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# Nonviolent Bodies and the Experience of Breakdown in the American Movement for Civil Rights

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NONVIOLENT BODIES AND THE EXPERIENCE OF BREAKDOWN IN THE AMERICAN  
MOVEMENT FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Southern Studies  
The University of Mississippi

by

DANIELLE ANDERSEN

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the experience of personal breakdown in the American Civil Rights Movement. It proposes that breakdown was triggered in individuals by the practice of nonviolence and contends that breakdown precipitated the Movement's shift away from nonviolence toward the more self-protective posture of black power.

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## **I. Introduction:**

### **Elizabeth Eckford and the Burden of Change**

In 1957, Elizabeth Eckford was one of nine African American students who attempted to enroll at Little Rock Central High School in response to the Supreme Court's dismissal of the “separate but equal” rationale for public schools in their *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. The Little Rock Nine, as they were later termed, became representative of the many school integration battles yet to be fought. But it was Eckford who, due to her lack of a telephone, missed a last minute change of plans and arrived at the school alone. Surrounded by the jeers and threats of a white mob, Eckford's solo attempt to enter the school was captured by journalist Will Counts, whose photographs from that day became iconic images.<sup>1</sup> Eckford, in a bright white dress and dark sunglasses, appears undaunted in the photograph, not oblivious of the hate that surrounds her, simply above it, her dignity and composure all the more powerful juxtaposed with the snarled, distorted faces of her tormenters. Elizabeth did not make into school that day, but she, along with the eight others, were eventually allowed to enroll, becoming the first black students to integrate Little Rock's public schools. That encounter between white fury and black determination, one of the first to garner national exposure through visual representation, became a touchstone in American memory, representing a dark yet pivotal point when America was forced to reconcile itself to the racism it had long permitted and the deep well of hate that lurked beneath it. Eckford's image both galvanized and alienated, and for the nation, Little Rock became a flashpoint when sides were chosen. Some Northern whites, uncertain how to express their disdain for such blatant exhibits of prejudice, sent money and letters of support into the NAACP, while

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<sup>1</sup> David Margolick, “Through the Lens, Darkly,” *Vanity Fair*, <http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2007/09/littlerock200709> (accessed January, 2012).

some white Southerners became more committed to avoiding integration, launching in the coming year what would be termed massive resistance, where school systems across the South chose to shut their doors rather than allow black attendance. For many black Americans, Eckford became inspiration. Black journalist L. Alex Wilson, sent to cover the ordeal from Memphis, was badly beaten by the mob that assembled for the Nine's second, and successful attempt to enter Central. In response to questions as to why he didn't run away, he later wrote how could *he*, when Eckford had not. Wilson died three years later from Parkinson's disease, possibly brought on by the attack.<sup>2</sup> Others, more focused on the daily stress of living under Jim Crow in the South, worried that integration attempts and the attention they would surely bring would only increase the already enormous pressure on their lives. These debates, not begun with Little Rock but brought more tangibly to the surface by it, continued throughout the Civil Rights Era.

The deeper resonances of that captured static image and what it would mean in individual lives was something that the majority of the nation could struggle with from a safe distance. For Eckford, who was fifteen years old at the time, the national symbolism became lost in the visceral impact of that day, on which, writes David Margolick, “something descended on Elizabeth that has never fully lifted.”<sup>3</sup> Eckford, repeatedly turned away from the school and back into the mob by national guardsmen, was spat upon and threatened with lynching. Journalist Benjamin Fine, who would eventually help Eckford escape, described the mob as “baying at her like a pack of wolves.”<sup>4</sup> The level of hostility did not appreciably decrease once the Nine were permitted to enroll a few weeks later, as “the mob didn't so much disperse as move inside the building.”<sup>5</sup> Disciplinary records paint a rather bleak picture of what life was like for Eckford, as, contrary to what is often assumed, attacks seemed to become more frequent as the year progressed:

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2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.



Sometime in October: Elizabeth hit with a shower of sharpened pencils. October 28: Elizabeth shoved in hall. November 20: Elizabeth jostled in gym. November 21: Elizabeth hit with paper clip. December 10: Elizabeth kicked. December 18: Elizabeth punched. January 10: Elizabeth shoved on the stairs. January 14: Elizabeth knocked flat. January 22: Elizabeth spat upon. January 29: Elizabeth attacked with spitballs. January 31: Elizabeth asks grandfather to take her home after girls serenade her with humiliating songs in gym class. February 4: Elizabeth has soda bottle thrown at her. February 14: Elizabeth attacked with rock-filled snowballs. March 7: Elizabeth hit by egg. March 12: Elizabeth hit by tomato.<sup>6</sup>

Very intelligent and driven, Eckford, inspired by Thurgood Marshall, had dreams of becoming a lawyer. She was also known to have a delicate, sensitive nature and the daily attacks, coupled with the trauma of her solo mob encounter, took their toll. Jefferson Thomas, another of the Nine, wrote, "she walked with her head down, as if she wanted to make sure the floor didn't open up beneath her."<sup>7</sup> Prior to their enrollment, Eckford and the others understood that their enterprise would face fierce opposition and had been given instructions to be "like Jackie Robinson, turning the other cheek, never talking or fighting back," yet foreknowledge did not prepare Eckford for how the constancy of the harassment would affect her.<sup>8</sup> She felt alone in her suffering. School administrators and teachers refused to provide protection, and she decided not tell her parents the extent of the mental and physical violence she was being subjected to, nor did she confess her deep unhappiness, for fear that they would pull her from school. As badly as she wanted escape, thoughts of the shame she would feel in letting down those who were counting on her weighed heavily. Eckford, an unlikely standard bearer for civil rights, was stuck with two unsatisfactory choices: she could continue at Central and bear the brunt of the pressure being brought down by those scrambling to defend segregation or she could disappoint the remaining nine, the NAACP, and in some ways, all of black America. Eckford chose to tough it out.

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6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

The following year, Arkansas shut down its public schools in support of massive resistance, leaving Elizabeth a few credits shy of graduating. She abandoned her dream of becoming a lawyer, and spent some time in the army. She struggled with severe depression. After a few unsuccessful suicide attempts, Eckford returned to Little Rock where she still resides. Until the late nineties, Eckford avoided reunions and commemorations for the Nine, of whom she alone says that she would not do it again if given the choice, although she is “pleased she did it once.”<sup>9</sup>

A lot has been written about Eckford and her experience, but little attention has been paid to her declaration that she would not repeat her actions. A lot was asked of African Americans during their quest for civil rights. Many books have been written about those who carried that burden, but we hear very little about or from those who have since determined that what was asked was too much. Eckford's voice is heard, because of her status as civil rights icon, but many who sacrificed for the Movement have been silenced or forgotten. Some of them have been left out of the record because they were unwilling to share in their own glorification, some because they turned their backs on nonviolence, some because they had to leave the Movement when they could no longer bear the incredible burden of the protest atmosphere, and some because their Movement experience left them what has been quietly termed “the walking wounded,” meaning they are deemed no longer fully mentally sound. I contend that what these silenced voices have in common is their experience of breakdown, and that a study of breakdown is essential to understanding why the Movement progressed away from nonviolence.

This thesis attempts to use those experiences of breakdown as a springboard into a broader discussion about the tactic of nonviolence employed by the Movement. It asks why nonviolence, which believes physical bodies can elicit change through a process of release and redemption, became the Movement's foundational strategy and why physical commitment to the philosophy deepened as

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

violence increased and doubts of the strategy's efficacy were raised. It explores what mechanisms of release were in place for the nonviolent bodies who acted as receptacles for the hate and prejudices of others and questions how well those mechanisms withstood the onslaught. It contends that, for many, the mechanisms failed and that breakdown was a byproduct of that failure.

This introduction uses Elizabeth Eckford as a starting point not to talk about the perseverance of Civil Rights Movement participants in the faces of virulent violence, but as a starting point to consider the broad social psychological costs of nonviolence in individual, interpersonal, and institutional contexts. It evaluates the historiography of Eckford's experience, with attention to the role of violence, non-violence, and emotional and mental breakdown in these historical documentations. It notes the casual nature with which breakdown is mentioned and questions the reasoning behind that easy dismissal.

Chapter 1 builds on the introduction's analysis of Eckford, breakdown, and the Civil Rights historiography of breakdown (or lack thereof). It examines three theorists whose work on the use of violence in social and political movements helps contextualize the use and practice of both nonviolent and violent protest within the Movement. Hannah Arendt's *On Violence*, Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, and the speeches of Martin Luther King are helpful tools for understanding why nonviolence became an untenable tactic for change.

Chapter 2 differentiates the practice of civil disobedience, which does not necessitate violence, and nonviolent protest, which does. Often mistaken for the same thing, they in fact make markedly different demands upon their practitioners. This chapter will cover the early stages of the movement, beginning with the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955, briefly chronicling the challenges of organizing and sustaining the boycott, and ending with the Freedom Riders in 1961. It will illustrate how the concept of nonviolence, introduced in Montgomery as a form of civil disobedience, underwent a radical shift with the violent beatings of Riders in Anniston, Montgomery, and Birmingham.

It is not an historical overview, but instead focuses on these two events as models of civil disobedience and nonviolent protest, respectively. These two stages of the movement will allow me to address different forms of violence and how they impacted Movement members. It shows how the Movement's conflicting relationship to violence progressed under the threat of remote violence, as house and church bombings became both an increasing danger and a marker of one's commitment and importance within the movement. It argues that this intensification of violence heightened the pressure upon individuals to sacrifice their bodies, creating a space wherein breakdown was more increasingly more likely.

Chapter 3 explores the dynamics of the violence/nonviolence dialectic as movement members began to struggle more openly with their experiences of extreme violence. It posits that navigating that dialectic, living within the liminal space between the two, was paralyzing for certain individuals and led to self-recrimination and instances of repeated self-inflicted violence and breakdown. I evaluate SNCC, focusing on the organization's experiences with violence in rural Mississippi before, during, and after the 1964 Summer Project. I show how debates among SNCC members concerning the continuation of both nonviolence and white involvement over this time period led to organizational breakdown. I argue that for individuals, nonviolent protest was fundamentally unsustainable as it leads to breakdown and the need for a more defensive posture: one supplied, in this case, by Black Power.

I conclude with a discussion of a 2012 speech delivered by Myrlie Evers-Williams, the widow of slain civil rights leader, Medgar Evers, which marked the beginning of the University of Mississippi's "50 Years of Integration" celebration. Her remarks revolved around the concept of sacrifice to initiate change. With an eye toward current social action, like Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, this thesis contends that the tactical use of nonviolence and the physical burden inherent within it must be approached with a deeper understanding of the mental and social consequences of that burden.

## **How to Reckon with Eckford: Breakdown and Civil Rights Historiography**

As noted above, Elizabeth Eckford experienced her share of troubles after her year at Central, including breakdowns so severe they resulted in suicide attempts. One can imagine that it was the fallout from the experience, more-so than the experience itself, that caused Eckford to reassess the value of her sacrifice. Eckford herself has made the connection between the experience and the fallout that few historians are willing to acknowledge. Civil Rights historiography is full of individuals who sacrificed for the betterment of the many and from those accounts it appears that most of them feel the benefits outweighed the costs. Yet, historians have yet to reckon with those who do not feel that the benefits outweighed the often-steep personal costs. Eckford is a case in point. In the long-form article, published in *Vanity Fair*, David Margolick explores the dynamic and emotionally fraught history of Eckford's relationship to Hazel Bryan, the young white girl seen snarling at Eckford in the Counts photograph.

[Insert photo, pending release]

can be viewed at: <http://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/archivesphotos/counts.jsp>

He delves into Eckford and Bryan's emotional states before, during, and after their experiences at Central and his work is valuable for shining a light into the often dark emotional fallout experienced by people who have undergone trauma in the Civil Right's Era. But Margolick's interest in Eckford and Bryan is that of a story that resonates within the larger questions of race relations in the country and speaks to the difficulties inherent in any kind of lasting racial reconciliation. It is an interesting profile of two very complicated women, but I believe Margolick's article also invites an inquiry into the connection between Eckford's experience at Central and her post-movement struggles. Eckford's position as nonviolent standard-bearer and her subsequent breakdown are at odds with standard civil right's narratives. The thesis asks why.

Most famously, Eckford, or more correctly Eckford's photograph, inspired Hannah Arendt to write "Reflections on Little Rock." This controversial essay argued against both the use of children in protest and the southern black community's push for school desegregation, which she saw as "a fight for social opportunity" as opposed to a political right.<sup>10</sup> She believed it was both counter-productive and dangerous to "burden children, black and white, with the working out of a problem which adults for generations have confessed themselves unable to solve."<sup>11</sup> While sympathetic on the whole to civil rights, Arendt was wary of the federal involvement that would be necessary to implement desegregation in the South and she was also concerned that fighting what she deemed social battles in the public political sphere would infringe upon the sanctity of the family and diminish its protective capacity. Arendt alights upon some important points concerning the psychological welfare of those who chose to participate in the Movement—even for the young people who composed the Nine it was firmly a choice, but she neglects to recognize that for black southerners of any age there was no social realm that existed outside of the political realm. Everyday threats against personal and familial safety were not only evident in work places and the voting booth but were a constant in all facets of life. One could not escape the burden through non-participation in "social opportunity" protest. While Eckford could have chosen not to add to the burden by refusing to put herself forward in integration attempts, she, like all black southerners, could not have escaped the burden altogether. And as will be examined in later chapters, opting out of protest became increasingly difficult as those who choose to sit on the sidelines were blamed for the lack of progress.

Christine Firer Hinze uses Eckford as a lens through which to examine the role of children in Christian protest. She takes the opposite position from Arendt, arguing that black citizens, including children, experienced terror whether or not they were involved in protest, and that the ability of parents

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10 Hannah Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," *Commentary*, [http://learningspaces.org/forgotten/little\\_rock1.pdf](http://learningspaces.org/forgotten/little_rock1.pdf) (accessed January, 2012).

11 Hannah Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," *Commentary*

to protect their children was repeatedly undercut by Jim Crow.

Just as a lifetime of breathing contaminated air debilitates physical health, immersion in racist culture perpetrated and still perpetrates long-lasting harm on targeted individuals, families, and communities as well as on their white counterparts, although to different effect.

The wonder is that the stories of southern black families were also narratives of survival, resistance, and courage; to the best of everyone's ability, local communities protected, nurtured, and trained black children for productive and dignified adulthood despite dehumanizing treatment by white society.<sup>12</sup>

Hinze connects the debilitating effects of Jim Crow to social action by addressing the purported relationship between protest and reclamation of self. “King and his fellow movement leaders argued that recovering the agency and the self-respect that racism had corroded could be facilitated by participation in action for civil rights.”<sup>13</sup> This is a simple, yet accurate statement of King's beliefs concerning nonviolent witness. What is curious about Hinze's article is her use of Eckford as an example. Hinze explains Eckford's involvement, speaks to her subsequent difficulties coping, but then does not incorporate those difficulties into her final thesis about the redemptive capacity of suffering for the sake of others. She fails to address those cases, like Eckford's, where participation does not lead to deepened self-respect or a gateway into personal redemption but instead to depression.

These are only three examples of analysis into a single civil right's activist, but my research has yet to uncover one that attempts to reckon with what it means for Eckford to declare that, if given the opportunity, she would not repeat her actions. Her statement is remarkable when one considers the vast amount of Movement literature expounding upon the edifying nature of nonviolence. Breakdown and regret have yet to find a place within the heroic profile that civil rights historiography has created.

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12 Christine Firer Hinze, “Reconsidering Little Rock: Hannah Arendt, Martin Luther King Jr., and Catholic Social Thought on Children and Families in the Struggle for Justice,” *Atlas*, <http://www.luc.edu/dccirp/pdfs/Articles%20for%20Resourc/Article - Hinze, Christine 3.pdf> (accessed January, 2012).

13 Ibid.

## **Project Genealogy and Methodology**

Eckford's story, or more correctly, how Eckford's story has been written about fascinates me. I have always been drawn to narratives of people contending with (and sometimes reaching) their emotional limits, and I started this research because I was curious how participants in the American Civil Rights Movement negotiated their respective limits during their periods of activism. Movement participants lived with the constant threat of danger and under tremendous stress. They were physically and often ideologically cut off from their family and communities. They were continually frustrated by the slow pace of improvement. People were physically and emotionally tortured. People were killed. They watched their friends and fellow workers be beaten and murdered. Any movement towards greater freedom necessitates exposure to risk and will inherently be fraught with trauma, but the consequences of that exposure and that trauma have been largely ignored. In my own explorations, I found that there are numerous examples of Civil Rights movement members whose participation in nonviolent witness led to various forms of breakdown. The cases, like Eckford's, are well documented, often by the participants themselves. Many speak freely of the difficulties they faced both during and after the movement. Considering the remarkable stress of living under the constant threat of violence the fact that breakdowns occurred is not surprising. Movement organizers acknowledged as much with their recruitment of volunteer mental health professionals for Freedom Summer.<sup>14</sup> However, none of the extant literature has anatomized mental breakdowns within the Civil Rights Movement and analyzed their determinative capacity within its structure and trajectory. This thesis situates mental breakdown at the crux of the movement's shift away from nonviolence toward a belief in the necessity for self-defense and proclamations of black power. Breakdowns precipitated a portion of the movement's disassociation with inter-racial cooperation and its embrace of white exclusion and Black

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14 John Dittmer writes extensively of the doctors, both black and white, who volunteered their time and expertise, often putting themselves in physical danger, to the movement in his book *The Good Doctors*. That book and its brief discussion of the concerns voiced by SNCC organizers concerning the ongoing mental health of volunteers was what originally inspired this work.



Nationalism. They also symbolized, as in the case of Elizabeth Eckford, the paradoxical nature of participant experience with nonviolent protest: the firm dedication to its principles as well as the difficulties inherent in its enactment. Breakdowns of this nature led to organizational rifts and, in the cases of Stokely Carmichael and Bob Moses, disavowals of previous statements of purpose. This thesis contends that nonviolence and violence were both tactics in a larger strategy. Rather than being situated in diametric opposition, I argue that they instead existed within an ever-shifting dialectic. One of the most provocative and influential forces within that dialectic was breakdown. Moreover, this thesis suggests that the primary trigger for breakdown was the practice of nonviolent witness or protest.<sup>15</sup>

My search for occurrences of breakdown, as well as my search for individual conflicts with nonviolence as a movement strategy, led me to the memoirs, interviews, and letters of Movement members. *Coming of Age In Mississippi*, by Anne Moody, and *From the Mississippi Delta*, by Endesha Ida Mae Holland were especially helpful, as was *Letters from Mississippi*, a compilation of letters sent by Freedom Summer volunteers during the 1964 Summer Project. I rely heavily upon the exhaustive scholarship of Taylor Branch, specifically upon his *America in the King Years* trilogy. Through these reading and others I sought connections between isolated and highly personal incidents of experienced or witnessed breakdown. I made use of sociological research into inter-racial interactions and the stress process to help ground those connections. There are, however, dangers to theorizing upon other people's experiences, the most obvious being outright misinterpretation. To this end, when discussing the actual experience of breakdown, I have tried to stay as close to the communicated remembrance as possible. I use the participant's words as often as I can and rely upon other first-hand accounts when those are lacking. My interest is not in interpreting the experience of breakdown itself.

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15 I differentiate between witness and protest as they represent different forms of experienced violence. A witness to violence is, like L. Alex Wilson, serving as a receptacle for random violence. Wilson was not performing some kind of civil disobedience when he was attacked, he was simply present in a space where violence was being enacted and he chose not to fight back. Essentially, he was black and in the wrong place at the wrong time. Nonviolent protest, on the other hand, happens in a location of performed civil disobedience where violence is a known possible outcome. In this case, the recipient is using the potential for violence and the violence itself, when enacted, to speak to a larger point.

I will not try to “put myself in the shoes of others.” That is the most immediate danger for one attempting to write of another's experience. For starters, I do not believe it to be possible. Human experience is a vast and complicated thing. Communicating to another the fullness of one's own experience is difficult enough, but interpreting another's experience through the lens of one's own and claiming any sort of real understanding is decidedly naïve. That is true within the normal scope of life, but when considering the singularity of the experience of being a Civil Rights protester in the South, interpretation becomes even more removed. In addition, I do not think it necessary for my purposes, as my theories revolve around the triggers and consequences of breakdown, the before and after, and the role of nonviolence in those processes. It would be more accurate to say that I want to view breakdown as a contextual event as opposed to a momentary one. Breakdowns, like earthquakes, may appear to happen spontaneously, they may often feel like such, but there have been prior disruptions beneath the surface that went unnoticed and are often left unexamined once the damage has been done. Also, like earthquakes, breakdown has aftershocks and can leave wreckage in its wake. When breakdown is viewed more holistically it becomes possible to seek out potential triggers and then trace the consequent ripples.

In this work, breakdown is broadly defined as the manifestation of a person at or exceeding their emotional limits. Breakdown can express itself physically, as in the temporary sensation of the loss of control. Anne Moody wrote remarkably candidly of her experiences with what she termed “cracking up” while working for SNCC in Mississippi. Called to give a speech whose purpose was to rally support for the movement, Moody instead found herself unable to contain the worry and frustration she had been struggling to keep under control.

I arrived at the church exhausted and an hour late, still wearing the skirt and blouse I had worked in all day; they looked like I had slept in them for weeks. The mistress of ceremonies was just explaining that I was unable to make it, when I walked straight up on the stage. She turned and looked at me as if I was crazy, and didn't say another word....I walked up to the

mike. By this time I had completely forgotten my prepared speech....I had been standing up there I don't know how long when the mistress of ceremonies said, "You are running overtime." I got mad at her and thought I would tell the audience exactly what I was thinking. When I finished telling them about the trouble we were having in Canton, I found myself crying. Tears were running down my cheeks and I was shaking and saying, "What are we going to do? Starve to death? Look at me. I've lost about fifteen pounds in a week." I stood there going to pieces, until Reverend King walked up on the platform, put his arm around me and led me away.....I didn't really think about what had happened during my speech until I was in bed trying to sleep. Then I realized I was cracking up, and I began to cry again.<sup>16</sup>

With few outlets and an increasingly remote sense of hopefulness, Moody felt her sense of purpose within the movement slipping away. The pressure to persevere in the face of progressively more immediate violence was momentarily more than she could bear.

Breakdown can also be marked by a disassociation from self, leading to a loss of the instinct for self-preservation. In some cases, breakdown, or fear of breakdown, led movement members to seek out violence. Breakdown in these cases became a vicious cycle wherein receiving violence, or putting oneself in a position where violence was likely to be inflicted, became the primary method for self-validation. Hosea Williams, in Selma after the attack on Jimmy Lee Jackson, who would soon die as a result of his injuries,

collected all potential weapons down to pocket combs and preached a congregation at Brown Chapel into frenzy for a Friday night march on the courthouse. Wilson Baker [Selma's police chief] stopped him on the church steps to warn that troopers and hotheads and assorted posses were spoiling for night violence downtown. He argued for postponement to protect the town and the marchers themselves, but Williams—glassy-eyed--shouted that he had given himself over to march. Baker had him arrested instead, to the relief of some terrified movement people standing uncertainly behind.<sup>17</sup>

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16 Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York: Laurel, 1968), 297.

17 Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years 1963-65*, (New York: Touchstone, 1998), 594.

A nighttime march into a known situation of severe danger had little to no tactical value for the Movement. Williams had simply “given himself over” to potential martyrdom. The fact that he was planning to carry others along with him only highlights how far Williams had broken from the reality of the situation.

Breakdown also manifested organizationally, as in Bob Moses' unexpected split from SNCC with the declaration that he would no longer speak to white people.<sup>18</sup> For Moses this constituted a complete reversal from his prior commitment to inter-racial cooperation, having previously declared “the one thing [SNCC] can do for the country that no one else can do is be above the race issue.”<sup>19</sup> Moses' breakdown is, to me, the most complex and, therefore, the most difficult to interpret, in part because the manifestation and the consequences occurred concurrently. Moses changed his name to Bob Parris, left SNCC and never returned. Little has been written about Moses after his departure from the organized Movement, but the dearth of scholarship belies his importance as an organizational and spiritual leader. Moses, one of the Movement's pioneers, is one of the voices that refused to participate in his own canonization, and he never spoke publicly about his breakdown and departure from SNCC.

Breakdown was repeatedly evident and acknowledged throughout the course of the Movement by participants, but scholars and historians have had little interest in discussing its significance. Considering the frequency with which it occurred, it is unlikely that breakdown is simply perceived to be irrelevant. It is possible that some of the hesitation is due to the general distrust Americans, or more specifically American historians, have toward what they consider to be “soft” sciences, like psychology. Arnold Rampersad argues that black Americans in particular avoid psychological theorizing, believing “it fair to say that, far from being influenced by psychology, black biography has kept a vast distance between itself and that discipline.”<sup>20</sup> He, however, attributes this distance, in part,

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18 Ibid., 589.

19 Ibid., 165

20 Houston Baker, *Turning South Again: Re-thinking Modernism/Re-reading Booker T.* (Durham: Duke University Press,

to “racial loyalty.”<sup>21</sup> The fact that black contributions to American history were ignored for so long makes this tendency understandable, and Rampersad's theory may have some validity. However, the frank discussion of breakdown by black Movement members, coupled with the fact that one does not have to dig too deeply into the available literature to find it, suggests that “racial loyalty” can only account for some of the academic trepidation. What seems more likely is an academic attachment to the heroic narrative and the heroic figure. If we view breakdown as a form of testimony an alternate view of the Civil Rights Movement emerges. That is, it can no longer be seen as a clear-cut and inevitable triumph of heroic personal sacrifice. From the vantage point of breakdown, bodies and minds become more fragile. They can be beaten and broken, and, sometimes, they do not get back up. Heroes, on the other hand, almost always find the strength to stand back up. If they don't, it is certainly not due to fear. Within the narrative of breakdown, fear and its consequences must find a place from which to speak. I recently attended a Civil Rights marker dedication to the Freedom Riders in Jackson, Mississippi. A number of state politicians spoke, including the Governor. Almost every speaker made a reference to the fearlessness of the Riders. To me, the notion that the Riders were without fear is not only ridiculous, but it does them a disservice as well. The heroism of the Riders lies in the fact that they *were* afraid, terribly so, but they did it anyway. For many of them their worst fears of violence were realized, but they survived and most got back on the bus. Among those was James Zwerg, who made the famous hospital bed declaration that violence could not stop the Riders because they “were prepared to die.”<sup>22</sup> Zwerg, like the others, repeatedly opened his body to violence in the name of civil rights. After the rides, he “was wracked with guilt and depression...He drank too much, contemplated suicide, and finally had to seek therapy.”<sup>23</sup> After discussing his depression with Martin Luther King, Zwerg decided to leave the Movement and work for civil rights through a career in the ministry. Does his depression or

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2001), 40

21 Ibid.

22 Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63* (New York: Touchstone, 1988), 450.

23 John Blake, *Children of the Movement* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2004), 27.

his termination of bodily commitment to the Movement make him any less of a hero? Are those who chose not to continue the rides after the brutality they experienced in Alabama any less heroic? Or, even more to the point, is hero even an appropriate word?

Patricia Yaegar explores the dual, and often conflicting, nature of corporeality and hero worship in an art exhibit honoring anti-apartheid activist Stephen Biko. The installation consisted of a double portraiture of two bodies, one, “a grand, upflung portrait of Biko's head—suggesting a persona already classicized, at a distance, monumental, heroic,” yet beneath this portrait “the museum [had] flung another replica of Biko's person (this time solid, tactile, plastic, inert) depicting a body face-down, bound, contorted, bleeding, opened: a terrifying representation of a person battered and left to die on the floor...”<sup>24</sup> The installation attempts to address the paradoxical nature of body politics. “Heroic” bodies, those bodies upon whom we confer an exceptionality, are still “real” bodies, upon which real violence can be enacted. Yaegar writes that in the second body, the solid, battered one, “we meet something more tenuous: a body harder to swallow. Instead of Biko's greatness we are reminded of the power of his political adversaries and his own loss of agency: of flesh that is open to brutality, inertia, decay...tipping the viewer back and forth between heroism and the....disquiet of unusable grief.”<sup>25</sup> In the “disquiet of unusable grief” we find a source for our disinclination to look at the Civil Rights Movement through the lens of breakdown. I argue that by “redeeming” Civil Rights heroes and heroines from their corporeality, we not only rob them of their complexity but moreover of their humanity, the very thing that made their actions worthy of recognition in the first place. More importantly, by placing them within the heroic narrative we construct walls between them and ourselves. We canonize them and by doing so we make their experiences increasingly less applicable to present-day society. What Movement members continually enacted were, essentially, attempts at

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24 Patricia Yaegar, “Consuming Trauma; or, the Pleasures of Merely Circulating,” *Extremities: Trauma Testimony and Community*, (Urbana: University of Indiana Press, 2002), 26.

25 Ibid.

counter-narrative. They purposefully stepped against the prevailing narrative of their time, defined primarily by black repression. These attempts at counter-narrative could, like in the case of the Riders, require an enormous swallowing of fear, but counter-narratives were enacted by black and white citizens across the South on a daily basis, each and every one an act of courage. Many people were inspired to action by the Movement precisely because the fear was *not* hidden. It was pervasive and palpable, but people witnessed it being overcome. The Memphis journalist beaten in Little Rock was not inspired by Eckford because he thought she was fearless, but because, as a fellow minority living under the violence of Jim Crow, he knew that under the increased strain of public activism, she most certainly was not. He knew she was terrified, but he watched her manage to put one foot in front of the other and hold her head high. If we acknowledge fear, an emotion we all experience, we simultaneously allow people the space with which to work through it, which in turn can inspire the rest of us to do the same. It is within that space between fear and action that exceptionalism truly exists. If we acknowledge fear, “heroism” becomes more available. However, when we acknowledge fear, we must also allow for a discussion of the consequences of having to repeatedly overcome it.

Furthermore, I argue that to allow the narrative of breakdown to enter into civil rights historiography is to acknowledge it as testimony against the philosophy of nonviolence. Herein lies the core of our unwillingness. Nonviolence has its own powerful hero narrative within which individual lives are intertwined. It has become a representation of the heroic values of selflessness, courage, and steadfastness. As such, I believe there to be a deep cross-racial disinclination to critically examine its extensive use in the American campaign for civil rights. Beyond affecting individual assessments of heroic courage, breakdown is an example of the negative fallout of nonviolence. There is also an assumption that to look at the philosophy critically necessarily means one is advocating for the use of violence in social movements. As violence is already pre-existent within the philosophy of nonviolence, I think such notions simply limit analysis. I believe nonviolence, especially as practiced

within the Civil Rights Movement, is more complex than we acknowledge. Within the Movement, nonviolence provided a sense of collective strength but also destroyed people's sense of self. It provided a platform on which blacks and whites could conceivably work together, but that platform also gave vent to existing complications of inter-racial cooperation, and, in many ways, exacerbated them. Nonviolence could be edifying, but the violence inherent in nonviolence also had the capacity to tear apart lives. I believe the lives and sacrifices of Movement members and the experiences of breakdown they suffered demand our critical attention, and this thesis is an attempt to begin that discussion.



## II. Chapter 1:

### Voices on Violence: King, Fanon, and Arendt

Human history has, in many ways, been a history of violence. Violence creates, defends, and conquers nations. It transplants, installs, and deposes leaders. Theorists have long grappled with the most effective ways to implement, counter, or harness the power of violence. This thesis uses the work of three theorists, Hannah Arendt, Frantz Fanon, and Martin Luther King, Jr., each of whom had a clearly delineated point of view, to construct a framework through which to examine the use of, and tensions between, violence and nonviolence in the American Civil Rights Movement. Of the three, only King writes and speaks from within the Movement, and this thesis relies primarily upon sermons and speeches delivered during the course of the Movement. King used his sermons to define his vision of nonviolence and to convert listeners to what he perceived to be its redemptive power. Neither Arendt nor Fanon were involved in the Movement and neither writes primarily of its strategies or history, but both critique its reliance on nonviolence. Fanon's work is fundamentally an assessment of violence as a mechanism of revolution from an anti-colonialist perspective. He argues that violence not only has a responsive or defensive role in the struggles between the colonized and the colonizers but an actively strategic one as well. This paper focuses on sections of his second, and last, book *The Wretched of the Earth* as a counterpoint to King's theories of nonviolence. Hannah Arendt's *On Violence* speaks to the dangers she sees inherent in violent protest, but her essays are not in themselves promoting nonviolence. Her work is useful as a tool to probe the strengths and weaknesses of both philosophies. All three all acknowledge that violence, whether enacted or reacted to, is a factor and a necessary presence in social movements, but speaking from different vantage points they reach vastly different

conclusions about the role of violent action. Philosophies of violence and nonviolence both rely upon over-arching principles which predetermine what form that action will take. For that reason neither philosophy provides an adequate mechanism for coping with changing conditions on the ground. As such, I believe neither to be a satisfactory road map for social action. Violence has grave consequences, and for violence to be both enacted and responded to in a manner conducive to its gravity, it must be situational, that is, not random and not predetermined.

## **KING**

King famously said that the “arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”<sup>26</sup> He also declared in a speech in Albany, Georgia that “time was neutral to the history of moral causes.”<sup>27</sup> King could make both of these seemingly oppositional statements because he believed in the fundamental goodness of humanity. Moreover, he believed nonviolence to be a corrective force for the morally misguided and a liberating force for the oppressed. King looked to nonviolence as a tool of conversion whose power rested in its demonstrative capacity, for if the nature of mankind is inherently good, then prejudicial actions are a manifestation of an internal imbalance and can therefore be rectified. Nonviolence was, in this respect, a teaching tool for the nation. It sought to eradicate prejudicial behavior through the remediation of the soul. Bayard Rustin, who entered his service to the Movement as a renowned pacifist, lectured to Freedom Summer volunteers that nonviolence had the ability “to take power from those who misuse it, at which point they can become human too.”<sup>28</sup> While employed in advocating for civil rights, nonviolence was understood by many of its practitioners to have larger implications. For James Lawson, another outspoken leader in the Movement committed to nonviolence, the Civil Rights Movement “was a moment in history when God saw fit to call America

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26 [http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/where\\_do\\_we\\_go\\_from\\_here\\_delivered\\_at\\_the\\_11th\\_annual\\_sclc\\_convention/](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/where_do_we_go_from_here_delivered_at_the_11th_annual_sclc_convention/)

27 Taylor Branch, *Parting the Water*, 545.

28 Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 370.

back from the depths of moral depravity and onto his path of righteousness.”<sup>29</sup> Nonviolence could not only “rehumanize,” but it could also be spiritually restorative. For these men, true civil equality required delving beneath actions perpetrated in the name of the state to their source in individuals whose humanity had become warped. This is not to say that King and the others were blind to the institutionalization of racism. King clearly understood the importance of politics, both in a personal and public relations sense, but he relied on nonviolent protest to garner the national attention necessary to demand the ear of politicians. Sustaining and mobilizing national attention required lots of people willing to use their bodies as a source of change. This use of nonviolence as both a political tool and an over-arching spiritual corrective is what, in part, makes King such a complicated figure.

King believed nonviolence to be not only the morally correct revolutionary force but also its most effective tool. For King, nonviolence was bedrock, and he refused to see an alternate pathway to equality. Late in his career, when nonviolence's popularity was beginning to ebb, he argued with advisors who he thought underestimated the centrality of nonviolence, declaring that “the enemy is violence, violence begets violence.”<sup>30</sup> He explained this commitment with his belief that “in the long run the end is pre-existent in the means, and the means represents the ideal in the making and the end in process.”<sup>31</sup> As a philosophical concept nonviolence is elevating. It is a means for change in which the active participant can maintain a sense of moral superiority. She is, to put it simply, leading by example. In practice however, placing the means, in this case nonviolent protest, in a superior position to the goals of the ends, the passage of civil rights legislation and the eradication of racism, led to the glorification of suffering. In the same speech wherein King issued a call for action by declaring the neutrality of time, he also said, “they can put you in a dungeon and transform you to glory. If they try to

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29 [www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/witnesses/james\\_lawson.html](http://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/witnesses/james_lawson.html)

30 Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years: 1965-68* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 690.

31 Taylor Branch, *Parting the Water*, 871.

kill you, develop a willingness to die.”<sup>32</sup> He continued with the belief that the battle for equality would be won by “the power of our capacity to endure.”<sup>33</sup> King’s speeches are replete with references to the “faith that unearned suffering is redemptive,”<sup>34</sup> and declarations that “‘nothing is more majestic and sublime’ than a willingness to suffer for a righteous cause.”<sup>35</sup> Suffering through nonviolent witness could mean choosing not to bail out of jail—thereby opening oneself to the all the possible violence that may be inflicted therein—or allowing oneself to be beaten without retaliating or simply placing oneself into a situation of known danger. Nonviolence makes the physical body the literal vehicle for change. If one believes that a.) human nature in its unadulterated state is intrinsically good, b.) that racist actions are based in a distortion of that nature, and c.) nonviolence provides an antidote to that distortion, the body becomes the physical ground on which that cleansing takes place. As a concept, nonviolence, in its willingness to take on the burdens of society, can be seen as a beautiful thing, its self-sacrificial nature representative of the best humanity has to offer. But in practice, it places a tremendous burden upon the individual body.

Part of the appeal of nonviolent witness or protest rests in the fact that it gives the witness, or the victim of violence, a sense of agency. Violence perpetrated against black bodies, especially in the South, was hardly a new phenomenon, but nonviolence gave the victim purpose. It placed the subjugated body into the position of authority—a moral authority but an authority nonetheless. When the philosophy of nonviolence is synthesized with religion, as was the case with King, moral authority takes on a deeper significance. A strong argument could be made that as the movement progressed, especially after the attention of the country shifted toward Vietnam and images of violence became commonplace, nonviolence lost much of its effectiveness. Violence inflicted upon protesters no longer shocked the nation or garnered much publicity. Even as former supporters of nonviolence, many in the

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32 Ibid., 546.

33 Ibid.

34 Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 338.

35 Taylor Branch, *Parting the Water*, 286.

wake of breakdown, turned toward black power and Black Nationalism, King held fast to his commitment. Toward the end of his life, which for many also marked the end of the movement, King's reliance upon nonviolence became the more reflexive and, some would argue, irrational response.

The centrality of the black body in the Civil Rights Movement was not lost on King. During the Birmingham campaign, made famous not only for Bull Connor's use of dogs and fire hoses but also for King's use of children marchers, he declared to a proposed compromise solution, "Do not underestimate the power of this movement! These things would not have been granted without your presenting your bodies and your very lives before the dogs and the tanks and the water hoses of this city."<sup>36</sup> The power of the Movement was directly related to the power of the body, which was measured both qualitatively in terms of personal commitment and quantitatively in terms of the sheer number of willing bodies. The nonviolent part of the Civil Rights Movement literally threw bodies at the intransigence of institutional racism in an effort to transform policy and restore people's humanity. In Birmingham, and in organized protests across the South at that time, the body itself and the violence inflicted upon it became testimony. It spoke the words that the masses of black citizens were unable to voice. In the nonviolence espoused and practiced by King and his followers, the burden of cleansing the humanity of white southerners fell upon black bodies. That burden was accepted by many bodies until they were wearied by unceasing violence and became disillusioned with nonviolence's redemptive capacity.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 791.

## FANON

For Fanon, nonviolence was not only ineffective, its use robbed revolutionaries, or the colonized, of their ability to realize their true intellectual and physical equality with their colonizers.

Writing from the colonial perspective in his seminal work, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon contended that

at the individual level, violence is a cleansing force. It rids the colonized of their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude. It emboldens them, and restores their self-confidence. Even if the armed struggle has been symbolic...the people have time to realize that liberation was the achievement of each and every one and no special merit should go to the leader. Violence hoists the people up to the level of the leader.<sup>37</sup>

It is interesting that King offered nonviolence as a similarly emboldening experience for the masses, believing that shared suffering and sacrifice could help people tap into latent strength, and that withstanding brutality without backing down could breed confidence and increase self-respect.<sup>38</sup> Both King and Fanon speak of the cleansing power of protest. If we apply Fanon's language to King's philosophy, it would be the goal of the colonized to cleanse the diseased nature of the colonizers through the example of nonviolence. For Fanon, however, this is counter-intuitive. Revolution is about empowering revolutionaries, with violence as the primary mechanism for that empowerment. Here we have not only violence and nonviolence existing in utter opposition, but also the objects of their energies. In his introduction to Fanon's book, philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, takes Fanon's belief in the liberating power of violence, even if symbolic, one step further by actualizing it in a victim. He writes,

...either one must remain terrified or become terrifying...when the peasants lay hands on a gun, the old myths fade, and one by one the taboos are overturned: a fighter's weapon is his humanity. For in the first phase of the revolt killing is a necessity: killing a European is killing two birds with one stone, eliminating in one go the oppressor and the

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37 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 51.

38 It is also worth noting that for an organization such as SNCC, whose organizational structure was founded in antithesis to the top-down structure of the SCLC, the initial adoption of the slogan "black power" was largely a symbolic gesture of an increasing belief in the need for self-defense.

oppressed: leaving one man dead and the other man free.<sup>39</sup>

Here we have a more immediate violence, one less open to symbology. For Sartre, mortal violence is a pathway to freedom. Sartre makes it clear that Fanon is not advocating violence because of some “odd liking” for it, but because he has “made himself spokesman for the situation.”<sup>40</sup> The violence Fanon is advocating is predicated on the colonial situation, wherein violence has long been a determinant force. The violence of the colonizer has created an atmosphere of terror for the colonized that is based not only in

the fear they feel when faced with [the colonizers] limitless means of repression, but also the fear that their own fury inspires in them. They are trapped between [the colonizers] guns...and those frightening instincts, those murderous impulses, that emerge from the bottom of their hearts and that they don't always recognize. For it is not first of all their violence, it is [theirs], on the rebound, that grows and tears them apart...This repressed rage, never managing to explode, goes round in circles and wreaks havoc on the oppressed themselves.<sup>41</sup>

Fanon suggests that the violence inflicted upon and around the colonized does not simply dissipate, and opening up one's body to it does not lend it spiritual strength. An outlet for it must be found. For the Civil Rights Movement some of those outlets were the church, the spirit of shared suffering, and collective singing. To Fanon, these outlets have been counter-productive, a waste of energy. He sees the unprovoked violence that surrounds the colonized as an important tactical resource. He writes, “we have seen [this violence] channeled through the emotional release of dance or possession. We have seen it exhaust itself in fratricidal struggles. The challenge now is to seize this violence as it realigns itself. Whereas it once reveled in myths and contrived ways to commit collective suicide, a fresh set of circumstances will now enable it to change direction.”<sup>42</sup> It is this redirected, or rebounded, violence

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39 Ibid., lv.

40 Ibid., xlix.

41 Ibid., lii.

42 Ibid., 21.

advocated by Fanon that Sartre believes to be situationally created, but it is important to recognize that for Sartre situational does not mean localized or directly experienced. We must go back to Sartre's use of the phrase "killing a European." He is not specifying the European as a colonizer, but conflating all Europeans with oppressors. He is not speaking of enacting violent in response to direct, localized exposure to personal violence, but of violence perpetrated in a more randomly directed nature and toward an unclear foe. This is an important distinction as one of the arguments against nonviolence is that one's actions within a nonviolent encounter are *predetermined*. It cannot be situationally responsive. Likewise, violence enacted indiscriminately, and not in self-defense, is also not situationally, or tactically, localized. Fanon argues that it is responsive to conditions, but those conditions are not immediate. It is a philosophy of predetermined action just like nonviolence. In terms of enacted violence, self-defense can be its only truly localized use. This is important because the origin of black power, as espoused by Stokely Carmichael and later adopted by his Lowndes County Black Panther political party, was the concept that self or community-defense was an acceptable form of violence. I concur as I believe, in that situation, it had the power to reestablish a sense of individual and community stability that had been deeply shaken by years of experienced terror and further diminished by its commitment to nonviolence.

One could easily understand Fanon to believe nonviolence to be one of the "contrived ways to commit collective suicide," and both he and Sartre argue against its effectiveness. For Fanon, nonviolence was synonymous with diplomacy, "an attempt to settle the colonial problem around the negotiating table before the irreparable is done, before any bloodshed or regrettable act is committed."<sup>43</sup> The above statement was possibly made in reference to the Montgomery bus boycott, which did seek to effect change through negotiation made possible through the pressure brought to bear by peaceful protest. Still, both Fanon and Sartre write of the necessity of violence: for its liberating

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43 Ibid., 23.



power and because, as Sartre contends, the colonized exist within a violent world. He writes, “if violence were only a thing of the future, if exploitation and oppression never existed on earth, perhaps displays of nonviolence might relieve the conflict. But if the entire regime, even your nonviolent thoughts, is governed by a thousand-year-old oppression, your passiveness serves no purpose but to put you on the side of the oppressors.”<sup>44</sup> Here we again see echoes of the situational argument. Violence must be met with violence, as passivity, a response born of fear, lends support to the status quo.

Decrying passivity was not solely the province of those advocating violent protest. Vernon Johns, the pastor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church prior to King, once gave a sermon entitled “It’s Safe to Murder Negroes in Montgomery.” When hauled before a judge to explain his inflammatory title, Johns said, “Everywhere I go in the South the Negro is forced to choose between his hide and his soul. Mostly, he chooses his hide. I’m going to tell him his hide is not worth it.” He went on to say that violence against blacks would continue as long as they “let it happen.”<sup>45</sup> King himself famously used similar arguments for the necessity of action by local church leadership in his “Letter From the Birmingham Jail,” but his response to the Birmingham church bombing, which killed four young girls, explicitly called out the complacency of ordinary black citizens: “What murdered these four girls? The apathy and complacency of many Negroes who will sit down on their stools and do nothing and not engage in creative protest to get rid of this evil.”<sup>46</sup> King’s indictment of inactivity is in many ways more lacerating than Sartre’s. His charge to use anger and frustration more “creatively,” however, differs drastically from Fanon and Sartre who want the oppressed to unleash those same frustrations and respond in kind to random violence. It is quite easy from this perspective to recognize both violence and nonviolence as tactics for the use of channeling the energy of its practitioners.

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44 Ibid., lviii.

45 Taylor Branch, *Parting the Water*, 22-3.

46 Ibid., 891.

Both Fanon and King represent distinct philosophies for enacting revolution, each of which revolve around violence. Although they ascribe to different mechanisms of action and response, they both seek to delimit the space within which the action of violence takes place. More importantly, each ascribes redemptive or empowering qualities to their chosen tactic. These are what cause each to escape ongoing strategic assessment and make their implementation non-responsive to changing conditions on the ground of the protest. This uncritical advocacy breeds disillusionment and causes them to fail in practice over the long term. Long-term nonviolent action places an unsustainable burden upon the body and mind. It cannot provide an adequate resource for the violence that the body withstands. This leads to breakdown and the search for new tactics. The random violent action proposed by Fanon, however, is difficult to implement strategically, leading to chaos and misdirected violence. Fanon died shortly after the 1961 publication of *The Wretched of the Earth*. The book was written, therefore, before the 1964 Freedom Riders, which I argue was a turning point for nonviolent practice in the United States: one that pulled the movement away from the negotiating table and into the streets. While Fanon's opinion of nonviolent protest may not have shifted in accordance, his theory on violence helps locate some the fault-lines existent within King's philosophy of nonviolence. That many of Fanon's words came to be used by later iterations of black power is not surprising, but I believe their failure resonates with the flaws in enacting random violence to initiate social change. Because both violent and nonviolent social action were contemporaneously assessed, in terms of the Civil Rights Movement, as instruments of personal and societal empowerment and redemption, respectively, neither was critically evaluated for its strategic costs and benefits. As such, those who clung to prescribing action within those two limited spaces used neither effectively. In contrast, I believe the Lowndes County Black Panther party's use of nonviolent tactics coupled with an acceptance of the need for self and community-defense was an attempt to bridge the two philosophies to fit the particular local circumstances of the community.

Hannah Arendt, in her book *On Violence*, sought to supply the critical tactical assessment of violent social action that she felt was lacking. She clearly identifies many of its tactical failings, but her analysis falls short in its insistence upon maintaining the strict separation of violent and nonviolent action.

## **ARENDR**

Unlike both King and Fanon, Hannah Arendt was a not a promoter of violence or nonviolence as a revolutionary mechanism. She did, however, bemoan the use of violence by student and black activists in the late 1960s, and argues forcefully against its effectiveness in her series of essays *On Violence*. Essentially, Arendt tries to draw a sharp distinction between violent and nonviolent forms of protest, but in order to keep that line clear she cannot fully delve into the meaning and ramifications of nonviolence in its relationship to violence. Her argument revolves around distaste for the violent student movements of the late-1960s, coupled with an idealistic view of what she saw as the unwaveringly nonviolent Civil Rights Movement. Arendt does not question why nonviolence fell out of favor. While she speaks to the motivations behind the rise of violence, she refuses to recognize the connective tissue between the two modes of social action. Because of her dichotomous vision Arendt necessarily sees the Movement as ending when nonviolence fell out of favor and was replaced by black power, but she does not recognize, or refuses to recognize, the tangible connection between the two, just as she refuses to see the connections between Fanon and King.

Arendt, like King, uses the means-end argument against violence as a mechanism of social change. She writes,

...the very substance of violent action is ruled by the means-end category, whose chief characteristic, if applied to human affairs, has always been that the end is in danger of being overwhelmed by the means which it justifies and which are needed to reach it. Since the end of human action, as distinct from the end products of fabrication, can never be reliably predicted, the means used to achieve political goals are more often than not

of greater relevance to the future world than the intended goals.<sup>47</sup>

Her use differs from King's in that it is not overtly religious and instead relies upon the unpredictability of the consequences of human action. To put it simply, Arendt is arguing that human action affects not only its immediate surroundings but the future as well, which while predicated on past events is still fundamentally unpredictable. While King also uses the concept of the power of human action to advocate for nonviolence, Arendt uses the repercussive power of that action as a warning against violence, arguing that the nature of human impact and how it is determined is unpredictable. It is, therefore, safer not to introduce violence into the equation. The means-end theory is used here to set-up her argument that violent protest is damaging to both its immediate and prospective surroundings. If one looks at the damage inflicted upon nonviolent bodies, however, the same argument can be used against its long-term use as well. Arendt lived contemporaneously with the Civil Rights Movement, so she was not ignorant of the violence suffered by those within it. She goes on to argue that

...legitimacy, when challenged, bases itself on an appeal to the past, while justification relates to an end that lies in the future. Violence can be justifiable, but it will never be legitimate. Its justification loses in plausibility the farther its intended end recedes into the future. No one questions the use of violence in self-defense, because the danger is not only clear but also present, and the end justifying the means is immediate.<sup>48</sup>

Arendt's use of means-end becomes more problematic here when she attempts to introduce a temporal relationship between violence and its justification. Arendt's statement that no one questions the use of violence in self-defense belies one of the foundational tenets of nonviolence. Having just lived through the Movement of the late-1950s and early 1960s, she must have been aware that the rejection of defensive violence was a core principle of the Movement. Furthermore, she does not address what it means to be under the constant threat of violence. Does the threat of violence or the perception of

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47 Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 1970), 4.

48 *Ibid.*, 52.

intended violence then justify its use? It would seem the answer would depend upon one's definition of violence. This study identifies and examines three distinct forms of violence: remote or indirect violence, direct or personal violence, and mental or psychic violence. Remote violence, which will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 2, is identified as violence experienced through another medium, like the bombing of a home or church. This kind of faceless violence, similar to terrorism, breeds fear based in a sense of helplessness. Direct violence, also discussed more fully in Chapter 2, is the physical experience of personal violence. The action of direct violence is easy to identify, and physical violence in any form is traumatic, but what made the violence inflicted upon nonviolent Movement protesters was not only the fact that they refused to fight back but the fact that the violence was expected, even, at times, provoked. Nonviolent bodies not only expected violence, they planned for it and the success of the campaign was dependent upon the ability of the protester to persevere through the violence and the tremendous fear engendered by its anticipation. Aside from the obvious logistical and organizational planning, nonviolent action required individual mental preparation for in many cases the fear of violence is more traumatic than the actual experience. This fear of impending violence is mental violence, the third form of violence discussed within the paper. Although all three forms are easily identified from each other they are hard to untangle within individuals who experience them on a regular basis. Both remote and direct violence lead to an increase in mental or anticipated violence. Arendt does not define violence, so one must assume she is speaking of direct, personal violence. This paper argues, however, that when experienced on a continual basis, such as in a nonviolent movement, direct and remote violence cannot be separated from mental violence. Is pre-emptory violence in those cases, such as the circumstances that gave rise to the original use of the slogan Black Power, then justifiable?

What is essential about the formation of the Black Power movement is that it did not spring out of a call for a Fanon-esque use of random violence, but from the same sentiment about the common-

sense acceptance of the use of violence in self-defense that Arendt expressed. She writes that “rage is by no means an automatic reaction to misery and suffering. [The] conspicuous absence [of rage and violence under such conditions] is the clearest sign of dehumanization...only where there is reason to suspect that conditions could be changed and are not does rage arise.”<sup>49</sup> It is fascinating that Arendt can look at the violence and rage expressed by the Black Power movement that she decries and not recognize that it was born out of the failures of Civil Rights Movement. Arendt instead completely separates the two movements. She writes that the Civil Rights Movement was both “highly successful” and “entirely nonviolent.”<sup>50</sup> One could take issue with either of those claims, but Arendt does not delve any further into her assessment. She does, however, claim that while the Movement succeeded in changing the laws and ordinances of segregation in the South, it “became counterproductive” when it attempted to tackle what she saw as the more intractable problems of the urban North.<sup>51</sup> Arendt clearly believes that the Movement ended with the burnout of nonviolence. Black power is in no way associated with the Movement. What Arendt does not acknowledge is that while discriminatory laws and ordinances were largely eliminated, very little changed on the ground for everyday people. Violence against those attempting to register to vote did not end with the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. In areas, such as Lowndes County, it seemed to increase. The contention that black power was in no way connected to the Civil Rights Movement not only negates the contributions of those who put themselves forward in Lowndes County, Alabama, but negates the journey of the Movement itself, which was a movement defined by its changing relationship to violence. This paper argues that the connection between the frustration expressed by Stokely Carmichael's declaration of black power and his long history fighting nonviolent battles is tangible. Arendt acknowledges as much when she writes, “I am inclined to think that much of the present glorification of violence is caused by severe frustration

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49 Ibid., 63

50 Ibid., 76.

51 Ibid., 76.

of the faculty of action in the modern world.”<sup>52</sup> Here, she is exactly right.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 83.

### **III. Chapter Two: Civil Disobedience and Nonviolence**

Nonviolent witness and civil disobedience are often used interchangeably. This practice, however, conflates two different, albeit overlapping, forms of social action. Civil disobedience is defined by the open refusal to comply with laws or practices that are perceived to be unjust. It is a peaceful protest conducted in an attempt to call attention to an element of society or government that the protester would like to alter. Often it is a practice that the protester feels they cannot comply with in good conscience. Civil disobedience can be as personal as refusing to pay income taxes or as coordinated as the King-led citywide bus boycott in Montgomery. To put it plainly, it is an action seeking a response, usually in the form of a policy change. Acts of civil disobedience may go ignored, but they may also lead to violence or arrest. The important distinction is that physical violence is not necessary for its enactment. The same cannot be said for nonviolent protest, which, as both a philosophy and a practice, is not, as is often thought, the absence of violence. It, in fact, requires violence, because it is not an action in itself but a response to violence. In this way civil disobedience can become nonviolent protest when its enactment elicits a violent reaction that is not responded to in kind. In essence, civil disobedience is an action in opposition to a codified law or function of society. It meant to apply pressure upon those in position to create change. Civil disobedience does not claim any redemptive or spiritual power. Nonviolent protest, on the other hand, consists primarily of bodies absorbing violence in an effort to call attention to a cause. How much attention nonviolent protest



garners depends upon the virulence of the opposition and the perseverance of the protester. Aside from tangible, external social and political goals, the philosophy of nonviolence also aims to alleviate the individual internal hatreds that create violence. It is important to clarify the two forms of activism because the Civil Rights Movement made use of both. Yet it was the practice of nonviolence that, in some cases, led to breakdown.

The Civil Rights Movement's adherence to nonviolence grew out of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, its first long-term, coordinated attempt at civil disobedience. As defined by its two major organizational leaders, the SCLC and SNCC, this adherence determined the overarching strategy that civil rights protest would utilize for the next ten years and prescribed how bodies would respond to the violence that protest would certainly elicit. This predetermined position was in some ways a natural response born of the history of extreme examples of physical violence that southern African Americans had suffered for over a century. Based upon that history of subjugation through extreme violence, it was assumed that any move toward a violent uprising would, in all probability, have induced an extremely bloody response. While practical considerations of avoiding retributive violence may make a person's commitment to nonviolence understandable, such considerations could not inhibit a person's instinct for self-defense or flight. That is, nonviolence not only asked participants not to fight back, but it also asked them not to run away. Furthermore, logical arguments may work on an individual basis, but practicality cannot inspire an entire movement to simultaneously invoke violence and then not reciprocate it. To this end, the long history of violence enacted upon black bodies and the fear that it engendered helped the cause of nonviolence.<sup>53</sup> Anne Moody reflects on her initiation to that fear:

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<sup>53</sup> There has been work done on the black southern body and it would be very interesting for someone to look to the generational connections between abuse of that body and its use in nonviolent protest. Was nonviolence another form of controlling or “shackling” the black body? Or, was it, as Houston Baker suggests, the black body's “frame-breaking” vehicle to modernity? (Turning South Again, 77) I find it fascinating that Baker finds Booker T. Washington's emphasis on “clean, thrifty, industrial” living to be a “performative modernity,” a form of “domesticated immobility,” but he finds the similar emphasis of the self-sacrificial nature of Civil Rights Movement, whose boundaries of self-expression were clearly delineated and could be considered performative, to be thoroughly modernizing (60). I do not necessarily disagree with him, but I think it's an area that could use further thought. He himself asks, “For whom—or better, as

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. This was the worst of my fears. I knew once I got food, the fear of starving to death would leave. I also was told that if I were a good girl, I wouldn't have to fear the Devil or hell. But I didn't know what one had to do or not do as a Negro not to be killed.<sup>54</sup>

Black southerners had learned through generations of violence that to display strength of any sort was to court death and heighten danger for themselves and their communities. Thus, framing the choice to practice nonviolence simply in terms of strength or weakness is problematic because it neglects the context within which the practice was accepted. Withstanding violence required a tremendous summoning of will, but it also exploited the long suffering of African American southerners. What separated the violence inflicted upon Movement members from the violence long endured by black southern bodies was that protest violence was sought out and at times was deliberately provoked. Asking a body to seek out violence is a tremendous request. This chapter examines how people come to a place wherein they can agree, with and through their bodies, to such a request—especially people whose bodies had been imprinted with a long history of unprovoked violence. I argue that the civil disobedience campaign initiated by the black community in Montgomery during the bus boycott of 1955 was the first step black southerners took toward full bodily commitment to the Movement for civil rights. Using the boycott as an exemplar of civil disobedience, I will examine what sustained and protected the community's steadfastness through the ordeal. I will also explore indirect violence and how it affected protesters. The chapter will then jump forward six years to the Freedom Rides of 1961, when direct violence brought the movement to a new plateau. It will argue that the Freedom Riders redefined nonviolent protest for the Movement by building upon the groundwork laid during the boycott. In redefining the meaning of nonviolence, the Riders also redefined what participation in the

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whom?--does public blackness perform?" (53). How does that question get answered within the Civil Rights movement?  
54 Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, 125-6.

Movement required of individuals. The connective tissue between these two campaigns illuminates how people within the Movement progressed from coordinated acts of community civil disobedience to full-scale individual mortal commitment.

### **The Montgomery Bus Boycott**

*“And we go on with a faith that unearned suffering is redemptive.”  
--Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>55</sup>*

The bus boycott in Montgomery was a seemingly spontaneous occurrence, sparked by the arrest of Rosa Parks for refusing to give up her seat on a public bus. While it was that particular event that broke the dam and precipitated the boycott there were many other smaller cracks that preceded it. The original idea to challenge the segregation statutes came from E.D. Nixon, who along with Fred Gray and Charles Durr, had long waited for the perfect candidate with whom to bring the suit. Whereas previous arrestees had been either too young, too poor, or too pregnant, Parks, secretary of the local NAACP, was intelligent and emotionally reserved. She was also well respected, which would make her a viable figure to rally community support. While Nixon organized the legal team to represent Parks, the Women's Political Council called for a one-day boycott of the city bus system as a show of solidarity. Quickly mobilizing upon word of the arrest, the WPC composed a leaflet that the women distributed individually by the thousands and en masse to local churches. Nixon called on local ministers, including King, who had come to Montgomery and the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church only the year before, to support the boycott from their pulpits. King initially hesitated, telling Nixon he would have to think on it. Ultimately, all the of the ministers representing the town's larger churches supported the one-day boycott, as did the local black community, which resulted in empty buses running the streets of Montgomery. The success of that first day was the result of the overwhelming support of their parishioners, and it excited the ministers. They determined the boycott would continue

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<sup>55</sup> Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 338.

during the duration of Parks' appeal in hopes of pressuring the city's white leadership to compromise. Black leadership founded the Montgomery Improvement Alliance (MIA) and elected King head of the organization. Limited by what they thought they could accomplish, as they knew state segregation laws superseded any local ones, the original goal of the boycott was not full integration of the bus system, but a clarification of the existing segregation statutes that required black riders to move at the discretion of the bus driver. Begun in December of 1955, nobody anticipated that the boycott would last for over a year or that, through a decision of the Supreme Court, it would result in the elimination of segregated bus transportation in the city. The Montgomery bus boycott presented one of the first major organizational testing grounds for what would become the larger Movement for civil rights. It was in Montgomery that the foundation of the Movement was laid, and as such it provides insights into how the Movement would progress, specifically in terms of organization, the initial rallying and subsequent maintenance of participant support, and the use of passive resistance tactics. Montgomery also outlined how the Movement would attempt to cope with violence as well as revealing some of the complications inherent within those attempts.

### **Initiation to the movement**

How the boycott initially gained community backing is indicative of how future undertakings across the South would progress: a seemingly spontaneous occurrence capitalizing upon the groundwork already laid by those who had been quietly working for civil rights for years. One of the most important factors was the limited amount of time for debate or hesitation. Parks was arrested on December 1<sup>st</sup>, a Thursday, with the WPC proposed boycott scheduled for the following Monday. Due to this short turnaround time, especially as it occurred over a weekend, Nixon knew he would need the support of the clergy to get the word out in church that Sunday. The initial timing of the arrest was crucial to the boycott's subsequent progression as it led to the centering of the boycott around the church—a center that would hold within the larger Movement for more than a decade—and not the

local NAACP office. Nixon knew he needed clergy support not only because of their integral relationship to the community, but because their churches provided one of the few places large groups of African Americans were allowed to gather. When he called to ask King for his support, he asked for the use of the church as a meeting space regardless of whether King decided to support the boycott. King recognized the church as an instrument of the larger community and agreed to its use prior to his agreement to support the boycott. From that first meeting, the church became a vital space for organization and the dissemination of information. In fact, it could be argued that the restrictions on black movement and the limited number of spaces wherein they could gather actually worked in the MIA's favor, as it made spreading information simpler and forced a cogency among disparate groups. By moving activism away from a known civil rights organization, the Movement was able to better shield its activities and its participants.

The quick turnaround from Thursday's arrest to Monday's boycott also helped make the first day of protest a success. Without much time to consider the gravity of the affront to white city leaders and what their response could possibly be, people agreed as congregations to participate. Confronting segregation as a group, instead of individually, alleviated much of the fear associated with openly challenging the white establishment. This comfort was not afforded to Parks, whose family disapproved of her decision to go along with the appeal, an action her husband believed would needlessly expose her to danger. Taylor Branch writes that in response to learning of Parks' decision, "Raymond Parks came nearly undone. Having just felt primitive, helpless terror when his wife had been snatched into jail, he could not bear the thought that she would reenter the forbidden zone by choice."<sup>56</sup> Raymond Parks recognized the political nature of the proposal and knew that for Rosa to become its focal point was risky. For Parks, who as Montgomery's NAACP secretary was one of those working to lay the groundwork necessary for challenges to Jim Crow legislation, the risk was deemed worthwhile.

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<sup>56</sup> Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 130.

Opening oneself up to individual attack by proponents of segregation could be physically and emotionally dangerous, as evidenced by the story of Juliette Morgan, Montgomery's white librarian, whose suicide was attributed to the severe harassment she received after writing a letter to the local paper in support of the boycott.<sup>57</sup> Making an unpopular stand within a group takes much of the incoming external pressure off individuals. Group dynamics, however, also simultaneously exert internal pressure upon individuals to consent to group decisions. When black clergy met to form the MIA they initially wanted to keep the organization a secret. They were afraid of white response and were hesitant to step forward and admit the boycott was a coordinated effort led by them. Frustrated, E.D. Nixon compared their reluctance to the outspoken courage of the women, and tore into the fears of the gathered men. "We've worn aprons all our lives...It's time to take the aprons off. If we're gonna be mens, now's the time to be mens."<sup>58</sup> The high percentage of black support for the boycott was a result of these two conflicting phenomena: the pressure to support and continue once a project is undertaken (similar to the pressure Elizabeth Eckford felt to stay in school despite her misery) coupled with the comfort of being one actor among a coordinated many. The Civil Rights Movement had its share of Rosa Parks. Individuals like James Meredith and William Moore<sup>59</sup> chose to step forward as lone actors against a hegemonic white society, but the majority of Movement members were acting in accordance with larger organizations. The bus boycott was one of the first implementations of the communal approach to African American civil rights protest. The ramifications of this sense of shared suffering will be discussed in more depth in subsequent chapters, but it is important to note how vital the group mentality was to the initial success of the boycott.

Although there were few white participants, the boycott also helped set the initial tone of inter-

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57 Ibid., 144.

58 Ibid., 136.

59 William Moore was a white postal worker who decided to walk from Chattanooga to Mississippi wearing a signboard that read "End Segregation in America" on the front and "Equal Rights for All Men" on the back. He was assassinated along the route. Taylor Branch, *Parting the Water*, 748-9.

racial cooperation for the Movement, as the complications of inter-racial contact was also ameliorated by the sense of shared suffering. As E.D. Nixon made his round of phone calls to local preachers, one man he avoided calling was Robert Graetz, a white northerner who was the newly installed pastor of the sparsely populated black Lutheran church. Graetz and his family had taken many pains toward acceptance by the community they had been sent to serve, but the community was hesitant. Upon hearing rumors of the boycott, Graetz called one of the few local blacks with whom he had been able to develop a relationship. Rosa Parks confessed that it was she who had been arrested and told Graetz the details of the boycott. The following morning at the pulpit, Graetz expressed support for Parks and the boycott, proclaiming that his family would abide by the restrictions as a mark of support. A “murmur of approval went through the congregation.”<sup>60</sup> It was this expression of solidarity and acceptance of shared suffering that finally warranted Graetz's approval by the community he had been struggling to serve. Graetz became a member of the MIA, and persisted within the struggle even when his home came under attack from bombs. His commitment was not questioned during the boycott as he was both a member of the community and exhibited a willingness to undergo the same hardships as his congregation.

The spirit of inter-racial cooperation and trust, however, only extended to those involved with the boycott. When white employers confronted blacks individually about the boycott, “practically none of the former bus riders would tell a white person that they thought the boycott was a good idea. Ordinary Negro folk would tell even known MIA supporters...that their regular bus had 'broken down' that day, or that they were walking for medical reasons, or, in a pinch, that they “just stays off the buses and leaves that boycott alone.”<sup>61</sup> As such, many whites viewed the struggle as the result of a few rabble-rousers inciting an otherwise contented African American community. While non-local organizations did play a central role in many subsequent civil rights campaigns, this was not the case

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60 Ibid., 134.

61 Ibid., 155.

for the boycott. This notion of “outside agitation,” a result of black hesitation to admit involvement and white unwillingness to admit that members of their community wanted to fundamentally alter the status quo, plagued the Movement in years to come and made non-locals the target of violence.

### **Maintenance of Support and Alleviation of Movement Stress**

Garnering initial support for the boycott was one thing, but as each side began to view the conflict with a siege mentality, maintaining that support became an altogether different hurdle. Success would depend upon the protesters' ability to endure, and building patience and inuring people to hardship became one of the MIA's primary focuses. The church again played the central role in the preservation of good spirits and energy. In addition to being spaces for organization, the mass meetings held at various churches throughout the year-long boycott also became a safe place wherein those involved in the movement could come to regroup, vent frustration, and seek solace.

The religious fervor they went to bed with at night always congealed by the next morning into cold practicality, as they faced rainstorms, mechanical breakdowns, stranded relatives, and complicated relays in getting from home to job without being late or getting fired or getting into an argument with the employer, then getting home again, perhaps having to find a way to and from the grocery store, and cooking and eating supper, dealing with children and housework, then perhaps going back out into the night for a mass meeting and finally home again, recharged by the “rousements” of Abernathy and the inspiration of King, and then at last some weary but contented sleep before the aching chill of dawn started the cycle all over again.<sup>62</sup>

At the very first mass meeting, held that Monday evening after the first day of empty buses, the excitement at their ability to pull together and enact such a sweeping show of solidarity swept through the community and thousands of people showed up to see what they should do next. Using the energy of the crowd, King's speech that night moved from the specific problems of bus integration to the general problem of inequality, proclaiming that, “there comes a time when people get tired of being

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62 Ibid., 145.



trampled over by the iron feet of oppression.”<sup>63</sup> While still centered upon the kernel of Parks' arrest, this broadening of purpose helped to elevate the cause in meaning and deepen people's commitment. This increased their willingness to endure the hardship of the boycott, which eventually included police harassment and arrests. It also helped alleviate class distinctions, bringing those who did not ride the bus into the movement. Furthermore, people got caught up in the excitement of organizing carpools and taxi services. They were forced to rely upon each other for rides and support, which further deepened their sense of solidarity across class lines. The boycott united their suffering and gave it a purpose. This build up of communal concern and responsibility helped hold the movement together once the violence began.

### **Introduction of Remote Violence**

The bombing of King's home was the first instance of remote violence experienced by the campaign. Preaching at the time, King was called away from the pulpit by aides who lacked the knowledge of Coretta and his young daughter's safety. At this point the foundation of passive resistance in the movement did not imply an overarching commitment to nonviolence, and King rushed home to find angry community members swarmed around his home carrying weapons. The collective mentality of the group at this point, expressed as a sense of collective responsibility for each other and ownership of the movement, had reached such a level that the crowd refused to disperse until an appearance by Coretta proved that she was unharmed. The initiation of violence into the movement deepened people's commitment, but it also caused them to demand more comprehensive concessions that they felt were commensurate with the risks they were taking. Shortly after the first bombing, Fred Gray filed a federal suit outright challenging the constitutionality of segregated bus transportation in Montgomery. Violence continued and arrests were threatened, as hundreds were indicted for violating a manufactured court order designed to play upon people's fear of jail. After much deliberation, movement leadership

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 139

decided not to wait for officers to arrest them but to instead surrender themselves willingly. The influx of the boycott leadership to the police station to surrender themselves shocked the white establishment. No one was held and a delighted black community who treated the day like a holiday greeted all those leaving the courthouse. Later, at that evening's mass meeting, the indicted leadership was feted and parents brought their children forward to touch those who had braved jail for the sake of the cause.

The spirit of suffering, later extolled by King as redemptive, was embraced wholeheartedly by some members of the movement. Others responded less enthusiastically, or more realistically, about expected suffering. King's father proclaimed to his son in the wake of the bombing that, "It's better to be a live dog than a dead lion."<sup>64</sup> The violence inflicted in Montgomery was very real, but it was remote and impersonal. Luckily the bombs never caused any casualties, just severe damage to buildings, and very few boycotters actually spent time in jail. Those facts kept ordinary black Montgomerians from having to directly contend with violent risks of civil rights protest. The remote nature of the violence also provided a clear excuse to invoke nonviolence. It was hard to fight an unseen enemy, and retaliation through random violence, it was argued, would make them no better than the segregationists they were trying to rise above. At this point, King himself kept weapons in his home and although he was theoretically a strong proponent of nonviolence, he had yet to determine if he could "apply nonviolence to [his] heart."<sup>65</sup> King was acting on feeling, simply moving forward in the direction he thought best on a day to day basis, going so far as to admit to Harry Belafonte that he "had no idea where this movement is going."<sup>66</sup>

As the violence continued, however, cracks within the community began to show. These cracks ironically became more apparent after the Supreme Court upheld a lower court's decision and bus integration was ordered in Montgomery. There were a few contributing factors to the disintegration of

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64 Ibid., 167.

65 Ibid., 180.

66 Ibid., 185.

the MIA and the larger Montgomery movement. The first was that the Supreme Court decision took weeks to implement, forcing the boycotters to walk and share rides beyond when they expected. Once integration was finally enforced, in late December of 1956, the elation felt by all quickly turned to disillusionment as homes and churches continued to be bombed and buses full of passengers became the targets of shotgun blasts, causing the local government to halt night bus service. Furthermore, those thought responsible for many of the bombings were arrested, and despite the fact that they had signed confessions, were acquitted by a jury. The seemingly endless nature of the struggle was a source of deep frustration, as a change in federal law could not effect change in the hearts and minds of those on the ground.

The second cause of rupture was the movement's complicated relationship to violence. The glorification of suffering coupled with the fact that only the elite leadership was targets provoked feelings of jealousy.

Even those who had lived through the boycott could not explain it, except to say that the MIA community was suffering a natural letdown. Once the endeavor was behind them, crisis emotions slipped easily into depression and jealousy. Some resented the fact that Abernathy's prestige rose dramatically because he was the only leader bombed both at church and at home. Graetz's stature grew because on the most recent night of terror his home had been the target of two bombs, one of which did not go off....When the rumor mill passed the word that one of Graetz bombs had been meant for a Methodist preacher within the MIA, that preacher actually became consumed with regret that he had not been bombed—to the point that he later had a mental breakdown.<sup>67</sup>

In this instance, a phenomenon that would repeat itself frequently during the Movement, violence was sought not to make a political statement but to assert one's individual importance and to signify that one's commitment could withstand not only the threat but also the physical act of violence. This personal desire to experience violence was not only counter-intuitive in terms of maintaining one's

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67 Ibid., 200.

physical safety, but it also proved dangerous to one's mental well-being. Furthermore, it was tactically irrelevant to the larger Movement and, in many cases, proved counter-productive. King himself, overcome with guilt over the danger he believed he had led people to and depressed by the infighting, experienced a form of breakdown in the loss of faculty. He

took the pulpit at an MIA mass meeting. Praying publicly for guidance, he said, 'Lord, I hope no one will have to die as a result of our struggle for freedom in Montgomery. Certainly I don't want to die. But if anyone has to die, let it be me!' his outcry threw the audience into pandemonium. Shouts of 'No! No!' clashed with a wave of religious ecstasy. In the midst of it, King became overwrought. He gripped the pulpit with both hands, unable to speak. He remained frozen there long after the crowd stilled itself, which produced an awkward silence and then a murmur of alarm as the seconds went by. King never spoke. Finally, two preachers draped their arms around him and led him to a seat.<sup>68</sup>

It is as if the gravity of the undertaking had finally caught up with King. His method of feeling things out day to day had reached a point where the possibility of death had become an issue, and it was not just his own death. For the first time, King found himself in a position of having to ask people to risk their lives, not in theoretical terms, but in actuality. How he would justify that potential sacrifice was, in part, born out of lessons he learned throughout the course of the boycott. He used that time to shape his feelings on nonviolence and think about how those feelings would translate into action. One of the foundational justifications for nonviolence was religious faith.

Aside from the rejuvenating influence, having religion impressed so firmly onto the boycott led to significant by-products. The centrality of the church space in the initial organization of the boycott also led to the elevation of the clergy to the position of spokesmen for the boycott. These were men more accustomed to moving between the races and it seemed natural that they would represent the voices of the larger community around the bargaining table. This class differentiation did lead to problems, however, once the boycott succeeded and the MIA looked toward a new project. King and

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68 Ibid., 201.

many of the leadership among the clergy wanted to tackle segregation at the airport, over the objections of many who questioned the importance of air travel to the majority of African Americans. In addition to being outward spokespeople for the boycott, they also came to define it internally for those participating as well. It was King who determined that the passive resistance of the boycott would also be nonviolent. He explained this in terms of religion, declaring in a mass meeting early in the boycott that “we are not here advocating violence. We have overcome that...I want it to be known throughout Montgomery and throughout this nation that we are a Christian people. The only weapon we have in our hands this evening is the weapon of protest.”<sup>69</sup> This connection between religion and nonviolence would be sustained throughout the boycott, even through tests of violence, and would continue for many throughout the course of the larger Movement, providing much of the basis for its support. This linkage between religion and nonviolent suffering also led to acceptance of martyrdom by many within the Movement. The willingness to die for the cause became a prerequisite for participation. While this led to a deeply committed core of supporters, it was also highly dangerous to their mental and physical health. William Anderson, thrown in jail with King during a campaign in Albany, Georgia, experienced a breakdown into deep religious fervor wherein he saw King as Jesus and himself and the others as saints.<sup>70</sup> His disconnection from the reality of the situation was so complete that King and the others were forced to bail out of jail earlier than they had planned in hopes that returning Anderson to his home would reconnect him to reality.

Another important lesson learned by Movement leadership in Montgomery was the direct correlation between jail and press coverage. Equally important, publicity garnered monetary contributions from across the nation. It was after the mass indictments that the MIA was finally able to solicit enough donations to buy a fleet of cars for transport. This connection between jail and national media attention would be exploited throughout the course of the Movement, but the meaning of jail for

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 550-51.

those who went would drastically change. The elation experienced by those in Montgomery who surrendered themselves to the local police station only to turn around and walk out with the charges dropped was not repeated in other campaigns. Montgomery, however, provided the Movement with a relatively safe opportunity to test jail as a tactic.

The question remains, what made Montgomery different from other attempts at collective protest by African Americans in the South? Or, as asked by Taylor Branch in his history of the boycott, “What was a fourteen-dollar fine levied on Rosa Parks to a community that had calmed down after lynchings?”<sup>71</sup> The difference was that the Montgomery bus boycott was a coordinated act of civil disobedience. The arrest of Rosa Parks provided a specificity of claim. Dissatisfaction stemming from being treated poorly on a daily basis while using public transportation was something around which people could be organized. The problem could be clearly protested against and the protesters could make specific demands. In a way, Montgomery can be seen as a microcosm of the Movement, which was most successful when targeted toward instances of clear injustice instead of trying to tackle the vague giant of prejudice and racial oppression. Civil disobedience is a highly useful tool in these kind of social endeavors because the clarity of purpose leads to increased community involvement and contributes to group solidarity. However, when civil disobedience precipitates violent responses it can lead to both organizational and personal breakdown. In the case of Montgomery, national recognition of the validity of the grievances led to successes within the courts and with local and national governments. Yet the uplift experienced with these successes lead to the disintegration of organization when those successes did not lead to immediate changes on the ground.

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71 Ibid., 137.

## Freedom Riders

*Where is your body?*  
--student organizers to Martin Luther King<sup>72</sup>

If the Montgomery Bus Boycott simultaneously introduced the Movement for civil rights to the nation and sowed the seed of nonviolence as the negation of violence in the American consciousness, then the Freedom Rides of five years later turned everything people thought they understood on its head. Begun quietly on May 4, 1961, by a group of interracial riders working with the Congress Of Racial Equality, or CORE, the Freedom Rides were meant to be a test of the 1960 Supreme Court decision in the case *Boynton v. Virginia*. The Boynton case declared discrimination based on race against interstate passengers to be in violation of the Interstate Commerce Act.<sup>73</sup> In practice, this meant that segregated waiting areas, food service venues, and restrooms in bus terminals across the South were illegal. It also meant, of course, that black patrons should be allowed use of those facilities without harassment. The two buses that left Washington D.C. for New Orleans, one Greyhound and one Trailways, each carried a small group of men and women determined to test the commitment of the federal government to uphold the court's ruling. Ironically, that same week, Robert Kennedy addressed an audience at the University of Georgia on "Law Day" in which he discussed the topic of race: "Respect for the law,' in essence, that is the meaning of Law Day. And every day must be Law Day, or else our society would collapse...You may ask: will we enforce the civil rights statutes? The answer is: yes, we will."<sup>74</sup> Kennedy's declaration of faithfulness in the upholding of the law would be sorely

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72 Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 25.

73 Justia, US Supreme Court Center, <http://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/364/454/case.html> (accessed 03/12/2012).

74 American Rhetoric, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/rfkgeorgialawschool.htm> (accessed 03/12/2012).

tested in the upcoming weeks and months as the Freedom Riders gained notoriety.

CORE was an organization committed to nonviolence, and the Freedom Riders built upon their knowledge, in some cases first-hand knowledge, of the student lunch counter sit-ins and theater pickets currently happening across the mid-South where harassment and arrests were commonplace. The Freedom Rides were also inspired by the Rock Hill Jail-In, which was the first instance of protesters refusing bail and serving out sentences. Each of these events signaled an increasing tolerance for suffering within the Movement and deepened its commitment to passive acts of civil disobedience. The Freedom Rides would become the first time Movement participants would knowingly open their bodies to violence, and while death was always a risk of activism in the South, the Freedom Rides were a departure from the acceptance of the possibility of random violence into a space wherein violence was inevitable and highly personal.

The original Freedom Riders made it as far as Rock Hill, South Carolina, the site of the “jail-in” earlier that year, before they experienced anything worse than unwelcoming glares and rude responses. As John Lewis attempted to enter the designated white waiting room he was confronted and told to remove himself to the Colored side of the terminal. When Lewis declared his right to enter based on the Boynton the case, he was struck in the face by one of the gathered white youths. Albert Bigelow, a white Rider, stepped in between Lewis and his attackers, but his “erect posture and determined passivity—such an alien sight in a fistfight—did not keep the attackers from darting in to strike him on the head and body.”<sup>75</sup> The violence that day was intense, but it was limited and was quickly broken up by local police. Lewis and the other battered riders refused to press charges as they had previously determined doing so would be out of line with the practice of nonviolence.<sup>76</sup> This refusal to seek even judicial restitution exemplified the Riders' belief in the nonviolent principle of personal redemption,

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<sup>75</sup> Taylor Branch, *Parting the Water*, 415.

<sup>76</sup> The core of their motivation is unclear, but I believe it to be similar to King's refusal of armed guards outside of his hotel room in Memphis shortly before he was assassinated. That is, by proclaiming oneself in opposition to violence one must be accepting of the consequences therein without the recourse of retribution in any form.



meaning they believed nonviolence could redeem one person at a time through a transfer of suffering in a way that the court system could not. As such, protesters were trained in specific techniques for the implementation of nonviolent theory. These techniques revolved around a sense of connection to the attacker. James Lawson, one of the leaders and progenitors of the policies and practical applications of nonviolence in the southern movement “recommended that resisters try to maintain eye-contact with those beating them.”<sup>77</sup> If connection could be achieved the idea was that it would force the attacker and the victim to recognize their common humanity. The passivity of the victim was intended to provoke a moment of doubt in the mind of the attacker. There are stories of attackers who ostensibly sensed that connection and were made uncomfortable by their victim's refusal to fight back, but there are many more examples, like that of Bigelow, of attackers who took advantage of that same refusal by inflicting more violence. In practice, this attempt at connection was highly dangerous to many bodies. By implication, seeking connection through violence connotes a connection to the violence itself, and many nonviolent practitioners came to experience odd sense of comfort within the experience of violence.

It is important to reclarify the differences between various forms of violence, as examples of three of these forms are discussed throughout this chapter. The first is the remote, impersonal violence discussed in the previous section on the bus boycott. This form of violence is not inflicted directly at a body in response to a nonviolent protest or action, but is instead directed more randomly and functions as a form of terrorism. Home and church bombings are examples of indirect violence. The second is direct, personal violence as experienced by the Freedom Riders. These two are easy to differentiate as they are carried out upon something tangible, like a body or a structure. The third is slightly more complicated as it happens within the mind and is carried out through tactics that invoke high levels of fear. It is essentially a form of mental terrorism. Mental terrorism functions as an inhibitor of action. It

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 260.

seeks to stop the protester from continuing due to a fear of violent retribution. Even a cursory knowledge of the historical record can lead one to assume that black people, especially those residing in the South, lived with the fear of violence on a daily basis and, whether conscious or not, the stress of that fear impacted almost all aspects of life. Martin Luther King wrote to President Kennedy in the wake of the Birmingham church bombing that killed four young girls, “the Negro feels that everywhere he goes, or if he remains stationary, he's in danger of some physical violence.”<sup>78</sup> King is clear that it is not participation in the Movement that is causing these feelings of danger, as they are felt even if one remains stationary or outside of Movement action, and there are many examples of Movement action leading to increased levels of random violence against all blacks, even those not directly involved. It is also true that blacks had been the targets of such violence for decades preceding any organized civil rights activity. The third form of violence, mental violence, sought to exploit the knowledge of prior violence. As violence escalated over the course of the Movement, it became apparent that the increased threat of violence that the Movement engendered was not empty. The civil disobedience campaign in Montgomery elicited numerous occurrences of remote violence that heightened the stress on participants through an increase of mental violence. We can see this in the breakdowns that begin to occur after the logistical stress of daily movement around the city had been alleviated. The stress felt by black Montgomerians actually increased with their success. To explain this we must expand our definition of experienced violence to the cases wherein a person was not a direct target of violence but an indirect one, in this case through their church or the home of their pastor. In some ways, the mental violence inflicted by remote violence is harder for people to reconcile because of the feelings of helplessness it creates. The previous section briefly discussed how religion helped some Movement workers cope with feelings of helplessness in the wake of remote violence. Religion as a mechanism for the release of the stress of indirect violence makes sense, as it allows one to surrender feelings of

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78 Ibid., 894.

helplessness to a larger power, one that is directed toward justice. Direct violence, as experienced by the Freedom Riders, opened the physical body to the hatred of others. Physical violence in any form is traumatic, but what sets apart violence inflicted upon a nonviolent body is the prior knowledge and anticipation of the violence to be enacted. Nonviolent protest, like walking in to demand service in a segregated bus terminal, requires planning. Its success depends upon perseverance through the tremendous fear felt by the protester. For many, the fear of violence is more traumatic than the actual experience. In a 1985 interview with Taylor Branch, Bernard Lee remembered the story of an Episcopal priest from the early days of the campaign in Montgomery: "Firemen had pointed a hose at the priest to move him back, and although they did not turn on the water, something in the sight made the priest snap. His mind went somewhere and never came back."<sup>79</sup> It follows that as remote violence became more direct and personal the anticipation of that violence created an even greater level of stress upon the mind. The Riders experienced that increase in stress after their experience at Rock Hill. They had to deal not only with fear but also with the exhaustion that the constant presence of that fear generated.

The Riders had been warned that they would find the most serious threats to their safe passage in Alabama and that proved to be true. One of their buses was met by a mob in the town of Anniston and was subsequently firebombed in its attempt to flee. The other was met by an angry, weapon-wielding mob in Birmingham, and many of the Riders were severely beaten. James Peck,<sup>80</sup> whose head wounds required 53 stitches, sustained the most extreme injuries.<sup>81</sup> Separated from each other in their attempts to escape, all of the Riders, including those stranded in Anniston, were eventually reunited in Birmingham. They were feted at a mass meeting led by local Pastor and civil rights leader Fred Shuttlesworth. At the meeting Shuttlesworth supported the notion of a direct correlation between

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79 Ibid., 551.

80 Peck was the white son of wealthy parents. He had a long history of pacifist action prior to the Freedom Rides. His relationship with CORE ended in 1965 when, according to him, "they kicked me out because of skin color".  
<http://digital.wustl.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=eop;cc=eop;rgn=main;view=text;idno=pec0015.0499.082>

81 Ibid., 423.

individual suffering and eventuality of racial equality. He declared to those gathered, “When white men and black men are beaten up together...the day is coming when they will walk together.”<sup>82</sup> This echoed the sense of shared suffering that bonded blacks and whites in Montgomery, but the definition of suffering had been elevated from participation in a boycott to being a victim of violence. This substantial shift happened along a progression from boycott to sit-in to jail-in that made fifty-three stitches seem like simply one more small step.

Alabama's Governor refused to guarantee the safety of the Riders if they continued, and after a tension filled next day at the Birmingham bus station surrounded by reporters and police officers waiting in vain for a driver willing to take on the risk of transporting them to Montgomery, they decided to abandon the buses, opting to instead fly to New Orleans. Having already garnered more national attention than they had anticipated, the Riders determined that the acceptance of “[f]urther beatings would not accomplish anything.”<sup>83</sup> In addition to its seeming futility, the Riders were also, according to a White House aide sent down as a show of the President's support, “a pathetic huddle of casualties..., suffering as much from battle fatigue as from wounds.”<sup>84</sup> Their reception at the airport was no less traumatic as they were subjected to a series of bomb threats. Seemingly trapped in Birmingham, “some of them had [given] way to paranoid ranting and had to be restrained by their companions.”<sup>85</sup> Being the first to step into the fray, the CORE Riders had not known what to expect. James Peck, in an interview years later, responded to a question about the source of their courage by noting that although they were committed and understood that what they were undertaking was dangerous, “they had no idea that it would be as dangerous as it turned out to be.”<sup>86</sup> The CORE Freedom Riders, based on either the experience or the knowledge of previous Movement campaigns,

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82 Ibid., 423.

83 Ibid., 427.

84 Ibid., 429.

85 Ibid., 429.

86 <http://digital.wustl.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=eop;cc=eop;rgn=main;view=text;idno=pec0015.0499.082> accessed 03/12/2012.

did not anticipate a scenario involving the prospect of death. This prospect was more than they were willing, or capable, to handle. Their experience, however, triggered excitement among others involved in Movement work, and students representing the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) quickly marshaled themselves to continue the Rides.

The SNCC reinforcements, under the direction of Diane Nash, did not have the luxury of CORE's ignorance. Whereas participation in previous sit-in campaigns had forced them to reckon with the prospect of jail, the students who volunteered to continue the Freedom Rides were being forced to contend with the likelihood of extreme violence. Putting one's body on the line as a marker of Movement commitment had progressed to open requests to put one's life on the line. Nash countered the incredulity of Shuttlesworth's demand, "Young lady, do you know that the Freedom Riders were almost killed here?" by insisting the movement was about selflessness, not individuals. Irritated that his concern over personal safety was trumping the progression of Movement ideology, Nash snapped, "That's exactly why the ride must not be stopped. If they stop us with violence, the movement is dead."<sup>87</sup> Nash felt that to give in after the mob onslaught would be admitting the defeat of the overarching cause. Of course, their continuation was not conversely a declaration of victory. Continuation would not stop the violence, but would in all likelihood cause it to increase. And increase it did. Under pressure from the Federal Government, the bus carrying the substitute Riders left Birmingham with police escort. Montgomery police were to take over protective duty upon entrance to the city, but when the bus arrived at the terminal no police were present. The Riders were instead greeted by men "brandishing baseball bats, bottles, and lead pipes."<sup>88</sup> The violence was horrific. Taylor Branch described what happened to James Zwerg: "one of the men grabbed Zwerg's suitcase and smashed him in the face with it. Others slugged him to the ground, and when he was dazed beyond resistance, one man pinned Zwerg's head between his knees so that the others could take turns hitting

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87 Taylor Branch, *Parting the Water*, 430.

88 *Ibid.*, 445.

him. As they steadily knocked out his teeth, and his face and chest were streaming with blood, a few adults on the perimeter put their children on their shoulders to view the carnage.”<sup>89</sup>

Chaos and violence ensued until the police arrived ten minutes later. Committed to continue the Ride, Zwerg, who later left the Movement after a breakdown, told reporters from his hospital bed that they “were prepared to die,” the Riders sought protection from the Federal Government, trying to make good on Kennedy's promise to enforce civil rights statutes. Through a secret compromise between Governor Patterson of Alabama, Governor Barnett of Mississippi, and Attorney General Kennedy, it was agreed that the Riders would be afforded state police protection as far as Jackson, Mississippi, where they would be arrested. The agreement seemingly fulfilled the legal duty of all parties and maintained the Democratic Party's uncomfortable alliance with the Deep South, but left many disillusioned Riders sitting in Parchman Penitentiary wondering what had become of Kennedy's promises.

The absence of direct violence upon their arrest in Jackson triggered a form of jealousy among the Riders similar to that experienced by those in Montgomery not targeted by bombs. Its absence created a similar longing for an avenue to showcase their commitment to the Movement and to nonviolence. Branch writes that “for some of the prisoners survival was a letdown. Having absorbed so many mob beatings, or stories of them, and having passed so many angry crowds and imaginary ambushes, the Freedom Riders hyperventilated with religious fervor, in a sense, so that a few of them seemed to collapse of disappointment when they passed unscathed into custody.”<sup>90</sup> Violence had become so intertwined with the Movement that its absence created a sense of lack. Unbeknownst to the Riders, however, this jail experience at the notoriously violent Parchman Penitentiary would differ from previous ventures. It was to become one more marker on a timeline that would include the beating of Fannie Lou Hamer in Winona, the confinement of hundreds of children in Birmingham stockyards,

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 446.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 482.

and the imprisonment, again at Parchman, of over 400 Natchez activists in 1965 who would be “stripped, force-fed laxatives, and chilled by night fans.”<sup>91</sup> Upon the release of the Riders, King declared that, “We will wear you down by our capacity to suffer.”<sup>92</sup> The success of these sacrifices was yet to be determined, but it seemed increasingly clear who would be bearing the brunt of that suffering.

In this case, as in many others through the Movement, young people would determine the path forward through personal sacrifice. Students were the first civil rights protesters to elevate the tactic of civil disobedience to the purposeful provocation of direct personal confrontation through the sit-in movement. Taylor Branch writes of King's response to that provocation and the perceived courage of the students:

King embraced the students for taking the step that he had been toying with for the past three years—of seeking out a nonviolent confrontation with the segregation laws. He had traveled halfway around the world to wrestle with obscure Gandhian conundrums, and declared countless times that he was prepared to die for his beliefs, but he had never been quite willing to follow his thoughts outside the relative safety of oratory. With a simple schoolboyish deed, the students cut through the complex knots he had been trying to untie at the erudite Institutes on Nonviolence.<sup>93</sup>

Since the sit-ins, the Nashville SNCC students had been progressing up the ladder to full-scale bodily commitment to nonviolence and they were determined to use the new rung forged by the CORE Freedom Riders. Their acceptance of the mortal danger represented by the continuation of the Freedom Rides signified the completion of that commitment. Their actions, from the sit-ins to the Freedom Rides, catalyzed the rest of the Movement into a deeper physical relationship with nonviolent protest.

The consequences of a full bodily commitment to nonviolence, in terms of Movement transformation and individual mental health, were not lost on its practitioners. Septima Clark, who ran educational programs for future voters called Citizenship Schools, warned the SCLC of a “smoldering

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91 Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 347.

92 Taylor Branch, *Parting the Water*, 489.

93 *Ibid.*, 276.

hate” within the movement, especially among young volunteers who had overcome their fears of jail.<sup>94</sup> Clark may have been expressing concerns about where that hatred would find outlet, especially if the sacrifices of protesters did not bring about the fundamental change they were after. As people began to question the redemptive capacity of nonviolence they were forced into questions of how continued exposure to violence would alleviate the hate that concerned Clark. That concern foreshadows the cycle of the self-inflicted violence that will be the subject of the following chapter.

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<sup>94</sup> Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 191.



#### **IV. Chapter Three:**

##### **The Anatomy of Breakdown**

The last chapter sought to examine how individual commitment to the Movement was forged and how the practice of nonviolence became rooted. This chapter will explore the consequences of those commitments and practices as experienced through breakdown. It considers three distinct triggers for the experience of breakdown: the long-term exposure to various forms of physical violence, a growing disillusionment toward the practice of nonviolence in the face of increasingly random and severe violence, and the complexities of forced inter-racial cooperation over the course of Freedom Summer. I look primarily at two direct sources, the letters of white Freedom Summer volunteers and Anne Moody's memoir, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. Close readings of these materials with an eye toward emotional stress help elucidate both personal and organizational breakdown. I will focus primarily upon the years 1963 and 1964, as I believe these to be the years of transition from a devotion to nonviolence toward a forced reconciliation with its limitations. Breakdown was both an example of those limitations as well as a vehicle of transformation, as those who actually experienced instances of breakdown often shed their adherence to nonviolence. Anne Moody is an excellent illustration of this and her experience is discussed in more depth later in the chapter. The heavy instances of violence suffered by Movement members during these years make the preponderance of breakdown not surprising, but I posit that violence was not the only trigger. The occurrences of severe and increasingly random acts of direct and indirect violence enacted both upon and around Movement members forced many to question both the efficacy and the safety of the practice of nonviolence. These questions

compelled many activists to briefly reside in the liminal space between a commitment to nonviolent action and a belief in the necessity for violence. For some, that violence was of a defensive nature, but for others their extended history of experienced violence gave vent to the desire for retributive violence. These people essentially existed for a time in the space between King and Fanon's philosophies. I argue this liminal space also triggered breakdown. Violence and nonviolence tend to be viewed on opposite ends of a spectrum, divided by a huge swath of middle ground. In fact, violent and nonviolent actions, as they relate to social movements, are divided by a very fine line.<sup>95</sup> As I have demonstrated in previous chapters the consistent presence of violence within the practice of nonviolence blurs the line between the former and the latter. The lives of Movement members, like Anne Moody and Stokely Carmichael, highlight that trying to navigate along that line is exhausting, leading, for some, to personal recrimination and acts of self-inflicted violence. The letters of some Freedom Summer volunteers, who were thrust into places both starkly new and dangerous are rife with that exhaustion. Their letters show them grappling with both their overwhelming fears of violence and frustration with the pace of change. Another trigger of breakdown during this time was heightened inter-racial contact and cooperation forced by the Summer Project. Both races experienced difficulties in this new alliance, and these difficulties reached a head in the following year with the breakdown of Robert Moses and the fragmentation of SNCC. I examine each of these three breakdown triggers throughout the course of this chapter.

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95 I believe it is a line Arendt tried to navigate theoretically in *On Violence* without success.

## Anne Moody

*They have a saying for people who fall down as I do:  
If a person is hit hard enough, even if she stands, she falls.  
Don't you think that's perceptive? --Meridian to Truman Held<sup>96</sup>*

Published in 1968, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* recounts Moody's childhood and Movement experience up to Freedom Summer and the arrival of white volunteers. This work differs from many civil rights memoirs in that it provides a direct, largely contemporaneous lens into the action it is describing, instead of reflecting from a temporal or spatial distance. Not yet knowing how things would work out, Moody was writing without the burden of interpretation. She is clearly writing for and of herself, and it often seems that Moody is writing because she must.<sup>97</sup> This close connection between experience and communication may explain Moody's candidness when writing of her frustrations with the Movement and her experiences with what she termed "cracking up." This directness also alleviated her from the burden of writing as a Movement representative, which in later years required one to clearly delineate oneself with either nonviolence or the sentiments behind the self-defensive and racial exclusionary positions represented by black power. In Moody's memoir, nonviolence and its practice has not yet been placed on the pedestal it has occupied since the advent of the black power movement. This lofty position precludes it from critical analysis and prevents it from being seen clearly. Moody's perspective is important because it allows us to see nonviolence in action and gets us closer to understanding what it felt like to be an activist in one of the Movement's bleakest periods.

The same visceral quality of experience is communicated by many of the Freedom Summer

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<sup>96</sup> Alice Walker, *Meridian*, 26.

<sup>97</sup> Many readers have commented on Moody's perceived narcissism, but, in a way, this quality lends to Moody's work a kind of experiential honesty that is lacking in other civil right's memoirs. Moody's perspective is utterly selfish and, at times, self-aggrandizing, but that bravado can be interpreted as another self-protective mechanism. If one "reads through" Moody's self-absorption one finds the raw vulnerability that the violence of civil right's activism often exposed. However, as with all memoirs, it is vital that the reader maintain an awareness that the events described and motivations attributed are Moody's alone.

volunteers. Unlike Moody, however, many of their letters are fraught with a sense of larger responsibility. Northern whites that traveled south were not acting to directly improve the quality of their own lives, but out of a sense of idealism grounded in a belief in fundamental equality. Their letters provide an interesting access point into what happens when ideals come face to face with reality. In 1964, Mississippi, those realities included violence that could result in severe injury or death and a Movement struggling to coordinate its disparate elements. Chief among SNCC's internal complications were issues of class and race, as theoretical racial cooperation was much easier to implement than its actuality. Themes of violence, race, and class run throughout the letters I examined. Both *Coming of Age* and the volunteer letters help shift the discussion away from the theoretical and into the experiential.

By the time Summer Project volunteers arrived, SNCC had local activists in many of Mississippi's counties, doing what Robert Moses described as the “nasty job” of attempting to register new voters. Anne Moody was one such worker. A Centreville, Mississippi native, Moody, unlike many of the SNCC workers, had grown up within the confines of Jim Crow. From a young age she understood the inherent danger of being black in the South, and by fifteen she had already come to a recognition of her own emotional limits under the stress of that constant danger. Having fled to Baton Rouge for the summer, she writes of her return, “‘Before I get home,’ I thought, ‘I’ll have a nervous breakdown in the street. I’ll surely get sick if anything like the Taplin burning happens this year. I’ll just crack up if I have to push anything else to the back of my mind.’”<sup>9899</sup> It is clear that it is not the violence that is causing Moody to fear a impending breakdown, but the frustration with the fact that she and her community are being forced to swallow the violence without any access to redress. Moody's frustration finds an outlet in lashing out against a black community she saw as weak. This burgeoning

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98 Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, 144.

99 The Taplins were a family of nine who burned to death in their Centreville home, most likely the result of arson. Moody believed their house was burned in a case of mistaken identity, and that the arsonists really meant to burn the neighbor's home that was targeted because he was suspected of having a consensual sexual relationship with a white woman.

hatred coincides with the recognition of her own mental fragility. She wrote of her response to the Emmett Till murder:

I was fifteen years old when I began to hate people. I hated the white men who had murdered Emmett Till and I hated all the other whites who were responsible for the countless murders Mrs. Rice had told me about and those I vaguely remembered from childhood. But I also hated Negroes. I hated them for not standing up and doing something about the murders. In fact, I think I had a stronger resentment toward Negroes for letting the whites kill them than toward the whites. Anyway, it was at this stage in my life that I began to look upon Negro men as cowards.<sup>100</sup>

This community castigation, which can be seen as a form of self-injury, is a common theme throughout Civil Rights writings. This phenomenon elicits many questions. On the surface it forces an inquiry into responsibility and communicates a sense of frustration with those who were unwilling to put themselves on the line for the Movement. Yet, if one looks beyond that surface frustration, it leads one to question the source of that unwillingness. For many, of course, that reluctance was grounded in a fear of violence, but in others, like Moody, one finds a deep fear of the futility of any kind of action and a hesitation about what a violent path to change would entail. It is not that Moody was unafraid of possible violence. She had just concluded, as Vernon Johns had previously concluded, that her integrity was worth more than her body. She writes, “I thought of waging a war in protest against the killings all by myself, if no one else would help. I wanted to take my savings, buy a machine gun, and walk down the main street in Centreville cutting down every white person I saw. Then, realizing that I didn't have it in me to kill, I slowly began to escape within myself again.”<sup>101</sup> She describes “pangs of anger [that] hit me like lightning, paralyzing me emotionally.”<sup>102</sup> The sense of paralysis Moody felt when her emotions overwhelmed her ability to act circles throughout her memoir. Nonviolence offered her a seemingly viable avenue for action that would not necessitate the use of violence. It is ironic that the

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100 Ibid., 129.

101 Ibid., 187.

102 Ibid.

path that nonviolence created would lead many, Moody included, to embrace the violence they sought to avoid.

The Movement also provided Moody with a sense of purpose. She wrote that in the Movement she had found “something outside myself that gave meaning to my life.”<sup>103</sup> Like many of the young volunteers, the Movement became her family, in many ways supplanting her own. At times, this break from what she perceived as the weakness of her family, gave Moody a sense of power. Using her activism as evidence of her greater internal strength, Moody felt herself to be superior to the rest of her community and she used that newly found strength as a tool to help propel her into situations of danger. When her mother writes begging her not to participate in a sit-in or attend the NAACP convention, Moody writes,

Mama's letter made me mad. I had to live my life as I saw fit. I had made that decision when I left home. But it hurt to have my family prove to me how scared they were. It hurt me more than anything else—I knew the whites had already started the threats and intimidations. I was the first Negro from my hometown who had openly demonstrated...When Negroes threatened to do anything in Centreville, they were either shot...or run out of town...Now I knew I could never go to Centreville safely again. I kept telling myself that I didn't really care too much about going home, that it was more important to me to go to the convention.<sup>104</sup>

Moody knew the fears of her family were well grounded, that the threats of whites were not idle, but being asked to shoulder both the worries for her own safety and those of her family was more than she could handle. In order to move forward, Moody had to refuse. This became more difficult as Moody's Movement activity caused her family's fears to shift from concerns over her safety to concerns over their own.

I got a letter from Adline in the same envelope. She told me what Mama hadn't mentioned—that Junior had been cornered by a group of white boys and was about to be lynched, when one of his friends came along in a car 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

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103 Ibid., 263.

104 Ibid., 262, 268.

sleep, for fear of night riders. They were all scared to death. My sister ended the letter by cursing me out. She said I was trying to get every Negro in Centreville murdered.<sup>105</sup>

Adline's letter is another example of the black community blaming itself for the violence that is being inflicted upon it. While Adline's response is, in part, a response to an increasing sense of the loss of control, Movement workers, like Moody and many others, really were increasing their family's exposure to retributive violence. Still, cutting her ties with the Movement may have decreased the pressure upon her family, but it would not have removed it. Violence and the threat of violence were daily stressors. One could take actions to either increase or decrease one's risk, but one could not escape it altogether. Placing the entire burden of risk upon Moody, however, affords Adline an outlet of release, a focal point for her frustration. Many Movement members became that focal point for families and their communities. For Moody this was deeply painful. She writes, "The others knew that I couldn't go home again, but no one knew of the agony I was going through because of it."<sup>106</sup> Being forced to cut ties to her family, however, caused Moody to deepen her commitment to the Movement, now representative of both her family and her purpose in life. This rejection of prior identity and increasing dependence upon the Movement for self-definition would lead to problems after Moody's breakdown and she tried to re-enter "normal" life.

### **Violence, Stress, and Breakdown**

For a time, however, Moody devoted herself entirely to SNCC and moved to Canton, Mississippi, one of the more dangerous areas in the state, to organize locals for Movement activity. It was here that things really began to fall apart. After a year of activity she wrote of the 1963 March on Washington, "Martin Luther King went on and on talking about his dream. I sat there thinking that in

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105 Ibid., 275.

106 Ibid., 314.

Canton we never had time to sleep, much less dream.”<sup>107</sup> Being in Washington “was the first time in well over a year I had been away from my work with the Movement and away from Mississippi. I had really forgotten what it was like to be out of an atmosphere of fear and threats.”<sup>108</sup> The Movement had lost its ability to enliven and invigorate Moody, and she found herself exhausted and stressed to the point of breaking. It was during this time of frayed nerves, less than a month after she returned from Washington, that a bomb went off in a Birmingham church, killing four young girls. The effect on Moody, already struggling to hold it together, was devastating. Moody had been living under the stress of direct violence for over a year, but it was this instance of deadly remote violence that would trigger a cycle of breakdowns. As discussed previously, remote violence created a sense of helplessness that could cause a person to experience extreme anxiety. It destroyed the sense of control that nonviolent activists relied upon for strength. For all of the chaos created by direct violence in response to nonviolent protest, it existed within certain confines. It was usually faced within a group and there was a certain amount of mental preparation that preceded its enactment.<sup>109</sup> Remote violence is a form of terrorism for which there can be no preparation. Ong, Fuller-Rowell, and Burrow's “Racial Discrimination and the Stress Process” examined the differing mental health consequences of various forms of stress. Based on prior research into the positive association between racial discrimination and mental illness, the authors note that “[d]ata from nationally representative samples have revealed that the links between lifetime discrimination and a variety of mental health outcomes, such as major depression and generalized anxiety disorder, are comparable in magnitude to those found in studies of

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107 Ibid., 307.

108 Ibid., 307.

109 This is especially true for large-scale marches and other forms of group protest, like picket lines, etc. The kind of work that Moody and other Mississippi organizers were undertaking, however, differed in its scale. There were around twenty SNCC workers scattered throughout the state in various Freedom Houses and while their goals were similar, their efforts were not coordinated. Instead of building toward one grand-scale campaign, organizers were working and living within communities. This daily contact with potential violence made everyday an exhaustive chore of mental preparation.



the effects of traumatic life events, such as sexual assault and combat exposure.”<sup>110</sup> Their research indicates that daily occurrences of stress “account for a greater portion of the variance in psychological distress” than the experience of chronic stressors, suggesting that when coping with chronic discrimination it becomes all the more imperative to avoid daily stressors.<sup>111</sup> Chronic stress can be defined as a stressor that cannot be escaped to the point that it becomes incorporated into the mental life of the individual. For the African Americans in this particular study, chronic stress is attributable to racism.

Given the documented robust associations between racial discrimination and psychological distress, some have suggested that racism represents a distinct source of chronic life stress for African Americans (Pieterse & Carter, 2007). Indeed, there are compelling reasons to believe that chronic exposure to racial discrimination can have wide-ranging effects on the mental and physical health of African Americans. For example, African Americans who are chronically exposed to racial discrimination are more likely to report greater numbers of stressful life events (Harrell, 2000; Pieterse & Carter, 2007); to appraise stressful situations as threats rather than challenges (Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone, & Zimmerman, 2003; Thompson, 2006); and to engage in maladaptive coping behaviors, thus increasing the probability of negative affective responses (Martin, Tuch, & Roman, 2003; Utsey et al., 2000).<sup>112</sup>

Chronic stress is a constant, it is assumed by the individual to the point where its lack would be more noticeable than its presence. Published in 2009 and citing contemporaneous instances of racism leading to a condition of chronic stress, it would not be difficult to assume that the conditions under which Moody was raised would lead to a high level of chronic stress.<sup>113</sup> Daily, or what I term singular stressors, are occurrences that accumulate and increase the burden of chronic stress. This study posits that it is those singular stressors that lead to feelings of distress, more so than the chronic condition.

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110 Ong, Fuller-Rowell, and Burrow, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 1260. (citing Kessler, Davis, & Kendler, 1997; Kessler et al., 1999)

111 Ibid., 1262.

112 Ibid., 1260.

113 This is in no way an attempt to detract from the reality of racism in contemporary society. One does not need this study to understand that racism is real and has decidedly real consequences, although it does help to illuminate variations upon those consequences. I am simply noting that the racism experienced in the Jim Crow South represented a more extreme and overt form of discrimination. It also carried a potential for violence that while not completely eradicated (one thinks immediately of the current Trayvon Martin case), has inarguably decreased.

Translated to race, this means that it is the singular instances of racial discrimination and not the knowledge of its existence that can trigger depression or anger or anxiety. I argue that Moody lived under chronic racial stress, exacerbated by the daily, or singular, stressors of impending violence and an inconsistent support network (both familial and organizational). This combination of conditions—chronic stress coupled with singular stressors—worked to reinforce chronic stress. Thus, as singular stressors, instances of remote violence easily tipped the scales toward breakdown. For Moody, the Birmingham bombing was the straw that caused the break. Of that day she wrote, “My mind was so warped and confused I couldn't think clearly...It made me question everything I had ever believed in.”<sup>114</sup> Considering their close alliance it is not surprising that the primary targets of her questioning were God and nonviolence. As discussed in the previous chapter, they were two of the primary pillars of the Movement and had become, for many, indistinguishable from each other. On hearing the news report, Moody rushed out of the house, tears streaming down her face: “I rushed out of the house and started walking aimlessly. I ran up a hill where there were trees. I found myself in a graveyard I didn't even know was there. I sat looking up through the trees, trying to communicate with God.”<sup>115</sup> As she addressed Him her sadness became anger, and she declared, “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. You know something else, God? Nonviolence is out. I have a good idea Martin Luther King is talking to you, too. If he is, tell him that nonviolence has served its purpose...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've had enough examples. I think we are overdoing it.”<sup>116</sup> She continued, “I'm through with you. Yes, I am going to put you down. From now on, I am my own God.”<sup>117</sup> For Moody, the Birmingham bombing was not only a human tragedy. It forced within her a reckoning of her own limits with violence. Movement work and the tactic of

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114 Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, 320.

115 *Ibid.*, 317.

116 *Ibid.*, 318-9.

117 *Ibid.*, 318.

nonviolence had been a way to engage with the violence that had surrounded her life. As noted earlier, it was pushing instances of violence and discrimination to the back of the mind that made her feel as if she were “cracking-up.” The Birmingham bombing forced Moody to account for the violence that her body and the bodies of others had suffered in the name of nonviolence. Such limited progress in the face of such extreme violence caused Moody to take the faith she had put into nonviolence into her own hands.

Individual responses to violence, either direct or remote, varied, but for some the limitations of nonviolence proved too much. Retributive violence could not be directed towards the originators of the violence, so often times it turned inwards, either upon the self or upon the community. Martin Luther King's response to the Birmingham bombings was, in part, to blame black people not involved with the Movement. He proclaimed, “What murdered these four girls? The apathy and complacency of many Negroes who will sit down on their stools and do nothing and not engage in creative protest to get rid of this evil.”<sup>118</sup> Blaming the community itself for the murder of its own children seems harsh, but at the time the unlikelihood that the real perpetrators would be held accountable meant that the only way to release the pressure their violence had created was to re-situate the blame. This is a form of self-inflicted violence. The discovery of the lynched bodies of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner, three SNCC volunteers who had disappeared months prior and, it was assumed, murdered, had a similar psychological effect on some. Taylor Branch writes that “angry vindication whipped through the mass meeting in Greenwood, which bristled against assorted foes and Uncle Toms who had doubted the movement. 'From now on,' shouted Stokely Carmichael, 'we're gonna check on niggers who ain't doin' right.’”<sup>119</sup> With another viable outlet for his frustration, Carmichael looked toward those who were not onboard with the Movement, as if their lack of participation was contributing to the violence. Local blacks began arguing for the need of armed self-defense. Carmichael, sympathetic to their case, called

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118 Taylor Branch, *Parting the Water*, 891.

119 Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 436.

Moses to let him know of the change to the Greenwood policy of nonviolence. Moses refused to give his approval and Carmichael reluctantly supported him. Carmichael caused himself to be sent to jail the following day as, what Branch termed “a compromise between rebellion and the summer project’s enveloping restraint.”<sup>120</sup> Branch may be correct, but this is also a form of self-punishment. It represented a need to inflict pain, and the inability to lash out against the real perpetrators led to self-infliction. Ironically, the strictures of nonviolence led Carmichael to feel out of control, and being sent to jail was a mechanism of reasserting that control. This is an excellent example of the way violence cycles. It cannot simply dissipate; it must seek an outlet. James Bevel, one of the primary advocates for nonviolence and a veteran of many campaigns, struck his wife, Diane Nash, in the face during an argument.<sup>121</sup> Again, a body can only accumulate so much violence before it breaks. For Carmichael the accumulated violence spilled over onto himself, for Bevel, onto his family, but each of those violent actions were precipitated by violence. King advocated nonviolence because he believed violence simply bred more violence. These two examples bear that out. However, nonviolence does not mean a stoppage of violence; in many ways it means an increase. In nonviolent practice that rebounded violence finds the only safe outlet allowed to it: the community, the family, and the self.

Unlike Greenwood, guns were permitted into the Canton Freedom House for the purposes of protection after the Birmingham bombing, but Moody continued to deteriorate. She wrote, “It had gotten to the point where my weight was going down to nothing. I was just skin and bones. My nerves were torn to shreds and I was losing my hair.”<sup>122</sup> She gave in to feelings of hopelessness and decided that in order to maintain her sanity she needed to leave, at least for a time. This recognition did not bring relief, but feelings of guilt. “I was not sure myself that I was not leaving for good—and this really made me feel bad. I had gotten so tired of seeing people suffering, naked and hungry. It just seemed as

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120 Ibid.

121 Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 13.

122 Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, 328.

if there was no end to it, or at least 'the Vote' was not the way to end it.”<sup>123</sup> She spent time with family in New Orleans. She found work and tried to regain a sense of normalcy, but she found this impossible. She could no longer connect with people on a common level and her attempts to do so led to additional feeling of breakdown. “I...realized that coming back to New Orleans was even worse than staying in Canton. Here I had nothing in common with the people around me except the color of my skin. Just to keep my sanity, I knew I had to get involved with the Movement again.”<sup>124</sup> Having sacrificed her family, her hometown, her time and energy, and her body, Moody had little left to give the larger world. She could no longer relate to those not initiated into Movement activity. In a Movement based upon what King called the “power of the capacity to endure” and a belief that there is “nothing more majestic and sublime” than submitting to suffering in the name of a righteous cause, Anne Moody is but one example what that meant in human terms. She provides an in depth and highly personal accounting of what stretching people's capacity to suffer looks like.

### 1964 Summer Project

*Alton Wayne Roberts exploded past more hesitant Klansmen  
to yank Schwerner from the cruiser next to a ditch.  
He jammed a pistol into his ribs and screamed from a face of animal hatred, “Are you that nigger lover?”  
Schwerner had an instant reply, “Sir, I know just how you feel.”  
--Mickey Schwerner's last words as recounted by Klan witnesses<sup>125</sup>*

The goal of the 1964 Freedom Summer was to disrupt the seemingly intractable monolithic power structure of Mississippi government through the education and registration of new black voters.<sup>126</sup> Robert Moses, the architect of the project, feared that without the outlet of a political solution the violence inflicted upon African Americans would eventually be returned with disastrous

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123 Ibid., 343.

124 Ibid., 355.

125 Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 509.

126 While much of SNCC's energy was directed toward city and county voter registration, uncooperative registrars largely squashed those efforts. In an attempt to harness the political energy being created through Freedom Schools and other educational avenues, SNCC created the Freedom Democratic Party and held “mock” elections as an outlet and educational tool, and, in the words of Bob Moses, “To dispel, at least, once and for all, the argument that the reason Negroes don't register is because they're apathetic.” (from his Stanford speech) Many of the Freedom Summer volunteers worked within this capacity during their stay in Mississippi.

consequences. Furthermore, changing segregationist policies and laws would be moot without their implementation by cooperative local governments. There were many challenges to registering new voters. The most primary complication, of course, was overcoming the obstructions, both violent and political, of local officials. Before that obstacle could be tackled SNCC organizers had to convince locals to rise above their fear of challenging the white power structure. In the words of Julian Bond, SNCC “fought white terror and helped create a willingness to risk danger in order to register to vote.”<sup>127</sup> SNCC needed volunteers to staff Freedom Houses and help canvas communities for support. After much heated debate the organization agreed to seek those volunteers on the largely white college campuses outside of the South. One of the benefits of bringing in help from outside the South was to nationalize the civil rights struggle. In his Stanford University speech Bob Moses told potential volunteers,

...what's at stake is something deeper. It's a question of whether, in this country, we can find people who are committed. Who know, who care, who are willing to sacrifice. Who are willing to say that they want to do their share. Who are willing and able, perhaps, to look on this as...the country's business, not just as [the] Negro's problem. Who are willing to look on this, not as something...that just has to be done in Mississippi, but something that will be carried back, and will have to be done in places all across this country, if we're really going to get at the bottom of some of these problems.<sup>128</sup>

On a more practical level, volunteers from around the country would spark more media attention: volunteers from California would create interest in Californian newspapers, as those from Ohio would in Ohioan papers, etc. In addition, SNCC understood that extending the threat of violence to young white people would most certainly garner more media attention than the constant threats they faced daily. Moses wrote of the decision, “Bring the nation's children, and the parent's will have to focus on

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127 Elizabeth Sutherland Martinez, *Letters from Mississippi: Personal Reports from Civil Rights Volunteers of the 1964 Freedom Summer* (Brookline: Zephyr Press, 2002), vi.

128 Bob Moses, Stanford University speech, <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/blackspeech/bmoses.html>, (accessed February 12, 2012).

Mississippi.”<sup>129</sup>

The potential for serious danger was not hidden from the volunteers, but the nebulousness of the anticipatory fear they experienced as they readied themselves for the journey south at a nonviolence training camp in Oxford, Ohio, differed from the fear felt by Moody and other Movement veterans that was grounded in experience. One volunteer wrote to Mommy, Daddy, and Toni, “We've been told over and over again of the brutality and beating and murder. Hank says none of us really believe it inside, we probably each feel we have a lucky charm which will give us a halo of sanctity. I think we do.”<sup>130</sup> The volunteers were not victims of chronic stress. Most had come from privileged backgrounds and had little experience with poverty or violence. They came largely because they believed in the ideal of equality, and they believed that ideals must be put into action to have any meaning. One wrote that her convictions “were worthless in themselves. In fact, if they don't become actions, they are worse than worthless—they become forces of evil in themselves. You can't run away from broadened consciousness.”<sup>131</sup> Many admitted that their altruism was essentially a form of selfishness, that they were seeking personal emotional enrichment or spiritual growth. Far from denigrating the courage or convictions of many of the volunteers, volunteers' honesty about their motivation makes their letters more compelling. They were about to enter into completely new territory in which they would face critical danger. Venturing into the South would separate them physically from their families and friends, and for many the journey required an ideological break from those same people. They were forced to grapple with their own mortality, and, out of necessity, most did so in the realm of theory.

Bret wrote,

“If we realize safety is a myth, aren't we in a sense 'saved' by that

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129 Robert P. Moses, *Radical Equations — Civil Rights from Mississippi to the Algebra Project* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 3.

130 Elizabeth Sutherland Martinez, *Letters From Mississippi*, 34.

131 *Ibid.*, 27.

knowledge and acceptance of death?...I began to realize that it is a war that I will enter and the enemy is even lunatic, even driven into frenzy by his fear. But I also learn that the enemy is very much myself and all of America and, perhaps, of humanity...”<sup>132</sup>

With no prior tangible connection to the “enemy,” Bret localizes him within himself. The proximity to danger shifted when three volunteers who had left Oxford only one week prior went missing. Barbara wrote home to her parents,

I cannot begin to tell you how it feels to be here...knowing about them. You feel like it couldn't be real. No—uh-huh. They were in Oxford only a few days before—they couldn't already be in such danger. But then all of a sudden—the disbelief is countered by a vivid picture of reality—that it could be you. And there's this weird feeling of guilt because it wasn't you—and here you are on a beautiful campus trying so hard to understand just what danger is anyway.<sup>133</sup>

The missing workers actualized the danger for the volunteers. The uncertainty surrounding their disappearance, however, made difficult the translation of that danger to the self. The focus was instead placed upon how one should react to the violence that, one could now imagine, was inevitable. In workshops, students were instructed by James Lawson in nonviolent techniques and schooled in its overarching philosophy of connection. For some, this education contributed to the “halo of sanctity.”

Part of [that contribution] is the nonviolent philosophy, especially the part I now understand, which I didn't before. That is the part that teaches you to love your 'enemy,' how to feel true compassion for the cop who is using a cattle-prod on you, how to understand him as a human being caught in a predicament not of his own making. I think...I know how.<sup>134</sup>

Others felt differently and found an ally in Stokely Carmichael, who also spoke at the workshops. Bill wrote, “What he is saying is that love and moral confrontations have no place in front of a brute who beats you till you cry nigger. My feelings, and I think these are common, is that nonviolence is a perverted way of life, but a necessary tactic and technique. It is harmful to the human person to feel

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132 Ibid., 21.

133 I bid., 31.

134 Ibid., 34.



that he must love a man who has a foot in his face.”<sup>135</sup> The letters of the students give us a telescoped lens into the debates going on in SNCC at the time. Nonviolence was its overarching strategy, but seeds of frustration with that strategy among those in the organization were already being sown.

Once volunteers arrived in Mississippi their ideals came face to face with grim reality. Theoretical discussions about violence and poverty and race had to contend with real people in real communities. Many struggled to cope. “Most of us are from schools and families where sensitivity to pain is a very important virtue. I have made here the discovery that sensitivity is one of those virtues that depends upon the certainty of food and roof...Here, one who is sensitive to pain will soon be reduced to a mass of wounds and hurts.”<sup>136</sup> Others were frustrated by the enormity the problem and what they perceived be the futility of their contribution. They had come south to make a difference, but that difference was hard to discern.

The depressing reality that surrounds me has been gnawing at my emotions until now I am completely frustrated. Living conditions here are so terrible, the Negroes are so completely oppressed, so completely without hope, that I want to change it all NOW. I mean this as sincerely as I can. Running a freedom school is an absurd waste of time. I don't want to sit around in a classroom; I want to go out and throw a few office buildings, not to injure people but to shake them up, destroy their stolen property, convince them we mean business...I really can't stand it here.<sup>137</sup>

As this letter exhibits, volunteers' frustration longed to find physical outlet, and many found themselves in communities struggling to walk the hazy line between justified violence and the philosophy of nonviolent connection they had learned in Oxford. Further, volunteers contended that

[SNCC] places a large order when it asks people to meet this kind of violence with non-violence. So far in Greenwood, they have been able to make their point—that non-violence is tactically necessary in demonstrations and wherever the ends of 'the movement' are concerned. But SNCC had also, I think, encouraged self protection, and it has proven difficult to discern where self-defense and 'defense of the community' are

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135 Ibid., 35.  
136 Ibid., 65.  
137 Ibid., 120.

distinct from each other.<sup>138</sup>

This distinction was becoming increasingly hard to discern as random violence continued to escalate.

“Violence hangs overhead like dead air—it hangs there and maybe it will fall and maybe it won't...something is in the air, something is going to happen, somewhere, sometime, to someone...”<sup>139</sup>

This sense of dread addresses the discussion of anticipatory fear provoking a feeling of the need for self-defense, and the questions of who draws the line and where.

### **Inter-racial Cooperation and Breakdown**

One of the most significant ramifications of the Summer Project was how it affected people's feelings on the feasibility of inter-racial cooperation. Contemporary research into the psychological consequences of inter-racial contact highlights the stressful nature of such contact. Specifically, studies have shown that stress can impair cognitive function in both blacks and whites.<sup>140</sup> Essentially, these studies posit that the human mind has a finite reservoir of resources on which to draw. If those resources are depleted during the completion of one task, they will not be immediately available for a successive task that requires similar resources. In whites, what is drawing on cognitive resources during an interracial interaction is a self-regulatory mechanism that activates in response to a fear of being perceived as prejudiced. If self-regulation does, in fact, draw on executive resources it would follow that the more an individual felt the need to self-regulate, the more their cognitive functioning would be subsequently impaired. For blacks, their level of impairment depends upon their individual level of outgroup bias, the outgroup in this case being white. Research supports the idea that bias against whites is due, in part, from the expectation that whites themselves are prejudiced against blacks. In other words, blacks with the highest levels of negative white bias are the most concerned about being the

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138 Ibid., 214.

139 Ibid., 171.

140 Richeson and Trawalter, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 935. Richeson, Trawalter, and Shelton. *Social Cognition*. 339.

target of white directed negative black bias.<sup>141</sup> When interracial interaction does occur, blacks with the highest levels of automatic bias “often engage in compensatory strategies designed to facilitate smooth interactions.”<sup>142</sup> These strategies include, but are not limited to, “behav[ing] in a more engaging and involved manner.”<sup>143</sup> These compensatory strategies are modes of self-regulation that have been shown to lead to resource depletion. It is highly unlikely that any person can actually recognize a temporary decrease in executive function, not to mention locate an interracial interaction as its source. However, these studies clearly demonstrate that interracial contact breeds anxiety, confusion over appropriate language and behavior, and a heightened sensitivity to personal social performance. All of these feelings are generally ones people avoid. As such, SNCC had fiercely debated the proposal to elicit white support prior to its approval. Through lifetimes of experienced racism, black SNCC workers understood that racial cooperation, while the ideal, was extremely hard to implement. Taylor Branch wrote that “for some, the rub was how much they resented the natural command of arriving white Freedom Workers, for others how much they admired their skills, for still others how much they resented admiring them.” One organizer proclaimed in trying to explain the complicated relationship, “I think one way and act another...It's not rational.”<sup>144</sup> The conscious realization that one's response to a person is “not rational,” that it is not an honest representation of how one truly feels is uncomfortable. Fearing a loss of organizational and emotional control, SNCC workers were understandably apprehensive about what an increase in white involvement would mean. For many white volunteers, previous experience working with people of color was limited, if one couples that inexperience with the ideal of enacting racial equality one can envision the high level of internal pressure to perform that ideal producing significant stress. Research into inter-racial contact provides us with a fuller

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141 Richeson, Trawalter, and Shelton. *Social Cognition*. 339. This seems a chicken and egg type situation, but this particular study does not tackle the question of whether high levels of negative white bias are a result of actual experiences of bias or a fear of bias.

142 Ibid.

143 Ibid.

144 Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 164.

understanding of the nature and source of that stress.

As helpful as these studies are, they cannot be used in a direct transpositional fashion. Published in the mid-2000s, all the studies under review are arguably representative of our present day society—a society, which no matter one's view on racial progress, is markedly less externally prejudiced than that of the Civil Rights Era. Having lost its social acceptability, racism has become coded in the “color-blind” terminology seemingly based upon issues of class over race. What further complicates their use is that increased use of racially coded language, what we have termed political correctness, in contemporary society may be increasing levels of racial stress in interracial interactions. A desire to be politically correct increases the stress upon performance and, hence, increases the potential for racial stress. The previous decades that constitute the majority of this research, however, utilized drastically less coded language creating situations of what we might term racial “distress.” In fact, inter-racial cooperation not only led to stress, but it provoked violence, especially when it involved cross-gender contact. One volunteer wrote home about a beating he received because he had been walking in a group that contained two young black women. The beating was so severe that he required ten stitches in his head. Violence triggered by a specific perceived offense was difficult to recover from. One could know that one was not to blame, that the prejudice that provoked the attack was undoubtedly wrong. Yet, one also understood that steps could be taken to avoid future attacks. He wrote of the day following the violence, “Downtown we met a Negro girl in the movement. Yesterday the stares wouldn't have bothered me, but today they did. I just wanted to get away from her. I can now understand much better the feelings of those who have worked long in Mississippi. And I can see why they have ulcers.”<sup>145</sup> Inter-racial interactions in the South of the 1950s and 1960s had a potential for violence that, although still evident, is not as prevalent today. Cognitive depletion, while interesting and illuminative of some of the conflicts faced by Freedom Summer volunteers, does not begin to tackle the effects of racial

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145 Elizabeth Sutherland Martinez, *Letters from Mississippi*, 144.

distress. Still, these studies do supply a framework and language with which to discuss the racial stress that Movement workers felt during the Project. Furthermore, the rabid, often violent, refusal to decrease de jure and de facto segregation exhibited by a large portion of white society can be seen, in part (however small), as an effort to avoid an increase in social, emotional, and intellectual anxiety and confusion. The knowledge engendered in these studies also applies to how movement organizations themselves became less integrated as the Civil Rights movement wore on, and organizations like SNCC (and people like Bob Moses) that had previously not only accepted but moreover solicited white support, evolved towards actively disavowing white participation. If it is true that those who assume a level of white prejudice will have less enjoyable and more cognitively depleting interactions with whites, it must be recognized that constant demonstration of white prejudice would be a invariable consequence of working for civil rights in the South of the 1960s. Efforts to sustain black-only organizations can be theorized as motivated, in part, as a response to a heightened sensitivity to white prejudice and a heightened awareness of its negative effects. This contemporary research into racial interaction and psychological distress could reveal some of the psychological foundation for interracial avoidance among ostensibly racial liberals and moderates.

### **The Breakdown of SNCC**

The voter education and registration drives undertaken by SNCC during and prior to the Summer Project were invaluable. They energized communities, inspired hope, and exposed many long hidden problems to the rest of the nation. However, the individual psychological toll that work exacted is undeniable. In addition, SNCC, as an organization grounded in nonviolence and inter-racial cooperation, completely fractured in the wake of the Project. Debates raged as to how the organization should move forward now that it had a place on the national stage and what should be done with the white volunteers who wanted to stay. One member suggested that a committee of black Southerners without a college education be formed to govern the organization. “Some ridiculed SNCC for limiting

its own franchise; others shouted that SNCC should make good on rhetoric about giving local people the power to be free.”<sup>146</sup> Into this, what James Forman called, “stormy, even traumatic, and at times totally confusing,” debate stepped Bob Moses, the deeply humble, and, to many, the unacknowledged leader of the organization.<sup>147</sup> In one of the more enigmatic moments of the Civil Rights movement, Moses announced, “I have a message for you. I have changed my name. I will no longer be known as Bob Moses.” According to Taylor Branch, Moses went on to say that

...people in SNCC faced too many paradoxes to keep hold of themselves in a whole world gone mad like Mississippi, which feared nonviolence as murder and excused murder as order. He talked about growing up in Harlem under family stress so severe they had to call an ambulance for his mother, and recalled hearing his father scream at the doctors, “She's not crazy! She's not crazy! *You're* the ones who're crazy!” He said years later they had picked up his father raving on the street that he was the actor Gary Cooper, and had taken him to Bellevue Hospital for extended psychiatric treatment. He told stories of his father loving the whole family very much...“I want you to eat and drink,” he said. He solemnly passed around a block of cheese and a jug of wine. Wordless, some pretended to drink after the jug was empty. “Some of you need to leave,” said Moses. They were becoming creatures of the media, contending for power, and to avoid all that he was adopting his mother's maiden name. “From now on, I am Bob Parris,” he said, “and I will no longer speak to white people.” He left the chapel before anyone could respond...[and] never attended another SNCC meeting.<sup>148</sup>

Moses did not subsequently address the reasoning behind his departure, but it was seemingly more than a disavowal of an organization. It was a disavowal of a prior self. Considering his previous statement that “the one thing we can do for the country that no one else can do is be above the race issue,” his declaration that he would no longer speak to white people is the hardest to reconcile. Moses had long grappled with the responsibility he felt about heading an organization that placed people in positions of mortal danger. He spoke openly about the guilt that he felt, but he rationalized it with the knowledge that he wasn't asking anybody to do something he would not. Moses, however, understood that his presence inspired a sort of messianic adoration among some of the workers.

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146 Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 589.

147 Ibid.

148 Ibid., 589-590.

Unlike King, he was deeply uncomfortable with the power that engendered.<sup>149</sup> His discomfort may have been attributable to the fact that Moses was not as entrenched as King within the philosophy of nonviolent redemption. Whatever the source, the weight of it may simply have become too much as the list of martyrs continued to grow. Moses had spoken to students at Stanford University about the necessity to find “internal balance” among what he termed the “symbolic acts of terror” that white segregationists perpetrated.<sup>150</sup> It is possible that Moses found that internal balance by exposing himself to danger. Branch writes that he, unlike other Movement people, “seemed to require such exposure constantly,” that he “reversed the psychic balance between tension and relief.”<sup>151</sup> It is possible that Moses' need for danger was an expiation of the guilt he felt for motivating others to do the same. Whatever the cause, over the course of the Summer Project, Moses had apparently lost his internal balance. The effect of Moses' breakdown and departure from the Movement was tremendous for SNCC, and it caused them to reassess their foundational principles. As such, shortly after Moses' departure, the organization voted to remove all of its white staff members from positions of authority and ask them to work solely on projects in white communities. Equally important, lacking Moses' strong advocacy for nonviolence, SNCC entered a period of uncertainty concerning their relationship to nonviolence.

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149 One student wrote a letter home describing a speech Moses gave shortly before they left Oxford for Mississippi. He wrote that Moses “talked of the problem of good and evil...[of] a rather unknown book by the Englishman, J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*...the hero gains a means to ultimate power which he does not want. Yet this power becomes a necessity to him until in the end he is unable to yield it voluntarily, and in a very great sense, he must sacrifice that which is best in himself.” Moses' power to inspire action was a necessity, but the fact that the source of that power came from himself and that those he inspired had been killed was hard for him to bear. One could see Moses' chosen departure as an attempt to yield the power of his personality. Elizabeth Martinez, *Letters from Mississippi*, 37.

150 Bob Moses, Stanford University speech,

<http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/blackspeech/bmoses.html>, accessed February 12, 2012.

151 Taylor Branch, *Parting the Water*, 519.

## **On the Threshold: Nonviolence, Violence, and Breakdown**

On a larger organizational scale, SNCC's efforts at overturning local governments through the vote continued to be stymied leading to broad disillusionment.<sup>152</sup> The organization, and most critically Moses, who had put a lot of energy and faith in the MFDP effort, had to reconcile itself to the fact that political realities precluded the federal government from stepping in and making good on their promises. All of the necessary legislation could be passed, but without dedicated Federal involvement, right to vote measures could not be implemented and were essentially meaningless. In fact, they were worse than meaningless because they dashed hopes and denigrated the sacrifices that people had made to bring them about. As sacrifices lost their value on a national scale, and were repeatedly proven meaningless by local juries, Movement members began to question the full-scale bodily commitment that had become the marker of one's dedication change.<sup>153</sup> It has previously been stated that this questioning places an individual within the liminal space between nonviolence and violence, a space that is a trigger site for breakdown, as exhibited by Anne Moody. This space is psychologically tricky because the body has become accustomed to having demands placed upon it, but the mind has begun to question those demands, causing confusion. The mind recognizes that violence is imminent, but it rebels against using the body, either one's own or another's, as a showcase for it. Stokely Carmichael experienced a breakdown in Selma under such conditions. Having decided to circumvent the stalled Selma march and get the attention of Alabama Governor, George Wallace, Carmichael and James Forman organized rallies in Montgomery. As he surveyed marchers gathering from nearby Alabama

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152 Moses was also deeply disappointed that the MFDP delegation was not seated in Atlantic City, as it signaled a federal government and a Democratic Party unwilling to stand up to its segregationist political faction.

153 For example, when King and the SCLC came into Alabama to organize for the Selma march, SNCC regarded it as "an invitation to punishment on a grand scale" and refused to cooperate. Have organized on a local level in Alabama for years, SNCC was also frustrated with the SCLC and King for not deferring to their leadership. Although they refused organizational involvement in the March, they did vote to allow individual members to participate. Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 26, 42.



State University from a fifth floor window of a Montgomery hotel, Carmichael

saw police units with cavalry detachments of sheriff's deputies move slowly from distant points to seal off the march. He rushed downstairs to sound a warning, only to find the hotel doors locked from the outside. He banged helplessly against the exits, then ran back upstairs to watch the converging police repulse the march in the streets below. Skirmishes broke out along the fringes. Horses reared, and officers swung long-handled truncheons. In the aftermath, SNCC colleagues came upon Carmichael standing dazed on the sidewalk. He said they should have seen this coming...He could not, or would not, explain himself beyond saying, 'Et tu, Brute?' with a vacant cast to his normally infectious grin.<sup>154</sup>

Carmichael blamed march organizers, not for the violence, but for betraying Movement bodies to that violence. He must have understood that violence was not only possible but also likely, but having lost his belief in the tactical power of nonviolence to instigate change, his relationship with the violence he once courted was under severe stress. Having no other available outlet for that stress, Carmichael directed it toward his colleagues, who had little time to assess the cause of Carmichael's breakdown, as his immediate situation required action.

Signs [were recognized] of the nervous breakdown that had afflicted SNCC workers with far less stress than [his] five years and two dozen trips to jail...[organizers] knew from previous triage to get him swiftly out of town...Carmichael himself went numbly but willingly to the Montgomery airport with escorts, headed for the usual therapy of a speaking tour in safe cities. Not for the first time, however, the contrast of bustling normalcy at an airport concourse...ate through the wounded psyche of a veteran SNCC worker, and Carmichael collapsed on the floor before an astonished police officer. He writhed and screamed beneath friends who sat on him until he was subdued enough to board an airplane for California.<sup>155</sup>

It is, of course, ironic that someone in the midst of a Movement-caused breakdown would be sent off to sell participation of the Movement in far-flung cities, but beyond that the recognition of the normalcy of the phenomenon is telling. There was protocol in place for these exact situations. They were not

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154 Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 109-110.

155 *Ibid.*, 110.

uncommon.

Frustrations among those workers who remained behind continued to rise and it was in this time that James Forman also had a transformative experience that severed his commitment to nonviolence. With the Selma march now deferred twice, Forman let loose his frustration at a mass meeting, declaring, “This problem goes to the very bottom of the United States, and you know, I said it today and I’ll say it again. If we can’t sit at the table, let’s knock the fucking legs off!”<sup>156</sup> He later acknowledged that the day had marked a turning point for him, saying, it was “the last time I wanted to participate in a nonviolent demonstration.”<sup>157</sup>

The frustration with nonviolence coupled with the continued white sabotage of black voters, led to the organization in 1965 of the Lowndes County Black Panther Party.<sup>158</sup> Originally designed to bypass the existing Democratic, white-dominated political structure, the Party proposed to nominate and elect their own candidates. With black voters outnumbering whites by a four to one margin, the proposal marked a potential tactical advancement for SNCC, and it was thought Lowndes could be a prototype for other black majority counties.<sup>159</sup> In discussing the Party, Carmichael called nonviolence’s moral force irrelevant, declaring “we’re building a force to take power. We’re not a protest movement.”<sup>160</sup> Prior to this time, SNCC had publicly embraced nonviolence and its efforts to “free men’s minds” to the concept of equality.<sup>161</sup> It had worked within existing political and power structures and had made attempts at integrating themselves into those structures. Their lack of tangible success engendered a loss of confidence with those tactics. It also fostered a frustration with the stress upon nonviolence’s moral superiority over its actual accomplishments. As a result, many within SNCC began

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156 Ibid., 121.

157 Ibid., 122.

158 The black panther symbol was inspired as a response to the local Democratic party’s bantam rooster logo, whose slogan was “White Supremacy for the Right.” After rejecting other suggestions as too vague or passive, it was determined that a cat would be appropriate as they chase chickens. The panther was traced from the mascot of the Atlanta’s Clark College. Taylor Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 389-92.

159 Taylor Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 464.

160 Ibid., 464.

161 Ibid., 465.

to feel it was time to break from the Movement's sanctioned line of action. The Lowndes County Party was one such break.

The Party's departure from the nonviolence philosophy and its simultaneous dismissal of integrationist tactics caused it to be castigated by the media, who characterized it as “destructive” and “extremist.”<sup>162</sup> Local officials warned that a black polling place could become a “turkey shoot,” yet they refused to provide protection. Carmichael warned John Doar, of the Federal Justice Department, that if protection were not provided, “we will be forced to look to such resources as we can muster on our own.”<sup>163</sup> This was the Movement's introduction into sanctioned defensive violence. No longer willing to place themselves at the mercy of segregationist violence and understanding that the federal government could not be depended upon, the Party organized its own defense network. In this case, the fear felt by Party members was alleviated not only by their sense of shared suffering but also by the pride their declarations of the right to protect themselves engendered. One member, at a pre-election meeting, “urged the crowd not to meddle or pick a fight, but to stand.” He declared, “We been walking with dropped down heads, a scrunched up heart, and a timid body in the bushes, but we ain't scared anymore!...If you have to die, die for something, and take somebody before you.”<sup>164</sup> That same year at the annual SNCC conference Carmichael's advocacy of defense violence unseated John Lewis' continuing commitment to nonviolence, and Carmichael became the organization's new national chairman. A little more than a month later in Greenwood, Mississippi Carmichael would declare the need for black power in front of a crowd of six hundred and the Movement would never be same.

From the perspective of fatigue and frustration, the disavowal of nonviolence and the embrace of the concept of black power seems unsurprising. Especially if one recognizes that black power began as a reassertion of the body. It did not advocate random violence, but insisted upon the necessity of

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162 Ibid., 460.

163 Ibid., 461.

164 Ibid., 462.

self-preservation. In Lowndes County, where the Black Panther party originated, there were, in fact, no instances of black sponsored terrorism. If, as this paper has attempted to prove, the threat of violence is equal to, or potentially more, psychologically damaging than actual inflicted violence it makes sense that the loud proclamations of black power, signifying a willingness to fight back, led to very little actual violence perpetrated in its name. The proclamations assuaged people's feelings of helplessness. It was not the violence that was necessary but the belief in one's willingness to use it. For a county such as Lowndes where segregation was so firmly entrenched that attendance at a SNCC meeting could lead to eviction and the confessed murderer of Jonathan Daniels could be acquitted in ninety-one minutes and have his hand shaken by each member of the all-white jury upon the reading of the verdict, nonviolence as a tactic for change simply failed. Retaliation against any sort of motion for equality was so brutal that achieving the safety of those willing to take a stand was vital to success. The Black Panther slogan and the concept of black power would find traction in other repressed communities across the nation and thus take on new meanings, but the original Black Panther Party attempted to speak to the defensive needs specific to Lowndes County so that its black residents could focus on actualizing their rights as citizens. They did not ultimately unseat the local white government that year, but they did succeed in legitimizing what came to known as the Lowndes County Freedom Party and helped restore a sense of dignity and personal control for local blacks. As such, I argue that the tactics of social activism ought to be localized. They should be directly responsive to events and communities. Without abandoning core tenets, neither of the overarching theories of violence and nonviolence can accomplish this.

## **V. Conclusion:**

### **Myrlie Evers-Williams and the Gift of the Body**

A short time ago I had the honor of hearing Myrlie Evers-Williams speak on the University of Mississippi campus. It was Black Alumni Weekend and Evers-Williams' speech was to serve two purposes: the keynote speech of the weekend's events and the inaugural address of Ole Miss' "50 Years of Integration" celebration. The year-long celebration will mark the fiftieth anniversary of James Meredith's admission to the university, but it will also mark the fiftieth anniversary of the riot in response to that admission that left two dead and hundreds wounded. Honoring the paradoxical nature of those two events is complicated, especially for a university struggling to overcome its racist heritage. Evers-Williams' speech was appropriately complex. She is a powerful speaker and the gravity of her experience within the Movement seemed to reverberate through her voice. As she looked out upon seats filled with black Ole Miss graduates, Evers-Williams praised the progress that those fifty years had brought. She also spoke, however, of the recent Trayvon Martin shooting and acknowledged the distance yet to be covered between what the Movement had hoped to accomplish and current social realities. What struck me most powerfully was her representation of the pathway of civil rights progress as having been constructed through personal sacrifice, which she referred to as "gifts to the nation," given in an attempt to "cleanse the soul of America." In light of my own research into the physical and mental burden of nonviolent Movement activity, I found this concept troubling for many reasons.

The gifts she spoke of were the lives of Movement workers, many of which were offered up in the spirit of nonviolent redemption as fodder for Americans to work through their deeply embedded, race-based hatreds. Included among those sacrifices are the families and communities that were left

behind, including Evers-Williams, who lost her husband and the father of her children to violence, as well as those who, like Elizabeth Eckford, sacrificed their dreams of the future and their emotional well-being. To conceive of a body rendered as a gift reinforces many of the tenets espoused by the philosophy of nonviolent social action. It is a lofty way to view death. It gives the self over to the concept of the greater good, but as one who watched her husband, Medgar, gunned down in front of their home, Evers-Williams understands that those gifts were not given lightly, and the loss of individuals resonated throughout families and communities, spreading the burden wide. They were given, according to Evers-Williams, with the hope that their loss would “cleanse,” or redeem, “the soul of America.” The Movement, however, began as an attempt to achieve equal political, educational, and social status. These subsequent “gifts,” which I have termed “the burden of redemption,” were introduced with the philosophy of nonviolence. It was nonviolence that increased the burden to encompass the redemption of the entire nation's collective soul. The responsibility upon the black body under the burden of nonviolence was incredible, and under these conditions for success, nonviolence was doomed to fail. If the soul of America could be redeemed through the sacrifice of bodies taken in hatred, it would have long been done. The history of slavery and lynchings would have left us all as innocent as babies. America is not yet a place of racial or social equality, because cleansing does not happen through violence. Violence leaves bodies broken and minds unhinged. For this reason, you can't simultaneously demonize violence and anglicize nonviolence. Nonviolent protest is not clean because it revolves around instances of violence. It does not provide a seamless, pure transition to change. Just as with violent protest, there are bodies left in its wake. In the case of the Civil Rights Movement, they were simply different bodies, bodies that the nation was willing to burden and to sacrifice. I think we need to put an end to this notion of nonviolence as spiritually redemptive for both victim and perpetrator. Nonviolence can be a powerful platform from which to address social and political concerns. It can invoke substantive social and political change. As such, it is a tactic, like many others,

for achieving tangible change. If a movement decides to embrace it as a tactic, it should have a clear understanding of the violence that it entails and the history of physical, emotional, and psychological consequences suffered by past activists. However, when one views nonviolence as something other than a mechanism for external change, like personal redemption, they lose the ability to critically assess its effectiveness. While personal redemption cannot be strategically analyzed, it can be individually assessed, which it increasingly was as the Movement progressed. What many people determined, after much experienced violence and instances of mental breakdown, was that nonviolence can expose hatred, but it cannot transform it. Channeling hatred expressed by violence through a body simply destroyed the body. In the case of the Civil Rights Movement, the cracks in the nonviolent tactic left by the philosophy of redemption were filled with the concept of black power and the validation of defensive violence.

We are living in an age of social action. In light of current uses of nonviolence throughout the world, I think we need to come to clearer understanding of the realities of its practice for individuals. Civil Rights Movement workers provide us with such a lens. In order to use that lens to its fullest capacity, however, we must be willing to look critically at both the occurrence of breakdown among Movement workers and how they resonate with the philosophy and practice of nonviolence.

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