

# Photography and the End of Segregation



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## PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE END OF SEGREGATION

*This paper studies the uses of photography and other visual media by American civil rights and black power organizations in the 1960s. Contrasting the media objectives of Martin Luther King Jr's Southern Christian Leadership conference to those of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and of the Black Panther Party, the paper argues that the Panthers aimed less to record than to reconfigure the visibility of the black citizen-subject. The Panthers' differently configured, more fluid vision of the black body constitutes a central and ongoing, yet productive, contradiction in their presence and legacy.*



Received wisdom can often cast the mid-century civil rights struggle as a declension narrative: the beloved community transcended racism, sat in, marched, endured attack, registered voters and filled the mall, as television beamed the news of this city on a hill to millions of approving viewers. But this exemplary group soon lost its leader, Dr King, and was corrupted by pointless violence and bullied into mystified and mystifying racist separatism. Riots broke out, incomprehensibly to white (and some black) observers, even as voting rights and civil rights acts were passed. Notions of black power, black consciousness, black arts and black studies became commonplace, and integration, which had once seemed a universal goal, is a term now scarcely heard.

More recent paradigms have attempted to minimize the Manichean violence/non-violence and integration/separatism divides; scholars speak of a long civil rights struggle, commencing after the Civil War and Emancipation, and of the black liberation struggle, beginning even earlier, encompassing many ideologies and forms of resistance, and still carried on. Such views usefully allow for focus both on specific aspects of mid-century movement history and on contingent processes and forces of change – historical, not moral, explanations. Relevant work includes that of Jacqueline Dowd Hall (2005), Nikhil Pal Singh (2004) and Waldo E. Martin Jr (2005), among many others. The changes I consider here concern relations between movement ideologies and leaders, and the news media and visual media generally, that represented the black liberation struggle, stressing particularly the historical and regional specificity of both the 'civil rights' moment and the 'black power' moment. In the former, I suggest, reporters were 'the good guys' for King and other Southern civil rights leaders (Roberts and Klibanoff, 2007, p. 396), and the presence of journalists' cameras was generally relied on as 'virtually the only inhibitor of official violence' in the south (Torres, 2003, p. 28).

In the 'black power' moment, however, the reasoning of California's Black Panther Party, though prompting its demonization as the seeming instigator of violence in the state's Sacramento legislative chamber, was as perceptive of media processes and possibilities, and as productive of social change, as King's earlier careful media cultivation had been. Driven by a differently configured, more fluid, vision of the black citizen-subject, the Panthers aimed less to record than to reconfigure their visibility.

The tension among the forces and visions I have sketched here was always present, palpable and voiced, in the long civil rights struggle. One who observed it was the brilliant documentarian

Danny Lyon; as staff photographer for SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) during the years 1961 to 1965, Lyon made many memorable and striking images of the Civil Rights movement (Lyon, 1992). Some became well known, even iconic, used in pamphlets and posters printed by SNCC, and in the book *The Movement*, with text by the playwright Lorraine Hansberry (Hansberry and Lyon, 1964). Others, recently collected and published, seem to be meant quietly to convey the day-to-dayness of the extraordinary work the SNCC activists were doing in the south; still others, like the portraits he made at the Waveland conference of 1964, are more personal in perspective, recording, Lyon has said (1992, p. 163 ff), aspects of people he cared for and admired.

When in 1964 Lyon left SNCC and turned to other subjects (such as his photographs of motorcycle gangs and violent prisoners), he gave several reasons for leaving the work. He was proud from the first that his photographs ‘traveled all across America and even around the world’; he knew that ten thousand copies of his poster of rights protestors praying in Cairo, Illinois, had been printed and that his image of the arrest of Taylor Washington had appeared in *Pravda* (1992, p. 30). Lyon knew that his photographs – ‘made because I had studied history, made because I loved to make them, made under direction from [James] Forman and the office’ – had helped to ‘create a public image for SNCC.’ But, he wrote (1992, p. 149), he had enjoyed being the sole photographer at many of the places SNCC had sent him, whereas by summer 1964 there were more and more photographers recording SNCC activities – Raiford (2007, p. 1139) cites a staff of 12. Photojournalist Matt Heron was organizing a SNCC documentary project, and Lyon, who ‘hated being organized,’ found himself, he writes (1992, p. 149), arguing that, in fact, ‘what was now happening in the movement did not lend itself to photography. The politics of the movement were complicated; photography dealt with surfaces.’ Describing some of these complications, Lyon mentions encountering a campus meeting of black nationalists; though the students displayed literature illustrated with his photographs, they barred him, as a white man, from entering. And, tracing even more complex emotions, he outlines his feelings of painful ambivalence about his involvement in building up the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964, a voter registration project that had been much debated in SNCC, and one that began with the disappearance of three civil rights workers, subsequently found to have been beaten and murdered. Lyon had helped to produce pamphlets attracting white northern students south, and his activities in Mississippi were similar to those that led Cheney, Schwerner and Goodman to their deaths. Reporting an SNCC discussion that took place shortly before the three workers’ disappearance, Lyon remembers the central issue to have concerned the presence of guns inside the Greenwood, Mississippi SNCC office, the discussion to have revolved around the reasons for them, and the question to have emerged: ‘How long can SNCC lead a nonviolent movement when its members and the people they hope to lead are more and more subjected to violence?’ (1992, p. 142).

The following spring, in Selma, Alabama, after several years of brutally opposed organizing efforts, SNCC and local organizers requested assistance from M. L. King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). This campaign would soon be infamous for March 7’s ‘Bloody Sunday.’ King’s SCLC had been determined to ‘keep some activity alive every day this week’ in order to ‘keep national attention focused on Selma,’ (Torres, 2003, p. 31) as King had instructed an associate (from his Selma jail cell); thus network television cameras were present when Alabama Governor George Wallace and local sheriff Jim Clark ordered mounted troopers and posse members armed with whips, clubs and tear gas to attack a few hundred marchers seeking to cross Edmund Pettus bridge en route to Montgomery, the state capital. The attackers, almost as numerous as the marchers, were hidden from them by the crest of the bridge, creating an opportunity for an attack so dramatic and brutal that the ABC network decided later that evening to interrupt its *Sunday Night Movie* program, a premiere of the

drama *Judgment at Nuremberg*, to carry 15 minutes of the attack on the marchers and its aftermath, which would include 17 hospitalizations and several critical injuries (Roberts and Klibanoff, 2007, pp. 385–7; Torres, 2003, pp. 34–5). On the soundtrack, Sheriff Clark is audible directing his men to ‘get those goddamned niggers. And get those goddamned white niggers.’ (Roberts and Klibanoff, 2007, p. 386).

The next day, the Montgomery airport was jammed with march supporters from all over the country, overwhelming transportation possibilities to nearby Selma, so that the movement had to organize car pools, which ran throughout Monday night. On Tuesday, 4,000 people crossed the bridge, and on March 21 a well-guarded, celebrity-studded march reached Montgomery and rallied 20,000 people on the state capitol grounds (Roberts and Klibanoff, 2007, pp. 387, 389–90). President Johnson, with an impassioned speech, had sent the Voting Rights Act to Congress on March 17, 1965, and it was law by the summer’s end.

In *Why We Can’t Wait*, King (cited in Raiford, 2007, p. 1164) described the role of media generally as revelatory; media exposure could disempower brutality even as, and because, its ‘luminous glare reveal[ed] the naked truth to the whole world.’ Its revelatory power made it the only reliable ‘inhibitor of official violence’ in the south, in SCLC associate Andrew Young’s memorable phrase (Torres, 2003, p. 24). In *The Race Beat*, their Pulitzer Prize-winning history of civil rights journalism, journalists Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff (2007) assert that ‘no one understood the power of vivid images better’ than Martin Luther King, underscoring their point with an anecdote from the Selma campaign in which Life magazine staffer Flip Schulke stopped photographing and attempted to intervene when he saw Sheriff Clark’s deputies shoving children to the ground. Hearing later on of Schulke’s impulse, King’s response was to remind him of his ‘duty as a photographer’; King (cited in Roberts and Klibanoff, 2007, p. 383) emphasized that ‘it is much more important for you to take a picture of us getting beaten up than for you to be another person joining in the fray.’

Media historian Sasha Torres (2003) points out that in these early days of national network television, the medium needed the movement just as the movement needed the medium. Television networks sought to justify their national reach by providing authoritative national stories as well as entertainment, and they needed proof that pictures informed more powerfully than words. Television’s imperatives, suggests Torres, are subsumed under the notion of ‘liveness,’ the fact that television can transmit images in more or less real time (as opposed to film’s lengthy editing process), and that its representation therefore has a particularly privileged claim to immediacy and transparency (pp. 13–14). But, like any such claim of privilege, this one needed constant support; it was not sufficient simply to be ‘live’ – liveness needed to be somehow both performed and authentic. Here, following Torres, we can link several strands in American cultural history to show the southern Civil Rights movement as ideal network television subject matter. Invoking the longstanding cultural mandate that requires subservient subjects to perform for the amusement of the ‘dominant power bloc,’ Jose Munoz (cited in Torres, 2003, p. 13) notes as well how readily television’s live transmission and its drive for *gravitas* joined performance to a different, more liberal imperative: to document, to ‘real’-ize, to be authentic in representing and depicting African Americans. An effect of this media culture has been to impose a ‘burden of liveness’ upon African Americans – an imperative to perform their own authenticity, whatever it might entail (Torres 2003, p. 13). Torres’s study traces the persistence of burdensome liveness throughout its history as a structuring element of African American televisual representation. The trope originates, however, in a 1960s moment of ‘co-implication’; to take on the burden of liveness – ‘of producing televisual immediacy via black performances of physical suffering and political demand’ – was seen then as a necessary movement focus, crucial to its success (pp. 14–15).

And what could be more burdensomely and gravely live than blacks getting beaten up by racist white officials? Though the Selma footage seen by national audiences was not technically live, as Torres points out, both its content and its formal features delivered the requisite liveness. Kept at a distance from the marchers, reporters' telephoto lenses dramatically collapsed perspective; the lack of shadow on an overcast day and the clouds of tear gas created images with what one viewer called 'the vehemence and immediacy of a dream' (Torres, 2003, p. 34). Perhaps more important to 'liveness than being live, it was crisis coverage': its oddly framed, blurry images of often-frenzied activity, while hard to read precisely, nevertheless clearly convey the camera's and cameraman's loss of control over their subject. Since this was a subject not only appearing on national television but irrupting into the ostensibly controllable televisual flow, the message of vastly-proportioned crisis was unmistakable, and, of course, the analogies between Nazi and Alabama brutalities were inescapable.

Historian Leigh Raiford (2007) has suggested that, relatively free of corporate media imperatives, the still photographs made by Lyon and other SNCC photographers captured something different and perhaps (historically) more valuable than what television showed its viewers. The photographs served 'as both performances of liberatory possibility and as documents of democracy in action. [...] [They] hand down to us what corporate-controlled television cannot: a vision of utopia as seen from the frontlines ( p. 1154). And Lyon (1992), in his brief against the continuation of his own SNCC employment, described King's Selma efforts as 'staged primarily for their media effect,' and he suggests this media-skewed inauthenticity is linked to the 'collapse' of any alliance between SNCC and SCLC (p. 167). But it is hard to deny that King's tactics worked.

Very different from their civil rights coverage is Roberts and Klibanoff's (2007) account, in their book's final chapter, titled 'Beyond,' of an assault on photographer and *Newsweek* bureau chief Karl Fleming. He was attacked from behind, his skull and jaw fractured, as he left a demonstration in Watts protesting police brutality, a few months after the uprisings there in August 1965. The rally's main speaker, SNCC leader Stokeley Carmichael, had used Fleming's presence to dramatize urban blacks' exploitation by 'honky reporters' who show up only 'when they have a chance to make black people look bad,' but were never around 'when the cops have been intimidating, beating and murdering our people,' Fleming remembered; his assailant, he believed, was a Watts resident who saw him as 'just another faceless, exploitative whitey, someone to hate, and hurt' (pp. 396–7).

Roberts and Klibanoff see the attack arising from 'the anger seething in Watts' – about which they say, most unreportorially and revealingly, 'no one was sure of the cause.' (This sneer bears out Lyon's prescient comment that 'to the press [black power] was like a red flag in front of a bull' (1992, p. 173).) Almost as an afterword to the main body of their book, 'Beyond' goes on to connect, in what had unfortunately become rather standard fashion, the putative 'hate' and 'anger' in Watts to the 'new' visibility of weapons in the offices of formerly 'non-violent' SNCC, and to newly emerging black leaders' articulations of positions interpreted as nationalist and 'separatist' (pp. 396–7).<sup>1</sup> At the same time, in light of what we know about media and the civil rights movement, Carmichael's pronouncement does not seem to state an unqualified truth.

But, perhaps surprisingly, the kind of truth it does state is amplified by journalists themselves. As a discerning editor put it, if television had not shown Bull Connor, his dogs and the march on Selma, there would not have been momentum to push the civil rights acts through Congress, so that, in that regard, television 'performed a magnificent service by showing violence.' Later

in the decade, however, 'it [found] [...] itself trapped in carrying on in the same manner and [...] incapable of providing anything except violence' (Roberts and Klibanoff, 2007, p. 400). Though journalists – all white, needless to say – were apparently sympathetic to African Americans' charges that the press, and particularly television, focused 'simplistically' on black militance and the violence of urban uprisings without exploring underlying problems and the effects of persistent white racism, they insisted in response that 'this same kind of simplistic coverage, just three and four years ago, of the Deep South situation [...] impressed the national community' and led to civil rights legislation (Hodding Carter, cited in Roberts and Klibanoff, 2007, p. 400).

So key and central was media coverage to the Southern Civil Rights Movement that, as network television journalism expanded and the movement learned to observe its rhythms, not only did campaigns make the provocation, even purposeful production, of spectacular racist violence against non-violent black demonstrators a key movement tactic, but also demonstration participants, timing and logistics were decided so that dramatic footage could reach New York in time for the evening news. The cities of both Birmingham and Selma were chosen for major campaigns with such access in mind. And yet, wrote Roberts and Klibanoff, (2007, p. 400) 'events moved so bewilderingly fast in 1966, 1967 and 1968 that every branch of journalism had difficulty staying abreast.' Again, hindsight's clarity suggests, they may be saying more than they intended. Bobby Seale and Huey Newton formed the Black Panther Party for Self Defense in Oakland, California, in 1966. Their initial tactic was a kind of didactic street performance, a community consciousness-raising that was unrecordable by standard journalistic means; differently from earlier groups, their goal was a community roused through the idea of self-defense to 'communal autonomy' and, they hoped, eventual self-actualization (Singh, 2004, p. 197). Newton and Seale were college dropouts, Seale a Vietnam veteran, Newton on probation; as students at Merritt Junior College they had become disaffected with nationalist groups, which they saw as not political and activist enough. At the time they formed the Black Panther Party both were working as community organizers in the Oakland poverty program office (Torres, 2003). As they developed and circulated the party's ten-point program, rented an office, started their own newspaper, and raised money by selling Mao's *Little Red Book* at anti-war protests and on the Berkeley campus, they realized that 'patrolling the pig cops' should be a major organizing activity. They would 'every day, [...] walk in and out of the Black Panther office, around to my house or around to Bobby Hutton's house, or somebody's house, with guns on our sides.' On Friday and Saturday nights, they ' [...] got in a car, or two or three cars, or four or five cars as it built up, and patrolled the pigs [...]. Sometimes when we went to a meeting during the week we patrolled the pigs. We had a camera or two, a law book, and were working on getting some tape recorders in patrolling the pig cops' (Seale, n.d.). If they encountered an arrest or harassment incident, 'the patrol participants were careful to stand no closer than ten feet from the arrest, to stay within the presumption that they were not interfering [...]' writes Newton (1980) in his PhD dissertation. And when passersby gathered, and the officers tried to dispel them by threatening arrest, the Panthers encouraged them to stay, explaining that, 'You have a right to observe an officer carrying out his duty [...]. As long as you stand a reasonable distance away, and you *are* a reasonable distance. *Don't go anywhere.*' What they would then see and hear was at once a didactic performance and a potentially fatal confrontation.

The pig said, 'What are you going to do with that gun?'

'What are you going to do with *your* gun?' Huey said. 'Because if you try to shoot at me, or if you try to take this gun, I'm going to shoot back at you, swine. Furthermore' – and he just got off into it – 'you're nothing but a sharecropper anyway [...] you come down here brutalizing and murdering black people in the black communities. [...] [Just a]

sharecropper from racist Georgia in the South somewhere. So if you draw that gun, I'll shoot back at you and blow your brains out!

'You, you, you ...' the pig was mad. 'You're just turning the Constitution around.' [...] Huey said, 'I'm not turning anything around. And I got my gun. What are you going to do with yours?' This blew the pigs' minds. They didn't know where to go, man. [...] As the fellow patrolling Panthers sat quietly in the car because, by prearrangement, Newton had '[made] us all shut up and be disciplined,' and the onlookers regularly 'holler[ed] something like "Tell it, do it, brother,"' Newton repeated that 'I'm turning nothing around. I'm exercising my constitutional right. I've got the gun to back it up!' And the pig sees the gun. The nigger told the pigs that if they act wrong or get down wrong, 'I'm going to kill you. I'll defend myself!' (Seale, n.d.).

As Seale reported, each such incident was 'very major,' recruiting so many potential members that it necessitated the production of a 'formal application form' ...to join the party.

Coming to terms with the meanings of this patrol work, we need to know that to carry visible, loaded firearms was legal in California at that time; even while on probation, writes Seale, Newton could carry a rifle or shotgun, though not a pistol. The guns were publicly displayed, but not pointed at anyone (Newton, 1980). It is also important to realize that police brutality against black residents was a common tactic and one understood by all, though from varying perspectives, as organized to protect white business interests as the economic basis and the racial composition of the city changed. Oakland's black population had grown from 3 percent to nearly 15 percent during World War II as rural Southerners migrated to take up shipyard and other wartime manufacturing jobs; when these jobs disappeared after the war, 100,000 white property owners moved out of Oakland, leaving a 'black belt' on the flat land of the East Bay stretching 200 blocks from the hills of South Berkeley. Unemployment climbed toward 25 percent, and one out of three young African Americans was said to be unemployed and a high school dropout (Pearson 1995, p. 50). Oakland whites, Pearson notes, 'had not expected Negroes to stay' after the war, nor to continue to arrive from the South. Governed by a city council elected at large rather than by district, Oakland was effectively controlled by its business cartel, which had kept Republicans in power since World War II (Pearson 1995, p. 50; Brown, 1992).

To 'contain and intimidate' the African Americans confined to the flats, police 'shock troops' were required (Pearson, 1995, p. 49). It is well documented that the Oakland Police Department recruited white Southern officers in these years, evidently welcoming their racist attitudes and repressive tactics ('Oakland California,' 2009). Jessica Mitford, who lived in Oakland, describes the police regularly lying in wait on Friday nights 'outside West Oakland bars that served as banks for cashing paychecks, [to] arrest those emerging on charges of drunkenness, and in the privacy of their prowl cars beat them and rob them of their week's pay' on the way to the station house (cited in Pearson, 1995, p. 49). A 1950 California legislative investigation led to a police chief's resignation and another officer's jail sentence. But by 1966 only 16 of the city's 661 police officers were black, and tensions and brutality continued ('Oakland, California,' 2009).

Such local knowledge underscored every word and action of the participants in these encounters. As everyone knew, this history had produced not just the brutality that rained down on the 'unexpected' black residents, but also, finally, the insurgence of residents such as Newton and Seale. They were not outsiders but known quantities, not dispatched with training and purpose from elsewhere by a far-flung organization, but stuck, jobless, poorly educated and ill-housed, on the east bay's shores like everyone else. Considering the spatial apartheid and environmental racism endemic to the situation of poor urban blacks, the Panthers saw little



in the recent reformist legislation responding to the southern civil rights movement that might alleviate their social and economic exclusion; they perceived analogies between themselves and the colonial *lumpenproletariat* described by Algerian doctor and writer Franz Fanon, who were rural Africans drawn to cities in search of work and remaining to exist, rootless and poor, confined by a colonial police force to their margins. Although the Panthers collectively did not foment or participate in the urban rebellions of the mid-sixties, they understood them as legitimate offensives, conscious ‘attacks on the physical emblems of the state (and private property)’ (Singh, 2004, p. 192).

Although it is often assumed, as Jeffrey Ogbar (2004, p. 87) writes, that the Panthers ‘conspicuously’ created a ‘bold, brash’ media image that was ‘symbiotic’ with mainstream media’s images and expectations, actual events indicate rather a concern to gather and reach a local counterpublic (Erickson and Newton, 1973, pp. 45–6). The Panthers embedded their evolving modes of communication and recruitment in everyday life and carefully calibrated them to their live, gathered audiences, which included both ‘the people’ – the black citizens of Oakland – and ‘the pigs’ – the white officers of the Oakland police department. It seems likely too that, at least initially, the Panthers gave little thought to their mass mediated representation, or they may have intended consciously to avoid non-local media attention as something which did not help their organizing and could ‘only make them look bad.’ Developing their own communicative tactics, the ‘Panthers’ (all three or four of them) turned from the mainstream media, who did not forgive the slight, and from their comfortably-ensconced, distant viewers. Like civil rights organizers, they depended on the visual image and on the hypervisuality of the black body to attract support, but it was not the burden of liveness they conveyed and needed to dramatize, but rather, more difficult and threatening, what Nikhal Pal Singh (2004, p. 300) has named their ‘insurgent visibility.’

Some of this visual force is conveyed by psychologist Erik Erikson’s (1973) reading of what he called in the 1970s the ‘now traditional’ photograph of Huey Newton, sitting ‘like a latter day American revolutionary with a gun in his hands, held not threateningly, but safely pointing upward.’ Erikson’s moving and unusual tribute begins by noting that, it was, not too long ago, almost impossible to imagine black men carrying guns openly; to imagine them taking up, as the Panthers do, the role once played by Ku Klux Klanners and White Citizens’ Councils in the South. But the Panthers have become, Erikson writes, ‘black vigilantes, black nightriders in automobiles, keeping an eye on (of all things) the law [the police][...]’ (pp. 45–6).

He goes on to suggest that California’s legal support of the right to bear arms ‘certainly did not envisage anybody but white men doing so,’ and that California lawmakers had imagined that ‘potential lawbreakers [would] be patrolled by vigilant citizens in an ill-defined and frontier territory.’ However, as the Panthers were making manifest, ‘the black man’s territory has never outlived the frontier state and is still the land of undefined laws; and [...] arbitrary violence in this territory often comes not from roving outlaws but from those charged with the enforcement of the law.’ Echoing here the metaphor earlier attributed to an Oakland policeman, Erikson continues: ‘Not only did the Black Panther Party make of the police, then, the symbol of uniformed and armed lawlessness,’ but also it ‘did so by ingeniously turning the white man’s own imagery (especially [that of] the American West [...]) around against the white world itself. And in arming [themselves] [...] against that world, [the Party] emphasized a disciplined adherence to existing law, [...] travel[ling] [...] not only with a gun but also with a law book.’ ‘The book and the fire,’ Erikson concludes, ‘– it cannot escape us – what an elemental pair of symbols this has been in revolts as far removed from each other as that of the Germans in Luther’s day and that of the Zionists in our own.’

Erikson's narrative – and there are, as far as I know, no pictures of any Panthers with both guns and law books – underscores the importance of Panther imagery; but it suggests as well its quality of semiotic excess – of visual violence, or insurgent visibility. The Panthers' practice of yoking signifiers together in unexpected juxtapositions does not just 'turn' their meanings – it re-turns them to us enlarged and newly created, or resignified: the Constitution, claim the Panthers, was 'meant' to protect both poor urban blacks and white police officers; violence and brutality 'mean' the same whoever their perpetrators and victims are.

The Panthers had only a 'few shotguns' and 'a handful' of members; they were young, poorly trained and ill-equipped, so that their force was never a real threat to that of the nation-state; nevertheless, as Jean Genet (cited in Singh, 2004) wrote admiringly, they did 'their best to terrorize the masters' using 'spectacle,' which was in fact 'the only means available to them.' Their visual project was (like King's) in fact spectacularly successful; by September 1969, J. Edgar Hoover had identified the Panthers as 'the greatest threat to the internal security of our country,' and soon after he called on his regional offices to institute 'hard-hitting' measures that would 'cripple the Black Panther Party' (Rhodes, 2007, pp. 184–5). By December 1969, Chicago Panther leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark were dead, the Panthers' Los Angeles office was involved in a major police shootout; 'and in late 1969 Panther attorney Charles Garry could claim, arguably, that twenty-eight Panthers had been killed in police clashes' (Rhodes, 2007, pp. 280–2). Although the *New Yorker* magazine later claimed to have found that only ten party members had been 'killed directly by the police,' the number wounded, jailed, exiled, or otherwise incapacitated by state repression, was obviously higher (Rhodes, 2007, p. 282). How to account for the large-scale terror of their little-seen spectacle?

The Panthers' first widely-seen media coverage showed their armed appearance on the floor of the California state legislature in Sacramento in May 1967, to protest the so-called Mulford Act, which would make illegal the bearing of guns – which was, of course, their *modus operandi* (Seale, n.d.). Uniformly negative mainstream press accounts of this protest emphasized the Panthers' weapons and their invasive entry – like a 'flying wedge of humanity' (Rhodes, 2007, p. 73). Angela Davis, however, (cited in Dent, 1992, pp. 319–20) 'saw that image [of the leather-jacketed, black bereted] warriors standing with guns at the entrance to the California legislature [...] in a German newspaper [...] in Frankfurt [...] [and it] called me home.' Davis may be conflating in retrospect several Panther images, and I do not want to overemphasize the contrast between the 'flying wedge' and the standing warriors; nevertheless, the differing accounts suggest difficulty and confusion in the media's recording and dissemination of Panther imagery. Later interviews with Panthers who participated suggest that bystanders understood at the time that the action was staged as spectacle rather than mounted as assault: they 'stopped, looked, and asked questions [like] "are those guns real?" and "if so, are they loaded?"' said one. <sup>2</sup>

For national media still congratulating themselves on the *gravitas* of their recent mission to 'reveal the [South's] naked truth to the whole world' (Raiford, 2007, p. 1164), Panther-concocted spectacle presented no single, salient truth, and Panthers themselves exhibited a liveness that was confusingly playful rather than burdensome and painful. Picking up precisely on this aspect, the Oakland newspaper, snidely titling an editorial 'Playtime in Sacramento,' emphasized the Party's choice of a 'secret name like "the Black Panthers," [its] put[ting] on berets and carry[ing] guns,' as signs of its 'pretending' to be grown up.<sup>3</sup>

As all these comments suggest, the Panthers' public appearances were not immediate, but rather planned and staged; they were not crisis footage because they were always under the Panthers' control; they meant to show the Party as law-abiding rather than violent; and their

message was not simple or one-dimensional. The Panthers' practices, their dramatizations of excess and insurgence, were neither containable nor recordable by mass media in the ways that, to that point, media, and especially television, had been able to construct in order to align black protests with their own interests.

The Panthers' unrepresentability was not solely a matter of failing to cultivate media relationships. For one thing, the imagery of themselves that the Panthers generated was motivated by a determination to express and amplify the party's ideology and worldview, a goal which did not readily suit television's and photojournalism's professions of objectivity. Consider 'the black panther' itself: the panther was not only a powerful animal that never attacked unprovoked, but also, as party members often explained in early days, an animal that, if attacked or backed into a corner, 'comes up to wipe that aggressor or that attacker out, absolutely, resolutely, wholly, thoroughly, and completely' (Seale, n.d.). The specific icon the party adopted first appeared in 1965 on ballots in Lowndes County, Alabama, where, as required by law, all political parties placed an identifying logo on ballots, in order to distinguish the parties for illiterate voters. The panther symbolized the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO), started in 1965 under the direction of SNCC activist Stokely Carmichael. In 1965, Lowndes County was 80 percent black but not a single black citizen was registered to vote, and more than half of the African American population lived below the poverty line. When Carmichael arrived to organize the voter registration campaign which gave rise to the LCFO, there was a long history of extreme white supremacist violence against anyone attempting to challenge all-white rule (Lowndes County Freedom Organization, n.d.; Jeffries 2009).

Attuned at once to objects as symbols and to their possibilities in lived experience, the Panthers were concerned as well to negate imagery which connected the black body to comic stereotype or concretized it as abject. They exuberantly exhibited the manifest reality – and mediated representation – of black men legally armed equivalently to the police; for distanced observers, as we are now and as many whites were then, it can be difficult to acknowledge the courage required to engage with the potentially deadly force of police officers. As most viewers of live or locally mediated police-Panther encounters seem readily to have perceived, however, the Panthers not only 'refus[ed] to recognize the status of policing as it operated within black communities,' but also, 'by performing it and in effect deforming it themselves,' they 'undermin[ed] the very notion of policing.' The Panthers' policing of the police nullified [their] privileged 'connection to the state.' Refusing to cower before police weaponry, and usurping 'police' functions, the Panthers, Singh (2004, p. 206) points out, 'disrupt[ed] the state's] ability to nominate and designate normative national subjects – in other words, its monopoly on [the use of] legitimate symbolic violence' to enforce citizens' behavioral norms. And because they challenged the state's authority not by force but by semiotics and spectacle, the Panthers alarmingly suggested that the state maintained itself by the same means – 'if their threats went unanswered, they might be proved right,' Singh (p. 206) proposes.

The disruption occasioned by the Party's street semiotics appeared in the media as well. Historian Jane Rhodes (2007) argues that the Panthers 'carried out an unrestrained quest for media attention that ultimately allowed the media to control the discourse within which they would be discussed.' I would complicate this view, however. Surely, control of media discourse is an unrealistic goal for any public figure or group. The radicalism of the Panthers' ambition to destabilize the totality of the media's racial apartheid, and their method based in dramatic enactments of black identity and political demand, seem of a piece with the totality of their work.

Exploring 1960s television's capacity for radicalism in *Feedback: Television against Democracy*, David Joselit (2007, pp. 123–4) offers a fascinating discussion of the ways that television – in all its forms from network programming to avant-garde gallery piece – proffered viewers an apparent citizenship grounded in spectatorship even as the medium subverted any such collectivity and agency. African Americans, Joselit asserts, 'lacked full citizenship in Media-America,' however spurious this 'info-nation' might be, so that throughout the 1960s black viewers suffered a 'media lynching,' and an 'annihilation,' or, more complexly, they occupied 'the impossible position of being shut out of the televisual public sphere while compelled to identify with it' (p. 126). Joselit suggests that post-Civil Rights media-consciousness – he notes especially that of Malcolm X – required crafting an arousing, 'directive' address to those electronically gathered yet simultaneously disenfranchised viewer-subjects, analogously to what the Black Panther Party's early street interventions had done. The admirable 'parasitism' of such successful interventions is in agreeing to appear in broadcast media, but not agreeing to comply with the racist and exclusionary assumptions of media discourses. Rather, what Malcolm or the Panthers provided onscreen were what Lerone Bennett (cited in Joselit, 2007, p. 126) called 'directive images' that, for the heretofore unacknowledged black viewers, 'present tasks, make demands, and pull individuals out of themselves,' rather than 'facilitat[ing] narcissistic identification or ecstatic modes of oblivion [...].' Whites could make of them what they would.

It is true that, like potentially violent civil rights demonstrations, and 'guerrilla television' actions such as those the Yippies staged, Panther actions reliably gained media coverage. Media requirements for news and novelty ensured ample opportunity for parasitical broadcast of 'directive images.' But differently from white protestors, as Rhodes also points out, the Panthers were never 'immune' to longstanding, historically determined constructions of blackness which viewed all African Americans as 'prone to violence and criminality, lacking in the ability to behave reasonably and responsibly, and driven by an irrational (and dangerous) hatred of whites' (Rhodes, 2007, pp. 89, 312). Whatever else might be represented about the Black Panther Party in mass media, Rhodes argues, 'certain racially coded frames' always communicated these 'deeply held' beliefs. The Panthers' shocking spectacularity – readily decipherable by Oakland residents observing it on their own streets, was different and demonizable in mass media (p. 99). It seems to me in retrospect that, far from unrestrained, the Panthers, amply aware of both danger and opportunity, were ambivalent, even uncertain and self-contradictory, in their approach to mass media. How the Panthers responded to, worked with, used and were parasitical on this demonization (which did not have to do entirely with violence) and on their celebrity – finding a way out of no way – constitutes an ongoing yet productive contradiction in their presence and legacy (see Singh, 2004, pp. 88, 90).



*Notes*

<sup>1</sup>Lyon (1992), especially on pp. 144–50, includes extensive mention of guns, both discussed and present in SNCC in 1964 and 1965.

<sup>2</sup>Interviewee in *Eyes on the Prize*, quoted in Singh (2004) p. 202.

<sup>3</sup>Editorial, Oakland Tribune, May 4, 1967, quoted in Rhodes (2007), pp. 73–4.

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*Insights*

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