

Making the Movement:
How Activists Fought for Civil Rights with Buttons, Flyers, Pins, and Posters

David L. Crane

Princeton Architectural Press

New York

2022

Historiography:

Objects, Objectives, and Civil Rights

Making the Movement: How Activists Fought for Civil Rights with Buttons, Flyers, Pins, and Posters fills a gap in the scholarship of the Civil Rights Movement, as well as that of material culture. Works about the Civil Rights Movement have neglected to focus on the objects that participants used to achieve their objectives, and works about material culture have left out the Civil Rights Movement. The first scholarship about the Civil Rights Movement sought to define it, and did so by separating it into different eras. *Making the Movement* uses periodization to show that throughout the Movement, material culture had an impact, but this method is not without its critics: describing the Movement as having one trajectory with distinguishable periods is problematic because it can create a “master narrative” without nuance. But regardless of how scholars have defined the Movement, none have included the impact of material culture.¹

C. Vann Woodward's seminal work, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, argued that Jim Crow was not inevitable and did not develop immediately after Reconstruction, but instead developed much later. In *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism*, Wilson Jeremiah Moses argued that Black Nationalism reached its height in the early twentieth century, not the 1960s and 1970s. Scholars have argued that the Civil Rights Movement was driven by key moments and turning points, in works such as James T. Patterson's *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy*, John Egerton's *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South*, and Taylor Branch's *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963–65*, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965–68*, and *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63*. These authors argued that the most significant events during the Movement took place in the 1950s and 1960s.

Absent from all of these works was an analysis of the impact of material culture. *Making the Movement* seeks to demonstrate that the objects used during the Civil Rights Movement were critical to achieving the objectives of the Movement, regardless of how one defines it.ⁱⁱ

Many scholars have sought to challenge commonly held beliefs, such as the notion of one cohesive movement or the ubiquity of nonviolence as a strategy. Works, such as, Charles E. Cobb's *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible*, Hasan Kwame Jeffries's *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt*, Cannon Cook's *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Reformist Insurgency for Civil Right*, and Wayne Greenhaw's *Fighting the Devil in Dixie: How Civil Rights Activists Took on the Ku Klux Klan in Alabama* do an excellent job of pushing back against the perception of a singular narrative driving the Movement. Each work, however, neglected to analyze the impact

of material culture. Those in the Movement used objects such as buttons, signs, and flyers to achieve a broad range of objectives, from nonviolent passive resistance to militant self-defense.ⁱⁱⁱ

In the twenty-first century, scholars have sought to highlight certain aspects of the Movement rather than provide a grand narrative of key events. Maurice Berger's *For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights* argued that the visual representation of African Americans in media had an impact on the public's perceptions and support for, and against, the Civil Rights Movement. Berger included a few buttons and pinbacks in his argument, but his analysis was based mostly on the imagery in films, television, advertising, and print media. *Making the Movement* argues that material culture—the physical objects used—helped those in the Movement achieve their objectives. Eugene F. Provenzo Jr.'s *W.E.B. Du Bois's Exhibit of American Negroes: African Americans at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century* argued that Du Bois's display at the 1900 World's Fair in Paris helped lay the groundwork for the modern Civil Rights Movement but did not argue that material culture made a significant contribution to those efforts. David Arenta's *The Story of the Selma Voting Rights Marches in Photographs* and Danny Lyon's *Memories of the Southern Civil Rights Movement* focus on the photographs that captured key events during the Movement. Many of the photographs show people wearing, and displaying, material culture, but the objects in the photographs were not discussed.^{iv}

For decades the impact of women in the Movement was ignored or downplayed as a supporting role. In recent years, scholars have noted that women were vital to every aspect of the Movement, yet material culture was absent from their analyses. In spite of the fact that women were integral to the design, manufacture, distribution, and use of the material culture, key works, such as Christina Greene's *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in*

Durham, North Carolina, Anita Nahal and Lopez D. Matthews Jr.'s "African American Women and the Niagara Movement, 1905–1909," Jo Ann Gibson's *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson*, and Faith Holsaert's *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts By Women in SNCC* did not include the impact these object had on the Civil Rights Movement's ability to achieve objectives.^v

Scholars have highlighted certain aspects of the Movement, such as the impact of music, the church, organizations, key individuals, and the military. Works include Deanna Frith Weber's *The Freedom Singers: Their History and Legacy For Music Education*, Reiland Rabaka's, *Civil Rights Music: The Soundtracks of the Civil Rights Movement*, and *Sing for Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement through Its Songs*, written by Guy Carawan, Candie Carawan, Julian Bond, and Florence Reece. Davis W. Houck's *Rhetoric, Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement: 1954–1965*, Patricia Sullivan's *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement*, Jeanne Theoharis's *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*, and Andrew Michael Manis's *A Fire You Can't Put Out: The Civil Rights Life of Birmingham's Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth* focus on the role of the church, organizations, and individuals to the success of the Movement. David Welky's *Marching Across the Color Line: A Philip Randolph and Civil Rights in the World War II Era* and Neil A. Wynn's *The African American Experience During World War 2* argue that the origins of the modern Civil Rights Movement can be found in the experiences of the War. *Making the Movement* seeks to add another facet to this kaleidoscopic analysis of the Movement by arguing that in all aspects, in every organization, from its beginning, material culture was a vital tool in achieving members' objectives.^{vi}

Many recent works have analyzed the various tactics used during the Movement, such as court cases in Jack Greenberg's *Crusaders in the Courts: Legal Battles of the Civil Rights Movement* and Michael J. Klarman's *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Justice*. Black Power is addressed in Peniel E. Joseph's *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, Jama Lazerow's *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement*, and Hugh Pearson's *The Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America*. Material culture was used to raise money for legal defense and to spread the message of the Black Panthers, but none of the works mention the impact of objects such as buttons, flyers, and pamphlets on the Movement's varied tactics. Even retrospectives, such as Julian Bond's *NAACP Celebrating a Century: 100 Years in Pictures* and the acclaimed *Eyes on the Prize* PBS series, did not analyze the importance of material culture to the Movement. Autobiographies written by those who witnessed these events firsthand have neglected the impact of material culture, including James Farmer's *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement*, Robert S. Graetz's *A White Preachers Memoir: The Montgomery Bus Boycott*, and John Lewis's *Walking With the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*, as well as *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver and *Write Me In!* by Dick Gregory.^{vii}

Making the Movement also seeks to fill a gap in the general scholarship about material culture. Researchers have studied the impact of material culture on nineteenth-century Great Britain, the Early-Modern Atlantic world, the Antebellum South, prehistoric Europe, Medieval Japan, the Eloyi People in Nigeria, and the counterculture in the United States, among other topics, but none have focused on the impact of material culture of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States.^{viii}

Two recent works mirror the argument made in *Making the Movement* that the material culture of the Civil Rights Movement helped it achieve many of its objectives, but with key differences. *Race and Affluence: An Archeology of African America and Consumer Culture* argues that ideas about race helped create the consumer culture that developed in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Mullins did not investigate how the creation of objects for the Civil Rights Movement used some aspects of consumer culture to fight against that racism. David Pilgrim's *Watermelons, Nooses, and Straight Razors: Stories from the Jim Crow Museum* argues that racist objects, and imagery, such as mammy and Sambo characters, helped reinforce the racist ideas that underpinned the system of Jim Crow. Objects had the power to fundamentally shape people's views on civil rights, but Pilgrim's work focuses on the objects that supported white supremacy, while *Making the Movement* focuses on the objects that fought against it.^{ix}

Making the Movement will help those interested in the impact of material culture on social movements, media, and popular culture, as well as politics, and economics. It will also contribute to the literature about the use of material culture as a tool of analysis to understand past societies, as well as the present. Works such as Simon Broner's "Grasping Things: Folk Material Culture and Mass Society in America," Lillian Ackerman's *A Song to the Creator: Traditional Arts of Native American Women of the Plateau*, and the anthology *Creating Material Worlds* ask us to consider how the physical world shapes events. *Making the Movement* seeks to fill a gap in two canons, that of the Civil Rights Movement and material culture, and the hope is that it will not be the last.^x

ⁱ Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984 [1979], reprint 1997. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi; Lyotard, Jean-

François. *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007; Bertens, Johannes Willem. *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History*. London: Routledge, 1996; Carr, David. *Time, Narrative, and History*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1999.

ⁱⁱ Woodward, C. Vann. *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006; Moses, Wilson Jeremiah. *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism: 1850-1925*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009; Patterson, James T. *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010; Egerton, John. *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995; Branch, Taylor. *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-65*. New York, NY: Touchstone Book, 1999; Branch, Taylor. *At Canaan's Edge*. Simon & Schuster Audio, 2006; Branch, Taylor. *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63*. New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2006.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cobb, Charles E. *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016; Jeffries, Hasan Kwame. *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt*. New York: New York University Press, 2010; Cook, Cannon. *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Reformist Insurgency for Civil Rights*. Ogden, UT: Weber State University, 2016; Greenhaw, Wayne. *Fighting the Devil in Dixie: How Civil Rights Activists Took on the Ku Klux Klan in Alabama*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2015.

^{iv} Berger, Maurice. *For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010; Provenzo, Eugene F. *W.E.B. Du Bois' Exhibit of American Negroes: African Americans at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013; Aretha, David. *The Story of the Selma Voting Rights Marches in Photographs*. Berkeley Heights, NJ: Enslow Publishers, Inc., 2014; Lyon, Danny. *Memories of the Southern Civil Rights Movement*. Santa Fe, N.M: Twin Palms Publishers, 2010.

^v Greene, Christina. *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005; Nahal, Anita; Lopez, D. Matthews Jr. (July 2008). "African American Women and the Niagara Movement, 1905-1909". *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History*. 32 (2); Robinson, Jo Ann Gibson. *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson*. Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 2011; Holsaert, Faith S. *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts By Women in SNCC*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012.

^{vi} Weber, Deanna Frith. *The Freedom Singers: Their History and Legacy For Music Education*. PhD diss., 2010; Rabaka, Reiland. *Civil rights Music: The Soundtracks of the Civil Rights Movement*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016; Carawan, Guy, Candie Carawan, Julian Bond, and Florence Reece. *Sing for Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement through Its Songs*. Montgomery, Ala.: New South Books, 2007; Sullivan, Patricia. *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement*. New York: New Press, 2010; Theoharis, Jeanne. *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2015; Manis, Andrew Michael. *A Fire You Can't Put Out: The Civil Rights Life of Birmingham's Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002; Welky, David. *Marching Across the Color Line: A. Philip Randolph and Civil Rights in the World War II Era*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014; Wynn, Neil A. *The African American Experience During World War 2*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011.

^{vii} Farmer, James. *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement*. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1998; Graetz, Robert S. *A White Preachers Memoir: The Montgomery Bus Boycott*. Montgomery: Black Belt Press, 1998; Lewis, John, and Michael D' Orso. *Walking With the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2015; Cleaver, Eldridge. *Soul on Ice. With an Introduction by Maxwell Geismar*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968; Gregory, Dick, and James R. McGraw. *Write Me In!*, New York: Bantam Books, 1968.

^{viii} Brooks, Alasdair Mark. *The Importance of British Material Culture to Historical Archaeologies of the Nineteenth Century*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016; Bleichmar, Daniela, and Peter C. Mancall. *Collecting Across Cultures: Material Exchanges in the Early Modern Atlantic World*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania

Press, 2013; Heneghan, Bridget T. *Whitewashing America: Material Culture and Race in the Antebellum Imagination*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003; Wells, Peter S. *How Ancient Europeans Saw the World*. Princeton University Press, 2012; Gerhart, Karen M. *The Material Culture of Death in Medieval Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009; Craven, Anna. "The Art and Material Culture of the Eloyi (Afo) People, Nigeria 1969/70: A Photographic Essay." *African Arts* 51, no. 1 (2018): 46-63. doi:10.1162/afar_a_00391; Auther, Elissa. *West of Center: Art and the Counterculture Experiment in America, 1965-1977*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

^x Mullins, Paul R. *Race and Affluence: An Archaeology of African America and Consumer Culture*. Boston, MA: Springer US, 2002; Pilgrim, David, and Debby Irving. *Watermelons, Nooses, and Straight Razors: Stories from the Jim Crow Museum*. Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2018.

^x Fine, Gary Alan, and Simon J. Bronner. "Grasping Things: Folk Material Culture and Mass Society in America." *Contemporary Sociology* 16, no. 2 (1987): 227; Ackerman, Lillian A. *A Song to the Creator: Traditional Arts of Native American Women of the Plateau*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996; Pierce, Elizabeth, Anthony Russell, Adrián Maldonado, and Louisa Campbell. *Creating Material Worlds: The Uses of Identity in Archaeology*. Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2016.