’s gaze finds profound change as it manifests within the fabric of daily life.

This sense of a movement embedded within everyday life can be seen in other examples from Randall’s archive. In one photograph of a voter registration meeting, two women are seen from behind as they sit in a tiny cramped room into which the meeting has overflowed (fig. 13). Just past where they sit, a narrow doorway affords a view of the adjacent room and shows the meeting from another angle. Through this aperture, more activists can be seen at a remove; they concentrate and look down at papers. A pair of legs jutting in from the right-hand side of the image represents those beyond the doorway and the frame of the shot. The camera’s height positions the viewer as an attendee, facing the same direction as the women in the foreground and sharing their restricted view of the proceedings. One woman leafs through her written notes while the second leans forward. Other activists write and listen, too,



- 13 Herbert Randall, *Voter Registration Meeting*, 1964.  
Herbert Randall Photographs  
Digital Collection, University of  
Southern Mississippi Libraries  
© Herbert Randall



and the meeting is very much in process. From this viewpoint, many of the activists remain unidentifiable. There is no focal point, and if someone is leading the meeting, it is not clear from the picture who it is. The restricted perspective creates a sense of deliberate withholding, and it becomes difficult to identify any one subject as more significant than another. The image is as much about the meeting as an activity as the individual participants themselves. Like Varela's and Herron's images, Randall's photographs seek to capture the ethos of nonhierarchical leadership that groups such as SNCC and the MFDP shared and attempt to convey the impact that this approach to leadership and organization was having in terms of the immediate goals of desegregation and voter registration, as well as the transformation of everyday practices within activist communities. As a result, the burdens that are often

associated with the more disenchanting experiences of the everyday—paperwork, registers, meetings—are, instead, treated with a certain reverence. They become part of broader efforts to enlarge the definition of activism and to document the intangible but profound changes that were newly shaping the South.

In a similar vein, one of the trials of daily life—waiting in line—underwent a notable transformation when viewed through the lens of voter registration. The associations between waiting in line and inertia, dependence, or anonymity make it an unprepossessing subject for an image of political action. As the social historian Joe Moran argues, “Waiting is frustrating because it is both an unavoidable and marginalized experience: an absolutely essential feature of daily life that is nevertheless associated with wasted time and even shameful indolence.” Moreover, “the very conditions that make waiting inevitable . . . give it low economic and cultural value.”<sup>36</sup> During the Depression, waiting in line had become visual shorthand for catastrophic conditions and dependency. Margaret Bourke-White's image of African Americans waiting in line for relief after the Great Ohio River Flood under a billboard depicting a smiling white family in a car with the slogan “World's Highest Standard of Living—There's no way like the American Way” emblazoned above them became an iconic example.<sup>37</sup> However, in images of future voters lined up to register, such as those Herron took in Canton, Mississippi, these negative



- 14 Matt Herron, *Federal Voter Registrars Enforce Voting Rights Act of 1965*, Canton, Miss., August 15, 1965. Photograph © 1976 Matt Herron/Take Stock/The Image Works
- 15 Matt Herron, *Federal Voter Registrars Enforce Voting Rights Act of 1965*, Canton, Miss., August 15, 1965. Photograph © 1976 Matt Herron/Take Stock/The Image Works



associations of waiting are both acknowledged and unsettled (figs. 14, 15). Taken in 1965, each photograph shows men and women standing in line, with the possibility that when they reach the front they will face intimidation and resistance from hostile registrars. One of the main deterrents to registration was the public posting of names and addresses, which left would-be voters susceptible to intimidation from employers, terror groups like the Klan and White Citizens Councils, and the police. The title *Federal Voter Registrars Enforce Voting Rights Act of 1965* sums up the determination of those who are waiting. In one of Herron's photographs (fig. 14), a significant number of people look toward the camera, and some even smile. This is a confrontation with the bureaucratic arm of white resistance, and the subjects' response to the presence of the camera testifies to the significance of this act, whether or not it is successful on this occasion.

16 Bob Fletcher, *Freedom Vote*,  
*Lowndes County, Alabama*, 1966.  
Photograph © 1966 Bob Fletcher



The association between waiting in line and a loss of individuality is also joyously overturned in Bob Fletcher's photograph of African American citizens participating in a primary vote for the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO) in Alabama in 1966 (fig. 16). Unlike Fletcher's other images of the event, which contain posters and the ballot box, this one is restricted to men and women waiting in line. The participants interact with one another, with some talking, laughing, and smiling while others look or lean forward; the upbeat mood undercuts the notion of the line as a frustration that must be endured. Diverse in terms of age and formality of dress—some wear suits and elegant hats while others are dressed in more casual garb—they nevertheless appear united in purpose. The line, which runs end to end of the frame, with some people partially cut off at the right-hand side, indicates the greater number beyond and imbues those pictured with a sense of momentum. They stand close together, and those at the front bunch together tightly or fix their gaze ahead, conveying a sense of focus and urgency. Farther back, a tall young man in a cap and sunglasses leans on the man in front of him as if they have come to an unexpected halt; the bent legs of the women in front of them add to this impression of interrupted motion. Instead of a static and relatively uniform line, each standee isolated from the others, this formation embodies a sense of togetherness and even fun. Small details indicate what they might be waiting for: ballot papers are visible in some hands, and a flyer featuring the LCFO symbol of a pouncing black panther can be seen attached to the handbag of the smiling woman in a patterned suit at the center of the photograph. The line becomes a means to capture the individuality and collective unity of those waiting to participate in the vote and is recast in these images as a site of fulfillment and agency.

Activist photographers affiliated with grassroots organizations produced images that display an acute awareness of the representational possibilities of the everyday. By recontextualizing tropes of both daily life and civil rights activism they enable new readings of each. The quiet, understated images discussed in this essay reflect the political aspirations and philosophies of the freedom movement as manifested in

the otherwise unremarkable rituals of daily life. Many of the images did not circulate widely during the period in which they were made. Only a small selection of the 1,759 negatives Randall took during Freedom Summer were printed before they were donated to the archives of the University of Southern Mississippi in 1997.<sup>38</sup> Iconic images taken by Herron have been published in *Life*, *Look*, *Time*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*, but his image of Chinn and the woman in her home in Canton has not been published before.<sup>39</sup> The touring exhibition *Faces of Freedom Summer: The Photographs of Herbert Randall*, the online archive Take Stock: Images of Change, and such publications as *This Light of Ours: Activist Photographers of the Civil Rights Movement* have brought belated recognition and expanded access to the range of civil rights images.<sup>40</sup> As the meanings and complexity of the civil rights movement itself have been fleshed out with scholarship, over the last two decades these previously unstudied photographs have assumed a new and important role. Rather than documenting moments of high drama, they offer a glimpse of long-running processes of profound political change in the arena of the everyday.

## Notes

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- 2 Françoise N. Hamlin, *Crossroads at Clarksdale: The Black Freedom Struggle in the Mississippi Delta after World War II* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2012), 42–73, at 67; and Charles Moore, *Powerful Days: The Civil Rights Photography of Charles Moore* (1991; Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 2007), 133.
- 3 Steven Kasher, *The Civil Rights Movement: A Photographic History, 1954–68* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1996), 13.
- 4 Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2011), 2, 79–82.
- 5 Martin A. Berger, *Freedom Now! Forgotten Photographs of the Civil Rights Struggle* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2013), 8–15, at 11; and Berger, *Seeing through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2011). See also Laura Coyle and Michèle Gates Moresi, eds., *Civil Rights and the Promise of Equality: Photographs from the National Museum of African American History and Culture, Double Exposure*, vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2015); and Deborah Willis, "Visualizing Political Struggle: Civil Rights–Era Photography," in *American Visual Cultures*, ed. David Holloway and John Beck (London: Continuum, 2005), 166–73.
- 6 This is not to suggest that violence is not relevant to these concerns; in fact, recognizing "the dailiness of the terror blacks experienced at the hands of capricious whites" is central to any meaningful understanding of life in the segregated South. Introduction to *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell about Life in the Segregated South*, ed. William H. Chafe, Raymond Gavins, and Robert Korstad (New York: New Press, 2001), xxix.
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- 8 Blair L. M. Kelley, *Right to Ride: Streetcar Boycotts and African American Citizenship in the Era of Plessy v. Ferguson* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2010), 4–5, at 4.
- 9 Robin D. G. Kelley, "'We Are Not What We Seem': Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South," *Journal of American History* 80, no. 1 (June 1993): 75–112, at 77, 78. Kelley (77) refers to the "dissident political culture that manifests itself in daily conversations, folklore, jokes, songs, and other cultural practices" as a "hidden transcript," a term that comes from James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1990), 4–5.
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- 11 Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 272.
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- 14 For a rich and sustained account of this image and the Jackson sit-in, see M. J. O'Brien, *We Shall Not Be Moved: The*



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  - 16 Elizabeth Abel, *Signs of the Times: The Visual Politics of Jim Crow* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2010), 252, 253.
  - 17 Danny Lyon, *Memories of the Southern Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1992), biographical information, 23–68, 129.
  - 18 Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare*, 73.
  - 19 Richard H. King, *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), 150.
  - 20 Rita Felski, "The Invention of Everyday Life," *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics*, no. 39 (1999): 15–31, at 17.
  - 21 Julian Bond, a founding member of SNCC and its communications director, adds Charles Cobb, Fred Devan, George Frye, Doug Harris, Herbert Randall, Buford Smith, William Squire, and Shawn Walker to this roster of SNCC photographers but also lists more than twenty other photographers who, though not employed by SNCC, contributed images and are listed in its archive. Bond, foreword to *This Light of Ours: Activist Photographers of the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Leslie G. Kelen (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2011), 17nn9–10.
  - 22 Maria Varela, "Time to Get Ready," in *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC*, ed. Faith S. Holseart et al. (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2010), 552–72, at 566.
  - 23 For a full discussion of Lange's involvement with the SDP, see Matt Herron, *Mississippi Eyes: The Story and Photography of the Southern Documentary Project* (San Rafael, Calif.: Talking Fingers Publications, 2014), 6–11. In Herron's original proposal for the SDP project, written in 1963, he cites the example of FSA photographers and mentions Gordon Parks. Herron, "Proposal for a Documentary Program in Photography," 1963–64, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed April 5, 2018, [crmvet.org/docs/sncc\\_photography.pdf](http://crmvet.org/docs/sncc_photography.pdf).
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  - 27 Carson, *In Struggle*, 66.
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  - 31 Bobs M. Tusa, introduction to *Faces of Freedom Summer* (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 2001), 1–3.
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  - 33 "Backstage," *Ebony* 1, no. 1 (November 1945), quoted in Maren Stange, "'Photographs Taken in Everyday Life': *Ebony's* Photojournalistic Discourse," in *The Black Press: New Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. Todd Vogel (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2001), 207.
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  - 37 Margaret Bourke-White, "The Louisville Flood," *Life*, February 15, 1937, 9.
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