"Come Let Us Build a New World Together": SNCC and Photography of the Civil Rights Movement

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For nearly two weeks in late April and early May of 1963, national and international audiences rose each morning to images of violence, confrontation, and resistance splashed across the front pages of their major newspapers. Black-and-white photographs paraded daily through the New York Times, and the Washington Post depicted white police officers in Birmingham, Alabama, wielding high-power fire hoses and training police dogs on nonviolent black and often very young protesters. Organized by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Project C, for “confrontation,” brought center stage the publicly unacknowledged terror, violence, and daily inequities African Americans had long suffered at the hands of white southerners. Through forced confrontations—between black and white, constitutional rights and segregationist practices, the genteel progressive image of the New South and the dehumanizing Old South reality—the thousands of men, women, and children who participated in Project C presented a watching world with the contradictions of contemporary southern race relations. They vividly and visually challenged an entire economic and social regime of power.

A year later, SCLC’s leader, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., recognized the power of such vivid imagery to galvanize support for the Civil Rights Act of 1964. King wrote of the campaign in his book Why We Can’t Wait:

The brutality with which officials would have quelled the black individual became impotent when it could not be pursued with stealth and remain unobserved. It was caught—as a fugitive from a penitentiary is often caught—in gigantic circling spotlights. It was imprisoned in a luminous glare revealing the naked truth to the whole world.¹

For King, the visual media proved a crucial means of capturing “fugitive” brutality, holding it still for scrutiny, and transmitting this “naked truth” to watching and judging audiences.

But white violence and black resistance are not the only captives imprisoned within the camera’s luminous glare and vigilant eye. For many contemporary
viewers, the whole of the civil rights movement is captured, quite literally, in the images of Birmingham 1963. These images have shaped and informed the ways scholars, politicians, artists, and everyday people recount, remember, and memorialize the 1960s freedom struggle specifically and movement histories generally. The use and repetition of movement photographs in contexts as varied as electoral campaigns, art exhibits, commercials, and of course academic texts, have crystallized many of these photographs into icons, images that come to distill and symbolize a range of complex events, ideas, and ideologies. These icons in turn become integral to processes of national, racial, and political identity formation. The repeated use of many of the more recognizable photographs of African American movements for social justice helps construct and reconstruct our collective history. They become tools to aid memory. We are invited, demanded, expected to recount and memorialize. To remember. But what exactly are we being asked to remember? How are we being asked to remember? And to what end?

This essay attempts to address these concerns through an examination of the vital yet contentious role photography has played in the mobilization, expansion, and consumption of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Through a focus on the development of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Photo Agency in the years 1962–64, we can discern how this important organization went beyond merely “providing visually dramatic and narratively coherent stories designed with the networks in mind,” as Sasha Torres argues so persuasively in her book on television and civil rights.

“It is no accident,” wrote SNCC communications secretary Mary King in a 1964 position paper, “that SNCC workers have learned that if our story is to be told, we will have to write it and photograph it and disseminate it ourselves.” Founded in 1960 in the midst of the student sit-ins that spread throughout the south that spring, SNCC quickly gained a reputation among other, older civil rights organizations, and with the Kennedy administration, as unorthodox and uncompromising, a cadre of mostly black, mostly southern students willing to challenge white southern repression in its most entrenched forms and its most dangerous locations. SNCC employed photographs to tell its story of struggle and resistance, of police brutality and violent confrontation, narratives of the 1960s civil rights movement with which most audiences are visually familiar. But SNCC also used photography to tell a story of gradual and procedural change, the hard work of consensus building, the development of collective leadership and leadership from below, community organizing, and the possibility of a better society, perhaps the civil rights movement’s most important legacies.
It is my belief that photography is essential to understanding the civil rights movement and its participants on the ground. Significantly, television familiarized national audiences with the institutionalized violence of Birmingham and Selma, with the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. and Bayard Rustin, and even SNCC’s own leadership in the persons of John Lewis and later Stokely Carmichael. Yet even though the evening news brought unprecedented images of civil unrest and movement into people’s homes, the circulation of this footage was limited to network television. The very nature of news work and the structures of the media industry in the early 1960s could almost only generate pithy and incomplete pictures of civil rights activity. Reporter Paul Good opened ABC television’s first news bureau in the South, in Atlanta, in the fall of 1963 and recounts that national news reporters were dispatched from location to location to produce reports of major “events,” especially those involving violent confrontations, as they happened, or shortly thereafter. Good notes that, by 1963, he had “received the impression that they [editors and producers] were weary of civil rights stories . . . and they did not want or need any analyses of current white-black attitudes or projections of how these attitudes could affect the course of the civil rights story in the days ahead.” When network television or dominant newspapers did report on movement activities, they tended to provide accounts of events involving white or well-known African American participants. Even with the best of intentions for a full and balanced story, television crews worked under tremendous time constraints. They had to complete the work of news gathering while leaving enough time to pack up equipment, get to a local affiliate, develop and edit the film, splice it together with sound, write a script, and feed the day’s report to New York City by 5:30 p.m. eastern standard time, 4:30 p.m. in the central zone states of Alabama and Mississippi, in time for the six o’clock evening news. “So many things could and did go wrong in this process,” Good recalled anxiously years later. “All this was for a piece of film that might run one minute [of a fifteen-minute newscast] if virtually nothing else were happening on the globe that day.” The production and dissemination of these powerful moving images—filmed by network camerapersons, framed by network-approved scripted commentary, and viewable only as often as network executives deemed necessary—nevertheless remained corporate controlled.

In contrast, photography proved a more accessible, contemplative, and democratic medium than television. Photography, especially as utilized by SNCC, introduced audiences to Albany, Georgia, and Danville, Virginia, and to the leadership of Gloria Richardson and Aaron Henry—more obscure but no less significant people and places. As SNCC photographer Danny Lyon
would later recount, images of the movement came and went: “The movement would appear and then it would vanish; there were Freedom Rides and there it was and then it was just gone, it didn’t exist. The turning point was the photograph.” For a grassroots organization like SNCC, photography proved especially important as a means to position the group within the growing civil rights terrain of the early 1960s and to enlarge its ranks, to remain visible and in control of its public image within a rapidly expanding corporate controlled televisual climate. This climate, as Torres points out, presented a largely sympathetic view of the southern movement before 1964, aimed primarily at an ideal northern white spectator, and motivated largely by a desire to produce a national consensus, thus establishing network authority and opening up southern markets to more advertisers.

Cheaper and more readily available, still cameras enabled activists themselves to frame the movement as they shaped and experienced it; photographic images circulated as posters, brochures, and the like granted audiences an opportunity for more sustained consideration of what was often fleeting on the television. Created by everyday producers and distributed in mobile forms meant to be looked at, studied, and reflected upon by broader and mostly marginalized audiences—consumers given hardly a second thought by network television—photography constituted a democratic practice that strove for the fullest representation possible. Photography offered, literally, what historian Charles Payne has called “a view from the trenches.”

Indeed, the extensive yet understudied corpus of social movement photography raises important questions for and about the direction of social movement scholarship as well as for the study of race and photography: What function did photography perform in the making of the African American freedom struggle and its histories? What is the place of photography in shaping and understanding the historiography of the period? What cultural work does photography perform in the creation and re-creation of audiences, communities, and collectivities, in both the era in which these images were produced and in our contemporary moment as well?

Photographs of police brutality, demonstrations, and organizing activities, as well as the media of their dissemination in pamphlets and in newsletters, as posters and as buttons, quietly surround and inform both casual and serious histories of African American social movements. Yet the role of these photographs in actively shaping these political struggles remains little analyzed. Photography has proved important in recounting the campaigns and activities of organizations as diverse as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), SNCC, and the Black Panther Party to audiences
then and now. These images also bring to light the medium’s significance as a tool for mobilization and self-representation by movement organizers.

Here I hope to demonstrate two ideas. First, through their use of photography, SNCC members created a formidable independent media structure that indeed influenced the course of the civil rights movement. Second, the images SNCC’s photographer-activists produced provide cues and clues for contemporary viewers to better understand and incorporate the lessons and legacies of the 1960s freedom struggle.

“Come Let Us Build a New World Together”

In July 1962, nineteen-year old Danny Lyon, a white man from Forest Hills, Queens, hitchhiked from Chicago 390 miles south to Cairo, Illinois. Lyon was studying photography and history at the University of Chicago, where he had just completed his junior year. Inspired by the nineteenth century “historian with a camera” Matthew Brady, renowned for visually chronicling the Civil War, Lyon set out to photograph another civil war and sought to document the activities of the radical youth organization SNCC.11 Arriving in Cairo under cover of night, Lyon was greeted by SNCC field secretaries Carver “Chico” Neblett, a sharecropper’s son and Southern Illinois College student from Tennessee, and Selyn McCollum, a northern white female Freedom Rider. Neblett and McCollum found Lyon housing, and the next day, July 14, 1962, escorted him to a small church. After listening to a number of stirring speeches, Lyon followed SNCC field secretary John Lewis, local high school student leader Charles Koen, and the small gathering of mostly children, as they marched out into the street and down to the segregated “public” pool.

Lyon possessed the only camera to document the small yet effective demonstration, one of nearly a hundred to take place that summer and fall in Cairo, one of thousands during the course of the movement to take place outside the glare of the national news media. Lyon photographed the group of demonstrators standing on line, some with towels tucked under their arms, some with their arms folded or with their hands on their hips in bold exasperation. He captured the anxious white men hiding, contained, corralled behind a large sign propped up on a desk spelling out their resistance: “Private Pool. Members Only.” And he recorded as the protesters knelt down in prayer in front of the pool building. It was this last photograph that one year later SNCC would reframe and reproduce as a poster with the caption: “COME LET US BUILD A NEW WORLD TOGETHER” (fig. 1). Ten thousand copies were printed and offered “for a dollar each, mostly in the North.” The posters sold out.12
come let us build a new world together

STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE

RAYMOND STREET, H.M. ATLANTA 14, GEORGIA
The genesis, transformation, and composition of this photograph begin to suggest the way SNCC viewed itself, its role in the southern civil rights movement, and the place of photography to support and advance both. SNCC was extremely conscious of the importance of documenting its activities, particularly protests that went largely un witnessed by those outside of the communities in which they took place. The photograph chosen by Lyon, director of communications Julian Bond, his assistant Mary King, and Mark Suckle, who ran the photo-offset presses, was not an image of police brutality or violent confrontation, the type of drama highlighted by the mainstream media, and, for the most part, the sort of frame that has been passed on to subsequent generations. Rather, they thoughtfully selected an image that highlighted the goals and beliefs, actions and interactions SNCC itself deemed important: higher morality, as evidenced by the posture of prayer, and the central role of youth as architects of an integrated future, evidenced by the lanky brown girl who occupies the middle of the frame.

This photograph literally envisions an alternative concept of leadership. Here, there is not one identifiable charismatic personality at the forefront leading the masses, a hallmark of more established, traditional civil rights organizations such as the NAACP and the SCLC with Dr. King at the helm. Rather, group-centered leadership is privileged, in which all stand, pray, and work side by side. Longtime activist, adult educator, and SNCC “midwife” Ella Baker inculcated in the young organization the belief that leadership of all types can be found in the smallest and most unlikely of sources. As the lone female head of the male-dominated SCLC headquarters before becoming SNCC’s founder and primary advisor at its inaugural conference in April 1960, Baker experienced firsthand the limitations imposed on both an organization and its members when “the prophetic leader turns out to have heavy feet of clay.” In 1961 when asked by a meeting of “interested Atlanta citizens” how SNCC raised money, executive secretary James Forman “replied that . . . we wanted to [raise money] on the basis of our program rather than any single image of a leader’s personality. Too often have we seen masses of people out in the streets, aroused and willing to stay there in the face of brutality, only to have some big leaders off in a cosy [sic] negotiating room making decisions which do not represent the wishes of the people.”

According to Forman, then, it was the masses of determined local people putting their bodies on the line in order to change the conditions of their lives who were at the center of SNCC’s program. Therefore, it was their
image that would be the public face of the organization and at the center of its fund-raising efforts.

Of course, there were many public faces, not all of them easily recognized or even visible. The framing of the Cairo image emphasizes the possibility of realizing a utopian vision through the collective effort of thousands working not for fame and recognition but for freedom. Again, Baker infused SNCC with the idea that all who are willing to work are welcome and needed to attain racial justice and should “either take part or step aside.” In the poster, only John Lewis, on the left, is a recognizable figure. In 1963, the year the poster was made, Lewis was catapulted to the national civil rights stage when he replaced Charles McDew as SNCC chair and represented the organization on the podium at the August March on Washington.

Yet it is the gangly brown girl at the center of the frame, bowed so deeply in prayer and contemplation that only the top of her head is visible, who captures the viewer’s attention. The fact that she is flanked by the two older, similarly dressed men on either side, who almost appear as pillars, might initially indicate that the picture was selected to emphasize female vulnerability and the need for older male protection. But if we look closely, we see a young girl in possession of her own body. The fingers on her right hand brace her small frame on the concrete and her index finger serves as a compass. This seems to be a familiar position for her, yet she is alert and at the ready, like runner Wilma Rudolph, 1960 three-time Olympic gold medalist, at the starting line anticipating the sound of the gun. She has entered this position of spiritual defiance willingly. She is faceless, suggesting that leadership and movement will come from a host of people whose names and faces we will not know, whose image is in some ways unnecessary. Yet her body is on the line for change. As longtime activist and white SNCC member Casey Hayden informs us:

Nonviolence took one out of the role of victim and put her in total command of her life. By acting in this clear, pure way, in which the act itself was of equal value to its outcome, and by risking all for it, we were broken open, released from old and lesser definitions of ourselves in terms of race, sex, class, into the larger self of the Beloved Community. This was freedom as an inside job, not as external to myself, but as created, on the spot and in the moment, by our actions. This was ideology turned inside out.

Consciously, willingly, and equally with her male counterparts, the young girl has entered the “beloved community,” a circle of redeeming kinship in and through which individuals aimed for their greatest personal and collective potential. Doing so forces each member of this trinity to recognize themselves and each other as free from fear, internal doubt, and external degradation.
Indeed, after this photo was taken, this young girl was the only protester to remain in the street while a white man in a blue pickup truck threatened to mow down the demonstrators. She defiantly “stood her ground” until the truck knocked her to the pavement. She was taken to the hospital, treated for injuries, and released later that evening.20

The text accompanying the image provides an open invitation and an opportunity, a call to action. Here, the juxtaposition of words and image functions as a catalyst to transform audiences into active participants, or at the very least distant and/or financial supporters. The poster could be found in Friends of SNCC offices—organs for publicity and fund-raising outside of the South—progressive college campus organizations, and church basements as far away as San Francisco.21 That SNCC chose this photographic poster as representative and appealing suggests that it was the image of themselves the young activists most wanted to promote. That the poster sold out suggests that, at least in 1963, this was the image of SNCC that audiences found most compelling.

“COME LET US BUILD A NEW WORLD TOGETHER” was one of at least six fourteen by twenty-two-inch posters, five made from Lyon’s photographs, produced and distributed throughout the United States between 1963 and 1965. SNCC sold these posters at speaking engagements and through The Student Voice for one dollar each, or four dollars for a set of five. Not only did the organization raise funds, but like the freedom song recordings We Shall Overcome and Freedom in the Air, the group also raised awareness, hope, and solidarity. SNCC posters appealed to the youthful contingent for whom posters were becoming a way of showing affinity for icons and ideals. Displaying them in offices indicated the type of work being done, organizations affiliated with, and ideas circulated.

As archivist Carol A. Wells has noted, posters have long played a significant part in movements for peace and social justice, from antislavery broadsides to the extensive circulation of propaganda posters by the Popular Front of the 1930s and 1940s. Because of the repressive practices of the McCarthy era, however, political posters “were one of the many casualties of the 1950s.”22 In the early 1960s, SNCC helped rejuvenate the production and popularity of political posters, which by the latter half of the decade would be ubiquitous throughout progressive circles in the United States and internationally.23 Posters not only projected specific singular images and ideals of the organization, but also literally sold those images and ideals to an audience of young people hungry to consume them. Indeed, posters constituted a new youth media, one through which young people could express their likes, their desires, and
their affiliations. By hanging a poster on the wall of a room, on a desk, or in a window, young people could literally lay claim to spaces of their own.

SNCC posters foreground a single magnified photograph accompanied by pithy text. This layout wedded the documentary impulse for social change handed down from the photographers of the Farm Securities Administration (FSA) of Depression-era America, with the emerging sensibilities of fashion design and graphic design of the 1950s to produce politically charged and visually hip invitations to social action. In this way, we might consider these posters the most vernacular manifestation of John Berger’s “alternative practice of photography,” one that simultaneously plays upon and subverts photography’s dialectical capacities to critique and to commodify, to memorialize and to spectacularize, to challenge the world it represents and to seduce viewers into it.24

Lyon’s Cairo photographs confirmed for SNCC the power of documentation. Based on the powerful images he made of SNCC activities in Cairo, Illinois, and Albany, Georgia, that summer and fall, Lyon was hired by James Forman as SNCC’s first staff photographer in 1962. Until then, SNCC used photographs made by Forman, white activist Bob Zellner, and whoever else was fortunate enough to avoid having his or her camera confiscated during an action arrest. The organization also borrowed images made by sympathetic photojournalists, including George Ballis, for use in their newspaper, The Student Voice. But as the organization grew, so too did the need for effective communications and a public image. Forman worked as a publicist for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in Chicago before joining SNCC in 1961. Immediately, he recognized the organization’s “critical weakness was in the area of communications.” In addition, SNCC “faced two major public relations problems. The first was simply to establish in the minds of the public that we existed, who we were and what we were about. The second was . . . to remove from the minds of those few people who knew we existed the idea that SNCC was an arm of SCLC.”25

SNCC leadership tightly orchestrated its visual images. For two years, under Forman’s direction, Lyon traveled from location to location. The organization’s elder statesman told Lyon where to go and sometimes even instructed him what to photograph. Lyon’s images appeared in the The Student Voice, in Life magazine, and even in the Soviet Union newspaper Pravda. They were reproduced and sold as posters and album covers, distributed in recruitment brochures and propaganda pamphlets. They were the visual component of The Movement: Documentary of a Struggle for Equality, a 1964 collaboration
between Lyon and African American playwright Lorraine Hansberry. As Julian Bond, SNCC’s first communications secretary and editor of *The Student Voice*, would later recount, Lyon’s pictures “showed what we did and how we did it and who we were and who we worked with and where the work was done. And they showed who wanted the worked stopped, how angry they could become, and what damage they could do . . . [Lyon’s pictures] helped to make the movement move.”26

By the time Lyon left SNCC in 1964 following Freedom Summer, he was one of a staff of twelve photographers, and at the center of a larger constellation of “field workers with cameras”: black, white, Asian, Latina, male, female.27 African Americans Joffre Clark, Fred deVan, Bob Fletcher, Doug Harris, Rufus Hinton, Julius Lester, Norris McNamara, Francis Mitchell, and Clifford Vaughs, as well as Latina Mary Varela, Japanese-Canadian Tamio “Tom” Wakayama and Dee Gorton, a white man from Mississippi, all joined SNCC between 1963 and 1965. Some arrived with technical expertise and equipment of their own, while others, like Harris and Fletcher, took part in a weekend-long tutorial by prominent photographer Richard Avedon in New York City. Others received training from Matt Herron, an independent photojournalist and former student of fine art photographer Minor White.28 Some received cameras through donations from photographers sympathetic to the movement.29 Almost all served in the field on voter registration, literacy training or direct action programs, visually documenting the people they worked with and the events, demonstrations, and projects they helped organize. The photographers developed their film in SNCC darkrooms in Atlanta, Selma, and Tougaloo. And their final products were distributed by the SNCC Photo Agency, officially established in 1964, and printed on the photo-offset press in the “constantly expanding printshop” in the Atlanta headquarters.30

SNCC, perhaps more than any other civil rights group of the time, understood the importance of photographs not only as documents of the efforts of thousands to raze the world of southern oppression, but also as visual bricks in the raising of the new integrated free world. SNCC recognized that it was not enough to simply intervene in dominant media frames and overcome what Forman called the national press “whiteout” of movement activities. As Lyon reflected in recent interviews, “political action has to be coupled with control of the media. I think that you have to have an active media.”31 And: “SNCC was its own media.”32 Under the general and expansive title “Communications,” SNCC developed a formidable media structure of its own through which the organization published its own newspaper and promotional materials, printed
its own posters and press releases, and conducted research and incident investigations. In 1964–65, this structure would expand to produce political primers and teaching tools and, beginning in 1965, art exhibits, calendars, postcards, and more photo-essay books in the vein of *The Movement*.

Integral to each of these endeavors, photography constituted one cog of the vast cultural work through which SNCC framed and popularized the movement. SNCC went further than any other civil rights organization of the time by creating its own extensive media structure. SNCC activists collaborated with San Francisco director Harvey Richards to produce the short documentary films *We'll Never Turn Back* (1963) and *A Dream Deferred* (1964). Similarly, field-worker Bernice Johnson Reagon helped found the Freedom Singers and would later establish the a cappella ensemble Sweet Honey in the Rock, musical groups that wrote, performed, and recorded freedom songs, the music of the movement. And three black volunteers, Doris Derby, John O’Neal, and Gil Moses, created the Free Southern Theater, which employed stage performance as a means of political education and consciousness-raising. Along with these various other cultural forms, photographs mobilized constituents, expanded the reach of the organization, and created communities of financial, intellectual, and political support throughout the country and the world. Photographs in particular helped to reframe the extant dominant media narratives and emerged as stories that SNCC told of the new world it was in the process of building.

**Student Voice, Student Vision**

Accompanying SNCC press releases, photographs were sent to major news media sources. They were used as visual evidence of police brutality and the vulnerability of blacks as they organized and acted for equality throughout the South. Nearly two months before the world watched Birmingham police sic German shepards on black protesters, James Forman managed to take photographs of police dogs in Greenwood, Mississippi. When Forman was subsequently arrested, field secretary Charles McLaurin struggled briefly with a police officer for the confiscated camera before getting away. Forman would later write: “Knowing that those photographs—later to be seen around the world—would get into the right hands was one of the biggest helps to my morale in jail.”

If photographs could function as weapons in the fight for public opinion, they could also act as shields, offering protection against excessive violence and mistreatment. Photographs helped provide a certain amount of safety for
imprisoned activists, hidden away and sometimes forgotten about in southern jails. In August 1963, Lyon traveled to Leesburg, Georgia, to photograph the many teenage girls detained after protesting in nearby Americus in July and August. Lyon’s images taken “through the broken glass of barred windows” depict cramped, subhuman conditions: no beds or blankets, clogged shower drains, and a single overflowing toilet. Many of the girls spent as much as a month in the Leesburg stockade and, according to Lyon, “had been forgotten by the world, including SNCC’s Atlanta office, which had its hands full.” Within a week, Lyon processed the pictures and SNCC sent them to a United States congressman, who in turn entered them into the Congressional Record, ultimately aiding the release of all the girls.

In addition to intervening in dominant institutions, photographs were central components of SNCC’s own propaganda machine. This apparatus not only produced *The Student Voice*, but also created propaganda pamphlets such as one describing the protest activities and severe police repression that rocked Danville, Virginia, in the summer of 1963. The pamphlet incorporated Lyon’s photographs and the text of white field secretary Dottie Miller (later Zellner). As part of such propaganda, photographs were utilized to enlist viewers, north and south, within and outside of the movement, as witnesses impelled to act. Forman recognized as early as 1958 that

> people are motivated to action for many reasons—and one of them is that they get angry when they see their people suffering at the hands of their oppressors . . . If the struggles, the beatings, the jailings, would rile up our people to action then they would be worth it. Therefore, it was always important to make sure that the act, the nonviolent protest, got the widest publicity and had the broadest public appeal.

It was important, then, not only to have the images of suffering circulate, but to frame them in such a way as to compel people to action.

Photographs, along with films and filmstrips also made by SNCC, became tools to teach nonviolent resistance, literacy, and economic development. Photographs became central in recruitment and fund-raising brochures, especially for the Mississippi Summer Project, produced by Dottie Zellner, Julian Bond, and Lyon. In the form of album covers, in books, and as posters, photographs helped raise funds directly.

Posters provide an especially significant window into SNCC’s early uses of photography. They constitute a representational strategy through which the organization could articulate its distinctly radical, and radically distinct, position on and in the civil rights movement, often through the presentation of alternative views of movement events. Posters also emerged as sites of internal
debate about democracy and representation within the movement. “Is He Protecting You?” was produced from a photograph taken amid the riots and unrest on “the University of Mississippi campus when James Meredith attempted to register as the first black student” (fig. 2). A helmeted white male Mississippi state trooper, a stern expression on his face, is crisply defined in the foreground. Behind him are the grainy figures of other white men and, in the distance, a white woman. The trooper stands between the viewer and the milling white figures. The text, “Is He Protecting You?” places the viewer in the vulnerable body of Meredith, forced to rely on law enforcement to safeguard him from agitated mobs gathered to prevent his entrance. The text also raises the question of whether this trooper defends the viewer against racial violence or if he is in fact the first line of terror. Police and state troopers had long been “official” perpetrators of violence against African Americans in the South, carrying out a brutal and lengthy legacy of maintaining peace through state-sanctioned coercion.

But state troopers especially were also beholden to a higher federal power, which ordered them to safeguard efforts at integration and registration. Conceivably, ideally, they could be made to protect rather than punish. Yet the Kennedy administration, represented by John Doar of the Justice Department, repeatedly informed SNCC, and the Freedom Riders before them, that they could not intervene in local situations until an incident occurred. Despite frequent and urgent requests for federal assistance and protection, federal agents merely observed and reported violence against the movement. Caught between the dictates of their local white communities and the commands of a distant authority, not to mention their personal beliefs, state troopers often did nothing. Rather they stood by as irate white mobs physically attacked African American demonstrators. Indeed, the trooper in the photograph stands with his arms folded, inactive. This poster explicitly reflects SNCC’s mistrust of police officials in Mississippi particularly, and throughout the South generally. It also implicitly signals the organization’s increasing lack of faith in the Justice Department to use its power, specifically its police power, on behalf of African American protesters. A cropped and tightly focused version of this image came to represent “Mississippi” as the cover of a 1964 pamphlet about SNCC activities in the state.

In the fall of 1963, Lyon made another photograph of Mississippi police, this time taken from the second floor of a SNCC–Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) office in Clarksdale in the northwest corner of the state (fig. 3). Here six white policemen “pose” under a tree as “ministers from the National Council of Churches march to the local church.” In the center, a
young tattooed officer, cigar dangling from his mouth, grabs his crotch as he looks directly into the camera. His sunglasses are tucked neatly in the breast pocket nearest his badge, and his handcuffs dangle from his belt loop. Behind him, another officer presents his middle finger and folded arm in another gesture of profanity. The answer to the question “Is he protecting you?” is a vicious and resounding “no,” as these officers of the law clearly flaunt their power and flout the viewer. They are unashamed. There is no ambiguity here. For SNCC photographer Tamio Wakayama, this is the image that best represents the reign of terror perpetuated and exacerbated by Mississippi law enforcement, the photograph that most accurately portrays the obstacles SNCC workers faced. “To me, that was it. That says it all.”42 Such an image, despite the clarity of its visual impact, would never become a poster or even be reprinted in *The Student Voice*.

“NOW,” made from an image taken during the 1963 March on Washington, similarly offers a unique view of an extensively covered and visually iconic event (fig. 4). The poster depicts a black male protester who seems to hold the word “NOW” tentatively in his right thumb and forefinger, raised high above him against a cloudless sky. To his right, another black man claps his hands, and surrounding them are more hands reaching toward the “NOW” in the sky, ready
Police pose for passing march of ministers, Clarksdale, Mississippi, fall 1963. Photograph by Danny Lyon, courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery.


to grab it should it fly away, ready to support it should it fall. This poster resonates with the immediacy of their demands for freedom and reverberates with the exuberance of being in church. Freedom is not to be found in a heav-
enly hereafter but grasped at this instant. The poster, the union of image and text, practically shivers in its impermanence. But it ripples with possibility. It is filled with what Walter Benjamin has called *jetztzeit*, or “now-time,” the production and performance of what is to come. As Jean-Luc Nancy describes it:

“No-time” does not mean the present, nor does it represent the present. “Now-time” presents the present, or makes it *emerge.* . . . The present of “now-time,” which is the present of an event, is never present. But “now” (and not “the now,” not a substantive, but “now” as a performed word, as the utterance which can be ours) presents this lack of presence. A time full of “now-time” is a time full of openness and heterogeneity. “Now” says “our time;” and “our time” says: “We, filling the space of time with existence.”

This poster, like so many SNCC posters, aligns multiple temporalities. Nine years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision ordering the desegregation of public schools, “Now” speaks of and to the youth gathered
NOW

STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE
8½ RAYMOND STREET, N.W. ATLANTA 14, GEORGIA
in the capital, frustrated and impatient with the glacial pace of “all deliberate speed.” “Now,” as utterance, as declaration, as performative, pronounces “this lack of presence,” the undelivered promise of integration and equality. As such, the poster’s power lies not in a faithful, identifiable documentation of the March; it “does not represent the present” as we have come to understand it as integrated multitudes and charismatic leaders. Rather, it captures the “fierce urgency” of its moment. The poster calls attention to the unfreedoms that envelop the very moment of the photograph, a moment surrounded by a past and future of oppression and resistance. Yet at just this moment, the moment of the photograph, this man and those around him are free. They make freedom “emerge.” This is an image filled with now-time, with the we.

The act of this poster is an effort to rip open history.

At times, some of the tensions in SNCC’s conception of its work, itself, and its constituents revealed themselves, played out on the visual field. In another poster, the dirty and impoverished face of a young blonde-haired white child fills the frame (fig. 5). The large text reads “FOR FOOD . . . FOR FREEDOM,” indicating that the bread and butter issues that lie at the heart of SNCC’s voter registration projects extend beyond the black community into white rural areas. It suggests that white children, like black children, suffer from economic injustice and that the social division of impoverished people along racial lines continues to oppress both African Americans and their white counterparts. Following James Baldwin’s commentary on the damaged white psyche in *The Fire Next Time*, the poster proposes that the repair of the United States’ “race problem” is not solely the provenance of African Americans, if it is theirs at all. Instead, white Americans must refocus their attention to encompass their own complicity in and confinement by this vicious and complex conundrum.

The “FOR FOOD . . . FOR FREEDOM” poster also suggests SNCC’s increased awareness of the value assigned white bodies over black bodies in the estimation of U.S. liberals, a cognizance that prompted the recruitment of more than eight hundred predominantly white, predominantly northern college students for the massive voter registration efforts of Freedom Summer. James Forman and Bob Moses rightly anticipated the media attention and general sympathy that would come to bear as young white men and women experienced, if only for a few months of 1964, the same vulnerability that beleaguered African Americans in the face of white supremacist violence. The poster speaks to the precarious situation of whites dehumanized by the matrices of race and poverty. But what Forman and Moses did not anticipate was the number of white volunteers who chose to remain with SNCC once the fall arrived—the
number of staff leapt from 76 to 161 following the official end of Freedom Summer.45

The poster begins to confront the conflict and concern around the place of white organizers within SNCC, an anxiety and tension that came to a head in the final expulsion of SNCC’s remaining white organizers at the 1966 conference on the estate of Peg Leg Bates in upstate New York. In its early years, up until Freedom Summer 1964, SNCC prided itself on its practice of an equitable model of interracial cooperation and collectivity, one in which black organizers held almost all positions of traditional prominence and field-workers of all races worked in tandem with local African Americans to address the problems of their communities. Yet at various times black members complained that white SNCC members should redirect their energy toward their “own” communities. Only white people, some staff felt, could effectively mount and organize an antiracist agenda in white communities.46 Who but whites could safely organize the dirty child’s parents? And indeed some white staffers, including Bob and Dottie Zellner, did attempt these sorts of conversations with southern whites, including attempting to organize white youth in Biloxi, Mississippi, during Freedom Summer.47 Greeted with disinterest and hostility, the Zellners and others soon quit their efforts. Yet faced with hostility from black staffers emboldened by a rising black power sentiment, the Zellners...
and others painfully left the organization they had helped build and turned their attention to other movements, including the one growing against the war in Vietnam. In choosing an image of a vulnerable white child in need of protection, the only SNCC poster to feature a white person sympathetically, the poster suggests the beginning of such efforts to address and mobilize whites. Simultaneously, “FOR FOOD . . . FOR FREEDOM” scratches at the seeds of anxiety germinating around the shape and very face of SNCC itself.

Another poster occasioned open debate over this particular concern with democracy and representation within the organization. “ONE MAN ONE VOTE” was SNCC’s slogan for the voter registration drives in Mississippi that lay at the center of the organization’s work starting in 1962 (fig. 6). Borrowed from African anticolonial struggles, the phrase could be found on SNCC letterhead, bumper stickers, buttons, and posters. The most widespread of these posters coupled the motto with a photograph of an elderly African American man seated in front of a simple and rundown house. He wears overalls and work boots, and the brim of his large straw hat obscures his eyes. His elbows rest on his knees and his weathered hands are folded, fingers intertwined, as he sits. Leaning forward on the edge of his seat, his open mouth suggests he is speaking. His engaged position and open mouth represent a person active in the world around him. He is quite simply one man of many black men around the world deserving of one meaningful vote. This man symbolized for people both within and outside of SNCC the black laborers, everyday folk, “local people” capable of taking control of their lives as responsible citizens, the ultimate expression of this being exercising the right to vote. In a position paper at the 1964 SNCC conference in Waveland, Mississippi, field-worker Frank Smith utilized the image of “the Negro farmer sitting on a stool” as a way of questioning SNCC’s democratic practices toward the people it was organizing, as well as its own field organizers, who could not vote on policy within the organization. “Does ONE MAN ONE VOTE include the sharecropper who has never been to school or are we really teasing when we say that? Do we really believe what the white man tells us, that the Negro is really too stupid to vote? You know that there are some Negroes in SNCC who believe that.”

SNCC, buttressed by this poster, placed the hardworking black laborer at the center of its voter registration campaign. As Smith imagines this man, “he more than likely lives in an old, worn-out house with a washpot in the back yard and an out-door toilet. He has never been to school. He probably does not know a verb from anything else and only goes to town a few times a year. He has always lived and worked on this white man’s farm . . . I happen to believe
that every man, farmer, lawyer, illiterate, PHD, has a right to speak and be heard.”49 Yet, when looking at the poster, rather than engaging this man directly, one has the feeling of not only looking down on the farmer, but of descending on him. What is especially disconcerting about this photograph is the angle of the camera: slightly above the man and almost tilting forward.

This last poster specifically centers on a photograph that focuses on the individual not as a leader but as universal figure in the vein of FSA documentary work of the 1930s. Photographer and art critic Allan Sekula writes, “The celebration of abstract humanity becomes, in any given political situation, the celebration of the dignity of the passive victim. This is the final outcome of the appropriation of the photographic image for liberal political ends; the op-
pressed are granted a bogus subjecthood when such status can be secured only from within, on their own terms. SNCC’s use of these images as a means to encourage a subjecthood from within troubles SNCC practice in the field, as field-workers, like Frank Smith, begin to reread such practices through the lens of photography. Simultaneously, the somewhat patronizing and demeaning angle of this photograph in particular vexes the facile employment of photography as a method of embodying SNCC ideology. Photographic representation then becomes both a way of giving voice and form to organizational anxieties and a source of anxiety in itself.

Indeed, tensions often pervaded the relationships between Lyon and Forman, between photographers and the organization, between photographers and their subjects, and among the photographers themselves. Because of these tensions, photography emerged as a site wherein the organization constantly worked and reworked its own sense of self. Yet despite these anxieties, the fundamental purpose of photography remained clear: to produce and disseminate visual materials to educate and empower, to encourage and enlist viewers, north and south, within and outside of the movement, as witnesses impelled to act.

**Living Contexts**

SNCC photographs capture some of the better-known “media-mediated” events and personalities of the 1960s African American freedom struggle, such as the March on Washington and the march on Selma, nonviolent protesters’ confrontations with police violence, Martin Luther King Jr., and Medgar Evers. However, SNCC photographers largely documented that which was deemed un-newsworthy by the mainstream media and therefore unrepresentable: the work of building a new world together. Mass community meetings, group prayers, organizing conversations, literacy training, leadership development, and simply time spent together make up the bulk of extant SNCC photographs. Photographs by SNCC photographer-activists offer individual views of collective work and community life amid the chaos and turmoil of civil rights organizing. Even though SNCC invited and needed outside help to further its efforts, these pictures convey that the work was already getting done, that African American communities were motivated, organized, and capable of changing the conditions of their lives.

Rather than viewing these images simply as historical artifacts, we might consider them a backdrop or even a bridge to a utopian vision for our own future. As John Berger tells us: “Photographs are relics of the past, traces of what has happened. If the living take that past upon themselves, if the past
becomes an integral part of the process of people making their own history, then all photographs would reacquire a living context, they would continue to exist in time, instead of being arrested moments. How do we create a living context for these photographs, one in which these many images can continue to educate and empower us, to encourage and enlist us? How do we, in Berger’s words, “incorporate photography into social and political memory, instead of using it as a substitute which encourages the atrophy of any such memory?”

I believe that both in the choice of subject and in modes of employment, SNCC’s images provide us with cues.

In 1965, SNCC reproduced a lynching photograph, adding to the original image the statement and accusation: “MISSISSIPPI” (fig. 7). At the beginning of Freedom Summer the previous year, SNCC workers Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney disappeared from Philadelphia, Mississippi, late on the night of June 21. Two months later their bodies were found. All three had been shot in the head and, in the case of James Chaney, the African American of the group, beaten until his bones shattered. Unlike the more carnivalesque lynchings in the earlier part of the century, lynchings that perhaps felt more like a county fair, with folks arriving by specially chartered excursion trains, with food and gossip passed around, and clicking cameras, Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney were lynched unannounced under cover of night.

The photograph itself was made by white local Mississippi photographer O. N. Pruitt of the July 1935 lynching of Bert Moore and Dooley Morton, south of the town of Columbus. According to Wakayama, he and Lyon “scored” this photo in a little town in Mississippi in 1964, the colloquial language suggesting the illicit nature of the item procured. Like Ida B. Wells-Barnett, the NAACP, and other activists who used lynching photographs as part of their antilynching campaigns before them, SNCC reclaimed the image of degradation and brutality as a means of effecting change. This poster is about the visible and the nonvisible. This poster is also about the past and the present. It suggests what Fred Moten calls the “phonic substance” of the photograph, its sound of moaning and mourning that takes us outside of the image’s frame and works through horror to a form of protest. Moore and Morton, who hang in the tree, their bodies steadied for the camera by the unidentified white man who kneels before them, stand in for the unphotographed bodies of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney; for the three other lynched black men whose bodies were found that summer; for another Freedom Summer worker who was also killed; for the terror and violence that pervaded Mississippi, especially, and the rest of the South, in general, that year. A year earlier, SNCC personified Mississippi as an
inactive and ambivalent state trooper. Now, “MISSISSIPPI” is best understood as the site of persistent, relentless, and unforgiving racial terror. By using an image from the past, SNCC also acknowledges and remembers the history and legacy of lynching in Mississippi. They have “seize[d] hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger . . . at the instant when it can be recognized . . . as one of its own,” to invoke Walter Benjamin. The victims of 1935 are linked to civil rights workers of 1964 and, in the words of sociologist Avery Gordon, are “offered a hospitable memory out of concern for justice.”

In Maria Varela’s “We Marched,” demonstrators in the 1966 Mississippi March Against Fear move away from us as their reflections progress in our

Figure 7.

Figure 8.
“We Marched,” Meredith March Against Fear, Mississippi, June 6–26, 1966. Photograph by Maria Varela. Copyright 1986 Maria Varela Take Stock Photos.
direction (fig. 8). Of this photograph, Varela writes: “We marched through valleys of dread, reflections in two centuries of tears . . . not knowing where we would sleep or if morning would come . . . not knowing, would it do any good?” This is an elusive photograph, one that defies easy assignment to a particular place or time. Framed slightly off-center, the marcher continues beyond the photograph’s edge; what remains is mostly empty space and empty time. The image’s aqueous mirroring is further destabilizing, at once in motion and still, both in ascension and already inherited. We are offered a reflection, a backward gaze at forward motion, not unlike Benjamin’s angel of history propelled “irresistibly . . . into the future to which his back is turned” by the “storm . . . we call progress.” A radical decontextualization of a historic event, Varela’s photograph attempts to capture what will always remain fugitive and out of reach of King’s “gigantic circling spotlights.” This photograph reminds us, as we look back with the benefit of forty years of history, of the uncertainty of civil rights work, that protesters risked their lives for unsure and indeterminate rewards.

SNCC utilized photography as another organized, public opportunity to challenge and dismantle the fact of political and social disfranchisement and fear of integration constructed by centuries of white domination. These photographs literally envision “the beloved community,” “the band of brothers and sisters within a circle of trust” that up until 1964 served as SNCC’s model for organizing, protesting, living, and working together. Photographs gave a face to the young vanguard organization. And more than that, the photographs gave form to the multiracial, integrated, and just society SNCC participants were risking their lives to create. In this sense then, SNCC photographs served as both performances of liberatory possibility and as documents of democracy in action. The images functioned as idealized visions of the redeemed and healing community SNCC participants were working to actualize, and evidence of the kinship the organization had already achieved. These still photographs hand down to us what corporate-controlled television cannot: a vision of utopia as seen from the frontlines.

Notes
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6. Ibid., 60.
8. Torres, Black, White, and in Color.
11. When Lyon joined up with SNCC in 1962, the organization had a small number of white student field-workers, including Bob Zellner, Casey Hayden, and Jim Monsonis, each of whom had ties to the predominantly white and northern Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). The number of white organizers increased in 1963–64, with large-scale SNCC organizing projects in southwest Georgia and Mississippi. By fall 1964, nearly half of SNCC’s 160 organizers were white. This new distribution became a source of internal conflict, which manifested in the proceedings of the November 1964 Waveland Retreat, escalating until the official expulsion of white members at the “Peg Leg” Bates Retreat in December 1966. See Clayborne Carson, In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981). See also Lyon, Memories of the Southern Civil Rights Movement.
17. I am indebted to Rick Powell and Michael Cohen for highlighting this connection.
19. Diane Nash, a founding member of SNCC, defines the beloved community as one “that gave to its citizens all that it could give and allowed its members to then give back to the community all that they could. Our goal was to reconcile, to heal and to rehabilitate, to solve problems rather than to simply gain power over the opposition.” In Greenberg, *A Circle of Trust*, 18–19.


27. This phrase is Tamio Wakayama’s, SNCC photographer and staff member, 1963–65. Telephone interview with author, July 17, 2001.

28. Herron conceived and directed the Southern Documentary Project, which worked with SNCC during 1964 to produce a visual record of the movement in the spirit of the Farm Securities Administration (FSA) images of the Depression-era. FSA photographer Dorothea Lange served as adviser for the project. Matt Herron, e-mail correspondence with author, July 13, 2007.

29. Open letter from Harvey Zucker (New York photographer and filmmaker), n.d., SNCC papers on microfilm (original papers housed at the King Center, Atlanta, Georgia).


35. There were Friends of SNCC chapters in Canada. And, ironically, through the United States Information Agency’s anticommunist program, photographs of SNCC successes were distributed throughout many newly independent African nations. Social Action Collection Vertical File, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison; Carson, *In Struggle*, 134–35; and Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 406.


38. Lyon, *Memories of the Southern Civil Rights Movement*, 80. For more on the protective role of photographs and photographers, see King, *Freedom Song*.


41. Ibid., 108.


49. Frank Smith, untitled position paper.
53. Ibid., 62.