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Beauty in the Face of Bigotry

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Beauty in the Face of Bigotry

by Katherine Ciesla

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The Emancipation Proclamation may have freed the slaves in the United States from their official title as property of their masters, but it would take the work and blood and protest of thousands of African Americans for years following that announcement to bring a measure of equality to the lives of black people, especially in the rural south where the autobiographical story of *Coming of Age In Mississippi* by Anne Moody takes place. When we think of the Civil Rights Movement often times the face that appears is that of Martin Luther King, maybe because he has his own national holiday; however, there are many unsung heroes and heroines of the movement like Anne Moody who saw, heard, and experienced the irrational hatred of her fellow man just because she was born to a different gene pool than they stemmed from. “In rural areas [where Moody grew up], blacks worked as field hands, sharecroppers and domestic servants, the same occupations they held under slavery.”¹ This is the condition Moody so viscerally describes during her early life and beyond as she works in the houses of white people to help support her family including one belonging to a woman who is more likely than not a member of the Ku Klux Klan, or a similar organization. Even after she has, in spite of the many obstacles both financial and social, completed her college degree very few other job opportunities become open to her. The burden of knowing that the doors of a better life are closed to her and her people coupled with the obvious lack of value placed on their very lives in the face of white oppression eventually spurs her to join the Civil Rights Movement via the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE).

The first portion of the book is largely devoted to setting the scene of life in the South from the perspective of Moody as a child: watching her mother work herself into exhaustion to provide minimal housing and barely enough food to keep her children healthy, the difficulties of attending school without proper nutrition and money for school supplies, and the need for young black children to take on their families financial burdens at an early age because of low wages and poor availability of work for their parents and themselves. The confusion she describes as a very young child just learning the difference between white and black peoples’ lives is positively heart-rending in its simplicity and devastating in its honesty: “It was the first time I had seen the inside of a white family’s kitchen. That kitchen was pretty, all white and shiny. Mama had cooked that food we were eating too. “If Mama only had a kitchen like this of her own,” I thought, “she would cook better food for us.”² Upon realizing that white people indeed lived better lives, not just because of their financial superiority in her area, but simply because of the very fact they were white, she tries to discover what makes the difference between white and black people: “If it wasn’t the straight hair and the white skin that made you white, then what was it?”³ The source of this disparity between worlds was of course the Jim Crow laws still in function at the time to maintain black’s status as second-class citizens.

As Moody is growing up she also becomes aware of the violence perpetrated against black people, particularly black men who “entangle” themselves with white women. In fact at the time there were several statutes and legislation to bar whites from marrying persons with even 1/8th “Negro blood” or of Asian descent.⁴ It only after the murder of a black man in her neighborhood that she learns what the NAACP is, overhearing the name from her employer’s “guild” (undoubtedly a white supremacy group for social ladies) meeting. With the guild activities increasing, and more

black people being killed or run out of town by them, Moody sees that change will not happen if she and others like her keep working for the white people who oppress them with the fear of murder, starvation, poverty, and homelessness. “I couldn’t go on working for Mrs. Burke pretending I was dumb and innocent, pretending I didn’t know what was going on in all her guild meetings, or about Jerry’s beating, or about the Taplin burning, and everything else that was going on. I was sick of pretending, sick of selling my feelings for a dollar a day,”⁵ she wrote about her decision to leave her hometown to escape the suffocation of complacency to murder and bigotry.

Particularly highlighted in history is the Emmett Till murder Moody describes learning about on her way home from high school. Apparently killed for the crime of whistling at a white woman, his death would ignite the fire to burn away injustice in the hearts of thousands of Americans, including Moody. Till was from Chicago and visiting his great uncle at the time of his murder. There are varied accounts of the story of what happened – some assert that he put both his arms around the white female shopkeeper and told her that he’d been with white women before, while others piece the events together as a series of unfortunate coincidences like Till’s stuttering solution of whistling when he couldn’t get a word out outside the store being taken out of context. Whatever happened in that store during the purchase of a piece of gum, the 14 year old boy was in fact brutalized and thrown in the nearby river and almost unrecognizable to his own mother when he was finally fished out for identification of the body. Despite the horror of his appearance, his mother had an open casket funeral in Chicago, refusing to hide the disfiguration visited upon her son by racist animals. “More than 100,000 people – some estimates say as many as 600,000 – marched passed Bo Till’s open casket in Chicago, first at A. A. Rayner & Sons funeral home at 41st Street and Cottage Grove, and later at Roberts Temple of the Church of God in Christ, 4021 South State St.”⁶ Even in the face of witness testimony and a general knowledge of who his killers were, they went free, outraging the black community as well as sane people everywhere. “When the state rested its case, all five defense lawyers – the entire Sumner County bar – would admit years later to Hugh Stephen Whitaker, a student studying the Till case, that prosecutors had presented “sufficient evidence to convict,” and even the jurors later confessed that not a single member of the panel doubted the defendants were guilty of murder. Still, after remaining behind closed doors for an hour and seven minutes, “they all-White, all-male jury returned not-guilty verdicts against Milam and Bryant.”⁷

Other important events are experienced by Moody and are recorded in *Coming of Age In Mississippi* such as the Woolworth counter sit in that marks her as an “agitator” in her home town, the murder of Medgar Evers, and the Freedom Ballot campaign she works on in Canton Mississippi via the Student Nonviolence Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Having known Evers personally, Moody suffers the loss of him, as does the Movement, acutely. Trying to organize a march to make felt the resilience of the Movement in spite of his death Moody goes to the college to recruit, but has this to say to the students after they give no reaction to the news: “It’s a shame, it really is a shame. This morning Medgar Evers was murdered and here you sit in a damn classroom with books in front of your faces, pretending you don’t even know he’s been killed. Every Negro in Jackson should be in the streets raising hell and protesting his death.”⁸ Once again though, justice would take a back seat to racism. “On June 23, Byron De La Beckwith, a fertilizer salesman and member of the White Citizens' Council and Ku Klux Klan, was arrested for Evers' murder....All-white juries twice that year deadlocked on De La Beckwith's guilt, allowing him to escape justice.”⁹ The whites’ use of his death though was even more unbearable in Moody’s description; in the aftermath of his death the NAACP focused even more on the importance of voter registration to the dismay of more militant members who would have liked to have taken the assassination as an invitation to defend themselves more vigorously and depart from nonviolence. “The Jackson *Daily News* seized the opportunity to cause more fragmentation. One day they ran a headline THERE IS A SPLIT IN THE ORGANIZATIONS, and sure enough, shortly afterward, certain organizations had completely severed their relations with each other. The whites had succeeded again. They had reached us

through the papers by letting us know we were not together.”¹⁰ It may provide some comfort that, in 1994, thirty years after the two previous trials had failed to reach a verdict, Beckwith was again brought to trial based on new evidence concerning statements he made to others. Beckwith was convicted on February 5, 1994, after living as a free man for three decades after the murder. Beckwith appealed unsuccessfully, and died in prison in January of 2001.

The story of Anne Moody is the story of a courageous woman in a dark and horribly ignorant period of our history that we should all be aware of, lest we repeat our bigotry and visit the horrors of hatred upon another group of individuals in the future. While Civil Rights have made great progress in the years following the work and sacrifice of individuals like Moody, Evers, Dr. King, and their compatriots, we are still prone to see the color of a person before we see the person. It can only be hoped that through education, appreciation, and earnest investigation of the past and the behavior of our country’s citizens through history we can indeed overcome. Like Moody, there is doubt in all our minds that such a world where white and black and red and all the colors of people stand side by side before the same hallway of open doors and opportunities can come to be a reality while people still don white sheets and chant hatred into the air like a cloud...but we have the responsibility to carry on the fight as they did – trusting that one day the truth of equality will be made manifest for us all.

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Notes

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- ² Moody, Anne. *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. (New York: Bantam Dell. 1968): 29.
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- ⁶ Anderson, Devery. Emmitt Till Murder.com <http://www.emmettillmurder.com/> *Emerge* (July/August 1995): 24–32.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
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- ⁹ National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. NAACP.org. Medgar Evers. <http://www.naacp.org/about/history/megarevers/>
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