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History at a Standstill: Agency and Gender in the Image of Civil Rights

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Elizabeth Abel

EDITOR'S NOTE

Reprinted from *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis*, Geoffrey Batchen, Mick Gidley, Nancy K. Miller and Jay Prosser (eds.), Reaktion, 2012.

In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill.
(Benjamin 1999, 463)

- 1 Few critics would dispute that Susan Sontag has defined the terms of the debate about “regarding the pain of others”. But as that very title of her influential book suggests, the set of questions she has put in circulation—whether we have been anesthetized (or, worse, titillated), rather than galvanized, by overexposure to images of global suffering—has also blurred the boundary between atrocity and the more inclusive and elastic category of pain. What falls out of the picture is intentionality. Unlike earthquakes, floods, famine, disease, destitution and other sources of human misery, atrocity is characterized by intentionality, a deliberate breach of the social contract, a knowing violation of a shared humanity. Its defining characteristic is a radical asymmetry of agency: massively pooled on one side, brutally drained from the other.
- 2 I want both to restore the centrality of agency to our picture of atrocity and to examine how a less drastically asymmetrical redistribution of agency might affect our ways of responding to that picture. Sontag implies a homology between the impotence of victims (whether of intentional assault or of natural disaster) and that of viewers routinely assailed by images of pain they can’t alleviate. If some degree of agency is retained by victims who may have deliberately subjected themselves to violence in order to call attention to the injustice of their position, is the viewer more open to engagement both affectively and intellectually?

- 3 These questions redirect our attention along two related axes. Substantively, they point us toward the visual archive of the Civil Rights Movement: “the deepest and broadest photographic documentation of any social struggle in America” (Kasher 10). Depictions of the state’s unwarranted and excessive use of force against peaceful protestors on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma or in Kelly Ingram Park in Birmingham would seem to fall within the boundaries of atrocity photographs, but even here the often-outraged faces of protestors scrambling to defend themselves from police batons, dogs, and fire hoses mark a difference from the mangled bodies and devastated homes that are salient features of the Spanish Civil War photographs that have come to exemplify atrocity images. The imprint of resistance becomes increasingly visible when the threat of violence is more restrained. Scenes of carefully crafted non-violent resistance by protestors who intentionally risked and stoically endured brutality invite us to rethink the balance between atrocity and agency.
- 4 Such a reconsideration is assisted by shifting our perspective from Susan Sontag to Walter Benjamin, the theorist she both designates “photography’s most original and important critic” and deprecates as fundamentally a Surrealist whose radical sympathies were more deeply aesthetic than political (Sontag 1977, 76). I would dispute this on two grounds: first, that the tension, rather than the choice, between divergent frames (politics and art, Marxism and Surrealism) was itself fundamental to Benjamin, and second, that however unorthodox or utopian his version of historical materialism, it was the framework that (among many others) enabled him to coordinate history with photography in ways that cast light on Sontag’s more pessimistic assessment of the medium.
- 5 Writing in the 1930s, under growing pressure to acquiesce to a version of historical necessity that would legitimate the rise of fascism, Benjamin intensified his call for vigorously oppositional strategies for wrenching images of the past from a historicist narrative that culminates inevitably in the status quo. “The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called ‘Once upon a time’ in historicism’s bordello. He remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history” (Benjamin 1969, 262).¹ Blasting images out of the continuum of history allows us to see them freshly. Instead of a stepping stone toward a foregone conclusion, an image of the past that “flashes up at a moment of danger” in the present both strips the veils off atrocities that have been neutralized as prerequisites to progress and gestures toward alternative futures that might still come about (255). Focusing aggressively on specific images is vital not because they condense a larger picture or longer narrative, but precisely because they don’t. Instead, they disrupt the aura of inevitability that emanates from a stable image of the past.
- 6 The Enlightenment narrative of progress that forms the underlying target of Benjamin’s critique might appear to diverge in both form and content from the episodic story of Civil Rights victories snatched from the likelihood of defeat. Retrospectively, however, as the Civil Rights Movement has been enshrined as a cherished American saga of our capacity for progress, that uplifting story has conformed to the structure in which past atrocities serve primarily to underscore the distance we have traveled. Assimilated to a national narrative of progress, even brutal attacks on demonstrators, commemorated through the reproduction and circulation of selected “memory pictures” (“fire hoses and dogs” in the accepted notation), offer evidence less of racist atrocities than of the inspirational courage and vision that ultimately succeeded in transforming the nation.²

- 7 As a site of both political resistance and cultural appropriation, the Civil Rights archive is a compelling resource for rethinking the picture of atrocity. The selection of a specific object of inquiry is less obvious. To bear the interpretive weight of challenging a longer narrative, the photograph must be thematically dense and formally complex. Rather than revisiting memory pictures of violence in the streets, I propose that we turn indoors to the more contemplative scenario of the lunch counter sit-ins, where hours of inaction gave photographers the opportunity to make self-conscious compositional choices. Situated between the poles of stalemate and flare-up, both within the immediate scene and in the longer movement chronology, the optimal image would harbor more than one potential trajectory. If differentiated by gender, these trajectories would complicate more than the univocal narrative of progress; they would also allow us to pressure Benjamin's uncritical (and largely uncontested) celebration of masculinity.
- 8 The feminine enters Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" only as historicism's whore, the slut that saps the virility that must be marshaled to "be man enough to blast open the continuum of history".³ Seemingly innocent activities such as singing lullabies, offering comfort, and anchoring individuals in an orderly communal heritage—what might otherwise be deemed benign maternal functions—are but modes of prostitution to the dominant regime. Even empathy is ruled out as a form of weakness "whose origin is the indolence of the heart, acedia, that despairs of grasping and holding the genuine historical image as it flares up briefly" (256). It is perhaps understandable that, under the pressure of an historical moment in which the dangers and enticements of the prevailing narrative were so great, Benjamin would find no value in the compliance that has traditionally been gendered feminine; but by gendering historicism and its associated affects feminine, in contradistinction to materialism's masculinity, he excludes sexual difference from the productive mechanisms of the dialectic. If, as he proposes about the reciprocal constitution of "then" and "now" in the contemporary reading of an image of the past, "the image is dialectics at a standstill", and if, as he argues, the greater the tension between dialectical opposites, the more productive the image, it seems worth asking if a photograph that depicts women as historical agents side-by-side with men could open the dialectic to the interplay between sexual as well as historical difference.
- 9 The photograph that elicits this inquiry was taken at a Woolworth lunch-counter demonstration in Jackson, Mississippi, on May 28, 1963, by Fred Blackwell, a stringer for the *Jackson Daily News* who had recently graduated from Jackson Central High, whose current students crowd into the space behind the protestors after the waitress had fled the scene (Fig. 1). It has become an iconic image of Jackson's first and last sit-in, and one of the last sit-ins in a movement whose recently gained confidence to bring direct action to the Deep South was jolted by the violence it encountered toward the marginally safer route of voter registration. It is thus both a terminal and a liminal image of a relatively quiet moment before a surge of violence triggered the round-the clock demonstrations, nightly mass rallies, and spiraling mass arrests that transformed Jackson into a "hotbed of racial demonstrations in the South" that rivaled Birmingham's.⁴



Fig. 1: *Sit-in Protesters Attacked at a Lunch Counter*, Jackson, Mississippi, May 28, 1963. Photograph by Fred Blackwell

Credit: Courtesy of Getty Images

- 10 The photograph focuses on one of the two interracial groups of three that sat at opposite ends of the counter after white replacements arrived to fill the places of the original sit-inners who had been beaten and dragged from their seats. Taken from an angle that aligns some of the principal players—in the foreground John Salter, sociology professor and NAACP campus coordinator at the historically black Tougaloo College in Jackson; in the background, Anne Moody, Tougaloo student activist and future author of *Coming of Age in Mississippi*; and at the center Moody's white Tougaloo classmate Joan Trumpauer, who had recently transferred from a segregated Duke University in order to participate in the movement—the photograph also divides into gendered spheres that both model and elicit different looking relations. Although gender was not a factor within the action of the scene—shortly after the photograph was taken, both women were pulled off their seats and dragged thirty feet along the floor by the hair—it provides at least a provisional frame for distinguishing some of the futures that a retrospective gaze might discover in the image.⁵
- 11 The first departs from the planning for the sit-in during a meeting between John Salter and his more visible and consequently vulnerable political ally, NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers, in the NAACP office downtown. Since Evers couldn't risk a high-profile exposure, Salter left the meeting to galvanize the sit-in by enlisting the participation of Anne Moody and the others, while Evers contacted the media from the NAACP office. The violence that erupted when students from Jackson High arrived during their lunch break was extensively captured on film because Evers' phone calls had alerted both the press and the television networks, which broadcast the events nationally on that evening's news. With a perverse irony, the publicity that tracked the ensuing events catapulted the circumspect Evers to a national visibility rivaling that of Martin Luther King, Jr.
- 12 Within this photograph, Salter is poised at the vertex of a widening wedge of a hostile and almost entirely masculine mob. Almost to a man, this muscle-bulging, set-jawed, single-

mindful crowd directs its fixed and hostile stare at Salter's back, on which one member of the crowd instructed another to "paint the word nigger". With salt in his hair and ketchup on his shirt, Salter, literally white and symbolically black, is the race-traitor target of the violence that converges on his back. In response, he performs the non-violent gesture of the laying down of arms by passively extending his own, palms down, on the counter, in contrast to the muscles flexed for action behind his back. A lone unsmoked cigarette he has placed with seeming purpose on the counter inches from a closed matchbox seems likewise to display a refusal to inflame passions in a situation in which a lit cigarette could switch in an instant to a weapon, as a photograph taken minutes later suggests may be occurring as one of the toughs closer to the seated protestors reaches out for the cigarette dangling from the lips of a buddy down the line, as another of their cohort pours soda over Trumpauer's head. Salter's battered body—beaten on the back and jaw with brass knuckles and doused in the eyes with pepper water—bears witness to the costs of transgressing racial boundaries in either direction. "We could get shot very easily just sitting here", he recalls thinking in his memoir (Salter 134-135).

- 13 Salter was not the one who was shot, but he was the relay of the killing looks whose translation into bullets did gun down the figure whose surrogate he is. Foreshadowed by the ketchup that suggests blood drawn by the mob behind Salter's back, the assassination of Medgar Evers, long threatened, was virtually secured by the explosive events triggered by this scene, which led immediately to a fire bomb hurled at Evers' house that same evening, and two weeks later to the gun shots in the back that murdered him on the threshold of his home, where, carrying NAACP sweatshirts stenciled "Jim Crow Must Go", he collapsed in a pool of blood just after midnight on June 12. Salter's stained body is a switch point through which past and future momentarily cross; exposing the cumulative burden of multiple previous acts of violence, it also bears the advance imprint of the singular act that would galvanize the conscience of the nation.
- 14 Within the prevailing narrative of the Civil Rights Movement, that blood would be redeemed: ultimately, by the movement's eventual success, and immediately by the historical conjunction through which Evers' assassination entered the public record. On the evening of June 11th, a few hours before Evers was gunned down, President John F. Kennedy went on television to prepare a national audience for the legislation he intended to submit to Congress to formally end segregation. Characterizing what would become the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as a necessary response to a "moral crisis", he asked the nation to be true to its founding principle "that all men are created equal" and to act legislatively and individually to ensure "that the Constitution will be color blind".⁶ In a coincidence that also seems historically determined, the assassination proved the necessity of the President's address, which inscribed that death in a larger social context.⁷ Through a merger of Christian and national narratives, bloodshed becomes the cost of achieving color blindness.
- 15 If we choose to "brush history against the grain" as Benjamin advises, however, we might see the logic of repetition rather than the arc of redemption in the sequence the image portends (257). Shifting focus from the symbolics of blood to the killing stares of the crowd that, indifferent to color, target symbolic blackness, a political rather than a biological position, our retrospective gaze discerns, from Salter's original and ultimately ineffectual assumption of Evers' place, a sequence of assassinations that reaches through Kennedy's own, to Martin Luther King's and Malcolm X's, and onward through the

alarming efflorescence of lynching iconography and sanctioned police violence toward black men. Blasting this photograph out of the celebratory narrative returns the mob's hostile stares with the backward-turning gaze of Benjamin's angel of history: "Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage" in the sequence we call progress (257).

- 16 These are not the only looking relations in the photograph, however, nor the only way of looking at it. If the narrative elicited from Salter's back recalls Benjamin's angel of history through its resistance to the consolations of progress and unsentimental vision of a future that is doomed to be a repetition of the past unless a far more radical course of social change is undertaken, an alternative perspective derived from the pair of women encourages us to take the risk of empathetic viewing as a utopian ballast to negative critique. Counterpointing Salter's conspicuous position at the vertex of the white crowd's line of vision, Anne Moody's more recessed yet luminous face represents the photograph's moral center. Although she is positioned further down the counter, hers is the only African American face that we see, and the one toward whom Joan Trumpauer turns. Moody, conversely, looks only and directly into Trumpauer's eyes. Within the moment captured by the camera, the two women occupy a distinctive conceptual as well as physical space. Held in one another's gaze, they constitute a quasi-autonomous and self-sustaining nucleus within the scene of racial hate. Even when, in the photograph taken a few minutes later, they are shown to be targets of that hate—Moody's hair already streaked with the salt or sugar that is being poured over Trumpauer's neck—they tilt their bowed heads toward each other. Moody confers recognition not only on Trumpauer, but also on the viewer who is similarly positioned to seek illumination in her pained yet hopeful face. The intensity of the gaze the two women share marks a moment of mutual recognition that holds out the prospect of a different social order.
- 17 This feminine enclave, depicting and eliciting the affective ties Benjamin found so disturbing, evokes a metaphor from one of his earlier essays, written at a less fraught moment. In "The Little History of Photography" (1931), he briefly but memorably describes the viewer's "irresistible urge" to search the photograph for "the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it" (Benjamin 2001, 510). Such a future could be discerned only by a gaze that envisions the lost moment as a site of possibility and reaches back to give birth to the unknown future that continues to germinate there. The merger implicit in the choice of the verb "to nest" (*nistir*)—both to build a nest and to inhabit one—is echoed by the reciprocity between the viewer who turns toward the image of the past and the future that looks back from it. This is a maternal gaze that elicits a trajectory more evolutionary than revolutionary, yet it is not castigated as historicism's whore. There are moments, it appears, when it is legitimate, or perhaps simply irresistible, to discover a new direction by uncovering its embryonic presence in the past.
- 18 And yet it is not quite so uncomplicated, either in Benjamin's essay or Blackwell's photograph. In the essay, the narrator's maternal gaze is directed toward a photograph of Karl Dauthendey and his fiancée, a woman who will kill herself after giving birth to the couple's sixth child. That is, the tender gaze directed at the distracted woman both anticipates her suicide and imagines averting it by drawing her toward an alternative future bestowed by a more discriminating viewer. There are competing versions of maternity at play here, one of which offers an imaginative escape from the destiny sealed by the other.⁸

- 19 In Blackwell's photograph, the fledgling potential of the nested pair of women is the unrealized promise of a cross-racial female solidarity, a promise shattered by the sexual politics of the Freedom Summer that followed the one represented here and by the racial politics of the white women's movement.⁹ The urge to recover and redeem that prior moment is, at least for this viewer, irresistible, and yet it is also suspect, for some of the reasons implied by Benjamin's figure of the nest. What kinds of triangulated desire to draw the African American woman away from her cohort might fuel investment in a different future? What promises of absolution or legitimization does Anne Moody's gaze potentially bestow not only on Trumpauer, her ally in action, but also on a viewer safely distanced by time and space?
- 20 Raising these questions may be sufficient reason to incorporate a reading of empathy, affiliation, and identification into the analysis of photography. However ambiguous and slippery these dynamics, they invite us to consider what enlists our investment in opposing, as well as in upholding, the status quo; in combating, as well as condoning, atrocity; in assuming agency.¹⁰
- 21 One way to galvanize viewers anesthetized by a surfeit of atrocity images is to redirect attention to photographs in which the odds are less overwhelmingly unequal and the affects that elicit action are made visible. Reading these photographs through Benjamin's lens, while putting pressure on his gender politics, guides us beyond Sontag's concern with photography in crisis to the crises to which photography continues to summon us.

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NOTES

1. See also “On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress” in *The Arcades Project*, 456-488; and Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997.
2. “Memory pictures” is Sontag’s phrase. On the idealized memory of the Civil Rights Movement, see the essays collected in Renée C. Romano and Leigh Raiford (eds.), *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, Athens: U of Georgia P, 2006.
3. Benjamin also examines the figure of the prostitute in the “Prostitution, Gambling” section of *The Arcades Project*, 489-515. For different aspects of this figure, see Susan Buck-Morss, “The Flaneur, the Sandwichman and the Whore: The Politics of Loitering”, *New German Critique* 39 (Fall 1986): 25-48.
4. Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, New York: Dell, 1976, 275. For detailed accounts of the sit-in, see Moody, chapter 2; John R. Salter, *Jackson, Mississippi: An American Chronicle of Struggle and Schism*, Hicksville / New York: Exposition Press, 1979, 132-153; and Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963*, New York: Touchstone, 1988, 813-816.
5. For some accounts of women’s actual roles in the Civil Rights Movement, see Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods (eds.), *Black Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965*, Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1990; Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, New York: William Morrow, 1984; and Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights*, New York: Oxford UP, 1997.
6. From Anthony Lewis’ extensive citation of Kennedy’s address in *Portrait of a Decade: The Second American Revolution*, New York: Random House, 1953, 192-195.

7. Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 827. Branch continues: “This was a mythical event of race [...]. White people who had never heard of Medgar Evers spoke his name over and over, as though the words themselves had the ring of legend”.

8. Similarly charged and fleeting gazes between a writer and his eroticized, mirroring female other recur in Benjamin’s reading of Baudelaire and Proust. See “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” and “The Image of Proust” in *Illuminations*, 155-216.

9. See Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left*, New York: Knopf, 1979.

10. This perspective accords with the radicalizing potential of photography explored in Mark Reinhardt, Holly Edwards, and Emma Duganne (eds.), *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain*, Williams College Museum of Art/U of Chicago P, 2007. It is also consistent with the claims on behalf of iconic images made by Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites in *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photos, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy*, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2007.

ABSTRACTS

This essay seeks to restore the centrality of agency to our picture of atrocity by examining photographs of non-violent resistance during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Heeding Walter Benjamin’s call to “blast open the continuum of history” that tends to legitimate atrocity as a stepping-stone in the march of civilization, I focus on an iconic photograph of a hostile white mob preparing to assault three seated protesters at a lunch counter sit-in in Jackson, Mississippi in 1963. Against the traditional recuperation of civil rights photographs to a narrative of social progress, I elicit two alternative trajectories. The first points toward the logic of repetition rather than redemption through the foreshadowing of the imminent murder of Civil Rights leader Medgar Evers (and the succession of assassinations that ensued) by the ketchup-smeard back of the male protestor who had taken Evers’ place. The second seeks to offset this critique by dwelling on the mutually sustaining gaze exchanged by the interracial pair of women seated at the counter. Without sentimentalizing the promise of this gaze, I propose that an analysis of affiliation in and with photographs of atrocity could illuminate and activate the origins of agency.

Cet essai a pour objet de redonner une importance capitale au pouvoir et à l’influence que nous exerçons dans l’image que nous nous faisons de la barbarie et ce, en examinant des photographies de résistance passive prises durant le Mouvement des droits civiques aux États-Unis dans les années 1960. En ayant à l’esprit l’appel lancé par Walter Benjamin à “faire exploser le continuum de l’histoire”, continuum qui a tendance à légitimer la barbarie comme tremplin vers le progrès de la civilisation, je me propose de centrer mon analyse sur l’étude de la photographie iconique d’une foule blanche hostile se préparant à agresser trois manifestants attablés au comptoir d’un restaurant, lors d’un *sit-in* à Jackson, dans le Mississippi, en 1963. Allant à l’encontre de la façon dont les photographies des droits civiques sont traditionnellement récupérées pour construire un récit de progrès social, je choisis deux autres trajectoires. La première met en évidence la logique de répétition, plutôt que la logique de rédemption, qui est à l’œuvre dans la préfiguration de l’assassinat imminent du leader des droits civiques Medgar Evers (et de la succession d’assassinats qui suivront) telle qu’elle peut se lire dans le dos maculé de ketchup du manifestant ayant pris sa place ce jour-là. La seconde cherche à nuancer cette

lecture de l'histoire en s'attardant sur le regard solidaire qu'échangent les deux femmes de races différentes assises à ce comptoir. Sans vouloir sentimentaliser la promesse de ce regard, j'avance l'hypothèse selon laquelle une analyse de photographies d'atrocités empreinte d'empathie pourrait permettre de mieux comprendre les origines de ce pouvoir et de cette influence que nous exerçons par l'image.

INDEX

Keywords: agency, gender, atrocity, Civil Rights, resistance, dialectics, sit-in, Mississippi

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