

Working class and racial discrimination

[Sociology](#), [Social Issues](#)



Each period of U. S. history presents an opportunity to think about the history of working class and racial discrimination. Having yet to develop thorough, critical, and radical interpretations of the civil rights struggle, historians have tended to share a sympathetic attitude toward the quest for civil rights. They also lack the advantage recently gained by diplomatic historians with the end of the cold war, and they cannot, and do not want to, declare the struggle to be “ over” because racial discord has not ended and racial justice has not been achieved.

Historians will, therefore, continue to write about an ongoing movement for equal rights in which their advocacy and support seem to them important to the movement's success. Surveys of the literature by Upton Sinclair and Anne Moody have already made important contributions in identifying persistent problems. For these writers, direct personal participation preceded writing about the movements. Unlike Sinclair's *The Jungle*, Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi* is compelling autobiographical narratives in the African American literary tradition.

In a voice that is as subtle as it is insistent, as unpretentious as it is uncompromising, Moody maps her coming of age in Mississippi during the repressive 1940s and 1950s and the turbulent early years of the 1960s. Yet Moody's narrative is more than a poignant personal testimony; it is an immensely valuable cultural document that offers an insightful view of life in Mississippi during the middle decades of the twentieth century and the carefully orchestrated resistance to that way of life that the civil rights movement initiated during the 1960s.

The beautiful descriptions of Moody's Coming of Age in Mississippi are all very good. They served a purpose and served it well. Coming of Age in Mississippi was a great book. It is lively and warm. It is written with pain and blood and groans and tears. It says not what man should be, but what man is forced to be in our world. It presents not what our country should be, but it describes what our country really is, the residence of pressure and unfairness, a nightmare of suffering, an inferno hell, a jungle of wild brutes.

But I consider that *The Jungle*, which has beautiful theories, is even a greater book. It was the novel, which was responsible for the passing of the Pure Food and Drug Act. In 1906, Sinclair's *The Jungle* catapulted him into almost-immediate fame. *The Jungle* became a best-seller in many languages and actually made Sinclair's name known all over the world. The *New York Evening World* announced: "Not since Byron awoke one morning to find himself famous has there been such an example of world-wide fame won in a day by a book as has come to Upton Sinclair" (Foner 89).

The Jungle produced big public excitement. I think that Upton Sinclair was emotionally involved in the creating of *The Jungle*. Though Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* concentrates more on working-class struggle than mobility, it does as well good job in getting readers to think about socialism, immigration, capitalism, and future reform. Written in Chicago's immigrant neighborhood under the name the Back of the Yards, *The Jungle* beckons readers to look for history of this neighborhood.

Descriptions of the neighborhood encourage readers to think about places where the author was writing and to understand historical events. The labor struggle in the book is based on the ineffective stockyard strike by workers

of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen in Chicago in 1904. Sinclair, who was there as a journalist for the Socialist weekly *Appeal to Reason*, stood among a growing number of pro-labor social workers. Unlike Moody, however, Sinclair evidently had much less sympathy for the struggles of African Americans, as his racist description of the strikebreakers makes clear.

In fact, Sinclair described a group of the strikebreakers as “ a throng of stupid black Negroes, and foreigners who could not understand a word that was said to them” (260). Sinclair describes the strikebreakers - especially the African Americans - as idle, unqualified, and threatening. He had the most tractable pupils, however. “ See hyar, boss,” a big black “ buck” would begin, “ ef you doan’ like de way Ah does dis job, you kin get somebody else to do it. ” Then a crowd would gather and listen, muttering threats.

After the first meal nearly all the steel knives had been missing, and now every Negro had one, ground to a fine point, hidden in his boot (261). Sinclair's recurring mention of African American men as « bucks» deserves attention. Studying the stereotypes of African Americans, Donald Bogle observes the character of the black buck or black brute in D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. Bogle depicts the African Americans as “ subhuman ... nameless characters setting out on a rampage of black rage. Bucks are always big, baaadd [sic] niggers, over sexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh” (Foner 41). Sinclair presents a similar stereotype.

He dramatizes the accusation by union officials in Chicago where African American strikebreakers brought amoral conditions to the plants because

they were more lecherous than white workers. The lack of remonstrance to racist passages gives additional proof of white supremacy during this time, which claimed “ that the Negro belonged to an inferior race and warned their comrades against violating the Caucasian purity of their association”. Unlike Sinclair, Moody presents the South through the eyes of Negro in the battle against Mississippi’s deep-rooted racist institutions and practices that remained largely unchallenged until the 1960s.

While Sinclair again minimizes the cruelty against African American workers by simply saying that the “ scab” who made the mistake of going into Packingtown “ fared badly” (263) Moody emphasizes the harsh realities of life in the Deep South in the mid-twentieth century—in Arkansas and Mississippi, respectively. As the critic Roger Rosenblatt has asserted, “ No black American author has ever felt the need to invent a nightmare to make [her] point” (Foner 89). Touched by the powerful effects of these destructive forces, Ann Moody holds herself with dignity and self-respect.

She moves forward toward a goal of self-sufficiency, combining a consciousness of self, an awareness of the political realities of black life in the South, and an appreciation of the responsibility that such awareness implies. Moody, however, is not entirely uncritical of the blacks in Mississippi. In fact, like Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*, the autobiography of Anne Moody can be read as an articulate yet restrained critique of certain aspects of southern black folk culture. It is a culture of fear that attempts to stifle inquisitiveness.

Many black adults actively discourage the children from asking probing questions about race relations. A curious black child, they are afraid, might grow up to be a rebellious adult, and rebellion, they knew, could be lethal in

Mississippi. When Moody, as a child, wants to know why whiteness is a marker of privilege or when she asks questions about reports of racially motivated violence, she is faced with a wall of silence or sometimes even intimidation. Later when she becomes an activist, some of her relatives plead with her to abandon her activism; some, in fear of white retaliation, refuse to associate with her.

However, Moody's fiercest criticism is directed at the whites. She is relentless in her assault on the Mississippi way of life. While she freely acknowledges the decency of some individual whites, even contemplates the possibility of interracial unity, she carefully exposes how the politics of color informs every aspect of life in Mississippi. With appropriately sharp sarcasm, the title of her autobiography alludes to Margaret Mead's famous text *Coming of Age in Samoa*.

Mead, an American anthropologist, examines in her work the social rituals and cultural codes that govern an individual's passage from childhood to young adulthood in a supposedly "primitive" Samoan culture. In *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, with nearly anthropological precision, Moody maps her initiatory journey from innocence to experience among the seemingly "primitive" whites of Mississippi. *Coming of Age in Mississippi* is divided into four sections. In the first section, titled "Childhood," Moody remembers her early years amid the grinding poverty of rural Mississippi.

Even though her parents labor in the cotton fields from dawn to dusk almost every day of the week, they are barely able to feed and clothe their children. At age nine Moody starts doing domestic work for white families. After her father abandons the family, she works several hours a day after school and

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on weekends to help feed her siblings. The opening section of the autobiography concludes with her recollection of her first calculated act of resistance to the southern racial codes. She begins to work for Mrs. Burke, a white woman. On her first day on the job Moody enters Mrs.

Burke's house through the front door. The next day, when she knocks on the front door, Mrs. Burke directs her to the back entrance and Moody complies. However, the following morning, Moody knocks on the front door again. Once Mrs. Burke realizes that she cannot dictate Moody's conduct, she lets her do the domestic chores without complaining. "Working for her," says Moody, "was a challenge," and Mrs. Burke would be the "first one of her type" that Moody would defy as she grows older (117). Moody's minor revolt against Mrs. Burke foreshadows her later civil rights activism.

Her political awakening begins during her teenage years, and Moody chronicles those years in the book's second section, titled "High School." When she asks her mother for the meaning of "NAACP" (127)—something she had overheard Mrs. Burke mention to a group of white women who regularly meet at her house—her mother angrily tells her never to mention that word in front of any white persons and orders her to complete her homework and go to sleep. Shortly thereafter Moody discovers that there is one adult in her life who could offer her the answers she seeks: Mrs. Rice, her homeroomteacher.

Like Mrs. Bertha Flowers in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Mrs. Rice plays a pivotal role in Moody's maturation. She not only answers Moody's questions about Emmett Till and the NAACP, but she volunteers a great deal more information about the state of race relations in

Mississippi. Moody's early curiosity about the NAACP resurfaces later when she attends Tougaloo College. Titled " College," the third section of the autobiography reveals Moody's increasing commitment to political activism.

The fourth and final section of the autobiography, titled " Movement," documents Moody's full-scale involvement in the struggle for civil rights. In the opening chapter of the final section Moody narrates her participation in a sit-in at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Jackson. She and three other civil rights workers—two of them white—take their seats at the lunch counter. They are, predictably, denied service, but the four continue to sit and wait. Soon a large number of white students from a local high school pour into Woolworth's.

When the students realize that a sit-in is in progress, they crowd around Moody and her companions and begin to taunt them. The verbal abuse quickly turns physical. Moody, along with the other three, is beaten, kicked, and " dragged about thirty feet toward the door by [her] hair" (226). Then all four of them are " smeared with ketchup, mustard, sugar, pies and everything on the counter" (226). The abuse continues for almost three hours until they are rescued by Dr. Beittel, the president of Tougaloo College who arrives after being informed of the violence.

When Moody is escorted out of Woolworth's by Dr. Beittel, she realizes that " about ninety white police officers had been standing outside the store; they had been watching the whole thing through the windows, but had not come in to stop the mob or do anything" (267). This experience helps Moody understand " how sick Mississippi whites were" and how " their disease, an

incurable disease," could prompt them even to kill to preserve " the segregated Southern way of life" (267).

In the chapters that follow she comments on the impact of the assassinations of Medgar Evers and President John F. Kennedy on the civil rights movement, the escalating turmoil across the South, and her participation in the attempts to integrate white churches in Jackson on the Sunday after the murder of Martin Luther King Jr. The short final chapter ends with her joining a busload of civil rights workers on their way to Washington, D. C. As the bus moves through the Mississippi landscape, her fellow travelers sing the anthem of the civil rights movement: " We shall overcome" (384). As she listens to the words of the song, Moody wonders.

The word wonder, in the context of the autobiography, lends itself to two different meanings. On the one hand, it suggests that Moody is skeptical if blacks in Mississippi will ever " overcome," as the anthem asserts. On the other hand, the word reveals her awe over her participation in a mass movement, her remarkable journey from her impoverished childhood on a plantation to her defiant participation as a young adult in a social rebellion that will shake the foundations of Mississippi, and the dignity and determination she sees on the faces of her fellow travelers on the bus to Washington, D. C. Both novels work well in determining the distinction between revolution and reform.

The result, the Meat Inspection Act of 1906, was championed as a victory of progressive reform, but in many ways it was a defeat for Sinclair and his revolutionary ambition. Coming of Age in Mississippi expanded coverage and broadened understanding of the black freedom movement beyond the

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traditional major events, individuals, and institutions. Moody examined the relationship between organized labor and the black freedom struggle. Her book opened new ways of understanding the southern movement.

The economic forces that inspired the works by Upton Sinclair and Anne Moody still operate. And the books do more than prove the importance of interracial labor solidarity. The works remind us that racialized enmity and violence are never without moral, political, and socioeconomic consequences.

Works Cited

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