Autobiography as Political Resistance:

Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi*

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation focuses on Anne Moody's use of the autobiographical genre as an extension of her political activism. Noting consistent values and conventions that govern the writing of political activists, this study asserts that Moody's narrative is best situated in the genre of political autobiography--a term coined by Angela Davis. Using Margo V. Perkins' text as a base to define autobiography as activism, this dissertation illustrates the consistent values that characterize Moody's narrative as political autobiography, resistance literature, and ultimately Black Power literature. Building on the works of Joanne Braxton, Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, bell hooks, Margo V. Perkins, Assata Shakur, and Johnny Stover, this project demonstrates the use of Moody's autobiography as a collective form of resistance that is reflective of autobiography as activism.

To frame its argument, this study theorizes how one comes into revolutionary consciousness, demonstrating the move toward activism as a process. Drawing on Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's autobiographical theory that the "narrated I" is distinguished from the "narrating I," this study asserts, as Francoise Lionnet suggests, that the "narrating I" is the vehicle to deliver recollections relevant to the autobiographer's agenda. This study emphasizes that the early version of the self Moody creates is consciously linked to her role as a future activist, ultimately demonstrating her political evolution through the emphatic linking of the personal and political.

Most importantly, this dissertation demonstrates that Moody's text represents a continuity--an autobiographical bridge--between representations of the Christian nonviolent civil rights movement and the Black Power movement of the late 1960's. This study argues that Moody's autobiography is ideologically poised at the intersection of civil rights and Black Power; therefore, it serves as *both* a civil rights autobiography and a Black Power autobiography. *Coming of Age in Mississippi* offers a unique contribution to the genre of Black Power autobiography for the way it facilitates unprecedented insight into the transition from non-violent civil rights ideology to revolutionary consciousness.

To Michael, Kerin, Kyle, Jack, Tess, and Liam.

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INTRODUCTION

In *Autobiography as Activism*, Margo V. Perkins examines how three women of the Black Power movement, Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, and Elaine Brown, use the genre of autobiography as a vehicle to deliver an alternative history of the civil rights movement. By connecting their personal lives to the political, these women use their life stories to both educate and mobilize their audiences. Perkins notes consistent values and conventions that govern the writing of political activists. She asserts that these expectations shape a genre of writing called political autobiography, a term coined by Angela Davis, who wrote that when she decided to write her autobiography "it was because I had come to envision it as a *political* autobiography that emphasized the people, the events and the forces in my life that propelled me to my present commitment" (*Autobiography* xvi). It is within this genre that Anne Moody's autobiography *Coming of Age in Mississippi* is best situated.

Anne Moody published her autobiography in 1968, a year traditionally marking the end of the civil rights movement.[1] Although her text is the best foot soldier autobiography of the civil rights movement, it has received scant attention from both historians and literary scholars. Importantly, Emmanuel Nelson notes,

[1] Many consider Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination on April 4th, 1968 as representing the end of the civil rights era. After the assassination of King, divisions within the civil rights organizations widened dramatically. The popularity of the Black Power movement was increasing, as well as the increase in violent responses to continued white police brutality. The two years prior to King's death, 1965-1967, were some of the most violent in history as represented in the number of riots in black neighborhoods in response to severe racism and resulting lack of opportunity; for example, in August, 1965, in Watts, California, over 34 people were killed, a thousand injured, and over 4,000 arrested for rioting in response to police brutality and racial oppression.

"Although *Coming of Age in Mississippi* is not an infrequently taught text on American campuses, it has not received the scholarly attention it deserves. There is only one article devoted entirely to Moody's autobiography" (284). One of the most overlooked scholarly contributions of Moody's autobiography is its emphasis on both the connection and shift from civil rights non-violence to Black Power. Like the women activists of the Black Power movement, Moody rejects mainstream assumptions about race and uses her text as an extension of her activism. This dissertation asserts that Moody's text, as a literary antecedent to the above authors, represents a continuity or an autobiographical bridge between representations of the Christian nonviolent civil rights movement of the early 1960's and the Black Power movement of the late 1960's. As a precursor to the women writing during the Black Power movement, Moody's autobiography offers critical insight into the scope of black women's activism during the early sixties by representing the beginning of the civil rights struggle, during a time when many activists believed in the method of non-violence in achieving racial equality, and offering a connection between historical periods and a better understanding of how one might embrace a more militant movement; therefore, Moody's literary activism can be viewed as a precursor to the texts of Davis and Shakur, but *more importantly*, as a rhetorical link between non-violence to a more radical approach in seeking civil rights. In this dissertation I conclude that one of the most significant contributions of Moody's autobiography is that it is *both* a civil rights autobiography and Black Power autobiography.

Significantly, Perkins, like other critics, fails to cite Moody's vital contributions to the both the genre of political autobiography, as well as the fundamental transition the text offers between the civil rights movement and the Black Power movement. Considering that the Black Power movement did not suddenly just appear--it grew in the wake of growing disillusionment and frustration with non-violence--Moody's autobiography is an essential component in understanding the rise in popularity of the Black Power movement and clearly illustrates a philosophy that anticipated the black power ideologies that emerge from the civil rights movement. Including Moody's autobiography in her study of Black Power narratives could have enriched Perkin's analysis, especially for the insight it provides in illustrating the beginning origins of the Black Power movement; thus, as I argue, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* is the first real glimpse of a Black Power woman's autobiography. As an activist and writer, Moody uses her text to represent the way in which non-violence gave way to a growing counterculture movement. In illuminating the negotiation between the civil rights movement and the Black Power movement, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* deserves an important place in American literature. Both historians and scholars fail to recognize the significant contributions Moody's autobiography offers to this historical period, specifically the illustration of change and modification in response to the growing violence of white supremacy. Suggesting that the civil rights movement was just the beginning in the fight for racial equality, Moody's autobiography ultimately acknowledges defeat in the methodology of non-violence by establishing relevant and vital connections between the failures of the

civil rights movement and the progression toward a more militant approach as embodied by the Black Power movement.

Building on the works of Joanne Braxton, Elaine Brown, Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, bell hooks, Margo Perkins, Assata Shakur, and Johnnie Stover, this dissertation demonstrates the use of Moody's autobiography as resistance literature, and more specifically as a collective form of resistance that is reflective of political autobiography. Using autobiography as an extension of her activism, Moody offers critical insight into her own transformation as a believer that non-violence alone will bring social justice to one that understands the faltering progress of the civil rights movement. In writing that nonviolent peaceful protests were not effective in bringing true social change to race relations, the objective of her political text is to cultivate alternative methods to counter the repressive and violent tactics of white supremacists.

In finding consistent values embraced by other activists, Perkins uses her own list of expectations to define political autobiography:

> (1) that the autobiographer will emphasize the story of the struggle over her own personal ordeals; (2) that she will use her own story both to document a history of the struggle and to further its political agenda; (3) that she will provide a voice for the voiceless; (4) that she will honor strategic silences in order to protect the integrity of the struggle as well as the welfare of other activists; (5) that she will expose oppressive conditions and the

> repressive tactics of the state; and (6) that she will use the autobiography as a form of political intervention, to educate as broad an audience as possible to the situation and the issues at stake. (7)

Using Perkins list as a foundation, this dissertation illustrates the consistent values that are present in *Coming of Age in Mississippi* that would characterize the text as political autobiography, resistance literature, and ultimately Black Power literature. Moody's text illuminates a commitment to ideas and actions that would help construct a society free of white supremacy and racial oppression by providing a counterhegemonic voice that challenges the dominant culture.

In writing her narrative, Moody chooses to establish her identity as a political activist. She models an ethos, a cognitive process, in which she demonstrates a self-awareness of the process of becoming a true revolutionary. As a writer, she traces this process of political development, and in doing so, offers her narrative as an example of how one arrives at a more radical political stance. Her text advocates for a more holistic understanding of how the civil rights movement transitioned from peaceful sit-ins to more aggressive modes of political protest. Moody uses--as Perkin's notes in her analysis of Davis and Shakur--her "life-writing as a tool for advancing political struggle" (xii). Thus, as Moody illustrates, the emphatic linking of the personal and the political is essential to the genre of political autobiography.

Certainly, as Perkins notes, one of the main concerns of those writing as political activists is to ensure that the community, or the plight of the community,

is at the core of the text, and that their own individual story is not read in isolation from the community.[2] Unlike the genre's historical emphasis on the heroic deeds of the individual, what Susan Stanford Friedman refers to as "a reflection of privilege," political autobiography emphasizes the author's community. For Moody, this is the black community in the segregated Mississippi Delta. In her autobiography, Moody not only exposes her own plight in a racist society, but the plight of all those who toil in the fields, working as sharecroppers to ensure the wealthy white landowners their position in society, those working as domestic servants in white women's houses, those trying to attain an education and a decent job, and those who eventually lose their lives at the hand of white supremacists.

As Joanne Braxton asserts in *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, "Black Women's autobiography is also an occasion for viewing the individual in relation to others with whom she shares emotional, philosophical, and spiritual affinities, as well as political realities" (9). In her essay "My Statue, My Self, Autobiographical Writings of Afro-American Women," Elizabeth Fox-Genovese continues this analysis by noting that the autobiographical works of black women writing during this period "do bear witness to a collective experience--to black powers of survival and creativity as well as to white oppression" (71). By focusing on collective experience, many of these women writers, including

[2] As Perkins notes, many human rights activists emphasized that their individual plight was representative of the plight of their community. She notes that both the narratives of Domilita Barrios of Bolivia, and Rigoberta Menchu of Guatemala are exemplary examples of cross-cultural political narratives/testimonios that emphasize community. She notes that Barrios "captures the ethos of their shared project best when she speaks of her own autobiography as the 'personal experience of my people' "(8).

Moody, eschew the conventional mode of putting the individual "I" first and view the autobiographical genre as a way to focus on issues that are important to the community as a whole. As Selwyn R. Cudjoe asserts in her analysis of Maya Angelou:

> [African American autobiography] is meant to serve the group rather than glorify the individual's exploits . . . . The autobiographical subject thus emerges as an almost capricious member of the group, selected to tell his or her own story and to explain the condition of the group rather than to assuage his or her egotistical concerns. As a consequence, the autobiographical statement emerges as a *public* rather than a *private* gesture*, me-ism* gives way to *our-ism* and superficial concerns with the *individual subject* (individualism) give way to the *collective subjection* of the group. (280)

Moody's autobiography, too, is representative of the community's experiences, demonstrating a collective at the center of the text. Her autobiography offers important insight into the harsh conditions of the segregated South that affected her community.

In her article titled "Breaking Silence: The Woman Warrior," Shirley Nelson Garner discusses the significance of public speaking and public *writing*--the fact that these acts are an assertion in themselves, even radical, for women who have been culturally marginalized. Looking at Maxine Hong Kingston's autobiography, *The Woman Warrior*, Garner notes that the author's "breaking of

silence makes her a woman warrior . . . . Her particular mode of warfare is her writing" (118). Part of the responsibility of a woman warrior is to use her pen to fight outside oppression. Moody, like Kingston, takes on the role of a warrior and uses the genre of autobiography to offer a counterhegemonic voice for those who have been silenced in the tradition of white supremacy. As a warrior, Moody uses her autobiography as a call for the liberation of those who are victims of racial oppression, and as she poignantly states: "[to] let the world know what was happening to us" (422).

In writing a political autobiography, Moody has the challenge that many activists face, and that, Perkins asserts, is of "recreat[ing] themselves as well as the era they recount. Many things are at stake for them in this process. These things include control of the historical record, control over their own public images, and control over how the resistance movement in which they are involved is defined and portrayed" (xiii). Throughout the text, Moody recreates her image by defying the controlling images that she faced on a daily basis. She confronts the image of African Americans as lazy as a justification of poverty, demonstrating how much they work for little pay, and ultimately turns the dominant image around by stating that it is the white women in her community who are lazy and cannot keep their houses clean without a black servant. She undermines the Jezebel image, the black woman as promiscuous, by revealing that it is the white men in the community that pursue black women; she confronts and challenges the image of the black man as violent and aggressive by writing about the murder of Emmett Till and other young black men "found floating in a

river or dead somewhere with their bodies riddled with bullets" (127). In addition, by writing about the murder of Emmett Till and other black members of the community, Moody reveals the extent of corruption within the Mississippi justice system, shedding light on the severity of racism in her community.

In theorizing their life stories, Perkins notes:

> activist autobiographers seek to alter the consciousness of their readers. Their narratives address crucial omissions in the historical record and endeavor to destabilize dominant ways of knowing by openly challenging hegemonic assumptions. The radical significance of activists' texts is in how their words compel readers to grapple with the sociopolitical landscape *outside* of the text. (25)

Moody's text cries out for action and urges her audience to interrogate the system which has allowed racism and oppression to continue. The end of her autobiography stresses the urgency for action in attaining social justice.

In addition, Perkins notes that none of the women she analyzes identify themselves as literary figures. She argues that women writing political autobiography immersed themselves in the political struggle for civil rights, and "their autobiographies are additionally distinguished by each writer's precarious status vis-à-vis mainstream society and the law, and their autobiographical focus on this particular aspect of their lives" (23). Similarly, Moody does not identify herself as a literary figure. Her motivation in writing her life story is to educate her readers on the severe racial oppression of the Mississippi Delta thriving under

white political supremacy. Just the very act of writing--for the purpose of exposing all the injustices of segregation--places her in a precarious position for going against a history based on white authority and segregation. Her text demands participation in an exclusive arena previously dominated by white discourse.

In *Reading Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson discuss the politics of remembering. They assert that "contexts are politically charged. What is remembered and what is forgotten, and *why,* change over time. Thus remembering also has a politics. There are struggles over who has authority to remember and what they are authorized to remember . . . " (18). Moody is personally involved and essentially fighting on the "frontlines" in the battle to achieve racial equality, and this grants her the authority to write about this period in American history. Moody writes her autobiography shortly after her involvement in the movement, so many of the events she describes are fresh in her memory. Still, she has the authority to choose what is significant in regards to furthering her own political agenda. Watson and Smith address the challenges of "remembering" and the "fierce struggles over how the American past is remembered at such crucial junctures as the Civil War, the civil rights movement, and the Vietnam War era" (19). Undoubtedly, Moody's act of remembering is crucial to both her culture and her audience. Like the events surrounding the Black Power movement, there were many select versions of what really occurred during the civil rights movement, and her act of writing reveals that she certainly remembers differently than those in power, who demonstrate a selective memory

that works in their favor. Her act of remembering allows for significant contributions to the history of the civil rights movement.

Certainly, as Moody's text can be viewed as a precursor and connection to the women writing during the Black Power movement, there were other African American women writers who came before Moody's text and used their personal narratives to resist the dominant culture and expose the harsh conditions surrounding their communities. Using their personal stories to expose the injustice and inequality of African Americans, women such as Harriet Jacobs, Sojourner Truth, Mary Church Terrell, and Ida. B. Wells-- who argued that lynching was a form of both political and economic oppression--offer a connection between the past and the period of the civil rights movement. This represents a continuum in the efforts to expose, through the genre of autobiography, the harsh conditions of the oppressed. In *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black Women's Autobiography*, Johnnie Stover asserts that black women writing their autobiographies in the nineteenth century create a new form of autobiography, "not so much as a subgenre as a countergenre," that is based on resistance. These women resist the traditional form of autobiography and use the genre as an act of resistance--and often use the pronoun "we" instead of "I." Stover writes: "As nineteenth- century African American women began recording their narratives for themselves, they continued to speak for their own needs as well as for those of the other members of the communities" (33). This demonstrates the interrelatedness of the texts of women writing before Moody, Moody's continuity in this tradition, and the women writing after. Political

realities are shared from generation to generation. Many of the same needs and political concerns in Moody's text have already been established by these literary antecedents, and these concerns are renewed in *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, demonstrating a lack of progress. Not insignificantly, Moody's autobiography ends with bitterness and disillusionment, leading her to declare, "Non-violence is out" (349). Unlike her predecessors, Moody's text does not display a sense of hope, setting her apart from her predecessors. As previously noted, her text represents the first glimpse of Black Power women's autobiography.

In illustrating how one comes into revolutionary consciousness, Chapter One focuses on the shaping of a political activist. Drawing on Perkin's analysis, this chapter demonstrates the move toward activism and resistance as a process; Perkins notes: "[t]he autobiographical form allows activists to offer as models--for understanding, imitating, and critiquing--their own processes of coming into revolutionary consciousness" (41). My analysis begins by looking closely at how Moody theorizes and analyzes her formative years; her politicizing of selective past experiences illuminate her developing political consciousness and her determination to fight social injustice. In recounting her childhood and adolescent years, Moody illustrates the events in her life that lead to her involvement and commitment to the civil rights movement. Drawing on Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's autobiographical theory that the "narrated 'I' is distinguished from the narrating 'I,'" this chapter focuses on, as Francoise Lionnet suggests, the narrating I as the agent or the vehicle to deliver specific recollections that are deemed important to the autobiographer's agenda (*Autobiographical Voices* 193);

therefore, as I argue, the version of the self that Moody creates is one that is consciously linked to her future representation and role as an activist.

Chapter Two illuminates autobiography as political intervention. An aspect of political autobiography includes challenging hegemonic history and the dominating images that are part of this history. Throughout her life story, Moody combats the negative controlling images of black women and men that permeate her culture and justify social injustice. In addition to using her autobiography to combat and correct negative stereotypes, this chapter demonstrates how Moody's text is consistent with Perkins' expectations of political autobiography by illustrating Moody's use of the text to provide "a voice for the voiceless." Moody includes examples of those who have been silenced or excluded from a hegemonic society by telling their stories and taking away the power of the dominant culture to silence their voices or minimize their plight. Barbara Harlow writes, "[t]he connection between knowledge and power, the awareness of the exploitation of knowledge by the interests of power to create a distorted historical record, is central to resistance narratives" (116). In keeping with the objective of political autobiography, Moody's text provides vivid details of specific events of the civil rights movement and the ways in which these events are constructed and distorted; in doing so, Moody actively provides a counter-history that challenges dominant discourse.

Chapter Three focuses on the significant role young black women activists played in shaping the civil rights movement. Moody's autobiography documents the vital contributions made by the young women involved in the fight

for equality and freedom by providing many personal examples of women activists demonstrating an unwavering commitment to end segregation. In representing herself as one who devotes every part of her life to the movement, Moody emphasizes, through her construct of the narrative "I," the sacrifices that were required to be fully committed to the goal of attaining civil rights. In transcending traditional gender roles, as well as traditional racial roles, Moody writes that her activism makes many members of the black community uncomfortable, resulting in her feeling profound isolation and detachment from her own community. As Perkins asserts, "[e]effectively challenging or dismantling structures of domination first requires an awareness of how one participates in them, that is, how one's individual actions and values function either to maintain or to disrupt dominant forms" (102). Importantly, she illuminates the profound isolation felt by many young women activists from their communities--and even from their own families.

Importantly, Moody's autobiography is part of a collective effort among many women who fought, some who died, for racial equality. It is particularly valuable for the contributions it makes in revealing the issues and conflicts that many young women activists faced while working and canvassing in the Mississippi Delta. *Coming of Age in Mississippi* contributes to the legacy of the young women foot soldiers who were willing to put their lives on the line day after day in order to propel the movement forward. The narrative is a vital example of how young women activists shaped the movement, and, significantly, it offers a better understanding of their invaluable activism.

Chapter Four demonstrates *Coming of Age in Mississippi* as a precursor to the Black Power movement autobiographies by illustrating one of the most significant aspects of the autobiography: Moody's use of the text to chronicle her own changing consciousness that eventually leads to her disillusionment with the non-violent approach of the civil rights movement. It is within this chapter that the tension Moody exhibits between non-violence and a more radical approach is fully explored as she contemplates her continued activism. At the point in her life when she is writing her autobiography, almost five years after leaving the movement, Moody's language demonstrates that she is at an ideological crossroads, illuminating her various stages of resistance and activism. Illustrating her uncertainly with the effectiveness of non-violence against such volatile tactics used by white supremacists, this chapter ultimately concludes that the final section of Moody's autobiography is in fact a Black Power autobiography. In illustrating concerns and issues addressed in the Black Power movement, and by using the autobiographical genre as resistance literature that acts as an extension of her activism, Moody's text prefigures the autobiographies of Davis and Shakur.

Reading Moody's text against the narratives of Davis and Shakur reveal dialogical moments between these three women writers. Chapter Five demonstrates how these connections allow for a more complex understanding of the shift between civil rights and Black Power. Reading these three narratives in tandem facilitates a richer discussion of how one evolves into a radical subject and demonstrates, through language, a radical political consciousness. Moody's narrative offers a unique contribution to the scholarship of Black Power

autobiography for the way in which it facilitates unprecedented insight into the connection between the civil rights movement and the more militant Black Power movement by offering a rhetorical bridge between both movements. Noting the parallels between Moody's narrative and the later narratives of Davis and Shakur, this chapter demonstrates the link between the early part of the civil rights movement and the Black Power movement, thus expanding our understanding of how each narrative contributes to a more complex comprehension of a tumultuous era. This final chapter concludes by examining the way activists' texts use language as a tool of empowerment for advancing their political struggle.

CHAPTER 1

Reflection of Formative Experiences

and the Shaping of a Political Activist

There is perhaps no literary form more conducive than autobiography to activists' efforts to emphatically link the personal to the political.

--Margo V. Perkins[3]

Black revolutionaries do not drop from the moon. We are created by our conditions. Shaped by our oppression.

--Assata Shakur[4]

I have come out to you from reconstruction eyes
that closed on black humanity
that reduced black hope to the dark
huts of America;

I have come to you from the lynching years,
the exploitation of black men and women by
a country that allowed the swinging of
strange fruits from southern trees

--Sonia Sanchez[5]

Anne Moody provides an autobiography that offers political resistance and a collective struggle and this begins with her first section, "Childhood." Instead of beginning with her years in the civil rights movement, Moody's narrative starts at the beginning--when she is a young child. Including details that describe an existence that does not differ greatly from the Antebellum period, Moody writes about the abject conditions and prevalent hopelessness surrounding her community in order to instantiate the need for political resistance and action.

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[3] Margo V. Perkins. *Autobiography as Activism*. (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2000). 41.

[4] Assata Shakur. *Assata: An Autobiography*. (Westport: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1987) 52.

[5] Sonia Sanchez. "Reflections After the June12th March for Disarmament." *Homegirls and Handgrenades*. (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1984).

Moody uses the genre of political autobiography to illuminate the haunting images of her childhood that she finds to be most crucial in both educating and mobilizing her audience: Poverty, hunger, lynchings, police brutality, violence, and a culture dominated by white supremacy. Depicting the choice to become an activist as a process, one that stems back to early childhood experiences, allows Moody's audience to understand the way in which she arrives at her present political position.

In this chapter I focus on Moody's use of the autobiographical genre to both theorize and politicize her past experiences in order to demonstrate a move toward revolutionary consciousness. I also consider the way that her autobiography functions as an extension of her political activism.

Margo V. Perkins writes that a key component of political autobiography is the ability of "subjects [to] manipulate the fiction of narrative to make sense of the past through the present" (42). It is this fiction of development that becomes "an indispensable aspect of *political autobiography*" (Perkins 42). This condition, as Frank Kermode refers to as the "double consciousness" of autobiography, is essential for understanding the process in which one moves toward a revolutionary consciousness--and, as Perkins importantly notes, this is achieved by theorizing significant events that illustrate the birth and development of a revolutionary consciousness; therefore, "events that may have had any number of meanings at one time are reduced to a single meaning that enables them to fit more convincingly into a narration of development" (Perkins 42). Moody's illustration of childhood remembrances provide a way in which to trace her

development and shift from an activist embracing non-violence to an activist embracing a radical stance. Maintaining the importance of past experiences in constructing radical subjectivity, Nellie McKay offers her analysis as it relates to black women's resistance narratives, "Childhood remembrances, recorded in autobiography, providing an excellent source for examining how these women understood their own development toward such radical stances" (107).

In writing extensively about the beginning years of her life and the effect these years have on shaping her sense of class consciousness, Moody presents a state of political and social awareness that is paradigmatic of political and resistance autobiography. For Moody's parents, the role of sharecropper does not vary much from the role of a slave, and through her visceral description of her childhood memories, the sense of economic powerlessness that surrounds her community is revealed. Upon closer examination of her family's economic situation, one can hear echoes of Maya Angelou's phrase from *The Heart of a Woman*, "[i]f you're black in this country, you're on a plantation" (33). In using her life story as a parallel between the contemporary situation of blacks and the historical reality of slavery, Moody emphasizes the fact that her community still continues to be victimized by colonial domination. The texts opens with Moody's reflection of her early childhood: "I'm still haunted by dreams of the time we lived on Mr. Carter's plantation. Lots of Negroes lived on this place. Like Mama and Daddy they were all farmers" (3). Revealing how her perception of class difference is shaped, Moody notes that Mr. Carter's house looked "like a big lighted castle" (5). In contrast, all the "Negro shacks down in the bottom began to

fade with the darkness" (5). Moody's analysis of the disparity between the whites in her community and the hopeless situation of the poor black sharecroppers trapped in abject poverty highlight the particular conditions that necessitate action.

In his analysis of young radicals against the Vietnam War, Kenneth Keniston discusses the connection between childhood and adult activists: "childhood creates in each of us physiological configurations that summarize the tensions and joys of our early lives. These configurations are, in one way or another, interwoven into our adult political commitments" (76). This analysis is relevant to Moody's account of her evolving consciousness as her text poignantly illustrates that the personal is political. By representing vast differences in the quality of life between blacks and whites at such a young age, Moody the autobiographer establishes a political foundation for her earlier activism. The significance of class disparity as it exists in the segregated South is seen throughout Moody's childhood and adolescence in *Coming of Age in Mississippi* as she provides a firsthand account of growing up poor and black in the Delta.[6]

In keeping with the objective of political autobiography--to use one's story to document a history of the struggle--Moody's text represents a continuum of collective resistance. Bernice Johnson Reagon asserts that black women's autobiography is really the telling of cultural history, a self-conscious

[6] Importantly, as Joanne Braxton points out, in many autobiographies of black women, "childhood receives scant attention" *(Black Women Writing Autobiography* 110). In contrast, Moody spends a significant amount of time writing about her childhood and adolescence in order to establish a political foundation for her text.

continuation of the slave narrative. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese identifies this important connection as well: "Autobiographies of black women...are inescapably grounded in the experience of slavery and the literary tradition of slave narratives" (*Writings of Afro-American Women* 65). This view is certainly applicable to Moody's autobiography as her text establishes themes, archetypes, and motifs that were previously addressed in slave narratives. This recognition reveals the extent in which Moody self-consciously connects her own experiences to the experiences of former slaves. In doing so, she presents an awareness of her present condition by strategically linking it to the historical period when her ancestors were struggling to be free. As her writing reveals, the connection between her ancestors and her current self aids in shaping her understanding of how her own political consciousness awakens. Perkins notes that "in addition to telling their own experiences, [activists] use their narratives as sites of critical pedagogy to share stories of the struggle and to convey other important (usually historical) information that might otherwise be lost" (40). Similarly, Moody uses her narrative to invoke parallels between slave narratives and her own experiences to demonstrate that black communities continue to be victimized by white supremacy.

In linking her autobiography to a consistent theme addressed in slave narratives, Moody's reflection of formative experiences addresses the separation of children and parents. Moody writes that she never "saw Mama and Daddy because they were in the field every day except Sunday" (4). In drawing a clear parallel between her condition as a child and the former condition of slave

children, Moody signifies that her experiences as a young child do not differ greatly from the experiences of former slave children. Prior to being responsible for caring for her own sister, Moody is left in the hands of her eight year old uncle who repeatedly abused her by instilling physical and psychological fears within her. As a young child, Moody is essentially left to care for herself because her mother cannot afford decent childcare.

Interestingly, in comparison to Harriet Jacobs' confession to her reader: "I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of my happy childhood had passed away" (3), Moody writes of a childhood in which she was always conscious of her family's condition; her testimony of recognizing her social condition as a young child is consistent with the goal of writing a political autobiography. In *Reading Autobiography*, Smith and Watson remind us that "the narrated 'I' is distinguished from the narrating 'I'...The narrated 'I' is the object, the protagonist of the narrative, the version of the self that the narrating 'I' chooses to constitute through recollection for the reader" (60). Many autobiographies, such as Moody's, begin with memories of childhood. But as Smith and Watson importantly point out, "the child is not doing the remembering or the narrating of the story. Nor is that narrated "I" directly experiencing the past" (61). At the center of Moody's text is her conscious choice to reproduce events significant in shaping her persona as a political activist. The child she conjures up focuses on the events that allow her audience to gain access to the perils of growing up in the Mississippi Delta. Mapping intersections of the psychological trauma of feeling alone and abandoned as a child and the physical danger of being unattended, the

child persona Moody creates represents the struggles of the black community as a result of the destructive forces implemented by a culture of white supremacy, emphasizing both the continued social powerlessness of her community and her end goal of writing an activist's autobiography to expose these conditions.

In her essay "Writing Autobiography," bell hooks states:

> the act of writing one's autobiography is a way to find again that aspect of self and experience that may no longer be an actual part of one's life but is a living memory shaping and informing the present. Autobiographical writing was a way for me to evoke the particular experience of growing up southern and black in segregated communities. (155)

In retelling her past, Moody writes of the dangers consistent with growing up as a child in the segregated South--including almost perishing in a fire that burns her family's shack to the ground. The events she includes all contribute to her present self: the activist trying to change a culture that creates the very conditions that place so many black children in danger, mostly as a result of being left alone and unattended. Perkins notes that most resistance literature is written in teleological form: "[a] writer rereads the early years of her life in such a way as to illuminate how she arrived at her present circumstances" (41). Using the politicizing of past events to emphasize her current state of awareness in understanding the depth of racial inequality engulfing her community, Moody's text is consistent with the conventions of political autobiography.

In describing her childhood struggles, Moody addresses the events that shape her class consciousness. She writes of the impact of being abandoned by her father at a young age. Illustrating the hardships that became a part of daily life due to his absence, Moody portrays her mother as raising three children on her own. She writes of her mother's refusal to accept any help from her father because he left her for another woman while she was pregnant with his third child. Initially unable to understand her mother's attitude, Moody indicates that her mother's sense of pride and self-determination result in there barely being enough food on the table, but her tone in illustrating her mother's independence and desire to support her children on her own is one of admiration and respect. Yet, the separation of her parents, and the financial responsibility her mother carries, has a significant impact on her family's economic situation and her developing awareness of class hierarchy.

In creating her story, Moody reveals to her reader that by age nine she is helping support the family household. As McKay points out in her essay "The Girls Who Became Women," "[p]oor black children assume greater responsibility for themselves and younger siblings at an early age, and in many cases, the earnings of the very young children are an essential part of the family budget" (107). Thus, Moody recalls that her income is essential in ensuring that there is food to eat. She tells her readers, "I was nine years old and I had my first job. I earned seventy-five cents and two gallons of milk per week" (39). She writes that later she will work in the fields with her mother and Raymond, her stepfather, trying to help harvest the crops so that the family will have enough to eat. She

adds that, after working in the fields, she works as a maid to try and supplement the family income. Making a point of addressing the lack of childhood that exists for her, Moody notes that even though she works as hard as she can, she arrives at the realization that there "were just too many mouths to feed" (118). Moody clearly carries the burden and feels, even at a young age, that she is responsible for feeding her younger siblings because her mother is not making enough as a domestic servant to support the family.

In recounting her early childhood years, Moody devotes considerable attention to pointing out the exploitation of black women working as domestic servants. Using her mother's situation as an example, Moody recalls that her mother barely made enough to feed her children, and often had to resort to stealing vegetables from the garden of the family she worked for in order to have enough food. This testimony shows the gross disparity between whites and blacks in Centreville, and that no matter how hard her mother worked, she cannot escape poverty. Perkins draws attention to the American Protestant work ethic as a myth, that if one only works hard enough then he or she can have a decent quality of life, as an important part of resistance American autobiography. This myth is addressed continuously in *Coming of Age in Mississippi* through various sections devoted to addressing poverty and its lack of opportunity. Using her own family as an example, Moody exclaims that the "white lady Mama was working for worked her so hard that she always came home griping about backaches" (31). Yet, all those backaches afforded her were beans for supper. Moody exposes the lack of opportunity available to those who are black and living in Mississippi.

Her collective memory, which evokes a reactionary response to the hardships her mother faces in the workforce, essentially "killing herself for more than seven years working on one job after another trying to feed us and keep us in school and all," demonstrates a move toward a revolutionary awareness that class separatism is based on color (45). Moody confronts the labor inequality associated with segregation by pointing out the job disparities within her community, disparities that are fueled by a Eurocentric view which allows and perpetuates the exploitation of those who are black by providing little compensation for work that is done.

In addition to educating her audience about the lack of decent jobs available to blacks, Moody addresses the disparity in segregated education by providing vivid details documenting her early educational experiences. She describes the school she attends as being "a little one-room rotten wood building" with little heat (14). Moody portrays her teacher, Reverend Carson, as abusive. In anger, he often took a switch to the children. Moody confesses: "I was so scared of him I never did anything. I hardly opened my mouth. I don't remember a word he said in class. I was too scared to listen to him" (15). This recollection is an example of Moody highlighting past experiences in order to demonstrate the way in which the personal is political. Moody's days in the classroom are dominated by the fear of a teacher who tells her: "I'm goin' to beat yo' brains out!" (16). Similar to other activists, Moody recognizes that the school room is in itself a

political arena by revealing the way in which power is inextricably linked to quality of education.[7]

Moody describes herself as a very superior student; therefore, one concludes that she is in fact self-taught. Moody's later successes in school demonstrate that she was able to thrive even though the foundation of her education was weak and unequal. Beyond critiquing the segregated school system while focusing on her superior scholastic achievements, Moody promotes her own ability to be diligent and successful in a society that did not grant her the same educational opportunities as the white children. The way in which she represents herself in the text is connected to how she wants to be perceived by her audience. Her illustration of herself as intellectually superior is important because it demonstrates her strength and perseverance, characteristics that will later be paramount to her role as an activist and writer.

Continuing with her goal of proving to the world that she was just as intelligent as any white student, Moody writes, with considerable detail, of her superior scholastic abilities. One such detail involves tutoring the son of Mrs. Burke, the racist white woman who employs her as a housekeeper. By including this example, Moody is countering the dominant ideology that black students are inferior; she is rewriting history by challenging the assumption that black students are illiterate. Even though she does not receive an equal education, and has to

[7] Later in the narrative, Moody writes about the first "separate but equal" school she attends: "I was thinking about how dumb we were to accept it. I knew the only reason the whites were being so nice was that they were protecting their own schools. Our shiny new school would never be equal to any school of theirs. All we had was a shiny new empty building where they always had the best teachers, more state money, and better equipment" (229-30).

actively pursue her own education, she is able to surpass white students in her community. Moody writes that Mrs. Burke "especially didn't like that Wayne was looking up to me now as his teacher'" (160). By using the term "teacher," Moody is subverting the racial ideology of southern whites by placing herself in a superior position. The language Moody uses to reconstruct this incident illustrates her own changing consciousness as she is actively challenging the dominant discourse.

Recalling the many hours of tutoring she provided to Mrs. Burke's son and several other white students in the community, Moody notes the confidence this experience invokes in her. This becomes an important moment in her development as she reveals to her readers: "courage was growing in me too. Little by little it was getting harder for me not to speak out" (163). These lines signify that she is beginning to find her voice and finds it quite difficult to not "talk back" to the dominant culture. Still, she is reminded of her mother's warning: "Just do your work like you don't know nothing" (163). The complexity of Moody's situation is represented in the conflict between speaking and silence: feeling torn between cultural expectations (represented by her mother's position of silence) and those of a developing political persona who is in the process of realizing that political transformation can begin only when someone breaks silence.

The beginning of *Coming of Age in Mississippi* involves an incident paradigmatic of many black autobiographies--the seven year old Moody quickly learns the hierarchal separation between blacks and whites based on skin color.

Recalling an incident that takes place in a movie theater, Moody describes her "awakening" or "coming of age" into the world of segregation. Revealing that as a little girl she is not aware of the social constructs that forbid blacks and whites to sit together at the movie theater, Moody recalls being punished by her mother for trying to enter the same section of a movie theater as the white children she played with on a daily basis. As result of her actions, Moody notes, she was dragged out of the theater by her mother, who angrily told her, "Essie Mae, um gonna try my best to kill you when I get you home. I told you 'bout running up these stores and things like you own 'em!" (33). The incident leads Moody to confess: "Up until that time I had never really thought about it" (33). Her perception of racial difference is realized when she learns that black and white children were not the same according to Mississippi law. Moody devotes considerable time analyzing the above incident involving the white children, stating that now "all of a sudden they were white, and their whiteness made them better than me" (34). She explains that it is their *whiteness* that allows them to sit in a nice section of the movie theater, whereas her *blackness* excludes her from the same section. For Moody, this event signifies a fundamental change in her perception of her social identity.

In writing about her evolving class consciousness, Moody continues to analyze the movie theater incident, "I knew we were going to separate schools and all, but I never knew why" (33). Constantly taught to not ask why, the narrator finds herself unable to not ask *why,* emphasizing that she is no longer able to ignore the confines of racial segregation. Her continued questioning of

race leads her to declare: "I now realized that not only were they better than me because they were white, but everything they owned and everything connected with them was better than was available to me" (34). Her questioning then, as a child--and as an activist--marks a departure from the way in which she was taught to remain silent. Here, Moody demonstrates that this is part of the process of becoming aware of the inequality surrounding her community.

In an attempt to theorize the absurdity of white supremacy, Moody writes to demystify racial differences. Because racial hierarchy in regards to privilege does not make sense to her as a child, she tells her reader, "[t]here is a secret to it besides being white" (34). Moody uses this incident to demonstrate the absurdity of racial segregation, and by using a childhood example, Moody is able to point out that there has to be more than color that allows one group to be so privileged. Her curiosity leads her to examine the white children in her neighborhood to see if they are in fact physically different from black children. After a thorough physical examination, Moody concludes that there are no differences, and that she will still have to search to find out the "secret" based on binary oppositions of black and white, an opposition that allows whites to have nice schools, beautiful homes with indoor plumbing, and many other nice things that she and her family went without. Her conclusion represents a significant aspect of her own self-identity: her realization that she is no different from the white children in her neighborhood; therefore, there is no reasonable explanation for racial segregation. In an almost mocking tone, she highlights the ridiculousness of white supremacy, and challenges the dominant racist ideology which is based on the

dehumanization of blacks by overtly declaring that there are no differences. As Jane Anderson points out, "Moody continues to remind her reader that 'race' is subjective" (35).

Moody's continued curiosity of physical racial differences leads her to question the color of her mother's own brothers. Confused about the light skin color of her mother's two young brothers, Sam and Walter, so light she originally believes they are white, Moody asks why they do not have the same skin color as their mother. In an angry tone, her mother responds, "Cause us daddy ain't that color. Now you shut up! Why you gotta know so much all the time" (26). In her article "Re-Writing Race," Anderson contends that "[b]y calling Sam and Walter 'white,' Moody appropriates an almost sacred term in American society. American language constructs 'white' as a quality which must be safeguarded from degeneration, for its very value depends upon purity" (37). As an author, Moody uses terms that she sees fits to describe racial differences, and, as Anderson asserts, "Moody challenges such words as 'white' and 'black'. She becomes the authority in describing her world, using terms she sees fit" (37). Using autobiography as a vehicle to challenges dominant white discourse, Moody uses the dominant language to define race and counter racial segregation.

Moody writes vividly about her mother's anger in response to her questioning the color of Walter and Sam, and by doing so reveals her mother's own self-concept of color. In addition, by recalling and including this conversation in her autobiography, Moody addresses the reality of bi-racial children in the community. Bringing to light the issue of interracial relationships,

Moody addresses the hypocrisy of the segregationists' views on racial mixing by exposing the myth of racial purity by noting that it is debunked by the very ones who are trying to validate its legitimacy.

Moody's narrative includes an analysis of bi-racial children--or those that she refers to as "high yellow," and her discussion addresses the hegemony that exists within her own community. Bringing this issue to light, Moody includes the treatment her mother receives from her stepfather's mother, Miss Pearl. Noting that Raymond's family are "real yellow people" and that Miss Pearl "looked like a slightly tanned white woman," Moody writes that her mother is never accepted by Raymond's mother or the rest of his family (26). She tells the reader that Raymond's family did not want him to marry her mother because she was not "yellow." This marks a critical point in Moody's awareness of how racism has been internalized by her own community. Recognizing this same internal hegemony in her essay "Black Beauty and Black Power," bell hooks writes: "Coming of age before black power, most black folks faced the implications of color caste either through devaluation or overvaluation. In other words to be born light meant one was born with an advantage, recognized by everyone. To be born dark was to start life handicapped, with serious disadvantage" (121). Moody explains how this form of internalized racism affected her mother's relationship with Raymond and how her mother was devalued within her own community for having darker skin.

As bell hooks suggests in her essay "Feminist Politicization: A Comment," "[t]here is much exciting work to be done when we use confessions and memory

as a way to theorize experience, to deepen our awareness, as part of the process of radical politicization" (110). Through memory, Moody's autobiography illuminates the significant experiences of her childhood and adolescence that ultimately lead her to act, to write, to ultimately confess: "I was fifteen years old when I began to hate white people" (136). This statement is made in response to Emmett Till's murder, and she portrays this event as one of the catalysts in motivating her activism. At this point, her choice of language demonstrates an open act of resistance by including this very controversial statement, a statement that will undeniably get the attention of both her white and black audiences. This representation of rage demonstrates Moody's developing awareness of the corrupt political atmosphere engulfing Mississippi, resulting in her own disconnect from the whites in her community. The death of Emmett Till is significant in the way in which it illuminates the beginning of the narrator's deepening awareness of the lack of social justice available to blacks in Mississippi.

In Moody's text, aside from awakening her political consciousness, the murder of Emmett Till represents her own vulnerability in the community. For Moody, the personal quickly becomes political as she tries to comprehend the magnitude of the situation. In recalling his murder, Moody theorizes the effect this heinous act has on her, "Before Emmett Till's murder, I had known the fear of hunger, hell, and the Devil. But now there was a new fear known to me--the fear of being killed just because I was black" (132). Moody learns, through a conversation that she has with Mrs. Burke, the woman who employs her as a domestic servant--and whose husband is a member of the Ku Klux Klan, that

Emmett Till is murdered "because he got out of his place with a white woman" (132). Moody writes to expose that leaving one's "place" was almost certainly punishable by death. In a chilling tone, Moody recalls Mrs. Burke tells the young Moody that Mississippi boys would have known better. The information Moody provides illustrates, without a doubt, just how bad the situation in Mississippi is for blacks who ignored the social expectations dictated by Jim Crow. When writing that Mrs. Burke compares Till's age to the narrator's own age, Moody recognizes the significance of the event, recognizes that this *could be her* if she ever steps out of her place. The conversation with Mrs. Burke, which Moody perceives as a subtle threat, has such an impact on her that, she relates, she went home "shaking like a leaf on a tree" (132). This profound moment for Moody functions on two levels. First, her recollection of the conversation and comments made by Mrs. Burke divulge the extent of intense fear that became a part of life for many Mississippi blacks. Second, this incident functions to expose the extent of racism that was ingrained within white members of society, so indoctrinated into their psyche that they would express or feel no remorse over the death of a young black man.[8]

Prior to the murder of Emmett Till, Moody recalls a conversation where she overheard her mother discussing a Negro man beaten to death. Moody's curiosity leads her to ask her mother who would do such a thing? Her mother

[8] In an interview given years after Till's murder, Myrlie Evers reflects on the impact of his death at the time: "The Emmett Till case shook the foundation of Mississippi, both black and white--the white community because it had become nationally publicized, with us blacks, because it said even a child was not safe from racism and bigotry and death" (qtd. in Williams 46).

responds by telling the young girl that "[a]n Evil Spirit killed him. You got to be a good girl or it will kill you too" (127). Moody indicates that her mother's use of the word "good" is implicitly connected with "staying in one's place." Moody's analysis implies that to be good meant one must not question or challenge white supremacy, because if one did, one could be killed by the Evil Spirit. Moody recalls that, since the age of seven, she lived in fear of this "Evil Spirit," stating that it took her "eight years to figure out what that spirit was" (127).

At the age of fifteen, when she declares her hatred of white people, she now knows that the "Evil Spirit" is white supremacy. The racist whites in the community then become synonymous with evil, the devil, and as young children are warned about the devil, young Moody is taught that being good, meaning staying in her place, would ensure that the "devil" would never get her: "I also was told that if I were a good girl, I wouldn't have to fear the devil or hell" (132). In *Killing Rage,* hooks reminds us that "[i]t is useful, when theorizing black experience, to examine the way the concept of terror is linked to representations of whiteness" (45). She tells her readers that "I learned as a child that to be 'safe' it was important to recognize the power of whiteness, even to fear it, and to avoid encounter" (45). The memory of terror is deeply embedded in Moody's recollection of Emmett Till's murder and functions on two levels in the text: it reminds the reader of the extent of violence that occurred, and, more profoundly, reminds the reader that this could happen again if one was to get out of place.

In trying to understand the murder of Emmett Till and the meaning of the NAACP, Moody writes of a conversation she has with her homeroom teacher,

Mrs. Rice. In highlighting the importance of this event, Moody recalls that their conversations open up "a whole new pool of knowledge about Negroes being butchered and slaughtered by whites in the South" (135). Moody tells her reader that Mrs. Rice became "like a mother to me" (135). This statement is significant for two reasons: it implies that Moody believes that it is a mother's responsibility to teach her children about the dangers of living in a society dominated by white supremacy and how to effectively address these issues, and secondly, it is representative of the distance that separates Moody from her mother. Moody writes that she cannot seek answers from her own mother; throughout the narrative she is continuously silenced by her mother. In contrast, Moody's conversations with Mrs. Rice enlighten her and allow her to have a voice. In Moody's autobiography, the relationship between the two women becomes a catalyst for the young Moody's evolving political consciousness. As Patricia Hill Collins importantly notes in her analysis of urban sociologist Cheryl Glikes' study of Black women leaders, "[Glikes] suggests that the community othermother relationship can be key in stimulating Black women's decisions to be social activists" (191).

Recalling that she is "choking to death in Centreville," Moody's words reveal her awareness of her growing radical subjectivity (146). Tired of working for the wives of Klan members, Moody decides to leave town: "I was sick of pretending, sick of selling my feelings for a dollar a day" (147). No longer able to hide her reaction to the murder of Emmett Till and the Taplin burning, Moody writes that she is too transparent to stay in Centreville. Even though the narrator

is only fifteen years old, she makes the decision to remove herself from her community in order to escape being around individuals like Mrs. Burke. The narrator leaves, but only for a short time; when she returns to go back to school, she discovers that everything is still the same and that there really is no one for her to talk to about the way she is feeling. She reflectively writes: "What's wrong with people? Negroes are being killed, beaten up, run out of town by these white folks and everything. But Negroes can't even talk about it" (155). Caught up in frustration, Moody tells her audience that when she finishes school, she will leave the area for good. She equates the repression she is feeling to Centreville; later in her autobiography she writes of her own realization that the repression she feels is due to something much larger than the physical space of Centreville.

In what appears to propel her own motivation to counter a culture permeated by white supremacy and her continuing development of political awareness, Moody draws attention to the impact of her mother's acceptance of her place within a racist society. Moody highlights her mother's passivity by describing her mother as a woman unwilling to address her position in a white dominated society. Moody writes that as a young girl, she is continuously shut down by her mother when she tries to seek answers in order to understand the Jim Crow South. This resistance in answering her daughter's questions demonstrates the extent of internalized racism that affects her mother.

In her own analysis of repressed resistance, bell hooks asserts that as a result of growing up in the segregated South, "[w]e learned when we were very little that black people could die from feeling rage and expressing it to the wrong

white folks. We learned to choke down our rage" (*Killing Rage* 14). As far as publically protesting and speaking out about the injustices inflicted on the black community, hooks asserts: "To express rage in that context was suicidal. Every black person knew it" (*Killing Rage* 14). Maya Angelou analyzes her mother's social etiquette around whites, and her belief that white folks could not "be talked to at all without risking one's life" *(Caged Bird* 39). Angelou elaborates: "If she had been asked the question of whether she was cowardly or not, she would have said she was a realist" (*Caged Bird* 39).

Moody reveals her mother to be a realist as well, and her portrayal of her mother emphasizes that this too has become her mother's political philosophy. In Moody's text, her mother continuously warns her to remain silent in front of the white women she works for and to act as if "you don't know nothing" in response to the murder of Emmett Till and other black men in the community. In the narrative her mother equates talking with danger and tells her young daughter, "[t]hese white folks get a hold of it they gonna be in trouble" (130). This attitude leads the narrator to question why her mother is so scared and why she places so much emphasis on remaining silent. Moody's mother's words inform the audience that the very act of speaking can bring dire consequences, and hooks reminds us "to imagine what it must mean to live in a culture where to speak one risks brutal punishment--imprisonment, torture, death" (*Talking Back* 17).

In her analysis of mother-daughter relationships in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Rosalie Troester discusses the ways in which many Black mothers have strategically protected their daughters by isolating them--as much as

possible--from the dominant culture. As Troester notes, this desire to protect often causes an emotional rift between mothers and daughters:

> Black mothers, particularly those with strong ties to their community, sometimes build high banks around their young daughters, isolating them from the dangers of the larger world until they are old and strong enough to function as autonomous women . . . . This isolation causes the currents between Black mothers and daughters to run deep and the relationship to be fraught with emotional intensity. (13)

Moody notes the emotional intensity and distance between her and her mother--especially when it comes to her mother's refusal to discuss issues involving civil rights. Writing that her mother begs her to leave the movement due to the dangerous environment, Moody notes that she refuses to listen. Even though the young Moody views this act of withholding important information and the refusal to discuss the current political milieu as damaging, this narrative can be read as a way in which Moody's mother chooses to shield her young daughter from a violently racist culture.

Coming of Age in Mississippi highlights conflict between mother and daughter, and I suggest that, in this autobiography, this very conflict contributes to the development of Moody's desire to become an activist. Moody describes her relationship with her mother as one based on little, if any, real communication, and she chooses not to include any real dialogue between the two in the text--possibly because this does not help her agenda, or simply because this type of

communication did not exist. Throughout the text, Moody seems to be waiting for her mother to validate her actions, or simply to validate her self-worth. As previously mentioned, Moody's representation of her mother is that she is unable to offer emotional support for her, and that their relationship lacks the level of emotional intensity that Moody appears to be wanting. It is possible that the narrator does not identify with her mother because Moody seeks to indicate that she does not want to *be her mother*. The emotional void that Moody feels propels her forward in finding her own strength. Certainly, the text makes the separation between Moody and her mother an implicit part of her evolving political consciousness. In essence, Moody explains that she writes because her mother *cannot* write.

On a strategic level, Moody's choice to explore the mother-daughter conflict she represents in her narrative could be directly linked to one of the objectives of political autobiography. Moody writes that she feels repressed by her mother, unable to find support for her evolving political consciousness. Importantly, Perkins points out that many activists have to "cultivate additional support systems through which they receive affirmation for their beliefs, values, and political commitment . . . " (69). In the narrative, Moody writes of her mother's inability to offer any type of support, and that she must look outside of her relationship with her mother to find guidance and affirmation. In choosing to focus on events that signify her political commitments, Moody writes of the separation that exist between her and her mother in order to emphasize the difficulties she faced in choosing to become an activist. In further keeping with

the objectives of a political autobiography, Moody's textual representation of her mother seems to support her end goal of writing an activist's text.

Moody describes her mother as a woman who is tired, poor, with too many children. Abandoned by her first husband, she is left to provide for her three young children by working various jobs as a domestic servant, barely making enough money to feed her children. Moody vividly remembers her mother's unhappiness, noting that her younger siblings "were too young to feel the things I felt and know the things I knew about Mama . . . .They had never heard her cry at nights as I had or worked and helped as I had done when we were starving" (57). The image Moody portrays of her mother can be seen as a way in which to educate and mobilize her readers to fight for all poor black women living in the segregated South. The illustration of her mother illuminates many characteristics associated with segregation: poverty, hunger, exploitation, miscegenation, and abandonment. Certainly, this description is effective for the way in which it highlights the repressive conditions of black women by educating her audience of their condition. Ultimately, as Selwyn Cudjoe asserts, "[autobiography] must generate actions and activities that are purposeful and also signify our liberation" (291).

Importantly, Moody emphasizes that her relationship with her mother can be representative of the internal struggle of the black community. According to Moody, many members in her community feared that becoming involved with any movement focusing on racial equality would result in their lives being jeopardized. Other blacks believed that trying to attain civil rights was a lost

cause, and many chose to remain complacent during this period. As bell hooks insightfully notes in her analysis of colonial resistance, "[t]he struggle may not even begin with the colonizer; it may begin with one's segregated, colonized community and family" (*Yearning* 151). For Moody, this realization proves to be true as she represents herself as one at odds with the majority of her community because of their unwillingness to participate in the fight for civil rights.

Moody draws attention to the complacency within her community several times in the text. She is very outspoken about the lack of voter participation; her criticism is harsh. She tells her reader that she quickly learns that most Negroes "were just apathetic or indifferent about voting" (320). Certainly, this could be a direct call for action. If so, she feels compelled to motivate those reading her autobiography. Her focus on the lack of voter participation seems to call for collective action. Maybe by voicing her disappointment concerning the apathy in her community she can stir up enough attention and spur voter registration and voting.

In order to demonstrate how bad things are in Centreville, Moody writes about an incident involving her stepmother, Emma, who is shot by a neighbor's husband while intervening in a domestic dispute. As a result, she loses almost her entire foot from a gunshot wound. In recalling the event, Moody shares her stepmother's response and emphasizes the fact that she did not blame the man who shot her: "[Emma] placed the blame where it belonged, that is, upon the whites in Woodville and how they had set things up making it almost impossible for the Negro men to earn a living" (226). The inclusion of this incident is

important in demonstrating Moody's developing understanding of the lack of financial opportunity available to black families. Emma tells Moody that this incident would have never happened if Wilbert was able to take care of his family: "If these damn white folks ain't shooting niggers' brains out they are starvin' them to death" (226). The implication is that the white community is responsible for the desperate conditions that are so much a part of daily life for many, if not most, black families. Moody writes that the conditions are so bad for this particular black man that he almost loses his mind. She gives this example in order for her audience to grasp how desperate this man is--so desperate that the only answer for him is to pick up a gun and possibly try to hurt his wife. He has no where to place the anger so he turns it inward.

Maintaining the importance of representation of community, Julia Swindells provides important analysis highlighting the radical uses of autobiography:

> Autobiography now has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual. People in a position of powerlessness--women, black people, working-class people--have more than begun to insert themselves into the culture via autobiography, via the assertion of the 'personal' voice, which speaks beyond itself. (7)

Certainly, Moody realizes this potential almost twenty-five years earlier when she uses the genre as both a testimony of racial oppression and to represent a marginalized group.

In describing the desperate situation of many families in her community, Moody includes a critique of the alienation between Mount Pleasant Baptist Church and members of the community. Although clearly upset by being forced to join Mount Pleasant Baptist Church, Moody's recollection focuses more on the lack of understanding between the reverend and the people in his congregation. When the reverend declares that "[w]e don't need them fine cars! We don't need them fancy clothes!", Moody coolly observes that obviously no one in here has any of those things (72). The reality is that most families that belong to the congregation are just simply trying to put food on the table and survive. Moody points out the disconnect between the church and the members of the congregation that demonstrate the reality of confinement related to race and class that affect almost every member in the church. Her rhetoric suggests that the pastor needs to look honestly at the reality of the daily lives of those who are struggling to survive through economic hardship. In addition, this example suggests a disconnect between the younger generation and older members of the community.

Moody illustrates her political development and growth when she writes about the necessity of shaping recruitment and participation by focusing on the young voters:

> I had finally realized that the future of Negroes in Mississippi didn't depend upon the older people. They were too scared and too suspicious. It was almost hopeless to try and educate minds that had been closed for so long . . . If we wanted to educate the vote, I thought, we should have been working with minds that were susceptible to change--ones that were open, inquisitive, and eager to learn. (I had the feeling that the whites in Canton knew too. Why else had those five teenagers been shot at the beginning of our work in the area?). (364-5)

Her stated awareness of the necessity to involve her own generation and future generations represents her progression and development within the movement. By indicating that her mother and other members of previous generations had accepted their place in an economically stratified, racially segregated society, Moody emphasizes the importance of educating and motivating younger generations to propel the movement forward. For Moody, to concentrate on educating young people with open minds is to discuss the advancement of the movement and to ensure the struggle for civil rights would continue to advance and succeed.

As the autobiography moves into Moody's college years, it constructs the image of a young lady who begins to recognize her ability as a political activist. Her efforts and contributions to the movement do not go unnoticed; after listening to her speech to educate farmers about how to receive FHA loans and ultimately thrive toward economic stability, the local police refer to her as "one smart bitch"

(365). This illustration contributes to Moody's overall identity formation as an activist by signifying her own awareness of her ability by her becoming conscious of her own strength. In addition, she is perceived as a threat by those fighting for the continuation of segregation. The image Moody constructs of herself is one of an empowered agent, valuable to the movement; in writing her story, she actively defies the limitations of black identity as constructed by the dominant culture. It is here that she uses language to defiantly counteract the social constraints and restrictions imposed by segregation.

In using the genre of autobiography by writing herself as subject, Moody is able to promote her political agenda and offer a view of her evolving development. Sidonie Smith writes that the rhetorical strategy of autobiography leads to political empowerment, stating [that when]:

> the autobiographer positions herself as the subject of traditional autobiography . . . . [this location] proffers authority, legitimacy, and readability. It also provides membership in the community of the fully human. For oppressed peoples, such membership can be physiologically and politically expedient and potent. (*Women, Autobiography & Theory* 433).

Moody moves herself from the position of object and repositions herself--as a representation of her community--at the center. By doing so, she challenges an entire system of white supremacy based on domination and objectification. The act of writing her story allows her to move herself from the outer margins of society to the center of the fight for civil rights.

In addition to providing reflections that demonstrate a move toward a revolutionary consciousness, Moody's sharing of early experiences can be viewed as a testimony in which she demonstrates solidarity with others of her community. Moody's reflection of past personal experiences demonstrates how the autobiographical form can be used to politicize and theorize these past experiences. Perkins perceptively notes, "The autobiographical form allows activists to offer as models--for understanding, imitating, and critiquing--their own process of coming into revolutionary consciousness" (41). In exploring early childhood memories, Moody enables her audience to see the events of her childhood that ultimately shape her persona as a political activist, and more importantly, events that necessitate the need for resistance and social change. As Mark Freeman notes in *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative,* the moment we try and create order and coherence regarding our past experiences, especially when we use the past to explain the present, a narrative is born. This is especially important in creating a political autobiography.

CHAPTER 2

Autobiography as Political Intervention:

Combating Negative Stereotypes and Controlling Images

The act of writing is claiming voice and taking power.
--Laura Tohe[9]

An important aspect of political autobiography includes challenging hegemonic history and the controlling images that dominate and create a distorted view of that history. As Barbara Harlow asserts, "The connection between knowledge and power, the awareness of the exploitation of knowledge by the interests of power to create a distorted historical record, is central to resistance narratives" (116). As an extension of her activism, Anne Moody uses her autobiography to combat the negative controlling images of black women and men that have been used to legitimize and condone both exploitation and violence against African Americans. Demonstrating how sexual politics are used to ensure continued oppression of both African American women and men, Moody writes to expose the promiscuous Jezebel myth and the myth of black men as sexual predators. Her narrative illustrates how the dominant culture links these sexual images to the ideological justification of using violence against the African American community to ensure an effective system of white hegemony.

Importantly, Angela Davis' work analyses the use of both the Jezebel myth and the myth of black men as sexually charged rapists. Davis argues that the

[9] Laura Tohe, qtd. in *Reinventing the Enemy's Language*. Ed. Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1997) 41.

significance of these myths is that they have "been methodically conjured up when recurrent waves of violence and terror against the black community required conviction" (*Women, Race, & Class* 25). As Moody importantly illustrates, these very images are used to justify violence against African Americans as they begin their fight for civil rights. Noting the connection between these controlling images and the political current, Moody uses her narrative as a site of critical pedagogy to demonstrate how the myth of the black Jezebel and the black rapist are used to ensure that African Americans continued to be both oppressed and exploited.

In her analysis of political autobiography, Margo Perkins notes that in "writing their lives, activists seek to document their experiences, to correct information, to educate their readers, and to encourage the continuation of the struggle" (70). As a political autobiographer, Moody continuously challenges dominant history by combating negative images of black men and women based on prominent cultural myths. To counter these images, Moody writes an accurate description of the black women in her community. Using both her mother and grandmother as examples, Moody provides an illustration of women who have worked hard their entire lives. Recalling an image of her grandmother, Moody notes: "I could see her whole life of hardship on her face" (190). In describing women who are strong, hard-working, and self-sufficient, and who have often suffered to provide for their families, Moody recuperates their image. In essence, Moody is *re-writing* the self or selves that make up her community. As Janice Morgan has argued, "to be marginalized to a dominant culture is also to have had

little or no say in the construction of one's socially acknowledged identity" (xv). The autobiographical genre provides Moody with a voice to counter negative stereotypes, and she uses this voice to rewrite history by providing accurate and realistic images of African American men and women that make up her community.

Patricia Hill Collins reminds us that these negative images of black women can be traced back to the era of slavery and these very same images continue to keep black women in subordinate positions. Collins points out that the images of the Mammy and Jezebel "have been fundamental to women's oppression" (5). As a political autobiographer, part of Moody's objective in writing her narrative is to argue against the hegemonic views of the men and women who make up her community.

One of the most prevalent images that Moody counters frequently is the Jezebel. The image of the Jezebel can be traced back to slavery; drawing from Angela Davis' analysis, Perkins notes that "Jezebel's function was to relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing a powerful rationale for the widespread assaults by White men typically reported by Black slave women" (81). [10] Stover continues this analysis by noting, "black

[10] In her analysis of sexuality and slavery, Angela Davis notes that rape was used as a weapon to control both black men and women. She asserts, "It would be a mistake to regard the institutionalized pattern of rape during slavery as an expression of white men's sexual urges . . . . Rape was a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression, whose covert goal was to extinguish slave women's will to resist, and in the process, to demoralize their men." (*Women, Race & Class*, 23). Moody's analysis of the sexual violence against black women in her community supports Davis's claim: that rape is a weapon used to keep African Americans in a position of subordination.

slave women were often portrayed as 'Jezebels.' To justify their own violent actions against black women, white mistresses necessarily had to view them as 'prostitutes' and to perceive the white masters (at least in public) as unwitting, benevolent gentlemen who were the victims of seduction" (41). Deborah Gray White notes, "[i]n every way Jezebel was the counterimage of the mid-nineteenth-century ideal of the Victorian lady" (29). Collins importantly observes that the contemporary image of the Jezebel, or prostitute, "is central in the nexus of controlling images of Black womanhood. Because efforts to control Black women's sexuality lie at the heart of Black women's oppression, historical jezebels and contemporary 'hoochies' represent a deviant Black sexuality" (81).

Significantly, Moody writes to expose the Jezebel myth, noting the degree in which African American women are victimized by this controlling stereotype. Using her own personal example as testimony to the effects of the Jezebel myth, Moody writes about an incident in which she is followed and approached by a group of white men. After one of the men approaches, her mother shouts out in anger, "What y'all wanta know where she live for? That ain't none of yo' business" (199). Illustrating that her mother "spoke so forcefully" that the white men retreated away, Moody signifies that she is temporally saved from danger. Her choice to include this incident serves as both a warning and reminder of the power of the Jezebel myth and its relation to white men's construction and interpretation of black women as purely sexual figures. In offering a warning to her daughter, Moody's mother tells her: "They think every Negro woman in Centreville who look like anything should lick their ass and whore around with

them" (200). Moody learns from her mother that she "must never be caught in town after dark alone" (200), implying the danger she could be in if not protected. Later in the autobiography, Moody's father will offer another warning: "I don't want you working for these no-good ass white men around here . . . . They don't do nothing but mess over those Negro girls working in their houses" (217).

In *Coming of Age in Mississippi,* Moody demonstrates how controlling images used to promote social powerlessness in regards to one's sexual identity become paramount in understanding the exploitation of black women. Including a detailed portrait of how the constructed Jezebel image extends to her whole community, Moody notes that white housewives would never leave their husbands alone with a young black servant because they are afraid that "the Negro girl would seduce him, never the contrary" (137). Moody writes to expose the dehumanizing treatment many young black girls and women receive from members of the white community based on the Jezebel stereotype. As Cheryl Gilkes maintains, "Black women emerged from slavery enshrined in the consciousness of white America...as the 'bad black woman'" (294). Because black women are viewed as bad--or more specifically, promiscuous--they cannot be viewed as innocent or as a victim. Countering the Jezebel myth in her text, Moody resists the ideological justifications that control the way in which black women are treated, and in doing so, she asks the same of her audience.

Outraged over the labeled sexual identity and vulnerability of African American women, Moody writes to actively counter and challenge the Jezebel image by telling her version of the story: *that it is the young Negro girls that*

need to worry, not the other way around. As Stephen Butterfield asserts, black autobiography is often a "mirror of white deeds" (3). In recalling an incident in which a young black girl is raped by a white farmer, Moody emphasizes the power of the Jezebel myth when she reveals the rapist is not prosecuted--and adds that, because the incident was reported by the young girl, her family is put at risk for retaliation.[11] Moody continues to write about the amount of sexual violence that occurs against black teenage girls and young women, noting how vulnerable they are at the hands of white men, because, as she asserts, the law does nothing to protect the victims or would be victims. As Hazel V. Carby notes, "black women were relegated to a place outside the ideological construct of 'womanhood.' The term included only white women; therefore the rape of black women was of no consequence outside the black community" (308). Although Carby is writing in response to Ida B. Well's concerns almost fifty years earlier, Moody's text maintains that this is still an issue for her community. Like Wells, Moody uses her pen to counter the Jezebel myth by overtly stating the degree in which these young girls are victimized. Moody continues her criticism by revealing an even more disturbing fact: many families with young black daughters have no choice but to send them to the fields to pick cotton because they are so poor, even knowing they are in a dangerous situation.[12]

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[11] As Danielle McGuire discloses in her recently published text *At The Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance*: "Between 1940 and 1965, only ten white men were convicted of raping black women or girls in Mississippi despite the fact that it happened regularly" (171).

[12] McGuire writes that on August 29th, 1955, a day after Emmett Till is kidnapped and murdered, an eleven year old girl black girl, Ida Mae Holland, is raped by a white man (166). Years later, in her own memoir, Holland writes about

In *Talking Back*, hooks discusses how women use their voice, their words, to move from being an object to subject:

> For us [black women], true speaking is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless . . . . Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited . . . . It is the act of speech, of "talking back," that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject--the liberated voice. (8-9)

By using her text to *talk back* to the controlling stereotypes, Moody is able to combat conventional ways of knowing that objectify African American women by providing an accurate description of exploited women in her Mississippi county. Catherine Belsey asserts: "In the fact that the subject is a process lies the possibility of transformation" (50). Moved by her passion for social justice, Moody actively writes to transform her constructed identity, as well as the identity of her community, by breaking through the barriers set by controlling images. The process of identity formation begins when one breaks down the negative constructed images used to maintain power and control in order to ensure that individuals remain in the margins. In addressing the connection between

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the rape: "It was just seen as a part of life and if you . . . .were black, you were always at the mercy of white people. You didn't need to be babysitting or cleaning houses to fall victim to the white man's lust . . . .We could just as easily be picking cotton or walking to the store . . . . and he take us--just like that . . . " (*From the Mississippi Delta: A Memoir* 84).

racial, sexual, and political consciousness in relation to identity formation, Moody, through her text, is able to begin the transformation of her community from object to subject, by actively writing them at the center of the text and moving them away from previously designated margins.

By offering a countertestimony, Moody's text encourages a reassessment of the construct and validity of the Jezebel image that justifies the marginalized positions of African American women, a realm in which they are solely viewed as object. In demonstrating the use of sexually controlling images to oppress black women and ensure their designated place in a racist society, Moody offers testimony to reveal that black women's sexuality has been racialized by the use of the Jezebel image. Another way Moody counters the Jezebel myth is by providing her own image of the white men in her community. She writes that they are licentious predators who pursue the young black women in the community. This is a liberating act for Moody--representing a transition from object to subject. Hooks continues this analysis by asserting: "As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their histories" (*Talking Back* 42). Moody does all of the above, offering a strong voice that identifies the women in her community as subjects by moving them out of the realm of objects--or Jezebels. Barbara Johnson reminds us how challenging this can be: "Just because identities are fictitious does not mean that they have not had, and could not have, real historical effects" (72). Therefore, the act of writing, as Toni Cade Bambara asserts, is that it provides an opportunity "to tell the truth

about people's lives" (qtd. in Tate 18). Moody uses the autobiographical genre to "tell the truth" about the women in her community.

An interesting omission in the realm of black women's sexuality in *Coming of Age in Mississippi* is Moody's own narrative silence toward her sexuality. Collins notes that "[i]n a climate where one's sexuality is on public display, holding fast to privacy and trying to shut the closet door becomes paramount" (125). In keeping with the objective of political autobiography, she remains silent because her primary focus is not her personal life. She also refuses to run the risk of being labeled or viewed as promiscuous. Collins analysis suggests that because U.S. culture "routinely accused Black women of being sexually immoral, promiscuous jezebels," black women choose to remain silent in order to protect "the safe spaces for Black women's self definitions" (125). Moody's very act of constructing her identity is connected to her authority to write about the movement; therefore, she takes no chance in how she wants to be perceived by her audience.

In what can clearly be considered a statement of defense in response to negative images, Moody asserts, "I was twenty years old and I had never been kissed" (250). Since a main function of her text is combating hegemonic ways of viewing black women, she does not run the risk of validating negative stereotypes imposed by a racist culture. This act of silence, as Darlene Clark Hine's suggests, allows black women "to hold their own in an often one-sided and mismatched resistance struggle" (382). Mary Helen Washington notes the effects of the Jezebel stereotype in regards to black women writing their life stories when she

notes, "The anxiety of black women writers over the representation of sexuality goes back to the nineteenth century and the prescription for womanly 'virtues' which made slave women automatically immoral and less 'feminine' than white women" (38). Washington's observations and analysis provide important insight when trying to understand Moody's choice to essentially remain silent when it comes to addressing her own sexuality.

In her attempt to counter the Jezebel image, however, Moody may run the risk of actively constructing a superior moral image of herself to reflect the "cult of true womanhood," which places white women on a moral pedestal. In analyzing the complexities of the relationship between the white mistress and black women during slavery, Katherine Fishburn notes the physiological effects this pedestal had on both sets of women: "Whereas the lady was deprived of her sexuality, the black woman was identified with hers" (11). Fishburn points out that the mythology surrounding black slave women created an image in which black women were viewed as "subhuman creatures who, by nature, were strong and sexual" (10-11). In trying to distance herself from this image, Moody addresses, as Marjorie Gwin notes, "[t]he virgin/whore dichotomy that was imposed upon white and black southern women . . . " (40). In actively moving away from the dehumanizing stereotypes used to characterize black women, Moody may risk creating a self-portrait that is representative of the virgin, one who possesses, "delicate constitutions" and "sexual purity" (Fishburn 10). In doing so, she may be countering her social identity and placing herself upon a pedestal previously reserved for white women only. While this role reverses racial

stereotypes, it is obviously not an ideal solution. But what other option did Moody the autobiographer have?[13]

Importantly, Sidonie Smith asks us to consider the scene of autobiographical performativity. She describes this "as a literal place, a location, a moment in history, a (sociopolitical) space in culture" (*Reading Autobiography* 110). Asserting that autobiographical speakers become subjects that "position themselves in historically specific identities" (108), Smith addresses the issue of autobiographical subjects constructing an image. For Moody this becomes a real challenge because, as previously noted, she has to *reposition* herself and form a counter identity. She estranges herself textually from her cultural identity in order to revise her persona and construct an image as devoid of debilitating stereotypes as possible. Through a conscientious manipulation of language, Moody uses the autobiographical genre to *recreate* her historically specific *identity*.

After the Jezebel label runs its course in the life of an African American woman, she is often relabeled a "Mammy." The perils of growing up in a racist and misogynistic society are illuminated through Moody's portrait of her grandmother, Winnie. In telling her story, Moody writes of the hardship encompassing her grandmother's life: "twenty-some years on Mr. Carter's plantation, thirteen children and no husband, and always the hope for something

[13] In noting the sexual racism that devalues black women, bell hooks also comments on this sexual "pedestal": "While white women have been placed on a symbolic pedestal, black women are seen as fallen women" (*Ain't* 110). hooks takes this analysis a step further in addressing the internal racism of her community: "In the black community the fair-skinned black woman who most nearly resembled the white woman was seen as the "lady" and placed on a pedestal while darker-skinned black women were seen as bitches and whores" (*Ain't* 110).

better" (191). In addressing her grandmother's situation, Moody notes that she had no choice but to give most of her children away to other black families that farmed because she could not afford to keep them with her. Moody's narration illuminates a woman who has been exploited her entire life. Many of her children were fathered by her white employer, and after she no longer fits into the Jezebel stereotype, she is relabeled as a Mammy.

Moody's contextualization of her grandmother represents a narrative voice that shifts from the individual to a more universal representation of the lives of many poor black women. Even though slavery had been abolished for almost a hundred years, African American women were still perceived primarily as servants. Although not overtly stated, one must wonder if Moody senses this could have been her mother's plight as well if she had not remarried. At the end of this scene, Moody declares that her grandmother's social location will result in her spending the rest of her life "in Maple Hill Restaurant washing dishes" (191).

Although Moody's grandmother does not perfectly fit the controlling image of the Mammy, her work and economic situation lends itself to a partial relation to this stereotype. Having spent most of her life working in the kitchen on Mr. Carter's plantation, Moody's grandmother can be placed in the category of the Mammy, "the faithful, obedient domestic servant" (Collins 72). As the Mammy was freed from slavery, her image in society, as Collins notes, was "sustained to explain Black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service" (72). White maintains that the Mammy image "helped endorse the service of black women in Southern households" (61). This image is central in

understanding how Moody's grandmother's oppression is linked to her economic exploitation. At the end of her life she is tired and poor; Moody writes: "Her deep sad eyes were filled with tears" (190). Here Moody emphasizes the extent of her oppression: racism, sexism, classism. The intersection of all three have left her grandmother to live out the remainder of her years in abject poverty--as a perpetual servant. White concludes: "On the eve of the Civil Rights Movement white Americans could feel that all was well with the world . . . . Mammy was back in their kitchens" (189).

As the image of Moody's grandmother reveals, "No matter how they were loved by their White 'families,' Black women domestic workers remained poor because they were economically exploited workers in a capitalistic political economy" (Collins 74). Looking at Moody's grandmother, one remembers the much quoted echo of Nanny in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* : "De nigger woman is de mule un de world so fur as Ah can see" (14). Like the mule, the Mammy is left to carry the world on her back, and like Moody's grandmother, she is often left to fend for herself even as she lives out her last years. The image of the Mammy functions in Moody's text to demonstrate how the dominate culture uses stereotypes to justify the objectification and exploitation of black women working as domestic servants. As Moody reveals, most white women in Centreville choose to regard themselves as people who are unable to keep up with housework and childrearing without a Mammy in their house.

In continuing with the objective of providing a countertestimony in response to the negative images controlling how her community is viewed,

Moody writes to actively challenge the dominant image of the black man as rapist. In recounting her life story, Moody asserts that she never heard of an incident involving a black man attacking a white woman. Exposing the connection between these constructed images and the power of the oppressor, Moody seeks to correct misinformation. As the momentum of the civil rights movement continued, so did the tension between the black and white community. Moody writes that as a way to stop or stall the movement, the white community started to falsely accuse black men of pursuing white women by using the controlling image of the black man as oversexed and therefore a threat to the community. This falsely constructed image was prevalent during the Reconstruction period and became one of the driving forces for Ida. B. Wells to write her autobiography. Historically, this false construct was used to justify the lynching of hundreds of black men. Years later, Moody discloses a disturbing point--the black men in her community knew all too well what could happen to them: "They had only to look at a white woman and be hanged for it. Emmett Till's murder had proved it was a crime, punishable by death, for a Negro man to even whistle at a white woman in Mississippi" (139). Moody writes to draw attention to the precarious situation that young black men face on a daily basis.[14]

[14] In addressing the precarious situation black men faced on a daily basis in regards to any type of communication or contact with white women, Danielle L. McGuire notes the effect this had on many of the civil rights political organizations: "Most African-American SNCC workers came of age in the 1950's, when white men had brutally murdered Emmett Till for talking fresh to a white woman; they did not want to subject local blacks to any danger if they could help it" (169). Therefore, as she notes, they often required strict segregation between black male activists and white female activists.

Providing further analysis of the image of the feared black rapist, Angela Davis notes the power this image has historically held: "In the history of the United States, the fraudulent rape charge stands out as one of the most formidable artifices invented by racism" (*Women, Race, Class* 173). Preceding Davis, Moody writes that "Negro men did not have access to white women," thereby attacking a prevalent racist myth. This image, as both Moody and Davis point out, is a political invention conjured up to control black men in their quest for civil rights. Lynching, as Davis argues, became a political weapon--or, as bell hooks asserts, cultural currency, used to dominate black men and keep them in their current social positions. As hooks contends in response to the perpetuation of the black rapist image, "The role it plays in the maintenance of racist domination is to convince the public that black men are a dangerous threat who must be controlled by any means necessary, including annihilation" (*Yearning* 61).

Making a connection between the image of the black man as rapist and the image of the Jezebel, Gerda Lerner contends:

> The myth of the black rapist of white women is the twin of the myth of the bad black woman--both designated to apologize for and facilitate the continued exploitation of black men and women. Black women perceived this connection very clearly and were early in the forefront of the fight against lynching. (193)

Significantly, Moody's text demonstrates how the two images are inextricably related to each other by illuminating how each construction perpetuated acts of

violence against black men and black women. As her text illustrates, African American men are at risk for lynching and castration, and African American women are subjected to acts of sexual violence and exploitation based on the controlling images of the over-sexed black male, the rapist, and the bad black woman who is the promiscuous Jezebel.

Moody's autobiography draws a parallel between the controlling image of the African American man as rapist--or as a sexual threat to white women--to the fear that image instilled in many who wanted to participate in the struggle for civil rights. This distorted image becomes a way for the dominant culture to limit participation in the civil rights movement. Moody notes the number of Guild meetings that take place in response to the civil rights movement and brings attention to the fact that the members are using this falsely constructed and distorted image of the black man as a scapegoat for what they are really concerned about, and that is blacks attaining civil rights. Noting that "the Guild had organized about two-thirds of the whites in Centreville," Moody draws attention to the amount of participation (137). In response to the rumors created by the white supremacist meetings, Moody writes, "[t]his gossip created so much tension, every Negro man in Centreville became afraid to walk the streets" (139).

Devoting considerable attention to the connection between the rape myth and the act of lynching, Moody writes about a young classmate named Jerry who is almost beaten to death for allegedly making calls to a white operator. In recalling the conversation she had with the young teenager months after the incident, Moody writes that he tells her he is tied to a tree naked and beaten so

badly by four white men that he passes out. The scene Moody describes is reminiscent of a lynching. Her analysis exposes the link between this act of violence, domination, and the desire for social control. This young teenage boy, like Emmett Till, is viewed as a sexual threat to the white women in the community, and for that alone he is punished. Moody's decision to write that the young teenage boy is stripped of his clothes emphasizes the connection between the beating and the sexual nature of his perceived crime as conjured up by the dominant culture. More disturbing is the reminder that when a young black man is accused of a crime against a white woman, he is often stripped naked and castrated before he is lynched. Moody's decision to include this incident, as well as the emphasis her autobiography places on the murder of Emmett Till, is a way for her to educate her audience of the reality that lynching is still a genuine threat instilling fear within many black men.

Like Ida B. Wells many years before her, Moody's text maintains a connection between lynching and political power. Carby asserts that "Wells' analysis of the relation between political terrorism, economic oppression, and conventional codes of sexuality and morality has still to be surpassed in its incisive condemnation of the patriarchal manipulation of race and gender" (307). Moody's personal examples of the connection between politics and lynching add to this analysis by offering clear examples that expose the motivation behind lynching and violence toward African American men. She depicts lynch-minded whites as motivated to crush African Americans' pursuit of racial equality and

civil rights.[15] Significantly, Moody's text provides a bridge between the historical act of lynching and the fear of African Americans voting.

Perkins writes that "[a]ll political activists who write are aware of the power of words to alter understanding" (84). Challenging the conventional belief that black men were a threat to white women, Moody offers a counterhistory when she writes that the real issue is the number of white men having affairs with young black women: "Just about every young white man in Centreville had a Negro lover" (137). By doing so, she counters and demystifies the permeating ideology, and anticipates Davis in noting whites' efforts to define African American women as Jezebels and African American men as sexually charged beasts. In using language that illuminates the sexual urges of white men and their desire for black women, Moody chooses the word "lover" to describe relationships taking place between white men and black women. In recalling a conversation she has with one of her peers, she remembers what he tells her: "Look at how many white babies we got walking around in our neighborhoods. Their Mama's ain't white either" (128).

In describing how common relationships were between white men and black women, Moody shifts the attention away from the falsely constructed image

[15] Nellie McKay writes: "In the late nineteenth century and the first third of the twentieth century the lynching of black men was the most potent weapon that white men used to reinforce racial supremacy" ("The Narrative Self" 105). Moody demonstrates that this "weapon" is still being used to intimidate black men from becoming involved and participating in the civil rights movement. Importantly, Danielle L McGuire notes the increase of violent acts against black men as a result of the Supreme Court decision in *Brown Vs. The Board of Education*, noting that a man is castrated by the Ku Klux Klan because, as they state, he thinks his children are good enough to go to school with white children (121).

of the black man as a threat to white women. By focusing on the licentious behavior of the (mostly married) white men in her community, Moody's portrayal of these men breaks the silence surrounding mixed relationships. Instead of the usual portrayal of the sexually promiscuous black woman that was prevalent in the white community, Moody provides a counter testimony that reveals the over-sexed white man.

In addressing the effects of racial sexual politics, Moody writes of a family in her neighborhood, the Taplins, whose home is mysteriously burned down, leaving nine members of the family dead. Trying to make sense of the Taplin burning, Moody provides information that sheds light on a possible motive for the fire. Through local gossip, she learns that a neighbor of the Taplins, Mr. Banks, a wealthy mulatto man, "had for some time discretely taken care of a white woman" who had been abandoned by her husband (145). Moody notes that the women of the local Guild discover the affair. Implying that the fire was meant for his home, Moody writes that "Mr. Banks escaped his punishment" (145). Significantly, Moody writes that the punishment for a black man having a consensual relationship with a white woman is death. In addition, this incident is representative of the sexual double standard that pervaded Moody's county, since many white men have an African American woman as a "lover."

Emphasizing the profound impact this tragedy has on her, Moody writes that the scene "would never leave me" (143). She recalls, "I shall never forget the expressions on the faces of the Negroes. There was almost unanimous hopelessness in them" (143). Moody's attention to language in her description of

the Taplin burning portrays the true horror of this event: bodies burning, the smell of gasoline, the strange smoke that did not seem natural--all indicating that this fire was set deliberately. Drawing attention to the suspicious nature of the fire, Moody writes that the FBI did come to Centreville but were ultimately unable to uncover any evidence that the fire was set deliberately. As Derrick Morrison will later note in his analysis of the civil rights movement, "While the FBI stood around 'taking notes,' white-racist violence continued unabated" (548). In the end, Moody explains, Mrs. Taplins' kerosene lamp was blamed. As Moody illustrates, the real guilty party or parties were never found, once again demonstrating the lack of justice that surrounded her community. But Moody reminds her audience of "[t]hose screams, those faces" that perished in the fire that day (143). In conveying the physiological and emotional scar this experience has left on her, Moody digs up buried history; in including this incident in her text, Moody provides a voice for the victims of the fire by drawing attention to the suspicious nature of the fire and connecting it to a falsely constructed myth.

By including this incident in her narrative, Moody's exposes another issue-- Mr. Banks is a wealthy African American man. According to Moody, not only is Mr. Banks a sexual threat, he also jeopardizes white capitalism and for that reason must be eliminated. In writing about Mr. Banks, Moody illustrates the dualistic threat he represents that ultimately leads the white men to attempt his murder. The reality portrayed in the text is that white men do not want to share financial success with a black man by allowing them access to wealth because this challenges the very foundation of white patriarchal economic success; therefore,

as Moody illustrates, the traditional realms of privilege and power ensure that white supremacists can inflict whatever punishment they deem necessary to ensure their hegemonic position.

Jacquelyn Grant provides an example of how white men perceived successful black men as a threat to their own success. In noting what happened to Fannie Lou Hammer's father when he tried to work his family out of abject poverty, she writes: "they were tossed back as a result of the sabotage of a racist and envious white man, who could not tolerate the economic advancement of a black man and his family" (41). In writing about Mr. Banks, Moody addresses a much larger political issue.

In continuing her critique of the use of sexual politics to ensure continued white domination, Moody's autobiography addresses the murder of Emmett Till. Using her text as a weapon, she challenges racist discourse by countering white racist constructions of black men. She illustrates how the myth of the black man as a sexual beast and threat is used to justify the death of an African American boy. The narrative is a tool in which Moody can separate the boy from the myth by exposing the racists sexual ideologies that fuel the lynching of Emmett Till.

In addition, Moody uses the text to deliver her own verdict to the white men responsible for Emmett Till's murder: "he was killed in Greenwood by some white men" (128). In offering a salient critique of the validity of the legal system in Mississippi, Moody highlights the fact these men are acquitted for the murder, revealing a disturbing lack of justice. Although these white men are not convicted in court, Moody uses the pages of her autobiography to deliver a guilty verdict.

Using her pen to deliver justice, Moody becomes the judge and jury, forever convicting the white men of the murder of Emmett Till; in doing so, she provides Emmett Till with a voice that was silenced by the acquittal.[16]

W.J.T. Mitchell suggests: "memory is an intersubjective phenomenon, a practice not only of recollection of a past *by* a subject, but of recollection of a past *for* a subject" (193). In keeping with the objectives of political autobiography, Moody offers a voice for many subjects who have been silenced by using her text as an extension of their personal plights. This act of resistance writing is a way to challenge previously held assumptions about race relations by exposing the damaging effects of negative controlling images and stereotypes. By challenging hegemonic ways of knowing, Moody offers a counter-testimony by providing a voice for all of those within her community who have not had the opportunity to be heard. In addition, her testimony revises the dominant culture's social constructs of African American women and men by offering convincing, positive images--not falsely constructed myths. As Perkin's importantly notes: "Ultimately, one of the most compelling aspects of activists' autobiographies may be the attention they inevitably call to the politics of how history and truth are constructed" (100).

This chapter concludes that Moody provides a voice to those who have been silenced and/or marginalized by correcting information that is fictitious and

[16] In a speech given in Harlem reflecting on Emmett Till's murder, Roy Wilkins, of the NAACP, revealed the following about the state of Mississippi: "Mississippi has decided to maintain white supremacy by murdering children. The killer of the boy felt free to lynch because there is in the entire state no restraining influence of decency, among the daily newspapers, among the clergy, not among any segment so-called lettered citizens." (*Eyes on the Prize* 52)

misleading or previously excluded by the dominant culture. Importantly, she points out how controlling stereotypes and myths are used to ensure racial oppression. In writing her life story, Moody challenges history by rewriting the negative images of black women and men to offer an accurate view, and in doing so provides critical information that has been previously omitted or glossed over.

CHAPTER 3

The Significant Role of Women Activists in the Mississippi Delta

In sit-ins and pray-ins

and march-ins and die-ins,

We carried it on...

Carried on a Black tradition

Carry it on

Pass it down to the children

Pass it down...

---Assata Shakur[17]

We are fighting in Mississippi for the common democracy. Men and women and children are dying. All because of liberty. Jesus died to make me holy. Let us fight to see me free. Cause were movin', movin' on.

---Fannie Lou Hammer[18]

As a foot soldier in the civil rights movement, Moody offers a significant contribution to the overall understanding of the role young black women activists played in the Mississippi Delta. Her firsthand account and participation in one of the historically famous Woolworth's lunch counter sit-ins, as well as many other demonstrations, provide valuable insight into the sacrifices made by black women activists involved in the battle for civil rights. Historically, the role of black

[17] Assata Shakur. *Assata: An Autobiography*. (Westport: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1987). 52.

[18] Fannie Lou Hammer. qtd. in Jacquelyn Grant. "Civil Rights Women: A Source for Doing Womanist Theology." (*Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965*. Eds. Vicki L. Crawford, Jaqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods. New York: Carlson Publishing Inc, 1990). 39.

women in the civil rights movement has received little attention from scholars. While men were historically regarded as the principal leaders in the movement due to the amount of published texts that focused on their leadership, Moody's narrative offers first hand examples of the valuable contributions and sacrifices women made during this period.[19] As Anne Standley asserts in her analysis of the role of women in the movement, "[t]hey demonstrated a heroism no less than that of men. They suffered the same physical abuse, loss of employment, destruction of property, and risk to their lives" (184).

Moody's narrative displays this heroism by exemplifying her powerful and courageous role as a young woman activist. Time and time again, she writes of her willingness to put herself in harm's way, even possible death, in order to ensure that her community will be freed from the constraints of segregation. Embracing the conventions used by other activists writing autobiography, this chapter demonstrates Moody's use of the genre to "expose oppressive conditions and the repressive tactics of the state . . . [and] to educate as broad an audience as possible to the situation and issues at stake" (Perkins 7), by emphasizing the vital role that women, as well as young activists in general, played in propelling the movement forward.

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[19] Though historians have long agreed that women played a pivotal role in shaping the movement, they were slow to provide this recognition. Recent publications focus on the instrumental role women played in the civil rights movement, especially in the Mississippi Delta. See *Women and the Civil Rights Movement (2009*), *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (2010), *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965* (1990).

As previously noted, historically, most studies of the civil rights movement focus on either specific organizations and/or the male leaders of the movement. Notably, Standley reminds us that "[t]he omission of women from many histories of the movement is also apparent in the widespread use of the metaphor of reaching manhood to describe the self-confidence that blacks gained from the movement" (183). Historians use of the analogy of "I became a man" in describing the young black students who participated in the sit-ins fails to consider the impact of the women students. Moody's text offers an example of the pivotal role of young black women activists within the movement who knew they were going "to be a part of whatever happened" (Moody 278). Importantly, Moody's narrative reveals a sense of self that is liberated from the confines of gender roles by her representation of black womanhood as powerful. In challenging traditional expectations, she writes of herself as fearless and unwavering in her commitment to end racism. By including her voice in the movement, she strengthens the historical perspective of women's roles within the movement by constructing an identity that boldly inscribes a revolutionary position for women. This identity will be seen in the future Black Power autobiographies of Angela Davis and Assata Shakur.

Significantly, Bernice Reagon, who sang with the Freedom Singers of Albany, writes about the sense of empowerment she felt as a woman participating in the civil rights movement:

> There was a sense of power, in a place where you didn't feel you had any power. There was a sense of confronting things that

> terrified you, like jail, police, walking in the street--you know, a whole lot of Black folks couldn't even walk in the street in those places in the South. So you were saying in some basic way "I will never again stay inside these boundaries . . . The Civil Rights Movement gave me the power to challenge *any* line that limits me. (Cluster 22-23)

Similarly, in writing about her experiences within the movement, Moody importantly represents herself as one who is willing to step outside the lines constructed by racial boundaries. She writes of her decision to consciously use an entrance at a bus station designated for whites only. The impact of her actions result in a mob forming, a response that could have most certainly lead to her being injured--or quite possibly killed. Moody writes: "We were now outside the station not knowing what to do or where to run . . . . We were at the back of the station and thought the mob would be waiting for us if we ran around front and tried to leave" (282). It is only by chance that a black employee of the bus station is able to drive them away from the violent mob. Later, while participating in a demonstration, Moody chillingly recalls, "The whites standing out there had murder in their eyes" (297). Her testimony emphasizes that the eminent threat of death for an activist was always close by, and that this threat was no different for women activists, reflecting a feminist perspective and reality that is often omitted from civil rights scholarship.

In her analysis of women's grassroots activism in the Mississippi Delta, Vicki Crawford concludes: "The realization of human injustice moved black

women to action; they viewed their roles as activists as a natural extension of their fundamental rights as human beings" (25). Having learned her place in the white world at a very early age, Moody writes of the many injustices surrounding her community. Distraught by the number of community members living in decrepit shacks on unpaved roads due to economic discrimination--very low paying jobs--Moody is compelled towards activism. Noting the lack of basic human rights available to her, as well as her community, Moody asserts, "I felt like the lowest animal on earth" (135). Emphasizing that the lack of basic human rights result in her feeling less than human, Moody's comparison becomes emblematic of the degradation caused by white supremacy.

Though it is true that many women who worked for the civil rights organizations were relegated to secretarial work, Moody illustrates that many women joined the men on the frontlines of battle to end segregation. Moody writes that after the bus station incident, she is warned by a preacher that "you girls just can't go around doing things on your own" (282). In including this incident, she illustrates her ability to make conscious and independent choices about the level of her activism. Demonstrating her independence, she writes of herself as one who *can* do things on her own. In writing about her participation, Moody illustrates her ability to actively challenge practices and laws of segregation that go beyond assigned gender roles. Perkins points out the challenges that many female activists faced during this period: "In transcending traditional feminine roles and gender expectations in order to participate actively in the struggle, they sometimes encountered rejection from their Black male

counterparts . . ." (103). Perkins notes the lack of femininity that is often a result of a female's role as an activists, suggesting that this is often difficult for male-counterparts to accept. Crossing gender boundaries also implies equality, which was problematic for many male leaders in the movement who believed and supported gender role expectations.

Clarissa Myrick-Harris writes, "African-American women's quest for self definition and empowerment is often advanced by their political activism" (219). In representing the movement as an inseparable part of her identity, Moody notes, "I knew that I would never really be leaving the Movement" (186). Illustrating the way in which she achieves empowerment through political activism, Moody describes the sense of self-confidence that she receives from her participation in the movement. Her text exhibits a redefining of herself through the role as an activist; she writes, "That summer I could feel myself beginning to change. For the first time I began to think something would be done about whites killing, beating, and misusing Negroes. I knew I was going to be a part of whatever happened" (278). As Angela Davis reminds us in her political text *Women, Culture, Politics*, "The concept of empowerment is hardly new to Afro-American women. For almost a century, we have been organized in bodies that have sought to collectively develop strategies illuminating the way to economic and political power for ourselves and our communities" (3). Moody's text illustrates how empowerment through activism is linked to her concept of self-identity, emphasizing how this concept of identity is crucial to helping her community achieve social change. Myrick-Harris poignantly argues that "African-American

women involved in the on-going struggle for social change contribute most to the black community when they step outside of roles defined for them by black males and use both their personal experience as black women and the collective history of all African-Americans to define and empower themselves" (219). By stepping out of the confines of specified gender roles, Moody illustrates herself as representative of this empowerment, demonstrating just how important women activists were to the movement.

Importantly, Moody's text questions the role of black male leadership within the movement. In exclaiming, "I just got my kicks looking at the ministers. Some of them looked so pitiful, I thought they would cry any minute, and here they were, supposed to be our leaders," Moody confronts what she believes to be a lack of guidance and support (298). Her conscientious attention to the role of leadership within the movement and her recuperation of crucial events that illustrate the impact of wavering leadership and lack of guidance offer important information concerning the sense of isolation that engulfed many of the young foot soldiers. Significantly, her testimonies demonstrate that many of the young students relied solely on each other for support, guidance, and leadership. Her very act of questioning the male leaders in the movement is an important part of her own awareness of her self-development as a female activist. The frustration she conveys when describing fear in the male leaders suggests a realization: she knows, even as a young woman activist, that she has the personal courage to confront a racist society.

In repeatedly emphasizing the lack of true guidance and leadership within the many civil rights organizations, Moody continues to emphasize the value of the young student activist in conducting demonstrations:

> The workshops were handled mostly by SNCC and CORE field secretaries and workers, almost all of whom were very young. The NAACP handled all the bail and legal services and public relations, but SNCC and CORE could draw teen-agers into the Movement as no other organization could. Whether they received attention for it or not, they helped make Jackson the center of attention throughout the nation. (296)

Moody's observations concerning the young activist's roles within the movement highlight the importance of their participation, suggesting that if it were not for these young students, Mississippi might not have received the national attention it did. Repeatedly, Moody writes about the sacrifices made by the young activists to ensure that they do "receive attention." In noting that "[m]ost [SNCC] workers had missed a bullet by an inch or so on many occasions. Threats didn't stop them. They just kept going all the time" (276), Moody emphasizes the perseverance and commitment of these young foot soldiers. Importantly, Derrick Morrison will later note the historical impact of the young activists:

> But the important thing was that the movement was not just putting forth demands and then waiting for action upon them by political, economic, and social institutions of the bourgeoisie. What the activists in SCLC and SNCC did was to combine this reliance

> upon bourgeois institutions with direct action by the masses . . . . People who had been trying to solve social problems in an individual way began to sense the power of the mass. (548)

Repeatedly, Moody acknowledges the value of the young activists through her documentation of their trials and tribulations. According to Moody's testimony, it is the young activists that profoundly shape the movement through their organization and participation in the demonstrations that became a symbol of the civil rights movement. The independence of the young activists could be related to the establishment of SNCC. Ella Baker, the executive director of SCLC, "saw the need for young activists to work independently of their elders" and provided resources to expand SNCC (Cashman 146). Moody certainly saw the opportunities these resources provided as demonstrated in the many examples she provides to illustrate the ways in which she fought racial oppression.

Importantly, as Moody illustrates, young activists were learning to work independently. After being thrown in jail for participating in a demonstration in Jackson, Mississippi, Moody notes that she "found a lot of . . . friends there" (298). Observing that all of the girls in her cell were college students, Moody recalls: "We had a lot to talk about" (298). Moody's recollection of her time in the movement express both the importance of camaraderie and solidarity of the young civil rights female workers as well as the invaluable contributions made by the young women activists who were willingly to go to jail and sacrifice almost everything. As Charles Payne notes in his essay "Men Led, but Women Organized: Movement Participation of Women in the Mississippi Delta,"

"women canvassed more than men, showed up more often at mass meetings and demonstrations, and more frequently attempted to register to vote" (2). Being involved in SNCC, an organization that as Payne notes "was structurally open to female participation in a way that many organizations were not," most likely allowed Moody opportunities that might not have been available in other organizations (3). As Moody poignantly illustrates, she took the opportunities available through the organization and became one of its top canvassers and organizers. Though Lawrence Goyot, a member of SNCC, states, "It is no secret that young people and women led organizationally," it is undoubtedly true, as Moody notes, that they did not receive the recognition or credit they deserved for their invaluable contributions and sacrifices (Raines 241).

Noting the amount of violence perpetrated against women activists, especially during Moody's time in the movement, Payne notes:

> Reprisals against women in the rural South were constant and highly visible. Examination of SNCC's newsletters in 1962 and 1963 suggest that some of the most violent reprisals took place against women . . . Women were regularly clubbed at demonstrations or beaten in jail. The homes of women activist were regularly shot into. Any woman in the Delta who contemplated joining the movement had to be aware of this. (4)

Certainly, this analysis indicates that Moody was aware that she was putting herself at extreme risk, but as illustrated, the hope for social change was more

important than her own personal suffering. Noting that there was concern over her decision to work with CORE in the Madison area, because "the place was too rough for girls," Moody writes of her unwavering commitment to join the organization: "I just had to. I don't know why I felt that way, but I did" (313). Moody emphasizes the necessity of participation and being involved, expressing that this is the only path she can take. In doing so, she displays exceptional courage in her quest for social equality.

Importantly, Vicki Crawford provides additional analysis concerning the specific challenges women activists faced, especially those canvassing in the remote areas of Mississippi:

> By the time the civil rights movement gained momentum throughout the South in the early 1960's, the large number of Mississippi blacks were so impoverished that any efforts to organize them had to focus first on meeting the demands of everyday survival. Moreover, because resistance to civil rights was greatest in remote, isolated areas that dominated the state, organizing there was life-threatening work. Very often the first blacks to engage in civil rights work found themselves and their families victims of violent threats and harassment. It is within this context that we can come to understand courageous, relentless work of black female activists throughout the state. (14)

Illustrating these very challenges, Moody vividly describes herself as unyielding in her commitment to improve the lives of impoverished blacks in her quest for

attaining civil rights. Noting that the "Delta Negroes still didn't understand the voting, but they knew they had found friends, friends they could trust," Moody writes of the efforts put forth by SNCC in attaining food and money for the impoverished (278).

Importantly, Patricia Hill Collins reminds us of the historical representation of black women dominated by those "portraying Black women solely as passive, unfortunate recipients of abuse stifle notions that Black women can actively work to change [their] circumstances and bring about change . . ." (287). Almost thirty years prior to the publication of Collin's text, Moody constructs an image of herself that actively counters representations of this passivity. In redefining gender roles, she portrays herself as strong, fearless, and willing to die for social change. Sidonie Smith notes the challenge for those writing autobiography who are poor and women of color: "she faces even more imbroglios of male-female figures: here ideologies of race and class, sometimes even nationality, intersect and confound those of gender" (*Poetics* 51). Often, this can lead to women becoming less visible, which is certainly true in the history of the movement; therefore, Moody's text challenges these perceived social constructs by providing social discourse that includes the voice of women in the movement. By writing them into existence, Moody provides these women visibility and a permanent place in history.

Illustrating the beginning of her commitment to the movement, Moody writes of her decision to join the NAACP at Tougaloo Southern College :

> All that night I didn't sleep. Everything started coming back to me. I thought of Samuel O'Quinn. I thought of how he had been shot in the back with a shotgun because they suspected him of being a member. I thought of Reverend Dupree and his family who had been run out Woodville when I was a senior in high school, and all he had done was mentioned the NAACP in a sermon. The more I remembered the killings, beatings, and intimidations, the more I worried what might possibly happen to me or my family if I joined the NAACP. But I knew I was going to join, anyway. I had wanted to for a time. (271)

What becomes apparent through her revelation is that for a long time she wanted to be part of the political struggle of her people. Her act of joining the NAACP is the beginning of her walk down the path she has chosen in her commitment to the political struggle, even if this decision leads to her ultimately feeling profound isolation from both her family and her community.

In recalling one of the famous historical Woolworth's lunch counter sit-ins, Moody writes of her significant role in the demonstration, noting that as a member of the NAACP, she had been one of its most "faithful canvassers and church speakers" (288). Moody notably points out that the leader of her campus NAACP branch, John Salter, requests of her to be the "spokesman for a team that would sit-in at the Woolworth's lunch counter" (288). By assigning the term *spokesman* to herself, Moody subverts the dominant ideology that emphasized the value of men in the civil rights movement. She continues by writing that "the

organization had a hard time finding students who were in a position to go to jail," noting that she "had nothing to lose . . . " (288). In illustrating herself as one who has a pivotal role in the demonstration, one who sacrifices everything, Moody continues to consciously constructs her identity as a key member of the movement.

In describing her participation in the Woolworth's sit-in, Moody writes of the extent of humiliation and danger she confronts: "We were called a little bit of everything . . . a couple of boys took one end of the rope and made it into a hangman's noose. Several attempts were made to put it around our necks" (290). Reflecting a history of lynching, this example serves to both remind the reader of the past violent acts committed against many blacks as well as to emphasize the continued danger that civil rights protesters faced on a daily basis. Smeared with "ketchup, mustard, sugar, pies, and everything on the counter," Moody writes of the inhumanity that surrounds her and her fellow demonstrators--noting that the mob went so far as to spray paint the word nigger on the back of a fellow demonstrator (292). Moody's testimony demonstrates the extent of racism so ingrained in those opposing desegregation, and in doing so, affirms the urgency and need to continue in the fight for civil rights . . . or more importantly as demonstrated in the Woolworth's sit-in, the fight for *human* rights.

Moody's text draws attention to the language and words used during the Woolworth's sit-in. Noting that the crowd began to chant, "Communists, Communists, Communists," when white student activists join the black students, Moody connects the use of the word to those committed to ending segregation

(291). Significantly, Eleanor Roosevelt's commitment to civil rights leads her to write about the very use of this term. Openly praising the courage of the civil rights workers, she notes the parallels between American racists and European fascists:

> And here, too, emerged another and unmistakably similarity to the Nazism we had believed destroyed . . . Most dictators of the West--Franco, Mussolini, Hitler--claim that they were "saving" their lands from the threat of Communism. Today, as I have learned over and over to my cost, one needs only to be outspoken about the unfair treatment of the Negro to be labeled "Communists." I had regarded such expression to be the only honorable and civilized course of a citizen of the United States. (52)

Like Roosevelt, Moody connects the use of the term to those fighting against public injustice. Therefore, as Roosevelt notes, the segregationists are no different from the dictators of the West, and as Moody illustrates, these "Communists" are the "only honorable and civilized" white individuals in Woolworths.

In writing that her involvement in the movement requires much sacrifice, Moody points out the social and cultural displacement that is directly a result of her activism. As Perkins notes in her analysis of women activists, "to love one's children, family, or community implies a willingness to also to sacrifice and struggle for society, a world worthy of their humanity. To work for freedom or justice is thus a profound expression of love" (111). In sharing her recollection of

certain events, Moody's autobiography provides important information in regards to the personal sacrifices that are required of one who works toward the goal of achieving racial equality. As a result of her activism, Moody's family essentially treats her as an outcast, fearing for their own safety. In addition, Moody's mother sends word that according to the hometown sheriff she "must never come back [home]" (301). The indication is that her life is in danger and she would not be safe because, as the sheriff mentions, "The whites are pretty upset about her doing these things" (301). In illustrating that there are serious consequences for her choice to work for "freedom and justice," Moody emphasizes that one of those consequences could very well be the loss of her life. Her willingness to continue at great personal expense, even knowing that she might very well be killed, is what sets her apart from most members of her community.

Notably, Moody expresses concern over the consequences of her actions, acknowledging the danger her family is in:

> Junior had been cornered by a group of white boys and was about to be lynched, when one of his friends came along and rescued him. Besides that, a group of white men had gone out and beaten up my old Uncle Buck. Adline said Mama told her they couldn't sleep, for fear of night riders. They were all scared to death. My sister ended up cursing me out. She said I was trying to get every Negro in Centreville murdered. (301)

Reflecting on the dangers that become a part of life for her family, Moody expresses both concern and remorse, but ultimately she writes that she decides to

remain in the movement in hopes that the suffering, violence, and oppression experienced by so many members of her community might eventually stop.

As a black woman using the autobiographical genre as an extension of her activism, Moody emphasizes the importance of writing and changing social conditions. In an interview given in the 1980's, Nikki Giovanni discusses the continued significance of the connection between black women's autobiographies and changing political condition, asserting that literature must reflect and seek social change (qtd. in Tate 62). In not believing there is a separation of the self and the body politic, Giovanni actively asserts that they are one (Tate 62). Emphasizing this connection in response to her participation in the movement, Moody exclaims, "I could feel myself beginning to change. For the first time I began to think something would be done about whites killing, beating, and misusing Negroes. I knew I was going to be part of whatever happened" (278). It is here that Moody begins to illuminate that there is no separation between the self--more specifically, her writing of the self-- and the body politic as represented by her illustration of her life as one with the social/political conditions of her community, emphasizing the political nature and focus of her autobiography.

In noting that her generation "recognized we were going to have to go to jail, and we were going to have to get killed . . . . We were going to get beaten; our houses were going to get bombed. But we went on the line. I mean bodies, a lot of bodies," Giovanni acknowledges the reality of political activism (qtd. in Tate 62). Moody's text provides a firsthand example of this recognition when she

notes that going on the line meant either being "shot like Samuel O'Quinn or run out of town, like Reverend Dupree" (294). Moody tells her reader that if she heard of another murder in Centreville, "I knew it would be a member of my family" (294). She notes that activists realized that at any moment their lives could be taken from them--and usually with no repercussion.

In vividly describing the death of Medgar Evers, Moody writes of the impact of his death on her role as an activist. Describing a scene in which she tries to get young students to participate in protesting his murder, Moody writes: "It's a shame, it really is a shame. This morning Medgar Evers was murdered and here you all sit in a damn classroom with books in front of your faces pretending you don't even know he's been killed. Every Negro in Jackson should be on the streets raising hell and protesting his death" (303). In addition to drawing attention to his murder, these lines demonstrate the important roll young civil rights workers played in both motivating and recruiting other young students to join the movement. It is here that Moody constructs the image of herself, as well as the other young activists, as invaluable and crucial to the momentum of the movement. At this moment she emphasizes the need for her generation to become actively involved in the movement in order to ensure that there is a possibility of social change. Once again, the image she constructs of herself draws attention to the important and valuable role filled by young women activists.

In including a scene in which she is to give a speech to motivate other young activist at a rally for CORE, Moody writes of a fellow male activist

praising her contributions: "she is dedicated, man. She has been beaten and kicked all over Jackson. Remember the bloody sit-in, and the other demonstrations? She was in all of them. She has been in jail four or five times, and as a result, she can't even go home again" (316). In writing that a male activist praises her dedication and unwavering commitment to the movement, and her bravery, Moody is consciously subverting gender role restrictions by announcing that even the young male foot soldiers are impressed by her work. This reconfirms to her audience that she was not afraid to be beaten or to go to jail, once again emphasizing her commitment; in doing so, she educates her audience of the value and strength of female activists by demonstrating that on the frontline battles to end segregation, women are in just as much danger. Thus, her text advocates for the recognition of the important contributions made by women working in CORE.

In describing her time in the movement, Moody writes that the "cops started arresting every Negro on the scene of a demonstration, whether or not he was participating. People were being carted off to jail every day of the week" (302). The theme of incarceration plays an important role in the text, and Moody notes the numbers of individuals locked up for simply demonstrating or being near a demonstration: "people were being carted off to jail every day of the week" (302). As a firsthand witness to the injustices, Moody provides vital information that demonstrated the continued oppression that her community faced on a daily basis. Importantly, she describes how jail in used to stop protests and deter future protests. By foregrounding the abuse of power exhibited by local

police, Moody notes that in Jackson, Mississippi plans were being drawn to "house over 12, 500 demonstrators at the local jails and fairgrounds" (301-2). As a result, most young activists, both male and female, found themselves incarcerated due to their participation.

Addressing sexual politics in the movement, Moody writes that being a female activist meant one had to deal with sexual harassment and exploitation. In describing a jail scene in which she is incarcerated for participating in a demonstration, Moody notes: "Our cell didn't even have a curtain over the shower. Every time the cops heard the water running, they came running to peep" (298). This example symbolizes the conditions of racial conditions under white supremacy: the exploited African American female as a sexual object. The white policemen, reminiscent of the white slaveholder, have access to the black women's bodies. Definitely, Moody takes the power away from the oppressor by cleverly improvising: "We took chewing gum and toilet paper and covered the opening of the door. They were afraid to take it down. I guess they thought it might come out in the newspaper. Their wives wouldn't have liked that at all" (298). In addressing the sexual exploitation, Moody notes the continued fascination with the sexuality surrounding black women's bodies, while at the same time villainizing the white policemen for their licentious behavior and actions. Thus, she uses the autobiographical genre to continue to expose the sexual degradation of black women. In addressing this issue, Collins writes, "Black women have no rights of privacy that Whites must observe...Black women's sexuality has been constructed by law as public property" (124).

Barbara Omolade offers further analysis that addresses the above intersections of sexual oppression, ""White men used their power in the public sphere to construct a private sphere that would meet their needs and their desire for black women" (17). In illustrating this scene, Moody illuminates and exposes the ways in which white men continue in their attempt to regulate and objectify black women's sexuality.[20]

Moody's observation of many members of the black community, especially the older generations, provides important analysis and information about the dynamics of her community--specifically how her community related to the movement. Moody recalls:

> Things didn't seem to be coming along too well in the Delta. On Saturdays we would spend all day canvassing and often at night we would have mass rallies. But these were usually poorly attended. Many Negroes were afraid to come. In the beginning some were even afraid to talk to us. Most of these old plantation Negroes had been brain-washed so by the whites, they really thought that only whites were supposed to vote. There were even a few who had

[20] In her recently published book *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance--a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*, Danielle L McGuire writes extensively about the sexual exploitation of young black female civil rights workers who were jailed. In the chapter titled "A Black Woman's Body Was Never Hers Alone," there are numerous testimonies from young activists who were sexually assaulted and exploited while under the supervision of white male guards. The young female prisoners were often ordered to strip naked and forced to endure humiliating thorough body searches. The text notes how frequently this occurred in Mississippi, especially for the SNCC workers. As McGuire notes, a report issued by the Medical Committee for Human Rights documented "extreme sexual brutality" in Jackson Mississippi regarding the treatment of young activists (161).

> never heard of voting. The only thing most of them knew was how to handle a hoe. (277)

Her testimony acknowledging the fear that impeded the older generation from being active in the movement is significant in addressing the difficulties that the younger generation faced in trying to gain momentum within the movement. As previously noted, Moody poignantly illustrates that the fate of the movement lies within the hands of her generation. Strategically, pointing out the lack of participation from the older generation is important because it continues to emphasize the value of young activists and the necessity of their participation as it relates to the continuation of the struggle. Significantly, her generation is the last generation to "come of age" in the segregated South.

Another important element of political autobiography is redefining what family means. Perkins notes that women activists have thought of the meaning of family "to extend beyond the narrow definition of blood relations. The term comes to include all those who provide emotional as well as a material sustenance and support " (69). In a possible attempt to redefine the definition of family, Moody writes extensively of her relationship with Mrs. Chinn, who she represents as a type of surrogate mother. Mrs. Chinn offers her what her mother cannot: affirmation of her values, beliefs, and a shared commitment to the movement. Crawford notes the impact of fellow women activists: "the influence of other women, particularly older members of the community, provided role models who encouraged younger women's social consciousness" (24).

Importantly, Moody's relationship with Mrs. Chinn illustrates an important part of her evolving political consciousness. Noting the amount of apathy that exists within the black community, Mrs. Chinn asserts, "[m]ost Negroes have been thoroughly brainwashed. If they aren't brainwashed, they are too insecure . . . " (315). The connections between segregation, poverty, and discrimination are at the center of these conversations. As Moody notes, Mrs. Chinn provides her with an education, a better understanding of the inequality that exists. This is something she is never able to get from her own mother, who continuously silences her when it comes to race relations and segregation.

In recounting her time spent at the CORE office in Canton, in which she canvassed tirelessly, Moody sadly writes that the majority of blacks are not willingly to participate, mostly due to extreme fear. In addition, many of her young helpers from CORE have been pulled out by their parents because of the amount of violence being inflicted upon them. Moody notes the way other blacks in the community look at her: "Why don't you all get out of here before you get us all killed?" (325). In writing of herself as an outcast, one that is no longer wanted by the community, she emphasizes that lack of support. At one point, things become so rough for her and the few remaining activists that she writes: "we were afraid to walk the streets" (325). Left with no money and resources, she often goes days without eating, resulting in her becoming very frail and thin, illustrating the indelible evils of racism.

One of the pivotal moments in the text is when Moody learns that she is on the Klan's blacklist. This example illustrates and affirms the power of her

political influence and her ability to lead. Being on the Klan's most wanted list implies that she is a threat--that she is important enough to be noticed and targeted. She notes the other faces she sees on the leaflet: Medgar Evers, John Satler, Bob Moses, Emmett Till, Reverend Ed King (373). In writing that her face appears with important leaders and individuals significant to the movement, she informs her readers of her own value and significance. Noting that "[t]his piece of paper shock me up worse than all of the letters Mama had sent me," Moody understands that she is truly in a very dangerous position, noting that many of the faces on the leaflet are of those who have been murdered (373).

As Ella Baker asserts, "the movement of the fifties and sixties was carried largely by women. How many made a conscious decision on the basis of the larger goals, how many on the basis of habit pattern, I don't know. But it is true that the number of women who carried the movement is much larger than that of men" ("Developing Community Leadership" 347). Certainly, Moody represents herself as one of those who carried the movement. She uses her autobiography to construct herself as someone completely absorbed in her quest for civil rights who gives up most of her teenage years as well as close connections to her family members. Her narrative self is someone defined, in large measure, by isolation, frustration, constant threats and ever-present danger. But her text also frames her unwavering commitment in her quest to end segregation. In doing so, it provides a detailed account of the valuable role women played in the movement. Her autobiography is witness to an unwavering commitment of a young woman foot soldier in the civil rights movement.

CHAPTER 4

Coming of Age in Mississippi:

The Textual Shift from Civil Rights to Black Power

Revolutions begin with the self, in the self. The individual, the basic revolutionary unit, must be purged of poison and lies that assault the ego and threaten the heart . . .

----Toni Cade Bambara[21]

You may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated.

----Maya Angelou[22]

I have come to you tonight as an equal, as a comrade, as a black woman walking down a corridor of tears.

----Sonia Sanchez[23]

The final section of *Coming of Age in Mississippi* illuminates a momentous shift from a civil rights autobiography to a Black Power autobiography. Illustrating that Anne Moody's idealism is fading due to the faltering progress of the movement, as represented in her despair concerning the endless murders of African Americans, including the shocking report of four little girls killed in a Birmingham church bombing, she declares: "Nonviolence is out" (349). The identity that emerges at this point in the narrative is one, as Stephen Butterfield asserts, that "begins to sound like a soldier" (217). It is Moody's

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[21] Toni Cade Bambara, "On the Issue of Roles." *The Black Woman* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1970) 109.

[22] Maya Angelou. (qtd in Tate) *Black Women Writer's at Work.* New York: Continuum, 1988) 7.

[23] Sonia Sanchez. "Reflections after the June 12th March for Disarmament." *Homegirls and Hangrenades*. (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1984).

representation of herself as a soldier, and revolutionary activist, that is the focus of this chapter. Demonstrating a momentous shift from civil rights to Black Power, Moody's writing reflects an erosion of confidence that is represented in her turning away from civil rights ideology. Her powerful rhetoric reflects the values of a Black Power autobiography by illustrating a radical departure from non-violence to a voice that emphasizes survival as its focus; thus, as Moody argues, the fight for civil rights becomes a fight for *human* rights. Importantly, this chapter examines how Moody utilizes the genre of political autobiography to "expose oppressive conditions and the repressive tactics of the state" (Perkins 7). In doing so, she emphasizes the need for a more radical approach in the political struggle to eradicate racism and the resulting social injustice that dominates the lives of African Americans.

Moody was responding to a dire racial problem in Mississippi, a problem that I will sketch below. During the civil rights movement, Mississippi led the nation in violent crimes committed against African Americans. In *Eyes on the Prize*, the companion volume to the PBS television series on the civil rights years, Juan Williams would later write about the degree of racism so embedded in die hard segregationists in Mississippi, noting that "they were not about to let blacks vote; many would sooner kill them" (208). Knowing that civil rights activists would be faced with white mobs intent on killing them, blacks knew that their chances of registering to vote were next to none. This is Moody's Mississippi, a place where an African American could be killed for sitting in the wrong section of the bus or using the wrong water fountain. White southerners responded to

African Americans requests to be treated as equal citizens with bullets, knives, bombs, and brutal physical violence. Importantly, Vicki Crawford writes, "[i]n the South in general, and in Mississippi in particular, the fight for civil rights was first and foremost a day-to-day struggle for survival . . . . It was considered the most violent, dreadful pocket of resistance in the South" (13-14).

In an interview reflecting her time in the civil rights movement, Myrlie Evers comments on what it was like live in Mississippi, "To be born black and live in Mississippi was to say your life was not worth much" (*Eyes on the Prize* 222). As history demonstrated, white segregationists in Mississippi did not think twice about killing African Americans--or anyone that threatened to change the segregation laws in their state. Mississippi is the state where fourteen-year-old Emmett Till was brutally murdered for whistling at a white women, where three civil rights workers, Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney, were discovered in an earthen dam, where a black soldier was bludgeoned to death by a policeman for refusing to sit at the back of the bus, where another black soldier was beaten unconscious for trying to eat at a public restaurant, where African American men frequently went missing, only to later be found brutally murdered.[24] The Mississippi segregationists demonstrated that they would do absolutely anything to keep blacks from achieving any kind of equality. [25] James Silver argued that the Mississippi of the early 1960's was in fact a

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[24] See *Eyes on the Prize* (214)

[25] Importantly, Jacquelyn Grant writes that "[w]hen one considers the conditions under which blacks were forced to exist in Mississippi and other parts of the deep South, it is easy to conclude that in the minds of whites, blacks were less than human . . . . Though slavery was no longer legal, blacks were still

"closed society." He writes, "within its own borders the closed society of Mississippi comes as near to approximating a police state as anything we have seen yet in America" (151).

Moreover, the governor at the time, Ross Barnett, as a hardcore segregationist, used the media spotlight to declare what he viewed as an attack on Mississippians' way of life when a federal court ruled that that James Meredith could legally attend the University of Mississippi. Barnett responded to the ruling by announcing it was "the moment of our greatest crisis since the War Between the States," and many perceived his announcement as way to "galvanize every segregationists in the state" (Williams 215). On the very day that Meredith stepped foot on the Ole Miss campus, riots followed that quickly escalated out of control. Federal troops were called in and the mayhem led to President Kennedy's conviction that this was "the worse thing" he had seen in all of his years (qtd. in Williams 217). In the end, two men were murdered and hundreds arrested. Once again, Mississippi demonstrated that it would "Never, Never, Never, Never, N-o-o-o, Never" allow social integration between blacks and whites (Williams 215).

Thus, importantly, Moody's narrative becomes a witness to the amount of violence and brutality inflicted upon African Americans in Mississippi; she writes that "Negroes frequently turned up dead...a man's headless corpse had been found...with the genitals cut off and with K's cut into flesh all over his body" (313). Using vivid examples to emphasize the brutal violence being inflicted on black men in the quest to reinforce white supremacy, the narrator provides

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perceived as servants, whose only function was to facilitate the needs of whites" ("Civil Rights Women . . . " 39).

information that is often omitted from mainstream media; in doing so, she educates her readers of the horrific crimes committed against African Americans in Mississippi by bringing these facts to light. Historically, Mississippi "led the nation in beatings, lynchings, and mysterious disappearances" (Williams 208). In addition, Moody notes the fact that these murders remain "unsolved," highlighting the lack of justice. It is this very lack of justice that will lead to Fannie Lou Hammer's powerful declaration: "A white person could [kill a black person] without bothering to explain" (51).

In addition to pointing out the lack of protection the state of Mississippi offered to its black citizens, Moody highlights the ineffectiveness of the federal government in protecting the rights--and lives--of African Americans: "The more I thought about it, the more it seemed that the federal government was directly or indirectly responsible for most of the segregation, discrimination, and poverty in the South" (315). Noting that the federal government controls cotton, the main crop in Mississippi, by being in charge of the number of allotments given to the southern states, Moody explains the unfair distribution that follows, stating that the southern states give the majority of the allotments to white farmers, where as African American farmers "were barely living off what they made for their land" (315). The economic imbalance of the sharecropping system revealed the inhumane conditions that blacks endured on a daily basis.

Noting social justice for blacks is both a state and federal issue, Moody illustrates the lack of protection available to blacks. The conclusion that Moody

asserts is that the whole structure of government is structurally flawed when it comes to providing equal rights--and protection--for African Americans.

Significantly, as Moody painfully writes, even the Birmingham, Alabama, church bombing that killed four little girls will most likely not bring an effective response from the white community and the federal government. Acknowledging that President Kennedy "will probably issue a statement saying, 'We are doing Everything in our Power to apprehend the killers'" (351), Moody notes that most likely the FBI will not apprehend the killers. Having criticized the FBI before, she expects there to be a lack of justice for the murder of the four little girls. As Moody anticipated, two years later, in 1965, J. Edgar Hoover, head of the FBI, announced that any chance of prosecution was remote.[26] This painful example reiterates both the lack of protection and the lack of justice available to African Americans.

As Perkins argues, "[a] major thrust of the Black Power Movement, in fact, was that the imperative for social change could not, should not, and would not any longer wait on Whites to be convinced of the moral right of oppressed people to struggle against their oppression" (29). Importantly, the view of the

[26] In 1968, the FBI pulled out of the investigation. Eventually, in 1977, Robert Chambliss was arrested and convicted for the murders of Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Denise McNair and sentenced to life prison. He died in 1985. Years later, in 2000, Thomas Blanton was convicted for his role in the murders and sentenced to life in prison. In 2002, Bobby Frank Cherry was found guilty and sentenced to life in prison. Interestingly, the same evidence that was used to convict these men much later was the same evidence that J. Edgar Hoover had in 1965. This validates Moody's criticism of the FBI, and the lack of justice--even with evidence--that led to the rise of the Black Power movement in response to the inequality in the United States legal system.

Black Power movement is significant in connection to the legal system, since the legal system was controlled by the dominate culture; Moody writes that even the cops are against them, signifying that her political consciousness is developing (310). Once again stating that "there has got to be another way for us," Moody recognizes that appealing to the moral conscience of the whites in her community is simply not enough to stop the violence and achieve true racial equality (351). The governments of the southern states made clear that they were not going to simply obey the federal government's request to integrate public facilities. Moreover, many local politicians used the federal government's intervention as a political weapon--claiming that their way of life was being threatened by the North. Moody notes that there is no real protection for African Americans--not even at a federal level. Thus, the narrative becomes a way for her to highlight the problem of the subordinate racial position of blacks within the U.S. legal system.[27]

As a political activist, Moody chooses words that counter the master narrative and represent self-empowerment. In response to President Kennedy's death, she writes that she can barely look at a white person without hate: "When I turned around and looked at all those white faces--all those southern white faces--

[27] In emphasizing that the laws of Mississippi did not extend to blacks, Moody once again reminds blacks that they must protect and defend themselves. In an interview given on the lack of justice for African Americans during the period of the civil rights movement in Mississippi, Congressman Charles Diggs reflects back to the Emmett Till case, stating that he knew the jury would never find the defendants guilty--even though they had an eye witness. Congressman Diggs discusses how the courtroom often became a place of intimidation: "This is Mississippi. . . with a long history of intimidation of witnesses and fear on the part of blacks to testify, in racial situations in particular" (qtd. in Williams 49).

fire was in my eyes...MURDERERS, MURDERERS, MURDERERS" (389). In writing that President Kennedy's murder makes her view the world as "cruel and evil," Moody chooses language that indicates that the world is cruel and evil because of white supremacy. In doing so, she facilitates an analysis of her own reaction in her choice to rename the white community "MURDERERS." As Kenneth O'Reilly asserts, rhetoric is the most important tool (or more significantly a weapon) at Black Power activists' disposal (295-96). Realizing the link between language and power, Moody writes to expose and challenge the dominant culture.

Acknowledging the effect President Kennedy's death will have on the African American community, Moody writes: "I knew they must feel as though they had lost their best friend--one who was in a position to help determine their destiny. To most Negroes, especially to me, the President had made 'Real Freedom' a hope" (390). The assassination of President Kennedy is yet another setback that contributes to Moody's disillusionment with the movement as illustrated by her connecting his death to "the destiny" of African Americans.

As Moody explains, the destiny for many civil rights activists is jail. In choosing her words carefully, as political autobiographers do, the narrator compares the treatment both she and other activists received when they were taken to jail--or more specifically, the local fairgrounds turned into a make-shift prison; powerfully, she writes that the scene could have been Nazi Germany:

> The openings had been closed up with wire. It reminded me of a concentration camp . . . .We were guarded by four policemen.

> They had rifles and kept an eye on us through the wire sides of the building. As I looked through the wire at them, I imagined myself in Nazi Germany, the policemen Nazi soldiers. They couldn't have been rougher than these cops. Yet this was America, "the land of the free and the home of the brave." (307)

Charging that America for blacks is like Nazi Germany, Moody thematically connects her autobiography to the Holocaust by linking the treatment of civil rights activists to the treatment of prisoners in concentration camps. Surrounded by barbed wire and under constant surveillance, the narrator uses her text to self-consciously situate herself and other young activists among the prisoners of the Nazis. This striking parallel is a powerful way to create an unforgettable image of the inhumane treatment the civil rights activists received. In an attempt to make an appeal to her audience, Moody questions how this type of fascism could happen in America--"land of the free."

Continuing with her recollection of her time spent incarcerated, Moody notes that the young activist prisoners were kept in large buildings used to "auction off cattle " (307). The description she provides functions to remind her audience of the similarities between the treatment of the civil rights activists and the historical treatment of slaves who were auctioned off like cattle. By using language that reminds her audience of the institution of slavery, Moody's text offers clear parallels between slavery and the incarceration of the activists. The treatment received by those struggling to attain civil rights is hauntingly familiar to what their slave ancestors were subjected to: violence, degradation, captivity,

and humiliation. This contrast suggested that being in one of these make-shift prisons is literally similar to being enslaved.

Perkins illuminates methods of breaking the spirit of political prisoners: "the combination of physical abuse and mental torture" (32). Similarly, Moody writes of conditions that the young activists were exposed to while facing incarcerated for participating in peaceful protests. Noting that after they were driven to the fairgrounds, a make-shift prison, "the driver rolled up the windows, turned the heater on, got out, closed the door and left us. It was over a hundred degrees outside that day. There was no air coming in" (306). When they begged a policeman to let them out, "[he] smiled and walked away" (306). Illustrating that there is a constant threat of death, Moody focuses on the human rights abuses inflicted upon the young activists. In her analysis of Black Power autobiographies, Perkins notes that one of the main goals by those in power is "to break the spirit of political prisoners" (32). Moody illustrates this focus of law enforcement officials by relating it to the way they treat the young student activists: "the cops had gone wild with their billy sticks" (307). In addition, activists receive inedible food, leading many to become weak and sick from hunger.

A defining moment that demonstrates the shift from a civil rights autobiography to a black power autobiography occurs when Moody reflects on the death of the four little girls killed in the Birmingham church bombing, which, as she emotionally writes, leads her to rethink her entire value structure: "It made me question everything I had ever believed in (351). The insight she gains from

this tragedy continues to contribute to her interrogation of the political ideology of non-violence, and passionately she writes, "what's gonna be our answer to the bombing?" (350). Realizing that there is not enough protection for African Americans, arguably due to the passivity within the white community, Moody's words reveal a painful reality that represents the true violence engulfing her community. In strategically asking what the answer will be, Moody implies that non-violence alone is not the answer--highlighting that previous methods founded in non-violence have not been effective in protecting the lives of African Americans, "[sending] more of our children right back to Sunday school to be killed" is not the answer (350). In critiquing the current direction of the civil rights movement, Moody's analysis importantly points out that finding an answer is strategically linked to survival.

The ideological shift in Moody's evolving political consciousness is evident in her analysis of the political use of non-violence: "First of all we were only using it as a tactic to show, or rather dramatize, to the world how bad the situation is in the South. Well. I think we have had enough examples" (350). Moody highlights that non-violence was never meant to be a solution to racial injustice, but rather a vehicle to deliver the message of what was actually happening in the Deep South. Moody illustrates that the reactions to the peaceful protests and marches by African Americans, as well as many whites, exposed the violent tactics of the extreme racist white segregationists: the painfully realistic

depictions of blacks being beaten by police officers and white bystanders.[28] Significantly, Moody's rhetoric raises an extremely important question: now that the civil rights activists have the spotlight, *what are they going to do to stop the violence*? The narrator points out that an answer is still needed.

In an emotional moment, Moody writes: "[m]ore than ever I began to wonder whether God actually existed" (372). Noting that since the beginning of her time in the movement, she has "witnessed killing, stealing, and adultery committed against Negroes by whites throughout the South. God didn't seem to be punishing anyone for these acts" (373). Writing that African Americans were the ones who were peace-loving and religious, Moody wonders why they are "the ones doing all the suffering" (373). Ultimately, she concludes that there must be "two gods, many gods or no god at all" (373). Moody sets up a framework for understanding by stimulating the need to question the nonviolent tactics of the civil rights movement.

In writing about the social construct of the self, bell hooks notes:

> Within radical political movements in the United States, this process of self-recovery, of education for critical consciousness, remains in many ways an unacknowledged process. Unlike revolutionary struggles globally, where it is deemed essential to the process of radicalization, models of radical social change in the

[28] In his "Letter From Birmingham Jail," Dr. King writes, [non-violent tactics] seek "to dramatize the issue [so] that it can no longer be ignored" (401).

> U.S. often de-emphasize focus on the ways individuals develop political consciousness. (*Talking Back* 31)

This process, according to hooks, can only occur when one opposes continued colonization and domination. I suggest that we view Moody's narrative as a model of resistance--of an individual radical developing political consciousness. Her act of recognizing and identifying the social and political reality in the fight for civil rights is linked to the understanding of how one would embrace a more radical mode of activism. By exposing the devastating perpetuation of segregation--and the amount of violence being inflicted to ensure its continuation--Moody's narrator portrays her evolution as a peaceable activists to a nascent revolutionary who realizes the ineffectiveness of previous tactics. The activists, as the narrator suggests, must be willingly to see the limitations of the movement and seek to transcend those very limitations that she believes are enabling the violence to continue. hooks further notes that "no radical change, no revolutionary transformation will occur in this society--in this culture of domination--if we refuse to acknowledge the necessity for radicalizing consciousness in conjunction with collective political resistance" (*Talking Back* 31).

After working tirelessly in the battle to attain civil rights, Moody asserts a sweeping culturally significant premise--namely that racism in the civil rights era South exhibits the same characteristics as a disease, pathological even for those who are perpetuating it. Moody poignantly writes:

> After the sit-in, all I could think of was how sick Mississippi whites were. They believed so much in the segregated Southern way of life, they would kill to preserve it. I sat there in the NAACP office and thought of how many times they had killed when this way of life was threatened...the whites had a disease, an incurable disease in its final stage. (292) [29]

This realization has a profound effect on her political consciousness. In providing analysis that exposes the degree of racism so ingrained in those who supported segregation, Moody's text demands that the current direction of the movement be rethought by emphasizing that racism is in fact a psychological sickness, and in doing so encourages a reexamination of the current civil rights methodology by arguing the need for a more effective approach in eradicating racism.[30] Significantly, Moody writes that it is the young activists who will eventually "be the best doctors in the world for social problems" (293).

Exposing the severity of racism in the South, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* questions the belief that peaceful sit-ins and protests will cure this disease. Ultimately, the narrator's rhetoric aggressively challenges Dr. Martin Luther King's ideology of non-violence, concluding that this will not work in the Delta: "If Dr. King thinks non-violence is really going to work in the South as it

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[29] Comparatively, In "Letter From Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King, Jr. refers to segregation as a "disease" (401).

[30] In 1996, Michael Vannoy Adams writes that "White racism is not just a scheme to deny certain people social, political, and economic rights. It is a mental (and moral) illness that we need to psychoanalyze" (13). See *The Multicultural Imagination.* More than 30 years earlier, Moody uses her autobiography to illustrate that white racism is in fact a psychological illness.

did for India, then he is out of his mind" (351). Because the extent of racism is so *severe* in the South, and increasingly growing more violent, Moody illustrates that social justice will not be achieved without a more radical approach: "There has got to be another way for us . . . . If not, then there is no end to the misery we are now encountering" (351). At this point in the autobiography, the narrator represents a self that is much more pessimistic and weary compared to previous self-representations. The identity that emerges as a result of this evaluation is more mature and controversial than her previous representations, one that is uncertain about the future due to all the extreme violence and hatred being continuously inflicted upon her community. Importantly, it is here, in the final section of the autobiography, that the narrator's rhetoric begins to sounds more like Malcolm X than Dr. King.

In a speech given in 1965, Malcolm X passionately states:

> We believe that our fight is just. We believe that our grievances are just. We believe that the evil practices against Black people in this society are criminal and that those engaged in such criminal practices are to be looked upon themselves as nothing but criminals. And we believe that we are within our rights to fight those criminals by any means necessary . . . . This doesn't mean we're for violence. But we do--we have seen that the federal government has shown its inability, its absolute unwillingness, to protect the lives and property of Black people. We have seen where organized white racists, Klansmen, Citizens' Councilmen,

> and others can come into the Black community and take a Black man and make him disappear and nothing be done about it.
>
> ("Not Just an American Problem . . ." 427)

Malcolm X's speech reflects the very same concerns highlighted in Moody's narrative. In fact, this very speech could have been given by Moody. There are important dialogical moments between this speech and Moody's narrative--which seem to converse with each other. Moody addresses the injustice that Malcolm X speaks about time and time again in her autobiography, sharing the same concerns, and powerfully noting that "at the rate we are being killed now, we'll all soon be dead anyway" (349). Comparatively, her narrative, like Malcolm X's speech, attests for the need to fight racism, which means acknowledging the reality of social and political factors, so that more African Americans are not murdered because of the color of their skin. In the end, both Moody and Malcolm X emphasize that self-defense must be part of the equation.

One of the most significant representations of *Coming of Age in Mississippi* as a revolutionary text--and a Black Power text--is the representation of power in numbers. In establishing a context of resistance, Moody writes of the potential her community has due to higher population numbers.[31] Writing that in certain Mississippi towns there are "three Negroes to every white," Moody draws attention to the potential for protection within her own community (314). Illustrating that at times she could "see white folks actually tremble with fear," when they were around large groups of African Americans, suggests the power

[31] In the late 1950's, "forty-five percent of Mississippi people were black, a higher percentage than in any other state." (Williams 208)

her community could have if they employed an alternate strategy--not one that relied solely on non-violence (314). In noting that "[w]henever I could detect the least amount of fear in any white Mississippian, I felt good. I almost felt there was a chance of winning the battle regardless of how costly it turned out to be," Moody is emphasizing the power of fear--and not the usual fear expressed by African Americans when dealing with the white community in Mississippi (314). Paying careful attention to language, she uses the word battle, implying that this is in fact a war. Writing that it will be "costly" suggests the painful reality that lives will be lost in the war.

Including actual demographic numbers, the narrator sets up the battle field in Madison, writing that there "was a population of twenty-nine thousand Negroes against nine thousand whites" (314). In the paragraph directly preceding these lines, Moody writes of extreme acts of violence inflicted upon blacks in the area; this connection suggests that her use of population numbers is meant to go beyond the scope of voting. In looking at the current situation in Mississippi--the amount of brutal violence being inflicted in African Americans during the civil rights movement--Moody directly states that "'the Vote' was not the way to end it" (378). Connecting the fact that African Americans have a higher population than whites in many Mississippi towns to the extreme violence inflicted on blacks by whites is a narrative strategy in which she advocates for transformative action and resistance in order to prevent any more "headless corpses" of African Americans from being found on the side of the road. In invoking a battle paradigm, Moody's narrative creates a space in which power dynamics can be rethought in terms of

physical power. Contrary to the civil rights ideology of passive resistance, Moody's text creates an atmosphere for important discussions in relation to self defense and saving the lives of African Americans.

Including a speech that she delivers to a group of young activists in CORE, Moody once again writes about the advantage that her community holds based on higher population numbers. Disenchanted with the results achieved by non-violence alone, Moody encourages her fellow activists to embrace a more radical approach:

> Now that we know that we are not free and realize what's involved in freeing ourselves, we have to take certain positive actions to work on the problem. First of all, we have got to get together. I was told that it's twenty-nine thousand Negroes in this county to nine thousand whites. What's wrong with you? Don't you realize what you have going for you? (317)

Certainly, this position could be a narrative strategy that demonstrates a revolutionary model that moves beyond the social expectations of the passive resistance. Suggesting that "certain positive actions" are needed, and then stressing the advantage based on numbers, Moody is trying to rally the troops--literally. Realizing that racial inequality cannot be abolished by marching and boycotting alone, the narrator challenges the young activists, or more specifically as she views them, the young soldiers, to rethink ways in which equality can be achieved. Instead of facing continuous acts of heinous violence and retreating, Moody is looking for a different reaction from these young foot soldiers.

Challenging them to think outside the political ideology of passive resistance, Moody uses language as a political weapon that emphasizes empowerment and physical strength in numbers.

Importantly, a noteworthy parallel can be drawn between Moody's evolving political representation of herself and the potent words of playwright Lorraine Hansberry, who passionately writes the following about the movement:

> Negroes must concern themselves with every single means of struggle: legal, illegal, passive, active, violent and non-violent. They must harass, debate, petition, give money to court struggles, sit-in, lie-down, strike, boycott, sing hymns, pray on steps--and shoot from their windows when the racists come cruising through their communities. (qtd. in hooks *Yearning* 187)

In interrogating ways in which systematic racism must be addressed, both writers express a sense of urgency--and more importantly, a willingness to do whatever it takes--in addressing and eradicating social injustice. In focusing on active resistance, Moody passionately writes, "[match] fire with fire instead of kneeling and praying while some white cracker shoots you to death or throws a few sticks of dynamite on you and blows you to hell or somewhere" (361). At the end of her narrative, Moody's representation of the realization that non-violence alone will not bring about change leads to her narrative's ideological shift that essentially captures the growing disillusionment within the civil rights movement. Moody's written observations assert that if there is any hope for the African American community to transcend its current impasse of powerlessness and injustice, then

there must be a willingness to reexamine the current approach in dealing with the vicious attacks being used to ensure white supremacy and racial segregation.

Moody was certainly not alone in her disillusionment concerning the strategy of passive resistance. In an interview, Dave Dennis, who headed CORE's Mississippi staff during the famous 1964 Freedom Summer, and who Moody worked with in previous years, reflects on his feelings when he attended the eulogy for James Chaney: [32]

> [I couldn't] talk about things getting better, and how we should do it in an easy manner with nonviolence. You cannot make a man change by speaking a foreign language; he has to understand what you're talking about. This country operated then and still operates on violence. An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth--that's what we respect . . . . I am sick and tired of going to the funerals of black men who have been murdered by white men . . . .If you go back home and sit down and take what these white men in Mississippi are doing to us . . . if you take it and don't do something about it . . . . then God damn your souls! (qtd. in Williams 238 & 240)

Comparatively, both Moody and Dennis have reached this conclusion. Realizing that even the federal government cannot protect African Americans who try and

[32] Chaney's body was found with the bodies of Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman--two white civil rights activists. Although all three men had been shot and killed, Chaney, an African American, was the only one who received a savage beaten before he was shot. This is another painful reminder of the stark brutality used by white supremacists on African Americans.

register to vote, both activists draw attention to the necessity of "doing something about it."

Focusing on what Moody perceives to be a lack of active resistance in the current civil rights movement, the final section of the autobiography generates its own language of resistance. Moving beyond what the narrator believes to be barriers to achieving true racial equality, the text offers a common language of resistance that challenge those whom she believes are imprisoned ideologically by the belief that peace and non-violence will be effective in stopping the violence and murder of African Americans. As an activist, Moody seeks to transcend the philosophy of the movement--a movement that she views as narrow and limiting in scope when addressing the dangers and risks connected to being an activist. Moody writes that the very fear of being murdered has become a political weapon used by white supremacists. By the end of the narrative, Moody notes that it is necessary to carry weapons in case they are confronted by racist whites or the Klan, because, as she states, "If we threatened to shoot them, or maybe gave them a warning shot, we wouldn't be killed or beaten--or whatever they might do to us" (370).

As the narrative demonstrates, shifting the debate from civil rights to human rights, the struggle becomes about survival. The rhetoric of Black Power is continuously represented in the final section of the autobiography, reflecting a strategic distancing from the notion of peaceful sit-ins and protests. It is the narrator's intent to disrupt the politics of passive resistance and non-violence by emphasizing the amount of violence perpetuated against African Americans.

Through her despair and disillusionment with the mounting violence occurring in her community, Moody begins to challenge the religious ideology of the civil rights movement. In a bold statement, she declares that she will be her own God (349). Tired of the living in a society "that apparently wasn't meant for [her] and [her] kind," Moody painfully declares to God to "leave [her] in this graveyard dead" (349). Concluding that death would mean no more suffering, Moody illustrates a current state that is dominated by violence, fear, and murder. Her anguished spirit has left her faith shattered, and she testifies that the only faith she has left is in herself: "I am going to live by the rules I set for myself" (349). Strategically, she begins her shift from non-violence to active resistance by illustrating an acute awareness that self-preservation and the preservation of her community must come from those who understand the impending danger connected with the fight to attain civil rights and that the fight requires more than peaceful marches and sit-ins: "We've been praying too long. Yes, as a race all we've got is a lot of religion. And the white man's got everything else, including all the dynamite" (350).

In the struggle for civil rights, Dr. King writes of the basic philosophy that guided the movement: "non-violence" and "passive resistance" (*Stride Toward Freedom* 84). But, as Dr. King writes, more importantly it is the concept of "Christian love" that allows one to accept and follow this philosophy when faced with the violent tactics used by white supremacists. At this point in the text, Moody is clearly disillusioned with the concept of Christian love because, according to her, it is one sided. In response to the brutal violence, Moody writes

that if God believes that non-violence is the answer for blacks, then "I know [God] must be white, too" (349). Continuing her conversation with God, Moody writes "if I ever find out you are white, then I'm through with you. And if I ever find out your black, I'll try my best not to kill you when I get to heaven" (349). At this moment in the narrative, Moody is distancing herself from God and religion, moving beyond the idea or belief that God will protect her and her community. Angered at the thought that God could be black and still allow this type of racism to continue, Moody again implies that passivity is the real enemy of the movement.

Continuing her criticism of God, Moody reflects on a moment filled with anger and rage over the death of the four little girls killed in the Birmingham church bombing; powerfully, she writes that she is through with God: "Yes, I am going to put you down" (349). Increasingly subjected to violence and hate, Moody writes that she has lost faith in the ability of prayer to heal and end racism. The considerable amount of attention the narrator provides critiquing religion and the concept of Christian love serve to undermine the effectiveness of religion in achieving social justice.

In a defining moment, Moody powerfully writes that she is through with non-violence:

> As long as I live, I'll never be beaten by a white man again. Not like in Woolworth's. Not any more. That's out. I have a good idea Martin Luther King is talking to you, too. If he is, tell him that non-violence has served its purpose. Tell him that for me, God,

and for a lot of other Negroes who must be thinking it today. (349)

Calling into question everything she had ever believed in, Moody demonstrates how her analysis leads her to reconceptualize the entire direction of the movement; in addition, she references the growing number of individuals in her community who are becoming disillusioned with Dr. King's approach in addressing the hundreds of African Americans victimized by white racists. Mocking the civil rights ideology, Moody anticipates the lack of justice that will be served to those responsible for the Birmingham church bombing, noting that she and other black civil rights activists "will still run out into the streets and bow our heads and pray to be spat upon in the process. I call that religion, real, honest-to-goodness nigger religion" (351). Moody paints a very unflattering picture of the religious foundation in which many considered to be the core of the movement.

In analyzing Black Power political autobiography, Margo Perkins notes that one element missing from these texts, as compared to emancipation narratives, is the "appeal to Christian morality" (29). Notably, this appeal to Christian morality is a key element of civil rights autobiographies as well. Within these texts, the struggles against racism are connected to religious beliefs. This connection is important in understanding the notion that non-violence and brotherly love would ultimately lead to equality. This element is paramount in tracing Moody's narrative development as an activist.

As Moody's text shifts into the realm of a Black Power autobiography, the absence of any appeal to Christian morality becomes conspicuous as well. This missing element becomes a key factor in Moody's textual shift from civil rights to Black Power. Challenging the religious ideology of the civil rights movement, Moody asks, "[w]hy in the hell should we be praying all the time?" (350). Grappling with the challenges of the civil rights philosophy, Moody's text once again represents a shift in the crusade of nonviolence by placing the focus on survival and urging physical action--not prayer--from those who seek to change the current direction of the movement.[33]

The self that Moody presents at this point in the narrative is fragmented, weak, and broken--both physically and spiritually. Reflecting on her developing awareness of the political situation at stake, the narrator demonstrates that she is in a process of transformation, trying to link herself once again to the plight of the oppressed, but, in her own terms. No longer willing to allow her activism to be shaped by a movement she feels is not only inadequate--but harmful for her community--her act of writing is a call for a more aggressive and defensive form of activism.

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[33]Sean Dennis Cashman notes that as Black Power emerged, so did "a vague philosophy of Marxism" (201). The group most associated with Black Power, The Black Panthers, embraced a form of social Marxism. Religion was no longer the center of the political ideology in the fight for equality and civil rights: "The African American protest movement had once been a mainly southern and integrated, Christian and optimistic movement working for civil rights. Now it was a largely northern, urban, secular and militant movement favoring Black Power" (Cashman 199). Moody's narrative is an example of this shift--of an activist who turns away from the religious ideology of the movement-- as illustrated in her rejection of God: "I will be my own God" (349).

Importantly, Sonia Sanchez writes about the political power of rhetoric: "[I] write because I think that one must not only share what one thinks, or the conclusions one has reached, but one must also share to help others reach their conclusions. Writing might help them survive" (qtd. in Tate 142). Moody's text has survival at its core; similarly, she too writes so that her audience will draw conclusions concerning the deadly consequences of white supremacy. Survival, as Moody emphasizes, is linked to standing up and fighting current political conditions that allow for the murder and mutilation of African Americans. In other words, maybe her narrative will help save the lives of others who are taking on the battle to end racism and segregation.

Similar to other Black Power autobiographers, Moody uses her text to address the hypocrisy of the federal government. After being arrested for participating in a protest, and treated inhumanly by local police, Moody finds the FBI at her door. In an unbelievable moment, she realizes that the FBI has been sent to investigate *her*--not the local police. What clearly comes to light from these experiences is a growing realization that she, as Stephen Butterfield asserts, is being punished in a manner reserved for revolutionaries (215). In writing about this incident, Moody exposes racism at a federal level.

In *Black Autobiography in America*, Butterfield comes closest to understanding Moody's text as a revolutionary text:

> *Coming of Age in Mississippi* could also be included in the chapters dealing with revolutionary narratives . . . [Moody] was involved in civil rights struggle as a foot soldier, living in

> Mississippi, subject to reprisal month in and month out by Mississippians, under pressure from her family to shut up and go quietly back to school, harassed and threatened by the FBI, expecting to be shot, raped, or bombed by the local rednecks, with no glamour, no publicity, no bank account to redeem her sacrifices, while the better-known movement leaders took the credit for her accomplishments. Under these conditions her zeal shines like the face of Joan of Arc. She worked for CORE, which is not a revolutionary organization; but what she suffered and achieved seems close to the experience of a Black Panther; (215)

Importantly, Butterfield addresses the value of Moody's text as a revolutionary narrative. Noting that she suffered like a revolutionary Black Panther--or Black Power activist--is significant, but more significant is the fact that she chooses to write, during the last section of her autobiography, a Black Power text. In doing so, she provides unprecedented insight into the relationship between civil rights ideology and the radical ideology of the Black Power movement. Her text offers a compelling rationale in understanding the importance of a revolutionary struggle in Mississippi. Having participated in the civil rights movement in the most dangerous state in the South for an African American, Moody is able to interrogate and critique the political ideology of the movement. Writing about the insight she gained, Moody offers a compelling argument that liberation will only come if a more aggressive mode of activism is demanded.

Near the closing of the narrative, Moody writes: "I walked around most of the next week wondering what to do about the Movement . . . . I had the feeling that I should be back in the Movement, but involved in some different way that I could not yet define" (388). The narrator's words imply that her future involvement in the struggle for civil rights will be more militant, as expressed in her linking survival to "a different way" in fighting for equality. Challenging conventional ways of achieving civil rights, and at times writing that her ideas are in sharp contrasts of many of the civil rights leaders, Moody, the activist, and the narrator, seeks to establish an ideological current that addresses the complexities of a movement that is changing direction.

In rigorously questioning the effectiveness of passive resistance, the text is consistent with the objectives of Black Power ideology. The closing lines of her narrative are as follows: "I WONDER. I really WONDER" (424). Based on the amount of Black Power rhetoric in the last section of her autobiography, one can draw the conclusion that her closing words are in relation to the methodology of the civil rights movement. In other words, what she is really wondering is if there is going to be a more effective approach in combating the die-hard segregationists of the South.

In an interview given in 1977, Moody writes of the insight she gained from writing her autobiography and the revelations that followed:

> I came to see through my writings that no matter how hard we in the Movement worked, nothing seemed to change; that we made few visible little gains, yet at the root, things always remained the

> same; and that the Movement was not in control of its destiny--nor did we have any means of gaining control of it. We were like an angry dog on a leash who had turned on its master. It could bark and howl and snap . . . but the master was always in control. I realized that the universal fight for human rights, dignity, justice, equality and freedom . . . [is] the fight of every ethnic and racial minority . . . every one of the millions who daily suffer one or another of the indignities of the powerless and voiceless masses. And this trend of thinking is what finally brought about an end to my involvement in the Civil Rights Movement . . . [34]

In addressing the complexities of the movement and the challenges involved in achieving true racial equality, Moody continues to position herself as one who understands that a move toward true liberation is not simple. Speaking nine years after the publication of her autobiography, Moody's words echo that the problem of racism is complex and that the struggle for blacks and other third world peoples is still very much a powerful reality. Certainly, these words reveal her belief--then and currently--that the civil rights movement, based on its methodology, failed to achieve its goals. As Moody so poignantly illustrated in her autobiography, the dialogue between social change and the methods needed to bring that change must be continued.

As Sonia Sanchez states, "in order to be a true revolutionary, you must understand and love. Love, sacrifice, and death" (qtd. in Tate 143). The final

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[34] Quoted in Jane E Bowden, ed., *Contemporary Authors*. (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1977) vol. 65-68, 418.

section of *Coming of Age in Mississippi* represents Anne Moody as a true revolutionary. As an activist, she loved, sacrificed, and risked death on several occasions, giving up essentially all of her college years, as well as her young adulthood, in the hopes of helping her community achieve racial equality. The sacrifices she made are consistent with true revolutionary values. In other words, she "walks the talk." Her powerful rhetoric illustrates her narrative as a trailblazer in the realm of Black Power autobiography.

CHAPTER 5

Black Power Narratives

For the sisters and brothers whose fighting spirit was my
liberator.
For those whose humanity is too rare to be destroyed
by walls, bars, and death houses.
And especially for those who are going to struggle until
racism and class injustice are forever banished
from our history.

---Angela Davis[35]

Every revolution in history has been accomplished by actions, although words are necessary. We must create shields that protect us and spears that penetrate our enemies. Black people must learn how to struggle by struggling. We must learn by our mistakes.

---Assata Shakur[36]

One of the most compelling arguments for viewing Anne Moody's narrative as a precursor to Black Power autobiographies is the degree to which Moody's text appears to converse with the later narratives of Angela Davis and Assata Shakur. There are noteworthy dialogical moments between Moody's text and the later Black Power women's autobiographies that allow for a better understanding of why the last section of Moody's narrative should be considered a Black Power autobiography. In this final chapter I examine how the issues present in Moody's narrative anticipate the concerns addressed by Davis and Shakur. This examination supports my argument that the end of Moody's narrative prefigures--and enhances--the Black Power ideologies that emerged at

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[35] Angela Davis. *An Autobiography*. (New York: International Publishers, 2nd ed., 1988)

[36] Assata Shakur. *Assata: An Autobiography.* (Westport, Conn: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1987). 52.

the end of the 1960's; as a result, Moody offers the first glimpse of a Black Power women's autobiography. Read alongside the Black Power narratives of Davis and Shakur, Moody's narrative offers noteworthy dialogical moments, enhancing the understanding of the rhetorical transition from civil rights to more revolutionary rhetoric--resulting in a more holistic understanding of the era. All three writers use language consistent with revolutionary rhetoric in order to argue for a resistance struggle, and when read collectively, offer a richer understanding of the complex struggle that led to the birth of the Black Power movement.

In 1974 Angela Davis wrote one of most influential Black Power autobiographies only because she envisioned that the text would, in her own words, "serve a very important and practical purpose. There was the possibility that, having read it, more people would understand why so many of us had no alternative but to offer our lives--our bodies, our knowledge, our will--to the cause of our oppressed people" (*Autobiography* Preface). Like other political autobiographers, Davis asserts that she wrote not to highlight the significance of personal importance, but rather to "utilize the autobiographical genre to evaluate my life in accordance with what I considered to be the political significance of my experiences" (viii).

In essence, Davis's narrative--as well as Shakur's text-- can be viewed on a continuum of Moody's political narrative. The similarity between the texts is revealed through shared ideological currents. All three narrators thematically situate themselves along the stream of defense, survival, resistance, and radicalism. The three Black Power autobiographies of Moody, Davis, and Shakur

illustrate the transition to a more radical approach through their rhetorical strategy of advancing revolutionary activism; thus, they exhibit shared characteristics that serve to depict the social and political reality of African Americans during this decade.

Although the Black Power autobiographies address the issue of gender by addressing women's roles in the Black Power movement--their testimonies suggest, as Perkins points out, that "any sustained preoccupation with gender was often subsumed by the more pressing struggle just to remain alive during the years of the government's massive crackdown on radical activists" (111). Another possible reason for not fully addressing the issue of gender within the Black Power movement is the author's end goal of writing a political autobiography--one that emphasizes the struggle of the community over the struggle of the individual. Certainly, women's experiences in the Black Power movement differed from the experiences of men; however, the narratives of both Davis and Shakur illustrate that they viewed the men in the movement as their "brothers." In both narratives, the writers choose to demonstrate a solidarity with the men in the movement, indicating, at least rhetorically, that they were fully united in the struggle for racial equality.

Davis's narrative opens with her fleeing the law after she arrived on the FBI's list of the Ten Most Wanted Fugitives for murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy. Although her text begins here, she soon reverts back to her childhood in Alabama's "Dynamite Hill" to trace her evolving political consciousness. In writing that her neighborhood earns this nickname because of the constant

bombings of black homes by racists whites--who are angry that blacks are moving into "their" neighborhood, Davis highlights the violence surrounding her community. She describes living on "Dynamite Hill"--"the roar of explosives, the fear, the hidden guns, the weeping Black woman at our door, the children without lunches, the schoolyard bloodshed . . . " (110). Read against Moody's text, one hauntingly recalls Centreville, Mississippi.

As a direct descendent of Moody's narrative, Davis' text will highlight the very same concerns addressed by Moody: the abject poverty surrounding the black community and the lack of opportunity to escape this poverty. Davis writes of her observations concerning the economic disparity between blacks and whites in Birmingham, Alabama, "My preoccupation with the poverty and wretchedness I saw around me would not have been so deep if I had not been able to contrast it with the relative affluence of the white world" (*Autobiography* 90). Inscribing these experiences communicates her evolving class consciousness toward a more revolutionary stance. The unequal distribution of wealth becomes a main topic in her narrative.

While both Moody and Davis illustrate in their autobiographies that being exposed to the vast differences in the quality of life between blacks and whites at such a young age sets the stage for their future political activism, Moody records that she lives in this type of poverty; Davis, on the other hand, presents herself as an observer, noting the poverty in her community but separated from it because her parents are college educated and able to provide a modest living for their children. This offers an interesting contrast concerning the background of Black

Power authors and a wider understanding of the motivation behind writing a radical text.

Like Moody's focus on the amount of violence engulfing her community, Davis reveals to her readers, "[w]e seemed to be caught up in a whirlpool of violence and blood from which none of us could swim away" (101). Emphasizing that the economic consequences of segregation result in perilous conditions, both physical and psychological, that many black children are exposed to on a daily basis, both narratives contribute to a more in-depth look at dire results of segregation. These early experiences are fundamental in demonstrating the development of a revolutionary consciousness--how one arrives at her present political position.

Just like Moody, Davis writes that racism is "a plague [that] infects every joint, muscle and tissue of social life in this country" (*Autobiography* 37). Drawing the same conclusion as Moody--that racism is a disease--Davis illustrates an understanding of the difficulty of eradicating racism. This analysis, like Moody's, encourages an examination of how one truly heals those who are racist or affected by racism. As previously mentioned, Perkins notes how political autobiographers use the power of language as a tool to dismantle preconceived ways of knowing. Choosing words such as plague, disease, and sickness to describe racism, both Davis and Moody demonstrate their understanding of the politics of language. In redefining the term, they clearly draw parallels between racism and death. Ultimately, this rhetorical context leads

to a pedagogical moment in which activists can educate--and sometimes challenge--their audience's understanding of racism.

In inventing the narrative "self," Davis, like Moody, chooses to describe herself as a superior student: "I had made up my mind that I was going to prove to the world that I was just as good , just as intelligent, just as capable as achieving as any white person (*Autobiography* 93).[37] By comparison, both authors emphasize this quality, possibly to remind their audience of the validity of their texts, or specifically to validate their authority. Apart from focusing on their superior abilities for perception purposes, it is important to note the intellectual advantage Davis had compared to Moody--Davis's educational background demonstrates that she had opportunities not available to the young Moody. Davis, through a program that allowed qualified southern black students to attend integrated high schools in the North, attended a prestigious school in Greenwich Village, New York. In contrast, Moody had to work much harder at achieving her academic goals due to the inequality between black and white schools in the segregated South.

Both Moody and Davis were active in SNCC. Similarly, her narrative offers her compelling testimony to the challenges that young student activists faced and her own disillusionment with the organization based on her view that many young activists only wanted to be "TV revolutionaries and to excite crowds

[37] Both Davis and Moody excelled academically in high school. Moody maintained an "A" average through her high school career--even while working to support the family household. Davis was educated in an integrated high school, Elisabeth Irwin High School, in Greenwich Village, New York. She was later accepted to Brandies University, where she was one of three black students in her Freshman class.

with militant rhetoric" (*Autobiography* 177). Noting the lack of desire to contribute to the day to day work --the unromantic part of the job--Davis illustrates her disillusionment with the student movement. In testifying about her personal experience with this civil rights organization, Davis interrogates the student's participation, concluding that there has to be more involvement in order to achieve social justice. Similarly, Moody writes of the lack of "Negro participation" due to the amount of sacrifice and work required of the young activists, noting that they "sometimes went for days without a meal" (325). In addition, Moody's narrative addresses the genuine fear that engulfed the majority of activists who knew that they could be killed at any moment. Davis, too, notes the amount of violence the young activists faced on a daily basis.

Perhaps one of the most powerful and memorable moments in Davis's narrative is reflected in her recollection of her initial response to hearing about the assassination of Martin Luther King:

> An amorphous sense of guilt came upon me. We had severely criticized Martin Luther King for his rigid stance on non-violence. Some of us, unfortunately, had assumed that his religion, his philosophical non-violence and his concentration on "civil rights," had rendered him an essentially harmless leader. Never would any of us have predicted that that he would be struck down by an assassin's bullet. Never would any of us predicted that he would have needed our protection. (176)

Certainly, choosing the word "protection" emphasizes the need for action. This can be viewed as a call for a more militant approach, for activists to wage a struggle against the assassins, to counter the perpetuation of repressive tactics used to both silence and kill those who threaten a society deeply rooted in racism. Interestingly, when analyzing the violence surrounding her community, Moody includes a line from a Ray Charles song: "The world is in an uproar, the danger zone is everywhere" (351). Both Moody and Davis use their autobiographies to illustrate the reality of the many "danger zones" affecting the black community.

Insightfully, Davis notes her own naivety when she writes that she did not believe that the dominant culture viewed King as a threat--based on the fact that he embraced non-violence. Davis's narrative points out that a non-violent approach in seeking civil rights--peaceful protests, sit-ins, and marches--was powerful enough to lead to the assassination of Dr. King. Her choice of language in reflecting Dr. King's assassination highlights that many of those who believed in a segregated way of life did view him as a threat, and that it was a mistake to "assume" that Dr. King's political methods were completely ineffectual.

The point that Davis is making is valuable when reflecting on Moody's text. Moody is disillusioned with King's approach, believing that is ineffective. Davis's analysis explicitly sets up further dialogue between her narrative and Moody's text by offering a continuation of "the story" between both movements. Because Davis's narrative addresses the end of the civil rights movement, it reveals information not found in Moody's text--that King was viewed as a genuine threat by those who would do anything to ensure that segregation continued--thus

offering a richer and more complex understanding of the connection between the civil rights movement and the later Black Power movement.

In examining the rhetorical connection between civil rights and Black Power, it is necessary to note that during Martin Luther King's last years his political philosophy was changing as well. Sean Dennis Cashman contends that Martin Luther King and Malcolm X "had more in common than was widely understood" (186). Although they may have initially disagreed on political strategies, it is notable to mention that in his last year Dr. King's rhetoric demonstrated a disillusionment with the movement. Noting that his dream was turning into a nightmare, King expresses his weariness.[38] In *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr*, David J. Garrow asserts that during Kings' last years, the establishment viewed him as a radical and revolutionary figure. As Cashman further notes, "some historians find there were two different leaders in Martin Luther King: the optimistic crusader seeking full rights of citizenship on grounds of morality and the more mature, pessimistic, controversial, and uncertain politician who had come to realize that civil rights were not enough" (211).[39]

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[38] Cashman notes that in an interview given during King's last month, he stated the following: "people expect me to have answers and I don't have any answers" (211).

[39] In response to the mounting violence erupting in poor black communities around the country, King shifted his focus from civil rights to the poverty surrounding the black ghettos. This new strategy became the Poor People's Campaign in Washington, D.C. The disparity of class between blacks and whites was a main focus of the Black Power movement. This example demonstrates that King's political views were evolving to reflect some of the same concerns addressed by more radical organizations. In 1968, Kenneth Clark wrote: "The masses of Negroes are now starkly aware that the recent civil rights victories benefited primarily a very small percentage of middle class Negroes while their predicament stayed the same or worsened" (461).

For many activists, as Davis's narrative demonstrates, Dr. King's assassination was the last straw. Davis's analysis of the impact of King's death on the black community addresses the complexity of civil rights politics and the changing political landscape. As previously noted, there was already division among leaders of various civil rights organizations.[40] Due to escalating police and mob brutality, advocates for non-violence were losing control of the movement and many were shifting away from this ideology due to the environment. Davis's text provides a testimony to the social landscape of the late 1960's and early 1970's--noting that it was complex and not easily defined.

In continuing to reflect on the assassination of Dr. King, Davis writes of the impact his murder has on student organizations and their ability to protest. Writing specifically about the Los Angeles branch of SNCC, Davis notes how it had developed into one of the most important activist organizations--and how this organization was targeted by police because the activists provided information about the murder of Dr. King. Noting that they [local police] had "attacked our printing machines," Davis emphasizes, as she writes, "[that] our organization was, in the first place, educational . We had just produced hundreds of thousands of leaflets protesting Dr. King's murder, explaining the racists forces behind his assassination and suggesting how we should manifest our resistance" (*Autobiography* 180). Many of her comrades were jailed for no reason except for

[40] In *African Americans and the Quest for Civil Rights*, Sean Dennis Cashman notes that in 1966, SNCC abandoned Martin Luther King as its leader. CORE was divided between traditional civil rights and Black Power, which Cashman asserts was "a power struggle between James Farmer and Floyd McKissick", its leaders (199). Cashman notes that by1966 CORE "endorsed the philosophy of black power" (199).

trying to organize resistance. Highlighting that the LA police were reacting to their strategy of political resistance--to motivated the masses in response to King's death--Davis writes to expose repressive tactics of the state. As Perkins writes in her analysis of the Black Power narratives, "the writers directly challenge the validity of the legal and economic system that implicitly denies the right (and 'moral imperative') of oppressed people to actively resist their exploitation" (73). Further noting the connection between writing and activism, Perkins notes that in the process of writing their life stories, the writers expose the state "as the original architect of violence and repression, while the people's resistance is reclaimed as healthy, reasonable, and just" (73).

Recalling the social atmosphere, Davis reflectively writes: "Tension was mounting; we felt as if we were on top of a simmering volcano which could explode at any moment" (179). She notes that many members of the black community advocate for immediate rebellion. Advocates for non-violence were being ignored; there was increasing impatience with many of the civil rights organizations; however, as Davis importantly notes, the police where standing by for immediate response to any move from the black community, especially in the inner city ghettos: "Machine guns had been mounted atop the major police stations in the ghetto; the operators were at their posts at all times" (*Autobiography* 178). In describing the political atmosphere, Davis chooses language that is representative of a war-like state, emphasizing the oppressive conditions that surrounded the black community.

Responding to the outrage over the murder of Dr. King, Davis writes: "we were going to need all the mind and muscle we could find" (177). Passionately reflecting on the moment, Davis remarks that "the eagerness to not fight back could not be permitted to wither away--it had to be channeled into a political direction" (178). Her words demonstrate the she views this as a pivotal movement for the black community--all the anger and frustration must be used to produce more aggressive activism. This tension is reminiscent of Moody's narrative. In essence, Davis's narrative revises parts of Moody's narrative, making available information that importantly expands on examples and analysis found in *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. As previously noted, Moody's recollections of Dr. King are based on the beginning years of the civil rights movement, while Davis's recollections focus on the later part of the decade, highlighting the evolving political landscape. Certainly, Davis's narrative reflects the momentum of the later part of the decade, when the stark contrast of political inequality--as represented in the violent responses to non-violent protests--became the motivating factor in moving toward a more revolutionary position.

Insightfully, Davis writes that "[e]very Black person who appeared to be disturbed about the assassination of Martin Luther King would be a potential target of attack. Noting that many members of the LAPD had been recruited from the deep South, Davis writes that they were "perhaps the most vicious in the country" (178). Once again, as a continuum of Moody's narrative, Davis's text both agrees with and expands the critique that Moody offers, allowing for additional insight into the violence that engulfed the South. Essentially, both

writers portray attacks on African Americans in the Deep South; read intertextually, the narratives enlarge our understanding of what activists were facing: physical violence and possible death.

Similarly, as previously noted, Moody's narrative illustrates her feelings--that she felt that she had no other alternative than to commit her life to the cause of her people by stating that she "had found something outside myself that gave meaning to my life" (288). Importantly, both Moody's and Davis's texts demonstrate how activists use the genre of autobiography to express their commitment to the struggle of their people. In an appeal to her audience, Davis writes of the oppressed in her community, "We--you and I--are their only hope for life and freedom" (400). Consistent with other activists writing their narratives, Davis uses the autobiographical genre to "educate as broad of an audience as possible to the situation and issues at stake" (Perkins 7).

Emphasizing survival and freedom, Assata Shakur's autobiography is published in 1987--almost twenty years after Moody. When she writes her narrative, she is living in Cuba, where she has been granted political asylum. As Lennon S. Hinds states, "The publication of this extraordinary autobiography provides a rare opportunity to see behind the carefully orchestrated distortions of fact concerning the life and motivations of Assata Shakuur" (XI). Importantly, like both Moody and Davis, Shakur writes "vividly about the racism that permeated her childhood and young womanhood--those ordinary experiences of Black people in the United States that have driven millions to despair and many to

rebellion" (Hinds XI). Thus, like Moody and Davis, Shakur writes to demonstrate how one evolves into a revolutionary activist.

Shakur begins her autobiography with a chronology of her alleged crimes and subsequent trial dates. She is charged with the following: bank robbery, kidnapping, murder, attempted murder of a policeman, and as an accomplice to the murder of a New Jersey Turnpike State Trooper--an incident in which she was shot and badly wounded. All but one of the above trials end in either dismissal, hung jury, or acquittal. In 1977, with only flimsy evidence, she is convicted as an accomplice in the death of a state trooper. She maintains her innocence throughout the narrative.

Like Davis, Shakur's narrative flashbacks to her youth in order to demonstrate how she arrived at her present political position--using the past to educate her readers of her situation. She was born JoAnne Deborah Byron in New York, and shortly after her birth, her parents divorced. Noting that after the divorce she moved with her mother to North Carolina to live with her grandparents, Shakur highlights how her early years are spent in the South; comparative to Moody's and Davis's texts, her narrative highlights the severe class difference due to southern segregation, writing that "Black people were forbidden to go many places" (23). Writing of the poor in her community--the many families that barely had enough to feed their children--her narrative highlights the economic disparity between blacks and whites.

Aside from being poor and underfed, Shakur notes that violent threats were a part of life for black families. While staying with her grandparents,

Shakur writes of "racist insults" hurled at her family by young white men (26). At one point, she writes of hearing gunshots from white men outside her grandparent's house, alluding that they might be from the Ku Klux Klan, and of being afraid that these men will hurt her or her grandparents. Later she will remark that her awareness of both class hierarchy and violent racist acts--of what it is like to grow up Black in America--is what leads her to live a life of activism.

Like Moody and Davis, Shakur writes of the impact of spending the early part of her life in the segregated South. In choosing to highlight childhood experiences that illustrate her growing political consciousness, Shakur's narrative participates in the conventions that define political autobiography. Her retelling of early significant events reveals her "understanding of the dynamics of race, class, and gender oppression in America" (Perkins 43).

Shakur, like both her predecessors, writes of the inequality in the segregated school system: "Our schools were inferior. The books were used and torn, handed down from white schools. We received only a fraction of the state money allotted to white schools, and the conditions under which many Black children received an education can only be described as horrible" (29). Here she clearly links the lack of opportunity available to black students to white supremacy, noting that there nothing equal about this separation. As bell hooks reminds us, "[e]ducation has always been a political issue for exploited and oppressed people" (*Talking Back* 98). As a predecessor to Shakur's narrative, Moody's text highlights the disparity between the "separate but equal" segregation

school system much earlier when she writes of the severe disadvantages and inequality of the southern public school system almost twenty years earlier.

Importantly, Shakur uses her narrative as a testimonial to all the injustice surrounding the black community, asserting that it is African Americans who are the victims--not the criminals. Reminding her reader that nearly sixty percent of all U.S murder victims are black, and they only make up fifteen percent of the population, Shakur illustrates the extent in which African Americans continue to be victimized by colonial oppression. Essentially, like both Moody and Davis, she illustrates that the prison system is simply another form of slavery due to the disproportionately African American population.

In writing that she is a target due to her political beliefs focused on improving the civil and human rights of African Americans, Shakur links the personal to the political. As Lewis Hinds, who served as national director of the National Conference of Black Lawyers, an organization that defended black political activists, reveals: "As it is now clear, a carefully orchestrated intelligence and counterintelligence campaign was conducted by the FBI in cooperation with state and local law enforcement agencies designed to criminalize, defame, harass, and intimidate Assata beginning at least in 1971" (*Assata* XIII) .[41] Importantly, as Hinds notes, Shaukur has no control over her public image; the media, as well as the general public, have already convicted her. Emphasizing that she is a political prisoner convicted by a mythical image,

[41] Hinds states, "The information presented here is based on federal and state court records and files, FBI memoranda, secret service files, police records, and information in the media." (*Assata* XIII)

Shakur writes to *rewrite* her public image, an image that portrays her as over "six feet tall, two hundred pounds, and very dark and wild looking" (*Assata* 87).

As if expanding on Moody's analysis, Shakur compares the way she is treated by the police to the treatment received by prisoners of the Nazis. Writing that while incarcerated she was exposed to troopers who "saluted like Nazis did in Germany," she writes to remind her readers of the dangers of white supremacy by connecting her personal treatment, as well as other members of the Black Power movement, to the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime (10). Contending that an officer told her that if "Hitler had won, the world wouldn't be in the mess it is today, that niggers like me, no-good niggers, wouldn't be going around shooting new jersey state troopers," Shakur exposes the racial hatred that surrounds her community" (10). By continuing to call the officers and prison guards "Nazis," Shakur creates a counter-discourse by emphasizing that they are the real criminals. Like Moody, she attests that the treatment of blacks in America is scarcely distinguishable from the brutal treatment of prisoners in Nazi Germany.

In illustrating how Shakur arrives at her present condition, part of the objective of her narrative is to show how circumstances of racism and class exploitation lead to the dehumanization of the black community. After the shootout on the New Jersey Turnpike that leaves one of her comrades dead, she writes the following poem "STORY":

> You died.
>
> I cried
>
> And kept on getting up.

A little slower.

And a lot more deadly. (*Assata* 17)

Using her voice to emphasize survival and defense, Shakur writes to both confront and challenge those who keep knocking her down. Choosing language that illustrates that she is a fighter emphasizes resistance. Hinds notes that it is "racist America that provides the context for the making of this Black revolutionary" (*Assata* XI). Using language to illustrate empowerment, Shakur creates a narrative self that emphasizes the continued fight against racism and segregation.

Reflecting on her response to Martin Luther King's assassination, Shakur writes:

> [I imagine] myself with a long knife slashing slits in white sheets Ku Klux Klan blood is spilling. You want to look like a ghost, you wanna look like a ghost, my mind keeps chanting, you want to look like a ghost, well, i'll make you one . . . . I am going to riot. I want to kill someone. (195)

The devastating effects of racism and the intensity of Shakur's rage are revealed. Illustrating the turbulence of the decade, her words strike at the heart of those who have caused so much pain and bloodshed. Contextualizing her anger, Shakur highlights her commitment to a revolutionary struggle. Similarly, Moody conceptualizes her anger in writing the following, "I thought of waging a war in protest of all the killings all by myself, if no one else would help" (203).

Shakur begins to set up the battle by writing the following:

> There is no blood yet. Everybody is getting into position. The wind is blowing rumors. The people are waiting. The streets are rumbling. The tanks are coming. The natives are restless. The tanks will quiet the natives. The tanks are coming . . . . I have to get myself ready. Revolution. The word has me going . . . . They kill our leaders, then they kill us for protesting. Protest. Protest. Revolution. If it exists, i want to find it. Bulletins. More bulletins. I'm tired of bulletins. I want bullets. (196)

Revealing her feelings, Shakur uses language to emphasize the importance of a revolutionary struggle. Raising the issue of armed self-defense in the fight toward social change, the narrative illustrates that the quality of resistance must be equal the violent force used by the oppressor.[42] In the process of a revolution, there must be those who are willing to use force and those who are willing to understand that the effectiveness of any strategy comes from those who are truly willing to fight and sacrifice for true social change and those who will embrace this revolutionary innovation. Suggesting that the civil rights movement lost its motivational impetus, Shakur's words are meant stir up her audience and provide a counter solution to the constant violence.

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[42] Similarity, in his autobiography *Seize the Time*, Bobby Seale's rhetoric focuses on self-defense: "*We want an immediate end to* POLICE BRUTALITY *and* MURDER *of black people*. We believe we can end police brutality in our black community by organizing black self-defense groups that are dedicated to defending our black community. The Second Amendment to the Constitution of the United States gives a right to bear arms. We therefore believe that all black people should arm themselves for self-defense" (62).

Made famous by her picture deployed on thousands of FBI wanted posters, Shakur is accustomed to being in the public spotlight as a radical militant. She became a favorite of the media, who used her image to depict the "terrorist" motivations of Black Power organizations. Reflectively, she will later write: "I am a Black revolutionary, and, as such, i am a victim of all the wrath, hatred, and slander that amerika is capable of. Like all other black revolutionaries, amerika is trying to lynch me" (50). As Shakur's narrative repeatedly attests, those who seek to truly change the condition of African Americans--the most politically aware--are the individuals who are viewed as the most threatening. As a result, she becomes a target of J. Edgar Hoover's campaign to criminalize black organizations focused on improving the rights and lives of African Americans.

The testimony provided by Shakur reveals that "[t]hose who dared to speak out against the injustices in this country, both black and white, have paid dearly for their courage, sometimes with their lives" (167). The issues that she addresses in her narrative expand on the previous issues included in both Moody and Davis's autobiographies. This revelation lends itself to the previous narratives, demonstrating a common goal of linking the struggle to the end goal of finding an effective solution to stop the violence. Revealing that death was a recurring experience, Black Power narratives seek to bear witness to the violence and, hopefully, to motivate their audience to participate in ending the violence.

Comparatively, like Moody and Davis, Shakur uses her narrative to compare racism to a disease. Connecting the impact of white racism to that of an illness, she writes the following lines in her poem "To My Momma":

We have all been infected

with a sickness

that can be traced back

to the auction block (194)

Linking the first symptom of the disease to the auction block, Shakur connects the cause of this sickness to the trauma of slavery. Noting the interconnectedness between "infection" and "racism," she writes to provide insight concerning the contagion of racist ideology and the connection to the larger political terrain. As Harold Cruse notes, "Sick social systems, like sick bodies, tend to resist curative treatment" (488). Shakur writes that the medicine needed to treat a sick social system is political activism: "The more active i became the more i liked it. It was like medicine, making me well, making me whole" (189).

In addressing the power of language, Shakur responds to being labeled a "militant" by including in the narrative the letter she wrote to jurors when she was standing trial for bank robbery:

> *During the voir dire process, we asked you about the word "militant." There was a reason for that. In the late sixties and early seventies, this country was in upheaval. There was a strong people's movement against the war, against racism, in the colleges, on the streets, and in the Black and Puerto Rican communities. This government, local police agencies, the FBI, and the CIA launched an all-out war on people they considered militants. We are only finding out now, because of investigations into the FBI*

> *and the CIA, how extensive and how criminal their methods were and still are. In the same way witches were burned in Salem, this government went on a witch-hunt for people they considered "militant."* (168)

Emphasizing the witch hunt mentality against her, Shakur's text seeks to use this opportunity to provide her own explanation of the intense repression she faces for being labeled a "militant." She points to the way in which this word is abused by noting the broad spectrum used to label an individual "a militant." Noting the way in which both the government and mainstream media manipulate language, Shakur challenges the way they "invent" her to the general public. Using her text, as Perkins's asserts, as a political tool to challenge conventional ways of knowing, Shakur attempts to recuperate the image of those who have taken a more radical stance in their activism--and therefore labeled a "militant." By doing so, the narrative offers a counter-history, one that fills in the blanks, and as Perkins writes, Black Power activists' texts "provide the side of the story silenced or distorted in hegemonic accounts of the period . . . activists who write autobiography aim to fill in or recast important information about key events or issue in the struggle that have been elided in the dominant accounts of the period" (70-1).

Continuing with her focus on resistance, Shakur writes the following in the poem "Affirmation":

> I have been locked by the lawless.
>
> Handcuffed by the haters.

Gagged by the greedy.

And, if i know any thing at all,

it's that a wall is just a wall

And nothing more at all.

It can be broken down. (*Assata*)

Writing that a wall is only a physical barrier, Shakur uses language to highlight the power of political resistance. It is often the political prisoners who are feared the most--the ones viewed as the biggest threat to society. In fact, while incarcerated, Shakur writes that she is treated in a manner reserved for dangerous revolutionaries: she is kept isolated (in a men's prison), away from other prisoners. She was denied reading material and adequate food. She was denied proper medical care--even after the birth of her daughter. As her story illustrates, there is no limitation to the use of criminal law to suppress political prisoners. But, as she powerfully writes, the oppressive tactics "can be broken down." What she expresses in the poem is a formula for revolutionary resistance--in order to break through racial barriers, one must continue to struggle and break down the "walls" built by a racist society.

Although it is clear that Shakur views her struggle as a collective struggle, it is important to note how her role as a mother provides information about the radically different experiences between men and women in the Black Power

movement.[43] Reflecting on the birth of her child as motivation to continue the struggle, Shakur writes the following in a poem for her daughter:

> i have shabby dreams for you
>
> of some vague freedom
>
> i have never known.
>
> Baby,
>
> i don't want you hungry or thirsty
>
> or out in the cold.
>
> And i don't want the frost
>
> to kill your fruit
>
> before it ripens. (259)

Stressing the importance of continuing the struggle of resistance to ensure that the next generation will live in a world void of racism and segregation, these lines focus on survival; therefore, for many women activists, motherhood becomes a catalysts--propelling the struggle forward.

Reading Shakur's, Moody's, and Davis's narratives in tandem reveals interesting dialogues concerning the notion of transcending the current movement. As Shakur insightfully states, "No movement can survive unless it is constantly

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[43] In addressing the sexual politics of the Black Power movement, Perkins writes that many leaders in the Black Panther Party condemned the use of contraceptives (105). Black Power women's sexuality was connected to their commitment to the revolution. They were often expected to sleep with a revolutionary comrade. In addition, Perkins notes that "women were additionally charged with the task of producing offspring for the revolution . . . " (105). Describing the patriarchal privilege that existed in the movement, Perkins reveals that the Black Panther Party's ideology of women's roles in the movement was anything but revolutionary in the realm of gender dynamics.

growing and changing with the times" (181). Shakur's narrative establishes a critical context for addressing the growing violence surrounding the African American community, and the increasing amount of police force used to counter demonstrations. Reading Shakur's narrative against the narratives of both Moody and Davis is illuminating in the way in which it demonstrates a continued thread of violent oppression. All three writers explore and ultimately advocate for social change by addressing the climate of violence and repressive tactics used by the government. The narratives of both Davis and Shakur can be viewed as a continuum of Moody's political autobiography. As demonstrated, many of the early experiences that shaped Moody's revolutionary activism are shared by Davis and Shakur, and these shared experiences create an autobiographical bridge between the beginning of the civil rights movement and the Black Power movement. Grouping these texts together creates a rich spectrum of narrative voices, revealing a collective effort to end racial oppression.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation concludes that Anne Moody's autobiography offers the first glimpse of a Black Power woman's narrative. Illustrating an evolving political consciousness, Moody uses her narrative to demonstrate how one becomes a radical subject. Invoking a model of development, Moody uses the story of her life to trace the growth of a revolutionary consciousness by illuminating the development of an activist who believes that non-violent protest and marches are effective to an activist who is disillusioned with the faltering progress in the civil rights movement. Ultimately, Moody concludes that she must "fight fire with fire" (110). This text has much to offer readers as it provides invaluable insight regarding the momentous shift in the black community from civil rights to Black Power during the 1960's.; therefore, as I have argued, it is *both* a civil rights autobiography and a Black Power autobiography.

Using her narrative as a method of political resistance, Moody's text is consistent with the expectations that shape political autobiography. In using her life story to document the history of the civil rights movement and the shift toward more revolutionary activism, Moody creates a rich context for discussing the multifaceted views of civil rights; therefore, her narrative becomes a social commentary geared at challenging the dominant culture's ideology concerning racial equality. Importantly, her rhetoric highlights the changing emphasis from civil rights to human rights--thus, as her narrative illustrates, *the focus becomes survival*.

As this study reveals, reading the autobiographies of Moody, Davis, and Shakur in tandem reveal many similarities between their respective experiences. In using the autobiographical genre as an extension of their political work, all three writers illustrate how the personal is political. By giving a voice to those who have been silenced and/or marginalized by hegemonic ways of knowing, activists seek to expose white racist ideology that perpetuates inequality. Each of the narratives represent a collective struggle in the fight for social equality. Therefore, it is illuminating to read Moody's narrative against the later narratives of Davis and Shakur for the way in which it offers a connection between the rhetorical traits of civil rights autobiographies and Black Power autobiographies.

Coming of Age in Mississippi is an important resource in reconstructing the era of civil rights and Black Power. Bearing witness to a brutal history of white supremacy, Moody effectively illustrates how her confidence in the movement is shaken due to mounting violence. The attention she provides in illustrating the transition from non-violence to a more militant form of activism becomes a site of pedagogy to offer critical insight into dynamics of resisting racial oppression and segregation.

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