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Source: *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Spring, 2007), pp. 113-135

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40232520>

Accessed: 15-08-2018 16:33 UTC

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## **Visibility and Rhetoric: Epiphanies and Transformations in the *Life* Photographs of the Selma Marches of 1965**

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**In this article, we contribute to scholarship on visibility and rhetoric by examining the way in which photographs published in march 1965 issues of *life* magazine functioned rhetorically to (1) evoke common humanity by capturing moments of embodiment and enactment that challenged the established images of blacks in the minds of whites and held up for scrutiny assumptions and power relationships that had long been taken for granted; (2) evoke common humanity by creating recognition of others through particularity; and (3) challenge taken-for-granted ideas of democracy, reminding viewers that a large gap existed between abstract political concepts like democracy and what was actually occurring in american streets. We conclude by considering the transformative capacity of photojournalism as it mediates between the universal and the particular, and enables viewers to experience epiphanic moments when issues, ideas, habits, and yearnings are crystallized into a single recognizable image.**

The last 20 years have witnessed a proliferation of museums, public art sculptures, monuments, oral history archives, retrospective books, heritage tours, and other commemorative activities related to the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s in the United States. As historian W. Fitzhugh Brundage suggests, “power and access to it are central to the creation and propagation of historical memory”; however, it was not until the 1960s that blacks commanded “the political power necessary to insist on a more inclusive historical memory for the South” (“No Deed but Memory” 22). Critical to both the success

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of the movement's activism *and* the establishment of a more inclusive historical memory are the compelling photographs that appeared in various media outlets such as the national magazine *Life* during the crucial years of 1958–1968. Historians, journalists, artists, and art critics have noted the significant role that visual images played in the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, David Halberstam, who covered the Civil Rights movement as a journalist, argues that the media's coverage of Martin Luther King Jr. offered an “ongoing confrontation of a high order and almost letter-perfect villains.”

Through King, the media was able to imbue the Civil Rights Movement with epic status: “impoverished blacks would wear white hats and white police would wear black ones. In effect [King] took the terrible beast of segregation, which had always been there just beneath the surface, and made it visible. . . . he brought it to the surface, and the beast, forced to reveal its police dogs and cattle prods and water hoses, exposed, dies on its own.” (“Martin Luther King, American Preacher” 311)

According to Steven Kasher “the photographs of the civil rights movement constitute the deepest and broadest photographic documentation of any social struggle in America” (2). In addition, Kasher asserts that, because in the past the white news media ignored positive images of African-American life and suppressed portrayals of black political action, “their [civil rights-related photographs] quantity, variety, and quality found a new receptiveness on the part of white Americans to look at African Americans’ struggles for liberation . . .” (3).

While rhetorical scholars have been somewhat less inclined toward these images, generally focusing instead on the speakers and the speeches of the movement, there are several notable exceptions including Kathleen Hall Jameson who argued in her book, *Eloquence in an Electronic Age*, that the Civil Rights movement “was catalyzed not by eloquent words but by eloquent pictures” (56). Additionally, Christine Harold and Kevin Deluca examined the photographic image of Emmett Till’s corpse and concluded that it became “a crucial visual *vocabulary* that articulated the ineffable qualities of American racism in ways words simply could not do” (265). And Victoria Gallagher and Kenneth Zagacki demonstrated how artworks such as Norman Rockwell’s Civil Rights Paintings, published in the national magazine *Look*, operated rhetorically to *make visible* people and abstract concepts and thereby, “to articulate public knowledge, to illustrate the moral challenges facing citizens and to shape commemorative practices” (175).

Our purpose in this article is to expand on the work of these critics by further exploring visibility as a rhetorical function of photographic images through analysis of Civil Rights–related photographs. We narrow the scope of our exploration by examining a series of pictures appearing in *Life* magazine, in March 1965, showing the Selma to Montgomery, Alabama marches (and related demonstrations) and the violence which accompanied them. As David Lubin notes, in the 1950s and 1960s, *Life* magazine was considered “the most influential American middle-class magazine of the time, if not also the one with the largest readership” (67). In 1950, according to James Baughman’s exploration into “Who Read *Life*?” “an Alfred Politz market research study commissioned by Time, Inc. [the parent company for *Life*], estimated that over [a period of] thirteen weeks about half of all Americans, ten years and older, had seen one or more copies of *Life*. Four years later, Politz upped the cumulative audience to just over 60 percent” (42). And, in 1970, according to Erika Doss, *Life* was America’s “favorite magazine” with over 8 million subscribers and an estimated “pass along” rate of 4 to 5 people per copy (“Introduction: Looking at *Life*” 1). We can assume, therefore, that the Selma photographs were seen by a significant portion of the population, guaranteeing them a place in the public consciousness. However, simply knowing this does not, in and of itself, do much to illuminate the significance of these images. Adopting a rhetorical perspective focuses our attention on the formal characteristics, relationships, and contexts featured in the images. Moreover, by examining photographic works from a rhetorical perspective, we are able to demonstrate how visual images can work both to articulate and to shape public knowledge through offering interpretive and evaluative versions of who does what to whom, when and where. Thus, through our analysis we seek to answer the question: How is it that these photographs have such a powerful impact? Our thesis is that Civil Rights–related photographs functioned rhetorically to evoke the common humanity of blacks and whites in compelling and profound ways by enabling viewers to recognize—and confront the implications of—themselves, their values, and their habits in the actions and experiences of others. That these images did so, at a time when much white-authored rhetoric (including Congressional debates over civil rights–related legislation) depicted black people either as a faceless, abstract concept (“the Negro”) or as interlopers into the territory of rights existing outside the flow of democratic conduct, is central to their rhetorical significance, both at the time they appeared and in their current use in commemorative settings.<sup>1</sup>

Certainly, there is something about photography that makes it uniquely suited to rhetorical inquiry. Perhaps it is the immediacy of

a photograph, the way in which it captures moments of embodiment and enactment—moments that are both situated within an historical context and transcendent of that context—that makes photographs so compelling, so *rhetorical*. Gordon Parks, *Life*'s first African-American photographer, articulates this property of photography as follows: "I have come to believe that no art form transforms human apathy quicker than that of photography. Having absorbed the message of a memorable photograph, the viewer's sense of compassion and newfound wisdom come together like two lips touching. And it is an extraordinary thing when an unforgettable photograph propels you from an evil interlude to the conviction that there must be a better day" (7). Additionally, David Lubin, in his analysis of *Life* photographs of John and Jackie Kennedy, argues that such photographs are culturally and historically situated:

Iconic images such as these have generally received a free pass from careful visual and cultural analysis because they suppress their precedents and seem entirely natural. I'll grant you the obvious, that these images are famous because they show famous events, but only if we can add what's less obvious. And that is that these particular pictures, as opposed to other photos now forgotten, are famous even more because they look like or call to mind or somehow otherwise invoke and engage a wide range of previous pictures (and literatures and historical actors and events) that have already staked a claim on the cultural imagination. These images are not transparent, innocent and natural but rather *historical*—not because they offer eyewitness reports on history but rather because they have a history, are part of a history, and further extend that history. (xi-xii)

And Danielle Alan, in her book, *Talking with Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown vs. Board of Education*, argues that photographs of Elizabeth Eckford—the young African-American woman who, on 4 September 1957, was kept from entering Central High School in Little Rock Arkansas by an angry white mob—forced a "psychic transformation of the citizenry" and enabled U.S. citizens to discover something "about their own democracy, about democratic citizenship and about democracies in general" (3).

As with controversial speech making or discourse, photography sometimes presents us with subjects to which we may not wish to attend; in a way photographs may function to force us to look at subjects we have otherwise chosen to ignore, making us think about them and, even, imagine ourselves in their situation. Yet it is in its capacity to make things visible that photography functions transformatively, and thereby rhetorically, by mediating between the universal and

the particular, enabling viewers to experience epiphanic moments when issues, ideas, habits, and yearnings are crystallized into a single recognizable image. Indeed, as Allen points out, civil rights-related photography created moments of “epiphany” by exploding old myths and provoking new ways of thinking about “the nature of democratic citizenship” (9). In *Experiencing Creativity*, Robert Wilson explains this effect as follows: “A function of art is to clarify alternatives in human values, to hold the most comfortable assumptions people make about themselves up to radical questioning” (111). In the analysis that follows, then, we examine the way in which the civil rights-related March 1965 *Life* photographs functioned rhetorically in at least three ways. First they evoked common humanity by capturing moments of embodiment and enactment that challenged the established images of blacks in the minds of whites and held up for scrutiny assumptions and power relationships that had long been taken for granted. Allen suggests this function in her analysis of the photographs of Elizabeth Eckford, particularly the one showing Elizabeth in front of Central High School with a white crowd around her and a white young woman by the name of “Hazel” behind her angrily yelling: “Hazel was insisting on her habitual prerogatives (with power behind her to back up her demand), and Elizabeth was (realistically) acquiescing.... The irony of the photo, what gives it its immediate aesthetic charge, is that the two etiquettes of citizenship—the one of dominance, the other of acquiescence—that were meant to police the boundaries of the public sphere as a ‘whites-only space’ have instead become the highly scrutinized subject of the public sphere” (5). Second, the photographs evoked common humanity by creating recognition of others through *particularity*. The *Life* photographers visualized the tremendous obstacles confronting blacks in America, especially as they participated in public demonstrations, often with whites. We suggest that the *Life* photographs demonstrated how blacks who confronted oppression in the here-and-now might have experienced isolation and anxiety in the public places in which they found themselves. Finally, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, if the idea of democracy was taken for granted by whites for whom democratic participation remained largely unproblematic, the situation was vastly different for blacks. Many whites had come to understand democracy as a non-controversial concept at work; they could see this in the idealistic visual renderings of Hollywood cinema and Norman Rockwell *Saturday Evening Post* covers. However, the *Life* photographs reminded viewers that a large gap existed between abstract political concepts like democracy and what was actually occurring in American streets. The pictures showed that these concepts were

always relative to the individuals or groups whose lives were most directly influenced by their presence or absence.

We begin with a brief description of the artifacts and of the political and rhetorical contexts in which they first appeared. We then examine the three strategies of visibility within the photographs. We conclude with a discussion of the rhetorical potential of these images in commemorative contexts.

### **Black Images in White Minds: The *Life* Magazine Photographs**

On 7 March 1965 in Selma, Alabama, a march was organized to protest unfair voting practices in the South, which essentially denied Negro citizens the right to vote. A bill before Congress (designed to strengthen previous bills) was stalled in committee and organizers were hoping to get it moving again through demonstrations such as the march in Selma. However, then-governor of Alabama, George Wallace, refused to allow the march, with the excuse that it would disrupt traffic. Instead, he sent policemen and state troopers to “disperse” the protestors. The resulting violence, described as “bloody Sunday” by the *New York Times*, was widely reported and, in response, a second march and related demonstrations were organized in and around Selma and Montgomery. These events were the subject of several photographs, which appeared in two issues of *Life* magazine during March 1965.

Although the coverage by other news media also had an effect on the public at the time (the following weekend the bill was drafted and Congressmen made appeals for its passage which referred to the march and its coverage in the media),<sup>2</sup> the *Life* photographs are unique in terms of their visibility and significance over time. Part of the reason for this rests with the phenomenon that was *Life* magazine and the visual culture it helped to create and of which it was a part. Erika Doss has examined the intent behind the development of *Life* magazine: “Recognizing the vast appeal of visual culture . . . Luce and *Life*’s editors seized on pictures as the ideal modern means to influence ‘men’s minds’” (“Introduction: Looking at *Life*” 11). They understood the structuring of visual experience through photography as “a new language, difficult, as yet unmastered, but incredibly powerful,” to the extent that it was capable of enlightening and instructing its viewers, and, ultimately, of shaping and directing popular opinion. Indeed, Doss argues that

*Life* was a major part of an admittedly paradoxical mainstream modernist aesthetic, blending its pictures, editorials, articles, and ads in a

decidedly contemporary graphics style that emphasized dynamism and flux and yet also, ironically, aimed at social and cultural cohesion and unity. Particularly in the postwar period, *Life's* style of 'corporate modernism' aimed at a synthesis of seeing with belief, combining visuality with consumerism and nationalism, and attempting to diffuse, or efface, the tensions of class, race, and social conflict in America." ("Introduction: Looking at *Life*" 11)

But beyond contributing to *Life's* role in the development of visual culture, the Selma photographs are notable because they provide compelling images of real people in all their individuality and immediacy. This was essential to their rhetorical influence, as our analysis demonstrates, and also, at least somewhat intentional. Reflecting back on his career at *Life*, Gordon Parks remarked that photography helped him to "expose the evils of racism, the evils of poverty, the discrimination and the bigotry, by showing the people who suffered the most under it" (226). Doss, in an essay on Parks, notes that "Many of his *Life* photo-essays bore a moral agenda of reimagining black representation and rectifying the decades of oppression that he, and millions of other black Americans, experienced" ("Visualizing Black America" 226). "To an extent," she continues, "Park's agenda fit with *Life's* own moralizing tendencies to tell the truth 'in a language of pictures' and by so doing, to shape and direct an overall vision of a progressive democratic society" ("Visualizing Black America" 226). At the same time, however, both Parks and the photographers of the Selma marches and demonstrations, affirmed pictorial objectivity. According to Doss, Parks asserted during an interview for *Ebony* magazine that "The photographer's job isn't to change these things; he just shows them up as they are, and the people take it from there" ("Visualizing Black America" 227). And Charles Moore, the chief photographer at the *Montgomery Adviser* and one of the contributors of the Selma pictures, is quoted by Kasher as remembering, "The newspaper tried very hard to portray everything fairly. It could have ignored the civil rights story; a very conservative paper would have said, 'We're giving this troublemaker King too much publicity. Let's ignore him. Maybe it will die down.' Well, the Montgomery paper didn't do that" (7). In fact, typically, according to Wendy Kozol, "*Life* did not give credit to . . . either a writer or photographer with a byline" (160). In addition, she notes, "it was the editors, not the photographers, at *Life* who had the power of selection and layout . . . photographers rarely participated in writing the text, a crucial part of anchoring meanings to visual images" (160). In the case of the Selma photographs, the names of the photographers/contributors were listed on the index page of the magazine



by page number and in addition to Charles Moore, included Frank Dandridge, an African American, and another white photographer, Flip Schulke, who freelanced for *Life*.

The pictures themselves, most of them in black and white, depict individuals singly, in groups of twos and threes, and/or in larger groups.<sup>3</sup> Of the eight photographs we analyze here, one set shows black people being charged by a phalanx of policemen while white males cheer them on, silhouetted against a backdrop of billboards (“Free Cash with Stamps,” “Chick-n-Treat”) and automobiles. In one of these pictures, a black protestor—a woman—has obviously fallen to the ground and is seen groping for help as a white policeman stands over her, nightstick at the ready. This set of photographs is attributed to Charles Moore and placed horizontally across two pages (30–31) in the 19 March 1965 issue of *Life*. Another set is of two men, one black (photographed by Flip Schulke) and one white (photographed by Charles Moore). The pictures are close-ups of the men’s faces and they are placed on the magazine pages (pgs. 36–37 of the 19 March 1965 issue) as if the two men are facing one another. The black man’s head is wrapped in a bandage, his eyes cast down to the right corner of the page. He is wearing a button that reads “Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee—We Shall Overcome.” The white man is wearing a riot helmet that completely shades his eyes, virtually blacking them out in the picture. His nose and mouth are visible, however, and there is a lit cigar clamped in his mouth. He wears a pin on the collar of his dark-colored dress shirt bearing the letters S.P.D. (Selma Police Department). Another set of photographs, which appeared in the 26 March 1965 issue of *Life* (pg. 34) and are attributed to Flip Schulke, documents the second march that was organized in response to the brutality of the first. In these, a white woman—the wife of an Illinois senator—is shown marching with mostly Negro citizens and a white man to her left who is perhaps the senator himself; in a second picture we see her with a white-gloved hand on Martin Luther King, Jr.’s shoulder, face to face, in close proximity with him, a sympathetic, respectful look on her face. In another photo, also attributed to Schulke (pgs. 32–33), white clergymen in clerical garb kneel to pray, silhouetted against a bright sky with wisps of clouds. In the foreground, a white man’s hand, most likely that of a policeman, clutches a nightstick. The angle of the photograph is such that the butt of the nightstick is horizontally positioned above the heads of some of the kneeling clergy; both the night-stick and the person holding it appear, therefore, to be much larger in stature than the clergy who are kneeling, seemingly under it, in a position of vulnerability. A final set of pictures in *Life* from 26 March 1965 (pgs. 36–37) shows white and black people being

pursued and beaten with nightsticks by white men on horseback. The largest picture in this set, the one we analyze here, is of a young black woman helping a white man who has clearly been injured (there is blood on his shirt and blood running down his neck). She is holding a white cloth to the side of his face that is turned from the camera, although he seems to be smiling at her, showing some form of appreciation. Her eyes show concern and care as she apparently gives aid and comfort. This photograph is attributed to Charles Moore.

## Rhetorical Analysis

### *Disregarding Established Caricatures/Scrutinizing Assumptions*

Visual images like the *Life* photographs made visible the common humanity of Americans by interrogating established caricatures and overturning inferior, threatening, or otherwise demeaning character tropes. According to Grace Elizabeth Hale, racially inscribed visual images of the time period from 1890–1940 were central to the establishment of the culture of segregation in the South to begin with. These images conveyed contradictions and evoked “oppositions like white racial supremacy, white racial innocence, and white racial dependency more easily and persuasively than a carefully plotted story” (7–8). Hale’s work shows how the distribution of visual images helped to originate such caricatures and thereby worked to mask oppressive power relationships within the culture.

Yet, visual images also create epiphanic moments by contributing to an unfolding process of articulation and interaction that enable an “other” to become known as a human being with specific and acceptable human traits and qualities (Gallagher and Zagacki 2005). More specifically, as the photographer Pirkle Jones notes about pictures he and his wife, Ruth-Marion Baruch, took of the Black Panthers in the 1960s: “We showed them as human beings, with all of their admirable traits and desires” (*Tavis Smiley Show*). This contrasted with the often one-dimensional portrayals of the Black Panther movement as violent anarchists promulgated in the press during that period, which also informed the racist attitudes of many whites. To a certain extent, the process of identifying the other with the viewer challenges pre-conceptions about the nature of otherness because the traits and qualities of the stereotyped other seem to represent the nature of all members of a society being depicted. At the same time, in the *Life* photographs, as we shall demonstrate, if any person or group was seen as transgressing or violating social principles and therefore as constituting a real

threat to social order or standing outside of it, it was the white police officers one views. Sometimes they were photographed in close up, sometimes from a distance, and sometimes lurking just outside of or at the borders of the photographs, as if the photojournalists were trying to depict them as agents of an oppressive and corrupt police-state waiting to attack.

Hence, the *Life* photographs used contrast to get viewers to re-think the dynamics of political power, its uses and abuses, and to explode old myths and instantiate new social realities. In the photographs, blacks were portrayed as decidedly unthreatening—their eyes were cast down or filled with concern, they were kneeling in prayer or caring for others, they were unarmed and outnumbered. Although some whites were also shown in these ways (the kneeling clergy, the injured white man, and Mrs. Douglas), many of the whites in the pictures were armed; their expressions angry, curious, even gleeful. They were disembodied (the close up of the policeman with the cigar and the foregrounding of another policeman's raised arm and night stick) and, as the photograph of the armed policeman looming over the unarmed, praying clergy suggested, threatening. These emotions and signs of physical domination contrasted starkly with and seemed out of proportion to the marchers' visible emotions and actions. None of the marchers' faces revealed anger or contemptuousness or hate. The marchers in these pictures were not fighting back nor were they showing any signs of physical aggression. Instead they were photographed engaged in activities and stances that demonstrated devoutness, care, and certainly, courage. As art historian Gretchen Sullivan Sorin points out, "Mainstream magazines like *Life* and *Look* brought people face-to-face with the courage of demonstrators," using the photographer's lens to frame the violence of attacks on peaceful protestors (17).

The *Life* photographs also subsumed and disregarded the terms of the debate over the Civil Rights Act. At the risk of over-generalization, the transcripts of the Congressional debates occurring at the time reveal two distinct views on the Act, which accorded with two distinct ways of depicting Negroes. There were those who supported the act and who saw its passage as the only avenue through which conditions for Negroes could be improved and a base of equality established. In opposition to this view was that which saw the passage of the Act as a dangerous step towards a communist or paternalistic form of government. The belief that issues of morality concerning human nature could not and should not be government-regulated also informed the debates. As one Congressman commented: "My section of the country, with its large Negro population, is going to receive the harshest effects of this bill. My people, who have elected me to represent their views,

say that they do not believe in this kind of law; they believe, as I do, that we cannot legislate morality or reason and we cannot eliminate by injunction the conflicts of human nature" (Hearings, 563).

In either case, the debate suggested that the formulation of a public moral code through legislation was undesirable, if not impossible, and revealed a view of "Negroes" as distinct entities separate from white citizens. Thus when the Congressman referred to the people who had elected him, their beliefs, their goals, and the harsh effects of the bill, he was concerned with a group of people separate from and not inclusive of the "large Negro population." Separating the two in this manner created a bifurcation which reinforced the notion of Negroes, as different from "one's own" (Hearings, 364).

By contrast, the *Life* pictures revealed "otherness" in that they showed gradations of skin color and, in addition, submission by primarily dark skinned marchers to primarily light skinned enforcers. They also took these two aspects of the bifurcated image set up by the opponents of the Civil Rights Act and confronted viewers with shared humanity and, by extension, a shared right to humane treatment. In other words, these images did not necessarily depict the idea that, as Allen puts it, "a democratic people should become one" (12), that whites and blacks should turn into a single homogeneous people. Rather, the photos imagined the people as "whole," a concept that provides "coherence and integrity of a consolidated but complex, intricate, and differentiated body" (17). The pictures suggested the creation of a "whole" people whose interests revolved around primordial and shared human concerns, such as the need for comfort and trust. Allen refers to this as "a transformation of the citizenship of dominance and acquiescence into a single more truly democratic citizenship shared by all citizens, through which we would aspire to make the citizenry not one but whole, mutually trusting and therefore healthy" (18).

This was most clearly accomplished in the photographs of Dr. King and Mrs. Douglas and of the injured white man being aided by the young black woman. These photographs brought into sharp relief the sameness or similarity of the dark skinned and light skinned people—they were engaged in the same activities, visibly in sympathy with one another—revealing otherness as inconsequential even as they maintained diverse cultural roots and practices. Implicit here was the idea that the Civil Rights movement was a coherent entity, an eclectic but "healthy" group of individuals who were strengthened and comforted in the face of racism by the common goals they shared. In particular, the black woman assisting the wounded man represented more than the reversal of patterns of domination and

acquiescence, a state of affairs that would merely unite blacks and whites by virtue of shared experience. Instead, the image displayed a moment of “transformation” during which this pattern was disrupted and “healthier” modes of social interaction came into being.

Stated differently, photojournalists point to these relatively rare moments of transformation in history, drawing them together and therefore increasing the possibility of future transformations. Indeed, the power of such photographs derives in part from their resonance or their ability to capture the universal in the particular moment, as other artists have done. As David Lubin might observe, one can discern in the picture of the wounded white man being assisted by the young black woman the lineaments of Christian iconography, particularly the famous “Pieta.” Susan Sontag has written in her “Looking at War: Photography’s View of Devastation and Death,” that “To feel the pulse of Christian iconography in certain wartime or disaster-time photographs is not a [mere] sentimental projection” (94). Indeed, a letter to the editor published in a subsequent edition of *Life* attested to the rhetorical power of these photographs to reveal shared humanity in an appropriate manner:

if at times history and fate meet at a single time in a single place to shape a turning point, the *Life’s* picture of the meeting of Mrs. Paul Douglas and the Rev. Martin Luther King at Selma, AL has captured the essence of this hour’s turning point. When enough of us have reached the place where these two stand, then this American problem will have found an answer. (Letter to the Editor, 18)

### *Creating Recognition Through Particularity*

As indicated earlier, visual images in the popular media have tended to “naturalize” the accepted experience of blacks as reality and disguise the social context in which institutions such as slavery or Jim Crow developed. Yet, as we also suggested earlier, images may disclose *particular* aspects of human beings as they confront the world in the here-and-now. A rhetorical perspective shows how images interrogate viewers so as to invoke self-awareness about the conscious lived experience of others as it relates to the viewer or as the viewer might have responded morally to the particular time and space in which others find themselves. The epiphany here concerns coming to know the other and the self as existing in an otherwise unacknowledged moment in history. As Hariman and Lucaites argue about this “visualizing” power of iconic photography, since the public is “a body of strangers constituted solely by the acts of being addressed and

paying attention, it can only acquire self-awareness and historical agency if individual auditors 'see themselves' in the collective representations that are the material of public culture" (364–365). At the same time, as Hariman and Lucaites point out, visual images "continually interpellate audiences and typically model preferred forms of response" and "can structure consciousness in ways that are not reducible to determinations of influence on specific policy decisions" (364).

In terms of the rhetorical image created in the discourse of supporters of the Civil Rights Act, the *Life* photographs brought what had been previously invisible, in light of the abstract, de-personalized nature of the rhetoric, into clear focus. Negro people became visible in their particularity—they were no longer simply a removed abstraction, but were clearly individuals engaged in the social world. One way this was accomplished in the photographs was through the framing of the subjects, particularly the use of close-ups and the focus on individual faces and expressions. As Jamieson suggests, seeing people's faces close at hand establishes a sense of intimacy and recognition since, normally, we would only get that close to the faces of our children, our spouses, and our dearest friends (62). In addition, in the picture of King and Mrs. Douglas, the stance and height of the two were approximately equivalent, balanced. Similarly, while the white police officer was shown in extreme close-up, emphasizing his angry facial expression and the angular, hard-edged SPD lapel pin, the black man on the facing page was shot from a little further out, highlighting the differences in facial demeanor and allowing a lucid view of the round, stamped, comparatively benign looking button of the SPLC. In the picture of the injured white man being assisted by the black woman, again the height of the two people was approximately equivalent, as was their dress. In fact, there was equivalency in the type of dress that both black and white marchers were wearing in each of the pictures, contrasting with the uniforms of the police. In the picture of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mrs. Douglas, she had on a hat, gloves, and pearls, signs of class and respectability. King looked equally respectable in his suit and tie. The attire worn by the people and the ministers (in their clericals) created a visual trope of "good church people" recognizable to *Life's* viewers and in stark contrast to the foreboding presence of the uniformed police. It thereby accentuated the *particular* condition of blacks in the American south, an experience heretofore largely under-appreciated by white audiences. Blacks were singled out and harassed even as they, like white Americans, sought to worship or gather freely. But, at the same time, those pictured remained courageous and determined to endure this persecution in order to realize their democratic rights.

It is also interesting to note that all of the pictures were taken outside where the strict color line was difficult to enforce except *through* physical force and therefore, more likely to be exposed as an arbitrary, cultural convention. As Hale points out, people who thought of themselves as “white” produced their own mass cultural identity across divisions of class, gender, region, and religion and rendered its whiteness invisible at the same time.

Focusing on the visible, they attempted to control both the geographical and representational mobility of nonwhites. African Americans were clearly inferior in the South because they occupied inferior spaces like Jim Crow cars, often literally marked as colored, and across the nation because they appeared at fairs, in advertisements, and in movies as visibly inferior characters. Yet whites made modern racial meaning not just by creating boundaries but also by crossing them. Containing the mobility of others allowed whites to put on blackface, to play with and project upon darkness, to let whiteness float free. These transgressions characterized and broadened modern whiteness, increasing its invisibility and its power. (8)

By the 1960s, however, although whites could make and enforce colored restrooms, waiting areas, entrances and so on in contained spaces through means other than direct physical force, their attempts to do so in the world out-of-doors proved much more difficult. Similarly, photographers in the early years of the Civil Rights movement focused primarily on public transportation since, according to Helen Shannon, “Trains, buses, and trolleys, unlike restricted restaurants, hotels and stores, were ironically some of the few public spaces of segregation that were actually occupied by both blacks and whites. As a result, the very arbitrary division of the races within a shared space illustrated the absurdity of this social construction” (22). Representing cases of segregation in other public accommodations would have meant compellingly portraying the non-presence of blacks, a difficult task.

The reaction of one Congressional member to televised media images of the march illustrates the power of such images to focus attention and create recognition of individuals in their particularity:

Last night I sat in my living room and viewed on my television screen the pictures of the brutality of Alabama police acting under the orders of the Governor who is quoted to have said, in effect, that they should take whatever action was necessary to stop that march. . . . As I watched the television screen last night and saw Negro women beaten to the ground; when I observed the nature of the blows that were struck on the heads

and the bodies of Negroes by white, bigoted, racist policemen, I shuddered to think that that could come to pass in any state in my country in the year 1965 (Congressional Record—Senate, 4350)

Wilson describes this focusing further: "...it [art] focuses the attention and sharpens awareness in a way nonaesthetic experience rarely ever does.... That is, the work of art has a coherence and pointedness that contrasts sharply with relatively formless flux of everyday life, and hence, seems to us more meaningful and tangible" (116–117).

### *Making Abstract Concepts Knowable*

Finally, a related and central function of pictorial rhetoric is the evocation of humanity by moving beyond abstract or idealistic categories to depictions of social experience that are recognizable to common audiences and that add moral import to the decisions or developments before them. As Michael Warner observes, visual images give "concrete shape to the interactivity of those who have no idea with whom they interact" and to abstract notions such as personal rights (57). By the same token, Hariman and Lucaites argue that such images re-articulate basic American values and beliefs in compelling visual form: "Concepts such as citizenship, emotions such as love of country, acts such as public advocacy, and practices such as critical reflection can only be taken up by others if they also provide some basis for identification, some grounding in the positive content of lived experience. The abstract forms of civic life have to be filled in with vernacular signs of social membership" (365). Allen adds that an old myth of citizenship is that it consists primarily of duties such as voting, paying taxes, and serving on juries or in the military, duties which, with the possible exception of paying taxes and military service, place a relatively small burden on Americans. Functioning as epiphanies, however, civil rights photographs like the *Life* images reveal the more demanding challenges of citizenship:

Political order is secured not only by institutions, but also by 'deep rules' that prescribe specific interactions among citizens in public spaces; citizens enact what they are to each other not only in assemblies... but also when, as strangers, they speak to one another, or don't, or otherwise respond to each other's presence. (10)

We suggest that the *Life* photographs drew attention to these "deep rules"—that is, to the concrete implications of racial inequality in American democracy and ways of dealing with it, to white-on-black



violence, and to examples of courage, compassion, and moral tenacity while answering the questions: What was the concrete relationship between civil rights and democracy? What was the human cost of establishing a de-segregated society? How was democracy “enacted” on the streets of the American South? For example, unarmed but obviously courageous black people were shown apparently attacked from behind by helmeted and armed police officers against a backdrop of “Chick-n-Treat, Home of Big Micky Burger” and “Kayo Gas for Less” billboards and 1950s cars. Black and white people in church clothes, clergymen, and people walking unarmed in public areas were molested by officers sworn to protect citizens. These images made visible abstract concepts such as democracy and freedom by showing their opposites, what Allen calls the “two different political etiquettes directed together toward the restoration of order” (10). If the backdrops to these activities had been unfamiliar, if they had been on some foreign battlefield, their impact might have been very different. But the familiarity of the setting, the fact that it was daylight, all suggested that the very basic conditions of democracy in a capitalist society, in which people were free to buy burgers and gas in peace without fear of unprovoked persecution, had been violated.

So, in answer to the inquiries concerning the concrete relationship between civil rights and democracy and the human cost of establishing a de-segregated society, the images of white male police officers engaged in brutality and savagery rather than protection and defense of the innocent, shocked viewers into recognizing the contradiction between the American dream of freedom and the oppression that exists/ed for Negroes *in the real world*. As one Congressman put it: “When the law enforcement officials in the United States of America find it necessary to turn on a peaceable group of citizens, who have no weapons and who indicate no signs of violence, find it necessary to use nightsticks, tear gas and whips to attack and brutalize these citizens, then the very foundation and root of our American democracy is in jeopardy” (Congressional Record—Senate, 4350).

The *Life* photographs, then, presented society with a new set of images and a more explicitly articulated set of “deep rules” concerning the relationship between blacks and whites, images that served as a mirror reflecting each viewer and his or her beliefs. Of course, like most photographic imagery, and perhaps unlike most non-stop imagery (television, streaming video, movies), the *Life* pictures etched a piece of history into the viewer’s memory. As Sontag explains, “Memory freeze-frames; its basic unit is the single image. In an era of information overload, the photograph provides a quick way of apprehending something and a compact form for memorizing it.

The photograph is like a quotation, or a maxim or proverb" (87). The risk, of course, is that one remembers only that moment and not the moments that came before and after—the justification for and the applicability of the morale, as it were. Yet, we have suggested that the power of the *Life* photographs resided in their ability to make visible real history, thereby sparking viewers to enthymematically "fill in" missing information about the past and the future. As Sullivan-Sorin argues, "each of these works places us in the position of facing the events head-on and examining our own prejudices. We are asked to consider our own involvement or passivity in the violence visited on some Americans by other Americans. Which side would each of us choose?" (76).

In other words, by asking viewers to make a choice, the *Life* pictures appealed to a basic kind of knowledge about democracy that exists in the public sphere, that can only be known in and through social practice, and that invariably influences the future. All choice necessarily impacts the future. This knowledge allows people to "know" concepts such as freedom and democracy and the extent to which we take them for granted and are willing to sacrifice on their behalf in the real world of social praxis. It is this knowing that visibility appeals to by making things recognizable and by prompting future behavior. The images make us recognizable to one another providing the possibility of breaking out of the social realm of enforced norms and limited recognitions and into the realm where rhetorical efforts can achieve significance, even a shared public voice.

## Implications and Conclusions

The analysis in this article establishes the extent to which photographs appearing in *Life* during the civil rights activism of the 1950s and 1960s were rhetorically powerful because they provided visibility to people who had been discounted or made invisible by white-authored rhetoric. The photographs, in other words, made visible to people how they/we in fact have behaved toward one another, in the flow of everyday life. Thus, despite the passage of time, the brutality unleashed against unarmed and visibly non-threatening people as depicted in the images makes us cringe still today. They reveal the power of rhetoric to create a truth and falsity that contradicts our basic "knowledge" of freedom and oppression. Yet at the same time, the images give us hope by showing us how visibility can provide access to a public voice for those previously denied access both by law and by practice, a voice that evokes the moral conscience of viewers. As a letter to the editor in a subsequent *Life* issue put it,

Your excellent coverage of events in Selma, AL hurts, but it is always unpleasant to be awakened from a complacent dream. Now we Southerners are presented with quite another picture of ourselves—and the shock is great. But the real horror to me is that so many white Southerners as yet feel no shame—only resentment and hatred. It seems to me that surely we must first feel the shame before we can begin to overcome the pain. (Letters to the Editor, 18)

Part of the reason these images were able to have such a clear and significant effect is that their form—the non-allegorical, immediacy of photo-realism—was still somewhat novel to the citizens of the time. As David Halberstam (1993) notes, the fifties were “captured in black and white, most often by still photographs” whereas the sixties were caught in living color and on tape (*The Fifties* ix). Viewers saw people’s faces in their human particularity—they saw them beating and being beaten, being brutal and being vulnerable, being courageous and being cowardly, being hateful and being compassionate, and so on, in a visual form that was difficult to deny. As a result, viewers encountered what Allen calls “The hard truth of democracy,” which is “that some citizens are always giving up for others” (29). Perhaps in acknowledgement of this fact, negatively critical letters to the editor of *Life* at the time did not address the photographs—rather they referred to “errors” or “inconsistencies” in the text accompanying the pictures. As such letters suggest, the prospects of confronting the images created by the photographs—the particularity of the moment that they captured—not only of Negroes, but by reflection, the white marchers and the police, were too difficult for some people. It also seems to reflect a basic feeling about photographs: They don’t lie, they cannot be contradicted.

The *Life* photographs not only made meaning for people and their leaders in the context of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. They have also appeared in museums, books, photography collections, and newspapers as part of commemorative displays. Of course, as Hariman and Lucaites suggest, once they are transformed into cultural “icons” such images are in fact vulnerable to manipulation, since the ideological import pertaining to a picture’s original context can easily be transferred to another context where appropriateness may be less clear.<sup>4</sup> Due to new communication and information technologies, popular images can be digitized, enlarged, layered, reproduced, recontextualized to make new meanings in shifting contexts. But such images can still provoke reflection, as was the case when several other *Life* photographs and a number of artistic renderings of the Selma march recently appeared in a special exhibit at the Smithsonian Museum on Washington, D.C., called, “In the Spirit

of Martin: The Living Legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.” Billed as one of the few exhibits on any subject to mix news photography with artwork on an equal footing, the exhibit featured a variety of works that cast Dr. King as a martyr and reflect on (racial) violence in American society.<sup>5</sup> Other featured works explored King’s position as an icon of popular culture or a source of African American pride. Collectively, the images problematized Dr. King’s legacy and the way in which he, and the Civil Rights Movement he represented, are remembered and celebrated from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century.

There are some limitations, however, to the rhetorical and commemorative potential of these images. First, although the photographs make visible they also conceal, particularly the reluctance, fear, and hesitancy that was certainly a part of the activism for many. The images, in other words, can oversimplify or reduce heroic acts, so that the deeper context in which the images are set becomes increasingly significant but not well articulated by the photographs themselves. For instance, depending on the commemorative context in which it is set, the photograph of the young black woman showing care toward the injured white protestor might be perceived as a facile, overly sentimental rendering of politically engaged black agents, in effect emasculating black rage by substituting stereotypes of compassionate black women.

At the same time, as indicated earlier, the visual portrayal of dramatic acts of heroism, some of them closely connected in one fashion or another to acts of defiance and even violence, tend to fixate a viewer’s gaze on what we might call the “in-betweenness” of social protest, where dissenters and the establishment seem locked in a dramatic struggle, the ultimate outcome of which is never made visible but only hinted at. Thus a second possible limitation is the extent to which such images substitute one set of rhetorical actions for what is in fact a large and sophisticated compliment of social protest strategies, at least some of which unfold as the social movement itself evolves in real time or at alternative destinations far away from the picture-taking event. As Foss and Domenici suggest, the reductionist, temporally suspending nature of photographs “may keep transformative rhetorical possibilities from emerging” (254).

Third, as Sontag points out, the global accumulation of photographs like those displayed in *Life* and shown in contemporary commemorative sites, often along-side images of other peoples’ suffering, “may spur people to feel . . . that the suffering and the misfortunes are too vast, too irrevocable, too epic to be changed by any local, political intervention. With a subject conceived on this scale, compassion can only flounder—and make abstract. But all politics, like all history, is concrete” (94).

Finally, Sontag argues that while photographs help people to “remember,” they remember “only the photographs. This remembering through photographs eclipses other forms of understanding—and remembering . . . . To remember is, more and more, not to recall a story but to be able to call up a picture” (94). In other words, in “remembering” we also risk conflating the political content of an image with its aesthetic form.

On the other hand, our analysis demonstrates that the *Life* photographs remain visually eloquent in that they are representations of historically significant events and that they activated and have the potential to activate strong emotional responses about people *in the particularity* of their life circumstances and in specific locales. Those responses tend to be specified by both the visual content of the photographs and by the discursive context in which they are placed. They are articulated and re-articulated, but always function to hold up for scrutiny what we value and/or ought to value, our habits or “etiquettes of citizenship” as Allen might put it. In this sense, despite their reductionist tendencies, photographs are especially relevant as modes of invention because they can help viewers visualize the moral topoi of a rhetor, their own moral responsibilities, and the specific practices by which these topoi/responsibilities can be realized in the social world. Allen, for example, notes that photographs of Elizabeth Eckford walking through crowds of protestors who were harassing her provoked political epiphanies, so that:

real, and not merely symbolic, reconstitution might occur. It was her way, the only one available to her, of talking to strangers. Quiet at the center of all that yelling, she could not be heard, nor would those immediately around her listen. Yet walking silently she was also, all the while, talking to strangers, and so provid[ing] an example of the powerful inventiveness that belongs to true democratic citizenship. (23–24)

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, these photographs showed ordinary people, black and white, acting humanely and, in that sense, overcoming stereotypes rather than sustaining them or recreating them. The picture of the black woman *unexpectedly* comforting the white man did not so much create a new “emasculated” stereotype as it drew upon the pre-existing and deeply embedded “good Samaritan” narrative, a narrative about people acting humanely toward others. Brought up-to-date, this is a potentially transformative narrative, for it forces the reader/viewer to ask whether he or she

would act similarly in a modern, racially inscribed context. The “story” revealed in the *Life* photographs did not deny the black woman’s anger or challenge her right to experience it. Rather, it depicted her in a moment of transformation, putting her rage aside, if only temporarily, to act on her greater humanity.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>This type of discourse is exemplified by the following excerpt from Congressional Debates the year preceding the Selma marches:

Mr Chairman, it takes little in the way of examination or imagination to see the proposals in this bill respecting Federal aid projects to States and communities, public schools, and public accommodations would thrust the long arm of the Federal authority right up the shoulder of the State, local, business, and personal affairs, even as the military is already telling private citizens that they must take Negro customers, boarders, patrons, and clients, like it or not. These provisions would rob American’s of precious liberties apparently on the theory that it is a desirable shortcut to the achievement of equality by Negroes. (Hearings before the Committee on Rules, House of Representatives, Civil Rights, H.R. 7152, 88th Congress, 1964 m, p. 563)

<sup>2</sup>See “An American Tragedy, *Newsweek* (22 March 1965), p. 21. The article gives a complete summary of the draft of the bill completed the weekend immediately following the Selma march. *Life* magazine ran stories about the Selma marches in back-to-back March issues that tied President Johnson’s pivotal speech in support of the bill to the photographs and other media coverage of the Selma march. And Senators referred to television coverage of the marches as impacting their view in the Senatorial debate over the bills, see Congressional Record – Senate, “Disorder in Selma, AL,” 9 March 1965, p. 4504.

<sup>3</sup>The description of the pictures that follows was re-written after a long and frustrating effort to receive permission to reprint the photographs themselves with the article. Black Star, a photo agency with a long and respected history, represents the photographers and their work. Unfortunately, the agency charges a minimum of \$300 for reprints of each civil rights-related photograph, making the cost of reprinting quite prohibitive. In our description of the artifacts, therefore, we strive to provide a brief written sketch of each picture we analyze—relying on the analysis itself to provide added dimension—and also describe its relation to others on the page and in the subsequent issue of the magazine. More importantly, we strive to provide information that will assist readers in locating the images via library resources to which they may have access.

<sup>4</sup>As Hariman and Lucaites argue, “Photojournalistic icons operate as powerful resources within a public culture, not because of their fixed meaning, but rather because they artistically coordinate available structures of identification within a performative space open to continued and varied articulation” (387).

<sup>5</sup>For a summary of this exhibit, see “In the Spirit of Martin: The Living Legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.” <[http://www.sites.si.edu/exhibitions/exhibit\\_main\\_print.asp?id=60](http://www.sites.si.edu/exhibitions/exhibit_main_print.asp?id=60)>.

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