

**Historical Moments of Police  
Violence Series  
- Volume 1 -  
The Mississippi Papers**



## ABOUT THIS SERIES

In the last few months of 2011 into early 2012, the issue of police violence once again burst into the mainstream with the treatment of Occupy protesters.

While we were appalled at the violence directed at peaceful protesters by law enforcement, we were also dismayed that this phenomenon was treated as a novel one. The incidents were discussed in a way that was divorced from historical context. After all, the black and white images of police dogs being unleashed on peaceful protesters during the black freedom movement of the 1950s and 60s would not have been alien to the young people who were abused by law enforcement in New York and Oakland at the Occupy protests. Police violence is unfortunately not new.

In an attempt to inject some historical memory into the current considerations of police violence, Project NIA and the Chicago Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) Teaching Collective decided to develop a series of pamphlets to inform and educate the broader public about the longstanding tradition of oppressive policing toward marginalized populations (including some activists and organizers).

This series titled "Historical Moments of Policing, Violence & Resistance" features pamphlets on various topics including: Oscar Grant, the Mississippi Black Papers, Slave Patrols, the Young Lords, the 1968 Democratic Convention, the Danzinger Bridge Shootings, Black Student Protests on College Campuses, Timothy Thomas, Resistance to Police Violence in Harlem, and the 1937 Memorial Day Massacre, among others.

The pamphlets are available for free downloading at <http://policeviolence.wordpress.com>. Please spread the word about the availability of these publications.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

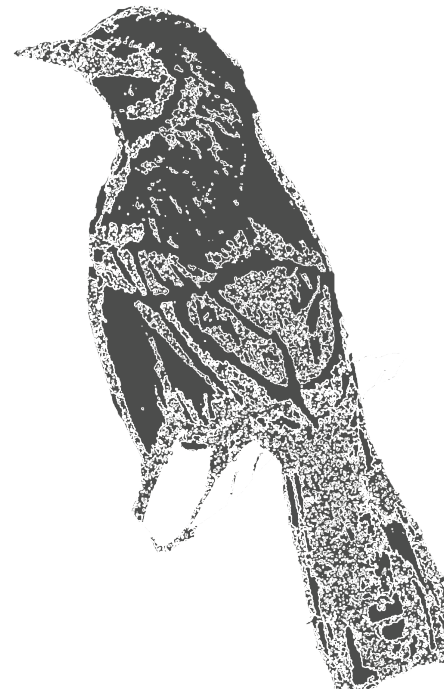
Every single person who worked on this series volunteered his or her time to this effort. We are grateful beyond words for your support and for your talents.

Special thanks to the following people who have contributed to making this project possible:

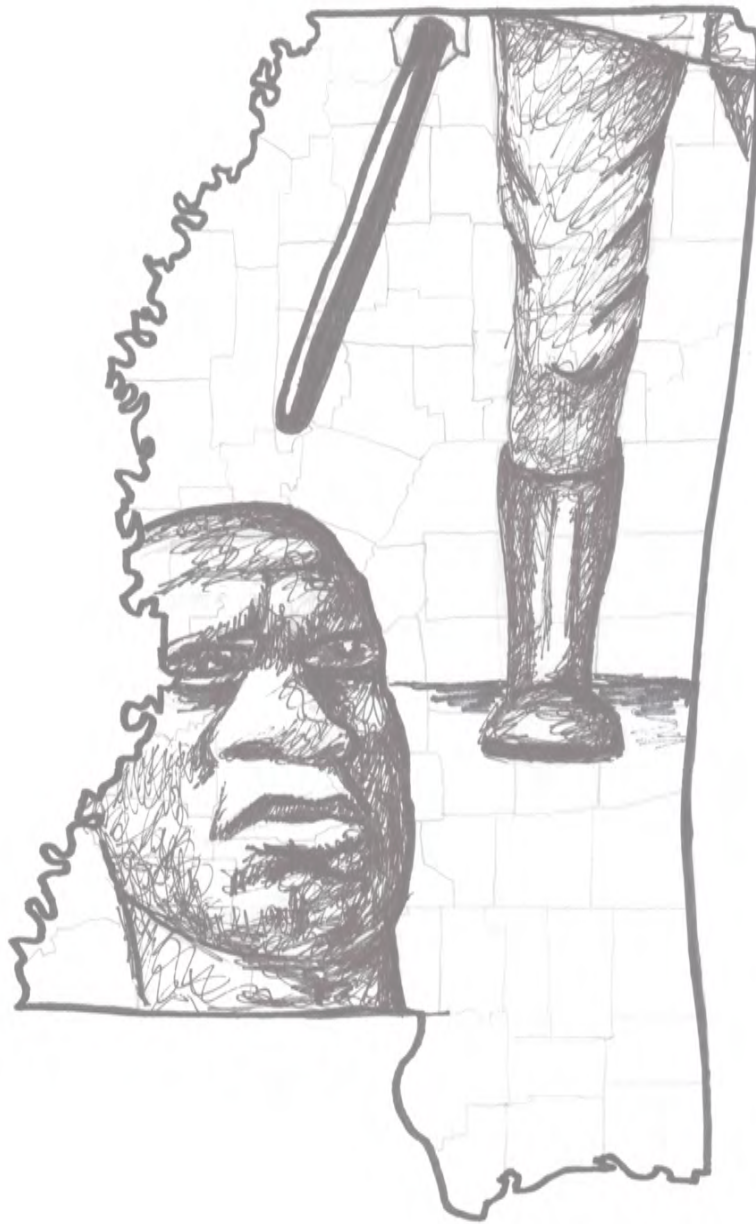
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**Editors:** Mariame Kaba, Laura Mintz, Emily Pineda, Gina Tarullo

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## **THE MISSISSIPPI BLACK PAPERS: Testimonials of Police Violence in the South**

Edited by Mariame Kaba

Art and Layout by Mauricio Pineda

In the mid-1960s, the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) collected statements and testimonials in support of a lawsuit against Sheriff Lawrence A. Rainey and other state officials in Mississippi. The goal was to convince the Federal government to appoint special commissioners who would prevent the ongoing and lethal violence against citizens of the state. Ultimately, the United States Court of Appeals in the Fifth Circuit agreed to hear the case.

Fifty-seven of the 257 statements and affidavits that were collected by COFO were published in a book titled "The Mississippi Black Papers" in 1965. The book is currently out of print but these stories are important historical artifacts and we believe that they deserve to be reanimated for the 21st century.

Here is just one example of the kinds of stories that were shared:

## COAHOMA COUNTY

I am a Negro, 21 years old.

On February 6, 1962, when I was 19, I was walking with a young man down a Clarksdale street when Clarksdale police officers \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ stopped us and accused me of having been involved in a theft. I was taken to jail by the officers and they forced me to unclthe and lie on my back.

One of the officers beat me between my legs with a belt. A few minutes later, the other officer began to beat me across my naked breasts.

**SIGNED: Bessie Turner**



What comes across clearly in these testimonials is the brutality of the police and the state terrorism that was deployed primarily against the black citizens of Mississippi. By the time the Mississippi Papers were published in 1965, Medgar Evers had been gunned down in Jackson, Mississippi by Byron De La Beckwith (a member of the White Citizen's Council), Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney had been lynched near Philadelphia, Mississippi, and the 1964 Freedom Summer had come and gone. Mississippi was a hotbed of racism and social unrest. The following six statements and affidavits offer more insight into this reality and point to the role that the police played in instigating and perpetuating violence.





### COAHAMA COUNTY

I am 16 years of age and was born in San Francisco, California. I presently reside in Clarksdale, together with my grandmother, Mrs. Beatrice Tanner. I have been a resident of Clarksdale for the last 15 years. My parents live in San Francisco. I also attend Clarksdale Agricultural High School.

On or about April 15, 1963, at approximately 7 p.m., I was walking alone, along Sunflower Avenue, Clarksdale, on my way home from Leon's Department Store, where I was working, when I was stopped by a Clarksdale police officer by the name of A<sup>1</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. He told me to get into his car, which I did. He then started driving to city hall. En route he said that some "boy" had told him that I had stolen a car. This I denied. He then told me, "If you don't tell me the truth, I'll kill you." I then told him that in that event he would have to kill me.

<sup>1</sup>"Each of these alphabetized members of the cast, a police officer – often the sheriff or police chief – of the town in which the incident described took place, has been protected from specific identification only because of the high costs of defending libel suits in Mississippi." Source: Publisher's Note, April 1965.





When we reached the jail, at Clarksdale City Hall, my shirt was torn off by one of five policemen, including B \_\_\_\_\_ C \_\_\_\_\_ and D \_\_\_\_\_. I was then told to get out of my clothes, which I did. While I was naked the same five police officers kicked, slapped, and punched me with their hands and feet. This beating lasted 35-40 minutes. I was hit in my face, buttocks, legs, and ear. Officer B \_\_\_\_\_ cuffed me on the left ear with the palm of his hand. When he pulled his hand away from my ear, it immediately began to ache. As a result of that beating and cuffing my left ear still periodically aches. It feels as if I can breathe through that ear, and water makes it ache. I never had that trouble before the aforementioned beating. I have not been to a doctor.



After the beating I was put into a cell. About 30 minutes later Officer B \_\_\_\_\_ came back and forced me to sign some papers called an "affidavit," which I didn't read. I spent the rest of the night in jail. The next week I was taken to city court. I had been in jail up until then with no visitors and no lawyer. At the court, I pleaded guilty to possessing a stolen car, a 1955 Chevrolet. Three other boys, Sonny, Roosevelt, and June were also convicted. (I was and am still innocent of the charge. I had been in said car only once, and that was about two days before the aforementioned arrest, and that was when Sonny drove the aforementioned car over to my house and said: "Look what my mother bought me." I then rode in the car with Sonny for

riding, Sonny  
Jefferson

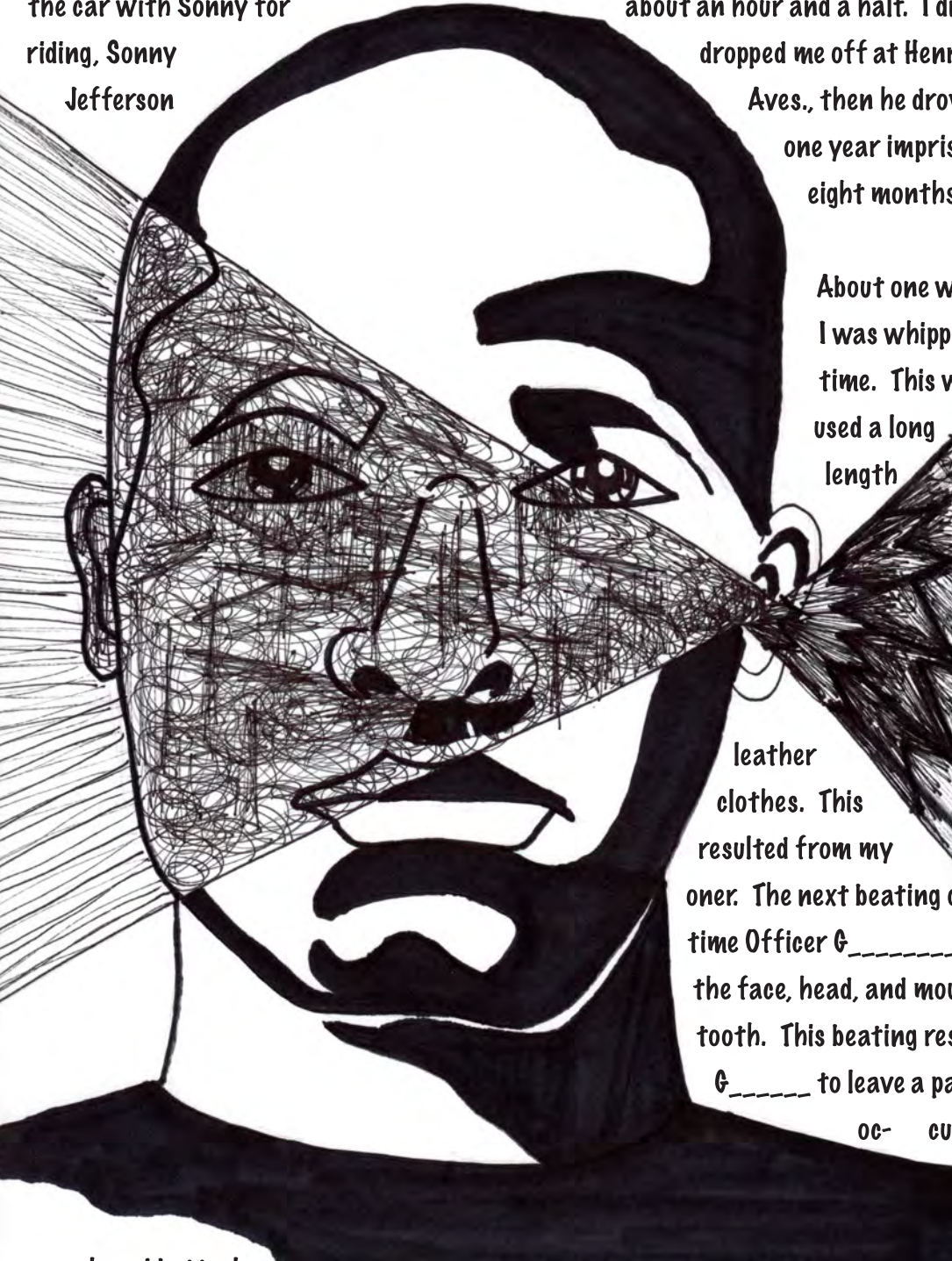
about an hour and a half. I did not know that it was stolen. After dropped me off at Henry Lawrence's grocery store, Poplar and Aves., then he drove off with the car.) I was sentenced to one year imprisonment and \$500 fine and served eight months.

About one week after I began serving my sentence I was whipped, beaten, and assaulted a second time. This was done by Police Officer E \_\_\_\_\_. He used a long leather strap about three feet in length and whipped me on the buttocks.

This beating lasted about 15 minutes. The next beating came about a month later and was administered by Police Officer E \_\_\_\_\_ and Police Officer F \_\_\_\_\_ with the aforementioned strap on my buttocks with no beating lasted about 10 minutes and refusal to inform on another pris-

oner. The next beating occurred about two weeks later. This time Officer G \_\_\_\_\_ punched me with his fists in and about the face, head, and mouth. He broke my left upper front tooth. This beating resulted from my having asked Officer G \_\_\_\_\_ to leave a particular door open. The last beating oc-

ccurred about two months later, about 8:30 p.m. Officer E \_\_\_\_\_ again whipped me with a leather strap on for about 15 minutes. He



my neck and buttocks had accused me of "rambling" through the mayor's office.

In September 1963, I reported the above incidents to the Clarksdale FBI in person.

**SIGNED: Larry Johnson**



**WE HAVE RIGHTS**

End  
Police  
BRUTALITY

WE  
SUPPORT  
SUSPENDED  
SENTENCES!

SEGREGATION  
IS  
MORALLY  
WRONG!

**COAHOMA COUNTY**

On July 30, 1963, at approximately 3 p.m., I was in the presence of nine other adult Negro citizens arrested by an unidentified police officer, and a few minutes later re-arrested by Clarksdale Police Officer A \_\_\_\_\_. At the time of our arrest we were wearing anti-segregation signs and orderly moving down Sharkely Avenue toward the Clarksdale City Hall. The unidentified police officer who first placed us under arrest did not ask us if we had a permit to parade nor did he inform us to what we were being charged with. In our second encounter, with Police Officer A \_\_\_\_\_ we were asked if we had a permit to parade. We told the officer we did not have a permit and that the request for a permit had been denied.

WE  
SUPPORT  
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End  
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WRONG!



We were taken to the  
Clarksdale City Jail and charged with "parading without a permit."

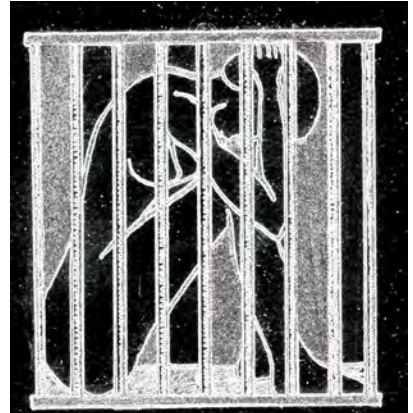
Between 20-25 female demonstrators were placed in a 9 by 9 cell  
which I feel would normally house six or eight persons. We were not  
given any food on this date of our arrest. The following day, July 31,  
1963, we were served for breakfast one spoonful of cold grits with  
no salt and one slice of cold bread. A group of young female demon-  
strators were taken out of the cell, leaving approximately eight of us  
in the cell.

Prior to the removing of the young demon-  
strators from the cell we had suffered  
severe discomfort due to the overcrowded  
conditions and excessive heat. On the night  
of July 31st, the conditions became worse as  
the heat was turned on. My hair was as if  
it had been washed, and sweat rolled down  
my face like rain.

Different police officers would come by at differ-  
ent times and call us ugly names like "nigger,"  
"bitch," "cow," etc. Police officers were always  
violating our privacy by peeping in the cell  
saying, "Man, if we could get in there. Nigger  
women have some good  
-----."

On August 1, 1963, we  
were tried and  
convicted of "parading  
without a permit" and  
sentenced to thirty days  
in jail plus a \$101 fine.

Even though I was not in the court at the time of the trial I understand that a plea of nolo contendere was entered for  
me by my attorney, R. Jess Brown, of Jackson, Mississippi. I had understood this plea to be the legal position of our  
group prior to my participation in the peaceful protest.



On the evening of August 1, 1963, I requested a couple of aspirins because I was feeling very ill because of the excessive heat and poor food. I was told by a police officer, "If niggers were not so hot-headed they would not be in here." I was finally given the aspirins.

On August 2, 1963, at approximately 10 in the morning, Officer A\_\_\_\_\_ came to our cell and asked us if we thought this was a hotel, that we had to work. We were made to work in the heat of the day cutting grass with sling blades and hoes in the oilmill area of town. We were ordered to work under the threat that if we did not work we would be taken back to the cell and the heat would be turned on again. I became very ill because of the excessive heat and the poor food. I was taken back to the city jail and treated by the jail doctor despite the fact that I had asked to be treated by my own doctor. I understood there were rumors that I had suffered a heat stroke.





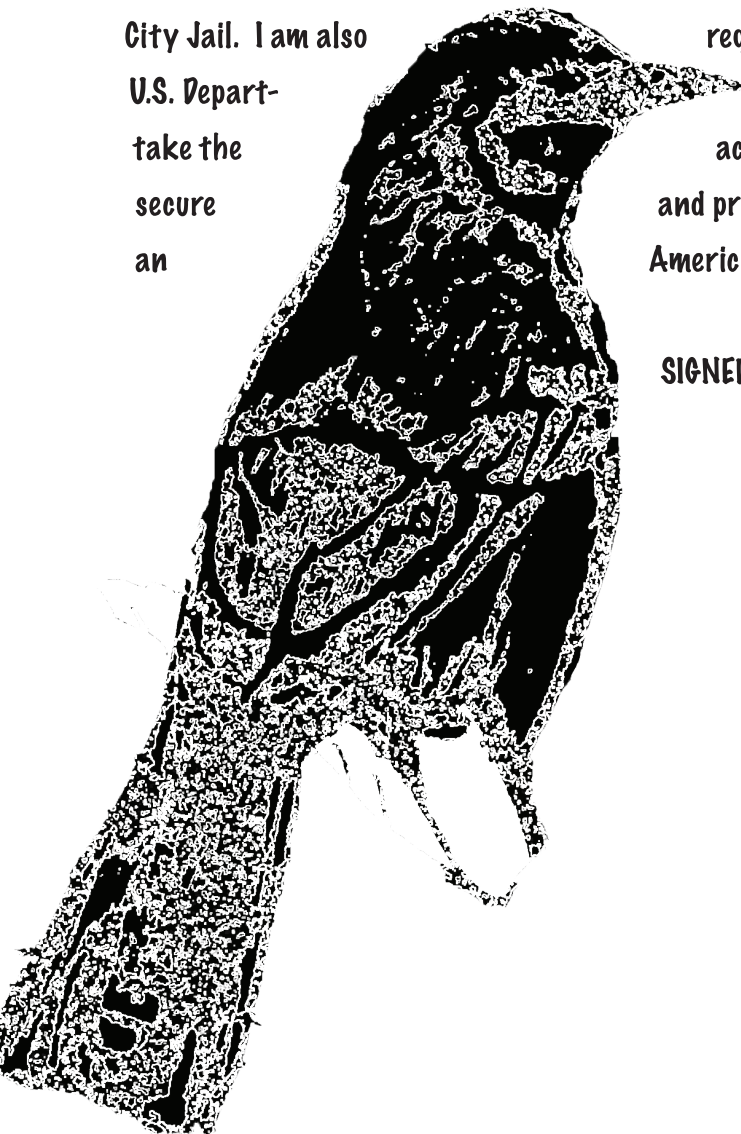
On August 3, 1963, at approximately 5:30 in the evening I was released from the city jail by posting a \$400 bond. I was immediately taken to the Sarah Brown Memorial Hospital at Mound Bayou, Mississippi, where I remained for one week.

I am asking the NAACP and its legal staff to represent me in filing whatever legal action that may be necessary to punish those who have violated my rights while I was a prisoner in the Clarksdale

City Jail. I am also  
U.S. Department  
take the  
secure  
an

requesting that the  
Department of Justice  
actions necessary to  
and protect my rights as  
American citizen.

SIGNED: Odessa Brooks.

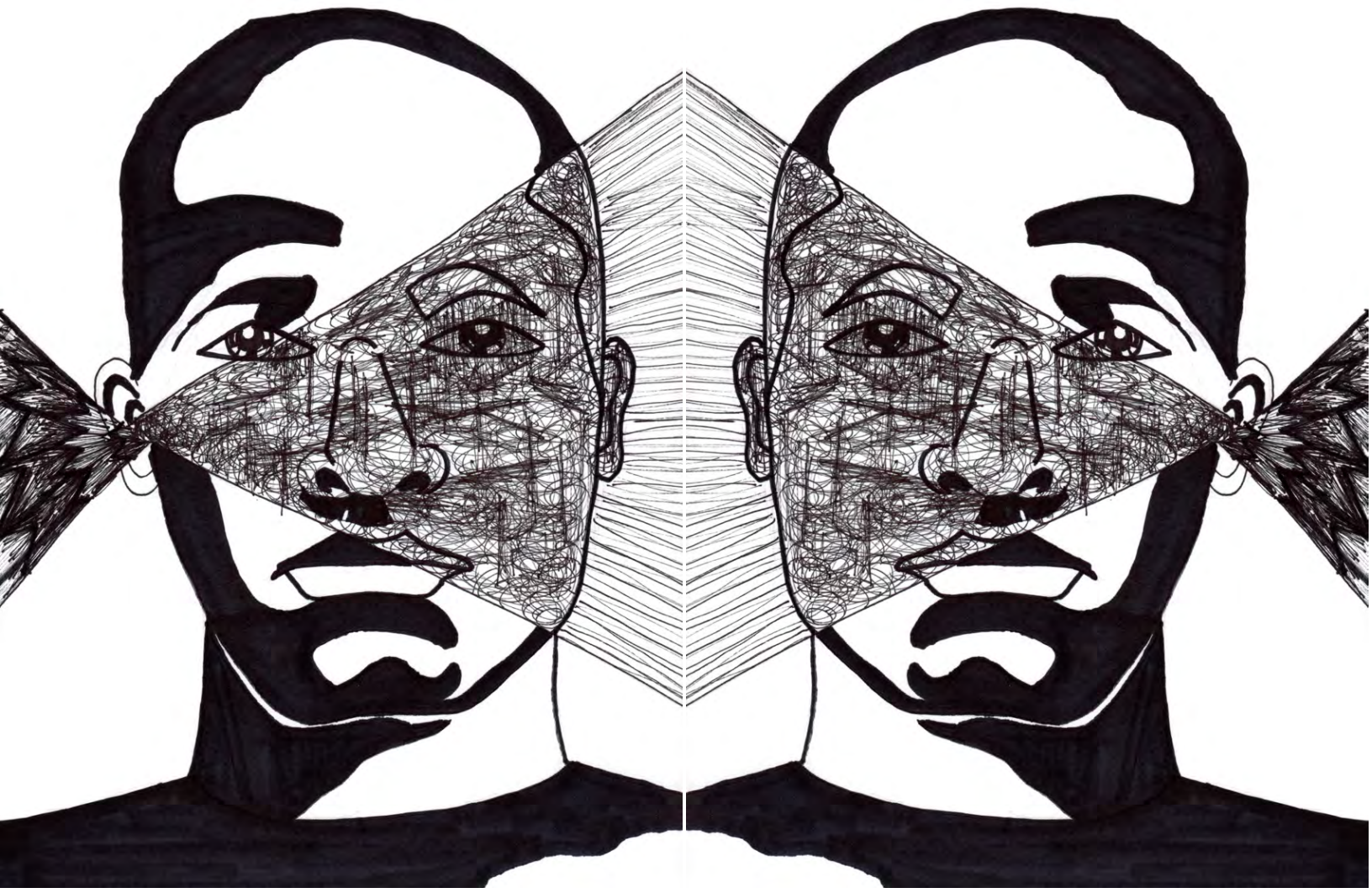




## COAHOMA COUNTY

I am 58 years old, a Negro, and a resident of Clarksdale, Mississippi.

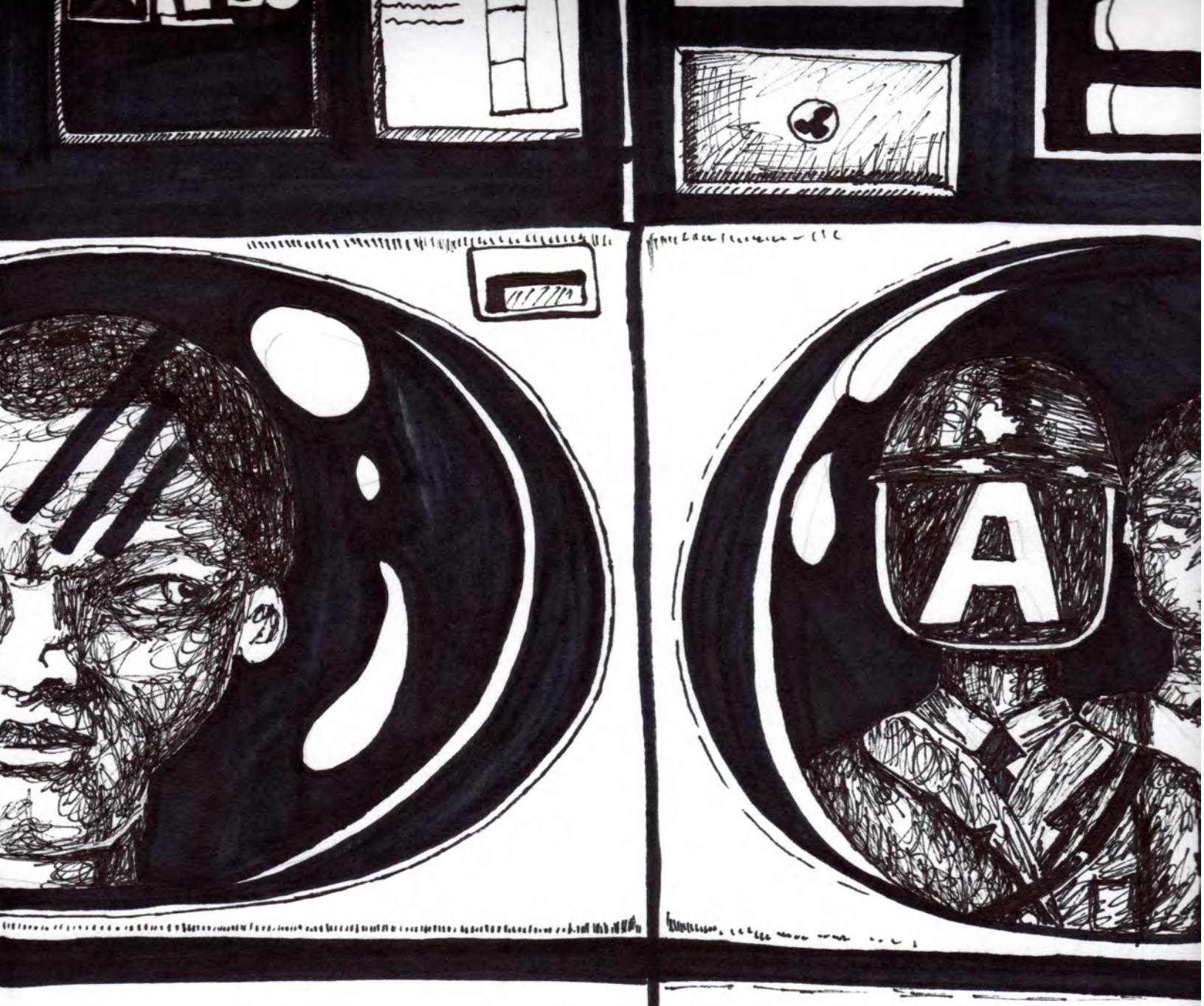
At about 3 p.m. on Wednesday, July 8, 1964, I parked my car on Tallahatchie Ave. to get something to eat. While I was gone, a Negro parked a dump truck and then backed out, rubbing a white woman's car. The police came along and said that I had done it. I told them I didn't do it. "I swear I didn't do it." They said, "Stop swearing, you done it all right." Then they took me to city hall and locked me up. A small, light-haired policeman, whose name I don't know but who I would recognize from a picture, hit me on the side of my head and on my jaw with his fist, then took me by my thumb and butted my head up against the wall. He hit me with his fists several times, for no reason at all. When the white-woman clerk in the office started asking me questions and I was answering them, this man told me, "Don't look a white lady in the face, you god-damn son-of-a-bitch." Officer A \_\_\_\_\_ was present while I was being beaten but didn't say anything about it.



I was not allowed to make a phone call until 8 a.m. the next morning. My rent man made \$102 bond and I got out of jail about 2 Thursday afternoon.

SIGNED: Joe Johnson





## COAHOMA COUNTY

I am 24 years old, and I reside in Clarksdale, Mississippi.

At about 1 p.m. on Sunday, July 12, 1964, I was in the Laundromat on State Street, next to the \_\_\_\_\_ Store. Although the store has no signs up, this is understood to be a "white" laundromat. My clothes were in the washer when the owner of the store came in accompanied by two policemen. He told me to get out and be quick about it, so I left. The police car followed me and about three blocks away pulled me over to the side. They asked to see my driver's license. They said I had failed to signal a turn. Then they took me down to the jail. There Police Officer A \_\_\_\_\_ and two other officers began to beat me. They hit me with both their fists and with a billy club, causing my mouth to bleed. Officer A \_\_\_\_\_ asked me what business I had in that place (the laundromat). He also said, "Do you know you're a nigger and are going to stay a nigger?" This was all going on while they were hitting me. Then they locked me up, and I was later released after making \$64 bond on charges of "resisting arrest" and "failure to signal." At no time did I put up any resistance to arrest.

SIGNED: James A. Campbell



## COAHOMA COUNTY

I am a white volunteer working in voter registration with the COFO Summer Project in Clarksdale, Mississippi, and am 20 years of age.

On Monday, July 22, 1964, at about 1 p.m., my wife Lisa and I were walking along Yazoo Ave. An unmarked police car, driven by Police Officer A\_\_\_\_\_ pulled up next to us. Officer A\_\_\_\_\_ called us over and started questioning us as to our names. We replied and he then said, "Didn't I tell you yesterday to get out of town?" He then asked us what we did for a living and by whom we were supported. Some discussion ensued as to what constituted support, after which Officer A\_\_\_\_\_ told us to get in the car. We were told that we were under arrest for vagrancy. On the way to the office, Officer A\_\_\_\_\_ kept up a constant stream of verbal abuse. He used such terms as "half-breed," "nigger-lover," "nigger whore," "nigger pimp." A white civilian, who was in the car when Officer A\_\_\_\_\_ drove up, also added to the stream of curses. Upon arrival at the station, Lisa and I were placed in the entry room and separated. We were instructed not to converse. We were not allowed to sit down. Officer A\_\_\_\_\_ left us with the white civilian who had been in the car as well as another unidentified civilian who was waiting at the jail. Both young men were in their middle twenties. They kept up a continuous stream of questions, insults, and veiled threats. After ten minutes, we were led into the investigation room by another officer who wore neither a badge number nor a name plate. He began questioning us, using a long investigation report containing questions on name, address, occupation, parents' occupation, etc. Lisa asked what the forms were, and he told her they were investigation forms. He asked me if we had actually been placed under arrest and we answered "Yes." He asked one of the aforementioned civilians to confirm this and he did. From then on, the officer left us under the impression that we were indeed under arrest. This officer then engaged us in conversation for a good hour on the racial situation in Mississippi. He was polite enough, though not friendly. He then fingerprinted us and took photographs. After about an hour and a half of questioning, unpleasant remarks, and stories about "niggers," Officer A\_\_\_\_\_ re-entered the room. He then proceeded to ask more questions, interspersing them with insults to my wife. The insults became the dominant part of the conversation, with Officer A\_\_\_\_\_ finally saying to me, "Why don't you get angry? Why don't you stand up like a man?" He was obviously trying to provoke me and would have, with the slightest provocation, proceeded to beat me. I refused to be baited and finally we were asked to leave the room. After a few minutes I was called back by myself. Officer A\_\_\_\_\_ started intensive questioning about where we stayed, how many stayed in the Freedom House, etc. I refused to answer the questions, whereupon he said, "Boy, if you give

me any trouble, I'm going to kill you." He then continued the questioning and began to insult my wife again, asking, "How many niggers did you sell your wife to last night?" "How many niggers did your wife \_\_\_\_\_?" I again refused to rise to the bait, at which point he said, "Why don't you stand up like a man? I'd like to bounce you off the floor three times. I'd like to kill you." After a few more minutes of this, Officer A\_\_\_\_\_ left. We were told that we were merely being investigated and would now be released. We left the station after having been held three hours.

SIGNED: Robert Mandel



## COAHOMA COUNTY

I am 22 years old, a Negro citizen of Mississippi, and field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. This summer I am the director of the Council of Federated Organization's project in Clarksdale, Miss. The first day that I arrived in Clarksdale to arrange for housing for the other workers Police Officer A\_\_\_\_\_ came up to me and said, "We ain't goin' to have this shit this year." He then asked me if I wanted to fight then and I said that I was nonviolent. He continued to use obscene and abusive language. The next day he and other policemen sat in front of the office and took our pictures with a movie camera. I didn't say anything the first day but the second day I asked one of the policemen what they were doing. He replied that Officer A\_\_\_\_\_ had told them to do it. I then went to Officer A\_\_\_\_\_ himself. He said this was America and he could do whatever he wanted. I told him that we were going to call the FBI. He said he didn't care who we were going to call. Officer A\_\_\_\_\_ then said, "I'm going to kill you if it's the last thing I do." I didn't say anything and went off. This same day Officer A\_\_\_\_\_ assigned a policeman to follow me around wherever I went. When I would go into any place that policeman would stay outside. This same policeman would follow people from the project to try to find out what families we were living with and where we are.



Bill  
A\_\_\_\_\_

After the  
Civil  
Rights

was signed, Officer



went around to all the Negro restaurants and told them that if they served the project workers, either white or Negro, he would close them up. He mentioned my name in particular and said he didn't care who they told.

A while later an agent from the city water and light department came to the office and tried to turn the lights off. He called Officer A\_\_\_\_\_ who came over and cursed at us. We talked to him outside the office. He told us to get inside and instructed another policeman to "Get the damned billy clubs, we're going to have to move these niggers." He grabbed the arm of a Negro volunteer named Doris Newman and twisted it. I called the FBI office. They asked for a statement. I said that the situation was too bad for us to go down and asked them to come over. But they wouldn't do this. The next day a Negro man came by the office. He refused to tell us his name and told me not to tell anyone of this conversation. He told me that Officer A\_\_\_\_\_ had hired some men to kill me. We haven't seen anything of him since. The next night, after I had been told of the threat to my life, I went to a drug store and the people in there told me that some white men had been asking about me. When I was on my way back to the Freedom House a group of white men stopped me and showed me a gun. They said, "This has two buckshots in it, and both of them have your name on them. I'm going to bowl this up your ass and blow it off." I walked off and called Officer A\_\_\_\_\_. He told me to go to hell and hung up.



About three days after the incident with the white men with the gun, I went up to the courthouse to help register some people and Police Officer B\_\_\_\_\_ and Officer A\_\_\_\_\_ were there waiting for me. Officer A\_\_\_\_\_ said, "There aren't too many white people in town who like you and I'm not one of them. If you don't want to come up like your nigger-loving friends in Philadelphia you'd better get back to the nigger section of town." I said, "What's that?" and two highway patrolmen came up and said, "Let us show him where it is." I was the only one standing outside so I decided to leave.

About a week ago the water and light man came back again. I was standing outside in front of the office. He was carrying a knife. Two police cars were parked across the street. He swore at me and threatened me. He went over to the policemen and talked to them for a while, then came back over to me and started the same thing over again. I went over to the policemen and told them that I wanted to have this man arrested. They said they hadn't seen him do anything.

On July 24 after midnight three white men threw bottles through the office windows. We called the police but they didn't come that night. They came the next day. While they were there the same three white men came in and a man

who lives across the street identified them as the ones who had thrown the bottles. They arrested them on the spot and said they were fined \$11 dollars, and let them go immediately.



**SIGNED:** Lafayette Surney

## POETRY

(This is not from the Mississippi Papers but feels relevant)

### On Police Brutality

By Margaret Walker Alexander

Recently, a reporter from Mother Jones magazine came to see me and asked how I could live in Mississippi with all the police brutality there. I wrote an answer to him in the form of a poem and here it is-

#### On Police Brutality:

I remember Memorial Day Massacre

Nineteen thirty-seven in Chicago.

And I was in the Capital of D.C.

May of nineteen seventy-one

When they beat all those white heads

And put two thousand souls in jail.

I wasn't in South Commons Boston

Neither when Crispus Attucks died

Nor South Boston when the rednecks rioted.

But I remember Boston

Where I couldn't buy a hot pastrami sandwich

In a greasy joint.

I remember living there in fear

Much as some would feel in Mississippi

I was neither in Watts, Los Angeles, California

In nineteen sixty-five

Nor Detroit in nineteen sixty-seven

And I remember all the fuss over LeRoi Jones

In Newark, New Jersey, too.

Now Santa Barbara, California is remembered

As a separate incident, a separate thing

From Kent State in Ohio

And Jackson State in Mississippi

And Orangeburg, South Carolina

And Texas Southern

But to me, they were all of one piece

Of the same old racist rag.

And all of these things are part

Of what I call Police Brutality.



Source: "Discovering Our Connections: Race, Gender, and the Law," a Keynote Address by Margaret Walker Alexander delivered at a symposium hosted by the American University Journal of Gender & Law (September 12, 1992) - <http://www.wcl.american.edu/journal/genderlaw/01/alexander.pdf?rd=1>



## **FIVE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What do each of the testimonials that you read in this pamphlet have in common?
2. Do you notice any differences in the testimonials that are presented? If so, what are they?
3. How are these testimonials relevant to our current situation?
4. What are the main points that Margaret Walker Alexander makes in her poem "On Police Brutality?"
5. Does her poem make you think any differently about the testimonials that you read?

## **RESOURCES**

For some background about Mississippi in the early and mid-1960's you can read the following texts and watch the following films.

### **Books**

**Freedom Summer (2000) by Doug McAdam**

**Freedom Summer: The Savage Season of 1964 That Made Mississippi Burn and Made American a Democracy (2011) by Bruce Watson**

**Lessons from Freedom Summer: Ordinary People Building Extraordinary Movements (2008) by Kathy Emery, Linda Reid Gold, and Sylvia Braselmann**

**Letters from Mississippi: Reports from Civil Rights Volunteers and Freedom School Poetry of the 1964 Summer (2007) by Elizabeth Martinez**

### **Film**

**Ghosts of Mississippi (1996)**

**Mississippi Burning (1989)**

**Murder in Mississippi (1990)**