In 1956 *Life* published a five-part series titled "Segregation," which included a two-page genealogical chart of the Reverend and Mrs. William J. Faulkner and their family. In the center of the layout is a color photograph of the couple with pictures of their children and grandchildren below them. Above are smaller black-and-white photographs of their ancestors. Staff writer Robert Wallace explained that what makes this a "typical" Negro family is the "fact that they have an admixture of white stock." He used this "fact" to destabilize the notion of racial purity: "A glance at the faces of the entire group raises this question: Who, or what, is a Negro?" To ask this question in 1956, a highly contested moment in American race relations, locates *Life*'s representation of race in a historically specific, yet politically ambiguous space. What is the magazine saying about race? And why is the family central to the "glance" at racial determination?

With an estimated postwar audience of twenty million, mostly white, middle-class readers, *Life* had great influence in shaping their knowledge about African Americans. Thus, articles and photographs like these were more than reflections, more than just pictures of black experiences in the segregated South. As Wallace's question suggests, an a priori prerogative to define "who or what is a Negro?" and thus to represent race,
structures this series’ depiction of segregation. The shift from who to what foregrounds the objectification at the heart of this classification. “Gazing at” in my title calls attention to the centrality of looking at another in the process of defining race. Indeed, photojournalism’s presumably neutral and objective gaze at race is anything but raceless. Instead, the presumption of neutrality reinforces the racial divisions in American society that depend on visual codes to define differences.

Since Life’s readers during the 1950s were primarily middle-class and white, one could easily argue that this series on segregation reinforced hegemonic white society by defining blacks as the Other. Yet such a generalized claim simplifies the historical complexities of seeing and being seen. We must be careful here not to assume a singular or monolithic gaze. In recent years theorists have argued that since spectators occupy multiple subject positions, looking is framed by and shaped by those social locations. Life photographers used a variety of formal visual strategies, such as point of view and composition, to align the viewer’s gaze with the camera’s and/or the subject’s gaze. The photographic subjects also gaze, both within the composition and in interaction with the camera, which further complicates acts of looking. Moreover, the diversified nature of production at the magazine raises questions about the authorship of the gaze.

Typically, Life did not give credit to, although at times we can speak of an authorial voice, either a writer or photographer with a byline. This series, for instance, identified Robert Wallace as the writer for four of the five installments, but only the fourth segment assigned a photographic byline to Gordon Parks. In addition, it was the editors, not the photographers, at Life who had the power of selection and layout. Finally, photographers rarely participated in writing the text, a crucial part of anchoring meanings to visual images. Therefore, when I discuss “Life’s gaze,” I refer to the final product that readers saw, since this ultimately was the magazine’s statement to its viewers. The concept of multiple gazes, however, enables us to be sensitive to the diverse perspectives embedded in this product. As Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins explained, multiple gazes are “the source of many of the photograph’s contradictions. . . . It is the root of much of the photograph’s dynamism as a cultural object and the place where the analyst can perhaps most productively begin to trace its connection to the wider social world of which it is a part.”

The racial gazes in this series were not merely oppressive ones that constructed an inferior and exploited other, in part because the magazine was critical of racial violence and generally supportive of African Americans’ civil rights. At the same time, in addressing the social and political conditions for African Americans, this series also reproduced normative ideals that in turn reinforced the racial identity of its readers. In other words, whiteness is never absent from this discourse. As Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has argued, race is “a social construction predicated upon the recognition of difference and signifying the simultaneous distinguishing and positioning of groups vis-à-vis one another. More than this, race is a highly contested representation of relations of power between social categories by which individuals are identified and identify themselves.” This chapter takes up the question of multiple gazes and their contradictions to explore how Life represented postwar race relations. In other words, when Life responded to the Civil Rights movement in the postwar period, why did the camera gaze at black and, as we will see, white families? Moreover, what can we learn from this five-part series on segregation about looking as a historical act?

Film and photography scholars have increasingly examined the power of visual apparatuses to construct ways of seeing that reproduce and/or challenge social relations. Feminist film theorists, for example, often understood the gaze as inherently one of male privilege. These scholars relied on psychoanalytic theories to examine how visual apparatuses appeal to male desires through processes of objectification. Recently, critics have made important arguments for complicat-
They argue that a theory of the gaze that relies only on
gender dualism excludes race, sexuality, and other key
social relations from analysis. Linda Williams, for example, writes that while “psychoanalytically derived
models of vision . . . have enabled the analysis of certain
kinds of power—the voyeuristic, phallic power attrib-
uted to a ‘male gaze’—they have sometimes crippled
the understanding of diverse visual pleasures. . . .”

Looking is not always about controlling; there are
times when we look with empathy, shared desires, etc.
For instance, did Life’s readers perceive the degree of
whiteness in the faces of the Faulkner family as rein-
forcing ideals of racial equality and assimilation so
prevalent at the time? Or did it provoke anxieties about
sexuality and racial purity? This ambiguity resonates
with another ambiguity in the genealogical chart. All
of the family members stare out, some smiling, some
reserved, some perhaps even skeptical of the camera.
What did these various looks say to the viewers? Can
we read resistance, or alternatively compliance, in these
smiling or unsmiling faces?

A related problem with psychoanalytic models is the
tendency toward an ahistorical or universalizing theory. Jane Gaines, for instance, has pointed out that “framing
the question of male privilege and viewing pleasure as the
‘right to look’ may help us to rethink film theory along
more materialist lines, considering, for instance, how
some groups have historically had the license to ‘look’
often while other groups have ‘looked’ illicitly.”

In other words, theories of looking need to account for the
historical relations of racial privilege and exclusion that
permit certain gazes (such as the white male gaze at
women of color), while taboos prohibit other gazes. For
instance, a reading of the genealogical chart that relies on
psychoanalytic theory can explain how visual images ac-
tivate racist fears and desires. While drawing on earlier
ways of seeing (such as nineteenth-century racial theories
about physiognomy), Life’s argument about racial mix-
ture took place amid the heated politics of the 1950s Civil
Rights movement. Notably, the text suppresses any dis-
cussion of interracial sexuality or sexual violence. As we
will see, a historical perspective reveals that beyond psy-
chic fears and desires, this suppression promoted racial
equality as part of postwar national ideals of progress at
the expense of examining sexuality in racial violence.

The crucial point is that visual images do not merely
reflect historical conditions but rather mediate those
historical forces to shape social understandings of polit-
ical struggles. In this regard, photographic histori-
ians have pushed debates about the gaze from the psy-
choanalytic to the social. They have explored the power
of the camera’s surveilling gaze to classify social
groups, implicating photography in such processes as
class formation and the colonizing power of the nation
state. As Lutz and Collins wrote, “the crucial role of
photography in the exercise of power lies in its ability
to allow for close study of the other and to promote,
in Foucault’s words the normalizing gaze, a surveil-
ance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to
punish.” When Life turned the camera’s “normalizing
gaze” to classify African Americans, it aligned 1950s as-
simulationist concepts of race with postwar national
ideologies about liberal progress, equality, and domes-
ticity. The series accomplished this effect by focusing
on African American families, such as the Faulkners. In
a magazine that routinely represented news events
through the lens of domesticity, picturing African
Americans as members of nuclear families legitimized
them. Notably, the genealogical chart is reminiscent of
numerous layouts in Life that simulated family photo
albums. In eliding difference, however, this visual at-
tention to African Americans as family members came
at the expense of representations of political activism.

Although Life’s editors tended to promote conser-
vative political positions, especially in Cold War poli-
tics, the magazine accepted African Americans’ de-
mands for legal equality. The five-part series stands out
as a privileged statement on race by the editors, appar-
ent in the extended length of the series, its promotion
on the covers, and lavish use of expensive color plates.
Yet this series offered a complex and often contradic-

G A Z I N G  A T  R A C E  I N  T H E  P A G E S  O F  L I F E  |  1 6 7
tory commentary about Southern race relations in 1956, a crucial moment in the Civil Rights movement when increasingly violent responses to integration by whites challenged major successes like Brown v. Board of Education (1954) and the Montgomery bus boycott (1955). While condemning racial violence, the journalistic pressure to be objective (and perhaps also a desire not to alienate Southern readers) resulted in the inclusion of a sympathetic photo-essay about white segregationists. Pictures of white families in this photo-essay complicated the representation of domesticity and race. Even a surveilling or normalizing gaze is not monolithic, since domesticity normalized both African Americans and whites, but with highly different consequences. Varied images of domesticity expose how multiple gazes both reproduced dominant ideals and functioned as a site of contestation over social and political meanings.

This demonstrates the complex role of “looking” in the politics of contemporary social movements. Increasingly since the postwar period, political activism has become dependent on visual media for publicity. How visual representations depict activism, therefore, is crucial to audiences’ perceptions about social problems and of the people working to alleviating those problems.

As the essays in this volume demonstrate, Life defined the terms of visuality at mid-century. Particularly acute consequences occurred in depictions of postwar race relations, since efforts to represent African Americans within the narrative and visual conventions of the magazine competed with, and at times contradicted, the prevailing social and political agendas.

Civil-rights struggles, including economic boycotts, school and housing integration, and voting-rights efforts, were among the most contentious issues facing postwar Americans. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant have observed, “The postwar period has indeed been a racial crucible. During these decades, new conceptions of racial identity and its meaning, new modes of political organization and confrontation, and new definitions of the state’s role in promoting and achieving ‘equality’ were explored, debated, and fought out on the battlefields of politics.” As one of the most prominent sources of visual news, Life magazine was instrumental in showing white Americans these struggles and defining the terms of debate. The editors explained in the introduction that the 1956 series was produced in response to the national crisis created by the 1954 Supreme Court decision, Brown v. Board of Education. From the outset, then, the editors framed their discussion of segregation around the theme of crisis—one that directly linked civil rights to national concerns. Life mediated, rather than merely reflected, historical relations by focusing on the socioeconomic problems of African Americans, as opposed to white racism, as the crucial challenge affecting blacks.

The representation of history in this series established at the outset the definition of race as a social problem. The first installment discussed the slave trade, economic and social conditions of slavery, and the political conflicts leading up to the Civil War. The photo-essay began with contemporary photographs of West Africa and captions that claimed that these images showed a social world that had not changed in four hundred years. This idealized image of Africa placed the continent and its peoples outside of historical time. The essay then included paintings (commissioned for this series) of an Ashanti court and a coffle of West Indian slaves. While condemning the brutality and exploitation of slavery, the text also pointed out that whites were not the only ones to use slaves and Africans routinely enslaved each other, thus diminishing Euro-Americans accountability. Significantly, in this historical review there is only one picture of a black leader, Booker T. Washington. The discussion of abolitionism featured William Lloyd Garrison, not the many African Americans who fought for the end of slavery or against lynching. Instead, the series presented blacks only as victims of oppression, as the social problem that the (white) nation must resolve.

The second installment referred to the war briefly
and then turned to the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, lynchings, and Jim Crow laws. One especially disturbing photograph of a lynching from 1919 demonstrates how a sympathetic gaze that condemned racial violence nonetheless also reinforced white paternalism. This image shows an African American burning on a pyre in front of a jeering crowd of men looking into the camera. The composition encourages us to gaze first at the foreground, which establishes an intimacy with the subject of the violence. Hence, the camera’s and the viewer’s gaze aligns against the white men who unself-consciously stare back. At the visual level, then, the camera’s gaze challenges the white lynchers’ gaze. The photograph and the accompanying text on lynching, however, remain part of a now-distant past, since there is no discussion of later racial violence or African American struggles for justice. As with the pictures of contemporary Africa, the layout disconnects the viewer’s gaze from historical responsibility and, instead, aligns it with a national gaze at a localized problem.

In the introduction, the editors announced their intention to publish a separate essay on northern racism, but, to my knowledge, this was never done. Instead, civil rights was portrayed as a regional issue that reinforced a common historical myth of Southern racial exceptionalism. After the lynching photograph, the text reported on the 1954 Supreme Court decision, accompanied by a two-page low-angle shot dramatically depicting the facade of the court building (Figure 8.1). Jumping from 1919 to the present, this symbol of American judicial ideals narratively signifies the nation’s progress on race relations. The inscription across the pediment of the building, EQUAL JUSTICE FOR ALL, is clearly readable at the top of the image. On the steps of the building a group of African American clergy kneel in prayer. The caption explains that they are praying “for the speedy integration of public schools.” Associating the clergy with national ideals was consistent with the magazine’s view of African American struggles as part of a steady American progression toward greater democracy.

This image itself is rife with ambiguity, since the monumental scale of the building dwarfs the figures. The camera’s gaze places the viewer in a powerful position, as we look down at these small figures with heads bowed. These figures could be read as non-threatening (because small), obedient (kneeling with bowed heads), or, by contrast, as part of a greater national ideal of freedom and democracy. In this regard, it is significant that the series discussed race relations and segregation only in terms of the South. For instance, Life explained that the legal doctrine of separate but equal “was emphatically the will of the white South, and the other sections of the nation acquiesced. But, in the 1930s the opinion in the north, east and west, a majority of the people, began to change. There-

Figure 8.1. A group of eminent black churchmen outside the U.S. Supreme Court, from “Momentous Reversals in the Court,” Life, September 10, 1956. (Courtesy Edward Clark/TimePix)
The mixture of stocks found in the Faulkner family on the preceding pages is also found in Negro society as a whole. In this cross-section of Chicago professional, business and laboring men, non-Negro characteristics are pronounced. Earnest Minor (top row, left) and Byron Turner (second row from top, third from left) have reddish hair. Thomas Pitt (second row from bottom, extreme left), one of whose grandparents was an American Indian, appears to be more Indian than Negro. Some, such as David Kilgore (second row from top, second from left), have almost pure Negro ancestry. But others, such as Archibald E. Alger (bottom row, second from left), contain so strong an admixture of white blood that, if they were not proud of their Negro heritage and did not choose to live in Negro society, they would be accepted as white.
upon the court too began to change.” Framing segregation as a Southern problem protected the nation from the taint of racism even when the editorial tone was supportive of civil rights.

The next essay in the series is concluded with a full-page color photograph of twenty-five African American men (Figure 8.2).28 Unlike the Faulkner family genealogical chart, here none of the men look at the camera. They all pose in three-quarter profile, and the viewer can now look with impunity since the subjects do not look back. The caption points out “non-Negro” characteristics, such as a man with reddish hair, another who appears to be “more Indian than Negro,” and those with light skin who, “if they were not so proud of their Negro heritage and did not choose to live in Negro society, they would be accepted as white.” Although the writer argues against concepts of racial purity, an essentializing quality persists as we are invited to peer at skin color and other physiognomic characteristics.
Figure B.4. Professor Thornton at a segregated bus station, from "A Professor's Injured Pride," Life, September 24, 1956. (Courtesy Gordon Parks/TimePix)
The layout relies on physical characteristics to construct a racial gaze that once again suggests that we can see race. Indeed, even as the text points out the problems with miscegenation laws that try to determine race through the percentage of blood, this photo-essay reduces race to a biological essence. Here, as elsewhere in the series, Life's gaze at race also addressed whiteness. The captions repeatedly emphasized the closeness or distance of skin color to whiteness. In the discussion of the Faulkners, the text reads, "One branch of the family... has such light skin that it is accepted as white. Many U.S. Negro families have such a branch. Since 1900 several hundred thousand Americans having a portion of Negro ancestry may have 'passed' or become white." The shift from a historical review to this discussion of genealogy and passing appears curious until we consider these images within the context of Life's liberal humanism. Following the photograph of the Supreme Court, the statement "there is no such thing as an exclusively Negro race" reinforces the liberal ideal that race does not matter. If blacks have white and Indian blood, then are we not all the same underneath?

Omi and Winant have contended that the dominant racial theory in the 1940s and 1950s was the ethnicity paradigm. Postwar critics viewed race as a type of ethnicity, relying on a model of European immigration to claim that equal opportunity would eliminate racial distinctions and that individual achievement would enable blacks to overcome unfair barriers. While this vision proved to be problematic, dismantled by other theories of race in the 1960s, in the 1950s civil rights activists used this argument to marshal radical and moderate forces in the fight against inequality in the South. Evaluating blacks in terms of the degree of whiteness in their skin upheld (albeit crudely) this model of ethnicity. Therefore, Life's gaze normalized an ideal of whiteness by which to judge the progress of African Americans.

The fourth installment, which concerns another African American family, demonstrates how this theory shaped the representation of race in this series. Here, the photo-essay presented a narrative of economic progress from Mr. and Mrs. Albert Thornton (Figure 8.3), the sharecropper parents, to a schoolteacher daughter and her husband, a successful but illiterate businessman, to a son who is a university professor (Figure 8.4). Life's writer, Robert Wallace, stated, however, that further progress had been halted because of "restraints." Using this euphemism for segregation, he explained that economic restraints against professor Thornton "are negligible, but social restraints remain strong... while some restraints are removed because he is an above-average citizen, remaining restraints are more mounting to him, for the same reason." Sequential photographs reinforced Wallace's claim of progress by moving from a picture of sharecroppers through pictures of individual families of varying economic status to the final spread of the professor and his wife, which included a photograph of them in formal attire at a university function. These images narrow the visual focus to an upwardly mobile black family working within the system but constrained by unfair barriers. The photo-essay's focus on individualism and the nuclear family offered a problematic and limiting representation of race that denied the politics of racial difference and the importance of community.

A theory of multiple gazes enables us to consider who is looking at whom and the racial consequences of that looking. What did it mean when white readers examined the faces of a black family to gauge their degrees of whiteness, or looked down on those small figures of the clergy? Did they associate the blacks in these photos with subordinate (smaller) status, or did they see them as ordinary citizens? Amid escalating postwar tensions over integration, Life supported the Supreme Court decision and advocated integration as the law. Yet, competing ideals appeared in the series because the magazine's address to its white readers often relied on a racial ideology at odds with its own critique of segregation.

Whiteness was not a stable category in this series (or
elsewhere for that matter). Instead, contradictions in these photo-essays spoke to social anxieties about race and conflicts over ideals of whiteness. Life's recurring themes of normalcy and deviance depended on concepts of gender, sexuality, and domesticity that demonstrate the historically contested nature of racial ideologies. The magazine's promotion of color-blind and power-evasive rhetorics of race helped to shape the postwar national imagination about race and racial conflict, creating a visual construct that continues to dominate popular debates today. Contemporary debates over affirmative action, for instance, still revolve around concepts of progress, merit, and color blindness. Assessments of merit or progress in turn have their historical (and visual) antecedents in the postwar period.

Brown v. Board of Education was a cataclysmic decision that provoked violent responses from white segregationists who no longer felt they had other forms of legal redress. In news stories in the same issues as the special series, Life reported on Southern whites' opposition to integrating public schools. The editorial tone condemned the lawlessness of white segregationists and praised those whites whose belief in the law took precedence over their antipathy to integration.

This viewpoint is most apparent in the third series installment, "The Voices of the White South," which featured five white segregationists who articulated their racist anxieties, especially fears about miscegenation. In the magazine's attempt to be fair and objective, the essay gave voice to these segregationists without commentary. It featured white men from different classes (a mayor, a sharecropper, a mechanic, an office worker, and an owner of a plantation) who all supported segregation. While this strategy acknowledged economic differences, it undermined any potential for class solidarity between blacks and whites or any critique of capitalism by depicting different individuals who held the same beliefs about segregation. This portrayal normalized racism as beliefs shared by people from different walks of life.

The essay's photographs depicted a benevolent South where the two races lived in harmonious small towns. One spread featured the mayor of Greenville, South Carolina, who supported "equalization," not integration. In the spread there is a picture of a swimming pool full of African Americans having a good time, a pool that the mayor built "for them." These images imply a caring white paternalism, and, according to the mayor, there is "no race trouble here, and won't be, unless an agitator comes in and stirs things up."

The absence of photographs of the active and ongoing struggles against segregation within African American communities left unquestioned this claim that outsiders would disrupt otherwise harmonious relations. Moreover, this reference to outsiders who threaten social stability reminded readers of thier concurrent anticommunist fears.

The layout featuring the plantation owner offered the most stereotypical images of the Old South. One picture shows the owner and his wife walking down a grand staircase while dressed in formal clothing. Another photograph depicts the owner supervising his workers in the fields. The owner's back is to the camera in the foreground, so that the viewer looks with him into the background at the black field hands. Yet this picture raises questions about how the spectator perceives the politics of the image. In 1956, did viewers gaze sympathetically with the owner, seeing his economic prosperity and accepting the text's explanation of his benevolent concern for his workers' health? Or did they remember the earlier picture of the lynching and associate the workers picking cotton with slave practices? Clearly, we cannot answer this question, but just as we can envision multiple readings, so too would readers in 1956 bring various political perspectives to their viewing of this series. Since viewing practices do not isolate individual pictures or photo-essays, these competing images of Southern race relations provide ambiguous, and often contradictory, messages about race and segregation.

In general, the editorial agenda of the series appears critical of the inequalities of Southern segregation. Be-
cause the editors in this series relied on representation conventions popular in the magazine, many of the photographs depict scenes familiar to its readers. This familiarity at times legitimized a social politics at odds with the magazine’s critique of Jim Crow. With the exception of the unmarried mayor, each story included a family picture. Domestic ideology pervaded postwar culture, including *Life* magazine, which routinely turned to white middle-class families to represent social and national concerns. Pictures of families in the third installment placed white segregationists within a wider national ideal of family values. This, in conjunction with comments that described these men as “thoughtful, pious gentlefolk—who are still in favor of segregation,” constructed racial conflicts as differences of opinion. For instance, the layout about the sharecropper included several pictures of family members working on the tobacco farm. According to the text, the white family’s hard work had paid off in the form of a recently purchased harvester, depicted in a full-page photograph. Even recreation was wholesome, as the farmer was shown relaxing in a country store and drinking a soda. Such images were familiar and accepted norms of social behavior. The narrative underscored the connections between these social norms and whiteness through the sharecropper’s comparison of his family’s hard work with blacks who did not work as hard and “just don’t care.”

Also reinforcing the normative whiteness of socially approved behavior is a two-page layout featuring pictures of African American deviance. Beginning with a picture of black couples dancing in a juke joint, the narrative proceeds to a street brawl broken up by white police, and a couple being charged with a domestic dispute. Such transgressive behavior and the presence of white policemen visually contrast with the white families on the previous pages. The final photograph in this two-page spread depicts a white girl with her back to the camera looking at a chain gang of black prisoners. The composition encourages the viewer to look with the female at the black male criminals.

The complex gazes here—the white girl looking at the chain gang, the camera looking at the girl, the viewer’s gaze at the “transgressive behavior”—play out common notions about race and sexuality, notably myths about dangerous black men who threaten white women. Such images reinforced the concerns expressed by white segregationists about integration, namely the fear of miscegenation. As Wallace wrote, millions of Southerners feel that “the end of segregation will soon lead to intermarriage between white and Negro on a large scale.” One of the men interviewed “calls it amalgamation and dreads it.” Fear of miscegenation, in turn, connected anxieties about whiteness to nationhood. At the end of this essay, Wallace quoted Governor Herman Talmadge of Georgia: “Certainly history shows that nations composed of a mongrel race lose their strength and become weak, lazy and indifferent. They become easy prey to outside nations. And isn’t that just exactly what the Communists want to happen to the United States?” Talmadge’s anti-Communist rhetoric vividly articulates the centrality of racial myths to postwar national ideologies. Moreover, the historical resonance of this rhetoric calls attention to the persistence of these mythologies about racial deviance. For instance, current debates about individual rights and government responsibility frequently blame black women on welfare for their financial predicaments.

Talmadge’s fears of a mongrel race also articulate the presence of sexuality in discursive struggles around race and nation. Here we need to return to the genealogical chart and the photograph of African American men (see Figure 8.2) in the second installment. The editors used these photographs to discredit laws against miscegenation. Yet, the text perpetuates silences on the history of sexual violence against black women, as well as the history of intimate interracial relations, by never discussing how this blood became mixed. Instead, the writer voices these anxieties in terms of marriage. Domesticity, which was so much at the heart of *Life*’s representation of the nation, here links the sexual threat to family and ultimately national.
ideals. By implication, miscegenation threatened to taint or contaminate the whiteness at the heart of popular visions of middle-class domesticity. Such anxieties spoke to the interrelated ideals of whiteness, family, and nationhood.

Such images of domesticity demonstrate that race and gender are never isolated or distinct categories but rather always intersect each other. As Higginbotham has argued, “in societies where racial demarcation is endemic to their sociocultural fabric and heritage . . . gender identity is inextricably linked to and even determined by racial identity.” Given the historical meanings of domesticity in the postwar period, it is significant that Life’s fourth installment turned to family imagery to represent African Americans’ experiences of segregation. Equally important, the photographer for this photo-essay, Gordon Parks, was the only photographer in the series to receive a byline. The appearance of a byline signaled Parks’s recognized status in the 1950s and the privileging of his vision by the magazine. Although some of Parks’s photographs conformed to domestic ideals prevalent throughout the magazine, in significant ways this photo-essay differed from others in the series. In our discussion, then, we
also need to consider the photographer’s gaze, which was, at least here, distinct from, if not a challenge to, *Life*’s vision of racial progress.

The essay opens with a full-page photograph of an elderly couple, Mrs. and Mrs. Albert Thornton, seated on a sofa staring directly at the camera (see Figure 8.3). Can we read resistance in their gaze back at the camera? By confronting the viewer, could this picture confront racist ideologies or did the other pictures in the series, as well as the dominant emphasis on white America in this magazine, overwhelm such challenges? While we cannot know what individual viewers thought, we can explore the significance of the Thorntons’ gaze, and Parks’s gaze at them, within the cultural and social politics of the time period.

Photographing the Thorntons as a nuclear family enables them to look like the families *Life*’s readers routinely saw in the magazine. Only one small photograph shows the large Thornton family, and even here no extended family beyond children and grandchildren appeared. Instead, in a series of two-page stories, the essay featured the Thorntons’ children as individual nuclear families. Thus, the layout presents only a heterosexual, nuclear family norm for this African American family, at the expense of other family and community relationships. This includes the first picture of Mr. and Mrs. Thornton, which conforms to traditions of family portraiture and to that extent is contained by the genre, despite the potential resistance of their gaze.

Only two of the Thornton photographs signal the importance of community relations for African Americans. One picture depicts a girl being helped by a male passerby while she drinks at a water fountain, with two other women looking on as they walk past. Whether Parks only shot a few such photographs or the editors decided to use only the pictures of nuclear families, the published photo-essay includes just this photograph and a small picture of a church congregation to represent community. This is a significant omission since the Civil Rights movement depended so much on the strengths of the community. Instead of looking at community to tell the story of black responses to racism, *Life* turns to the family to legitimize its support for African Americans’ struggles. In some ways, then, this photo-essay, like the series, depends on white models of domesticity to construct “who or what is a Negro.” These family pictures demonstrate the benefits of a historical rather than a psychoanalytic analysis. The tendency in psychoanalytic theory toward universal claims runs the danger of imposing white middle-class family ideals onto other types of family arrangements. Instead, this gaze at the Thorntons mobilized postwar ideals of (white) domesticity. Domesticity legitimized this African American family, but not in some kind of universalized notion of family; rather, meanings are activated within the context of a postwar hegemonic discourse that ignored cultural differences.

Even as the photo-essay conforms in some ways to *Life*’s conventions of focusing on individual families, however, another vision of race appears. As Stuart Hall has written, “It would be . . . wrong to read these portraits as exclusively the result of the imposition of codes of formal (white) portrait photography on an alien (black) subject, for that simplification would be precisely to collude, however, unconsciously, with the construction of [blacks] as objects, always ‘outside time,’ ‘outside history.’” The Thornton’s unsmiling, stern faces, as well as their age and the poverty of their surroundings could challenge the ideals of domesticity they were meant to encode. There are also other pictures in this photo-essay that more overtly destabilize the social norms popularized in the magazine.

Like the white girl looking at the chain gang, two photographs in this photo-essay use a similar composition of a foreground figure whose back to the camera directs the viewer’s gaze to the background. Parks’s images, however, challenge assumptions about a monolithic gaze of power. In both pictures, the subjects of the camera’s gaze, African Americans, look at signs of whiteness. The first depicts a black woman and her
young granddaughter window shopping (Figure 8.5). The granddaughter leans on the glass as she peers at the white female mannequins, which signify popular, commercial ideals of femininity. While the girl’s leaning body suggests desire for the image and the products they are selling, her gaze and the window separating her from the mannequins emphatically underlines racial differences. Parks’s photograph of exclusion turns this white ideal of femininity, protected so fiercely in Southern culture, into a symbol of Jim Crow. Parks relies on gender here to question social ideals of whiteness.

On the page opposite this picture, another photograph shows six African American children with their backs to the camera looking through a chain-link fence at a park with amusement rides (Figure 8.6). The caption reminds the viewer that these children can only watch the white children at the playground. These images of racial difference and exclusion encode a different gaze than the plantation owner or the white girl’s gaze at a chain gang. While it is a gaze by the powerless at that from which they are excluded, Parks’s gaze and the images themselves are not powerless. Parks challenges the seemingly stable ideology of domesticity by linking images of children playing or a grandmother and granddaughter to the hard truth of segregation. Again, a historical reading helps us to move beyond a generalized statement about the gaze of the powerless who confront oppressive institutions. In this photo-essay, Parks draws on postwar domestic ideals, espe-
cially ideals of femininity and childhood innocence, to portray the effects of segregation. This strategy in turn demonstrates that domesticity is not monolithic or universal, but rather a historical construct subject to challenges and reappropriations.

Although Parks’s photographs directly confront racial barriers, neither here nor elsewhere in the series does Life include specific images of African American activism. This absence is equally apparent in the fifth and final installment. The series ends not with more photographs, but with a lengthy roundtable discussion between white Christian ministers debating whether the church should participate actively in integration efforts. By concluding with ministers, not civil-rights activists, Life avoided a discussion of political and legal solutions, and instead framed the problem of segregation as a moral issue. The ministers agree that nowhere does the Bible condone segregation. Instead, they debate whether or not the church has a moral obligation to participate in efforts to change race relations. Some ministers emphatically insist that this is their moral duty, while others argue that Southerners are making changes, and that any efforts to hurry along the process will damage these developments. Like the rest of the series, this roundtable presented blacks as the problem, but these ministers made it a moral dilemma. By giving equal weight to both sides, as in earlier photo-essays, the roundtable legitimized segregation as a debatable issue.

Life’s special series on postwar race relations illustrates important theoretical issues about acts of looking. How the camera visualizes the problem, who the viewer gazes at, and the varied meanings of those gazes affect how we explore the politics of representation. When scholars discuss a racial gaze, they should consider that this gaze is also always about sexuality, gender, national ideals, class, and other forms of power. Gazes convey multiple meanings with varied, unstable, and often unpredictable effects. Rather than conclude that photographs are open to infinite interpretations, however, a historical perspective reveals that gazes hold particular meanings within their specific social, cultural, and political contexts.

Life’s series on segregation was just as much about liberalism, nationalism, and democracy, as it was about family, sexuality, and whiteness. Whiteness was implicated not only through what whites bestow on or do to blacks, but also through the family, gender, and sexual norms promoted throughout the magazine. Life’s representation of race relations encoded social and political ideals that legitimated blacks within a national ideal in problematic ways and also limited readers’ knowledge about African American families, communities, and activism. As Parks’s photographs demonstrate, however, this was not a monolithic, stable, or uniform message but one open to critique and revision through alternative ways of seeing race. These varied ways of seeing were tremendously influential in shaping Life’s readers’ knowledge about African Americans, race relations, segregation, and the struggle for civil rights during the postwar period.

Life’s complex visual statements about race depended not only on silences about African American activism and past instances of sexual violence, but also on the presence of certain legitimizing discourses such as domesticity. The magazine’s series on segregation in turn had important social and political consequences for later understandings of race relations. Life’s implication that nuclear families were at the heart of civil rights produced ways of seeing that ultimately condemned the worst practices of Jim Crow. However, this visual legacy has also severely circumscribed racial discourses. Most notably, devaluations of African American families that fail to resemble this progressive ideal have maintained a persistent presence in political discourse from the 1965 Moynihan Report to recent caricatures of welfare queens. These racialized images of domestic deviance owe much to visual codifications of race relations such as those in Life’s series on the segregated South of the 1950s.
NOTES

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2. See N. W. Ayer and Son’s Directory: Newspapers and Periodicals (Philadelphia: N. W. Ayer and Son, annual volumes) for circulation rates. Throughout the magazine’s history, Life commissioned demographic and marketing studies to determine the composition and consumption habits of its readership. These studies clearly profile the racial and class status of its readers. See, for example, Life Study of Consumer Expenditures, conducted for Life by Alfred Politz Research (New York: Time, 1957).


4. Life typically reserved bylines for lengthy photo-essays by famous photographers. Even then, photographers had difficulties with the magazine about credit. For a discussion of this issue, see Vicki Goldberg, Margaret Bourke-White: A Biography (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 194–95.


14. Consider, for instance, the 1955 lynching case of Emmett Till, in which Till’s alleged sexual action toward a white woman was the source of provocation for this violence. For an in-depth discussion of this case, see Stephen Whitfield, A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till (New York: Free Press, 1988).

15. Williams, “Feminist Film Theory,” 19, similarly cautions film studies against relying on sociological perspectives that read texts as reflecting isolated political and historical referents. She argues that film analyses need “to account for the complex ways in which a text mediates, rather than simply reflects, history.”


17. Lutz and Collins, Reading National Geographic, 192.

18. Life used this format from the first issue, 23 November 1936, in a photo-essay about Franklin D. Roosevelt.

19. See Todd Gitlin, The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the
23. Ibid., 102.
25. I thank Andrea Volpe for this insight.
29. Ibid., 106.
31. Ibid., 90.
33. Ibid., 108.
36. Ibid., 109.
39. Ibid., 119.
42. For instance, a year before Life’s special series, African Americans in Montgomery, Alabama, worked together as a community, carpooling, walking in groups to work, and resisting coercive pressure in order to sustain the boycott. See Aldon D. Morris, The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change (New York: Free Press, 1984), especially 40–63.
44. Hall, “Reconstruction Work,” 156.