INTRODUCTION: THE CASE FOR A NEW CANON

Photographers shot millions of pictures of the black civil rights struggle between the close of World War II and the early 1970s. Thousands of men and women with cameras working for mainstream media outlets, alternative newspapers, civil rights organizations, documentary history projects, police departments, and federal agencies, along with ordinary citizens, recorded the struggles of black Americans for social and economic justice. Yet, despite the staggering number of photographs shot and preserved, the civil rights story is represented today by a limited number of images that are remarkably similar.

When you picture the civil rights movement, which images come to mind? If you are among the more than 200 million Americans who have come of age since the 1960s, the odds are good that a predictable set of photographs helps you think about the movement. Among them are surely images from the South of fire hoses and attack dogs turned on peaceful protestors; well-dressed youths taunted, punched, and kicked at sit-ins at segregated lunch counters; Freedom Riders bombed and beaten while integrating interstate buses; black children harassed for attending previously all-white schools; voter-rights marchers clubbed and gassed by state troopers; and perhaps an image or two from the North or West of white antibusing violence or a Black Panther protest. In both the public imagination and our history books, the civil rights story is overwhelmingly one of well-behaved black protestors victimized by racist and violent whites.[1]

This observation hardly seems remarkable. A few famous photographs have for many years defined the popular story told about the civil rights struggle: dignified black protestors passively resisted the laws and social conventions of Southern white society and suffered, with stoicism, unwarranted attacks by white mobs and police. Since the early 1960s reporters and historians have credited the photographic evidence of such protests with helping to transform American society. From the moment of their publication in Northern newspapers and magazines, the photographs were lauded for affording fair-minded white citizens the opportunity to experience the plight of African Americans in the South, so fostering white sympathy for blacks and, ultimately, support for legislative reform, including the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965).[2] Over the years that handful of famous civil rights photographs, which virtually all Americans can picture, have come to epitomize the struggle. But the role that the photographs played in this history is considerably more complex.

Scholars of U.S. history credit black activists with driving many of the social and legislative reforms of the civil rights era. Over time black protestors, politicians, and educators pushed white Americans to reassess their positions on race relations and social justice. Change was driven by black action, not victimhood.[3] Yet the best-known photographs do not show blacks defending themselves (never mind fighting back), and only infrequently do they illustrate African Americans delivering impassioned speeches, organizing voter-registration drives, running for office, educating younger generations, or advancing legislative reforms. Photographs exist of all these activities. They circulated during the civil rights era in black newspapers and magazines, left-leaning white publications, and, on occasion, in the mainstream press, but they were seen by only a small minority and never assumed a place in the American imagination as representative of the struggle.

What the best-known photographs illustrate is the "passive resistance" for which the civil rights movement is famous. There is considerable evidence that these iconic scenes of submissive black protestors taunted and brutalized by white public-safety officials and mobs moved many millions of white Americans to feel sympathy for blacks. But it is significant that the majority of civil rights organizations in the second half of the twentieth century shunned the "passive resistance" label, preferring to describe their approach with the decidedly active phrase: "nonviolent direct action."[4] For organizers and rank-and-file activists, sit-ins, marches, and rallies, as well as grassroots political organizing and voter-education drives, were active strategies that demonstrated black power and created the conditions for its expansion. "Passive resistance" no more sums up the reality of the civil rights struggle than do the famous photographs of black victims.

There is little doubt that the best-known photographs provide largely accurate depictions of events in the street. The point is that their relentless focus on confrontational protests, and specifically on white-on-black violence, promotes a distorted impression of the civil rights movement overall. When a tiny subset of a movement's visual history is elevated as representative of that movement, photographs that are individually truthful distort history as a group.

In restricting themselves to the publication of a particular type of photograph, white media outlets were not trying to mislead their readers or diminish the achievements of black activists. The mostly liberal reporters and editors who worked for mainstream media outlets in the North sympathized with citizens whose rights were systematically denied and sought to advance the cause of black civil rights. They were, however, conscious of the need to carefully nurture white public support for social and legislative change. At the time a political cross section of whites worried about the disorder fostered by black protests and the white counterprotests they sparked. Millions of whites, whether they supported or deplored black activism, were united in their fear that massive protests would fray the bonds of civil society, leading to domestic chaos and strife. In order to garner sympathy for black citizens and to build support for social and legislative changes that would make U.S. society more just, liberal white editors consistently published civil rights photographs that did two things well: offer stark, morally unambiguous narratives; and reassure whites that racial reform need not lead to social disorder—or even to upending the racial hierarchy that had long favored European Americans.[5]

Black activists organized to raise awareness and fight a diverse array of inequalities present in U.S. society. Some actions targeted segregation in public transportation, libraries, restaurants, housing, public recreational facilities, schools, and universities; others tackled discriminatory public or private hiring practices, loan policies, salary inequities, and job safety or fought state poll taxes, voter eligibility tests, police brutality, and mob violence. Yet despite the diversity of issues that individual actions sought to remedy, the famous photographs of the movement differentiate little between the various protests and give scant information on the specific battles fought. Famous photographs of civil rights protests, ranging from Anniston to Selma, are virtually interchangeable. All displayed similar scenes of white-on-black violence or its

threat, and each drew from the same menu of generalized narratives of black versus white, passive versus active, and good versus bad.[6]

The photographs' focus on white-on-black violence reassured whites that blacks needed their help. Because few of the iconic images capture the forceful actions of black organizers, protestors, and politicians, they implied that justice hinged on the intervention of concerned white citizens. Pictures of victimized activists raised the sympathy of whites at the same time that they made images of protest safe.[7] Since the depicted protestors appeared in no position to take power or force changes in U.S. society, the photographs helped tamp down white discomfort with black protest by suggesting that major reforms remained within the control of whites. According to the photographs published by the mainstream media, whites, and not blacks, held the power needed to set the pace and establish the extent of reform.

As we have begun to see, iconic photographs are not those that capture the essence of a particular event. The opposite is often true. In attaining iconic status, photographs frequently detach themselves from the events and era they purportedly depict; they rise above the specifics to tap into broader cultural narratives. My undergraduates, even when they have not previously seen them, can readily explain the meaning of the famous dog-attack photographs of Birmingham: good, submissive blacks do battle against bad, violent whites.[8] The photographs do not add to students' knowledge of the civil rights movement so much as they confirm simplistic narratives (unconnected to the Birmingham campaign) that they already know. The same is true when students compare civil rights photographs to other famous images of black-white conflict. My students see a clear line of descent running from nineteenth-century photographs of slaves abused by their masters to twenty-first century videos and stills of black civilians harmed by police. Separated by 150 years of history —and radically different racial and social systems—these disparate images of violence convey nothing historically specific about the events they purport to capture. My students' responses suggest that iconic photographs mirror back to us powerful social narratives more than they provide faithful reports of, or insights into, particular events.

This catalogue proceeds from the basic assumption that photographs do not speak for themselves. Iconic photographs need explanation if they are to be understood in historical context and, moreover, if they are to mean more than the simplistic and supposedly timeless narratives to which they are attached. But the same is true of the so-called "forgotten" photographs introduced in this catalogue. They require explication: to be rooted in their time and place, of course, but also to make good on their potential to shed new light on the civil rights movement. Because forgotten photographs are often linked to more socially marginal narratives, they have the ability to expand the range of stories we tell about a given incident, person, or era.

Freedom Now! Forgotten Photographs of the Civil Rights Struggle makes the straightforward point that there are several equally legitimate ways of narrating the civil rights story that have long been ignored in mainstream society. To expand our understanding of the civil rights movement, and twentieth-century U.S. history, this exhibition offers alternative pictures of the era. It displays photographs showing well-known events from vantage points not commonly depicted in history books as well as those that illustrate lesser-known people and incidents that were nonetheless integral to the struggle. *Freedom Now!* puts into circulation a new set of photographs to offer a fuller account of the actions and aspirations of the activists themselves and to counterbalance our fixation with the famous photographs, which were often selected and reproduced based on their likely effects on whites. Together, these less famous and, on occasion, previously unknown photographs form a picture of black planning and action that challenges the stories told in many of the famous images. This exhibition seeks to focus twenty-first-century Americans on facets of the struggle that were of paramount importance to the protestors and the many millions of black citizens who observed the struggle with interest, even when they did not take to the streets themselves.[9]

This exhibition and catalogue are divided into seven sections: "The Canon," "Historical Precedents," "Doctored," "Strength," "Women," "Children and Youths," and "Joy." The first two sections provide a modest selection of the famous photographs to orient viewers and sharpen the points of divergence between the standard pictorial account of the civil rights movement and the alternative view presented by the forgotten photographs of the exhibition. In "The Canon" famous photographs of Little Rock, Montgomery, Birmingham, Jackson, and Selma are analyzed for the visual and narrative qualities they share; the people, events, and issues they failed to record; and the messages on race they communicated to period audiences. To augment the many discussions that accept without question the documentary qualities of these photographs, I step back from their narratives to also consider the political and social conditions that led these photographs to be selected from among the many hundreds or thousands taken of each event. My analysis takes care to recount the actions of participants, but instead of focusing solely on those figures captured within the tiny photographic frame, I broaden out the discussion to explore the motivations of photographers, editors, organizers, and activists.

The second, closely related section, "Historical Precedents," argues that the expectations for what canonical civil rights photographs should depict were conditioned by nineteenth-century standards for the representation of black slaves and freedmen. A selection of early photographic prints created by white abolitionists to raise sympathy and funds for blacks makes clear the narrative and formal correspondences between abolitionist and civil rights photography. The images of ex-slaves depict anonymous, nonthreatening subjects whose bodies bear the marks of abuse at the hands of former masters. While many of the freedmen showed great resourcefulness in making their escape from Southern plantations, the images reference suffering, not ingenuity. So ingrained was this model for the representation of blacks that it readily suggested itself to twentieth-century photographers in search of a formula for the sympathetic and safe depiction of black protestors. These images suggest why journalists arrived at scenes of protest with a preexisting picture of what the "right" or "best" photograph should look like. Instead of simply finding compelling shots of activism, photographers unconsciously sought out particular scenes and framed them in predetermined ways to meet social expectations for how blacks and whites "should" look. This section also illustrates how the seeds for more progressive manners of representing black identity and action were sown in the wake of emancipation, when blacks enjoyed greater resources to represent themselves.

"Doctored" illustrates how civil rights photographs were physically and contextually manipulated. When digital alterations of newspaper or magazine photographs come to light today, they invariably lead to vigorous public debate on the responsibilities of the press to provide unadulterated pictures of reality. In the middle of the last century, however, media standards were much looser and the public more trusting; even altered images were deemed capable of capturing the essence of an issue or event. This section demonstrates the lengths to which photographers and editors went to secure civil rights images that communicated expected narratives. Examples show mainstream editors using extensive airbrushing and radical cropping, pairing images with misleading captions, and publishing photographs taken wholly out of context to make the required points.

The next four sections offer new kinds of photographs for reimagining the civil rights struggle. To come to terms with the photographic legacy of the movement, we must both analyze the limitations inherent in the canon and develop new, more inclusive ways of remembering the past. "Strength" tackles head-on the myth that black Americans assumed submissive roles within the civil rights struggle. It begins with a grainy photograph taken surreptitiously during the Mississippi trial of the two men who murdered fourteen-year-old Emmett Till in the summer of 1955. The photograph shows Till's great uncle rising from the witness stand and pointing out for the court the men who abducted the boy in the middle of the night. The uncle's act of bravery stunned Mississippi whites and galvanized blacks across the United States, but it received comparatively little attention in the white press. Mainstream reporters showed greater interest in discussing

the novelty of trying whites for the murder of an African American in the South, and in wringing their hands over the gruesomeness of the crime, than in explaining to readers the unprecedented decision taken by Till's relatives to confront the killers in open court.

Other photographs in "Strength" that are little known today depict blacks arming themselves and fighting back against rioting police, registering to vote in hostile county courthouses controlled by unsympathetic Southern whites, providing armed defense of black-run institutions from domestic terrorists, and exercising the right to vote. This section includes a news photograph capturing the infamous "Black Power" protest of John Carlos and Tommie Smith at the Mexico City Olympics in 1968. While the image is not traditionally seen as representing the civil rights era, this silent and peaceful protest was intimately connected to the politics and techniques of the movement. Its apparent distance from traditional civil rights imagery has much more to do with the unambiguous power the men exhibited than with their complaints against the United States.

"Women" and "Children and Youths" each address an imbalance in the photographic record of the civil rights movement. Activists and historians know that women and young people appear in surprisingly few of the famous images of the civil rights struggle given the key roles they played in advancing the cause. "Women" includes a photograph of the domestic workers who in 1955 and 1956 refused to ride the buses in Montgomery, choosing instead to trudge to and from work on foot in the heat and rain. More than any single leader, it was these thousands of unheralded women who launched the modern civil rights movement and propelled Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to national prominence. Other photographs capture women registering to vote in South Carolina and Louisiana and physically resisting armed policemen in Alabama. This section highlights the particular contributions of a number of singular female organizers, including Fannie Lou Hamer and Ella Baker, both of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and a sampling of little-known women who served bravely as midwives, teachers, and political organizers.

Similarly, "Children and Youths" documents the dedication of and sacrifices made by black children who volunteered to integrate schools in the South and North. These photographs remind viewers of the central place children occupied in debates over civil rights and of the many protest actions that took place in the North. Other photographs in this section show college students staging sit-ins at department-store lunch counters that incited no violence and six- and seven-year-olds facing arrest in Birmingham, Jackson, and Selma for participating in civil rights protests.

The final section, "Joy," impresses upon readers that the civil rights movement brought great happiness to millions of black Americans. Not only did black activists and observers take satisfaction in the gains achieved by the struggle, but they also relished the sense of power and solidarity that working together for greater freedoms brought. While canonical images of the movement illustrate stoic, often grim, protestors confronting brutality, thousands of counterexamples illustrate the pleasure blacks took in movement activism. This section displays photographs of activists joined in joyful prayer and song, reacting with smiles to speeches and civil rights marchers, proudly displaying "certificates of courage" and voter-registration cards, and even laughing and singing while led to fetid municipal and county jails. Many black activists saw the act of binding themselves into a community to fight discrimination as not only an effective means for creating a more just society but also a worthy end in itself.

The photographs in these final four sections of the catalogue—"Strength," "Women," "Children and Youths," and "Joy"—expose viewers to alternative histories and perspectives preserved in forgotten photographs and so increase understanding of the roles black Americans played in reforming American society. At the same time they illustrate the high stakes involved in selecting groups of images with which to narrate our nation's history. There are risks in circulating both canonical and forgotten photographs on civil rights. It is simply not possible for several dozen images—no matter how carefully selected—to communicate the complexity of a movement that involved millions of people from across the

country working within hundreds of distinct organizations toward many different political and social goals over several decades. To gather a group of photographs for display from among the multitude produced is necessarily to advance a particular perspective.

While all collections of photos present a partial and subjective picture of their subjects, they are not all equally flawed. Recall that the civil rights canon with which we are all familiar was not formed with forethought. It grew up organically over time in response to the unarticulated fears and desires of the people who guided the mainstream media (most of whom were white). In contrast, the counternarrative presented in this catalogue was deliberately created as a historical corrective. The photographs here do not so much replace as augment the picture presented in the famous images, ensuring that a wider sampling of black American perspectives receives equal time.

To be eligible for inclusion in this catalogue, photographs had to meet two important tests. First, they had to present a picture of blacks as effective agents in driving the reforms of civil rights, regardless of who—freelancers or staff photographers, men or women, blacks or whites—shot the images. And second, they had to be readily available to the mainstream media outlets of their day. I restricted my selection to photographs that were then accessible to the mainstream press because I aimed to tell a story of black activism that was available to white reporters and their editors in the 1960s and 1970s. While commercial photographers took many of the photographs included here, movement activists and supporters, concerned to make their work available to wider audiences, shot others. The picture of black activism presented herein is one that mainstream newspapers and magazines could have told had they been so inclined.

A good number of the photographs included in this catalogue never made their way into twentieth-century newspapers and magazines. They were among the millions of photographs that editors passed over for aesthetic, narrative, or political reasons before filing them away. Many of these overlooked photographs are reproduced here because they highlight a forgotten incident, individual, or issue whose consideration enriches the understanding of the civil rights movement. They are necessarily not photographs that played a part in shaping U.S. society, and several of them fail to meet aesthetic standards for "good" photography. But wherever possible I selected photographs with more obvious social roles and aesthetic appeal. Many of the chosen photographs have revealing publication histories—those reproduced in both the white and black press but interpreted in different ways by each; those published either in the mainstream media or black press but ignored by the other; or those widely published photographs whose crystal-clear narratives distracted readers from considering the underlying economic, social, or political dynamics of the scene.

This catalogue ultimately tells a story about the power of photographs to both explain and create our history. And it initiates a longer conversation on how and why particular people, events, and issues have been edited out of the photographic story we tell about our past.