

Book Review: Looking Back on Forgotten Images of Injustice and Integration

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Advancing the Civil Rights Movement: Race and Geography of Life Magazine's Visual Representation, 1954-1965. Michael DiBari Jr. Lexington Books, 2017. 148 pp. \$85.00 hardback.

If 2016 caused us to ponder the progress, or lack thereof, in racial reconciliation, we might have spent some time recounting previous moments of deep national discord. Michael DiBari's book *Advancing the Civil Rights Movement: Race and Geography of Life Magazine's Visual Representation, 1954-65* serves as a useful resource in that regard by analyzing photojournalism's social impact through the pages of what was once the country's top general-interest magazine.

The book examines *Life's* coverage of the civil rights movement from the Supreme Court's decision in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1954 to the 1965 passage of the Voting Rights Act. During this time, the magazine published 227 articles and 1,200 photographs related to the civil rights movement—an annual average of almost 19 stories and 100 photographs—arguably expending more resources on covering the topic than any other magazine of the era.

The book is organized into six chapters. The first two describe the coverage *Life* had given to race before the mid-1950s and the context in which it began covering the civil rights era. The next three chapters, which delve into the events and escalating violence of the era, are rich with detail. The concluding chapter is an ideal reading for a journalism history course because it succinctly sums up many of the points of the preceding chapters.

DiBari, a Scripps Howard endowed professor at Hampton University, uses both qualitative and quantitative methods for his analysis, which stems from his doctoral dissertation. The book starts with a content analysis of stories and photographs that fit the "civil rights" definition in the *Civil Rights Handbook* of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. DiBari follows with a compositional interpretation. Who produced each image, and under what circumstances? What were the leanings of Henry R. Luce, *Life's* founder and publisher? What were staff and freelance photojournalists thinking at the time? What did they think in retrospect?

He folds in considerations of the geographic theory of space, analyzing not only the ways in which black and white people were framed, but also the ways in which they did or did not share space. For example, he discusses a photograph of a lunch counter sit-in, in which the black patrons are literally separated from the white patrons by a partition, arguing that it illustrates the era's "fight for equal space." (p. 5-6). Later, when explaining how *Life* covered school desegregation in Hoxie, Arkansas, DiBari uses this approach to explain how editors constructed a story and a photo package about students at a new school that took

readers on a visual desegregation journey: “As the story progressed, they appeared closer to each other, and by the end of the photographic essay, the students were arm in arm. *Life* not only showed and explained to viewers the story, but visually described integration within the photographs themselves.” (p. 34)

Life's significance is often lost on modern audiences who missed the magazine's heyday, but DiBari rights this lack of understanding by including a variety of descriptive statistics about the magazine's circulation and readership. For example, at its zenith, *Life* reached 21 percent of the entire U.S. population over the age of 10. DiBari also recounts the magazine's editorial decisions in critical moments, such as Malcolm X's assassination, and reminds us that *Life* gave space to the work of legendary photojournalists, including Gordon Parks, Margaret Bourke-White, and Charles Moore.

One of the more chilling parts of the book tackles the case of Willie and Allie Lee Causey, owners of 40 acres near Mobile, Alabama, who were featured in a series on segregation. A teacher who had recently married widower Willie Causey, Allie Lee Causey was quoted as saying that integration is the only way African-Americans would receive justice. In the aftermath of the story's publication, the couple was run out of town and forced to resettle in another community.

In an interview with DiBari, the writer of the piece, Richard B. Stolley, regrets that he was not allowed to read the article before it appeared in print: “Those were explosive words in Alabama for a black teacher to say. ... I think if we had convinced them to soften her quotes, she would never have gotten into that problem” (p. 54). This episode has instructive value in considering the unintended effects of thrusting marginalized sources into the public spotlight. It also illustrates why DiBari's interviews with Stolley and other key staffers are the book's most revelatory material. Journalists rarely have time to reflect on their work, but when they do, their narratives often illuminate the incredible emotional burden that comes with writing the first draft of history.

This book is not without some flaws, such as occasional typos and sentence errors, but they do not diminish its value. The writing is simple and clear, and the themes will resonate with all kinds of readers, from journalism scholars to anyone seeking to ensure equality and justice for all. Historians and journalists covering today's complex racial realities will find this book a useful accompaniment to other histories of the era, such as *The Race Beat* by Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff.