

UNDERSTANDING SELF-DEFENSE IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT THROUGH VISUAL ARTS

By Sonia James-Wilson

Introduction—From “Freedom” to “Power!”

For the past 30 years there has been an ongoing debate about the distinction between the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Some view the period from the mid 1950s to the mid 1970s as two distinct eras in U.S. history, and suggest that by 1966 race riots and the pervasive marginalization of African Americans marked the end of “the traditional southern-based, nonviolent Civil Rights Movement [which] had largely ground to a halt and was in its death throes” (Allen, 1970). This interpretation of events often leads to the popularized representation of long-suffering, law abiding and well-behaved African Americans who petitioned peacefully, which is held in sharp contrast to portrayals of “militants,” rioters, and the disillusioned. As one reporter in 1967 suggested, the Black Power movement has often been viewed as a time when “Negroes patiently praying on court house steps [were] replaced by angry mobs looting ghetto stores.”

It is important to avoid presenting these movements as two binaries, or to suggest that the latter is simply an extension of the former, because there were fundamental differences between the ideologies that informed them. For example, for the leaders of the Black Power movement, self-determination was recognized as the highest aspiration of African Americans, whereas many civil rights leaders believed this goal alienated sympathizers. The Black Power movement’s emphasis on blackness and the belief that African Americans could succeed independently was also criticized by prominent civil rights leaders, including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., because they believed that African Americans (as a minority group) needed the support of the dominant group and multiracial coalitions. Black Power proponents also argued that the African-American community should take the lead in the fight against racism, and rejected the notion that change could only come by “appealing to the consciences of the rest of society.” Many sanctioned violence as a viable form of resistance and de-emphasized the ideal of “morality,” which was central to the efforts of civil rights activist (McCarthy, 1992).

In what is to follow, I will suggest a framework that teachers can use for the development of activities that can help increase their students’ ability to understand how strategies of self-defense were encouraged and employed by African Americans in the struggle against white supremacy both in the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power movement. Through the integration of the visual arts, students can explore images and ideologies that have been downplayed or erased from the Civil Rights Movement story as it is retold in mainstream social studies curriculum. They can also be encouraged to frame the ideas and actions of “radical” groups and individuals as important contributions to the struggle against racism.

Setting the Stage: Contextualizing Self-Defense within the Social Studies Curriculum

In “‘This Nonviolent Stuff Ain’t No Good. It’ll Get Ya Killed’: Teaching about Self-Defense in the African-American Freedom Struggle,” Emiyle Crosby introduces the key points that she emphasizes in her teaching to challenge students’ assumptions about the strategies African Americans used in the struggle to gain the rights and freedoms promised to all Americans. These points include: (1) self-defense and nonviolence are



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neither opposites nor mutually exclusive; (2) self-defense was intrinsically related to violent white resistance and an ineffective legal system; and, (3) self-defense as a strategy against oppression did not originate in northern cities. Her work with college students suggests that even though young people may support the ideal of equality in principle, they may also harbor beliefs that "African Americans must 'earn' rights through certain behaviors; that disorder is more of a problem than lack of equality; and that potential black violence is more of a problem than actual white violence." Because high schoolers may also carry these, or other preconceptions about one's right to protection, it is important to engage students in preliminary discussions of the nature and role of self-defense before and during the Civil Rights Movement before the artwork to be integrated is introduced.

Self-Defense and Nonviolence Are Not Mutually Exclusive

As previously noted, it is critical that students understand that self-defense is not the opposite of nonviolence. Though they should not be required (or even encouraged) to embrace violence as the preferred response to racial oppression, students should be helped to understand the rationale offered by those who did. One way to begin this exploration is to examine the ways in which Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Williams conceptualized the connections between their actions and their desire to have their humanity recognized.

Though influenced by the teaching of Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King's method of nonviolence was based on Christian pacifism including the notion of "meeting hate with love" and winning the support of morally decent and compassionate people. In his view, if civil rights activists responded to harassment and physical abuse with violence they would "undermine the righteousness of the cause" (Williams, 1988). Below, is a statement written by Dr. King about the nonviolence strategy as it was used in Birmingham, a city which in 1963 upheld an entrenched code of racial segregation, sanctioned a court system with a long track record of gross injustices against African Americans, and held the record for the most "unsolved" bombings of African-American homes and churches in the country. King writes:

In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist, negotiation, self-purification, and direct action. We have gone through these steps in Birmingham... Negro leaders sought to negotiate with the city fathers, but the latter consistently refused to engage in good-faith negotiation... We had no alternative except to prepare for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and the national community... Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks to dramatize the issue so that it can no longer be ignored... I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth.... The purpose of our direct-action program is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation.... I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure... If this philosophy had not emerged by now many streets of the South would, I am convinced, be flowing with blood... I have consistently preached that nonviolence demands that the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek. I have tried to make clear that it is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends. (King, 1963)

Robert Williams was a proponent of "armed self-reliance" who in 1957 organized a community in armed defense against the Ku Klux Klan in North Carolina. Williams also

used and approved of nonviolent resistance, but he believed that “a man cannot have human dignity if he allows himself to be abused; to be kicked and beaten to the ground, to allow his wife and children to be attacked, refusing to defend them on the basis that he’s so pious, so self-righteous, that it would demean his personality if he fought back” (Williams, 1962). Williams also argued that “the stranglehold of oppression [could not] be loosened by a plea to the oppressor’s conscience,” and that “social change in something as fundamental as racist oppression involves violence.” Students could be challenged to identify events in history that led to changes in racist oppression that did not involve violence and be asked to think about and compare the following statements by Williams and King about the ways in which violence perpetuated by “white racists” was largely unexamined. This discussion could also be extended to include an exploration of their ideas about how African Americans—and the nation as a whole—should respond:

The Afro-American militant is a “militant” because he defends himself, his family, his home and his dignity. He does not introduce violence into a racist social system—the violence is already there, and has always been there. It is precisely this unchallenged violence that allows a racist social system to perpetuate itself. When people say that they are opposed to Negroes “resorting to violence” what they really mean is that they are opposed to Negroes defending themselves and challenging the exclusive monopoly of violence practiced by white racists. (Williams, 1962)

We who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light. Injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured (King, 1963).

Teachers might also ask their students to think about the ways that nonviolent protesters have been valorized in the popular press and by supporters. Witnesses to the Montgomery bus boycott talked about being “awed with admiration at the quiet dignity, discipline, and dedication” of those who participated, and journalists often suggest that “nonviolence required compassion, commitment, courage, and faith” (Williams, 1988). Dr. King even described nonviolent demonstrators as “real heroes,” and praised them for their “sublime courage, their willingness to suffer, and their amazing discipline in the midst of great provocation.” Students could be asked to think about the types of adjectives they would use to describe those who stood armed against Klansmen, or those who fought back when blatantly ignored (or viciously attacked) by the authorities who had sworn to protect them as U.S. citizens.

The fact that self-defense, as a strategy against oppression, did not originate in northern cities is information that should be taught before embarking on this curriculum. One way



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“Until the day of liberation, protection for my child can only be guaranteed through the barrel of the gun” – by Audrey Hudson

BABYLON



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to go about this is to compare and contrast two prominent groups that supported this ideology. Students with some knowledge of the Black Panther Party may already know that self-defense was advocated among many African Americans living in major cities during the 1960s and 1970s. The Deacons for Defense and Justice is one example of a group that embraced this long tradition of self-defense as it was practiced in the rural South.

Self-Defense Was a Response to a Corrupt System of Law Enforcement

The notion that self-defense was intrinsically related to violent white resistance and an ineffective legal system is another important idea for students to grapple with. The opening quote from the biography of Robert Williams is one way to begin a discussion about the role of self-protection throughout U.S. history, and to connect it to actions and incidents that students may have learned about in their study of U.S. history. Williams writes:

American Negroes have armed themselves as a group... where the authorities could not, or rather would not, enforce their duty to protect Americans from a lawless mob... It has always been an accepted right of Americans, as the history of our

Western states proves, that where the law is unable, or unwilling, to enforce order, the citizens can, and must act in self-defense against lawless violence. I believe this right holds for black Americans as well as whites. (Williams, 1962)

Teachers might also consider exposing students to eye-witness accounts of mistreatment or abuses, or permit them to watch footage of images of African Americans being hosed down by police, trampled by their horses, or fainting from exposure to tear gas as captured in various documentaries about the Civil Rights Movement. Both the stories and the media could be introduced with a short narrative description, such as Dr. King's response to an open letter published in 1963 in the *Birmingham News* from eight clergy who criticized his work in Birmingham. King wrote:

You warmly commended the Birmingham police force for keeping "order" and "preventing violence." I doubt that you would have so warmly commended the police force if you had seen its dogs sinking their teeth into unarmed, nonviolent Negroes. I doubt that you would so quickly commend the policemen if you were to observe their ugly and inhumane treatment of Negroes here in the city jail; if you were to watch them push and curse old Negro women and young Negro girls; if you were to see them slap and kick old Negro men and young boys; if you were to observe them, as they did on two occasions, refuse to give us food because we wanted to sing our grace together. I cannot join you in your praise of the Birmingham police department. (King, 1963)

Finally, students can be introduced to vivid examples of the ways that both local and federal authorities failed to ensure the safety and rights of African Americans through case studies and oral histories of the lives of individuals who were actively involved in the Movement. This is particularly appropriate because self-defense strategies were used pervasively amongst nonviolence supporters and were often necessary for the Movement's survival (Crosby, 2002). *Minds Stayed on Freedom: The Civil Rights*

Struggle in the Rural South (Youth of the Rural Organizing and Cultural Center, 1991), is a good resource, as it is a collection of oral histories collected by school children where interviewees describe carrying guns for a range of reasons including the protection of people exercising their right to register to vote and protest peacefully. Other recommendations for literature that could be used for this purpose include: *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Forman, 1985); *Black Protest: 350 Years of History, Documents, and Analysis* (Grant, 1998); *The Deacons for Defense and Justice: Defenders of the African-American Community in Bogalusa, Louisiana, during the 1960s* (LaSimba, 2001); *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (Moody, 1968); *My Soul Is Rested: The Story of the Civil Rights Struggle in the Deep South* (Raines, 1977); and, *Negroes with Guns* (Williams, 1962).



DEFEND THE GHETTO

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Developing Activities: Self-Defense in the Context of Revolutionary Art

In addition to its emphasis on social and political action, the Black Power movement also influenced the ways African Americans thought about and created art. The emphasis on community pride and self-actualization became more apparent in music, dance, theatre, literature, and the visual arts, and artists across the country produced texts, sounds, and images to attest to the fact that African-American culture “was not deficient or deviant or a pathological perversion of mainstream culture” (van Dubury, 1992). For people living in improvised inner-city neighborhoods, the expression of black power through the arts also became a source of pride, a reflection of their humanity, and a reminder of their inherent dignity. Artists who were also Panther members used words and images to communicate their message of self-defense through revolutionary art.

In an effort to reach out to people in the community, to raise funds, and to recruit new members, the Panthers published *The Black Panther*, a weekly newspaper with a distribution of more than 100,000 copies during its peak from 1968–72 (Abron, 1993). It has been said that the beginning of the Black Power movement coincided with the shift from “moral imperatives” that were supported by moderates (including the right to vote and the right to equal education) to those “whose moral rightness was not as readily apparent” (Williams, 1988) (including the right to employment and decent housing and affirmative action). This new emphasis was clearly articulated in revolutionary art images.

Emory Douglas, Minister of Culture and the primary artist for *The Black Panther*, and other artists produced hundreds of images intended to inspire African Americans to defend themselves through armed conflict and to demand culturally responsive education and decent housing. Douglas believed revolutionary artists should portray their visual interpretations of the struggle in ways that would “agitate the people” (Douglas, 1970),



"Our fight is not in Vietnam."

and he encouraged them to create images that would portray "fascist judges, lawyers, generals, pig policemen, fireman, senators, congressmen, governors, presidents, et al., being punished for their criminal acts against American people and the struggling people of the world" (Alloway, 1970). This perspective is exemplified in Douglas' article, "On Revolutionary Art:"

Revolutionary art is an extension and interpretation to the masses in the most simplest and obvious form.... Revolutionary art is learned in the ghetto... Not in the school of fine art. The revolutionary artist hears the people screams which [sic] they are being attacked by the pigs. They share their curses when they feel like killing the pigs but are unequipped. He watches and hears the sounds of foot steps of black people trampling the ghetto streets and translates them into pictures of slow revolts against the slave masters, stomping them in their brains with bullets—that we can have power and freedom to determine the destiny of our community and help build "our world" (Douglas, 1970).

Through their work, revolutionary artists were challenged to "cut through the smokescreens of the oppressor and create brand new images of revolutionary action for the total community," which included "the Christian to the brother on the block, the college students and the high school drop-out, the street walker and the secretary, and the pimp and the preacher" (Douglas, 1970). In addition to visual accessibility, the images were also physically accessible to the people. Douglas considered "the ghetto" his gallery and revolutionary art posters were pasted, not hung, on storefront widows, fences, telephone poles, barbershops, laundromats, and liquor stores. The bombardment of these images was meant to "educate the people as they [went] through their daily routine, from to day-to-day, week-to-week, and month-to-month" (Douglas, 1970).

Activities that integrate the visual arts in curricula about the Civil Rights Movement could draw on the work of revolutionary artists to introduce the ways in which the ideology of self-defense was translated into visual messages designed to inspire, educate, and enrage. In addition to an understanding of the ways in which self-defense was used, students will need to be familiar with a few key concepts in order to interpret this work, including: symbolism, caricature, oversimplification, bias, point of view personification, propaganda, and political art (or art for political resistance).

Potential Apprehensions

Educators who are committed to teaching about the history of the struggle for equity and social justice in the United States make difficult choices about what to include in the curriculum. The decision to teach about the Black Panther Party, revolutionary art, or even self-defense is one that should be made with serious consideration, and there is little doubt in my mind that teachers will either spend a great deal of time deliberating about whether to engage their students or quickly decide not to. Based on my experience of working with teachers in the field, resistance to teaching this material is usually associated with a variety of concerns including its placement in an Anglo-Eurocentric, often standardized social studies curriculum and the possibility of negative reactions from administrators, colleagues and parents. Some teachers may even worry that, as *New York Times* reporter Sol Stern suggested in 1967, "there are a thousand black people in the ghetto that think privately what any Panther says out loud," and that introducing these ideas will somehow inspire students toward violent behavior.

Though the violent images portrayed in this work are graphic and disturbing, neither they nor their message should be discounted. Students who have the opportunity to learn about the contribution of revolutionary art to the Black Power movement will be faced with jarring and potentially upsetting images, but their engagement may also provide an opportunity for them to move beyond those initial reactions to a place where they can consider the experiences, beliefs, and histories from which this work originates. It is important to help students understand that the violence advocated by those who supported self-defense was a form of “fighting back” in response to violence perpetrated by others—and not violence for its own sake. In the case of the rhetoric surrounding revolutionary art, this perspective may be more difficult to defend, but it is important to present the words or images of this work within the context of disenfranchised African-American communities from the late 1960s to early 1970s.

The potential for backlash from administrators, colleagues, and parents or caregivers is always a possibility when teaching material that is controversial or viewed as outside of the “mainstream” or canon. However, teachers can justify their inclusion of this material in the social studies curriculum by making the case that without it students have a distorted view of the ideologies held and the tactics used by African Americans during the Civil Rights Movement.

Mainstream social studies curriculum is almost void of the stories of African-American women and men who did not, as Martin Luther King Jr. suggested, “present [their] very bodies as a means of laying [their] case before the conscience of their oppressors.” Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth have been offered to school children as examples of courageous individuals who used their intellect, experience, allies, and powers of persuasion to take their freedom and to win it for others, but the names of Gabriel Prosser and Denmark Vesey or the stories of the Maroons or Cinque and the *Amistad* are still widely unknown.

It is important that children do not come away from the experience of learning social studies believing that all African Americans were supporters of passive resistance, or that those who opposed the use of violence were morally superior to those who believed that its value was limited. It is also important to talk about the ways that people defended themselves against racists because students may not realize that, even though many permitted themselves to be physically and emotionally abused in nonviolent protest, all citizens have the right to protect themselves. An accurate introduction to the Civil Rights curriculum should extend students’ thinking to a place where notions of Black Power are not equated with images of riots and looters. A balanced portrayal of the Civil Rights Movement should include a discussion about the ways in which a marginalized community worked outside of the “system” and created a new African-American identity that framed them, not as victims or martyrs, but as empowered citizens and guardians of their communities.

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