

UNDERSTANDING UNDERLYING SIMILARITIES IN CIVIL RIGHTS
PHILOSOPHIES: A SURVEY OF THE MEMOIRS OF
CORETTA SCOTT KING, MALCOLM X, ANNE MOODY,
JOHN HOWARD GRIFFIN, AND SARA MITCHELL PARSONS

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Abstract

Since today's society is so evidently enamored of the assertion of dichotomies, even where they may not exist, it is vital to take a closer look at what civil rights activists of the past have thought and done in order to realize how similar many civil rights leaders became as the Movement progressed in the fifties and sixties. The difficulty in placing each author in "conversation" with one another lies in selecting the most appropriate texts through which to do so. Therefore, this research uses the genre of memoirs in order to take a closer look into the thoughts and opinions of each figure, not just their actions. By conducting close reads and comparisons of these texts, it is evident that the thinking of all five activists bears striking similarities in the strategies they advocate. Conclusively, it is false to assert that a hard dichotomy exists between the methodologies of these five prominent civil rights activists. Each activist developed his or her views as their involvement in the struggle progressed and, with the exception of Anne Moody, gradually grew to become more similar to each other in their support of moderate and integrationist tactics.

I. Introduction: Memoirs, My Methodology, and Terms Used in the Texts

Looking at today's world, there is little doubt that the plagues of racism and discrimination are still harming countless people. In response, movements such as Black Lives Matter have formed to defeat the seemingly ubiquitous devaluing and exploitation of people. Consequently, to be able to learn the successful strategies of past leaders and realize the agreement that existed between different civil rights philosophies, one must examine the harmony of ideas that one finds between many civil rights activists' philosophies. In an effort to find an insightful pathway to study the ideological struggle of civil rights leaders, I could think of no more engaging way than to "speak" with them directly by closely analyzing their own words. As a result, I selected the memoirs of five diverse civil rights leaders to delve into the world of the civil rights movement in the middle of the twentieth century.

Showing how keenly aware each was concerning the ideological battle between advocates of the use of violence and nonviolence in the struggle to achieve justice and equality for all Americans, the memoirs of these civil rights leaders demonstrate the common search among all civil rights leaders to find the balance between philosophies of militancy and moderation. Furthermore, attempting to establish dichotomies between leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X is problematic when one considers the drastic ideological change that Malcolm X underwent near the end of his life. Additionally, this paper consults the work of three lesser-known activists, Griffin, Parsons, and Moody, in order to illuminate the diversity of opinions beyond King and

Malcolm X's philosophies. Additionally, these memoirists faced inward and outward struggle to either embrace integration or abandon the idea in favor of a more isolationist ideology. Although there are many distinctive qualities distinguishing each of these activists, it is through these common struggles that the reader is able to see the many ideological similarities among the different activists. Ultimately, the memoirs of these five civil rights activists show us that, despite their different backgrounds, commitment to a philosophy of nonviolence and a determination to integrate society was present in the thoughts and actions of each.

Chiefly, this study uses memoirs as the medium of entering into the thoughts and feelings of the Civil Rights era. Each memoir offers something distinctive in terms of its author's experiences and voice. Memoirs possess great usefulness by allowing us to construct a historical narrative of a person's life, what they did, and the place and culture in which they lived. However, time can color memoirs as well as the author's own perspective. Written by fallible people, memoirs are often the medium through which their author seeks to understand their own life and the world around them. Additionally, readers of memoirs can have a hard time truly understanding everything about the author's life because of the author's necessity to truncate their vast life story by choosing to tell certain stories and omitting a great many others. Moreover, in an excellent memoir, readers will see different sides of the author as they reveal their thoughts, actions, and characteristics as accurately as possible. Memoirs give readers a look into the mind of the author, both what they were and who they are at the time of their writing. Since the memoir bases itself so much on the internal workings of its author, it gives readers a unique perspective that one may access through the more superficial study of their

actions. Additionally, the skilled memoirist can give readers the experience of living in the world of the author. As a result, one can expect memoirs to instruct readers about the author's world and its critical issues and give a reasonably accurate description of the author's own views, emotions, and actions. Finally, it is necessary to give a brief definition of what a memoir is. This study considers a memoir as an autobiographical account of someone's experiences in regards to a particular subject. Using this definition, each work is a memoir, even Malcolm X's autobiography, since each focuses on the author's experiences living in a racist society and working to improve conditions for African-Americans.

The works consulted for this research are *From Southern Wrongs to Civil Rights: The Memoir of a White Civil Rights Activist* by Sara Mitchell Parsons (2000)-*The Autobiography of Malcolm X* by Malcolm X and Alex Haley (1965)-*My Life with Martin Luther King Jr.* by Coretta Scott King (1969)-*Coming of Age in Mississippi* by Anne Moody (1968), and *Black Like Me* by John Howard Griffin (1961). Each work offers a unique perspective. Whether it's Moody's viewpoint of an African-American woman working at the grassroots level to better the living conditions and political rights of African-Americans, King's intimate perspective on her and her husband's work, Griffin's exposé on the effects of discrimination and racism, Malcolm X's mesmerizing personal journey from a horrific childhood, to troubled adult, then brilliant civil rights leader, or Sara Mitchell Parsons' story of leaving the safe confines of her upper-middle class white world to work to integrate schools and achieve educational equality in Atlanta's schools, each memoirist presents readers with experiences that are similar and yet unique. Each memoir provides excellent specifics regarding the conditions of African-Americans in the

United States during the early and middle twentieth century. In conclusion, a comparison of these works—making particular note of each author’s different reactions to major problems like economic discrimination as well as key moments like the Montgomery Bus boycott, the opening of the Selma to Montgomery march, and the March on Washington— show just how similar the thinking of many civil rights leaders was at this time, despite the sometimes shockingly different rhetoric of militant and moderate groups.

It may be helpful to provide a working definition of the terms “moderate” and “militant,” as well as “isolationism” and “integrationism.” For the sake of clarity, this paper defines militancy as an approach that uses confrontational and radical tactics to accomplish an end. Militancy is keener on breaking laws and social norms than a moderate approach. Militancy can advocate ethnic isolationism, as Malcolm X did, as a solution to race problems.¹ A militant approach may entirely reject the political system as a means of solving civil rights problems, it can be very reluctant to find a middle ground with its opponents, and it is always aggressive. Considering the centuries of slavery and oppression resulting from the racism of whites, it is unsurprising that militant civil rights activists like Malcolm X were against the integration of African-American people into the larger fabric of American society.

One can find an example of militancy and isolationism in Malcolm X’s rhetoric, coupled with Malcolm’s frequent usage of the pejorative term “devil white man” in his autobiography, shows just a little of the militant approach he used as a civil rights activist. On the other hand, the numerous nonviolent protests—for example “sit-ins” at

1. Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 317.
2. Malcolm X and Alex Haley, 317.

lunch counters, “pray-ins” in front of segregated churches, public marches to protest injustice, or “freedom rides” on buses—were also a form of militancy in that they broke the laws and/or customs of the day. However, such actions typically bore little of the hostility and violence that marked the actions of groups such as the Black Panthers.³ Therefore, while Martin Luther King Jr.’s own rhetoric of peace and integration stands in stark contrast to the isolationist and even violent attitudes adopted by many civil rights leaders of the time, there is an apparent connection between his tactics of nonviolent action, which was often militant in its use, and the tactics of groups like the Black Panthers.

Whereas militants are less inclined to work patiently within the boundaries of law and society, moderates typically work within laws, they are more willing to make compromises to achieve their goals, they look more favorably toward work with others like the government, and they are much less violent and provocative in their approach. Sara Mitchell Parsons is an excellent example of an activist who used moderate tactics. By running for public office, she worked within the laws of her society to change the government, laws, and civil services in Atlanta, Georgia to protect African-Americans from discrimination. Likewise utilizing moderate tactics, Anne Moody worked with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to lead a voting drive within African-American communities.⁴ Ultimately, militancy and moderation, as well as

3. Yohuru Williams, ““some Abstract Thing Called Freedom”: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Legacy of the Black Panther Party”. *OAH Magazine of History* 22 (3). (Oxford University Press, Organization of American Historians, 2008), 16.

4. Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, (New York: Dial Press, 1968), 273.

integration and isolation, were just different approaches civil rights activists used to work towards solving the same problem of achieving a stable and fair society in which African-Americans could live.

II. Racial Discrimination in America in the 40s, 50s, and 60s

During early 20th century, the issue of full civil rights for minorities was one of the most divisive and pressing problems facing Americans. Specifically, whites all over the country, but predominately in the South, deprived African-Americans of basic privileges like the opportunity to achieve a good education, the right to vote, a fair opportunity to obtain a decent job, and the right to use the same public and private stores, hospitals, schools, restrooms, and even water fountains. Responding to this nightmarish social and political environment, numerous writers and social leaders wrote works that attacked the racism of their day, putting forth ideas as to how to correct the situation and showing the world what atrocities were being committed. Many of these works did so by giving readers a new manner of seeing to issues or problems by telling stories not often told. Whether it is Anne Moody showing the reader the early life of an African-American civil rights worker who saw her whole people, and herself, suffer the hatred of whites because of her ethnicity, Coretta Scott King's explanation of her and her husband's work in the Civil Rights Movement, John Howard Griffin's exposé of the racism and economic injustice in the South during the late 50s, Sara Mitchell Parsons' accounts of the discrimination in the segregated school system in Atlanta, or Malcolm X's autobiographical account of his lifelong victimization by white oppression, many authors of the middle twentieth century gave new voice to the protest movements that strove to achieve civil rights for African-Americans.

Each of the memoirs contains numerous stories that paint the picture of what racism looked like in America during the early and middle parts of the twentieth century.

In Anne Moody's work, she describes the harsh poverty in which she was raised, first with her biological father and mother working as sharecroppers for a white man,⁵ and then when her mother and siblings were forced to live on their own after Anne's father left them.⁶ Throughout her life, Moody was forced to live a second-rate existence as a house-worker for a white family,⁷ receive education in segregated schools, and suffer outright abuse and threats of violence when she became involved in the Civil Rights Movement.⁸ The scarring effects of economic injustice against African-Americans that permeate so much of *Coming of Age in Mississippi* are also present in Coretta Scott King, John Howard Griffin, and Malcolm X's works.

Steeped in deep poverty and economic suffering, Malcolm X had a very difficult early life. Before white racists killed his father in 1931 for speaking out against the racism in America, Malcolm's family lost all their worldly possessions when white supremacists burned their house down.⁹ Left to raise Malcolm and his seven siblings on her own, the state social service constantly pressured Malcolm's mother, Louise, to give up custody of her children. Declaring that the state social workers "were as vicious as vultures," Malcolm explains that the people who wished to take his mother's children away "had no feelings, understanding, compassion, or respect for my mother."¹⁰ Often with little to eat,¹¹ Malcolm's family was soon feeling the emotional and mental pressure

5. Ibid, 1-5.

6. Ibid, 38-41.

7. Ibid, 164.

8. Ibid, 278-79.

9. Malcolm X and Alex Haley, 4.

10. Ibid, 10.

11. Ibid, 15.

of “[s]ome kind of psychological deterioration [that] hit our family circle and began to eat away our pride.”¹² Because of her husband’s murder, the pressure of caring for eight children, and the stress of the state constantly wanting to take away her children, Malcolm’s mother “suffered a complete breakdown.”¹³ Sent to the State Mental Hospital located at Kalamazoo, Michigan, which was located about seventy miles from where her children lived, the fracture of Malcolm’s family was complete as he and his siblings went into different homes.¹⁴

The threat of violence and the twisted views of racists found a seemingly natural expression in the sexual exploitation of both African women and men by whites. Anne Moody describes an instance in which a white man raped an African-American woman and publicly bragged about it. Shockingly, such violent behavior went completely unpunished by the local whites.¹⁵ Similarly, Malcolm X describes the same perverse attitudes by white people, specifically white women, against black men. Recounting one story in which a white woman forced a black man to sleep with the threat of removal from his job, Malcolm X reveals the twisted exploitative characteristic of many white racists.¹⁶ Likewise exposed to numerous perverse questions from white men regarding his sexuality, Griffin nobly ignored the attempted exploitation of himself by racist whites.¹⁷

12. Ibid, 16.

13. Ibid, 24.

14. Ibid, 24, 27.

15. Ibid, 354-355.

16. Ibid, 102.

17. John Howard Griffin, *Black like Me*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), 81.

This utter disregard by white racists for the safety, chastity, and privacy of African-Americans demonstrates just another layer of the injustice and abuse that was occurring in American society.

Educationally, African-American students were at a significant disadvantage to white students. In what was a complete anomaly, a young Malcolm X attended a white school after he went into foster care. Despite being at the top of his class, the teachers and students in his school consistently told Malcolm that he could not succeed, regardless of his academic success. In one incident that Malcolm X repeatedly references as a turning point in his thinking, his English teacher Mr. Ostrowski was shocked when Malcolm told him that he desired to become a lawyer. Malcolm X recalls that the teacher

“leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. He kind of half-smiled and said, “Malcolm, one of life’s first needs is for us to be realistic... A lawyer—that’s no realistic goal for a nigger. You need to think about something you can be... Why don’t you plan on carpentry?””¹⁸

Still even more appalling than this racist advice against Malcolm working to become a lawyer is the fact that all the other white students in the school who were interested in studying to enter challenging fields were encouraged to do so.¹⁹ A lack of encouragement for African-American students was not rare and certainly not the only manner in which racist whites sabotaged African-Americans in their education.

Although the Supreme Court declared the system of segregating schools based on race illegal on May 17, 1954, Southern states enacted integration at a snail’s pace. In her

18. Malcolm X and Alex Haley, 43.

19. Ibid, 102.

service on the Atlanta school board, Sarah Mitchell Parsons details the awful condition of African-American schools in Atlanta. According to Parsons, one African-American elementary school had a fifty-one-year-old building and almost nothing in terms of a playground. Additionally, Parsons writes that this school was “[o]vercrowded and on double sessions for nineteen years.” She then ponders, “[h]ow can a child taught one half day for seven years compete with those taught for a full school day?”²⁰ Further supporting Parsons’ testimony of discrimination against African-Americans in the educational system, Anne Moody was one of the mere eight percent of African-American children who attended high school during the 1950s in the almost entirely segregated school system in Mississippi.²¹

Attacking African-Americans at a spiritual and ideological level, numerous African-American ministers actively aided racist whites. In her memoir, Parsons reveals that numerous civil rights activists contended that many African-American preachers were preaching a message of acceptance on the part of African-Americans of the abuse directed towards them by white racists. Parsons quotes a Reverend Isaac Richmond who fiercely attacks African-American ministers who drive costly cars, take expensive trips, and yet offer nothing to their congregants but the assurance of heaven if they would patiently endure their sufferings at the hands of white racists.²² Parsons herself wholeheartedly agrees with this assessment and found that many African-

20. Sara Mitchell Parsons, *From Southern Wrongs to Civil Rights: The Memoir of a White Civil Rights Activist*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000), 83.

21. Boisseau, Tracey Jean. "Always in the Mood for Moody: Teaching History through Anne Moody's Coming of Age in Mississippi." (*Feminist Teacher* no. 1, 2014), 19.

22. Parsons, 69-71.

American churches were preaching inaction as a response to racism.²³ Thus, the methodological tactics that many civil rights activists used to remove segregation, gain voting rights, and eliminate economic discrimination were opposed by numerous African-American pastors.

As to economic inequalities, discrimination forced African-Americans to take the worst jobs even if they had a college education.²⁴ In Griffin's social experiment—in which he dyed his skin darker and experienced life as an African-American man in the Deep South—he found that he could not find a job, even though he was a highly skilled and educated man. His skin color was obviously all that white business would look at when Griffin inquired about employment. In fact, Griffin could only find work doing menial jobs like shining shoes.²⁵ This economic discrimination and social segregation led to, in Griffin's estimation, one of the most dire effects of discrimination. According to Griffin, such intense racial discrimination leads to a “discrimination against [oneself],” a “contempt for the blackness that he associates with his suffering,” and a “willingness to sabotage [one's] fellow Negroes because they are part of the blackness he has found so painful.”²⁶ So not only did the discrimination African-Americans faced rob them of job opportunities, the constant negative associations to the color of their skin could readily result in disdain for their own ethnic group.

Anne Moody experienced many difficulties finding jobs that would actually from utilizing the education she had earned. After graduating college, Moody assesses her

23. Parsons, 67-69.

24. John Howard Griffin, 38.

25. Ibid, 36.

26. Ibid, 40.

opportunities and paints a very dark picture for educated African-Americans in her day. She recalls, “[w]ith a college education, about the only thing [an African-American] could do in Mississippi, Louisiana, and most of the South was teach.” However, with her bachelor’s degree, she did not want to either join teaching in an integrated school in the South since of the African-American teachers there were, in her opinion, most were “Uncle Toms” who were sacrificing their cultural identity and dignity to appease whites.²⁷ Moody further explains that “[t]hose that weren’t [teaching in integrated schools] had to teach in awful, segregated, inferior Uncle Tom schools.” With such a lack of befitting opportunities for her, Moody harshly states “[t]he way I felt about teaching, I would much rather wash dishes with my degree—that is, if I weren’t told how clean I should get them or where to stack them.”²⁸ Although her recollections are evidently so bitter, her assessment shows just of little the racially discriminating society of the South would support the economic advancement of educated African-Americans.

In the early half of the 20th century, whites economically exploited many African-Americans who worked as farmers. One particularly disheartening instance of discrimination on the federal level was the use of governmental production controls on the amount of cotton states grew. Moody recalls one farmer that explained to her “[e]ach state decides how much each county gets and each county distributes the allotments to the farmers. “It always ends up with the white people getting most of the allotments,” Mrs. Chinn said. “The Negroes aren’t able to get more, regardless of how much land they

27. Moody, 380.

28. Ibid.

have.”²⁹ Moody asserts that the result of this inability to grow such a lucrative crop reduced many African-American farmers to poverty. She writes about the farmers of Madison County, Mississippi asserting, “[m]ost of the farmers in Madison County were barely living off what they made from their land. Besides, they were never clear from debt. The independent farmers were practically like sharecroppers, because they always had their crop pledged in advance.”³⁰ Thus, through federal regulation of crop production and discrimination at the state and local levels of government, African-American farmers returned to a state of existence little better than sharecroppers who gave up most of their profits to pay rent for their land. When she was young, Moody’s father experienced a similar poverty and exploitation by whites. As a farmer, he never had enough money to support his family adequately once the white man to whom he was financially indebted took away a share of the profits.³¹ So for the multitudes of African-Americans living in rural areas, the economic discrimination they faced was crippling.

Finally, numerous civil services did not either extended to African-Americans at all or were provided in an inferior form. In her memoir, Parsons explains the many problems facing African-American neighborhoods in Atlanta. Parsons lists “restrictive zoning, crowded housing, unpaved streets, lack of city water in some areas, and—most important to me—schools that were second-class in every way, from ancient textbooks to inadequate and unkempt grounds” as just some problems that were reported to her.³² From discrimination in educational and job opportunities to an inability to outright

29. Ibid, 312.

30. Ibid, 342.

31. Ibid, 7-8.

32. Parsons, 24.

attacks by whites against the humanity and value of African-Americans, each memoirist's work depicts the system of racial discrimination that was entrenched in the South during the lives of the authors. Within this context of segregation and discrimination, each author developed their civil rights philosophy.

III. The Authors Themselves

John Howard Griffin

A native Texan born in 1920, John Howard Griffin witnessed the injustice perpetrated against African-Americans during his lifetime, but he wished to experience personally the burning racism of whites, in the form of both Jim Crow laws and on a more individual level, in order to dispel every false notion that African-Americans were exaggerating the extent of their mistreatment. Accordingly, in 1959 Griffin “died” his skin by the aid of pharmaceutical drugs and lying under an ultraviolet light for hours each day for several weeks. In addition to this, he regularly applied makeup and shaved his head in order to appear to be a black man. Once the change in his appearance was complete, Griffin embarked on a journey from New Orleans to Mississippi and then Alabama. Griffin freely shared all the details of his life, education, and personality to those with whom he met. During his study, he kept a journal of notes that allowed him to recount his experiences, which every kind of humiliation at hands of whites filled. He found that the very nature of the Jim Crow laws, unpunished murders of African-Americans by whites, and the entire social injustice perpetrated against African-Americans had led to many African-Americans fearing genocide by whites. At the end of his study, Griffin firmly asserts that racial prejudice and injustice existed at virtually every level of society in the late 1950s.

As a memoirist, Griffin’s work presents readers with the unique view of a white man becoming black and embracing all the abuse heaped upon him merely because his skin was darker. By changing his ethnic identity, Griffin passed from the majority to the

minority and from the protected to the abused. Recounting his experiences, Griffin makes it clear that the entire society of the day systematically broke down African-Americans by forbidding them even basic human rights and economic opportunities and forcing them to live under the constant threat of violence. What makes this memoir so unique is his experience coming as an outside observer of these sufferings. Griffin's own great work in the civil rights struggle, especially after returning to his natural identity, culminates in an exceedingly insightful epilogue in which he discusses the topics of nonviolence and integration in detail. Additionally, the text focuses on the key issue of economic injustice, as well as the need for greater unity among the various actors in the Civil Rights movement.

One finds many of the same themes and accounts in Griffin's memoir in other memoirist's works. Much of what makes *Black Like Me* such a powerful work of Civil Rights literature is that it does not shy away from addressing even the most bizarre forms of racism. Both Griffin and Malcolm X reveal that white men would often ascribe much looser sexual morals to African-American men, and yet at the same time would demonstrate the most abusive and perverse view of African-American women. In revealing the darker side of his society, the author has constructed a classic work of civil rights literature that gives great insight into the psychological, emotional, and spiritual oppression that the force of racism generates. Similar to *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, the author shows how the lack of economic opportunities can leave people devoid of hope for the future of themselves, their family, and their friends.

Coretta Scott King

Similar to John Howard Griffin's work, Coretta Scott King's memoir also reveals the profound despair, especially when she recounts her and her husband's time spent working in the ghettos of northern cities. Ultimately, Coretta Scott King's memoir effectively captures the powerful and unrelenting forces blocking progressive change in both the southern and northern parts of the United States during the era of the Civil Rights movement. Every battle has a cost and the assassination of her husband at the end of King's memoir tragically demonstrates this truism. By affirming her desire to "carry on... in the tradition" of her husband in the epilogue to her memoir issues,³³ Coretta Scott King explains both the reason for her writing and her views on how to approach finding solutions to civil rights issues. Based on this statement of her intentions, this study will treat her as supportive of her husband's methods, unless she makes an explicit statement to the alternative. However, Coretta Scott King's memoir is distinctive from the other works gathered here in that it is both her own memoir and a detailed record of her husband's life as well. Numerous times within the text, King leaves her own story and perspective to tell that of her husband. Since she writes her memoir in part to convey to the reader the principles and methods of her husband, this work is distinctive in that it gives two individuals' opinions and experiences, that while similar, complement and enhance the memoir's support of its own thesis—that nonviolence and love triumph over racial hatred.³⁴

33. Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin Luther King*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1970), 312.

As to the woman herself, Coretta Scott King was born on April 27, 1927 in Alabama. Growing up in a rural area of the state, she had the universal experience of African-American children who are the victims of racial hatred. When her parents taught her own worth, regardless of whatever a racist society says, Coretta heeded the admonitions that she must gain education to achieve her personal goals and gain equality.³⁵ In 1951, she enrolled in school at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, which is where she met her future husband. She married Martin Luther King Jr. in 1953 and they had four children together. After completing their educations, the King family returned to the South in 1955 to lead a church in Montgomery, Alabama. Almost immediately, Coretta watched local civil rights leaders elected her husband to lead the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Although she did not initially see her and Dr. King's future as being embroiled in civil rights issues, she was supportive of her husband's work and became deeply involved herself in the Movement. After her husband's death in 1968, Ms. King continued to serve as a leader of the Civil Rights movement. Founding the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change in 1968, the same year that saw the assassination of her husband, Ms. King fought long after her husband's death for social change through nonviolence.

34. Ibid, xii-xiii.

35. Ibid, 31-34.

Anne Moody

Anne Moody, born on September 15, 1940, is the author of *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, one of the classics of Civil Rights literature. Offering a distinctive perspective on the grassroots level of the Civil Rights Movement in the Deep South during the 1960s, *Coming of Age* furthers the genre of Civil Rights memoirs in that an African-American woman authors the work. Presenting readers not just with her experience as a civil rights activist, Moody reveals the additional challenge of being a woman, thus receiving the full force of both racial and misogynistic prejudice. Countless times in her autobiographical account, Moody recalls the acts of white society's segregation and racism against African-Americans she witnessed first-hand. Therefore, having lived and participated in the heart of the struggle in Mississippi, Moody has experiential knowledge that gives her memoir the distinctive perspective of an insider. Throughout her memoir, Moody explicates the issues facing African-American people during the middle of the twentieth century. In telling her own story, *Coming of Age* highlights the ideological struggle Moody engaged in with both white society around her and even her fellow Civil Rights activists. It is the discussion of social concepts, the author's doubt over the ultimate success of the Civil Rights movement, and her revealing description of the early life of an African-American civil rights worker—who saw her whole people, and herself, suffer the hatred of whites because of her ethnicity—that gives readers an insight into a dark world.

Looking to Anne Moody's work, the perspective of growing up in the South and her later account of her time as a civil rights worker gives readers the perspective of a woman and the trials she went through due solely to her gender. Born the daughter of

poor African-American sharecroppers in 1940, Moody earned her grade school education in the lackluster segregated school system in the South. Not easily dissuaded from her dream to receive higher education, she worked hard at her studies and attended two colleges with only African-American students. During her time as an undergraduate student, Moody helped organize a local chapter of the civil rights group Congress of Racial Equality, or CORE. Prominent in her work as a civil rights activist is her participation in a nonviolent “sit-in” demonstration at a segregated lunch counter in 1963. After working for a two years at Cornell University as a civil rights project coordinator, Moody quit in 1965 after becoming disenchanted with the direction and methods of the civil rights movement.

Numerous times in her autobiographical work *Coming of Age*, Moody recalls instances of segregation and white people using their power to suppress African-Americans into an inferior social, political, and economic standing. Starting out the work with a section regarding her early childhood experiences, it is evident that the censure of blacks by whites creates an economic and social condition which takes its toll on Moody’s mother’s first marriage and then the difficult path she must take to finally marry a “lighter-skinned” African-American man.³⁶ In order to receive this second marriage proposal, Moody’s mother, a darker skinned woman, had to work against the prejudice of her second husband’s lighter skinned family, who judge her solely on her skin color.

Later in her life, Moody’s mother, so cowed by the white supremacists in her society, tried to dissuade her daughter by telling her that the social structure in the South

36. Moody, 7-9, 28.

will never alter no matter how one labors to enact change.³⁷ It is when Moody becomes actively and publically involved in the Civil Rights movement that white racists threaten her mother back home to make her daughter quit the movement.³⁸ Additionally, the reader is able to witness a portrait of the life of an African-American young woman as a house-cleaner in the South. Because Moody worked in such a position, Moody is able to explain the pressure of having to work in such an environment without possessing the freedom to know or socialize with anyone in the house.³⁹ Finally, Moody is able to offer the reader a look into the dangers and backlash directed against her as a female civil rights worker.⁴⁰ Throughout her work, the author uses these dark accounts of the life through which her family struggled as an example of the highly destructive racist culture propagated by Southern whites.

In Moody's memoir, numerous stories of white oppression against civil rights workers illustrate the author's story of the injustices perpetrated against blacks during this time and support her argument that relations were unfair and must be corrected. The danger directed against civil rights workers is brutally shown when Moody recounts working for the cause of black voter registration in South during the height of the Civil Rights movement. Threatened by the Ku Klux Klan and consequently ostracized by her terrified and endangered family, Moody's political strategy centers on local action to resolve the twin issues of segregation and discrimination. Comparing in regards to some of the tactics used by Martin Luther King, Moody was repulsed at the huge rallies King

37. Ibid, 320-321.

38. Ibid, 280.

39. Ibid, 164.

40. Ibid, 278-279.

held to preach his message of nonviolence, seeing instead that work at the local level was the only thing that could effectively make change. She felt the leadership of the movement was out of touch with the local level after witnessing Dr. King lead March on Washington to no immediate effect.⁴¹ Instead of struggling to obtain voting rights, she felt the movement needed to focus on alleviating poverty at the local level.⁴² Also important to note is Moody's unique position as a female writer and civil rights leader in a time when men still dominated much of public society. Attacked not just for being an activist, several male white supremacists viciously disparaged Moody on repeated occasions for simply being a woman. At its end, which sees the brutal beating and killing of a teenage boy at the hands of policemen, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* leaves Moody wondering if anything can or will actually change in her society. Her pessimism contrasts with Martin Luther King's optimism for change—as long as everyone works toward the common cause of freedom—as seen in his Letter from Birmingham Jail.

In a blatant attempt to segregate young Anne from becoming friends with her son, Moody's employer, a white woman for whom she cleans her house, asks her if she indeed wants to go to an integrated school with white children in it. When Anne replies that she thinks there would be much to gain from an integrated school, with each ethnic group learning from the other, her employer storms away and leaves Moody in doubt as to her future employment.⁴³ Additionally, Moody has to worry greatly about her employer blacklisting her in their small town. Likewise, in a violent story, an entire African-American family burns to death in as a terrorist act by white supremacists seeking to stop

41. Ibid, 334.

42. Ibid, 339.

43. Ibid, 164.

and punish interracial relationships.⁴⁴ At the end of her work, Moody recalls an act of terrorism by white supremacists who sought to maintain segregation so horrific that it left her faith in both the ability of the Civil Rights Movement force real change and even God himself for allowing good people to suffer and die because of their ethnicity. The cause of her personal crisis of faith was the death of four young girls in the bombing of an African-American church in Birmingham on September 15, 1963.⁴⁵ After all, Moody reasons, if these girls were not attending church to worship a supposedly caring God, then they would not be dead. Although she regains some of her optimism, the end of *Coming of Age* leaves Moody wondering shortly after the beating to death of a young African-American protestor by the police, if any change will actually happen.⁴⁶

Through these stories, Moody communicates the feeling of powerlessness that segregated African-Americans felt in the South during the early and middle twentieth century. Using her own life story of which sees her thwarted in her attempts improve her life and achieve equality for all African-Americans, Moody renders an intimate portrait of the effects of segregation and white supremacy on the lives of African-Americans. From a grassroots perspective, the reader is able to see the enormous pressures exerted against the Civil Rights Movement and its workers by the racist white society. In a similar manner to Richard Wright's *Native Son*—which recounts the dark tale of a fictional African-American man who violently reacts to being deprived of all his opportunity and hope by society—and Griffin's *Black Like Me, Coming of Age*

44. Ibid, 143.

45. Ibid, 346-347.

46. Ibid, 411, 424.

describes the deadening effects of discrimination on the spirit and personality of the afflicted.

Malcolm X

In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Malcolm X tells the story of his life, especially his turbulent early years. His account highlights the same effects of discrimination and terrorism wrought by white supremacists that one finds in Moody's *Coming of Age*. In fact, the very first page of the work tells the story of white supremacists killing Malcolm's father for advocating black pride and a return to Africa for the racially discriminated African-American peoples.⁴⁷ At one point in grade school, Malcolm, one of the best students in his class, is strongly discouraged from aspiring to higher careers including the law and be contented with menial labor jobs or something like carpentry.⁴⁸ When he ventures into the city in his later teen years, Malcolm is only able to get "acceptable" jobs like shining shoes⁴⁹ or working as an attendant on a train.⁵⁰ Malcolm X's early life shows the same discrimination and severe lack of opportunity due to one's ethnicity that runs through so many stories.

Born on May 19, 1925 as Malcolm Little, Malcolm X suffered one of the more difficult childhoods imaginable. After his father was murdered by white supremacists for speaking out in favor of black nationalism Malcolm's mother was driven to a mental breakdown from the stress of her husband's death, the responsibility of caring for his eight children, and the pressure of the state social service agency to take over custody of

47. Malcolm X and Haley, 3-4.

48. Ibid, 42-43.

49. Ibid, 57.

50. Ibid, 88.

her children. Black nationalism itself was a movement which sought to foster a feeling of group and community among African-Americans and create a sense of ethnic pride in black ancestry. While he was initially very successful in his scholastic studies, Malcolm lost interest in education after the eighth grade when one of his favorite teachers attempted to steer him away from pursuing a law degree. While a teenager, he moved from his juvenile home in Mason, Michigan to Detroit. Quickly enough, Malcolm became a petty criminal and eventually found himself sent to prison from 1946 to 1952 for a robbery.

During his incarceration, Malcolm converted to the Islamic faith and joined the Nation of Islam, which was an African-American movement which fused together Black nationalism and parts of Islam. When he joined the Nation of Islam, Malcolm changed his last name from "Little" to "X," which signified his rejection of a last name he considered to be not of his African ancestors but a white slaveholder. In his time spent working in the Nation of Islam from 1952 to 1964, Malcolm X started numerous churches, promulgated the views of the Nation of Islam of black superiority and that whites were all evil, and rose to a high rank within the organization. His eventual break with the Nation of Islam came in March 1964 after conflict with Elijah Muhammad, the Nation of Islam's chief leader, over the political and social direction of the Nation, as well as Muhammad's own series of marital infidelities. After a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1965, Malcolm X embraced Sunni Islam, publicly renounced the beliefs of the Nation that did not align with Orthodox Islam, and asserted that Orthodox Islam was the solution to America's problems. Tragically, not long after his acceptance of more moderate methods assassins murdered Malcolm X on February 21, 1965. One of his chief legacies

is his fierce resistance to Martin Luther King's ideas of integration and nonviolence. Famously, Malcolm X asserted that that it was "by any means necessary" that the victims of white racism should protect themselves.⁵¹ However, the shift in his opinions and methods as a civil rights activist renders him an essential figure to study to understand the tension between violence and nonviolence and integrationism and isolationism.

Malcolm X's autobiographical account of his life as an African-American man parallels many of the same themes of Moody's work. Just as the story of Anne Moody and the fictitious Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright's *Native Son* give the reader the perspective of the victims of discrimination, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* tells of the numerous ways the white-dominated society of his day wrecked his family. Whether it's the story of the death of his father for defying white-supremacy,⁵² his mother being badgered by the state to breakup her family such that she suffered a mental breakdown,⁵³ or the numerous instances of being denied a fair education and job opportunity,⁵⁴ Malcolm X's work gives allows the reader to understand his almost lifelong animosity against the racist society that destroyed so much in his life. Malcolm X, after a long personal journey, puts forth God as that which can solve America's problems. Writing, "America needs to understand Islam, because it is the one religion that erases from society the race problem," Malcolm X shows his acceptance of the ideas of universal brotherhood.⁵⁵ While he initially was against African-Americans integrating with whites,

51. Ibid, 420.

52. Ibid, 3-4.

53. Ibid, 14-15.

54. Ibid, 25, 42-44, 57, 88.

Malcolm X sees the truth behind all ethnicities living as one after his pilgrimage to Mecca and seeing the vast and harmonious mixture of races there.

Grassroots action to combat poverty, advocating for voter registration, calling for a higher ethical standard in how members of society treat one another, seeing through the eyes of those victimized by racism, and relying on the higher power of God to change the hearts of people and bring them together are all methods which these five authors have asserted can change society for the better. Reading these works, it is unmistakable that, although many horrific evils have plagued American society, many people are willing to commit their lives to improving their world. In the case of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., both men eventually gave the ultimate sacrifice of their lives as they worked to cure America's social ills. It is in reading these authors that one finds not just an explanation of problems, but solutions and a deep conviction—one that cannot help but find its way into the heart of the reader—to do what is right even though the majority or those in power are for what is wrong.

Sara Mitchell Parsons

Growing up in South during the early 20th century, Sara Mitchell Parsons witnessed a world of discrimination from the viewpoint of a white middle-class woman. Born on April 18, 1912, Parsons describes her upbringing as being “raised a daughter of the Old South.”⁵⁶ In her family, Parsons’ parents exhibited racism against numerous

55. Ibid, 389.

people groups. Parsons says of her mother “[h]er unthinking prejudice extended not only to blacks but also to Jews, Catholics, and Gypsies.”⁵⁷ Nevertheless, it was not just Parsons’ family that displayed racist attitudes during her childhood; her entire community promulgated racist discriminatory attitudes. Recalling the society of her youth, Parsons writes “[i]n my southern community we feared others who were in any way different from us... And although blacks lived among us, they were fundamentally, profoundly different, or so I was constantly told.”⁵⁸ Certainly, before she was even old enough to vote, Parsons was drenched with the racism of her family and society. Nonetheless, this woman was able to rise far above the attitudes of her day and work in her city to better the educational opportunities for African-American students. Summarizing what she and other white women were able to accomplish in eliminating Atlanta’s system of discrimination, Parsons writes, “[w]hile we may not have been heroes on the front line, we offered heavy backup support for those who were. We helped black civil right workers bring about integration of schools and public accommodations, often at considerable personal cost.”⁵⁹ Moreover, in case of Parsons, the sacrifice of her marriage became the cost of publically working in the Civil Rights Movement and expediting integration in Atlanta.

One of the key themes in Parsons’ work is the moral awakening of an individual through merely interacting with those oppressed by society is. In her early childhood, Parsons’ family employed an African-American woman, Bertha, as a house servant.⁶⁰

56. Parsons, 1.
57. Ibid, 2.
58. Ibid, 2.
59. Ibid, 80.

With all the time she and Bertha spent together, Parsons, a little girl, was able to understand the great economic distress in which discrimination forced Bertha and other African-Americans to live. Parsons remembers, “feeling sorry for [Bertha]” even though the memories were decades old.⁶¹ Years later Parsons attended a political rally that had both whites and African-Americans sitting together. According to Parsons, the novelty of this “first-ever event” led to her interest in attending. After this event, Parsons felt what she describes as a “further stirring of my social conscience.”⁶² By just going to an integrated event, Parsons was able to find the conviction to start seeing her society from a new perspective.

After going to the first integrated public meeting, she confesses that she did not radically change her life. Her husband held the typical racist views of a middle-class white of the time and Parsons did not openly challenge his attitudes. She did not even immediately join the Movement.⁶³ Rather, in time she decided to quit all superfluous and purposeless activities like bridge, garden, and study clubs and find join the League of Women Voters to encourage women to use their votes to help heal the problems in society.⁶⁴ Quickly enough, the chapter in which Parsons was involved became embroiled in the issue of integration when league officials challenged their charter due to the segregated meetings they held.⁶⁵ After much debate, the chapter allowed African-American women to join, which led to the entire city taking notice to this act of integration.⁶⁶ Despite pressure from her husband to stay away from civil rights issues,

60. Ibid, 5.

61. Ibid, 4.

62. Ibid, 15.

63. Ibid, 16.

64. Ibid, 18.

Parsons quickly began to become involved in integration efforts throughout her city.⁶⁷ Finally, after running and becoming elected for a seat on the Atlanta school board, Ms. Parsons completed her journey from being unconcerned with social issues of her city to actively working to eliminate discrimination while in an influential position of power. This distinctive perspective of a person who step out of the rank and file racists of her time to make a change is what gives Parsons' story and analysis of her society such a weight and meaning.

Another crucial theme in Parsons' memoir is her moral awakening leading to her rejecting segregated churches. Seeing that most of the white churches in the South remained at best segregated and silent in civil rights issues and at worst active in keeping African-Americans oppressed, Parsons developed strongly negative views against many of the churches and pastors in her city. For much of her life, Parsons attended segregated Methodist churches. Highly conscious of the responsibility her election to the Atlanta school board, Parsons took it upon herself to personally tour each school in Atlanta and was able to very closely examine the caustic effects of segregation in the lives of African-Americans all over Atlanta.⁶⁸ In a powerful denunciation of religion in the South, Parsons' says, "[a]t the historical moment when the white churches of the Bible Belt most needed to prove their Christianity, they failed miserably. The shame of their stand against integration will endure as a blot on their history."⁶⁹ Thus, Parsons' found that her social conscience far outstripped that of her fellow churchgoers, understood that the segregated

65. Ibid, 21.

66. Ibid, 22-23.

67. Ibid, 27-28.

white churches were doing nothing to help protect African-Americans against discrimination and exploitation, and finally left her Methodist congregation to join an integrated church.⁷⁰ Parsons defied the prevalent thinking of her peers and stepped out of the church to accomplish what she perceived as her ministry, which was the Civil Rights Movement. Sacrificing so much in her married life and in her church and social life, Parsons agreed with civil rights activist John Lewis when he said, “I saw more God in the movement than in the church.”⁷¹ Similar to John Howard Griffin’s awareness of the racial discriminations of his society increased following his passing from one ethnic identity to another, Parsons’ perspective on her racist society changed radically. Like Griffin, Parsons’ conscience led her to forsake any protection offered by tacitly supporting the social evils of her time and publically join the actively persecuted Civil Rights Movement.

68. Ibid, 83.

69. Ibid, 54.

70. Ibid, 58-59.

71. Ibid, 69.

IV. Understanding the Authors' Civil Rights Philosophies

While each author is distinctive in their voice and many of their experiences, they also tend to have similar views on how to enact social change. Analyzing what these five civil rights activists say on the issues of nonviolence and integration in particular reveals the many underlying similarities the strategies and tactics they used. As a matter of explanation, this analysis will look at how the author asserts one should approach bettering the economic, legal, and social standing of African-Americans. Without a doubt, the most well-known of the five memoirists I've selected are Coretta Scott King and Malcolm X. After all, the views of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X before he went on pilgrimage to Mecca are very different in regards to integration and nonviolence. In addition, both men were some of the foremost leaders of the Civil Rights movement in their time and all in the Civil Rights movement knew them. So while the memoirs that deal chiefly with these two figures give more a mainstream understanding of the movement, Moody's, Griffin's, and Parsons' works show the levels to which these lesser known activists adhere or diverge from mainstream tactics and strategies.

Malcolm X recognized the inherent barriers to reconciliation between African-Americans and whites created by countless whites' sense of racial superiority and their abuse of their social, political, and economic power over African-Americans. Explaining how African-Americans' right to self-determination was constantly attack by whites, he states "[o]ur slave foreparents would have been put to death for advocating so-called 'integration' with the white man. Now when Mr. Muhammad speaks of 'separation,' the white man calls us 'hate-teachers' and 'fascists!'"⁷² Seeing this unreasonable and

exploitative behavior by whites, Malcolm X fiercely fought against African-Americans integrating into white society. In an extreme statement, Malcolm X asserted that integration was “socially... no good for either [whites or African-Americans].”⁷³ However, during his pilgrimage to Mecca, Malcolm X’s views shifted from this isolationistic philosophy and militant approach. Recalling his conversation with a white American ambassador to an African country, Malcolm X explains, “[w]e both agreed that American society makes it next to impossible for humans to meet in America and not be conscious of their color differences. And we both agreed that if racism could be removed, America could offer a society where rich and poor could truly live like human beings.”⁷⁴

According to scholar Curtiss DeYoung, before his pilgrimage to Mecca “Malcolm X’s sense of self was still connected to white identity. The Nation of Islam could only reverse the effects of racism, not reconcile Malcolm X with the broader human family.” Given his lack of a connection and reconciliation to the rest of humanity, Malcolm X’s “essential understanding of himself and others was transformed through his complete embrace of Orthodox Islam and fully realized during the hajj to Mecca.”⁷⁵ Malcolm X was then able to transform his civil rights philosophy to one that embraced integration as the solution to race problems. Malcolm X’s change was spiritual in nature. According to DeYoung, “[a]fter he returned from Mecca, Malcolm X suggested that whites should study Islam if they also wanted to embrace racial reconciliation.”⁷⁶ DeYoung attributes

72. Malcolm X and Haley, 276.

73. Ibid, 317.

74. Ibid, 426-427.

75. Curtiss Paul DeYoung, “The Power of Reconciliation: From the Apostle Paul to Malcolm X,” (Crosscurrents 57, 2007). 207.

76. Ibid, 207.

this ideological change to Malcolm X's experience of meeting whites while on the haji who were "unlike anything he had previously experienced in the United States. They exuded an attitude and character untainted by racism."⁷⁷ Now able to see the inherent humanity and equality of all individuals, Malcolm X felt led to write of his ideological conversion to the ideas of integration and peace.

I believe in recognizing every human being as a human being, neither white, black, brown nor red. When you are dealing with humanity as one family, there's no question of integration or intermarriage. It's just one human being marrying another human being, or one human being living around and with another human being.⁷⁸

Therefore, after his pilgrimage to Mecca, Malcolm X's views rapidly came right into agreement with the integrationist goals of Martin Luther King Jr. as well as the philosophies of John Howard Griffin, Sara Mitchell Parsons, and Anne Moody. Right before his assassination in 1965, Malcolm X unequivocally explained his views on the essential equality of humanity declared, "[t]he worst form of a human being, I believe, is one who judges another human being by the color of his skin."⁷⁹ Though he had little time to further his newfound civil rights philosophies before his tragic death, Malcolm X's attitude changed from being highly militant, he repeatedly refers to whites as "devils" before his pilgrimage, to one of fraternity and racial harmony.

As for Martin Luther King Jr., the formation of his civil rights philosophy was not overnight. Scholar James H. Cone asserts that "[t]he development of Martin King's philosophy of nonviolence was a gradual process" and that he initially had a negative

77. Ibid, 207.

78. Malcolm X and Haley, 487.

79. Ibid, 487-488.

“attitude towards whites.”⁸⁰ Nevertheless, it is obvious from his later tenants of love and nonviolence that this ill will towards whites transformed dramatically. According to Cone, his opinions of whites “started to change through the influence of religion, education, and personal encounters with moderate whites.”⁸¹ Similar to Malcolm X’s experiences while on the Hajj, the influence of religion and exposure to whites who exhibited fairness toward African-Americans changed King. Writing of her husband’s civil rights philosophy, Coretta Scott King asserts, “[w]e who knew him intimately cannot recall a single instance when he expressed a word of hatred for any man. Yet his indictment of segregation, discrimination, and poverty was a hurricane of fire that opened a new era of struggle for freedom.”⁸² Nevertheless, King did more than simply support a set of goals and philosophies for the Civil Rights movement, he galvanized the idea of nonviolent protest into tactics that could utilize massive amounts of people to work against the caustic forces of discrimination and racism without using violence.

In stark contrast to Malcolm X’s early belief that segregation is “socially... no good for either [whites or African-Americans],”⁸³ Martin Luther King’s career in the civil rights movement saw him consistently support the goal of social integration. Unequivocally, Dr. King asserts that “[s]egregation is as bad for [whites] as for [African-Americans].”⁸⁴ King was further alarmed at the South’s oppressive system of segregation because he recognized the potential catastrophic level of violence that of hate can cause

80. James H Cone, “Martin and Malcolm on Nonviolence and Violence”. (Clark Atlanta University: 2001), 174.

81. Ibid, 174.

82. King, 310.

83. Malcolm X and Haley, 317.

84. King, 112.

in a world with nuclear weapons. Coretta Scott King reflects on her husband's global perspective saying, "[m]ore terrible was the fear of death, even racial annihilation, in this atomic age, when the whole world teetered on "a balance of terror... fearful lest some diplomatic faux pas ignite a frightful holocaust."⁸⁵ Consequently, Dr. King asserted that nonviolence and love are the only way to respond to the hatred of others.⁸⁶ Therefore, there is a sharp difference between Dr. King and Malcolm X, but once Malcolm X embraced integration as one of the goals of the Civil Rights movement his civil rights philosophy shifted noticeably closer to King's.

While it took Malcolm X quite a long time to embrace integration as part of the solution for civil rights issues, he never totally embraced the philosophy of nonviolence. He did lament at the end of his life that he could not shake his "old 'hate' and 'violence' image" despite the change in his views on humanity in general and integration. Nevertheless, while he recanted his notion of ethnic isolationism as a solution for race problems, he did not unequivocally accept nonviolence. Malcolm X certainly saw its usefulness, but did not limit his civil rights philosophy to using that as his only tactic.⁸⁷ Comparing his and Martin Luther King's civil rights philosophies, Malcolm X writes "[t]he goal has always been the same, with the approaches to it as different as mine and Dr. Martin Luther King's non-violent marching, that dramatizes the brutality and the evil of the white man against defenseless blacks."⁸⁸ Now the goal of eliminating discrimination against African-Americans and creating equality between whites and

85. Ibid, 95.

86. Ibid, 119-120.

87. Malcolm X and Haley, 422.

88. Ibid, 434-435.

African-Americans *had* always been the same, but Malcolm X and Dr. King spent much of their time as civil rights leaders in disagreement on the issue of integration. Nevertheless, their approaches, which Malcolm X characterizes as “‘nonviolent’ Dr. King [and] so-called ‘violent’ me,” were different in what King advocated show a difference in tactics, although Malcolm X did see the usefulness of nonviolence but unlike Dr. King only so far as the method bore results.⁸⁹

In the case of Anne Moody, she experienced significant change in her beliefs as she worked for several years in the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. While in college, she was committed to nonviolent protest in the form of sit-ins as a tactic to defeat segregation in the South. Once while in a bus station, a stationmaster denied Moody and a friend of hers service because of their ethnicity. Consequently, Moody insisted that she and her friend sit in the bus station for the entire day as a means of protesting the station and its attendant.⁹⁰ During this impromptu sit-in, whites verbally assaulted Moody and her friend and threatened them with violence.⁹¹ Nevertheless, Moody did not respond with violence and practiced the philosophy of nonviolence. Another example of Moody’s commitment to nonviolence is her involvement with the famous series Woolworth sit-ins across the South in 1960. During that time, Woolworth was a prominent department store chain all across America. Unfortunately, Woolworth stores did not allow African-Americans to sit at the store’s lunch counter. In response, Moody and several of her fellow civil rights activists protested the discriminatory business practices of the

89. Ibid, 435.

90. Moody, 275-278.

91. Ibid, 276-278.

92. Ibid, 434-435.

company. During their protest, the racist white onlookers verbally and physically assaulted Moody and her fellow workers.⁹³ Regardless of the abuse she received while practicing her civil rights philosophy, Moody did not respond with violence and showed her deep commitment to both the philosophy of nonviolence and the goal of integration.

However, Anne Moody's civil rights philosophy did not constantly remain supportive of nonviolence. After a white terrorist killed several young girls while they attended Sunday school, Moody experienced a crisis of faith and became disillusioned with the efficacy of nonviolence as a means to change society. In an emotionally raw prayer, Moody declares to God "[n]onviolence is out" and asserts, "nonviolence has served its purpose."⁹⁴ Moody recalls that she further explained to her fellow civil rights activists that

we were only using [nonviolence] as a tactic to show, or rather dramatize, to the world how bad the situation is in the South. Well, I think we've had enough examples. I think we are overdoing it. After this bombing, if there are any more nonviolent demonstrations for the mere sake of proving what all the rest of them have, then I think we are overdramatizing the issue.⁹⁵

Although she does not use violence herself for the remainder of her memoir, Moody never reaffirms her belief in nonviolence as a tactic that the Civil Rights movement should use. Thus, while her early opinions align quite well with King's, Parsons', and Griffin's philosophies, Moody's later civil rights philosophy is more in line with Malcolm X's philosophy. But while Malcolm X did not advocate nonviolence if its use

93. Ibid, 287-289.

94. Ibid, 346-347.

95. Ibid, 348.

did not immediately fix the problem,⁹⁶ Anne Moody simply felt that the philosophy of nonviolence had served its purpose in the context of the American Civil Rights movement by bringing to light the mistreatment of African-Americans in the South.

In her memoir, Parsons is very straightforward in presenting her civil rights philosophy. Like Dr. King, Sara Mitchell Parsons was a devoted adherent to the philosophy of nonviolence. By running for public office, Parsons demonstrated her commitment to both a moderate and nonviolent approach. Dissimilar to either Dr. King, Malcolm X, or Moody, Parsons was unwilling to become involved in militant tactics such as nonviolent protest marches. Parsons recalls that she refused an invitation from Coretta Scott King to help picket a segregated store simply because she “lacked the courage” to do so.⁹⁷ Nevertheless, Parsons recounts several bold acts of nonviolent protest by others activists in Atlanta. One of the most distinctive of such protests was a series of “pray-ins” in front of segregated churches. While Parsons was a firm supporter of nonviolence and nonviolent protest, she was unfortunately unwilling to become involved on the “front lines” of the Civil Rights movement.⁹⁸ However, Parsons was also a staunch believer in segregation as a solution to race problems. Throughout her entire career as a member of the school board, she worked to end segregation and discrimination in Atlanta’s public schools. Having met with Dr. King numerous times and seen him preach multiple times, Parsons’ civil rights philosophy most closely resembles that of her friend and fellow activist.

96. Malcolm X and Haley, 422.

97. Parsons, 135.

98. Ibid, 80.

Similar to the memoirs of Coretta Scott King and Sara Mitchell Parsons, John Howard Griffin repeatedly affirms his support for nonviolence and integration. In Griffin's work in the Civil Rights movement, he gave a special focus to eliminating economic discrimination. When asking a gentleman in 1959 what he thought was the greatest issue facing African-American people, Griffin received the answer that "[e]qual job opportunities" were the solution to much of the problem facing young African-American people.⁹⁹ Later, Griffin asserts, "though financing is the key, other elements are no less important. Education, housing, job opportunities and the vote enter the picture of any improving community."¹⁰⁰ During the era of racial segregation in America, this dream of achieving a higher level of education and getting a better job proved to be quixotic. One of the principle problems, in Griffin's words, was the issue of "fragmented individualism. Griffin explains this term as the phenomena that occurred when African-Americans "tried to make it in this society: in order to succeed, he had to become an imitation white man – dress white, talk white, think white, express values of middle-class white culture (at least when [they] were in the presence of white [people])."¹⁰¹ In other words, African-Americans could only integrate if they assumed, or forced if necessary, all aspects of white culture upon themselves. Malcolm X's response to this same issue, the loss of African-American cultural identity, was to insist that ethnic isolation would be the best protection for African-Americans from racist whites. Griffin's own opinion was that integration must be an essential goal of the Civil Rights movement.

99. Griffin, 38.

100. Ibid, 131-132.

101. Ibid, 185-186.

In Griffin's view, the ideology of nonviolence that Martin Luther King Jr. advocated was deeply impactful in changing the conversation among civil rights activists. During the sixties, violence was an ever-present concern. Griffin recalls that a commission reported, "massive displays of so-called riot control was one of the deepest sources of resentment and could trigger off more riots."¹⁰² The great threat of this riot control, which Griffin explains was so over-used and heavy-handed as to make African-Americans feel their safety was threatened, as well as the countless acts of violence perpetrated by whites against African-Americans necessitated a response.¹⁰³ To many African-Americans at the time, the idea of African-American genocide at the hands of whites seemed a very real possibility. On the street, young African-American men would say to each other "take ten!" to each other since, as Griffin explains, they believed "that this country was moving toward the destruction of black people, and since the proportion was ten white to every black, then black men should take ten white lives for every black life taken by white men."¹⁰⁴ Even up to the eve of Dr. King's assassination, this fear of genocide seemed to find proof in many African-American people's eyes since "every time a black community was goaded into [violence], it served only the cause of racists and brought us closer to a genocidal situation."¹⁰⁵ In this tumultuous environment of fear and looming violence, African-American leaders were still determining what sort of response to give in response to attempts by white racists to goad African-Americans into violence.

102.Ibid 178.

103.Ibid, 191.

104.Ibid, 180.

105.Ibid, 183.

As for how to respond to this violence and hostility from white racists, Griffin commends Dr. King's philosophy of nonviolence as being essential in calming the tension between African-Americans and whites. Griffin asserts that the method of responding with nonviolence when abused drastically lessened the violence unleashed by Dr. King's death in 1968. In Griffin's words, the riots that follow King's death were "not the all-out race war that it could have been."¹⁰⁶ Additionally, Griffin's entire work aims itself at defeating segregation by exposing its effects on African-Americans.¹⁰⁷ In his Civil Rights philosophy, Griffin was a firm believer in nonviolence as a means to defeat segregation and economic discrimination, as well as peacefully defuse potentially violent racial hostilities.

106.Ibid 184.

107.Ibid, 1-2, 130.

V. Conclusion

In the study of these five civil rights activists' memoirs, it is apparent that there was an underlying similarity in their civil rights philosophies in that they all eventually supported the goal of integration for African-Americans. Additionally, all were at least partially accepting of the philosophy of nonviolence as a means to defeat the system of segregation and discrimination in the South. Where the activists differ is to what extent each is committed to using nonviolence. In the case of Anne Moody, she saw nonviolent protests as useful mechanization to dramatize the oppression of African-Americans in the South. However, in her mind, once the tactic had sufficiently shown the violence and oppression perpetrated by white racists against African-Americans, the tactic did no more good and only resulted in the harm of those who chose not to resist their attackers. As for Malcolm X, he simply did not wish to limit himself to only one reaction, that of nonviolence, when faced with the oppression caused by racist whites. As for Coretta Scott King and her husband, the philosophy of nonviolence was essential to both defeat the hatred of others and preserve humanity in the face of a potential nuclear holocaust. Finally, the civil rights philosophies of Sara Mitchell Parsons and John Howard Griffin closely adhered to Dr. King's own philosophy. Through the study of these five texts, it is evident that there exists no polar opposites and that although total commitment to nonviolence was predominant in three of the memoirists' philosophies, Malcolm X and Anne Moody for different reasons did not have a complete adherence to this philosophy.

As racism becomes less visible from the public perspective, the social issues facing society are different today from the issues of voting rights and segregation upon

which the civil rights leaders of the 50s and 60s focused much of their efforts. However, while there may not be a Bull Connor assaulting civil rights activists with firehoses and police attack dogs, there are still countless acts of racism every day. When one looks at wage gaps between whites and African-Americans and funding that for schools of primarily minority students is on average less than the funding for schools of mostly white students, one might wonder if there will ever be true equality between every race. Nevertheless, doubts about the eventual success of the civil rights movement did not dissuade any of the memoirists included in this study. Each embraced a diversity of tactics to achieve successfully the eventual goal of integration. As we look back today, it is easy to assume that the path they traveled was sure to them and with only a quick decision-making process did they choose their tactics. However, as can be seen in the stories of Malcolm X and Anne Moody, the decisions of civil rights activists about which tactics to use could easily change over time. Even Martin Luther King Jr. had a somewhat lengthy process by which he formulated his particular civil rights philosophy. Clearly, these civil rights leaders were neither certain of success or without thought in how they formulated their civil rights philosophies.

As these five activists demonstrate in their memoirs, one of the most pressing lessons that contemporary civil rights organizations must learn is the commitment to examine carefully which tactics are best to utilize. For activist movements like Black Lives Matter, the organization and structure of the Civil Rights movement that these five individuals helped create serves as an example of successful tactics and leadership. Even though today's racism manifests itself through more amorphous means than was evident during height of the Civil Rights movement, the courageous and tenacious mindset of

these five leaders show that when one works diligently change will happen. As the world becomes more interconnected thus creating more ethnically diverse society, every person must embrace a sacrificial mindset similar to the civil rights activists that gave up so much of their lives to serve those around them.

VI. Bibliography

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