Leonard Freed's Black in White America

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Leonard Freed’s *Black in White America*

By

Jennifer Cherry Wilkinson

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Thesis sponsor:

December 21, 2016  Maria Antonella Pelizzari
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Date              Signature of Second Reader
For my parents, Alexander “Sandy” and Louise Cherry Wilkinson
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First, I would like to underscore that following thesis is a direct result of a course supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation’s grant to the Art History department at the City University of New York’s Graduate Center, which made research at the Magnum Archives in New York and New Jersey possible for a small group of students in the fall of 2015. Led by Professor Maria Antonella Pelizzari, along with International Center of Photography curator Kristen Lubben and photographer Susan Miselas, this course focused on the photo essay: what constitutes it and how it appeared in various historical contexts, as well as the theoretical issues of authorship, language, and representation that are essential to its interpretation. Without the offsite visits this course provided, my fellow classmates and I would have never had the opportunity to learn hands-on about how a story is created, do original archival research, or discuss the form of the photo essay with renowned critics and celebrated photographers.

While the class was my introduction to Leonard Freed’s work and *Black in White America*, it was thanks to Magnum’s own Matt Murphy that I was introduced to the photographer’s widow, Brigitte Freed. Brigitte generously hosted me at her home twice while I was writing, opening Leonard’s archives to me, answering any questions I had, and sharing with me over many hours (and delicious meals) the history of her and Leonard’s life during the 1960s. The access I was granted was a scholar’s dream, however I would have been much less successful in navigating the archives and other historical materials essential to my research had I not been able to speak with Paul Farber about my project. Brigitte, Paul: I thank you both very much for your bountiful assistance.
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Introduction

[S]uppose we thought about representation, not in terms of a particular kind of object (like a statue or a painting) but as a kind of activity, process, or set of relationships?

W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*¹

The task of an alternative photography is to incorporate photography into social and political memory, instead of using it as a substitute which encourages the atrophy of any such memory.

John Berger, *About Looking*²

The visual impact of the 2010 paperback edition of Leonard Freed’s *Black in White America* begins the moment a reader lays eyes on its cover, which displays a photograph of a young African American boy posing to have his picture taken.³ With his mouth firmly closed and his right arm bent above his head, he shows off his bicep for his audience. (Fig. 1) A second child’s arm, arranged in a similar position, runs parallel to this portrait, filling a third of the image. Partially obscured by the book’s title and slightly out of focus, this foregrounded form functions primarily as a compositional element. Together, the two arms frame the visible child’s face. A four-story brownstone building in the distance, blurry and overexposed, serves as a backdrop for the boy’s visage and upper torso.

Liquid glistens on the child’s forehead and the bridge of his nose, underneath his eyes and along his temple. While these are not beads of sweat but remnants from a recent spin in the pool behind, the image is cropped in such a way that it is nearly impossible to ascertain that the

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small white field in the bottom left corner of the photograph is a body of water. This context is almost incidental, as the focus rests entirely with the scowling black boy who looks down, out of the corners of his eyes, and directly into the crouching white man’s camera. With droplets lining his face, the child is simultaneously tough and delicate; his arm—like that of his friend—is lean and the curve of his shoulder is both strong and graceful.

This photograph is drawn from a 35 mm. roll of film that presents an extensive sequence of playful poses struck by two boys at a New York City pool on a summer day in 1963. In most frames from the corresponding contact sheet, the boys are horsing around or laughing, clearly enjoying the attention of Leonard Freed’s camera. Significantly, none of this light and joyful tone comes through in the image chosen by Freed for reproduction in *Black in White America*, which captures the boy as he would have liked to be seen—robust and rebellious. (Fig. 2) This image has become iconic of the project, reproduced in various media, throughout Freed’s life and after.

The poignant contradictions of this haunting image underscore the lesson at the heart of Freed’s project: that the camera is a flawed yet essential tool for documentation and communication. No matter how close he gets, the white photographer will never be able to know or fully portray the experience of his black subject. At best, his film will record a fleeting moment, capturing the complex relationship between that subject and the camera’s operator.

Nevertheless, this thesis argues that Freed’s *Black in White America*, which investigates this dynamic through a range of images and texts, is an exceptional artwork, highly valuable both for understanding the numerous ways photography creates meaning and for its unique utilization of

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4 The reproduction is cropped even further than in Freed’s first edition of his book, on page 72. This subtle difference speaks to the compositional changes that a photograph can undergo, even when the intentions of those reproducing the image are to remain true to the photographer’s original intent.
the photo book format for creating an alternate history of the Civil Rights movement and the lives of all those impacted by it.

Thus the aforementioned photo is a useful introduction to the politics and aesthetics that one associates with this photographer’s work. However Freed was not responsible for the photograph’s placement on his book’s cover, as he had passed away four years prior to the release of its second edition. This exception of the cover aside, the entirety of *Black in White America*, which is notable for its creative design throughout, is perfectly reproduced in the re-release.

Freed’s handling of book’s original cover is deceptively simple: the first edition presents the volume’s title and author’s name in white, bold, lowercase letters against a plain black ground. (Fig. 3) The word “black”—three times the size of all other words—pushes up against the book’s top and side edges. The first interior page reproduces the same design but in reverse, referencing the photographic process through the display of both negative and positive layouts. (Fig. 4) Upon further reflection, in either configuration the customary letters acquire a new significance: the page conveys the impression that what is “black” is expanding, pushing against its constraints, and cannot be contained nor ignored.

Freed recognized that the early 1960s in the United States were a time of profound transformation in race relations and as an ethnically Jewish American man, he was inspired to photograph African American citizens as they experienced these changes. He chose the format of the photo book not only because it afforded him the opportunity to present a great number of images at once but also because he could use language to impact their reception. The unillustrated cover of his original book, with its symbolic formatting of text, nods to the importance Freed put on words to communicate directly to the viewer what could not be
captured by his camera but was nonetheless essential to his message and mission. This strategy demonstrates Freed’s alignment with what Victor Burgin and other theorists articulated in the 1970s and 1980s, namely that the photographic is always and necessarily mediated by the verbal.5

Yet the radicalism of Black in White America lies not merely in the presence of text but in the diversity of the voices it reproduces. In addition to Freed’s own words, the reader encounters the words of Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., a newspaper advertisement, a prisoner and a prison guard, racist men and women, Civil Rights organizers, and numerous children, along with black and white Americans who were simply trying to eek out a life in their evolving society. The volume purposefully inscribes their divergent words into the reader’s experience of thinking about the black subject, providing historical context and social texture to the photos.

This linguistic strategy is distinctive within the larger body of Freed’s photo books. The two publications that preceded Black in White America, Joden van Amsterdam (“Jews from Amsterdam,” 1958) and Deutsche Juden heute (“German Jews Today,” 1965), also contain significant literary components, but the writing is narrower in scope and tone than in their successor.6 The impetus behind these earlier publications can be found in Freed’s itinerant travels throughout Europe as a young man in the late 1950s. The son of Jewish working-class immigrants who had fled to the United States from Minsk, Russia, in order to escape religious


persecution, Freed felt compelled by his family history to spend the first years of his adulthood observing the European continent and its post-war renewal.\(^7\)

Freed’s Jewish heritage was an important part of his identity and continued to inspire his projects throughout his career, including *Black in White America*.\(^8\) The photographer’s practice, Frank Horch observed, can be understood as “a means of self-identification with the ghetto problems of Jews and Negroes.”\(^9\) However according to the Freed’s journal from 1964-65, his interest lay in investigating—through his camera and the conversations it catalyzed—why society discriminated against certain groups, whether attitudes could change, and if integration was possible.\(^10\) Freed often felt conflicted about what he saw and heard while traveling. In an effort to create a representative document of this experience, he included his own voice and reflections along with those he spoke with and photographed in his book. Thus Freed occupies the unique position of being both a protagonist in and the creator of *Black in White America*.

Exploring his interests through photography was hardly Freed’s intended plan as a young man. Discouraged by his parents from pursuing his dream of becoming a painter, he slowly came around to the photographic medium. Late in life, Freed admitted to having taken a camera with him on his first journeys through Europe and shooting extremely little—perhaps no more than a single roll of film over multiple years.\(^11\) Yet he did not relinquish the camera. Along with his journal, it accompanied him throughout those formative adventures. A combination of factors

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7 Leonard Freed, and Bill Ewing, unpublished interview in Leonard Freed’s archives, n.d.


11 Leonard Freed and Bill Ewing, *cit.*
pushed Freed to turn to photography as a way to channel his artistic aspirations and support himself financially: becoming more comfortable with in the world, learning more about the medium, and seeing Henri-Cartier Bresson’s famed photo book, *The Decisive Moment* (1952), all played their part.  

A turning point in this development was when, at the age of twenty-five, Freed sold his first photograph for publication to the Salvation Army newspaper in Holland. This helped cement his commitment to the field and over the subsequent decades he continued taking assignments for periodicals such as *Paris-Match, GEO, London Sunday Times Magazine*, and *Der Stern*. Despite his sustained success in this arena, Freed considered this aspect of his career as a means to support his other, self-directed projects. These longer undertakings often resulted in photo books, which he was able to release in every decade of his life. The photo book became Freed’s preferred medium, and the complexity and creativity he demonstrated within the format and sequencing of *Black in White America* proves his affinity for it. (Fig. 5)

Literature on the photo book has grown greatly in the past ten years and has informed this study. Gerry Badger has explained the nature of this particular publication lies in the combination of text and image into a unique experience that is greater than the simple addition of the two elements. Similarly, Dutch historian Ralph Prins has described the photo book as “an autonomous artform [in which] the photographs lose their own photographic character as things

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13 Leonard Freed and Bill Ewing, *cit.*

14 Ibid. These projects often focused on a single specific religious or ethnic group of people, such as Jewish, Bedouins, or Italian communities, in their own country or abroad. These include *Deutsche Juden heute* (1965), *The Italians* (2011), and Freed’s photographs in the Negev desert in 1967.

‘in themselves’ and become parts, translated into printing ink, of a dramatic event called a book.”16 Patrizia Di Bello and Shamoon Zamir, in the introduction to their anthology on the genre, emphasize the importance of language to the photo book, writing that, “to grant primacy to the image, and to relegate the text to a supportive or enhancing role” unnecessarily constrains analysis of the medium.17 The thematic range of the essays selected by Di Bello and Zamir—including articles that explore themes “of nation and national history,” “national landscape,” “the photographer as international citizen and traveler,” and “the culturally dispossessed”—has been helpful for considering the different levels on which a photo book like in *Black in White America* can operate.

In addition to these published works, Andrea Jeannette Nelson’s dissertation, *Reading Photobooks: Narrative Montage and the Construction of Modern Visual Literacy* (2007), is an outstanding contribution to the history of this form.18 Her analysis includes a discussion of the 1940s photography scene in the U.S., touching on important precedents that are related to this thesis, such as Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam’s *12 Million Black Voices*, and James Agee and Walker Evans’ *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, both released in 1941. Similarly, Freed’s *Black in White America* sought to portray his disenfranchised subject through words and images.

Earlier writings by W. J. T. Mitchell on the politics of work that conjoins visual and written languages are also relevant to understanding Freed’s practice. In his conclusion to *Picture Theory*, Mitchell discusses the hybrid ‘image-text’ (i.e. the photo essay or photo book) and asks the following three questions of its reader: “(1) what lies outside representation? (2)

16 Ibid.


why are we so anxious about it? (3) what is our responsibility towards it?” He later explains that responsibility and representation are symbiotic. As he writes,

[T]here is a kind of correspondence between them, a mutual resonance, a co-responsiveness. Responsibility, for its part, cannot exist apart from representation. Representation can, must be irresponsible; responsibility can, must be unrepresentable.

This tension is what makes Freed’s *Black in White America* a uniquely valuable artwork—a creative project driven by the desire to witness and the responsibility to “represent.” Through its assemblage of the author’s personal reflections and diverse photographic aesthetics, the book consciously reflects upon the limitations of such an ambitious undertaking and gives appropriate form to the question of representation of black lives in the United States. This thesis argues that Freed’s volume is much more than a collection of photographs from the Civil Rights era. In its format and layering of voices and perspectives, it raises very important questions on how African American history is told and shaped.

In his introduction to the second edition of *Black in White America*, Brett Abbott notes how the text functions diaristically throughout the volume, starting with the first page, where the following quote by Abraham Lincoln appears: “Volumes have been written in defense of slavery, but I have never heard of any of these authors wanting to be slaves themselves.” With his publication, Freed frequently calls attention to the question of who is speaking—who he is as an author and who the reader is as an audience. Presenting Lincoln’s words before any image, the

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19 W. J. T. Mitchell, 418.

20 Ibid., 421.

photographer underscores that this chronicle of life is also a political work, and that the photo
book is valuable for its multi-sensual engagement with history.  

Freed’s project has never before been examined in depth. In addition to contributing
original analysis grounded in scholarly and archival research, this thesis simultaneously enters a
work of art historical importance into the timely and growing canon of writings on photographic
representation of African Americans and into the recent histories of the photo book. The first
chapter, “Picturing Black Lives in the Civil Rights Era,” provides the reader with a historical
discussion of the visual presentation of race in the Civil Rights era, drawing from texts by
renowned scholars including Brett Abbott, whose exhibition and eponymous book, *Engaged
Observers: Documentary Photography Since the Sixties*, has been a touchstone for this project.

The second chapter, “American Photo Narratives and the Black Image,” takes after
Nicholas Natanson’s meticulous evaluation of the Farm Security Administration, *The Black
Image in the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography* (1992), by focusing on the
representation of black lives in paradigmatic photo books such as Walker Evans’ *American
Photographs* and Robert Frank’s *The Americans*. This section provides context for Freed’s
project by discussing three photo essays that reflect race relations in mid-century America.
Following Natanson’s study, this section analyzes what the portraits of black citizens in these
publications express about their place in American society, thus contributes to ongoing
discussions of these historic publications.

The third chapter looks closely at *Black in White in America* itself. Following an analysis
of the structure and contents of the book, this study turns to its interpretation and meaning. Freed
wanted his project to be a place where, in the later words of Stuart Hall, ideas about race could

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22 For further thoughts on the multi-sensual levels that the photo book operates on, see Alex Hughes and Andrea
Noble, *cit.*, 6. Parr asserts that providing a “chronicle of life” is what photography does best. Martin Parr, and Gerry
be “articulated, worked on, transformed and elaborated.”

Although Freed could not change his identity of being the “white eye,” “always outside the frame—but seeing and positioning everything within it,” he tried to draw attention to his perception through the words and images he selected for publication. The analysis of Freed’s work is inflected by Hall’s contributions to media theory, which insightfully articulated the power dynamics of race representation across disciplines.

This project on *Black in White in America* also is inspired by Shawn Michelle Smith and Maurice O. Wallace’s work reconsidering photographic representations of African Americans. Although Smith’s art historical research on African American identity is primarily dedicated to nineteenth century photography, her mission of newly examining the work of authors who employed both language and image in order to create complex meanings about identity is highly pertinent to this study. Similarly, Wallace’s skillful use of a variety of theoretical frameworks in the service of mapping and analyzing the Black Masculine throughout history and into the present day is relevant to this project.

Lastly, Maurice Berger’s well-known work on race surfaces throughout this text. The parallels between this scholar and Freed are striking: both grew up Jewish, with little money, in mid-twentieth century New York households, and their careers demonstrate an ongoing commitment to creating sensitive and honest work about race relations in their time. Berger’s contribution to the history of African American representation is exceptional in that he has written on the topic from art historical as well as personal perspectives. Like Freed’s photography, Berger’s writing is both considered and passionate. This thesis applies for the first

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24 Ibid.
time Berger's sensitive insights about race to Freed’s publication, extending its impact into the contemporary moment. This mode of analysis is particularly prominent in the final chapter, which, in addition to exploring the reception of *Black in White America*, attempts to put the volume in conversation with other, recent publications that articulate, through the combination of words and pictures on the printed page, the experience of being African American in the United States today.
Chapter 1

Picturing Black Lives in the Civil Rights Era

Before expanding upon the scholarship on the photo book through select comparisons between photo-essays and *Black in White America*, consideration of the representation of African Americans is essential to understand the context of Freed’s project. Equally valuable is a reflection on documentary photography as it emerged in the 1930s and continued to flourish in subsequent eras. Given the breadth of these topics, this section is necessarily incomplete; its goal is to provide an overview of both subject, with an eye towards the politics and subjectivity of the photographer.

**Representing African Americans**

In the decades prior to the 1960s, depictions of African Americans in popular culture were characterized by tokenism and stereotypes. As Leigh Raiford writes, “black bodies were confined to the frames of the criminal, the pornographic, the ethnographic, the comedic photograph, or to the margins of the sentimental portraits of whites.”  

25 Their likenesses were found adorning “postcards, trade cards, posters, buttons, and in newspapers” that circulated widely, and such media often “reproduc[ed] the violence or spectaculariz[ed] the figures it document[ed] without occasioning an opportunity for action, engendering both shock and silence.”  

26 Such demeaning pictures actively contributed to the negative view that white Americans had of the black populace.  

27 Arguably, imagery of African Americans evolved little

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26 Ibid, 8.

since the turn of the nineteenth century, wherein the prevalence of racist images in popular culture and society effectively destroyed much of “the remarkable socio-economic transformations wrought by the abolition of slavery.” As Kellie Jones penetratingly writes, “the struggles of the 1960s are the struggles of the 1860s.” Hence, essential to the achievement of political freedoms in the Civil Rights era was a simultaneous fight against the enduring stereotypes of African Americans.

Given this history, it comes as no surprise that at the start of the movement, any affirmative representation of black lives was extremely “selective, narrowly conceived, and determined by anticipation of white reception.” Although positive images of African Americans from this period are celebrated today, at the time it was difficult to see them in print and their presentation often lacked context, functioning as mere illustration rather than contextualized or informative content. As Brett Abbott explains, magazines were often tasked with taking an overall “positive outlook on the world.” Given this position, portraying difficult subjects, including race in society, was discouraged.

Nevertheless, the tumultuous events of the 1960s necessitated coverage. In response, the media emphasized violent encounters in the lives of African Americans; sensationalist stories

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30 Barbara Johnson calls a stereotype “an already-read text of debasedness and animality. (Gates, 13.) These problems of representation did not end with the Civil Rights era. As Thelma Golden wrote in “My Brother,” the essay that accompanied her iconic exhibition “Black Male,” “Black masculinity suffers not just from overrepresentation, but oversimplification, demonization, and (at times) utter incomprehension.” Golden, cit., 19.

31 Thulani Davis, “Foreword,” in Berger, cit., xi.


33 Brett Abbott, cit., 14.
and “explicit images of racial brutality” were prominently featured, with little regard to the overall impression they were creating for their audiences.\textsuperscript{34} Since, as Raiford points out, the “photograph is itself a mode of arrest and incarceration,” one could argue that such presentations doubled the victimhood of their black subjects, barring them any agency within the contexts of their reproduction as well as exploiting their image for the profit of others.\textsuperscript{35}

Such coverage significantly contributed to popular opinion about race relations in this era. In the words of Maurice Berger, for the first time the trials of black citizens “materialized” “on the pages of Life, Time, Look, and Newsweek.”\textsuperscript{36} Berger also noted that, like today, the “sheer repetition of images of racial dissension and hostility” made the injustices suffered by black citizens impossible to ignore.\textsuperscript{37} Given the simultaneous coverage in the press of the U.S.’s involvements abroad, the appetite for sensationalism was set high. As Steven Kasher has argued, the Civil Rights movement “took advantage of the media’s greediness for that most valuable of photographic commodities—the image of extreme violence.”\textsuperscript{38}

This iconography created an even deeper divide between black and white Americans. Aldon Morris, in his historical study of Civil Rights, summarizes the status of African Americans in this moment as simultaneously “disenfranchised from southern legislature and culture companies” and denied of the chance for equitable political and visual representation.\textsuperscript{39} He

\textsuperscript{34} Berger, \textit{cit.}, 116.

\textsuperscript{35} Raiford, \textit{cit.}, 6.

\textsuperscript{36} Berger, \textit{cit.}, 116.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{38} Note that \textit{Life} was the publication with the widest readership, renowned for placing great emphasis on the photographic image. Steven Kasher, \textit{The Civil Rights Movement: a photographic history, 1954-68}. New York: Abbeville Press, 1996, 13. Anderson, \textit{cit.}, 12.

writes that as the movement grew, alternatives emerged and adapted, but black Americans continued to be refused “the institutional access and outlets necessary to normal social existence,” ensuring they would be unable to achieve social equality.\footnote{Ibid.}

Yet they persevered, making inroads in both the socio-cultural and political contexts. In the words of Ralph Ellison, they continued to find ways to “recover and reveal that which has remained unseen and unacknowledged” in the country.\footnote{Berger, \textit{cit.}, 8. Quoting Ralph Ellison’s forward in a re-release of his 1952 book, \textit{Invisible Man}.} Photography in this post-war moment was a crucial tool for achieving a new vision of race and recognition of black lives, playing different roles depending on the communities it represented. One poignant example lies in the publication of the photographs of Emmett Till’s mutilated body as seen in its open casket before burial in 1955. (Fig. 6) While the goal of publishing these images was, for the child’s mother, to have viewers recognize their “responsibility in pushing for an end” to racist violence, mainstream publications refused to run the pictures, thus limiting responsibility to only those minority readers who themselves were victims of racism.\footnote{Ibid., \textit{cit.}, 105.} According to former Congressman Charles Diggs, the photographs were “probably the greatest media product in the last forty or fifty years, because [they] stimulated a lot of interest and anger on the part of blacks all over the country.”\footnote{Kasher, \textit{cit.}, 11, ft. 5.} Nonetheless, they were censored by the white cultural producers who controlled what the majority of the country saw and knew. Only in the 1960s did readers of national publications learn what their black countrymen had known for much longer.

Such censorship was not restricted to violent images but to all types of visual and factual information about the Civil Rights Movement. Thulani Davis’s research on sit-ins is illustrative,
and hardly unique. The scholar journeyed to Virginia only to learn from a local writer “that there were no articles in the archives because editors in the state had met [in the 1960s] and decided not to print stories on the movement in an attempt to stop it from spreading.” Such was the cultural environment of the Civil Rights era: coverage of events pertaining to the struggle had to be constantly fought for on both the local and national levels.

Contemporary readers must also keep in mind the variegated media landscape of this historical moment. As Steven Kasher writes in The Civil Rights Movement: A Photographic History, 1954-68, actions were organized for the press by both Civil Rights groups and their detractors. The variety of photographers who documented these events further diversified the field that already included distinctly opposing narratives. In his book, Kasher explains that in addition to professional photojournalists who claimed to use their cameras objectively, there were also “movement photographers, anti movement photographers, artists, and amateurs” documenting the newsworthy actions. Some tried to take a historical perspective, while others were interested in influencing the present moment. Nonetheless, all contributed to the extremely heterogeneous national conversation about race at the time.

The process of creating and circulating images brings to the fore the critical issue of access, which Freed calls attention to in Black in White America by emphasizing his status as a white outsider to the African American communities both visually and linguistically. Just as black readers reacted differently from white readers to violent images of the Civil Rights Movement, black photographers had a different relationship to the visual records they created

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44 Davis, cit., xiii.

45 Ibid.

46 Kasher, cit., 14.

47 Ibid., 11-12.
compared to their white counterparts. The divergence lies not only in how these authors felt about their subject—the color of their skin was an important factor in what they were able to see and how they expressed their perspective.  

Coincident with the need for African American photographers to document their perspective of the Civil Rights Movement was the need for outlets where they could publish their work. As Mary King noted, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) workers learned that if they wanted their stories to be heard in the prejudiced media environment of the time, they would have to take full responsibility for producing and disseminating them. Iris Schmeisser thoroughly researched the history of this organization, writing that SNCC became one of the most prominent national organizations to generate and distribute African American images by and for African Americans. Key in this operation was Communications Director Julian Bond, who was hired because of his plans to harness the power of photography both for fundraising purposes and in order to “pressure reporters into covering stories that they would otherwise ignore.” The resulting iconic images importantly “depicted white brutality and violence against peacefully resisting black and white Civil Rights activists,” thus expanding the public perception of who was fighting for justice in the South and encouraging the participation of all Americans in the movement. Such pictures were effective not only in eliciting public

48 Kasher, cit., 12.

49 Ibid, 16.


51 Schmeisser, 107 [my emphasis].
sympathy and financial resources, they were also useful for gaining the political backing that would become critical for ushering in governmental change.\(^{52}\)

Connie H. Choi expands on Schmeisser’s article in her excellent chapter, “Documentary Activism: Photography and the Civil Rights Movement,” noting that “SNCC was one of many Civil Rights groups to acknowledge and employ the influence of photography in recording their struggle.”\(^{53}\) The growing number of these records and their various means of dissemination precluded the “reductive monolithic visual documentation” described by Kasher in the white printed media.\(^{54}\) Choi also points out the importance of SNCC’s deliberate decision “to promote group-centered images as a means of countering the media saturation of more familiar figures and encouraging the participation of the younger generation.”\(^{55}\)

The impact of these pictures cannot be overstated. As Julius Lester, head of the SNCC Photo Agency, stated, “the opportunity to know their own images” was groundbreaking for African Americans, who had previously been depicted token roles and racist modes.\(^{56}\) Expanding on his statement, Lester explains that “even just to have access to one’s own image, or to manage the framing of representation, was huge.”\(^{57}\) Such photographs were disseminated widely and in a variety of formats. In addition to being “picked up by the [national] news services,” they were circulated as posters, were hung in “freedom houses” and offices, and were reprinted in targeted Civil Rights and African American publications, catalyzing discussion in homes throughout the

\(^{52}\) Kasher, cit., 8.


\(^{54}\) Kasher, cit., 16.

\(^{55}\) Choi, cit., 64.

\(^{56}\) Jones, cit., 19.

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 17.
nation. Although these images were often created with particular audiences in mind, they circulated widely in the 1960s and subsequent eras, becoming an essential source for historians and the public to better understand this moment in American history.

As Raiford summarizes in her brilliant study,

images were central to changing public opinion about the violent entrenchment of white supremacy in the South and that system's over-determination of black life and possibility. The visual proved a tool as effective as bus boycotts and as righteous as nonviolence.

Crucially, this type of photography established its meaning alongside other photographs within the culture at large and according to their individual reader’s evolving politics.

One relevant example of how the social landscape was changing lies in the reception of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s 1969 exhibition, *Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900–1968*. Although intentioned as a timely show about the African American life in the twentieth century, the project was lambasted for excluding black citizens from participating in the planning process or contributing any scholarly, informative, or artistic content to the presentation—a decision which contradicted the Museum’s own panel convened specifically to advise the exhibition. Bridget R. Cooks explains that while the show, which was the Museum’s first attempt at creating an exhibition concerning African Americans, was well-attended, its importance lay not in its presentation but in the conversations about representation

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that it sparked between black artists and museum professionals—conversations which continue to the present day.\footnote{Bridget R. Cooks, “Black Artists and Activism: Harlem on My Mind (1969),” in American Studies, vol. 48 no. 1, 2007, 7.}

**1960s Visual Environment and the Documentary**

Pictures of all types circulated in the ever-expanding media environment of the 1960s. Berger’s scholarship is particularly useful here, as he explains how this decade was marked by the meteoric rise of the new medium of television.\footnote{Berger, cit., 6.} As early as 1963, ninety-one percent of households owned a T.V. Nevertheless, the medium was more often a vehicle for perpetuating old modes of covering events than introducing innovative ones.\footnote{Ibid., 130.} For example, as in periodicals, T.V. broadcasts repeatedly “honied in on […] the unreconstructed and brutal southern white bigot” as the villain of the era, leaving little room for nuance, dialogue, or transformation.\footnote{Ibid. 137.}

These media often reinforced each other’s perspectives. Berger writes how broadcasts suffered from the same tendency as print “to overlook the more mundane, everyday reality of racial prejudice, whether the harsh restrictions of the Jim Crow South or the more subtle bias of the urban North” in favor of more shocking content.\footnote{Ibid.} This was precisely the perspective that Freed was trying to counter in *Black in White America*. Schmeisser notes other historical exceptions to this prevailing norm such as the work created by the Southern Documentary

\footnote{Ibid.}
Project, which also attempted to capture the realities of black life as it was lived in the 1960s. Unfortunately, such important endeavors were infrequent and typically unmarketable.\textsuperscript{66}

T.V. followed a similar format to magazines of the time, which Brett Abbot describes as presenting audiences with complete stories—central to which was still the photographic image—often at the expense of publishing more nuanced perspectives.\textsuperscript{67} This was standard practice since the late 1930s in preeminent American magazines such as \textit{Life}.\textsuperscript{68} Unlike Freed or the other photographers who released photo books independently, the editors of such periodicals relied on market research and wrote for their intended consumer. They also enlarged, cropped, and framed their images to their liking, giving the photographers who shot for these publications little to no agency in the final printed product.\textsuperscript{69}

Although a few counterexamples to this arrangement exist (Gordon Parks and W. Eugene Smith are two notable cases), most photographers working for post-war magazines were not valued for their creative visions.\textsuperscript{70} Frustration about this lack of control inspired the creation of Magnum Photos in 1947. Within this new model of an independent agency serving the vision and financial gain of its members, photographers were able to control the final product, only releasing what they wanted to be published. Instead of filling assignments, they pitched to interested parties “sequences of pictures, captions, and descriptive context” that had to be

\textsuperscript{66} Schmeisser, \textit{cit.}, 111-2.

\textsuperscript{67} Abbott, \textit{cit.}, 14.

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 8.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 13.

\textsuperscript{70} Connie Choi writes how “Gordon Parks insisted on writing the texts that accompanied his images for \textit{Life} magazine, recognizing that his photographic subjects would hold him accountable for how they were portrayed.” Choi, 57, \textit{cit.}, ft. 4.
reproduced as their author had intended. With the income provided by such commercial assignments, members of this burgeoning photography collective were free to pursue projects whose content was too unconventional for standard publications or exceeded the length of a typical photo essay.

Magnum’s ethos was important to Freed. While he only joined the organization officially in 1972, in the previous decade, at the invitation of Inge Bondi, he came by the office whenever he was in New York and was thus intimately aware of their model. Here Freed was presumably exposed to other photographers’ work, including Bruce Davidson (whose *East 100th Street* will be discussed in the following chapter) and Henri Cartier-Bresson. As Brett Abbott writes, Magnum photographers were sensitive to the relationship between subject matter and artistic approach, transforming the documentary impulse of the 1930s into a more subjective style.

T.V. was not a threat to these authors since their work was characterized by “a higher degree of visual creativity, complexity, and depth” than the newer medium could achieve.

Abbott also writes about the rise of so-called “New Journalism” in this era, which is pertinent because, like documentary photography, it walked the line between “objectivity and subjectivity, information and interpretation, journalism and art.” Although it took many forms, key to “New Journalism” was the long-form text and personal voice that required a greater investment of the author’s time than other, faster forms of journalism. One publication that employed this style to great acclaim was *Nothing Personal*, which was released in 1964, when

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72 Leonard Freed, and Bill Ewing, *cit.*


74 Ibid., 18.

75 Ibid., 1, 20.
Freed was still developing his project. With writing by James Baldwin and photographs by Richard Avedon—who was training multiple SNCC photographers at the same moment as he was putting together the book—this volume fluidly moves from politics to celebrity, from war to Civil Rights, and from old age to love. Just as Baldwin’s writing rejects the rules of conventional grammar, the photographs are also distinctly not uniform in size or style. Rather, Avedon employs juxtaposition to push the reader into thinking about the social history that connects two seemingly opposite subjects. (Fig. 7) Like Black in White America, the meaning of these images emerges out of their relationship to each other as well as from the resonances with the writing that accompanies them. Thus, as Abbott argues, Freed’s volume “might [very well] be considered a part of this larger movement to rethink journalistic practice.”

On the other hand, images from Black in White America were strong enough to be published outside of the photo book format, without the dynamics of the page contributing to their reception. Prior to the publication’s release in the United States, Freed’s photos from the project were reproduced in European periodicals and presented in a slide show on Dutch television. Moreover, selections from Freed’s project were on display for the last three months of 1967 in Cornell Capa’s exhibition at the Riverside Museum, “The Concerned Photographer,” and were reproduced in the accompanying catalogue. (Fig. 8) Out of the six photographers

77 Kasher, cit., XX.
78 Abbott, cit., 20.
79 The Salvation Army Magazine and other periodicals published these images. Paul Farber, interview with the author, May 23, 2016. The 1967 slideshow on Dutch TV would present one photograph at a time, not in the sequence of the book, with slow zooming and continuous narrative by a critic. A transcript of this text unfortunately does not exist.
represented in the show, only Freed (38 years old at the time) and André Kertész (then 74) were alive to enjoy the reception of their work in this context. Notably the Fund for Concerned Photography, which co-sponsored the project, was headed in this moment by the exhibition’s curator, Cornell Capa, who had previously been president of Magnum from 1956 until 1960.

The fact that what would become the iconic photographs from *Black in White America* were reproduced in these different venues before the volume was available for purchase speaks to their communicative power, even though the project was always intended to be primarily experienced as discrete photo book. The success of “The Concerned Photographer” and its correlated impact on Freed’s career also underscores the numerous ways in which Magnum and the socially engaged documentary tradition was dominant within world of photography in the 1960s. As Freed stated in an interview about the exhibition, “Suddenly, I feel I belong to a tradition.”

Another example of this trend of timely yet enduring documentary photography can be found in the book *America in Crisis*, released in 1969, only two years after the aforementioned exhibition. (Fig. 9) Just sixteen pages shorter than *Black in White America*, the publication consists of eight chapters with titles such as “Battle for equality” and “The quality of American life” and images by Magnum photographers, including Bruce Davidson and Danny Lyon, that range from violence to celebrity and poverty to politics. Although Freed explored these very

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82 The show was so successful that a follow up exhibition, “The Concerned Photographer 2,” was held in 1973. Also noteworthy is that while the first show was evenly split between photographers who were members of Magnum and those who were not, Freed was the only one to subsequently join the organization.


themes in his own book, his work was excluded from the later publication as he was not yet officially part of Magnum, which clearly organized its members’ photographs in order to illustrate for readers social issues that had already been discussed within the popular media for years.

Indisputably, the photo agency’s motivations for releasing *America in Crisis* differed from those of Freed, as well as from those of Avedon and Baldwin. Still, consideration of this volume, along with the other aforementioned projects, demonstrates the variety of ways in which, during the Civil Rights era, documentary images circulated across media—from books to exhibitions, and from illustrated magazines to newspapers to television—all contributing to the American public’s evolving understanding of race relations. While the messages African American and white audiences may have created and received about black lives was severely limited in earlier decades, by the end of the 1960s, the material they read and looked at was both more diverse and accessible.

Having established this overview of the visual and documentary contexts pertinent to Freed’s project, the following chapter will focus on five photo essays that speak through content, style, and format to *Black in White America*. 

The following chapter analyzes four photo books and one magazine’s photo essay wherein photographers sequenced their images in order to channel a particular message about the social and cultural landscape in the United States. These works ground this text’s subsequent discussion of Freed’s *Black in White America*, suggesting a vocabulary he was possibly familiar with and drew inspiration from. The selected narrative essays are: Walker Evans’ *American Photographs* (1938), Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes’ *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955), a *Life* magazine photo essay by Gordon Parks and Robert Wallace published in September 1956, and Robert Frank’s *The Americans* (1958). Finally, the discussion of Magnum photographer Bruce Davidson’s *East 100th Street* (1970) serves as comparison to Freed’s representation of African Americans during the Civil Rights era. A close consideration of the choices these authors made within their publications helps to shed light on the ways Freed’s project both continued as well as broke away from these traditions. The following investigations consider the impact of image and text on the photographer’s overall message and the manner in which each work depicts African Americans. For some of these photographers, the representation of black lives was the primary goal, while for others it was not. Here the selected essays are carefully examined in order to better understand how photo sequences make meaning and Americans saw themselves in the mid-twentieth century.

**Walker Evans’ *American Photographs***

One of the oldest and most revered American photo books is undoubtedly Walker Evans’ *American Photographs*, published in September 1938 alongside his exhibition at the Museum of
Modern Art. Despite the profound differences between this book and *Black in White America*, a comparison is pertinent since Evans, like Freed, was a white man who set himself the goal of creating through his photography a statement about then present-day America, which necessarily included an aspect of race-relations. The two books take a similar typographical approach to their covers—both prefer bold titles to an image—and both volumes contain photographs of differing aspect ratios, which the photographers manipulated in order to heighten the impact of their compositions. Though the publications vary greatly in terms of layout, their authors paid careful attention to the proportions of their photographs, ensuring that each enlargement, trim, and position on the page was optimal for the presentation of its subject. (Fig. 10) Lastly, although Evans was avowedly apolitical—a stance perhaps cultivated through his privileged upbringing, which contrasted markedly to Freed’s own—his approach to representing African American spaces, signage, and subjects confirms the acute thoughtfulness he put towards representing their lives.

While *American Photographs* was released at the same time that Evans’ eponymous exhibition opened at MoMA, it was always intended as a stand-alone photo book. Elegantly designed, it is comprised of two distinct sections of fifty and thirty-seven photographs respectively, along with an essay by Lincoln Kirstein at the end. The first section is thematically organized according to social landscape—what Kirstein called “people by photography”—with all ages and classes of Americans interacting with everyday sites of commerce, transit, and leisure. The second grouping represents a wide spectrum of built landscapes—from urban to rural and from domestic to industrial. For the purposes of this essay, discussion is limited to the

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86 Ibid., 198.
first section devoted to people as opposed to the second, which takes architecture as its primary subject.

*American Photographs* purposefully separates language from the photographic sequence. The caption on the otherwise empty page adjacent to each image is minimal, consisting of a short title describing the subject, along with the date when the photograph was taken and only in a few occasions, the location. As John Tagg has studied, Evans went through multiple drafts of acknowledgments, but none made it into the final edition. Thus, the photographer’s voice is entirely absent from the publication. The only words the reader encounters before Lincoln Kirstein’s essay at the back of the volume consists of a disclaimer stating that the selection and sequence of the photographs was determined solely by Evans, “without sponsorship or connection” to any agencies or institutions. Following this, a simple (if obscure) dedication, and the heading of “Part One,” begins the sequence of images that illustrate a wide span of the United States. This pronounced separation of verbal description and image is correlated to Evans’ stated aversion to what he referred to as “pictorial journalism,” the hybrid essay form that was popular at the time in magazines such as *Life*, which merged photography and text.

In contrast, Evans sought to create a “lyric” document that, in the words of John T. Hill, would operate as an “epic poem,” with stanzas that built upon each other over the course of the book. When expressive language appears, it is within the photographs, masterfully framed by

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88 Evans, *cit.*, np.

89 Tagg, *cit.*, 141.

the photographer’s compositions, simultaneously lending meaning and structure to the images. For example, in “Roadside Stand near Birmingham, Alabama,” the hand-painted signs simultaneously provide socio-cultural context for the pictured boys and a visual counterpoint to their physical forms. (Fig. 11) Where Freed reproduces signage in his book, he follows this tradition, taking into account its aesthetic as well as linguistic qualities, such as in the street scene from Harlem.⁹¹ (Fig. 12)

Despite their shared desire to capture the country’s social landscape, these two photographers construct their visual narratives very differently. By choosing an informal layout that bleeds many photographs to the edge of the page or placing them directly up against each other, Freed encourages his reader to move around the text, opening it up to any spread that catches their attention. Conversely, Evans’ photographs are always published one per page, with some form of white border.⁹² While both impart nothing more than the intended visual information to the reader, their preferred layouts are radically different. While the earlier work demonstrates formal restraint and consistent pacing, the latter can feel improvisational and wide-ranging. (see Fig. 5) This difference corresponds to the photographers’ aesthetics and camerawork: Evans’ is characterized by an “unsparing frankness,” while Freed’s exhibits a variety of approaches, including a more sympathetic one.⁹³

The other fundamental difference that arises from this comparison is the photographers chosen subject. Only four plates in American Photographs show African Americans, and one of

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⁹¹ Freed, cit., 44.

⁹² See Nelson, cit., 212, who describes this as “Evans’s signature layout design.”

⁹³ Kirstein, cit., np.
them is shot outside of the United States, in Havana, Cuba. While select other images hint at the complexity of African American life through signage, architecture, studio photography, and show bills, Evans did not set himself the goal of depicting this society.94 Nevertheless, when he did include these subjects in his book, he was thoughtful about the manner in which they were portrayed. For example, photographs 19 and 20 show a woman and a man respectively, both in extremely elegant attire within a bustling urban environment. (Figs. 13-14) Evans catches them as if lost in thought, elevating their stature and isolating them from their chaotic surroundings.95 The sequence of these images leads one to think of the stature of African Americans in cities as opposed to other, less progressive places.

This photographic pair brings to mind another, much less flattering one: photographs 34 and 42, which show minstrel show bills from 1936. (Figs. 15-16) The former contains crude stereotypical imagery, while the latter shows black figures in white dresses and tuxedos within a contrived, formal setting. The differences between these two sets of photographs are important: while the first pair is placed one after the other, doubling the presentation of well-to-do African Americans by showing both a man and a woman of this stature, the latter pair are separated by eight plates, drawing on the reader’s memory or inciting them to flip back a number of pages to compare them and discover that they represent the extremes of class difference. Additionally, the show bills are not portraits but outmoded vernacular depictions of black stereotypes. The latter images are documentation of circulating pictures of black life, where as the first are photographs of a real individuals. The juxtaposition of these two pairs draws the reader’s attention to the very

94 Note that two-fifths of the photographs in this first section do not present people of any race.

95 Note that there is only one other photograph in the book shot outside of the United States.
limited modes in which white America portrayed African Americans during the first decades of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{96}

Though Evans’ project was supposedly apolitical, his choice to include photographs of African Americans in his book was itself a political act. As a photographer working for the FSA, he knew that images of black people were purposefully repressed by Roy Stryker, the man responsible for disseminating the project’s images within the cultural mainstream during this era.\textsuperscript{97} Evans’ choice is perhaps even more significant when one considers the diversity of lives he presents, ranging from the aforementioned African Americans in elegant attire to disenfranchised men hanging around outside a barbershop and a temporarily displaced black woman in a shelter. (Figs. 17-18) Such a socio-economic breadth in Evans’ small selection of photographs raises the reader’s awareness of the need for black lives to be represented more fully and known more deeply.

There are a few other photographs in the book that notably touch on the black experience without representing the human figure. Throughout his work, Evans would render a subject metaphorically, hinting at identity through the representation of objects and décor that referred to a particular social group. This treatment also was applied to African American spaces of commerce and faith. What does it mean for the privileged white photographer to show a room in the “Negro Preacher’s house” but not the religious leader himself, or the “Negro Barber Shop” but not the men who staffed it, as Freed later did? The reader imagines that Evans avoided photographing those who belonged in these spaces because it would have made him or his audience uncomfortable; however he did not omit these sites entirely, as he could have easily

\textsuperscript{96} In addition to the previous chapter, for more information on how few positive representations of black Americans there were at the time, see Nelson, \textit{cit.}, 207.

\textsuperscript{97} Nelson, \textit{cit.}, 208, notes how it was difficult for Wright to find photographs of African Americans when putting together 12 \textit{Million Black Voices}. For the history of representation of African Americans during FSA, see Nicholas Natanson, \textit{The Black Image of the New Deal}. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992.
done. Rather, Evans chose to present African American life indirectly, such as in advertisements and with architectures, as well as metaphorically. For example, the last image of this first section of *American Photographs* has an indubitable significance for the issue of race in the country, referring to it through powerful architectural symbolism. (Fig. 19) The “Louisiana Plantation House” shows a large uprooted tree in front of an abandoned neoclassical home that the viewer imagines was once occupied by slave-owners. Through this composition, Evans communicates that the Southern way of life associated with the felled tree and the derelict home is beyond salvation.98

**Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes’ *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* **

*The Sweet Flypaper of Life* is one among few historic photo books that portrays the experience of belonging to an African American community—black Harlem in particular—and thus deserves careful consideration in the context of Freed’s project. Like *Black in White America*, the book presents a combination of words and pictures to conveying the tenor of postwar African American life with immediacy and empathy.99 The two photo books accomplish this goal by publishing multiple images of the same scene in succession, which have seemingly transpired within moments of each other, as well as sampling vernacular speech and closely framing their subjects so that their figure dominates the composition. However *The Sweet Flypaper*, which predates Freed’s volume by more than a decade, is authored by two black artists who had sustained contact with those pictured, and thus is much more personal than the white

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98 That Evans purposefully selected the most dramatic of multiple takes of this house for his book further supports the claim that he intended to stress the uprootedness of the tree against the backdrop of the plantation. For another view see http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/276253. The importance of this scene is attested by its position in *American Photographs*, in addition to its inclusion in Walker Evans’ later book, co-authored with James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960.

photographer’s book. *Black in White America* is a purposeful, challenging blend of different voices and multiple perspectives, while the earlier volume is more accessible, giving the reader a single cohesive narrative.

*The Sweet Flypaper* is comprised of one hundred forty one photographs taken by Roy DeCarava in Harlem and a text by Langston Hughes that runs continuously through ninety-six pages. The book is little, measuring 7.75 x 6.75 inches and can be read in a single sitting. (Fig. 20) This format, much smaller than Freed’s photo book, enhances its literary and intimate nature. The publication’s cover differs drastically from the later publication, presenting photographic and extensive literary content. The upper-half of the page is filled with the striking image of a black child staring at the reader. This image is cropped so that only his wide eyes and eyebrows are visible. The book’s title is superimposed in bold, capitalized white letters onto the child’s forehead. Below are the authors’ names (also in white against a black ground) and further down, Hughes’ story begins, printed in smaller font, black on white paper as inside the book. The eyes of the child combined with the first lines of the story call out to the viewer to pick up the book and read further.

This bold approach, along with the volume’s small size and accessible price, contributed to the selling out of the publisher’s first run.¹⁰⁰ *The Sweet Flypaper* was a boon for Hughes—it was, according to his biographer, his most appreciated publication—while DeCarava considered it “a slight detour [in his…] development” as a photographer.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, this text that created the opportunity for DeCarava to release his work to the American public, as no publisher was willing to release a volume consisting solely of his photographs, despite the fact that they

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were an outgrowth of his prestigious 1952 Guggenheim Fellowship.\textsuperscript{102} Without Langston Hughes’ collaboration, the book contract the photographer had been seeking would never have been secured.

Maren Stange has studied this project in depth and noted that DeCarava’s original goal was to make a book similar to Evans’ \textit{American Photographs}, with each photograph floating on a white page, separate from any text. In other words, DeCarava did not want his images to share the page with other content, lest they be mistaken for mere illustration.\textsuperscript{103} Similarly, Hughes had desired to keep his own literary autonomy at an early stage. Clearly these authors’ artistic aims were transformed by their publisher and the book succeeded because of their collaboration. Indeed, Hughes’s text not only appears alongside the images but it often refers to them in a colloquial tone, reinforcing the unity of the volumes content and the authors’ shared status as members of the represented community. Such consistency is intentionally eschewed by Freed, whose book contains many pages of images without any descriptive text and reproduces multiple voices, not just his own—each one with its own unique relationship to the photographs.

Nevertheless, \textit{Black in White America} and \textit{The Sweet Flypaper} both portray black social landscapes: there are certain familiar and everyday scenes that appear in both publications, such as portraits of individuals against the steps of a brownstone or a father caring for his son, or various activities in the street, ranging from picketing to manual labor to children playing. Yet DeCarava’s portrayal of domestic life is distinctive, with scenes of ironing, washing dishes, or arranging a child’s hairstyle, attesting to the close relationship that the photographer had to his subjects. There are no comparable photographs in Freed’s volume. Additionally, many of DeCarava’s images—more than Freed’s—feature a subject casually and comfortably engaging

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 57.

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 78.
directly with the camera. (Figs. 21-22) In this manner, DeCarava’s project demonstrates his deep empathy for and integration within his own community, whereas Freed always operated as a stranger, whether in New York or in the South.

Notably, both books present photographs in succession, sustaining a mood and extending a scene across multiple pages. (Figs. 23-24) *The Sweet Flypaper* uses this technique to portray activity within the home, such as singing and dancing in the kitchen, or having dinner and cleaning up.104 The pictures purposefully expand the narrative of a particular moment, and DeCarava goes so far as to use photographs from multiple evenings to illustrate what is described in the corresponding text as a single night.105 Freed’s approach to sequencing is more circumscribed, showing photographs seemingly seconds apart from each other from one page to the next—as is the case with photographs from the ‘Moving Star Hall’ Gospel meeting—or within the same spread, as in the trio of images from a funeral parade in New Orleans arranged beside a larger shot from the same event.106 (Fig. 25-26)

By publishing sequential images of a dramatic public event, Freed’s photographs evoke newsreel footage whereas the format of DeCarava’s work is more akin to a family album. Still, in both books the reader is reminded of the purposeful framing of the event by the photographer through the presentation of the same subject multiple times. This temporality manifests itself uniquely in *The Sweet Flypaper*, which pairs two photographs of a “sad” “little boy [from] down the street” on the same page: in the first, the reader sees him leaning against a lamppost with a white family pictured in the background; in the second, the reader sees a close-up of the child’s

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104 DeCarava and Hughes, *cit.*, 46 and 59-60.

105 Note how the narrative in pages 59-60 describes one evening but Melinda’s dress changes depending on the page.

scowling, sweating face.\textsuperscript{107} (Fig. 27) Technically these are not successive shots, since they both appear to be produced from the same negative, but together they accomplish the effect of extending time and drawing the readers’ attention to a specific moment in the book, and a particular face expressive of a state of mind.

Despite employing similar techniques, the differences between the two books are as numerous as they are important: the earlier work feels more accessible because the text is one continuous account of a specific neighborhood, narrated by a fictional elderly woman named Mary Bradley, whose portrait appears on the book’s final page, whereas \textit{Black in White America}, in addition to spanning multiple years and geographic locations, does not feature an image of the narrator, and its narrative tracks are multiple. Additionally, nearly all of DeCarava’s images are taken at close range and his subjects predominantly look at ease around him. (Figs. 28-29) Freed, by contrast, further underscores that he is not part of the communities he documents by choosing to include text where his subjects speak to him in a hostile manner and selecting photographs where his subjects look suspiciously in his direction.\textsuperscript{108}

Such a range of reactions to the camera is absent from \textit{The Sweet Flypaper}. The reader is consistently invited to feel that she or he is looking at a community from within. Many of the individuals photographed are related, if not by blood than through a social network, to the elderly “Sister Bradley,” and this close connection to the photographer-narrator is reinforced by the seeming candidness of the figures’ actions and the number of views taken within the home.\textsuperscript{109} Of this latter type, DeCarava’s photographs are more numerous and less formal than Freed’s. As Freed’s contact sheets attest, the younger, white photographer would sometimes dedicate the

\textsuperscript{107} DeCarava and Hughes, \textit{cit.}, 28.

\textsuperscript{108} Examples include Freed, \textit{cit.}, 56-7 and 142-3.

\textsuperscript{109} Hughes’ text refers to her as “Sister” and this further emphasizes the familial quality.
majority of a roll of film to getting the right shot within a home, portraying his subjects exactly in the manner he intended. The results are splendid, but do not emerge from being integrated in the social scene, as DeCarava was.

Unlike in *Black in White America*, *The Sweet Flypaper* can be likened to a vernacular family photo album: the cropped photographs of different sizes connote a tactile sense of trimming and a personal connection to the figures pictured. The prevalence of small-sized portraits is also reminiscent of keepsake photographs one might carry in one’s wallet. The frequent removal of all environmental information from these pictures as well as the subjects’ unguarded demeanor emphasizes their value as portraits—representations of specific individuals—rather than as metonyms for a larger message. None of the photographs stretch to the edges of the page but rather are placed upon it in relation to the text that runs underneath, alongside, or above them, further contributing to the volume’s improvisational and personal character. Instead of an art book created by a sole author, this publication’s style bespeaks the multiple hands and eyes involved in its assembly.

In all of the aforementioned ways, words and pictures combine in *The Sweet Flypaper* to portray black life in a candid, affecting manner. Aside from the note at the beginning of the book about the Supreme Court’s decision on integration, there are few references in the volume about these lives intersecting with white Americans and their broader society. The political importance of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* lies in the unprecedented depiction of a “variety of human expression, the multiplicity of characters, moods, and emotions, and the diversity of life experience” in the community of black Harlem.\(^{110}\) In this manner, it is similar to *Black in White*

America, as both are photographic documents that simultaneously address the particular postwar moment in which they were created and continue to have relevance to the present day.

Gordon Parks’ Life Magazine story

These years saw the emergence of another African American photographer, Gordon Parks, and his close involvement with the media is pertinent to this discussion of the era. His twelve-page color photo-essay, published in the September 24, 1956 issue of Life magazine along with text by writer Robert Wallace is particularly relevant to this analysis since, like Freed’s book, it conveys an explicit political message. This comparison brings to the fore the journalistic quality of Freed’s narrative and the photographers shared intent of showing African Americans at work and at home. Moreover, both essays publish the first-person voice of their subject, making space on the page for them to communicate directly to their reader.

Parks’ story is comprised of twenty-six photographs of various members of the African American Thornton family. This is the fourth part of Life magazine’s five-section series, titled “Background of Segregation,” dealing with race relations in the South. Except for one, all spreads are organized around a title in bold letters: the first, “The Restraints: Open and Hidden,” clearly marks the piece as dedicated to exploring the obstacles facing black Americans. (Fig. 30) In other instances, however, these headings refer more directly to their individual subjects.


Two such examples are titled “An Aged Man's Small Reward” and “A Professor’s Injured Pride.” (Figs. 31-32)

Parks’ photographs fall into an easily legible visual grid and logically flow from one to another: grandparents are followed by grandchildren, women’s work is followed by men’s, domestic and neighborhood activities are followed by work and commuting. Additionally, as Wendy Kozol notes, the story charts the upward mobility of the family from those hindered by illiteracy and poverty to those who benefitted from a better education and economic status, concluding with the successful story about Professor F. J. Thornton, “department head at Tennessee State University (all Negro) in Nashville.”

Freed’s book employs a similar strategy by loosely grouping together photographs of like subjects (social gatherings, families, or protests) and moving from images of adults who have been adversely affected by racism to younger adults who are breaking barriers of segregation in a variety of ways.

Parks is credited with a byline in the magazine’s series but his contribution did not extend to the magazine layout and selection of images for his story. Nevertheless, the picture editors of Life published his work in dynamic layouts: each spread is unique and positions up to five photographs in a variety of sizes, amongst three tiers of descriptive language (the headline, the image’s caption, and the narrative text) shaped by the magazine’s staff. Indeed, pictures were handled with great care by staff since they were the primary interest for many readers of Life, who often flipped through, rather than closely read, the magazine’s articles.

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113 “Economic constraints upon Mr. Thornton are negligible, but social restraints remain strong. He cannot mingle publicly with his intellectual equals, white professors from other Nashville colleges, and he must follow the local segregation customs.” Parks and Wallace, cit., 108.


Just as in this photo essay, *Black and White America* creates a narrative balance with photographs, publishing succinct captions alongside images that give insight into their socio-cultural context. This is the case, for example, in Freed’s sequence of sidewalk scenes with blacks, whites, and racist portrayals of African American women. (Fig. 33) Their accompanying caption states: “What the barber pole is to the barber shop, the Negro ‘Mammy’ is to the shop selling gifts from the ‘Old South.’” While Freed reproduces multiple voices within his volume, he chooses to keep them typographically and linguistically consistent within a given spread, thus replicating the magazine format.

Similar to Freed, Parks aimed to show black Americans as regular, upright citizens, thus engendering empathy in white viewers. Life was the perfect vehicle for such images as it had an “estimated postwar audience of twenty million, mostly white, middle-class readers.” That the magazine “had great influence in shaping [wealthy northern whites’] knowledge about African Americans” must have played a large part in Parks’ working process. The photographs published in *Life* demonstrate their black author’s dexterity in using diverse camera angles, light conditions, and depths of field—all of this in color film, which, as Maurice Berger notes, was uncommon for both the subject matter and the historical moment. Yet Parks bucked the trends by using color photography and not showing any explicitly political or violent events. In this

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116 Freed, *cit.*, 22-3. See also Freed, *cit.*, 160-1: “While the majority of Negroes remain outside the main stream [sic] of American life, slowly, ever-greater numbers are beginning to enter into it.” Compare to *Life* "Outside Looking in, the three young Tanners and three friends watch some children at a playground in a white neighborhood not far from theirs." Wallace, *cit.*, 106.


118 Kozol, *cit.*, 159.

119 Ibid.

way, the photographer and his editors at *Life* attempted to show the topical subject of segregation in a non-threatening manner.121

Although Freed was abroad in 1956 and did not return to the U.S. before 1963, he had comparable goals to Parks. In fact, *Black and White in America* contains very similar views to those selected by *Life* magazine editors, such as outdoor gatherings of African Americans socializing in their finest and multiple generations of a family gathering on the porch of their home. The choice to focus on a single family over multiple consecutive pages, in the style of a shorter picture essay like Parks’, occurs only once in Freed’s volume: within pages 46 to 51. (Fig. 34)

While subject and duration of the Segregation story and *Black in White America* overlap in this regard, there are notable differences between the respective photographers’ approaches. Take Parks’ image of the Thornstons on the porch, published just above the photo essay’s first title, which is shot in a simple, straight-forward manner: clearly the subjects arranged themselves for the camera and Parks has made sure to include all of them within his frame. The image Freed chose to publish of a similar composition is markedly different in approach and style: not only is he physically much closer to his subjects than Parks was to his, but less than half of them look directly at his lens.122 Here the children are not arranged in rows, but rather position themselves as they like, hanging off the railing or hiding behind it. The feeling that Freed is amongst the family is further emphasized by the sleeve of another figure that intrudes into the right edge of the frame’s foreground, cutting off some of the siblings’ forms. No such closeness is communicated through Parks’ image.


This and the other pages in this section of Freed’s book attest to the fact that this family trusts the white photographer: they have allowed him to photograph their children, in pairs or smaller groups, in their home or dancing outside. Unlike the Life magazine layout, multiple of these images are full-bleed on a two-page spread, allowing the reader of Black in White America to clearly see the family members’ various expressions and attitudes. This is rarely the case in Life story, including the aforementioned porch view.

Nevertheless, photographing for Life had been Gordon Parks’ dream long before he joined its staff, and he continued taking assignments even if it meant relinquishing control over how his images were printed and how he was referred to in his byline. Periodicals were Parks’ favored mode for presenting his images and, later in his career, he went on to found Essence magazine to continue working in this medium. In addition to his dedication to showing the black experience to a broader public, he was also interested in fashion; the vibrancy with which he frames the Thorntons within the Segregation Story photographs belies this burgeoning passion that Parks continued to develop in later years. Freed, on the other hand, never enjoyed commercial assignments nor working with color film. Rather, he preferred books and black and white prints where he felt he had more control over the outcome.

Significantly, Parks’ creativity in shooting the Life magazine story was brought to light recently when over two hundred transparencies from the assignment were rediscovered in

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125 Ibid.

126 Leonard Freed, and Bill Ewing, cit.
The High Museum exhibited a number of these works in a 2014-15 show that coincided with the Museum’s display of *Black in White America*. According to his wife, Brigitte, Leonard Freed did not know Parks or his photo essays well, but the photographers were friendly after they had met at the March on Washington and they respected each other’s work. While they belonged to different races and had different dispositions with regards to the camera, both created “positive images [which] helped to bolster the morale of blacks in the face of withering prejudice,” in addition to introducing the country to another, more pluralistic views of their fellow Americans. For this reason, part IV of the Segregation Story is an important predecessor to Freed’s project. Indeed, it is quite possible that the same readers of *Life* became the audience of *Black in White in America* over a decade later.

**Robert Frank’s The Americans**

Another project from the late 1950s that is relevant to the discussion of *Black in White America* is Robert Frank’s photo book *The Americans*. Like many of his generation, Freed had greatly admired this volume prior to creating his own survey of the country. The Swiss photographer’s influence on the younger American’s style and choice of subject is demonstrable when comparing specific photographs from the two books. However the influence of *The Americans* should not solely be credited to the photographer, Robert Frank, but also to his editor.

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131 Brigitte Freed, interview with the author, March 25, 2016.
Indeed, before finalizing the layout for *Black in White America*, Brigitte and Leonard Freed solicited advice from the man responsible for the first French edition of Frank’s volume, Robert Delpire. As he was taken with the project, the influential Parisian publisher went so far as to construct a partial dummy of *Black in White America* for the Freeds before finalizing their publication.\(^{132}\) (Fig. 35) Thus for multiple reasons, a comparison between the books is helpful in gaining a greater understanding of the latter work.

Along with *American Photographs*, *The Americans* is often cited as one of a handful of iconic photo books produced in the U.S. before color photography began to dominate the field. In fact, the connection between the two books is more than incidental: Evans’ guidance was sought out by the younger foreign photographer when they were both working for Alexey Brodovitch, the influential photography director at *Harper’s Bazaar*, in 1945.\(^{133}\) Brodovitch is one of the few lynchpins between these multiple generations of photographers, since he also allowed Leonard Freed to take his photography class, for free, in 1955.\(^{134}\) Following the closing of the eminent periodical’s photography department in 1948 and Frank’s disengagement with the world of fashion photography, he (like Freed) traveled to and photographed abroad before returning to New York years later.\(^{135}\) Upon Evans’ urging, he applied and subsequently received a Guggenheim grant to photograph in the U.S.; significantly, he wrote in his application that Delpire would publish the project if it was funded.

\(^{132}\) Brigitte Freed, interview with the author, May 29, 2016.

\(^{133}\) Joshua Chuang, “When the messenger is the medium: the making of Walker Evans’s American Photographs and Robert Frank’s The Americans,” in *Yale University Art Gallery bulletin*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Art Gallery, 2006, 115.

\(^{134}\) Brodovitch did not, however, allow Gordon Parks to join the photography staff of *Harper’s Bazaar*, stating the magazine did not “hire Negroes.” Stange, 16.

\(^{135}\) Unlike Freed, Frank also traveled through Latin America before returning to the U.S. See Chuang, cit., 116.
Frank’s following legendary travels across almost all of the 48 states yielded nearly seven hundred rolls of film, from which the photographer proofed over one thousand individual images before pairing his selection down to ninety. Thirty three were published in *U.S. Camera*, but his energies were more concentrated on his forthcoming book. Since it was to be released as part of Delpire’s *Encyclopédie Essentielle* series, certain aspects of the volume, such as the method for reproducing the photographer’s images (rotogravure) and the size of the page, 7.5 x 8.5 inches (only a quarter inch off on both sides from *American Photographs*), were predetermined.

These parameters suited Frank. However, he was unprepared for Delpire’s insistence on adding a series of quotations by celebrated Americans such as Benjamin Franklin and Walt Whitman alongside his photographs, as well as publishing the “incongruously lighthearted illustration by Saul Steinberg that spanned” the book’s cover.136 (Fig. 36) In the same vein as Evans, and later Freed, the Swiss photographer had “painstakingly labored to achieve” the tenor of his volume through its sensitive order. Frank felt that the lengthy texts both visually distracted from his images and that their tone struck a dissonant chord with his own.137 Furthermore, the piece that Jack Kerouac had written for Frank about his project went unpublished in this first, French edition, released in 1957.

Dissatisfied, the Swiss photographer soon brokered a deal with Grove Press in New York to publish the project as he had envisioned it: happily, they ordered new gravure sheets of his photographs but kept them in the same order and published Kerouac’s introduction. Compared to the mixed reviews that *American Photographs* first garnered, this U.S. edition of *The Americans* was relatively poorly received; its status was only revised in the 1960s, when Frank’s style was

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136 Chuang, *cit.*, 118.

137 Ibid.
celebrated as befitting the tumultuous decade. This reaction was prompted by the Aperture’s re-release of the book, which reproduced the images in a “grittier” style than previous editions.

The cover of the first American edition of *The Americans* (as well as many subsequent ones) departed from the austerity of Evans’s book by reproducing the title along with Frank’s photograph, “Trolley – New Orleans.” (Fig. 37) Leonard Freed may not have been consciously thinking of this image when shooting a similar train car years later, but the influence of the image, published in a spread towards the center of his volume, is undeniable.\(^\text{138}\) (Fig. 38) While in Frank’s photograph, the train is parallel to the picture plane, giving the viewer the opportunity to scrutinize the diverse faces of children and adult riders of both races, in Freed’s image the vehicle is angled, showing white riders in suits and fur-lined jackets looking down at the African American men taking a lunch break alongside the tracks.

A number of photographs in *Black in White America* lack captions and fewer are accompanied by an extended, corresponding description. The three sentences that contextualize to this aforementioned image precede it by multiple pages are cutting in their description of the unpictured white overseer who “never smiled” nor “questioned” the black workers, and only spoke to them “when giving instruction.”\(^\text{139}\) The account of the white boss’s refusal to sit, eat, or even look at the black laborers hovers over the subsequent image, particularly those who appear to be looking up at the passing train and its riders. All figures in this double-page spread seem to be focused on someone who does not return their gaze, with the exception of the young man in the third window from the picture’s right edge: he clearly acknowledges Freed’s camera, yet is still inscrutable. Remarkably, despite the train’s speed, the photograph is not blurry. As in Frank’s photograph, the viewer can see the reflection of the surrounding environment in addition

\(^{\text{138}}\) Freed, *cit.*, 80-1.

\(^{\text{139}}\) Ibid., 77.
to its passengers. In Frank’s image there is no ambiguity in the expression of the black man seated just behind the somber white boy and his crying sister; his reality is separate from theirs, and this situation resonates powerfully with Freed’s composition. Notably, the train image is one of the very few photographs in Black in White America where only a few of the subjects faces are visible, thus placing further emphasis on the relationship between the laborers and the passengers.

Further proof that Freed’s book lives within a tradition of American photo books is found in the recurring presence of subjects that marked both Evans and Frank’s volumes. For example, Freed’s trolley image is followed by a second double-page spread of four young barbers in their South Carolina shop.\footnote{Ibid., 82-3.} (Fig. 39) Frank, too, photographs the black barbershop in South Carolina, though his image is, like Evans’, vacant, with only an outline of the white photographer’s head, shoulders, and hands barely visible in the window’s reflection. (Fig. 40) Freed’s bright photograph differs dramatically from these earlier pictures: here everything is visible and the mirrors replicate the environment on a diagonal composition that resembles that of the train in his previous image. Despite the presence of these reflective surfaces, Freed’s own figure remains absent. What holds the photograph together is the young, seated barber who closes his lips within his mouth while bending slightly forward, towards the camera, his gaze meeting its lens. This attitude communicates the man’s simultaneous awareness of and discomfort with his place in the world, his gesture communicating an inability to speak of—and thus to change—anything about it.

The expression is self-aware and spontaneous, a genuine result of Freed’s presence. The young man agreed to sit for the camera but leans out of the expected, upright pose. His implicit expression and silent dialogue with the photographer recalls that of another young man found a
few pages later in *Black and White America*: here, however, instead of closing his lips upon themselves, this man holds his hand over his mouth in reaction to what he has seen on the blurry screen to his left. (Fig. 41) The corresponding text describes how the subject assumed this stance after discussing with Freed how the television had shown him, in a new way, the unequal opportunities that he and his community had in comparison to his fellow Americans.\footnote{Ibid., 132-3.}

This is Freed’s only television photograph, which recuperates a trope already established by Frank. In “Television Studio – Burbank, California,” Frank shows the studio origin of such new and precise broadcast images. (Fig. 42) In contrast, time within Freed’s image appears to have slowed down as both the figure on the screen and the one in the room are caught in moments of reflection, unsure of what to say or do next. The slightly soft focus contributes to this feeling—it is a photographic style that can also be found in certain photographs in *The Americans*, including another, well-known television image from the book, “Restaurant, from U.S. 1, leaving Columbia, South Carolina.” (Fig. 43) Frank’s impressionistic focus contributes greatly to the photograph’s mood and would not have been lost on Freed, who published similarly grainy images in his volume. Thus the younger photographer employs a technique similar to the elder in depicting a similar subject, but foregrounds uncertainty instead of nostalgia.

As previously discussed, television, like the radio or the diner, are hallmarks of American culture in the post-war era, and Frank purposefully includes them in his photo book to allude to their significance in shaping a new vision of the country. Similarly, car culture, patriotic parades, and busy street scenes are chosen for their relevancy. Freed draws from these tropes of American life in his own book, together with other themes selected by Frank to portray African Americans, as in the case in his depiction of a community funeral and of a black nanny caring for a young
white child. (Fig. 44) Even the cool gaze a black couple looking back at Frank’s camera is found, in a slightly different form, in *Black in White America*.¹⁴² (Fig. 45) Frank’s images of African Americans are not flattering but they are sympathetic. Though not overtly political, each reproduces views of the black community which are stereotypical for this period, pointing to the fact that they are the caretakers of a wealthier class, that they are denied equal access to public space, and that their community members often die before their time.

None of Frank’s portrayals of African Americans intersect with America’s glamorous parties and Hollywood entertainment, which are often presented as sources of enjoyment by the white citizens in his book. While *The Americans* does not focus on race, like *American Photographs*, it touches the topic obliquely, as it integral for creating an existential picture of the country. In this sense, Frank’s book is—like its forerunner—inherently political. Thus the influence of Frank’s thoughtful portrayal of the manifold experiences of Americans through a variety of photographic techniques is important for understanding what Freed accomplished with his own volume.

**Bruce Davidson’s *East 100th Street***

Although released five years after Freed finished photographing *Black and White in America* in 1965, Bruce Davidson’s *East 100th Street* is a helpful comparison for thinking through the politics of a photo book created by a white male photographer about a disenfranchised community.¹⁴³ Unlike Freed, Davidson had formal training as a photographer early on and was an established personality in the field when he embarked on this project: not only had he already published another photographic series focusing on African Americans earlier.

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¹⁴² Ibid., 108-09.

in the decade, he had been a standing member of Magnum since 1958. Since the two publications differ greatly in format and style, it is important to consider how each succeeds (and fails) at their respective attempts to document the lifestyle of their fellow underserved Americans.

Davidson first published his project as a book of hundred twenty-three photographs about this single block in East Harlem in 1970.\textsuperscript{144} The selected images were shot over a two-year period in the late-1960s. Notably, a second edition was released in 1999 and then another, slightly expanded version, in 2003.\textsuperscript{145} Given Davidson’s prominence—he received a Guggenheim in 1962 and had a solo show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1964, and then again in 1970, with selections from his East Harlem years—Freed was undoubtedly aware of this fellow photographer’s work.\textsuperscript{146} Furthermore, some of Davidson’s earlier projects were directly related to \textit{Black in White America}, such as the work he published within Talcott Parsons and Kenneth B. Clark’s \textit{The American Negro}.\textsuperscript{147}

Erina Duganne has noted that in the 1960s, Davidson had the unique privilege of successfully presenting his photographs in multiple settings: some were geared towards a socio-political attention to poverty, others concerned themselves more with a particular modernist aesthetics celebrated in then-contemporary art circles.\textsuperscript{148} Similarly the content of \textit{East 100th Street} spoke to the former, while the elegant white cloth volume of was clearly pitched for

\textsuperscript{144} An earlier edition was released the year prior by Zürich publisher Conzett & Huber but it was not available for consultation for this project.


\textsuperscript{146} Freed stated in an interview: “I went over to the Magnum office and met Inge Bondi – this was around the time Capa and Chim where killed – and she said I could hang around, look through the files and use the office.” Leonard Freed, and Bill Ewing, \textit{cit}. Freed hung out at Magnum when he was in New York in 1954-6. This was confirmed in Brigitte Freed, interview with the author, May 29, 2016.


audiences comfortable in the latter category, who would have likely been familiar with *American Photographs* and *The Americans*. (Fig. 46) Yet by focusing on a single community within New York, Davidson’s project departs from these forerunners in scope as well as style.\textsuperscript{149}

Like Evans’ and Frank’s projects, Davidson’s book is linguistically sparse: after two title pages falls a third with a very short text printed in an off-center column, a quarter of the way down the page. It begins with a quote: “What you call a ghetto, I call my home.”\textsuperscript{150} The author’s voice then switches from that of the unidentified East Harlem resident to the photographer’s own. Davidson describes the various people he portrays in the following pages as all representatives of this “home,” subjects who range from a revolutionary to a veteran, and from an old man to a young girl. The final sentence articulates the contradictory feelings of attraction and repulsion that many viewers may have in looking through the book. Davidson writes, “I entered a life style [sic], and, like the people who live on the block, I love and hate it and I keep going back.”\textsuperscript{151}

As Mae C. Johnson and James R. Murray noted in 1971, lifestyle may have been a poor choice of words, as Davidson appears to have posed many of the portraits he published.\textsuperscript{152} In his review of the work, A.D. Coleman wrote that there is “automatically a barrier” between the photographer and his subject, “a wariness” that prohibits the candid portrayal of life in East Harlem.\textsuperscript{153} Yet the dissonance between the carefully composed photographs and what appears to

\textsuperscript{149} Measuring 12.25 x 11.25 inches, it also dwarfs these smaller publications.

\textsuperscript{150} Davidson, *cit.*, np.

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid.


be a hastily-written preface does not, to this reader, indicate that the photographs are, as Johnson and Murray put it, “irrelevant to the intent of the book,” but rather that the photographer did not put much thought into his choice of language, downplaying the relationship between his words and images. Indeed, Davidson eschews the use of any further text in the volume, publishing his photographs always at the same size (6.5 x 8.5 inches in both orientations) and without captions, on the recto and verso of every page.

For Davidson, then, the editing and layout of his photo book consisted solely of the formal qualities of the prints and the order in which they fell. His concerns were similar to those of Evans and Frank, though he focused on a greater number of interiors and domestic shots than his predecessors. Also notable is how, as in The Sweet Flypaper of Life and Black in White America, the subject of East 100th Street is predominantly a social landscape: only a handful of images are absent of any human presence, and in more than a few, the reader must look closely to see the silhouette of someone in the distance, on a street corner or rooftop. (Fig. 47)

The order of the book is thoughtful: similar subjects (couples, families, close-up portraits, children) are paired together across spreads, and dissimilar ones are arranged according to a more formal aesthetic. The different pairings help the reader to draw social parallels and visual connections. The juxtapositions encourage the reader to think about the subjects’ lives, their histories, and their futures. Unlike in The American Negro, which divided Davidson’s photographs into four sections—physical presence, environmental conditions, labor, and the protest movement—within East 100th Street, the photographer deliberately eschews divisions in

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154 Johnson and Murray, *cit.*, 348.
order to focus attention on the individual. This disavowal of sections also puts all the decision-making in the hands of the reader: they decide when and where to pause or jump ahead.

This uniform mode of organization also makes possible the unbiased presentation of the neighborhood’s ethnic diversity, since all subjects are given equal weight on the page. Moreover, residents not only consented to the photographer taking their picture, but were often portrayed as they wished to be seen. Davidson spoke of the pleasure multiple subjects expressed in having their photograph taken; they not only tolerated the sometimes complex preparation involved in making the image, they also acted as co-producers. As he writes in the forward to East 100th Street, by the end of the project, Davidson felt part of the community he had been photographing.

Yet, as A.D. Coleman notes, the photographer had the option of leaving this community, while the residents did not. Although Davidson “took extensive precautions” to be sensitive to his subjects, the project was condemned to fall short of its goal of truly capturing the social reality of East 100th Street because it was inflected with the unequal power dynamic between the white photographer and his minority subjects. Among Davidson’s strategies to rebalance this relationship was his decision to give away “several thousand prints” as well as copies of the book to community members, as well as his extending to them an invitation to the project’s exhibition opening at MoMA. While Davidson looked for ways to use “the book as a lever to get funds” for


157 Coleman, cit., 46.

158 Ibid., 45-6.
the neighborhood, his success with this endeavor when compared to the success of the book was circumscribed.

The politics of Davidson’s project and Freed’s are similar in this regard—in both situations, the photographers were aware of being the outsiders, trying to give form to the experience of a marginalized other. Faced with these limitations, Davidson and Freed made opposite choices in nearly every regard: where to shoot and in what style, what should be the book layout and the size of the images, and (perhaps most importantly) where and how to use language to describe their subject. Whereas *East 100th Street* was photographed with a cumbersome, large format camera, Freed shot all the photographs in *Black in White America* with his 35-mm Leica and may have left quickly from certain uncomfortable settings after obtaining his desired shot. Indeed, there is a visible tension between photographer and subject within certain pages of Freed’s volume that is absent from *East 100th Street*. Unlike Davidson, Freed never went back to the places he photographed nor sent copies of the final product to those he portrayed. He did not attempt to leverage his publication into any direct advocacy and, a couple exceptions aside, he was never again in contact with those who filled his book’s pages.159

What to make of such dissimilar projects? Later in his review of Davidson’s volume, Coleman writes: “If we are to come to terms with the situation [of inequality in the country], as a first step toward improving it, then we need to hear (and see) from the other side.”160 As noted in the previous chapter, Freed and Davidson were photographing during a period in which America was not open to seeing complex views of minorities or hearing about their daily oppression. Given these circumstances, both photographers set out to bear witness to the lives of the disempowered and then represent them for a broader audience, with the goal of engendering

159 Brigitte Freed, interview with the author, March 25, 2016.

160 Coleman, *cit.*, 47.
understanding as well as inciting change. The fact that both books were republished in recent years speaks to the enduring quality of their work, and the benefits of their respective approaches. There is more than one way to create a photo book but, as will be discussed further in the coming chapter, Freed’s approach to the form was unique, particularly with regards to the types of language he published and its placement in relation to his photographs.
Chapter 3
Leonard Freed’s *Black in White America*

**The Creation of the Book**

*Black in White America* is comprised of one hundred sixty-five photographs published in various sizes ranging from double-page, full-bleed spreads to tight layouts with sequences of eight images. (Figs. 48-49) Some of the sequences show a continuous temporal flow, as if they were drawn directly from Freed’s contact sheets, while others offer up solitary moments for contemplation. These dynamic pages present a wide range of figures: individuals and couples, groups and gatherings, old and young, white and black. Throughout this book, Freed fashions himself alternately as a photojournalist, a reveler, a member of the movement, and a foreigner. His photographs cover a full range of documentary genres, presenting both historical events—such as the March on Washington and African Americans voting for the first time in Washington D.C.—and the everyday lives of his fellow Americans. The accompanying text is equally diverse, ranging in style and source from slogans and advertisements to lyrics and spirituals, and from third-person accounts to dialogue to Freed’s own first-person description of his experience. Additionally, one finds captions for the majority of the images, even if they only provide minimal information.

As in most photo books, including many of those described earlier, *Black in White America* has no table of contents or chapter headings. The heterogeneity of the visual and textual material is seemingly random and dense with information, thwarting any consistent narrative. Many photographs are untitled and some captions apply to multiple pages of very diverse images, asking the reader to retain the information while advancing through the book. For
example, Freed’s impressions of “Jazz Funerals in New Orleans” runs across seven pages with images presenting a lively street scene with men yelling and smiling, multiple environmental reflections in a pane of glass, and a somber procession taking place in a graveyard.\textsuperscript{161} (Fig. 50) This loose, improvisatory style of language and visual montage recalls the tenor of The Sweet Flypaper of Life and contrasts with Freed’s first two books, Jews from Amsterdam (1958) and Jews in Germany (1965), where photographs and text were presented in a more traditional format.\textsuperscript{162} What unites these three photo books is Freed’s commitment to portraying a diverse, marginalized group in a sensitive way, however Black in White America reaches a whole new level of literary and aesthetic experimentation.

The impetus for the volume dates to 1962, when Freed traveled to Berlin after hearing about the construction of the wall dividing East and West Germany and saw an African American soldier on patrol. Freed was troubled by how he had taken on the duty of ensuring safety abroad yet was still unsafe at home. In response, he took a single photograph of this striking scene: the resulting photograph shows the black soldier at the edge of the American zone with eyes downcast and hand resting on his gun. (Fig. 51) Once captured on film, the significance of the image haunted him, ultimately compelling him to go back to the United States the following year to start his project. While this is the only photograph included in the book that was shot outside of the United States, it sets the tone for many others that touch upon themes of freedom, violence, protection, and belonging.

The journey to home in 1963, taken by boat with his wife Brigitte and his young daughter Susannah, marked Freed’s first time back in America in six years. To reconcile with his

\textsuperscript{161} Freed, \textit{cit.}, 68.

\textsuperscript{162} Leonard Freed, \textit{Joden van Amsterdam}, \textit{cit.} and Leonard Freed, \textit{Deutsche Juden heute}, \textit{cit.}
birthplace, Freed spent the majority of his time actively shooting in and around New York. He returned to Amsterdam in January 1964, where he continued to develop his career while also living near his wife’s family. Freed made a second cross-Atlantic trip alone later that year so that he could expand his project and photograph in the South. Once this tour was completed, he headed back in to Europe 1965.164

Like Robert Frank on his Guggenheim-funded road trip across the United States in the mid-1950s, Freed had a large amount of freedom in his self-directed journey. His journey was not dependent on an assignment, as in the case of photographers shooting the Civil Rights Movement, and being constrained by the limits of their media. On the contrary, Freed could adapt his itinerary according to the circumstances he encountered. Notwithstanding the political impetus of the project, Freed’s focus was on documenting the daily life of African Americans. The 1964 March on Washington is illustrative of his approach: despite having travelled to D.C. to document this historical moment, only four photographs ended up in the 1967 publication. This was not due to a lack of material. Like Roy DeCarava’s Harlem photographs and Gordon Parks’ Life magazine story, Freed made a deliberate choice to avoid the iconic and focus his camera on “exploring the diverse everyday lives of a people that had been marginalized[, discriminated against, and unjustly persecuted] for so long.”168

164 Ibid.
165 Paul M. Farber, interview with the author, May 23, 2016.
166 Farber, *cit.*, 106.
167 Indeed, Freed shot so much film that the day became the subject of an entirely separate, second book, *This Is the Day: The March on Washington*, *cit.*, which was released posthumously on occasion of the event’s 50th anniversary of the march.
This decision to focus on the unglamorous, quotidian parts of life had economic drawbacks, as Freed could not pitch this work to a commercial media outlet. Rather than financial reward, Freed was motivated to create a singular project unique in its genre at this heated time in American history. He was more concerned with giving back to the historic moment he was witnessing than with profiting from it.169 Indeed, the photographer wrote in his travel journal in late 1964 how he was dismayed by whites who profited financially from portraying black culture—a view that may partially explain why Black in White America was released over two years after Freed’s final trip to the South.170

As previously noted, pictures from the project were published abroad before the book was released in the U.S. The photographer’s wife, Brigitte Freed, was not only instrumental in the process of distributing her husband’s images to periodicals and photo editors during this time, she also helped produce the publication.171 Brigitte assisted in printing Leonard’s contact sheets both in New York and in Amsterdam, prepared photographs for the book’s maquette, typed and edited captions, and even created the volume’s layout, which she and Leonard refined together before they brought it to Robert Delpire for feedback. At this time, Delpire was considered the most astute editor of photo books and the meeting was highly productive for the Freeds, as he gave them useful guidance on page layout. For example, the couple learned from Delpire how to properly arrange a double-page spread without losing information in the gutter. Brigitte later revised the position of prints selected for the publication and supervised its printing while Leonard was abroad shooting the Six-Day War of 1967.172

171 Brigitte Freed, interview with the author, May 29, 2016.
172 Ibid.
It is not accidental that the photographer’s projects which bookend Black in White America focus on Jewish populations—a subject that touched on questions of racism and marginalization and had clear repercussions on the representation of African Americans. In his book, White Lies: Race and the Myths of Whiteness, Maurice Berger writes that “many liberal Jews in the 1950s and 1960s […] saw blackness as an extension of [their] own Jewishness—a similar disfranchisement.” Similarly, Freed felt a kinship with both Jewish and black communities, but he also felt exiled from and unwelcome in them and recognized their important differences. In his journal—and presumably also in discussion with various people he met on his travels—Freed thought through what specific tactics utilized by the country’s Jewish communities could be useful to the disenfranchised African Americans in fighting racism. These notes also reflect the photographer’s frustrations with his project. In one instance he bleakly summarized a passage from one of James Baldwin’s writings, which stated that the relationship between whites and blacks was destined to remain one-sided. The son of Jewish immigrants, Freed did not think of himself as a white man of power, yet he also understood that, when he traveled around the country, many would, at least initially, see him as such.

He was, therefore, sensitive to how he interacted yet he persevered in his goal of seeing black communities in New York and throughout the South. In an interview given towards the end of his life, Freed stated that his aim was always to “get to know a society and [learn] how it reflects on yourself, who you are and what it means.” This sensibility explains his personal tone and the impressionistic views in Black in White America, in addition to the reproduction of


175 Leonard Freed, and Bill Ewing, cit.
historical texts and straight-ahead photographs. Freed thought of himself as a humanist and understood that as a photographer, he would never have complete control of his final project. This suited him: the image was never going to be perfect, nor should it be. Rather, it was to be just one part of a larger whole—be that the book or the project of understanding the experience of another community.

**Contents and Organization**

While the layout of the volume transformed over time and in creative spurts together with Brigitte’s input, by the time Freed had set out on his journey to the South in 1964, it was clear to the photographer that the project’s final form would be a publication with text both written and collected by him. His journal documents his musings on what type of structure the forthcoming volume should have and what might be good opening lines or a poignant interlude as well as his day-to-day experiences. Many of those accounts were subsequently published, in shortened versions, in *Black in White America*. Freed remained firm throughout the project’s production in his goal not to focus on specific historic events, but rather to present an unseen side of African American life. He also never lost sight of the role his identity played in this process.

The aforementioned photograph of the African American soldier that opens the book immediately establishes for the reader a direct confrontation of (black) subject and (white) photographer. This occurs on the visual level as well as in the text, writing to the right of the image,

> We, he and I, two Americans. We meet silently and part silently. Between us, impregnable and as deadly as the wall behind him, is another wall. [The wall divides] us, wherever we meet. I am White and he is Black.  

176 Ibid.

177 Freed, *cit.*,  

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Following this text and a line break is another, more descriptive caption: “In defense of Western Civilization, an American soldier’s hand rests on his gun.” This interesting combination of writing styles and voices serves as a reminder that verbal descriptions can contribute to the meaning of photographs, including those in Freed’s book. By using language in this original manner, Freed underscores that he is simultaneously author and observer of the images he creates and writes about. As Brett Abbott explains, this hybridity “works as a part of Freed’s larger rhetorical strategy, complicating and adding depth to the circumstances portrayed.”

The strength of the prose in Black in White America and its integration alongside Freed’s pictures is what truly distinguishes this photo book from all other similar documents from the Civil Rights era. As Andrea Nelson writes, “[i]ntertextual and interracial collaborations depend on and work against privileging the visual.” This push-pull highlights the reader’s role not only in constructing meaning out of the diverse parts of the publication, but also, more broadly, as a member of society that assigns meaning to race. In its fullest form, the book functions on both semiotic and discursive levels, showing both the “how of representation” through photography and the “effects and consequences of representation” through the stories recounted therein.

178 Ibid.
Although there are no formal chapters in *Black and White in America*, a structure exists. The book presents five main sections that are marked by a change in photographic subject alongside an extended text written by Freed that reads as brief introduction. The Berlin photograph, discussed earlier, functions as the Preface, situating the content of the book and drawing a direct link with Freed’s biography of traveling from Europe to back the U.S. The subsequent first section is shot mainly in the South and begins with a striking image taken in a Louisiana jail, printed full bleed and on a double-page spread. (Fig. 52) The reader’s eye is drawn into the dark and narrow hallway: on the right, black hands reach out through the iron bars while on the left, two figures appear to converse with obscured inmates. None of their faces are visible: they are anonymous bodies within the prison system. This photograph, along with the accompanying text about the arbitrary treatment the inmates are given by their jailer, creates a poignant juxtaposition to the previous spread with the image of the soldier alongside Freed’s reflections.

This section’s third photo provides another strong contrast: the institution of the jail is replaced with that of the “Gospel Tent,” where all subjects but one are women. (Fig. 53) The reader sees five bent elbows on the right side of the page—on the same diagonal as the hands of the previous image—leading up to the speaker at the front of the room who mirrors this gesture by resting her left arm on her waist. Although the reader does not know the content of what this woman has said, the tone of the photograph and the expression on her face belie its gravity. This sequencing of photographs that respond to each other either compositionally or through the choice of subject recalls previously discussed photo books like *American Photographs* and *The Americans*, where the impact of the individual page is heightened due to its placement within a
The remaining pages in this initial grouping of Freed’s book are predominantly from the South and mostly show daily activities and family life, both in public spaces and at home.

The second section begins with the photograph that will become the most iconic image from Freed’s project, the aforementioned child with his arm raised. (Fig. 1) The following pages present two different kinds of texts. One describes in third-person the agitation at a public meeting in Maryland, held with the aim of removing a fence that separated the black community from the white; the other narrative consists of an extended discussion by a black government official of his brother’s experience in the Army of the country’s hypocritical democracy.

Overall, the photographs in this section are much more urban than in the preceding one, showing a wide range of actions, such as working and playing in the street, as well as men and women in fashionable attire, photographed at formal events such as a wedding.

This second section is where Robert Frank’s influence is most evident, with images that revisit his subjects, such as the previously discussed trolley, the barbershop, a black nanny holding a white child, and multiple portraits of children and adults riding in automobiles. Along with the American flag, the car is a recurring motif in *The Americans*, and a direct comparison can be drawn between the children surveying their surroundings from their family’s convertible in Frank’s “Belle Isle – Detroit” and those uncaptioned photos in this section of Freed’s book. (Figs. 54-55) Additionally, views in this section are comparable to Davidson’s later images showing parents lovingly holding their children. The grouping ends with an intimate image of a

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184 For example, consider in *The Americans* the juxtapositions of elbows and expressions in the sequence *Funeral – St. Helena, South Carolina* followed by *Rodeo – Detroit* and *Savannah, Georgia* or in *American Photographs* plates 44 through 46, *Arkansas Flood Refugee, 1937; People in Summer, New York State Town, 1930; Birmingham Boarding House, 1936.*

185 Freed, *cit.*, 72-3.

186 Ibid., 75.
father cradling his son on a New York balcony, followed by a man dressed as Santa—with a
camera around his neck—standing cheerfully in front of a large group of children. (Figs. 56-57)

This radiant atmosphere is blunted by the text that fills the following four pages, in which Freed recounts the nights of December 30th and 31st, as well as January 1, spent in the “‘Black Belt’ of Florida.” Freed’s text, marking the start of the third section of the book, is as trenchant as his photographs, and its departure in tone from the previous joyous images has a profound impact on the reader. The dim hopefulness that the reader feels when learning about “two teenage girls” who want to challenge the racism that surrounds them by buying a hamburger at the window intended only for white customers is abruptly undercut by the recounting of a Civil Rights worker who was compelled to leave town because—so long as he continued organizing—his father would be fired in retaliation from any job he managed to get once his employer realized their relationship. This report is followed by the book’s most heartbreaking tale about Jake, an epileptic black man who is locked up in the town’s jail, his parents powerless to do anything for him as they and the other townspeople hear his cries for help from the street.188

These accounts are as moving as they are unforgettable and, just as in the previous section of text about African American citizens who serve their country but are denied equal rights, there are no images corresponding to the linguistic content. Though it is likely that Freed had the opportunity to photograph the orators, the reader never sees them or the environments that they describe because, as evidenced by his contact sheets, Freed never shot them. Instead of providing visuals for the aforementioned narratives, the following spread is one of the most unique in the volume and marks the visual start of this section. Here the reader finds, on the

187 Ibid., 124-7.
188 Ibid.
right, a book advertisement and, on the adjacent page, a black man in a crowded street in New York City, holding the newspaper *Muhammad Speaks* up to Freed’s camera so that he can read and record the text.\(^\text{189}\) (Fig. 58)

Both the advertisement and newspaper headline are written in bold, capital letters, and end with exclamation points: on the left, “The God Dam White Man!” and on the right, “We Must Have Justice!” This latter photograph would have recalled to a select readership an earlier image by Gordon Parks, often reproduced in the media during the previous year, showing Malcolm X calmly holding a newspaper with a headline proclaiming the number of dead resulting from recent spree of police brutality. (Fig. 59) Additionally, the subtitles of each photographs text nod to the omnipresent financial constraints on the African American community: “Read This Book, Only 60¢” vs. “Regardless of the Price.”\(^\text{190}\) The depiction of the street and the prominence of linguistic components in this spread are marked by Walker Evans’ previously discussed influence. (Fig. 11) The relationship between commerce and freedom; the doubled, urgent language; the visual collage of the city street in contrast to the empty, black ground that surrounds the book poster—all contribute to the powerful dynamic engendered by the two images published side by side, full-bleed.

Between them, the reader of *Black in White America* is simultaneously reminded of Freed’s identity as a white man making a book about the various experiences of African Americans that other (particularly other white) Americans will read. Readers are also reminded of their own identity, how it shapes their interpretation of the text, and of the importance of continuing to read carefully the publication between their hands. These photographs act as a

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\(^{189}\) Ibid., 128-9.

\(^{190}\) The relationship between financial constraints and black Americans’ freedom greatly occupied Freed during his travels South, as he wrote in his journal about church collections, economic aid given to the South by the North, and the immigration to the North by African Americans looking for work.
meta-language within the book: just as the man who addresses Freed’s camera also addresses the viewer of Freed’s photograph, so do the words “Read This Book” speak simultaneously to their intended historical audience in Harlem and to the reader who encounters them.191

The photographs that follow this spread are the most overtly political and historically specific, almost journalistic in their look. Here Freed portrays marches and demonstrations, blacks and whites lying side-by-side on the street in protest, black men and women being arrested by whites in various uniforms. (Fig. 60) The language chosen, particularly in the first-half of this section, is more journalistic, too. Short, impersonal descriptions succinctly describe where the action is taking place, as well as what the political stakes and risks are to the participants involved.192 For example, the pages that show protesters peacefully holding picket signs as well as being violently arrested by the police are described as such: “Civil Rights demonstrations in the North and South for jobs, equality, housing, schools and Civil Rights. The law says demonstrators obstructing traffic will be jailed.” Later on, the texts lengthen and give more space to individual voices, but they never lose their political bent.

The book’s next break, marking the start of the fourth section, imitates the layout used to present the image of the poolside boy with his arm raised: a full-page photograph is presented on the left and a page of continuous writing is published on the right. The photograph in this case shows a young black man leaning against a brick building and speaking with two older white women, presumably about the voting that is to take place therein; the text consists of one extended narrative that spans the following pages.193 (Fig. 61) The writing describes a young black woman named Jone who turned her back on the Civil Rights movement after being

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191 Ibid., 132.
192 Ibid., 135.
193 Ibid., 152-3.
arrested multiple times and giving birth to the child that resulted from having been raped by a group of white high school boys. The text distinguishes itself both by its personal nature and its considerable length, as well as for integrating the photographer’s voice throughout. Rather than reproducing a single voice, it is a multivalent dialogue. Freed transcribes his questions to Jone, recounts his actions, and then ends the section by addressing the reader directly, asking, “What will become of her?”

This conjectural tone hovers over the following double-page photograph of a crowd of white families on a New York pier showcasing fighter planes: at the center of the image, a smiling, light-skinned black mother accompanies her two boys away from the river behind them. The reader cannot help but grapple with the differences between her life and Jone’s. The book’s previous demanding prose and preceding moving images haunt the subsequent pages of upbeat photographs showing black American football players speaking with their fans, proper young black women in a park, African American men in uniform, and a joyful multiracial family. This rather idyllic sequence ends abruptly with images dedicated to the funeral and subsequent burial of a young woman who died in the North, as well as an ominous-looking hunting party. This portion of the book is marked by a wide range of emotions and geographies and by its diversity of subjects. The last image of this fourth section shows a boy walking ahead of a fatherly figure, whose arm stretches to reach the child’s shoulder. (Fig. 62) Both are photographed with their mouths open and the reader imagines the elder’s speech reinforcing his gesture, saying ‘slow down’ or ‘be careful,’ yet no corresponding textual information is provided.

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194 “Will she, like others in the past, hide and suppress her emotions, become the white man’s mistress, while he sleeps beside her in secure contentment?” Ibid., 155.

195 Ibid., 156-191.
The fifth and final section begins with a lengthy text that consists of Freed recounting two conversations he had in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. In the first dialogue, the reader learns about a white student the photographer was rooming with, who, unlike the young man’s family back home, shared Freed’s desire for racial equality; in the second, the photographer speaks with a Mississippi native about the reaction expressed by whites at the news of new wealth in the black community. The conflicting feelings engendered by these accounts, touching on relations between blacks and whites, are sustained through the last, abridged section of images that focuses primarily on depictions of children. The corresponding caption describes how, at a camp in upstate New York, black and white “poor children of the cities” play outdoors alongside each other. In one enlarged photograph, they all stand together, goofing off for the camera; adjacent to this image is another, smaller photograph of a young black boy with his fist held up in boxing position, framed by the heads of two other young, white boys in the foreground. (Fig. 63) In both the child’s gesture and its dynamic framing, the photograph evokes Freed’s earlier shot of the boys at the city pool. There is a poignant ambiguity in these gestures: one wonders whether these kids are playing, fighting, or acting out something in between. This short sequence of images—along with others throughout the book that show children of variety of ages—recalls work by another New York photographer, Helen Levitt. Although the photographs she took of children in the 1940s may not have been known to Freed, both created work that skillfully captured the wide range of childhood emotions and interactions.

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196 Ibid., 194-6.
197 Ibid.
198 Ibid., 196.
199 Ibid., 198.
200 See also Helen Levitt, and James Agee, A way of seeing. New York: Horizon Press, 1981.
The last photograph of *Black in White America* is a double-page spread showing an encounter on a sidewalk that skirts the intersection of a railroad and a highway. Populating the image are four black teenage boys on bikes, dressed in nice sweaters and collared shirts, looking over their shoulders at a young white man in stained work clothes, head down as he walks towards them. (Fig. 64) In a sense, he is the inverse of the black soldier pictured in the book’s first spread: he is determined to walk ahead despite the uncomfortable situation that lay before him while his army counterpart appears to have momentarily stopped, resignedly. Both men turn their eyes away from Freed’s camera, yet their troubled expressions are still discernable. They appear to contemplate the weight of their situations. But what will the following moments look like for the white man, or for the black soldier? The reader is left to consider their expectations as they close the book.

**Representation and Identity**

Text serves many different functions within Freed’s project: sometimes it ties a photograph to a particular town, other times it recounts a story that was not photographed either because Freed could not get the picture or because he chose to speak to the person rather than photograph them. From the beginning of his career, Freed placed great importance on the personal exchange with his subjects, and he would frequently ask for permission to use his camera before raising it to his eye. The words that run alongside the photographs in *Black in White America* range from popular sayings and song lyrics heard by Freed during his travels to more general information about the culture he witnessed. For example, one reads the photographer’s impressions of culture, such as “self-imposed laws operate to segregate the
people at this great city beach.”¹²⁰¹ His texts also serve as a vehicle for providing further information about those he photographs, as with his description of an impoverished man on the street who, “may not ask for but is permitted to receive donations.”¹²⁰²

Unlike other aforementioned photo books surveying America, Freed provides pointed commentary about people he spoke with and changes he became aware of while traveling. One such text is located above a slightly blurry photograph, over halfway through the book, showing a woman screaming while being arrested— one of only a handful of violent images the photographer chose to publish. (Fig. 65) The text supports the visuals below, but not directly, with Freed writing that the young African American man pictured on a previous page is “being forced to acknowledge his condition, to take note that he lives as a black in white America. And he is in revolt.”¹²⁰³

Often these pages present a vision of future America to the reader. One such example is found in the upper right corner of a spread showing studious black pupils in a Southern High School. (Fig. 66) The tenor of the text falls somewhere between Freed’s personal voice and the more descriptive tone of a periodical like *Life*, reading thus,

> While the majority of Negroes remain outside the mainstream of American life, slowly, ever-greater numbers are beginning to enter into it. […] Middle class America and the middle class neighborhood are no longer a white reserve.¹²⁰⁴

With these texts, Freed styles himself as a sensitive journalist, assuming the voice of the writer usually sent by a magazine on assignment along with the photographer to report on what cannot be captured on film. Yet by filling the role of both writer and photographer, Freed is able to

¹²⁰¹ Ibid., 58-9.
¹²⁰² Ibid., 63.
¹²⁰³ Ibid., 133.
¹²⁰⁴ Ibid., 161.
creatively deploy each medium with more variety and nuance than if the project had been jointly authored.

Within the final pages of the book, Freed becomes more explicitly political. He reproduces excerpts from Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous address at the March on Washington, which gained a new poignancy after the Civil Rights leader’s assassination in 1968. Then, alongside the second-to-last image showing children from the aforementioned South Carolina family, Freed quotes a man he had met at the “poor man’s Negro lunch counter” in Washington, D.C. This man tells the photographer that if no improvements to racism are made, “‘there’s going to be a race riot all around the white man’s White House.’” Following these words, the man “pulls out a newspaper article stating that the Negroes now constituted sixty-three percent of this city’s present population.” This demographic fact is in the last sentence in Black in White America; like its final photograph that shows a working-class white man encountering four African American boys who appear have stopped on the sidewalk in front of him, potentially to block his path, the text connotes the tensions that may lie ahead for a more integrated nation.

There is an inherent risk in Freed’s project, just as in Davidson’s East 100th Street, of not succeeding in representing the lives of a diverse minority group with dignity. Freed attempted to offset this by publishing writing that took into account his position as an outsider as well as other passages that affirmed a longer, historical view. He tried to avoid the danger of practicing what Farm Security Administration photographer John Collier Jr. once called ‘visual anthropology,’ yet the fact remains that he did journey to the South with an itinerary of potential subjects and

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205 Farber, cit., 107.
206 Ibid., 204-5.
207 Ibid.
scenarios he wanted to shoot.\textsuperscript{208} For all its accomplishments, there is no denying that for some readers, \textit{Black in White America} evinces the “paradoxical mixture of social and psychological ‘truths,’ exotic voyeurism, fetishized artistic subjectivity, and formalist claims to universality, which [are] mutually enhancing[,] contradictory and unstable.”\textsuperscript{209}

For this reader, the few photographs that fall into this category are often those that have been reproduced the greatest number of times outside the context of the book. For example, the uncaptioned image of children playing in water from a city fire hydrant in \textit{The Concerned Photographer} seems to have become a trope in the photographers’ canon of socially acceptable image of black life, reappearing in other exhibitions and publications, along with the oeuvres of Davidson and DeCarava, amongst others. (See fig. 8) Freed’s photographs can also fail when they do not benefit from any nearby caption to complicate their reception, but instead unfortunately augment the spectacle that black Americans put on for their audiences. This is evident in the photographer’s portrayal of the beauty pageant cake walk, for example.\textsuperscript{210}

Yet such instances are outliers in the larger, exceptional project. Since Freed invested great care as well as time into a given setting, his subjects were usually engaged and comfortable around him. The resulting pictures that constitute \textit{Black in White America}, feel more like sensitive, spontaneous, portraits rather than crafted studies. (Fig. 67) At other times, the photographs succeed precisely because Freed candidly portrays what it feels like to be uninvited, showing his own awareness of being an outsider. In the words of Paul Farber,

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\textsuperscript{209} Ibid., 15.

\textsuperscript{210} Freed, \textit{cit.}, 106-7.
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Freed attempted to capture his subjects’ fields of vision—the looks shared among the people he photographed, and at times with the photographer—as a way of demonstrating the story of America’s tacit but clear racial boundaries.  

Such visions play off of each other across the volume’s pages: for example, the photograph of a group of men who hostilely assess Freed is recalled in a later image of a group of huddled boys, one of whom glares into the photographer’s lens, protective of his peers. (Figs. 68-69)

In his travel journal from 1964-65, Freed acknowledges his testing of these boundaries in order to get the photograph he desired. Unsurprisingly this operation was, at times, uncomfortable. He also writes about being influenced by William Agee and Walker Evans’ Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, trying to describe what he saw in the fashion of the former, or push further what went undocumented by the latter. Freed also avoids photographing certain subjects: he does not portray everyday chores such as cooking or washing, or social rituals such as dining or smoking and in this omission, fails at giving a complete picture of black life. For the most part, however, he avoids showing the institutions that perpetuate segregation: though they may be described in the text, the reader does not see the restaurant, the doctor’s office or the gas station with “separate but equal” spaces for black and white Americans. Focusing on the people who have suffered discrimination as opposed to the spaces that perpetuated those injustices has served the project well, since its subjects remain relatable to the contemporary viewer despite clear indicators, such as fashion, that the pictures are from a previous era.

211 Farber, cit., 105.

212 One example of this was the day he spent talking with one of the workers from the earlier-discussed railroad photograph, ultimately buying him lunch and giving him a dollar as he departed. Leonard Freed, Unpublished Journal, December 22, 1964.

213 Specifically, Freed writes in his unpublished journal about photographing an oil lamp that was described but not shown in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. He also writes about encountering a rundown shed and being reminded of those homes Agee described in the volume. The influence of this book was also noted by fellow Magnum photographer Bruce Davidson.
Like other artists who struggled with similar ambitions of representing a minority group in a sensitive and ethical manner, Freed had to come to terms with his own identity and how it affected his project. He opens this space of self-reckoning by including his own voice in the text, and this personal accent grows over the course of the publication, increasingly encouraging the reader to consider the photographer’s relationship to his subject and to make their own meanings from his open-ended situations. This direct questioning of identity in relationship to the black subject is quite extraordinary. As Stuart Hall has insightfully noted, such interrogation can, mobilize powerful feelings and emotions, of both a positive and negative kind. We feel their contradictory pull, their struggle over ambivalence. They sometimes call our very identities into question. We struggle over them because they matter – and these contests from which serious consequences can flow. They define what is ‘normal’, who belongs – and therefore, who is excluded. They are deeply inscribed in relations of power.  

While Freed’s book does not resolve any of the difficult questions of race relations in American life in the 1960s, it does raise them in a creative and, at times provocative, manner.

The photographer anticipated a biracial readership for his book and he felt that the purposeful reimagining of black life by all citizens was essential for achieving inroads in the Civil Rights movement. He knew that representation is inherently dialogic and stressed this aspect of the book by sharing his own thoughts and reproducing his conversations with others alongside his photographs. Lastly, Freed understood that “no one strategy can be adequate for the diversity of sites and confrontations.” Accordingly, he presented a heterogeneous compilation of material in *Black in White in America* in order to allow meaning to emerge in relation to its


readership, thus contributing to a unique and ever evolving understanding of race in the United States.
Conclusion

Despite the energies Freed invested in his project, over two years passed between the end of his travels in the South and his signing of the book contract for *Black in White America* with Grossman Publishers, on November 10, 1967. The intervening years first saw the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, then the fracturing of the Civil Rights movement, and the rise of violent public actions. Though Freed’s volume does not date any of its photographs, its very first readers would have quickly realized that they dated to an earlier moment in the country’s history, one that perhaps the publisher thought would appeal to those wanting to relive more hopeful times. Although there are no extant records concerning where the book was distributed or who purchased it, Brigitte Freed recalls that it was favored by libraries and schools, and that even the U.S. Army ordered copies for distribution to troops fighting in Vietnam. Ultimately over 60,000 copies were sold, and the book was translated into Italian, Dutch, and German for distribution throughout Europe.

Freed had always intended for the book to be accessible, visually as well as monetarily, and the $3.99 price listed in a *New York Times* article confirms that it succeeded in this aim, especially when compared with the $12.95 cost of the earlier-discussed *America in Crisis*, edited

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217 Brigitte Freed, interview with the author, March 25, 2016.

by Charles Harbutt and Lee Jones for Magnum.\textsuperscript{219} Also notable is that the two extant reviews of the publication did not appear until 1969, testifying to the prolonged pace of distribution and reception in this era.\textsuperscript{220} The articles provide insight into what was valued at the time by critics and the general public. Not unsurprisingly, both stress Freed’s unique visual approach as well as the text’s heterogeneity, explaining that the photographs therein show not only a diversity of subjects but also a range of emotion: “grief, joy and rage,” in the words of Watkins;\textsuperscript{221} “happiness and hope as well as sadness and deprivation,” in the words of Deschin. The second analysis, which appraises Black in White in America alongside America in Crisis and The Americans, even calls attention to the invitation for “the participation of the reader to interpret the [subject] matter according to his [or her] own likes.”\textsuperscript{222} This confirms that, from its first years of circulation, Freed’s project was appreciated both for the emotional range of its photographs and for its direct engagement with the reader.

Additionally, the reviewers emphasized Freed’s role as a witness to African American culture. Watkins called it a “testament,” and Deschin remarked on the “authenticity” of his “on-the-spot report.” These fundamental notions of photography as mirror and witness have been revised in later literature. In particular, Kelly Oliver, in her book, Witnessing: Beyond Recognition, examines the contradiction inherent in the concept. As she writes, in one sense, ‘to witness’ means to be capable of providing first-hand testimony to what has transpired but on the other hand, witnessing signals having been present for “something unrecognizable, something

\textsuperscript{220} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{222} Deschin, cit.
that cannot be observed.” Thus, as Oliver explains, “the act of witnessing itself is a testimony to one’s subjectivity.” This tension at the heart of witnessing is continuously played out over the pages of *Black in White in America* where Freed hints to what is pictured and what is absent, what is described and what is left unspoken. This complex relationship is what sustains the book’s relevancy for generation after generation.

Although information about who read *Black in White America* is sparse, it is known that this book became a noted touchstone for black photographers across multiple generations. Also significant is the reemergence of the project in recent years, first in the form of gallery shows in New York and outside Boston in 2000, and then as a section of the nine-part exhibition *Engaged Observers: Documentary Photography Since the Sixties* (2010), at the J. Paul Getty Museum. The 2000s also saw the acquisition of Freed’s work by a number of major New York museums, most of which previously had at most a couple of the photographer’s works in their collections. In New York such institutions include the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the International Center of Photography, and the Museum of the City of New York. Additionally, the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles not only acquired photographs but was also responsible for publishing the second edition of *Black in White America*, released in 2010.

Although many images from the project are exceptionally relevant to the conversations the country was having about race in the late-2000s, only two of the five noted institutions chose

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225 Jamel Shabazz is one such example. Paul Farber, interview with the author, May 23, 2016.

to acquire more than a couple photographs from the *Black in White America* project, namely the Metropolitan and the Getty.\(^{227}\) The other ones acquired photographs dated either to the beginning of Freed’s career or to the 1970s, the decade in which he devoted much of his time to shadowing members of the New York police force during a very tumultuous chapter in the city’s history. The resulting project, *Police Work* (1980), is a dramatic contrast to *Black in White America* in its depiction of the unsavory and violent sides of life, though it too, in certain images, touched on race relations in a thought-provoking manner.\(^{228}\) Earning the trust of the police force and accompanying them on their rounds in order to capture dynamic scenes such as street fights and dangerous arrests could not have come easily; indeed, the amount of time Freed invested in the project—in a community that he visited time and again, as Bruce Davidson did when creating *East 100th Street*—is noteworthy when compared to *Black in White America*.

In a *New Yorker* review of the New York gallery exhibition of *Black in White America* in 2000, Vince Aletti pointedly wrote: “Seen today, the pictures reinforce the value (artistic, political, psychological) of Freed’s sympathetic white viewpoint while raising questions about its limitations.”\(^{229}\) Such a statement stresses the span of time between the 1960s and the present-day, and the distance between the perspective of the critic and that of the photographer. As I have articulated earlier, Freed was well aware of the potential pitfalls of the project when he was shooting. For example, he wrote in his travel journal of his “guilty feelings” when leaving a conversation with a worker without the promise of a return visit. Moreover, the pictures and texts he chose to reproduce belie his struggle—one he shares with even contemporary

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\(^{227}\) The Getty’s collection of Freed’s photographs is nearly triple those of other organizations, presumably because of the Museum’s investment in the publication and since all were displayed in the aforementioned exhibition, *Engaged Observers.*


photographers—to create much-needed images of black Americans that do not stereotype or simplify.\footnote{230}

How can identity be affirmatively portrayed if it continues to be, in the words of Judith Butler, “a mode of being dispossessed, a way of being for another or by virtue of another”\footnote{231}\n
Freed’s journal documents the fact that this remained a core issue for him throughout his project.

Darby English reproduces Butler’s question in his text, \textit{How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness}, positing that one potential workaround is to invest one’s efforts into projects that can never be seen as final, but that can instead continually adapt, “as a site of production where the interaction of making and unmaking not only forms the dynamic basis but, more importantly, produces more than identity can account for.”\footnote{232} By resisting a permanent narrative and presenting a large number of diverse figures, the meaning that emerges about the identities in question in \textit{Black in White America} become a reflection of its reader and her politics. In this instability lies the book’s strength.

Accordingly, Lee Raiford asks: “Can social movement photography be situated or enlisted in such a way that takes both the photograph’s spatiality and its temporality into account, aware and self-conscious of the tension between its situatedness and its transcendence?”\footnote{233} This is, of course, the admirable yet nearly unattainable goal of much documentary photography, \textit{Black in White America} included. Nevertheless, the published works that perhaps fall short of this goal are still valuable since they, too, can open up a

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{231}{Judith Butler, \textit{Undoing Gender}. New York: Routledge, 19. Quoted in English, 286.}
\footnote{232}{English, \textit{cit.}, 288.}
\footnote{233}{Raiford, \textit{cit.}, 235.}
\end{footnotes}
space for the viewer to consider the relationship between their own habits of perception and those of the photographer responsible for the image.

Towards this goal, this text will conclude by proposing three individual photographs from *Black in White America* that take strength in their ambiguity, privileging this effect to the impact that other iconic images have had. The following photographs fall into the category of work that Erina Duganne describes in her book, *The Self in Black and White Race and Subjectivity in Postwar American Photography*, that simultaneously portray the inter-subjectivity inherent within creating meaning as well as the specific and particular lives of the people who create this meaning.\textsuperscript{234}

To extract these photographs from their original published context wherein their meanings are complicated by thoughtful sequencing and poignant captioning is certainly not in keeping with Freed’s intent for his publication. Yet, as Martin Parr and Gerry Badger note, the photo book, “if executed with consistency and visual intelligence, has the capacity to operate on a different level from that originally envisaged, the ability to move and provoke in a way unintended by its makers.”\textsuperscript{235} The re-publication of Freed’s text in 2010 is a testament not only to its usefulness as a historic document but also to its value in today’s context, alongside contemporary volumes that also seek to speak truthfully of and call attention to the experience of being black in America.

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First, consider again the earlier-discussed photograph outside a voting station in Washington, D.C., taken on the occasion of the first time that black Americans were able to

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\textsuperscript{234} Kate Sampsell-Willmann, “Retreat from Racial Essentialism: Reading the Photographer as Text,” *Reviews in American History*, 41.2 (June 2013), 325.

\textsuperscript{235} Parr and Badger, *cit.*, 9.
vote.\textsuperscript{236} (Fig. 61) A young African American man with a pen in his hand and his right leg crossed over his left rests his back up against a brick wall while trying to express something to the two bespeckled older white women, with matching hats, hair cuts, and dark skirts, who hold their purses while sticking their chins out towards their interlocutor. Looking at the image, questions immediately arise: at what point are they in their conversation? How will it end? What will have changed?

In her award-winning, genre-breaking book, \textit{Citizen: An American Lyric}, which also pairs images and text in an evocative manner, Claudia Rainke’s describes listening to, and subsequently thinking through, the implications of a lecture Judith Butler gave at the University of Southern California in 2010. The scholar writes:

\textbf{We suffer from the condition of being addressable. Our emotional openness, [Butler] adds, is carried by our addressability. Language navigates this. For so long you thought the ambition of racist language was to denigrate and erase you as a person. After considering Butler’s remarks, you begin to understand yourself as rendered hypervisible in the face of such language acts. Language that feels hurtful is intended to exploit all the ways that you are present. Your alertness, your openness, and your desire to engage actually demand your presence, your looking up, your talking back, and, as insane as it is, saying please.\textsuperscript{237}}

Freed’s photograph succeeds in creating for the viewer the opportunity to reflect upon what forms of address, what potential language could have been exchanged during the discussion between the man and the pair of ladies; its force lies not in documenting the conversation but rather in the expression of possibility of meaningful dialogue.\textsuperscript{238}

\textsuperscript{236} Freed, \textit{cit.}, 152.


\textsuperscript{238} Freed, \textit{cit.}, 166-7.
A second image from the book, also of discussion, is captivating for different reasons. (Fig. 70) At an unidentified public park, African American children and their caregivers populate the background while in the foreground a group of younger adults is gathered in a dynamic arrangement. All in view are nicely attired: heels and dresses, suits and ties, sunglasses and hats in the latest styles, but through the photographer’s framing of the scene, the viewer’s attention is drawn to the speakers’ postures rather than not their garments. Freed captures hands in various gestures and mouths in different moments of speaking. Each figure appears to either be reaching for something just beyond articulation or is in the process of reframing what is on their mind. In this image, Freed reminds his viewer—as Claudia Rankine reminds her reader—that we constantly negotiate how we express ourselves based on our audience, at great risk of failure. We pick our words and choose our images from a myriad of possibilities, in the face of so many other potential interpretations and misinterpretations, all to give more concrete form to our elusive, singular experiences of the biased world. The following passage, also from Citizen, seems appropriate to this photograph:

Do feelings lose their feeling if they speak to a lack of feeling? Can feelings be a hazard, a warning sign, a disturbance, distaste, the disgrace? Don’t feel like you are mistaken. It’s not that (It is not that?) you are oversensitive or misunderstanding. You know feelings destabilize since everyone you ask is laughing that kind of close-the-gap laughter: all ha-ha’s wanting uninterrupted views. Don’t be ridiculous. None of the other black friends feel that way and how you feel is how you feel even if what you perceive isn’t tied to what is … What is?239

Ta-Nehisi Coates is another prominent writer whose words have helped to give form to and ignite discussion about the black experience in contemporary culture. Like Rankine’s volume, Coates bestselling Between the World and Me helped to articulate for a large group of Americans the experience of being discriminated against. Reading his text alongside Black in

239 Rankine, cit., 153.
White America was helpful to this research, as it served as guidepost for trying to make sense of the various truths it attempts to present. Thus I was troubled by a recent interview given by the author, in which he told his interlocutor that he did not understand why white Americans were interested in reading his celebrated text. Was this how Coates truly felt or simply a provocation?

As I reflect on the passing of another year in the ever more polarized United States, I recall an elegiac image from Freed’s book of five men in New Orleans with brows furrowed, dressed in dark suits and white gloves, carrying the coffin of their kin. Though similarly attired, each looks in a different direction and with a unique expression. The image masterfully frames the figures: sacrificing a view of their legs in order to focus the viewer’s attention more fully on their gracefully curved fingers and straight, shrouded arms. The photographer has taken advantage of how they have momentarily stopped, choosing to juxtapose the weight of their thoughts with the apparent lightness of the casket, which floats horizontally between their bodies. (Fig. 71) If they together were to be the chorus of Citizen, each would take a different line:

Exactly why we survive and can look back with furrowed brow is beyond me. 
It is not something to know. 
Your ill-spirited, cooked, hell on Main Street, nobody’s here, broken down, first person could be one of many definitions of being to pass on. 
The past is a life sentence, a blunt instrument aimed at tomorrow. 
Drag that first person out of the social death of history, then we’re kin.

Although half a century separate volumes, they yet they appear to speak the same language. I wonder what Coates would think of Freed’s project, of Black in White America being

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241 Freed, cit., 70-1.

242 Rankine, cit., 72.
republished in 2010, and of white scholars reading it alongside *A Fire Next Time* or *12 Million Black Voices*, but also *Citizen*, *Americanah*, and his own texts. Could it be that these photographs should be seen—and these writings read—by more than just certain Americans?

Certainly the representation of African American life is dramatically expanded across all media today in comparison with the late 1960s when *Black in White America* was first released. The country is in a far different place, socially and politically. The visual landscape, too, is nearly unrecognizable, with countless numbers of images being created and circulated daily, across a myriad of platforms. Even so, the form of the photo essay still speaks to us: we still find it both in print and in online news sources because the ability to convey a narrative through a sequence of photographs and text is still effective, and powerful, in this digital age.

Particularly now, studying the historical circumstances of African American lives in the Civil Rights era is deeply valuable for all citizens. Furthermore, through its diversity, *Black in White America* encourages the reader to consider the numerous ways in which photography can operate; it reminds us that meaning is a constant negotiation between those who purport to construct it and those who receive and analyze it, making it their own. Freed’s publication retains its potency because it requires the reader to co-create its meaning: to look and read closely, to identify and to speculate, to put oneself into question, and ultimately to envision another America, past, present, or yet to come.
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Representative spread from Hughes and DeCavara’s *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, 1955, p. 46-7. © Roy DeCarava / Langston Hughes / Hill and Wang / Farrar, Straus and Giroux
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Robert Delpire, Unpaginated mock-up of a spread for Leonard Freed’s *Black in White America*, 1967. Photos © Leonard Freed / Magnum Photos

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Bruce Davidson, Cover of *East 100th Street*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970. © Bruce Davidson / Magnum Photos
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