

ESIDE




**CLEAVER**
  
**FOR PRESIDENT**

PEACE & FREEDOM  
**NEWTON SEAL**  
 CONGRESS STATE ASSEMBLY  
 BLACK PANTHER - PEACE & FREEDOM  
**NEWTON SEAL**  
 CONGRESS STATE ASSEMBLY

**FREE HUEY** BLACK PANTHER  
**NEWTON SEAL**

**Deborah Willis**

*I find it difficult to look at these photographs without  
flinching from the memories and from the anger they  
invoke. But I must look. I must remember, as you must.  
For this was history in the making. Like it or not, you  
cannot hide from the camera's eye.*  
—Myrlie Evers-Williams<sup>1</sup>

## EXPOSURE

I begin my essay with this epigraph in order to situate the Civil Rights photographs in *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*. Just as Evers-Williams, widow of slain civil rights leader Medgar Evers, imagines “you cannot hide from the camera’s eye,” the curators of *Only Skin Deep* argue “photography has played a key role in shaping our ideas about nationalism and selfhood.” The images I have selected to discuss reflect life in America between 1942 and 1968, a time of racial strife and new social awareness. Some of the photographs are widely known, while others are familiar to the neighborhoods and communities they represent. Some of the photographers are black, some white, both male and female. Photographers including Gordon Parks, Danny Lyon, Ernest Withers, Pirkle Jones, Roz Payne, and Charles Moore played crucial roles documenting and reinterpreting the varied experiences of living in a segregated society. What we imagine about this period is mediated through the insights of the photographers. This essay explores the social conditions governing the act of being photographed and the decoding of the photographs.

From its beginnings, photography was used to define, oppress, and subjugate, but it also was used in positive ways: a close examination of private family photographs indicates that photography was also used to document and celebrate. During the first decades of the twentieth century, photography as an art form and as a vehicle of popular culture moved more directly into the national psyche. Documenting family activities as well as the faces of young children was an important role for many American photographers. Baby and beauty contests were among the types of images offering a new paradigm in which to express black culture.

Contending “a fair art is propaganda,”<sup>2</sup> W. L. B. DuBois used the photographic image to promote positive aspects of the black race. With the introduction of photographs in 1910, *Crisis*, the journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), “doubled the size of the tiny first issue.” As evidenced in Daylanne English’s essay “DuBois’s Family *Crisis*,” DuBois created a visual taxonomy in which to read photographs of black people. English argues that:

1. Myrlie Evers-Williams, foreword to Steven Kasher, *The Civil Rights Movement: A Photographic History, 1954-68* (New York: Abbeville Press, 2000).

2. *Ibid.*, Stephen Kasher, “Criteria of Negro Art,” p. 323.

[U]nder DuBois's editorship, the *Crisis* comprises a kind of eugenic "family album," a visual and literary blueprint for the ideal, modern black individual....[His] column functions to counter racist representations of African Americans by the white press; but given the predominantly black readership of the *Crisis*, such compulsive cataloging also serves to keep the "family" updated on its members' activities.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout his early years as editor, DuBois published hundreds of photographs of "Prize Babies." As historians Shane White and Graham White observed, "There were babies on the cover, pages with sixteen photographs of babies, half-page shots of babies, babies in cute outfits, and even naked babies artistically arrayed on rugs."<sup>4</sup> The photograph of the 1946 NAACP Baby Contest is rooted in the DuBoisian construction. The photographs showed black children as the pride of the race as a whole. DuBois wrote: "These are selected children; but careful consideration of the total pictures received by the *Crisis*... makes it seem certain that there is growing up in the United States a large and larger class of well-nourished, healthy, beautiful children among the colored people."<sup>5</sup>

Immediately following World War II, a large number of black Americans found work as preachers, tenant farmers, factory and domestic workers, teachers, and cooks throughout the rural South. Many moved to urban centers like Detroit, Chicago, Oakland, New York, and Los Angeles, hoping for a new life outside of poverty and discrimination. The photographs of this era create a new historical consciousness that has the power to rewrite history itself. Central to this new visualization were images that depicted life within the margins, images of beauty, advertising, and work, representing a vibrant community of men, women, and their sons and daughters who fought to achieve their rights. No doubt this informed consciousness possessed an undeniable and collective power. Family and community life were important, and protecting the family was paramount. This changing attitude was captured most evocatively through the photographic medium.

With the postwar migration, more and more black men and women also experienced racial discrimination, physical and emotional abuses, economic rejection, and too often, death. As I began to select images, I noted the smiling face of Emmett Till and was reminded of the photograph of the brutally beaten and swollen body of the young Till published in *Jet* magazine in 1955. Photography had played a significant role in Till's life prior to his murder that summer of 1955. "He had brought with him photos from his junior high school graduation in Chicago, which

3. Daylanne English, "W. E. B. DuBois's Family Crisis," *American Literature*, 72, no. 2 (June 2000): 300.

4. Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 195.

5. "Our Baby Pictures," *Crisis*, October 1914, p. 298.



showed both black and white students. Seeing that the Southern children were impressed, Emmett commented that one of the white girls in the photographs was his girlfriend. This prompted one of the local boys to say, 'Hoy, there's a white girl in that store there. I bet you won't go in there and talk to her.' Calling the boy's bluff, Emmett went in, bought some candy, and as he was leaving the store, said to the woman, 'Bye, baby.'"<sup>6</sup>

Memphis-born Ernest Withers was hired as photographer for the Emmett Till murder trial, which lasted a week. The all-white, all-male jury found the white male defendants *not guilty*.<sup>7</sup> After the trial, Withers returned to Memphis where he copublished and distributed a pamphlet on the murder trial of young Emmett Till, titled *Complete Photo Story of Till Murder Case*. It was sold for one dollar a copy. This act revealed Withers's concern for preserving the memory of this horrific experience. As he wrote in the circular, "... we are not only depicting

6. Brenda Wilkinson, *The Civil Rights Movement: An Illustrated History* (New York: Crescent Books, 1997), p. 84.

7. Ernest C. Withers, *Pictures Tell the Story: Ernest C. Withers Reflections in History* (Norfolk, VA: Chrysler Museum of Art, 2000), p. 60.



the plight of an individual Negro, but rather of life as it affects all Negroes in the United States....In brief we are presenting this photo story not in an attempt to stir up racial animosities or to question the verdict in the Till Murder Case, but in the hope that this booklet might serve to help our nation decide itself to seeing that such incidents need not occur again."<sup>8</sup>

Many families experienced episodes of hostile confrontation that intensified during the years of the social protest movements. Blacks were being killed, hosed, jailed, and subjected to Jim Crow laws throughout the American landscape. Photographers witnessing assaults both brutal and social, created a new visual consciousness for the American public, and established a visual language of "testifying" about their individual and collective experience. As Danny Lyon recounts about his experience in Albany, Georgia:

8. *Ibid.*, p. 60.



*Smoking a corncob pipe, drifting in and out of the southern accent he had picked up in Mississippi, [SNCC executive secretary James Forman] was serious, extremely polite, and always under pressure. Forman treated me like he treated most newcomers. He put me to work. "You got a camera? Go inside the courthouse. Down at the back they have a big water cooler for whites and next to it a little bowl for Negroes. Go in there and take a picture of that." With Forman's blessing, I had a place in the civil rights movement that I would occupy for the next two years. James Forman would direct me, protect me, and at times fight for a place for me in the movement. He is directly responsible for my pictures existing at all.<sup>9</sup>*

9. Danny Lyon, *Memories of the Southern Civil Rights Movement*, [Chapel Hill, NC: Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University/The University of North Carolina Press, 1992], p. 30.

Lyon's photograph plainly depicts the horrific reality of black people in Albany. As the perfect visual metaphor for "Jim Crow," this photograph, like many others of its type, mobilized the protest movement. The segregated signs—one marked "colored" and the other "white" simply demonstrate what it meant to be a member of the privileged class. The "white" water fountain was larger, free flowing with a quick switch of the dial; while the drinking water fountain for the black man, woman, or child, short or tall, was anything but equal—theirs was the size of a small bowl that appears to be not even three feet from the floor.

On June 19, 1963, seven days after the murder of NAACP leader Medgar Evers in Jackson, Mississippi, a civil rights bill was introduced in the U.S. Senate. That year was a pivotal one in the visualization of racial discontent: Charles Moore photographed the Birmingham Riots, and hundreds of photographers witnessed the March on Washington. Photography was instrumental in galvanizing young people, motivating cultural change and defining the significance of the struggle for human and civil rights that eventually forced the Federal government into creating laws against racial domination and discrimination. Photographs of anonymous Americans and leading figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X marching, protesting, participating in sit-ins, and attending rallies showed the world that blacks were indeed fighting back and depicted the new Southern black as rebellious and deviant. Moore's photographs of Martin Luther King's arrest are graphic evidence of this new black citizen. Dr. King, wearing a hat and suit, is jostled by police officers. The underlying tension in the image can be found in King's own words:

*The tension, which we are witnessing in race relations in the South today, is to be explained in part by the revolutionary change in the Negro's evaluation of himself.... You cannot understand the bus protest in Montgomery without understanding that there is a New Negro in the South.*<sup>10</sup>

By the early 1960s, the protest movements had become a national crusade for human rights for all oppressed people. Newspapers and magazines throughout the world had published gripping images of racial hatred and police brutality in Birmingham, Selma, Montgomery, Oakland, and Los Angeles. The most brutalizing events caused photographers to speak out en masse. On April 27, 1962, there was a shootout between the Los Angeles police and members of the Nation of Islam; Ronald Stokes, a member of the Nation of Islam, was killed. Fourteen Muslims were arrested; one was charged with assault with intent to kill and the others with assault and interference with police

10. Quoted in Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984), p. 106.

officers. A year later Elijah Muhammad sent Malcolm X to investigate the incident and the trial. Gordon Parks's photograph of Malcolm X holding a photograph of a brutally beaten Nation of Islam member was remembered in this way:

*I remember the night Malcolm spoke after this brother Stokes was killed in Los Angeles, and he was holding up a huge photo showing the autopsy with a bullet hole at the back of the head. He was angry then, he was dead angry. It was a huge rally. But he was never out of control. The press tried to project his militancy as wild, unthoughtful, and out of control. But Malcolm was always controlled, always thinking what to do in political terms.<sup>11</sup>*

The Civil Rights Movement was unfolding on the streets in virtually every rural and urban city in America. Reporters, photographers, and students from television stations, newspapers, and magazines were on hand to document the conscience of this country. The small triumphs in local communities and the disappointments in the larger cities are forever etched into our memories because of the camera. During this dangerous yet invigorating time, photographers sought to create a collective visual memory that would empower communities while at the same time provide evidence of the struggles, defeats, goals, and victories.

11. James Turner quoted in *Malcolm X: The Great Photographs*, ed. Howard Chapnick and Thulani Davis (New York: Stewart, Tabori and Chang, 1992), p. 83.



**Bruce Davidson.** *Voter Registration*, 1965. Gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 in. (27.9 x 35.5 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Magnum Photos, Inc.