

Making Pictures, Making Racial Progress
Meena Krishnamurthy

Empathy has recently come under fire. Critics argue that empathy is significantly limited when it comes to political motivation. I argue that Martin Luther King Jr. and Mamie Till-Mobley's deployment of photographs during the Civil Rights movement shows us that many of the purported limitations of empathy can be overcome through the use of visual images. Images are not a panacea, however. King and Till-Mobley also complicate the traditional picture of the limitations of empathy by suggesting that, when racial injustice is at play, there are additional barriers to empathy. Some of these barriers are purely psychological, but most are related to the social and economic benefits that racist systems confer. In some cases, King and Till-Mobley used demonstrations and economic boycotts to amplify their use of images to overcome these barriers. In others, where sympathy wasn't possible, they used these methods to put pressure on the white moderates by appealing to their material self-interests. In identifying new barriers to empathy and in finding ways to overcome them, King and Till-Mobley significantly advance the philosophical debate about the political efficacy of empathy.