

Memoir as Museum: Experiencing the Civil Rights Movement
Through 'The Real Thing'

By

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Abstract

The memoir genre offers a unique opportunity for readers to learn about the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) through firsthand narrative accounts of this time in United States history. Memoirs are hybrid in nature as both historical and literary texts that use storytelling methods which encourage readers to make emotional connections to the stories contained within. Similarly, visitor-centered museums exhibiting authentic objects promote emotional connections between people and artifacts. This essay asserts that memoir—particularly in African American literary tradition—impacts audiences in the same way as these museum collections do, while also illustrating the educational value of the genre. I suggest that four qualitative categories of experiencing ‘The Real Thing’ (TRT), a museum studies concept—“self,” “relation,” “presence,” and “surround”—can be applied to how readers interact with two CRM memoirs: Anne Moody’s *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968) and John Lewis’s *Walking with the Wind* (1998). Moody’s memoir recounts her experience growing up as an African American woman in rural Mississippi during the mid-twentieth century, highlighting her childhood and eventual direct involvement with the CRM as a college student and activist. Lewis’s memoir tells a similar tale from his own upbringing in Alabama during the same time, as well as outlines his own activism and eventual political involvement. By analyzing these memoirs through the lens of TRT and alongside scholarship from museum studies and literary theory, I argue the effectiveness of memoir as a tool for teaching and learning about Black history and the Civil Rights Movement.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Jade Harrison and Rebecca Schroeder as well as all my friends and professors who helped me make it to this point.

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Memoir as Museum: Experiencing the Civil Rights Movement Through ‘The Real Thing’

Learning about the past and those who lived before us can be overwhelming. We might start this process by perusing historical texts and websites or visiting local historical societies and museums where we know we can find facts, timelines, or objects that can help us better understand a particular time or place. The latter of these options—specifically event- or topic-based museums—are popular attractions which appeal to people of all different demographics because of the experiential methods used by curators and designers to share information they purport to be important and credible. While we might come away from these experiences feeling refreshed in our knowledge about a topic, we don’t always gain enough emotional context to be able to understand the gravity of the content we have engaged with to truly empathize with it. In other words, historical texts often lack certain qualities that promote human connection to the events they recount and curate.

This shortcoming is important to acknowledge because it can contribute to the level at which people engage and connect with events from the past that are still relevant today. This connection is typically one-way and does not enable individuals to insert their own experiences into how they understand history. Considering alternative methods for teaching history can help us move away from one-way methods of sharing information about the past, which are often used in educational settings like classrooms and museums. Such methods don’t always prioritize students’ or users’ learning experiences or facilitate their connection with people and happenings with which they are not personally familiar. The impact of this shortfall is particularly salient in the context of Black history, specifically the more recent history of the Civil Rights Movement (CRM), because our relationship with race is so intertwined with nearly every aspect of the world around us, especially today when racial tensions are still very present and unresolved.

Learning history in this manner works for some, but for many something is missing from this experience.

This something, I posit, is the narrative version of the events which took place during the Civil Rights Movement—the *story*—which provides a more visceral reading experience with sensory detail, firsthand knowledge, and human perspective. Although generally there is limited extensive knowledge of Black history among a broad public, Americans are generally aware of the CRM, as well as the fact that it was an important event. However, because of how this knowledge is often transmitted—via a one-way stream of communication—this information is sometimes simply received and filed away. Like any historical event, the CRM is something only those who directly experienced it can truly understand, but narrative storytelling elements can enhance the potential one-dimensional quality of history, bringing it to life for readers in a way that historical, exclusively dates and facts focused texts cannot. Moreover, I contend it is useful for us to understand how audiences process these historical stories, particularly the genre of memoir, by analyzing them in the context of the user experience methods, which have become increasingly popular in the field of museum studies. By using museum studies frameworks, which conducts studies using interview-based user experience research, we can gain a better understanding of how real people could interact with memoir in a similar way to how they interact with authentic objects in museums. In this essay, I will lay the framework for identifying the parallels between how we can process authentic objects and authentic stories to demonstrate how the memoir genre enhances the educational value of historical narratives for those interested in learning about the past. Memoir prioritizes the learning experiences of students, or users; they also facilitate the audiences' connection with people and happenings with which they are not personally familiar.

In literary studies, memoir has always complicated our understanding of history and truth because of its hybrid nature as a genre associated with both the historical and fiction. One question often posed about memoirs is: are they true? The not so simple answer is yes and no. As Jennifer Jensen Wallach outlines in her book *Closer to the Truth Than Any Fact: Memoir, Memory, and Jim Crow*, memoirs have been the topic of much academic debate since the nineteenth century, when their validity as historical texts was brought into question as history became accepted as a scientific and objective field (Jensen Wallach 5). As subjective works, memoirs lost their status as primary historical documents; yet because of their reference to real events, they were also rejected by the literary crowd. Memoir's hybrid nature as both a science and an art left the genre stranded in a gray area until the field of autobiographical criticism gained traction in the mid-twentieth century, where it remained a subject of debate until the twenty-first century when focus shifted from figuring out the genre's factual value to observing how it uses composition to communicate both fact and feeling (Jensen Wallach 7). Memoir, unlike other genres, has the unique ability to teach us about events we can never personally experience by combining narrative storytelling techniques and firsthand recollection to weave together accounts that are both factually true and artistically inventive. Jensen Wallach explains that this combination of creative elements is what gives memoir the power to "render emotional truths that cannot be conveyed through a mere recitation of facts" (Jensen Wallach 5).

Historical texts, on the other hand, lack the creative elements that give memoirs their emotional power, and instead rely on a more straightforward recitation of facts to teach readers about various topics. This type of communication purports that there is one "objective truth," a false assertion continuously upheld by white, Western society. Constructivist theory argues that "truth is always mediated by our cultural and historical positions," thus "knowledge is relative"

(Goswami 2). In other words, there is no such thing as simple facts. “Facts” always carry the burden of those they misrepresent or the misinformation they spread to idealize a certain event or group of people. In addition to the problematics of scope, this is the most basic reason why museums and historical texts don’t always paint a full picture of history, especially Black history which has long been systematically excluded from white Western perspectives, but instead simplify historical narratives like the Civil Rights Movement by iconizing or caricaturizing its key figures (Sanchez 39). Filled with “facts,” these spaces and texts tell a one-sided account of the Black historical experiences. Historian Hayden White argues:

How a given historical situation is to be configured depends on the historian’s subtlety in matching up a specific plot structure with the set of historical events that he wishes to endow with a meaning of a particular time. This is essentially a literary, that is to say fiction-making, operation (White 85).

Similarly, novelist Salman Rushdie writes: “History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish and capable of being given many meanings. Reality is built on our prejudices, misconceptions, and ignorance as well as on our perceptiveness and knowledge” (Rushdie 25).

This blurring of the line between story and fact is what gives memoir the ability to teach us about the humanity of the world around us. In separating story from “fact,” as is often done in traditional historical texts, we risk losing the emotions and thoughts of the people who lived through, and contributed to, the major events in history. In the context of the Civil Rights Movement, civil rights activist John Lewis writes in his 1998 memoir *Walking with the Wind* that “[n]o one can truly know what it was like to be faced with the challenges and realities of a certain time and place unless he or she has actually lived through it” (Lewis 47). While Lewis is correct that it is technically impossible for people who didn’t participate in the CRM to truly grasp

what happened and how it felt to be there in the moment, the closest we can come to any semblance of understanding is through reading the thoughts and feelings of those who were there. White, Western culture has historically excluded and misrepresented Black culture and history from the country's grand narrative, which celebrates the CRM as the end of systemic racism to uphold myths of perpetual racial progress (Jeffries). By providing Black CRM activist perspectives on this history, memoir challenges this grand narrative and shifts the focus to more nuanced representations of what happened during the CRM to lead to where we are today.

Lewis's memoir, and memoirs like it, allow us to read and feel different perspectives that challenge the grand narrative of the CRM, but they also ask us to consider that every person's experiences of that event is what makes up the "truth" of what happened. While traditional historical texts are often deemed more credible because of their focus on fact rather than "fiction," memoir holds the same potential, if not more so, for the opposite reason. I maintain that memoir is the closest we can come to "living through" such experiences and beginning to understand their impact on individuals and the world. As a hybrid genre, memoir is "more accurate, more concrete, more compelling, and truer to the 'experience'" of the CRM because it creates a dialogue with history rather than presents an altogether new story (Nasstrom 326-7). More than that, because memoirs are never neutral in the stories they tell, they allow readers "to see themselves under a new light, spurring them to act" (Martinez Garcia 253). Frederick Luis Aldama explains that Black memoirs in particular serve a variety of purposes from making "[t]he move to emphasize the particular over the universal" with the hope of drawing attention to how whiteness objectifies Black bodies, to highlighting systemic issues or simply making one's story known (Aldama 1005). The raw emotion and firsthand knowledge contained within the pages of these memoirs are precisely what give them their credibility and historical meaning-making, and

memoirs about the CRM enhance our understanding of race, oppression, and resistance then and now. It is for this reason that I argue for memoirs' unique effectiveness as learning tools for exploring the civil rights era and for recognizing the importance of fuller accounts of history.

In the following discussion, I analyze two Civil Rights Movement memoirs, John Lewis's *Walking with the Wind* and Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968), to demonstrate how their storytelling methods help readers form connections to the historical topics they cover. As both memoirs outline the authors' lives in connection with the CRM, from childhood to adulthood, readers can begin to understand what it was like to grow up as an African American during one of the most tumultuous times in United States history—the height of mid-twentieth century segregation. In Moody's memoir, her experience growing up as a young Black woman in rural Mississippi is made palpable through her firsthand account of the everyday aspects of her life, from working in the homes of racist white families, to feeding her siblings, to leaving home to join the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). She also recounts her time at Tougaloo College, where she helped create the Congress of Racial Equity (CORE) and participated in lunch counter sit-ins. Similarly, in Lewis's memoir, he recounts his life in rural Alabama and time as the chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Lewis faced the same sort of poverty and racism, at the same time as Moody, but as a Black male, he had a different vantage point within the movement, which led to a prominent leadership role and garnered more visibility for his political involvement. As one of the "Big Six" leaders, Lewis, along with James Farmer, Martin Luther King Jr., A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, and Whitney Young, helped organize the March on Washington in 1963. *Walking with the Wind* also details his experience crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma on "Bloody Sunday," and his election to a congressional seat in Georgia in 1986.

I chose to analyze these two memoirs in my analysis because of their overlapping timelines and Southern geographical areas in addition to the authors' comparable involvement in the movement. Despite differences in the arcs of their stories, both Lewis and Moody describe the struggles that ultimately motivated their active and distinctive roles in the CRM and shaped the trajectory of their lives outside of the communities in which they grew up. Both born in 1940, the children of sharecroppers in the rural South, Moody's and Lewis's stories ask readers to see through their eyes and feel through their experiences of the CRM in a visceral way that promotes readers' enhanced personal engagement with a topic that is still relevant today. Although Moody's and Lewis's memoirs adhere rather closely to the "facts" of the movement by grafting their life stories onto the commonly accepted grand narrative of the campaign, their personal accounts of their experiences complicate this misleading narrative by challenging its simplicity (Nasstrom 354). This is where narrative storytelling becomes an important tool in learning about this history. Through their memoirs, Moody and Lewis give exigence and humanity to the time of the movement. They create purposefully curated spaces within their texts, like museums do, which encourages readers to emotionally connect to the stories contained within.

In this essay, I consider the memoir as a sort of literary museum "exhibit" in which memoirists purposefully curate a collection of stories to explain an event, or series of events, in their lives in ways that are both factual and literary. Yet, before turning to a close reading of *Coming of Age in Mississippi* and *Walking with the Wind*, I put literary studies and museum studies in dialogue with one another by discussing the similar approaches both have taken to communicate information to audiences. In a subsequent section I also briefly discuss museum studies in the context of affect theory to illustrate the importance of the emotional connections people make between themselves and objects and ideas. Then, I draw on both museum

frameworks and affect theory to demonstrate that Lewis's and Moody's memoirs use storytelling elements to paint a fuller picture of the Civil Rights Movement for readers, which ultimately helps them form important emotional connections.

Museum Studies Framework and 'The Real Thing'

In the past twenty years or so, many museums have transitioned away from being collections-focused, a less successful method of connecting with visitors because of its impact on user experience and thus their overall success as an industry. In less user-centered museums, historical events are often explained using dates, locations, and integral details using didactic labels. A curator or institution acts as the authoritative source on the topic, transmitting the information to "uninformed" visitors who file it away in their bank of knowledge, perhaps acknowledging that they have "learned something." Due to the limitations of this method, the goal has instead become visitor-centeredness focused on personal meaning-making.

The need to feel as though one fits into a larger human network is tied directly to what Lois Silverman calls "visitor meaning-making." This concept focuses on how people make personal connections with things, information, and physical spaces through their own experiences, and it represents the evolution of museums over the past thirty years to become more visitor centered. In her first article on meaning-making in 1995, Silverman writes of the importance of visitors' "active role in creating meaning of a museum experience through the context [they] bring," echoing the need for relation (Silverman, "Visitor Meaning-Making" 161). Museum studies scholar K.F. Latham's concept of 'The Real Thing' shows how user-centered experiences, like those Silverman describes, affect visitors by encouraging them to make connections on a deeper level than simply taking in information. To conduct this project, Latham takes an "interpretative phenomenological analysis" approach, meaning that she uses qualitative

methods, like conducting interviews, to focus on the lived experiences of museum visitors to “make sense of the meanings made around certain events, experiences, or states” (Latham 3). Through this study, she asserts that museumgoers benefit from a perceived sense of authenticity or “realness” when learning about a historical event. She explains how we can interpret visitors’ experience of authentic objects through four major themes:

1. Self: relating to something through aspects of one’s self
2. Relation: connecting to other people, events, times, and things
3. Presence: recognizing the presence of the physical thing
4. Surround: one’s experience is affected by the way [an exhibit] is presented to them and by what surrounds them (and it) (Latham 5).

In Latham’s study of these four themes of ‘The Real Thing’ (TRT), she analyzed the ways in which museum visitors learned from, interpreted, and experienced exhibits, particularly those of a historical nature, based on whether they were perceived to be authentic or *real*.

When presented with historical artifacts, or “real” objects,” participants in Latham’s study described their experiences in ways that could be boiled down to the overarching themes of “self,” “relation,” “presence,” and “surround.” The specific exhibition items in Latham’s study include the theatre chair in which Abraham Lincoln was seated when he was assassinated, everyday items recovered from the *Titanic*, and an electric chair used to execute hundreds of prisoners in Ohio. The state used the electric chair, named “Old Sparky,” to execute 312 men and three women, and the Ohio Historical Society displayed the chair for the first time in eighty years, in 2011, when a museumgoer named Howard viewed it as part of an exhibit titled “Controversy: Pieces You Don’t Normally See.” When interviewed about his experience viewing the Ohio electric chair—“Old Sparky”—in the Ohio Historical Society, Howard explained

that the artifact made him consider relationships between real objects, the people who interacted with them in the past, and the people who were subsequently affected by those interactions in the future. He stated

When you get the chance to sit down and think about the impact of each of these objects – it really kind of makes you think. And I think when you think about one thing, it kind of leads to another, and *it* kind of leads to another. Like this discussion with the electric chair. It's like – one life was affected – ok, then maybe that life was affected, and that one, and that one, and that one (Latham 9).

Through his interaction with the electric chair, Howard was able to make a connection via the relation theme, acknowledging the object's impact on the past and the present through the people it was used to execute. He also acknowledged the way in which all objects have this potential.

The provocative “Controversy: Pieces You Don't Normally See” exhibit also featured a wooden cage used to restrain patients at Ohio mental institutions during the Victorian Era, a Ku Klux Klan hood and robe, a 150-year-old sheepskin condom, and a metal “thumb mitt” used to prevent children from sucking their thumb. The historical society described all the artifacts as “inanimate objects that have ignited real, raw emotion” (“Past Exhibits”). The comments from another participant named Barbara indicate that one's ability to make an emotional connection is what makes a historical story or object stand out in one's mind. Barbara reflected on connecting to Lincoln's theatre seat through another aspect of ‘The Real Thing’: presence. She stated, “I remember like the sense of reverence, of ‘wow’, you know, like this is where it happened, you know? One chunk of where it happened... Well, the chair wasn't in the place, but the chair itself was the place” (Latham 13). In this instance, it was Barbara's emotional reaction—her awe—that made her consider the presence of the theatre chair within the museum space, leaving her to

consider her physical relation to the object. Similarly, when it came to connecting via Latham's theme of "self," a participant named Helen reflected that encountering an authentic Thomas Cole painting at the Columbus Museum of Art made her realize that "I'll never be there or see [the landscape] in person, but I could stand there imagining myself going up the mountain" (Latham 7). In this way, Helen made a connection between her place in the world and the experiences she had had or was likely to have, and she was able to imagine herself where Cole once stood when he painted the image of the mountain.

Museums are generally accepted by the public to be "keepers of 'real things'," institutions chock-full of knowledge which foster a unique sense of trust between themselves and their audiences (Latham 2). Latham's fourth major theme "surround" can be understood as "gestalt that the real could only be experienced as a part of a larger scenario or situation, consisting of many parts that come together to create a whole that becomes the real" (Latham 13). In the museum space, this effect is created by environmental factors such as lighting, the spatial relation of objects, and presentation style. For example, the display for the Ohio electric chair was very specifically designed to draw attention to the object while simply showcasing its appearance and presence within the space. Toward this end, the chair was situated on its own in the center of a room with dark-painted walls, lights shining toward it to make it the focus of the space, with a small, simple label attached to the side of the display. Because of the placement of the label, visitors were forced to turn their backs on the chair if they wanted to learn about it, thus iterating that their interaction was "intended to be with the object, not the explanation" (Columbus Underground). A participant, Harley, described her encounter with the chair that highlights how an object can have power simply by existing. She remarked that it "just kind of

caught my eye...the way the chair was presented” because of how the lighting in the room “made the chair the item of focus but it didn’t have a big spotlight” (Latham 15).

The perceived “realness” of an object, an experience, or a place is largely contributed to by how immersive the user’s engagement with it is. In Latham’s study, the visitors she interviewed spoke to this point, referring to the effectiveness of museum exhibits in terms of how immersive these experiences are or the *verisimilitude* they perceive exhibits to contain based on how they are curated. Latham describes this type of ideal all-encompassing museum experience as a “holistic” one, noting that this is more difficult to achieve if an exhibition does not evoke emotion or tap into at least some of the five senses (Latham 15). Another participant named Sasha explained the effects of “surround” in the dinosaur exhibit at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History as being almost synonymous with verisimilitude. Specifically, she felt that viewing the actual bones of the extinct creatures, arranged with purpose in a room of their own, showed that the curator carefully “put the pieces together in such a way to convince you it’s real,” thus creating what she calls “The Holy Grail” (Latham 14). She goes on to say that when people experience the dinosaur room, they “can walk through and see it and feel it and imagine it, and it stops being hypothetical or scientific, and it becomes real” (Latham 14).

Though Latham observes some people experienced TRT more strongly through one of the four themes presented rather than all of them equally, all twenty-one participants touched on at least one facet of each of Latham’s themes when describing their overall experience. Thus, she concludes there is “not one single way of understanding what is real in the museum,” but she confirms that the four major themes of TRT are the most common ways of processing information (Latham 17). Latham’s conclusion is significant because it shows the need for

museums to consider how they present historical artifacts to help people create connections that are as affective and real as possible.

Latham's four themes for assessing museumgoers' estimation of TRT is a useful pivot from older museum models that are less concerned with user engagement. For much of the twentieth century, museums were stuck in what Jeanne Goswami calls a "one-way stream of communication" in which "institutions dictated facts and information about the objects in their collections to visitors through didactic labels, audioguides, and tours" (Goswami 2). This type of communication to visitors was based solely on the misconception that the method used to present information was objective and that it would be "received equally and in the same way (i.e., as truth) by any and all visitors, regardless of their own unique background, life, experiences, or pre-existing structures of knowledge: (Goswami 2). These outdated exhibitions or, rather, this outdated *style* of communicating information to the public echoes Paulo Freire's "banking concept" of education, in which one individual—usually a teacher or any person in a place of authority—relays information and expects the audience to absorb the information like a sponge (Freire 71). Eilean Hooper Greenhill describes this outdated style of "transmission" as

a linear process of information-transfer from an authoritative source to an uninformed receiver. Knowledge is seen as objective, singular and value-free. The receiver of the message to be communicated is conceptualized as open to the reception of the message, which is received more or less efficiently, and in the same way by all (Hooper Greenhill 15).

In contrast, Latham's four themes are key to "understanding what it means to live in a time or be at an event in history," as they encourage visitors to connect to history through "empathetic understanding" (Latham 8). She explains this concept of empathetic understanding as someone

thinking to themselves, “I can imagine what it have been like to...” instead of simply intaking historic information at face value (Latham 8). Latham found that maintaining, collecting, and/or highlighting “real” objects in the museum space can be critical to a museum’s success with the public, as user experience that facilitates active thinking and empathetic understanding is integral to how the concepts these institutions present are understood and interpreted.

I see visiting museums and reading books as similar experiences because both ask people to step into a “world” other than their own and process an idea that may be new to them. Thus, in my essay, I draw on Latham’s study as a way to connect the museumgoer to the reader in order to understand the similarities between how people make connections through both of these experiences, specifically in relation to memoir. In the museum space, the role of the “narrator” lies with the curatorial professional in charge of developing the many facets of an exhibition, including its presentation, labels, and location. Therefore, if we view memoirs as analogous to the museum space, then the authors of these texts become curators of the exhibition that is their life story.

Museums, Affect, and Memoir

Meaning-making is not exclusive to museums, but rather something everyone experiences, every day, no matter where they are or what they are doing. Whether as visitors or readers, people are constantly making meaning of “individual objects, images, people, places, selves, relationships, and institutions” through “behaviors basic to most humans (Silverman “Visitor Meaning-Making” 161-162). Meaning-making is open-ended because of how it can “link seemingly independent components, explain how they are related, and demystify these collective social processes” (162). In everyday life, meaning-making happens at the grocery store when someone seeing a child picking out a box triggers a memory of their own favorite

childhood cereal, years forgotten. Similarly, such meaning-making can happen when someone recalls what they know about their favorite film genre, such as its themes, tropes, effects, and uses these aspects to help them understand a film they have never seen before, from a country or director they have never heard of. In museums, meaning-making is purposefully orchestrated to help visitors arrive at these intended connections through exhibit content and design, as well as various engagement techniques within a physical space. In this way, museums make a pointed effort to be conscious of the emotions of their audience, just like the authors of memoirs. Ultimately, no matter how it happens, meaning-making is what bridges the gap between experiences people have had and the infinite number they never will.

Meaning-making within the museum space generates similar connections between people and objects as the kinds of attachments observed between people and written texts through the lens of affect theory. Affect theory, which seeks to analyze how people make emotional associations between themselves and objects, places, and other beings, is most closely related to Latham's "self" and "relation" themes as well as the intended outcome for "empathetic reading." In the museum space, this can be seen when a visit is made memorable based on the affect that "sticks" between the visitor and the exhibits they are viewing. For example, a visitor might view an exhibit about a historical event that makes them feel sad and then later recall that feeling when they remember their visit. Sara Ahmed, in her article "Happy Objects," explains that it is this "sticky" quality of affect that "sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects," ultimately leaving a lasting impression on individuals who experience this type of connection during a visit (Ahmed 29). Similarly, when reading a written text, readers are often drawn to, and make connections with, content that affects them in some way—usually positively but also negatively. Although Ahmed's article focuses on the positive affective connections

people make to things, she also notes that “we are touched by what we are near,” which I think applies to any feeling one may have when in the presence of an authentic object or text. In other words, the effect is as powerful no matter the specific emotion or association being provoked (Ahmed 30).

In literary criticism involving affective theory, these types of associations are comparable to Latham’s “self” and “relation” themes because they are unique to one’s personal experiences and the knowledge acquired throughout one’s lifetime. In an exhibit that lacks authentic objects, just like in a literary text that lacks a first-person account, visitors and readers alike can observe the factual highlights of an event or topic while appreciating its positive aspects, such as progress made, or conflicts resolved. Whereas, when audiences are confronted with TRT or memoir, one has no choice but to substantively consider the authentic nature of an object or the narration of a firsthand experience, whether good or bad. When encountering TRT in a memoir, people’s emotions are often dictated by their own personal connections to the story, and this emotional response is what they are likely to remember long after their reading has concluded. Literary devices like descriptive language, irony, and metaphor “heighten the author’s ability to represent lived experience,” which ultimately allows readers to “refeel” or “rethink” what a memoirist felt or thought in the past (Jensen Wallach 36-37). The literary devices used by authors to help us “refeel” what they felt during the events they describe allow us to have a “vicarious experience” in which we can live through the stories we read through the emotions elicited by the text (Barzun and Graff 45).

Applying ‘The Real Thing’ to *Coming of Age in Mississippi* and *Walking with the Wind*

In applying Latham’s lens of TRT to these memoirs, I find that many of the literary techniques and tropes used in memoir, such as descriptive language and first-person perspective,

do similar work as the museum space to communicate similar authentic information to audiences. Just as museums use spatial, visual, and linguistic methods to carefully curate immersive exhibits of real objects within their spaces, Lewis and Moody do comparable work in their narratives to create immersive texts in which readers can experience “the real thing” by reading moments from their past. The Civil Rights Movement, which is the period of history their books cover, is defined by African Americans’ struggle for equal rights in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s. Despite slavery being abolished a hundred years before, Black individuals still faced discrimination and racism that had devastating effects on their everyday lives, especially in the Southern region of the country. Lewis’s and Moody’s memoirs highlight the time in which people across the country, tired of this systemic mistreatment, decided to mobilize against the violence and prejudice plaguing the Black community with boycotts, marches, and legal advocacy.

In this way, the two memoirs serve as artifacts of the time and the events which took place by capturing the thoughts, feelings, and memories of Lewis and Moody, as well as those around them who shared their experiences. Though their books cover generally the same topics and events, both authors take unique approaches to their retelling of what they experienced. Lewis, for example, composed his memoir from a point of view much further removed from the historical events he narrates, which allow him to connect to readers more strongly through the “self” theme. In contrast, Moody, who composed her memoir just as the movement was ending, which gives her writing a sense of urgency instead of respective reflectiveness. Lewis’s memoir is also distinguished by its inclusion of photographs, which strengthens its “surround” effect and allows readers to *see* what he is talking about instead of strictly having to imagine the people, places, and events in his book. However, both memoirs’ strength lies in their ability to connect to

readers via Latham's "presence" and "relation" themes due to the ways in which they intertwine personal stories and real-life events to enhance the relevance and reality of the experiences they describe. No matter their sometimes differing approaches, Lewis's and Moody's narratives prompt connections in audiences via the four main themes outlined in Latham's study—"self," "relation," "presence," and "surround"—which I argue are integral, in the same way, to how readers process and understand memoirs of the Civil Rights Movement.

Before turning to a close reading of specific excerpts from Lewis's and Moody's narratives in the following subsections, I provide a general overview of the four ways I identify memoirs and TRT as parallel. First, the "self" theme can be observed through Lewis's and Moody's use of different perspectives in their writing. For example, the first person "I" is often used to help readers put themselves into the position of the narrator, a method found in a variety of genres. Yet it is, perhaps, more effective in memoir because the situations being recounted are understood as having happened to real people in the past. A first-person narrative voice causes readers to "remember specific events, occurrences, similarities, and differences," which is conducive to the development of empathy because it asks them to connect to the writer via their own "personal knowledge" or "self" (Latham 6).

Second, both authors use the "relation" theme by using their memoirs to tell the stories about familiar historical events from the Civil Rights Movement, bridging the gaps between real people (the authors) and topics with which readers are not personally knowledgeable, making these historical events seem more real in effect. When readers encounter ideas or events they are familiar with, from other aspects of their lives, they can jump more easily between seemingly disconnected concepts they see as related, even if only very minimally. These types of relational connections can be as simple as recalling a similar scene one remembers from a movie or as

complex as remembering comparable information acquired in a class over the course of a semester.

Third, I contend the “presence” theme is key to understanding when Lewis’s and Moody’s backgrounds. Readers’ association with “presence” is deepened by the authors building family backstories, humanizing themselves, and asking readers to acknowledge their existence in both the past and the present. Additionally, this theme, though it refers to “the actual presence of a physical thing that is in the space with the experiencer,” can be applied to the written text if we consider that memoir is the physical *embodiment* of the thoughts and feelings of people who physically existed in history (Latham 10). The kind of literary embodiment negotiated by memoirists differs from that of the authors and editors of nonliterary historical texts because they do not necessarily possess firsthand experience of the topics they write on. Meaning the latter act as more of an intermediary between an event, they have secondhand knowledge of, and the reader, who might also lack firsthand experience.

Lastly, memoirs, on a most basic level, are presented to readers as real or authentic by way of their cover art and text, which we associate with the “surround” theme. All memoir covers state the memoirist’s name, and they often explicitly state that the book is a memoir. The authentic or real nature of memoir is also used to promote these texts online and, in the media, including such publications as *New York Times* book reviews or the synopses on publishing companies’ websites. Additionally, memoir covers often include either an image of the memoirist at the age they were during the stories they tell or a contemporary photograph showing them on the other side of whatever events they describe. Less often, an artistic representation is used as a metaphor for, or a glimpse of, a major theme from the work. These trends presenting authenticity signal to readers that the pages within contain a lived experiences

just as the conventions of the genre suggest to readers that their expectations of honesty and accuracy will be fulfilled.

Self

Latham's theme of "self" is often associated by museumgoers with the learning of new information, making it an integral component to the process of understanding a Civil Rights Movement memoir. For readers who might struggle to grasp why, for example, members of the Black community were willing to put their lives on the line through their activism to change the racist mindset and discriminatory actions of white America, relating to civil rights activists' memoirs via "self" can be a helpful tool. Even for the optimistic reader, it is easy to become discouraged when comparing the past to the present, especially when it seems as though not much has changed for the better or that the movement's methods used back then were ineffective. One way to better understand the progress that has been made or the reasons why something was done a certain way is to gain insight from someone who was there and experienced it firsthand. When Lewis explains one of the motivating factors behind his involvement in the CRM he says,

Part of the effort of the movement was to tame the madness of men, to take the beast that lives in all of us and turn it toward love, to show humankind a different way, to teach the way of compassion, of connection and community, of peace and nonviolence. Yes, we are human, and yes, there is a savage side in all of us. The first impulse of man has always been to react like an animal, to respond to attack in a like manner. If someone hits you, strike back. If someone bombs you, bomb back. But there have been teachers, men and women throughout history, who have stood and said, No, you can't take an eye for an eye.

If you do, we will all be blind. At some point we have to lift ourselves to a higher plane.

And it is possible. Men have shown throughout history that it is possible (Lewis 409).

Lewis uses several key terms in this passage which invoke readers' understanding via "self": the unifying "us" and "we" and the second person "you." These terms, on their own and in conjunction with one another, work to place the audience into the mindset of the people involved in the Civil Rights Movement to communicate the exigence behind maintaining their nonviolent methods. In this way, readers can connect to these individuals through the "self" theme's emphasis on relating "through aspects of myself" because of Lewis's word choice, which relates to Lewis and other protesters on an even deeper level (Latham 6).

The concept of "self" "is about one's own identity, understandings, and ways of figuring things out for one's self," which memoirs tap into using language that asks readers to put themselves in the place of the memoirist. Lewis's memoir encourages readers to "remember specific events, occurrences, similarities, and differences" from our pasts, thus encouraging us to empathize with the experience of being a movement member (Latham 6). Specifically, Lewis's use of the second person in this passage directly addresses readers by asking us to consider what we would do in his position, in the position of any Black person living during this time period. Would we go up against this sort of opposition, and if so—how? At the same time, Lewis suggests that the alternative is "madness." Lewis implicitly asks readers to question whether he and other members of the movement really have a choice. Did Lewis and other members of the movement really have a choice? By figuring ourselves and the choices we might make into Lewis's memoir, we are factoring in our own "personal knowledge" and empathy in the form of similar experiences. And in this way, his narrative becomes more real. Lewis illustrates that although the CRM's methods went against what many people wanted – against even human nature – good

could come from what they were doing and there were successes to be had, as small as they may seem now and as dangerous as they were to achieve.

While Lewis spent thirty years ruminating on his involvement in the movement before publishing his memoir, Moody wrote hers while the movement was still going on, giving it a less reflective feel. As a result, Moody's writing moment gives her memoir a more urgent and present feel because it is less apparent to readers how much time has passed since the events in her story occurred. An example of this is salient as the memoir comes to a close, when Moody reevaluates her role in the movement, and the progress it has made, while on her way to testify at the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) hearings in Washington. Following her college graduation and a bout of depression after her uncle was shot and killed, Moody finds herself disenchanted by the movement as she begins the long bus ride to attend the hearings. As everyone sings excitedly around her and enthusiastically tells everyone in Washington about what the Mississippi COFO branch has been working on, she struggles to be in the moment with them as tears well up in her eyes. She remembers fellow COFO member, Mrs. Chinn, telling her, "We ain't big enough to do it by ourselves,"—it being freedom for all—and she begins to cry because she is overwhelmed by the prospect of what is to come and the seeming impossibility of it all. When asked by her friend Gene if she thinks they will figure things out in Washington, Moody remains silent:

I didn't answer him. I knew I didn't have to. He looked as if he knew exactly what I was thinking.

"I wonder. I wonder."

We shall overcome, We shall overcome

We shall overcome some day.

I WONDER. I really WONDER (Moody 384).

In this moment, readers who remember along with Moody all that she has been through, all that she has helped the movement accomplish, and all that remains unchanged, are able to feel the gravity of what it is like to fight long and hard for something one believes in and then be hit with the impossible nature of one's mission. Although not much is said in this scene, Moody's inclusion of "We Shall Overcome," a well-known gospel song popularized during the Civil Rights Movement, signals the possibility of hope and unites readers with those riding the bus to Washington that day despite Moody's uncertainty about the hearing's outcome. The seeming formatting of the lyrics into verses might even encourage readers familiar with the tune to hum or sing along, to hear the song and its message in their head in a way Moody could not that day. Lastly, in light of the Black Lives Matter protests that occurred following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, contemporary readers in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement might also consider—*wonder*—where we stand today in regard to racial politics compared to where Black freedom struggles were in Moody's time. Moody's description of that day on the bus gives this scene a transhistorical effect.

Relation

Perhaps the most useful of the four themes to learning about the Civil Rights Movement is "relation," which encourages readers to connect "to other beings (living things), events, the past, and ways of life, but in less personal aspects than in the 'self' theme" (Latham 8). While one can generally make at least some form of personal connection to any aspect of the human experience, some experiences can be too much of a stretch for this connection to be meaningful. Relation draws from more imprecise connections, asking less of readers but still impacting them via their basic understanding of history. For example, both Lewis and Moody communicate the

effect of Emmett Till's death on their childhoods and how this event ultimately shaped their involvement in the Civil Right Movement. To some, his death might seem abstract, a tragedy understood through hazy details. To combat this abstraction, readers can draw from their familiarity with the basics of the CRM and use the experience of relation to make a connection between the murder of Till and the trauma of Moody and Lewis. Their firsthand accounts create a bridge between real, physical human beings and this intangible moment in time, making Till's murder and the aftermath seem more real to contemporary readers distanced from his death in effect.

In Moody's and Lewis's writing, they explain the utter hopelessness and grief they felt as young African Americans experiencing Till's murder and others like it. Because relation is about "understanding what it means to live in a time or be at an event in history," when, for example, Lewis describes the effect of this tragedy on his life, readers are able to connect to the history of Till through "empathic understanding" when Lewis describes the effect of Till's murder on his life (Latham 8). Lewis writes that he was "shaken to the core," "at the edge of manhood, just like him [Till]" (Lewis 47). The news of the event destroyed any preconceived notions he had about the changes he thought were taking place in the South (Lewis 47). Expanding on these feelings, he explains, "[Till] could have been me. *That* could have been me, beaten, tortured, dead at the bottom of a river" (Lewis 47). At this moment, the reality of the world around Lewis sets in, making him feel "like a fool" for believing that life for Black Americans was changing for the better. He remembers that

[i]t didn't seem that the Supreme Court mattered. It didn't seem that the American principles of justice and equality I read about in my beat-up civics books at school mattered. The messages I heard in church, the songs we would sing – 'In Christ there's no east or west,

no north or south' – declarations of absolute equality in God's eyes, didn't seem to matter either. They didn't matter to the men who killed Emmett Till. They didn't matter to the jury that deliberated for a mere hour before delivering its verdict of not guilty. Nor did they matter to the county that continued to send me to a school separate from white children and forbade me to eat at the same drugstore counter or even use the same public restroom as they (Lewis 47).

In this instance, the gravity of Lewis's place in the world becomes clear to him through the death of a boy he never met but could relate to because of their similar position on the cusp of manhood. Here, Lewis himself connects to Till's life and death relationally through his own empathetic understanding of what happened and what that meant for the future of other African American boys and men across the country. In this way, "relation" works twofold in Lewis's memoir: the affective connection between he and Till, and the empathetic reading Lewis facilitates among his audience for his own life story by way of Till.

Moody, who was the same age as Lewis at the time of Till's murder, describes a similar experience of learning about his murder, which gave her "a completely new insight into the life of Negroes in Mississippi" (Moody 121). She remembers, "Up until [Till's] death, I had heard of Negroes found floating in a river or dead somewhere with their bodies riddled with bullets. But I didn't know the mystery behind these killings then" (Moody 121). As a Black child living in the South, Moody was no stranger to cold-blooded murder and racial violence perpetrated by white people in and around her community. She was confronted with this reality as early as age seven when her mother explained that an "Evil Spirit" had beaten a Black man to death and that if she was not a "good girl" this "Evil Spirit" would kill her too (Moody 121). When she learns about

Till, Moody has the same realization as Lewis. Feeling “stupid,” she discovers, “I really didn’t know what was going on all around me.”

Her feeling quickly turns to fear as she begins to understand that her boss, a white woman named Mrs. Burke, is of the mindset that Till’s death was his own fault. Moody remembers,

I went home shaking like a leaf on a tree. For the first time out of all her trying, Mrs. Burke had made me feel like rotten garbage. Many times, she had tried to instill fear within me and subdue me and had given up. But when she talked about Emmett Till there was something in her voice that sent chills and fear all over me. 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 was also 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. Probably just being a Negro period was enough, I thought (Moody 125-6).

Like Lewis, Moody has a similar revelation about the meaning of Till’s death for herself and other young African Americans. She relates her feelings in this moment to others she has had in the past, including reflections about food insecurity and the consequences of her behavior. Her relational thoughts she has, severe in their own right, are nothing compared to her realization that simply existing is enough to get her killed.

Being afraid for one’s life due to racialized threat is not a universal feeling. Moody focuses not only on her experience of poverty and religious fears of hell and the devil, but also being afraid for her life based on her race. The relational experience, however, makes it easier to understand how one’s skin color might dictate their safety, because it requires them to consider

“understandings about humanity, existence,” and being “a part of something bigger, a part of humanity” (Latham 9). By nature, memoirs, like museums, invoke a “passion to discover meaning,” “a striving towards a higher order of relation, which also carries its emotions, its hopes, its threats, its triumphs” (Barthes 271). Readers of Moody’s memoir can say to themselves *I have never been afraid for my life because of my race, but I have been afraid, and I can use my own fears to better understand the feelings Emmett Till’s murder awakened in Black people who experienced it firsthand*. Despite the lack of a direct personal connection, this relational association asks readers to think about what it means to be “human and the shared understanding of what that means across time, empathy, and grappling with issues around justice, morality, mortality, and life” (Latham 9). Moody’s is not an “Every-woman story,” nor is it a stand-in for the story of Black women in general, but she writes of many different experiences with which countless readers can form a connection with her story. This is what ultimately gives her memoir its relational power (Duran 122).

In the explicit context of the classroom, Moody’s text has the potential to help readers make connections across time and experience. For example, TJ Boisseau, who regularly teaches Moody’s memoir at the high school and college level, states that her writing invites his students “into the labyrinth of historical change and fosters their ability to perceive history as happening at the level of the individual psyche in conjunction with that of the economy and community” (Boisseau 19). Through reading Moody’s memoir, Boisseau’s students can see how her personal experiences tie into, and help form, a collective historical experience that transcends time and informs our contemporary experiences with racial injustice. In other words, Moody’s story, and others like it, employ relation for readers to be able to comprehend “what it was like for another being...to be in some other time or place” and to realize that “[a]s a member of the human race,

there are certain universals we share over space and time.” The need and desire for safety is a primary connector across time, race, and culture and “fitting” us “into a network” of humanity (Latham 9).

The ability of this type of relational understanding to foster shared across a span of time is integral to its affective impact on readers and their commitment to the continued fight for racial justice. When *Walking with the Wind* and *Coming of Age* were written, in 1998 and 1968, respectively, both Lewis and Moody were still alive. Although the Civil Rights Movement is often discussed with an air of finality and is commonly perceived as distant and thus resolved, stories from this era still have much to teach us. The issues they portray carry over into today’s world. Jeanne Theoharis, in the introduction to her book *A More Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History*, references this portrayal when she points out that the Civil Rights Movement’s status as a “national fable” began in 1968 with the push to make Martin Luther King Jr. Day a federal holiday (Theoharis 3). The creation of the holiday in 1983 under the Reagan administration ultimately served as a political move to “demonstrate racial sensitivity, pay tribute to the movement’s successful and now completed battle against racism...and thwart ongoing calls for racial justice” (Theoharis 4). She goes on to explain that subsequent holidays and honors, like our increasingly commercialized celebration of Black History Month and Rosa Parks’s national funeral in 2005, allow us to avoid hard questions about continued racial inequality in the United States and uphold the illusion that we have moved past the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement. Later events, such as President Barack Obama’s speech in Ferguson, Missouri following the 2014 murder of Michael Brown by police, further perpetuated this idea that the racial injustices still happening today are not systemic because they are not sanctioned by law. Despite this national fable, I argue when readers encounter stories like

Lewis's and Moody's, they relate the past to the present, which makes it harder for national politics and holidays to "simplify, appropriate, and contain" the Civil Rights Movement as has been done historically by political figures and the country as a whole (Dowd Hall 1235).

Presence

The building of a narrator's "presence" through memoir is one of the defining facets of the genre itself. When telling the story of their life, one must typically start from the beginning, or if taking a non-traditional route, they must at least include their backstory at some point or another. Moody and Lewis provide detailed accounts of their early lives, starting from their birth or infancy and recounting their upbringing through high school and into college, highlighting their experiences performing physical labor and facing institutional oppression. Whereas Moody's memoir concludes with her college years, Lewis's takes off in the direction of his career endeavors. Both memoirs, however, give us an account of the time before, during, and after the movement by providing decades of firsthand perspective with which to engage. In particular, the narrative sense of "the real thing" through the theme of "presence" is conveyed through the way they represent their relationship with racialized, class, and exploitative labor. Although Moody and Lewis cannot share their stories in person, the descriptions they provide of their physical presence in the past helps keep this presence alive for readers through the pages of their books.

Both born to sharecroppers in the rural South in 1940, Moody's and Lewis's descriptions of their childhoods echo each other in several aspects and, thus, together paint a picture of what life was like for other African Americans with similar regional and class backgrounds during the period. Although Moody was no stranger to hunger and hardship, she faced a different set of struggles based on her gender and her regulation to domestic work. She recounts many instances

in which her mother had to steal to feed Moody and her siblings, their hunger made visceral for readers by her descriptions of her family's constant lack of food. Most of their meals consisted of beans or leftovers from the white families her mother worked for, and eating these leftovers were the only time they had access to meat (Moody 20, 25, 34). At one point, money is so sparse after Moody's father leaves the family that her mother begins to send her out regularly to sweep a white woman's porch. Moody remembers, "I was nine years old and I had my first job. I earned seventy-five cents and two gallons of milk a week." This milk, she would later discover, was from the pan the woman left for her cats to drink (Moody 44-5). From that moment on, Moody works various jobs to supplement her mother's meager income, oftentimes in the homes of openly racist white families in her community.

Lewis, on the other hand, depicts a less tumultuous childhood. His family's poverty was severe, but his parents, who are still married and contributing to the household, carefully keep their economic status from him. As soon as he is old and fit enough to be of some assistance in the field work, he is brought along to help farm the land, work that he at an early age understands to be rooted in "exploitation, hopelessness, a dead-end way of life" (Lewis 10). He goes on to put the sharecropping lifestyle into perspective for readers:

Imagine how much cotton must be picked to total a hundred pounds. Imagine a man picking a little over two hundred pounds in a day, and his wife, working right beside him, picking almost that much. Imagine that their payment at the end of that day is thirty-five cents per hundred pounds, or a total of \$1.40 for four hundred pounds of cotton – a fifth of a tone for less than two dollar bills. Now stop imagining. Those numbers are precisely what my mother and father were picking and earning at the time I was born (Lewis 10).

He goes on to explain that his parents,

like hundreds of thousands – no, *millions* – of black men and women of their generation, worked harder than seemed humanly possible, under circumstances more difficult than most Americans today could possibly imagine, to carve out a life for themselves and their children in a society that saw them as less than fully human (Lewis 9).

By providing these insights into not only their childhoods but the lives of their parents, Moody and Lewis work to solidify their corporeal presence by constructing backstories for themselves through a map of their genealogies which span not just their lives but also generations of African Americans' lives, labor, and institutional oppression. This physical, familial, and collective history serves as the basis for their activism. Both writers signify in their memoirs that they are “an actual physical thing that *was there* and is *right here in front of me now*” (Latham 5). These authors' depiction of the poverty and bodily trauma they experienced, though specific to the time and the places they lived, potentially continues to resonate with readers because poverty and food insecurity is something many people still experience to this day.

Former SNCC organizer, Charles E. Cobb Jr., now a middle school instructor in Mississippi, writes about an encounter with the concept of ‘presence’ in his own teaching of Black history. While giving a lesson on the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi, in a school located directly across the street from the Fannie Lou Hamer Public Library, Cobb mentioned to his students at the time that he would be happy to share what he remembered of his time working with Hamer in the movement. One of his students shot up from his seat “in sheer amazement” and exclaimed, “Mr. Cobb! You was *alive* back then!” (Cobb 15). Despite the fact that Cobb's students saw the library every single day, it took making a connection to their instructor who *was there* (with Hamer) to give any sort of meaning to the building's existence. They knew that the

library building was important to the community, and they assumed that because it was named for Hamer, she must be important, too. However, outside of that basic knowledge, the students know of no significance for either the person or the place. But once they connected the building and Hamer with their teacher, someone whose “presence” they were personally familiar with, then they were able to see how the past carries over into the present. Similarly, when Lewis and Moody humanize themselves, as Cobb did to himself and Hamer in this moment, as “characters” in Black history, they force readers to acknowledge that they were there—in the past, involved in the Civil Rights Movement, and in the existence beyond it. Their memoirs convey they are here now, telling us their stories and connecting us to the past.

Surround

The most basic of Latham’s four themes—“surround”—can be tied directly into how memoir’s physical form, and the genre itself, solicit certain expectations from readers. Memoirs, like museums, have an inherent air of trust about them, in the sense that the genre, as life-writing, causes readers to assume the story being told by the narrator is an honest recollection of a real person’s memories and experiences. This perception is very different in the context of memoir than within the museum space. For memoir, this effect is created through a book’s physical presentation, the narrative style of writing, and often the inclusion of pictures, primary documents, and/or references to popular culture. As a form of “visual identification,” photographs strengthen connections between readers and the narrative as well as support referentiality, which contributes to the verisimilitude of the text (Garcia Martinez 266). While primary documents eliminate the third voice interpretation that comes with the average historical text and leave the learner alone with the source to develop their own meaning, images put a “face” to the movement. Leigh Raiford notes that the repetitive use of certain photographs in art

exhibits, textbooks, political campaigns, and commercials have turned such images into “icons” that “come to distill and symbolize a range of complex events and ideologies” (Raiford 3). Christine Acham argues that mass media, be it the iconic photographs Raiford discusses or documentary films and television shows, also serve as Black “sites of resistance” that communicate and promote different aspects of the movement (Acham xiii). These types of visual narratives do special work to document a collective history of the CRM in our memory to invite and demand that we remember the not-so-distant past (Raiford 4). Much like the museum creates an immersive world for its visitors—an alternate universe of sorts—so too does the memoir.

For example, in Lewis’s memoir, this immersive experience begins with the front cover, where large yellow text below the title clearly states, “A Memoir of the Movement.” The text overlays an image of the author himself which spans the entire cover space. The image, a black and white profile shot, shows Lewis seemingly in deep thought with a solemn, contemplative expression on his face, which signals to readers the seriousness of his story. Additionally, the decision to pair an image of Lewis as a young adult with a tagline referencing the Civil Rights Movement iterates just how young he was in many of the stories he recounts about his time advocating for social justice during his college years. At the time of its release, Lewis’s memoir was also advertised by the press as an authentic account of the movement, which likely contributed to how it was received by readers. In William H. Chafe’s 1998 review of the book for the *New York Times*, he refers to it as a “powerful memoir” that “evokes, with passion and simplicity, how the 1960s transformed the United States” (Chafe). He also notes that “[o]ne of the virtues of memoir is that it can highlight through personal example themes that historians have articulated but not made vivid” (Chafe). Chafe’s review suggests that Lewis does in his

memoir what historians cannot and thus enhances readers' understanding of the movement (Chafe).

Similarly, the cover of Moody's memoir also includes her photograph. It is a sepia-toned image in which she glances up and away from the camera, appearing, like Lewis, to be very young and in deep thought. This photograph is layered upon an image that readers can assume is Moody's childhood home: a small white building with one window and one door. The image of her home, which is paired with a single line of text stating that the book is "[t]he classic autobiography of a young black girl in the rural south" helps people begin to understand, even without reading the memoir, what her life might have been like. In a *New York Times* review of Moody's book, Edward M. Kennedy calls it "a history of our time" as "seen through the eyes of the participant" (Kennedy). Kennedy also notes how Moody "brings to life the signs and smells of rural poverty" and "bares the psyche of the rural Negro" in a way that "personaliz[es] poverty and degradation and mak[es] it more real than any study or statistic could have done" (Kennedy). As soon as this book is pulled off the shelf, readers know they will be receiving a firsthand account of the author's experiences. Moody's memoir is also broken into chronological sections which provide a timeline for readers to be able to situate her stories within a general time frame that they are likely familiar with if they have a rudimentary understanding of the CRM. For example, she speaks about Emmett Till's 1955 murder in the "High School" section of her book and President John F. Kennedy's 1963 assassination in the "The Movement" section. Both examples helping readers situate Moody's story within the larger historical moment as well as their existing historical knowledge about the era. These facets of Moody's memoir, simple though they may seem, lay the framework for how her book should be interpreted by readers and ultimately how much authentic value it will be perceived to have.

The verisimilitude of these texts is, of course, most directly affected by how Moody and Lewis tap into readers' senses through the descriptive language they use and the iconic movement situations they depict—especially as they relate to racial violence. As supporters of the nonviolent movement, both writers attended their fair share of sit-ins and marches by joining forces with their fellow SNCC, CORE, and NAACP members at protest demonstrations across the South. In Moody's account of her first Woolworth's sit-in, she narrates a fast-paced, chaotic scene in which she protests the segregation of lunch counters. As the sit-in heats up, Moody recounts a moment when students from a white high school nearby enter the store and begin fashioning a rope into a hangman's noose which they attempt to put around the necks of the protestors. In this same instance, another white man draws a knife and slaps Moody across the face as the crowd starts to chant, "Communists, Communists, Communists" (Moody 265). Moody is then dragged by her hair across the store while "ketchup, mustard, sugar, pies, and everything on the counter" is smeared on her and her fellow protestors, who have taken no action except to sit silently at the whites-only lunch counter (Moody 266). Salt is thrown into the protestor's open wounds, and they are spray-painted with the word "nigger" by people who, as Moody describes them, "believed so much in the segregated way of life, they would kill to preserve it" (Moody 267). She thinks to herself at this moment, "Many more will die before this is over with" (Moody 267).

In a similar scene, Lewis recounts the violence he and others faced during an attempted march in 1965 across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama where they were attacked by a posse of white deputized citizens and state troopers. The event, now referred to as "Bloody Sunday," was part of the 1965 Selma and Montgomery marches for voting rights, and it became one of the most brutal attacks on nonviolent protestors during the Civil Rights Movement. With

their passage blocked by troopers and posse men, Lewis and his group make the decision to kneel and pray in lieu of reversing their course on the bridge that day. Then Lewis describes in the next moment “all hell broke loose” (Lewis 340). The marchers are engulfed by a “human wave,” a blur of blur shirts and billy clubs and bullwhips” as they try to hold their ground in an effort to not be pushed into the river below. He remembers, vividly, “the clunk of the troopers’ heavy boots, the whoops of rebel yells from white onlookers, the clip-clop of horses’ hooves hitting the hard asphalt of the highway, the voice of a woman shouting, ‘Get ‘em! *Get* the niggers!’” (Lewis 340). As Lewis’s head is bludgeoned by a state trooper and tear gas is released into the crowd, he writes,

I began choking, coughing. I couldn’t get air into my lungs. I felt as if I was taking my last breath. If there was ever a time in my life for me to panic, it should have been then. But I didn’t. I remember how strangely calm I felt as I thought, this is it. People are going to die here. *I’m* going to die here. I really felt that I saw death at that moment, that I looked it right in its face (Lewis 340).

When he finally comes to again, the scene around him is utter mayhem. People—children even—are gushing blood from open wounds, others are lying incapacitated on the ground, while some are vomiting or sobbing as the troopers trample over their bodies with their horses. “Bloody Sunday” jumpstarted a major wave of support from white Americans when photographs of the attack were published by the media and broadcast on television.

Moody’s and Lewis’s graphic descriptions of whites’ violence targeting peaceful Black protesters force readers to witness the bloodshed of the movement, smell the tear gas, hear the anti-Black chants, and feel the beatings endured by protesters. The fear is palpable, and this fear, communicated via sensory detail, complicates the traditional white, Westernized narrative of the

movement, which is void of emotion and oversimplified. Both narratives resist the sterile facts that describe *Protestors A, B, and C protested laws D, E, and F and the result was G, H, and I*. These scenes take this one-dimensional narrative of non-violent protests and flips it on its head. They humanize the protesters' experiences by untying the neat little bow which has been wrapped around these events for so long. At one point, Lewis asks readers to consider this sanitized narrative directly by heroically describing the anonymous civil rights protesters:

They were the rank and file, in Selma, in Americus, in Little Rock, everywhere. You see their faces today in photographs in history books and nobody knows their names. That young guy sitting stoically at the lunch counter in Jackson with mustard streaming down his face and a mob of white hoodlums crowded around him taunting and laughing—who is he? Where is he today? The young man whose pants leg is being torn by a snarling German shepherd in Birmingham—what is his name? Where is *he*? Whatever happened to the little girl who was turned head over heels by those fire hoses? (Lewis 318).

With this passage he iterates the fact that members of the CRM (and Black people in general) were (and are) living, breathing people, not flat stock characters in a textbook. As readers see, hear, and feel the protests and their violent backlash, perhaps truly for the first time, they better appreciate these individual's experience of having lived through these turbulent events.

Conclusion: Final Thoughts on Memoir and the Classroom

Memoirs and museum exhibits have much more in common than one might think, as both serve to teach us new perspectives on historical events we might not have ever considered before. As our study of how people engage with objects—be it an artifact in an exhibit or a memoir about a certain topic—has slowly evolved to be mindful of the user experience, we have adopted new understandings of how to help museumgoers and readers alike engage with these

materials in more meaningful ways. Memoir's distinctive quality lies in its ability to teach us about the past using storytelling method typically absent from traditional historical texts, which ultimately allows for more human connection to be made between readers and the stories they contain. This type of affective connection, or meaning-making, is similar to that created between visitors and objects in museums, as Silverman and Latham both outline in their work. By drawing on user experience studies in museums to analyze how readers can make connection to the memoirs they read, we can see the value in teaching history through the memoir which offer students access to artifacts of "the real thing." Moreover, by looking to the field of museum studies, we discover how the interweaving of user experience with empathy helps readers make connections across time, space, and race.

Teachers like Cobb and Boisseau, try different approaches to keep historical lessons relevant and engaging in the twenty-first century. Where museums have begun to listen intently to visitors' thoughts on their exhibitions and to substantively consider their direct engagement with collections, the classroom is another space in which one's experiences can be useful to help students make connections with course content. I do not advocate for the exclusion of history and "facts" from the methods we use to teach and learn about the Civil Rights Movement. Rather, this type of information should be used, and recognized as, *an entry point* for our efforts to better understand Black history. People, cultures, and movements are multidimensional, and it is imperative that we treat their stories in a way that communicates these intricacies to readers.

This topic is of personal importance to me as someone who didn't receive what I feel to be a well-rounded education about the Civil Rights Movement and Black history. Growing up in a small rural town in Kansas, I did not encounter much diversity in the people around me, the ideas I was exposed to, or the education I received. It was my responsibility to look elsewhere

for the variety of perspectives I knew were out there but did not have easy access to. This is one of the main reasons I decided to attend the University of Kansas, which is where I was finally exposed to Black history during my undergraduate and graduate careers. I took classes in Latinx trauma literature, African diaspora literature, and Civil Rights and Black Power Movement literature, which complicated what I was taught previously in my education and socialization.

As literary exhibits of “The Real Thing,” John Lewis’s and Anne Moody’s memoirs illustrate the innate connection between humanity and history, showing us that the nonviolent movement did not appear in abstract facts and figures but was realized through the individuals who experienced it firsthand. Museums and instructors tend to uphold certain texts, stories, and objects as great, all-encompassing representations of particular times, places, and people, which can be intimidating and misleading, especially when visitors and students often feel as though teachers, scholars, curators possess some sort of unique, all-knowing authority over the history we share with them. History is complicated, unidealized, and human, and it is our duty as educators in museums and classrooms, to help people connect to it in ways that are equally complex.

As our understanding of educational methods continues to evolve, we must not limit our learning to traditional historical texts but expand our repertoire to include the narrative act of storytelling. Memoir, like literature, “helps us *feel* history” (Whitt x). Although this can be an uncomfortable process, especially when dealing with matters of race, it is when we are feeling, through connections between who we are and what we know, that we are truly learning. Cobb’s and Boisseau’s essays inspire me to consider my own positionality as an instructor, and I conclude this essay with my developing thoughts on how teaching life writing can work in the composition classroom space. I believe we must diversify our reading lists to include memoir as

well as life writing activities for our students that help them make connections between how their own experiences translate into the written word and how their experiences may make affective connections with readers.

Although I have yet to teach memoir, I have incorporated life writing into my curriculum to help my students document their own personal experiences in a similar way as Lewis and Moody. I emphasize the concept that my students are already writers with ideas worth writing about, and I use this approach to level the playing field between academic writing and the work they think they can produce. In other words, I hope to invite my students into what Hephzibah Roskelly calls the “academic club” by sharing with them the belief that “they *can* write and that they know something worth writing about” (Roskelly 142, Redd 148). To this end, I start every semester off with an assignment in which students must write a personal narrative essay about a pivotal moment in their life that they feel shaped them into who they are today or changed them in some way. I am continually impressed and moved by the essays I receive—emotional accounts of slowly losing loved ones to cancer, battling eating disorders, watching a parent succumb to alcoholism or drug abuse—and so are my other students who have the privilege of reading their peers’ work. It is my goal with these types of assignments to teach my students the value of documenting one’s own story for future generations to read and emotionally connect to. In this way, my work in the classroom reflects the work of my thesis, as my aim here was to not only engage but to promote memoirs and texts like them, as learning tools, in the classroom and beyond.

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