"He Was Non-Violent, But My Boys Weren’t": The Hegemonic Myth of Non-Violence and the Construction of a Black Identity
by Spencer D. Wood and Ricardo Samuel

Introduction

In this paper we consider five case studies of armed self defense as examples of types of contextually situated social action. The cases, involving three men and two women, are a mixture of new and familiar actors drawn from the long freedom struggle of Blacks in the Jim Crow South. These narratives are in keeping with an emerging civil rights historiography that celebrates the transformative work of local people and by extension must come to terms with tensions embedded in those change-oriented actions that choose to face violence with violence (Collins 1974).

Armed self-defense is a broad term that covers a wide range of social actions that include actual instances of self defense but also actions that imply a willingness or ability to bear arms. As such the action has both symbolic and material components. In fact, a considerable amount of the symbolic power comes from the shared meaning and cultural history of firearms and guns in the making of our history. This symbolic meaning builds on the larger cultural manifestations of gunfighting and violence in the mythologizing of the frontier (Slotkin 1992). To get one’s gun is to declare one’s independence. This is true, regardless of how realistic or unrealistic an outcome of independence is to actually occur. Such a declaration has especially profound import when conveyed by those at the bottom. That is, firearms possess an inherent meaning that conveys overt and explicit resistance, and as such express a pointed challenge for the racial order in the Jim Crow South. The title to Robert Williams’ book, Negroes with Guns, captures this symbolic power. In a Durkheimian sense a gun in the hands of Blacks is taboo precisely because it implies resistance and non-compliance with the racial order.

To conceptualize the forms of action described in the cases, we rely on the recent work of sociologists Ernhrayer and Mische in their influential article on agency (Emnhrayer and Mische 1998). We show that the historical context surrounding the action defines not only the type of action taken, but also our perceptions of that action. In conclusion, we identify different orientations and shifting perceptions that suggest the need for more nuanced and local study of action, non-violence, and armed self defense in the black freedom movement. Further, we argue that this new agentic historiography represents an important intellectual shift. Even more than the movement toward the social history of the late 1960s this intellectual project gives greater voice to its subjects and promises to yield a more egalitarian and democratic re-
reading of the black freedom movement. Finally, our call for furthering this line of research resonates strongly with existing views about the centrality of praxis and prescription in the broader family of African-American intellectualism (Marable 2000). We begin with a brief review of this new historiographic literature, followed by our case studies and conclude with an interpretive section oriented through the conceptual lens of agency as developed by Emirbayer and Mische.

Theory: Agency, Strategy, Structure, and Time

We are not the first to recognize this new agentic historiography of the black freedom movement and so provide only a sketch here of this exciting body of work. For us, there are two important developments reflected in this work. First, is the localist approach embodied in John Dittmer’s aptly titled Local People. To be sure, there are similarities in this work with that of scholars of key movement organizations with strong local orientations, especially the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) (see Carson 1981; and Zinn 1964). What is different, however, is the intensive use of oral histories and the focus on the contributions of local, community people.

A second important development is its criticism of the dominance of the field by master narratives that focus predominantly on the life and influence of Martin Luther King (e.g. Branch 1988). Along this vein, Tyson’s award-winning history of the life of Robert Williams created a significant space for more readings of movement history that chronicled lesser known and ideologically controversial subjects such as armed self defense (Tyson 1999). Similarly, Hill’s account of the Deacons for Defense provided a much welcomed addition (Hill 2004). These impressive accounts, like Carson and Zinn before, filled important voids, but kept as their focus key, though under-studied, people in established movement organizations. Umoja, Berrey, and de Jong, by contrast, have combined Dittmer’s focus on local people, with an attention to alternative narratives (Berrey 2006; Umoja 2003; de Jong 2002; and, Umoja 1999). These new historical treatments recognize that history and historical change occurs in very local places through the action of individuals, though of course not precisely to their choosing. This recognition fits neatly with Randal Collins’ theorizing about history and violence.

Collins’ work goes a long way toward outlining a social theory of violence and in doing so emphasizes the contributions violence makes to the building of social structure. For Collins, violence as a form of social action becomes increasingly prevalent as we concentrate our focus on the activities of individual actors through agentic history (Collins 1974). That is, for Collins, history as made by people is both local and violent. Despite this contribution, contemporary social theory has largely neglected to further develop a theory of violence as a form of social action. By considering violence as another form of action we are free to take advantage of recent contributions toward thinking about agency. For us, as Emirbayer and Mische put it,

Theoretically, our central contribution is to begin to reconceptualize human agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment). The agentic dimension of social action can only be captured in its full complexity, we argue, if it is analytically situated within the flow of time. (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 963)

In moving directly to this view of agency we still acknowledge the significance of the classical tradition in helping to develop an un-
nderstanding of the relationship between action and structural context. We want to argue that what is still missing, first of all, is an empirically and historically grounded theory that conceptualizes violence by emphasizing the relationships between agency, strategies, structure, and time, and that, secondly, situates these relationships within specific historical and local contexts.

Emirbayer and Mische provide a useful heuristic for reconceptualizing agency in a manner that more fully allows actors to alter and be influenced by their structural setting. This is precisely the type of action that black freedom activists imagined both in their acts of non-violence and their acts of armed self-defense. As Emirbayer and Mische illustrate,

The key to grasping the dynamic possibilities of human agency is to view it as composed of variable and changing orientations within the flow of time. Only then will it be clear how the structural environments of action are both dynamically sustained by and also altered through human agency--by actors capable of formulating projects for the future and realizing them, even if only in small part, and with unforeseen outcomes, in the present. (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 964)

Emirbayer and Mische stress the importance of the agentic dimension of social action. Agency allows, "ends and means [to] develop coterminously within contexts that are themselves ever changing and thus always subject to reevaluation and reconstruction on the part of the reflective intelligence" (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 967-68). With this in mind, we turn to a series of brief depictions of selected events in the lives of actors who embraced different dimensions of armed self-defense.

Case Studies

In this section we highlight instances of armed self-defense in the Mississippi Delta and discuss the importance of context in the interpretation of these actions. We consider the significance of armed self-defense by varying our perspective as exemplified through the different historical contexts surrounding select events in the lives of activists: Ida B. Wells, Robert Williams, Hartman Turnbow, Erma Russell, and Reverend Willie James Burns. Importantly each of these activists preceded the more well-known Black Panther Party, the most familiar manifestation of black armed self-defense. We rely, here, primarily upon the words and writings of the figures themselves, rather than secondary accounts. It is in these primary texts that one sees the vitality and intentional-ity of armed self-defense but also how the specific historical context is so crucial for both understanding their actions and informing our interpretation. More specifically, by analyzing the responses of local civil rights activists to the threat or action of violence from a racist regime, we can discern key themes that highlight the significance of armed resistance and violence as a means to defining the cohesion and social solidarity of black communities.

Ida B. Wells: The Failure of the State to Protect

The work of Ida B. Wells, a black civil rights leader, publisher, and journalist stands as a lifelong effort to expose violence against African Americans and to lay to rest the myths and lies surrounding lynchings. In particular, her utilization of statistics and evidence compiled by white reporters and other sources added both legitimacy to her argument and contempt from the Whites she confronted (Collins 2002, 17).

The daughter of slaves, Wells was born in Holly Springs, Mississippi in 1862. There, she attended Rust University but after the death of her parents during a yellow fever epidemic, she withdrew to care for her siblings and began working as a rural teacher (Collins 2002). She eventually moved to Memphis, Tennessee where she began writing newspaper stories
about racial inequalities faced by African Americans. Eventually becoming the leading spokesperson decrying the prevalence of lynching, she challenged Southerners to end the practice and advised black families to be prepared to defend themselves.

Wells wrote unflinchingly about the violent nightmare unfolding in the post-reconstruction South. Promoting a strong black identity she challenged stereotypes and fought for equality at every turn. She wrote in the preface of her pamphlet Southern Horrors. Lynch Law in all its Phases: "The Afro-American is not a bestial race. If this work can contribute in any way toward proving this, and at the same time arouse the conscience of the American people to a demand for justice to every citizen, and punishment by law for the lawless, I shall feel I have done my race a service. Other considerations are of minor importance." To accomplish this goal, she would rely on evidence and reason.

In Spring of 1892, after three of her friends were murdered at the hands of a lynch mob in Memphis, Tennessee, she responded with a sustained series of editorials published in the Memphis Free Speech that resulted in the destruction of her newspaper and deep concern for her safety. We focus on this event and share below some excerpts from her pamphlet Southern Horrors where she describes the events revealing the real threat to her and her bravery in challenging the white power structure. In reference to a failed effort to locate and lynch her and her associates at the newspaper she writes that the cause lay in the following editorial she wrote and printed on May 21, 1892:

Eight negroes lynched since last issue of the Free Speech one at Little Rock, Ark., last Saturday morning where the citizens broke(!) into the penitentiary and got their man; three near Anniston, Ala., one near New Orleans; and three at Clarksville, Ga., the last three for killing a white man, and five on the same old racket—the new alarm about raping white women. The same programme of hanging, then shooting bullets into the lifeless bodies was carried out to the letter.

Nobody in this section of the country believes the old thread-bare lie that Negro men rape white women. If Southern white men are not careful, they will overreach themselves and public sentiment will have a reaction; a conclusion will then be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women (Wells 2002 [1892], 29).

White response to Wells' argument that there was no evidence of black men assaulting white women, was to threaten even more mob violence unless she and other leaders toned things down and let vigilante justice be carried out. In addition to reprinting her argument above, they wrote in the Daily Commercial:

Those negroes who are attempting to make the lynching of individuals of their race a means for arousing the worst passions of their kind are playing with a dangerous sentiment. The negroes may as well understand that there is no mercy for the negro rapist and little patience with his defenders (Wells 2002 [1892], 30).

Similarly, another Memphis, Tennessee newspaper, The Evening Scimitar, took the threat of violence one step further: "Patience under such circumstances is not a virtue. If the negroes themselves do not apply the remedy without delay it will be the duty of those whom he has attacked to tie the wretch who utters these calumnies to a stake at the intersection of Main and Madison Sts., brand him in the forehead with a hot iron and perform upon him a surgical operation with a pair of tailor's shears" (Wells 2002 [1892], 30).

Powerful indeed was the persuasiveness of Wells' words. In light of such continued retorts threatening violence and the continued occurrence of lynching throughout the South, Wells concluded that armed self-defense was crucial. As she poured through the long list of lynching
ings she soon realized that “the only times an Afro-American who was assaulted got away has been when he had a gun and used it in self-defense” (Wells 2002 [1892], 52). For Wells then the solution lay in convincing others of the need for anti-lynching legislation and a recognition of the need to defend oneself in the meantime. For her the failure to protect black citizens revealed an important fact that “every Afro-American should ponder well, . . . that a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give” (Wells 2002 [1892], 52). This failure of the state and the need to construct their own security mechanisms was a view shared by later civil rights leader Robert Williams as well.

Robert Williams: In Defense of Civil Society--From Race to Citizenship

WWII veteran Robert Williams was born in 1925 in Monroe, NC the home of Senator Jesse Helms. His early life, in many regards is anything but extraordinary, yet somehow profoundly “emblematic” (Tyson 1999, 26). In particular, his involvement in the army and movement around the country was typical of so many hundreds of thousands of other black Americans (Tyson 1999, 26). For biographer Tyson, a key shaping influence was Williams’ military service where he learned valuable first-hand lessons. By the time he returned to North Carolina as a veteran in 1946 he had an empowered sense of his entitlements and a more accurate understanding of white people (Tyson 1999, 27). In a 1968 interview with Robert Cohen he said, “Before then, it appeared that [Whites] were so well-organized and so powerful, it seemed that they really might be superior. But then I found that they are a long ways from being superior. I also realized that they are afraid, and that they had certain weaknesses, and this is why they had to react so violently and so swiftly in stamping out anything that they figured to be contrary to their interests” (cited in Tyson 1999, 27). In short, military service had imbued Williams with a civic identity that was indisputable confirmation of his equality and rights. Armed with his entitlements born of his patriotic service, Williams prepared to challenge lawlessness and white supremacy by gaining leadership of the faltering local chapter of the NAACP, quickly transforming it into the most militant chapter nationwide (Williams 1962, 51-52).

In his introduction to his famous pamphlet Negroes with Guns Robert Williams writes:

Why do I speak to you from exile? Because a Negro community in the South took up guns in self-defense against racist violence--and used them. I am held responsible for this action, that for the first time in history American Negroes have armed themselves as a group, to defend their homes, their wives, their children, in a situation where law and order had broken down, where the authorities could not, or rather would not, enforce their duty to protect Americans from a lawless mob. I accept this responsibility and am proud of it. I have asserted the right of Negroes to meet the violence of the Ku Klux Klan by armed self-defense--and have acted on it. 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, 39)

Williams links the right to armed resistance to the general history of the United States, arguing that what defines America in general is the right to protect one’s liberty and property. Armed resistance, therefore, is a universal American right, and through armed resistance blacks protect themselves as Americans. What we see here is a shift from race to a more general concern with citizenship. Williams goes on to say, “In civilized society the law serves as a de-
terrent against lawless forces that would destroy the democratic process. But where there is a breakdown of the law, the individual citizen has a right to protect his person, his family, his home and his property. To me this is so simple and proper that it is self-evident” (Williams 1962, 40).

Williams’ move toward armed self-defense officially began over two conflicts in 1959. The first was associated with the famous “Kissing Case” involving an innocent kiss between a nine-year old black boy and a seven year-old white girl (see Tyson 1999; and, Williams 1962). The second, in a mockery of any notion of reasonably fair legal inquiry, involved the acquittal of a white man charged with attempted rape of an eight-month pregnant black woman from Montoe. After the latter event, Williams answered area women’s concerns about their safety by arguing that it was now necessary for Blacks to “create their own deterrent” against the lawlessness of Whites (Williams 1962, 63).

Below, though, we highlight a different confrontation associated with integrating the local swimming pool that demonstrates the profoundly local nature of social action and the need to navigate the challenges and opportunities presented in the daily unfolding of history. In this planned attempt to lynch Williams, local authorities were reluctantly brought to intervene only after realizing that Williams and his co-passengers were armed. The event, detailed in *Negroes with Guns*, occurred when Whites waiting for Williams to drive past forced his car off the road and started screaming, “Kill the niggers! Kill the niggers! Pour gasoline on the niggers! Burn the niggers!” while local police watched from approximately fifty feet away (Williams 1962, 45-46). Recognizing that the police were not going to intervene, Williams and a passenger defended themselves by pointing weapons at the approaching aggressors. Only then did the police interfere, grabbing Williams on the shoulder and ordering him to “Surrender your weapon!” Williams struck the officer in the face, knocking him backward. Williams wrote that after pointing his rifle in the police officer’s face “I told him we were not going to surrender to a mob. I told him that we didn’t intend to be lynched” (Williams 1962, 46). Eventually, at the suggestion of a city councilman, the highway was opened allowing Williams and his passengers to leave.

Here we see the development of a further theme that argues when blacks stand up to defend themselves, whites will be forced, or at a minimum more inclined, to negotiate. In other words, armed resistance is a crucial means for negotiating social gains:

When an oppressed people show a willingness to defend themselves, the enemy, who is a moral weakling and coward, is more willing to grant concessions and work for a respectable compromise. Psychologically, moreover, racists consider themselves superior beings and they are not willing to exchange their superior lives for our inferior ones. They are most vicious and violent when they can practice violence with impunity. This we have shown in Monroe. Moreover, when because of our self-defense there is a danger that the blood of whites may be spilled, the local authorities in the South suddenly enforce law and order when previously they had been complaisant toward lawless, racist violence. This too we have proven in Monroe. It is remarkable how easily and quickly state and local police control and disperse lawless mobs when the Negro is ready to defend himself with arms. (Williams, 1962, 40-41)

**Hartman Turnbow: Non-violence Will Get You Killed**

Hartman Turnbow, the grandson of a slave, became the one of the first African Americans to attempt to register to vote in Holmes County, MS during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Turnbow was a formidable opponent, by anyone’s standards. Lawrence Guyot
remembered Turnbow as someone not to be "messed with." When asked what things were considered out of bounds for SNCC organizers, Guyot recalled, "Now there were some clear no-no's. Hartman Turnbow had a daughter, and it was clearly understood that if ever there was a no-no, that was the no-no" (Guyot 1978, 261). Regularly carrying a loaded automatic pistol, Turnbow was prepared to himself and his family. Julian Bond identified the disconnect between the theory of non-violence and the practice of self defense in rural Mississippi. For many, Hartman Turnbow epitomizes the distinction. Bond recalled, probably with a slight grin, the sight of Turnbow, dressed in overalls and carrying a briefcase with one thing inside—his army automatic (Bond 1978, 294-295).

A laborer for all his 58 years, his physical presence commanded respect. He made a lasting impression with Howell Raines,

On his farm between Mileston and Tchula, I spent a memorable under the spell of one of the most powerful personalities I expect ever to encounter. . . . He was not at all what I had expected. . . . even among Movement people who admired his courage, Turnbow had the reputation of being difficult to deal with. He was known as a man who, as the Southern saying has it, covered all the ground he stood on. But where I had expected a big man, Hartman Turnbow was no more than five and a half feet tall. (Raines 1978, 4)

Like other farmers in Mileston and throughout rural America, Turnbow was well-acquainted with firearms and fiercely independent. Unlike some others he had witnessed a lynching as a youth and spent most of his life being cheated, yet knowing he deserved better (Turnbow 1967). At sixteen, while working on a plantation, Turnbow was whipped by two men who worked for the plantation owner. They "jus' grabbed me by the head and snatched me down and put his pistol to the back of my neck and went to beatin' me with this strap." (Turnbow 1980, 194). Such experiences combined with a life of poverty and hard work erupted tragically in October of 1951. With little to his name but his distorted sense of masculine pride, Turnbow viciously shot and killed his wife Celie near the square in Lexington as she was boarding a bus trying to leave him. It must have been a horrible scene for all involved, especially their son Gerow Turnbow, who was identified as a witness by the Grand Jury of Holmes County. A year later, Turnbow was sentenced to five years for manslaughter and sent to Parchman Prison (Mississippi Department of Corrections 1952; State of Mississippi 1951). Rightly, such recklessness was considered a liability to many in the movement. Mileston farmer Reverend J. J. Russell recalled that there were times during marches and demonstrations when Turnbow was asked to stay behind (Russell and Russell 1991, 29).

On April 9, 1963, roughly twenty Mileston farm men and women drove to Lexington, the Holmes County seat, to register to vote. Sheriff Andrew Smith stood on the courthouse steps, large and imposing under his cowboy hat. When they approached, Smith shouted to no one in particular but for all to hear, "Who wants to be first?" as he alternately palmed his pistol and twirled his nightstick, slapping it into his hand. Hartman Turnbow, one of the farmers, no doubt knew what Smith meant. The sheriff had long intimidated Holmes County's African American population by following up his question with a sharp blow from his billy club. In that classically southern way, Smith simultaneously invited the applicants into the courthouse and unmistakably threatened them. Registering to vote was dangerous business, and Sheriff Smith was not a gentle man.

Turnbow recalled the other folks who were there to register looking at one another and saying to himself, "These niggers fixin' to run," and then stating in his surprisingly high voice for all to hear, "Me, I'll be the first," as he stepped forward, calling the sheriff's bluff (Turnbow 1980,
Weighing around 175 pounds, Turnbow was smaller than the sheriff but an intimidating foe. Smith was certainly aware of Turnbow’s reputation and that he had served time in Parchman for murdering his wife (McLauren 2006; Mississippi Department of Corrections 1952; State of Mississippi 1951). He faced, a moment of truth. For Smith to deny Turnbow risked a physical confrontation with uncertain outcomes in front of a group of witnesses. Turnbow was, what white folks then might call, a crazy nigger—they just were not quite certain how he might behave. Quickly sizing matters up, Smith let him in.

In addition to voter registration, Turnbow was also housing white northern civil rights workers: two nurses for the local Mileston Health Clinic (Johnson 1991, 73). When Sheriff Smith asked who wanted to go first his message was clear: step out of line and you’ll pay it. Integrating his house and attempting to vote, Turnbow had crossed the line in the eyes of Whites and become a right uppity nigger. Soon he would draw the heat of local white supremacists. In response to violent threats, Turnbow declared that he could invite anybody he wanted into his own house. A month later, Turnbow’s house was shot into and firebombed. Defending his family, Turnbow fired his .22 caliber rifle, shooting one intruder three times and driving them all away. The next day, he, Bob Moses, Hollis Watkins, John Ball, and Lavon Hampton were arrested (United Press International 1963b). Interestingly, Turnbow was charged with arson (burning down his own house), not the shooting. Local authorities explained the arson as an effort by Turnbow and the others to rekindle interest in the voter registration initiative by staging an attack by Whites (United Press International 1963a).

Moses was charged with interfering with an officer because he refused to stop taking pictures and asking the sheriff and deputies questions (United Press International 1963a). By May 13 they were all released after the arresting officers declined to testify in a preliminary hearing (United Press International 1963c). After being contacted, the U.S. Department of Justice soon filed a lawsuit against Holmes County officials, Smith, county attorney Pat M. Barrett, and Mississippi 4th Judicial District attorney Parham Williams for intimidating potential black voters (MacLeod p. 13; SNCC News Release 1963; United Press International 1963b; United States v. Holmes County 1967). Notable among the charges were that no African Americans had successfully registered to vote between 1956 and 1963, the years Smith was in office. Further, the suit claimed that Smith, Barrett, and Williams had arrested and prosecuted certain African Americans in Holmes County as well as voter registration workers in efforts to intimidate them (United States v. Holmes County 1967). While the charges against Moses, Watkins, Ball, and Hampton were dropped, the charges against Turnbow were held over for review by the Grand Jury. While awaiting the hearing, Turnbow and C. Bell Leflore were arrested for unlawful cohabitation. The federal case argued that this arrest served only one purpose, to intimidate and retaliate against Turnbow for registering to vote. Further, County Attorney Barrett acknowledged that this was the first prosecution for unlawful cohabitation in the county since 1938 (United States v. Holmes County 1967, 147-148). Eventually, the Justice Department intervened, bringing suit against the county for voter registration intimidation and later against the school board for their failure to comply with Brown. Like its role throughout Mississippi, it was of little help with immediate threats and acts of violence.

Later, Turnbow told Martin Luther King in Frogmore, South Carolina, “I ain’t never, never make a nonviolent man” (Turnbow 1978, 292). Moreover, a delegate to the 1964 Democratic National Convention, Turnbow disagreed with King’s program of non-violence. Importantly, he was probably not alone in his sentiments.
During a meeting in Atlantic City, he rebuked King for saying he would never approve of violence by saying pointedly, "This nonviolent stuff ain't no good. It'll get ya' killed. . . . If you follow it long enough, it's gon' get you killed. . . . you finish up in a cemetery you just keep a followin' it" (Turnbow 1978, 293). When asked what was good, if non-violence was not the answer, Turnbow said,

It ain't but one thing that is good. Every what the Mississippi white man pose with, he got to be met with. Meet him with whatever he pose with. If he pose with a smile, meet him with a smile, and if he pose with a gun, meet him with a gun. . . . They [the other people at the meeting] said that was the answer, the only answer for that question, said, 'Meet 'em with ever what they pose with.' So, [Martin Luther King] was the only one in that national politician meetin' that believed and agreed on nonviolent. (Turnbow 1978, 293)

Turnbow’s reputation as a volatile, if not dangerous man, repugnant in its origins, nonetheless contributed to his influence in the movement. Turnbow, through his words and actions, created a scenario, however, where he would be seen as dangerous, and consequently, through fear, respected, when he later deployed justifiable violence. He carried a firearm in his briefcase and told others that this would be their defense if whites were to come in after them. Recognizing that in the shadows of America where law enforcement is either corrupt or ineffective non-violence would get one killed, Turnbow took action, like Williams, to protect the rights of an entitled citizenry.

Reverend Willie James Burns and Erma Russell: Protecting Your Family

The idea of defending your local community, of protecting families and friends, of strengthening and reinforcing social ties also was a strong theme in our interview with Reverend Willie James Burns and Erma Russell. We spoke with Reverend Burns on January 16th, 2006, in Greenwood, Mississippi, focusing, in particular, on his reaction and response to the murder of Emmett Till. During our interview, we asked Reverend Burns if he recalled where he was and what his reaction was to learning about the murder of Emmett Till. Burns remembered that he was in Holmes County and that he heard about the lynching over the radio. While listening to the news he learned that the murdered youth was the nephew of a family friend, Moses Wright. The Rights had attended church in Mileston at the Church of God in Christ, so Burns was familiar with the family. When Burns saw his family friend, a distraught Eva Berryman, drive up to his house with a sobbing passenger, he knew something horrible must have happened, but he did not at first realize that the passenger was Elizabeth Wright, Emmett Till’s Auntie. He recalled the scene the day after the Emmett Till’s abduction for us,

And the next morning ah I was listening to the news as I said and Miss Eva Barryman who was a friend of the family and Emmett Till’s Auntie had made her way down to Mileston Community and she brought the lady to me and both of ‘em was crying furiously. They was just crying and I walked up to the car and I asked them “What was wrong?” And she told me, Miss Eva told me, that was Emmett Till’s Auntie and they just had taken her baby from the house and she was trying to escape. And I told her stop crying and I went home and got my 44-40 Winchester put her in my car and carried her to Yazoo City, Mississippi and she lacked forty dollars from having enough money to go to Los Angeles, California and I reached in my pocket and I give her the forty dollars. (Burns 2006)

We then asked Reverend Burns how that made him feel, and he replied,

I was furious at that point. The reason why I went back home before I carried her to
Yazoo City to get my 44-40 Winchester I told her wasn't no way in the world no sheriff was going to bother her, no highway patrolman cause I was going to kill all of 'em. I was just, I was just almost crazy man. Something like that happen you know. (Burns 2006)

Later in the interview, Reverend Burns stated that in addition to the 44-40 Winchester he also owned a 45 caliber pistol, a 38 caliber pistol, and about three shotguns. Moreover, it was apparent he had thought a great deal about self-defense. He said, “The shotguns was too weak that's the reason why I carried the forty four with me” (Burns 2006). Being a young man at the time of the murder, Burns expressed a certain amount of personal identification with the murdered Emmett Till. He stated “You know I was raised up in a home up at Mileston, and my parents taught us not to fear no man. Even [though] we live in a segregated society, my parents taught us that we was much as anybody and we wasn't no more than nobody,” (Burns 2006).

The issue of protection of one's immediate family, of protecting one's kin, and of social solidarity was also a strong and defining theme in our interview with another local civil rights activist, the late Erma Russell. She and her husband Reverend Jessie James Russell were considered the King family of the Holmes County movement and experienced targeted reprisals from the white power structure for their leadership. During our interview with Mrs. Russell, she recounted how Hartman Turnbow had stored numerous firearms in her closet both for safe keeping should his home be raided and for her own safety should anyone try to harm her or her family while Turnbow and Reverend Russell were attending meetings. She said,

We were just like non-violent people but we did have plenty of guns. That Mr. Turnbow had so many guns that he didn't know which one to shoot. He would travel with [Reverend] Russell. They would go, you know, these far distance together sometime. He bring all those guns over here and leave them at my house. They put them in that closet there. And . . . he said, “Any time you want to use one, Ms. Russell, just get any one. They're already ready for shooting.” I was scared to put my hand on the thing. Just scared. (Russell 2006)

Thinking that perhaps the use of guns was isolated to Turnbow, we asked if she and Reverend Russell ever carried guns and she replied, “No, he didn't either. He said he was non-violent. But my boys weren't. He didn't know that they carried guns. He had three boys with him, traveling with him. They would go hide the gun in the car before he'd go out there and get in it” (Russell 2006). When asked if this made them violent, she answered, “They defend their dad if they had to, if they had to,” (Russell 2006).

Analysis

We want to conclude this paper by making a number of more general observations. We are interested in looking at the resistance of everyday people to violence and threats of violence. While there is now a significant amount of scholarship available on armed resistance as an important parameter of understanding civil rights organizations, more locally focused studies that provide a more nuanced discussion are still lacking.

We want to suggest that armed resistance is a broad term that covers a wide range of social actions as seen in the different examples we discussed above. Situating these responses within the specific historical context of the emerging civil rights movement shows the significance of armed resistance within the fabric of how local black activists--some later to become well known like Ida B. Wells and Hartman Turnbow--attempted to define and outline a repertoire of rhetoric and action to respond to the crude and dehumanizing assault by white racists. These actions highlight certain com-
mon themes: In the case of Ida B. Wells, the importance of creating a counter-narrative of analysis and reason, a narrative that is set against the crude narrative of violence and dehumanization that the racist power structure used to justify lynchings. In the example of Robert Williams, we see armed resistance as one way to assert citizenship rights of Blacks. According to Williams, armed resistance was an American tradition, giving citizens the right to defend themselves. It is also an American tradition to carry guns, so in emphasizing weapons this also underscores that Black armed resistance is linked to the overall narrative of the history of the United States.

The examples of Turnbow and Rev. Burns show another crucial dimension of armed resistance. Nothing seemed to infuriate the white power structure more than “Negroes with Guns.” For Turnbow and Reverend Burns, guns seemed to symbolize the most visible manifestation of power (went home and got his Winchester) but also, and perhaps more importantly, both saw guns as a form of “protective masculinity”, thus drawing from and linking themselves to another significant defining myth of what it means to be an American.

What strongly came through in our interviews with Reverend Burns and Erma Russell, was the significance of guns as a defining parameter of the fabric of every day black life of kinship and friendship. Armed resistance was crucial to protecting these local bonds. Armed resistance created social solidarity, a kind of solidarity that went beyond merely protecting your immediate family and extended to friends and neighbors. Armed resistance does not just do “big things” like bring about major social changes, it simply helps protect local folks. Armed resistance saves lives.

Our examples highlight that we need to redirect our attention to the important contributions local people made to armed resistance. Armed resistance as a socially and culturally significant response to white racism and violence did not merely emerge in big cities and through the work and actions of important leaders but was just as much shaped and developed though the actions of everyday local men and women, most of whom never made it into the textbooks of history.

Scholars of social movements will likely ask how our arguments connect with the broader field of social movement studies. A full-blown study of how armed self-defense is both part of and apart from the broader civil rights movement is beyond the purview of this study; however, we can make some preliminary observations. While armed self defense likely speaks to several areas of social movement theory, we find the relevance to three areas to be of primary importance: resource mobilization, framing, and political process. That is, in particular armed self defense is dependent upon the availability of a firearm (resource), a shared set of meanings that justify the use of force (frame), and a set of repertoires of action that are strategic in their timing and deployment (process). Our approach to the study of armed self-defense connects with all three of these theoretical traditions, while at the same time emphasizing the significance of local conditions and resources, both material and symbolic, that helped local people devise strategies of resistance.

Conclusion

Courage and the will to stand for justice was also bolstered by an important, though understudied corollary to property ownership, the right to self-defense (See Hill 2004; Tyson 1999; Umoja 1996). Holmes County is rural, very rural. The land there is excellently suited to two things: agriculture and hunting. Mileston farmers, like most rural people Black or White, grew up hunting and farming. They knew how to handle guns and they owned many. As property owners, they were in many respects conservative. Many are the stories of
Milestone children being forbidden from listening to blues music (Burns 2006). Rather, the less provocative sounds of the Grand Ole Opry were more in keeping with the strict Baptist cultural mores. So too were the lessons of hard work, thrift, cleanliness, and godliness. Such teachings are all too familiar. They are the core values of Weber's Protestant Work Ethic. So, like other Americans who have received accolades for their discretionary use of violence, many Mileston farmers, along with numerous other rural African Americans and later militant urban organizations, were willing to defend their property and families with force if necessary. They were no less American in their values and beliefs than the many heroes of the Old West (See Wright 1975). Further, the violent and isolated climate of the rural South necessitated self-defense if one wanted to stay alive. An emphasis on nonviolence seems oddly ahistorical, yet remains the dominant historical narrative of the movement. Put another way, expecting people faced with the terror common during Jim Crow to turn the other cheek as their family is brutalized is a testament to the power of the myth of nonviolence as master narrative, not an accurate depiction of the civil rights movement.

This paper argues that the dichotomized distinction between violence and non-violence in the history and sociology of the civil rights movement in the American South is not a useful heuristic tool for understanding the ways in which black activists chose among different strategies in their pursuit of justice and change. Rather than looking at violence and non-violence as mutually exclusive opposites, we suggest that an empirically more useful approach is to situate both of these on a continuum within specific social, cultural, and historical contexts. This specific context can be summarized as follows: The particular menace of living an isolated life in the Mississippi Delta, requiring a familiarity with guns and hunting; this sense of isolation required a kind of do-it-yourself approach: if we don’t do it, no one else will; if one wanted to get things done, one needed to go home and get one’s .44 Winchester.

Black folks needed to go places, take their kids to school, etc. In other words, living in the Mississippi Delta country meant a need for movement and travel and the need to protect that ability. Racism was by contrast a strategy of confinement, a way of restricting movement. In this context, armed resistance can be seen as a “toolkit” (Swidler 1986) for opposing this restriction. Armed resistance, in other words, helps make freedom a real possibility.

Such an approach fits neatly with the new historiography of the civil rights movement that privileges the histories of local actors and is beginning to highlight the role of violence not only as perpetrated against Blacks, but also, in the form of armed self-defense, as a key form of action in the movement (Berrey 2009; Berrey 2006; Wood 2006; Hill 2004; Umoja 2003; Woodruff 2003; de Jong 2002; Tyson 1999; Umoja 1999; Dittmer 1995). Further, this contextualized interpretation is consistent with recent directions in sociological theories of agency and action (Emirbayer and Mische 1998).

In suggesting the importance of this approach, we wish to accomplish two things. First of all, this essay makes a sociological contribution to the study of social action: violent and non-violent actions are part of repertoires of action that are used strategically and exist along a continuum, situated as they are in the context of building and defending social communities. How then might this view lead to a reconsideration of our understanding of violent and non-violent actions? It is quite possible and likely that strategies of violence are more closely connected to the building of institutions of civil society than we like to acknowledge. These repertoires of action work to build social solidarity among actors and work to maintain and protect the civic spaces under the care of oppressed groups. Just as subaltern spaces are im-
portant for marginalized groups, as Nancy Fraser has argued, so too are more prominent spaces (Fraser 1992). It may well be that these less-marginalized, more public spaces are more valued and consequently at times are deemed worthy of violent defense.

Non-violent direct action was a powerful tool for galvanizing a nation around the injustices of white supremacy and Jim Crow, but did little when it went without witnesses. On the other hand, self-defense also contributed to social cohesion among group members, but was essential when one was alone. We might say that violent can been seen as having dual functions that both contribute to social solidarity and protect individuals, their families, and their property from harm. Even more strongly, we that non-violent strategies were most effectively employed when keeping Whites on board with the movement was an essential goal. However, struggles outside the main media spotlight needed firstly to maintain and create a cohesive group of local actors. In these instances, concern for white support moved to the background, opening up new opportunities for effective action that included self-defense. That is, the act of making of history for black activists must be seen in a contextual light in which history unfolds as an interplay of forces, never to any group's exact liking yet always through their actions. The prevalence of violence beyond the media spotlights and the absence of a cadre of available and present white supporters, meant local attitudes and needs took priority.

Notes

1It is doubtful that Turnbow was the first to attempt to register in the 20th Century. Ralthus Hayes, no doubt among others, had tried to pay his poll taxes as early as the 1950s. Nonetheless, Turnbow was the first that day and during the confrontational early 1960s.

2"Quiet Prevails Here After Tense Situation: Citizens Cooperate with Law in Preventative Action," Holmes County Herald 5 (4/11/1963), 1. Despite its significance, the day failed to qualify for inclusion in the recently published pictorial commemoration of key events in the county. See Holmes County Chamber of Commerce, There's No Place Like Holmes: Pictures from the Past (Lexington, MS, 2002). Jay Macleod incorrectly states that this was the majority of all Mileston farmers. See Jay Macleod, "Introduction: Racism, Resistance, and the Origins of the Holmes County Movement," in Minds Stayed on Freedom: The Civil Rights Struggle in the Rural South by The Youth of the Rural Organizing and Cultural Center (Boulder, CO: Westview Press 1991), 1-20. In fact as of 1960 there were nearly 100 farm families owning approximately 10,000 acres in Mileston. By 1970, roughly 116 African American owners possessed approximately 7,581 acres.

We do not fully explore these connections in this article; however we are currently working toward such a piece for future publication.

References


Burns, Willie James. 2006. Interview by Spencer D. Wood (Clarksdale, MS).

Carson, Clayborne. 1981. In Struggle: SNCC


Black People of 1960s Holmes Co., Mississippi Organized Their Civil Rights Movement."


United States v. Holmes County, Mississippi. 1967. F.2nd 21548 (Fifth Cir., 24 October).


Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies  
(formerly Kansas Quarterly)  
Volume 41, Number 3  
Winter/December 2010  

"He Was Non-Violent, But My Boys Weren’t": The Hegemonic Myth of Non-Violence and the Construction of a Black Identity .......... 155
by Spencer D. Wood and Ricardo Samuel

Deep Soil (memoir) .................................................. 170
by Laura Riggs

Poems................................................................. 174
by Ray McManus

The Crab (story) ..................................................... 176
by Lyle Roebuck

State Hospital No. 4 for the Insane (poetry) .......................... 184
by Mary Elizabeth Pope

Heaven and Hell Parties: Ministers, Bluesmen, and Black Youth in the Mississippi Delta, 1920-1942 ......................... 186
by Adam Gussow

Delta Sources and Resources ........................................ 204
Longfellow-Evangeline State Historic Site by Longfellow-Evangeline SHS Staff

Reviews ............................................................ 207
Holloway, ed., Other Souths: Diversity & Difference in the U.S. South, Reconstruction to Present, reviewed by Frank Cha
Cooley, Breach, reviewed by Carolyn Hembree
Mesler, The Ballad of the Two Tom Mores, reviewed by Garry Craig Powell
Eagles, The Price of Defiance: James Meredith and the Integration of Ole Miss, reviewed by John A. Kirk
Scott, The Mississippi: A Visual Biography, reviewed by Jack Zibluk
Boisseau, A Sunday in God-Years, reviewed by Ed Madden
Dowdy, Crusades for Freedom: Memphis and the Political Transformation of the American South, reviewed by Angie Maxwell
Johnson and Gane, Dark Rain: A New Orleans Story, reviewed by Guy Lancaster
Woody and Teske, Homefront Arkansas: Arkansans Face Wartime, reviewed by John Hantke
Dillard, Statesmen, Scoundrels, and Eccentrics: A Gallery of Amazing Arkansans, reviewed by Mark M. Carroll