

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Dr. Alison Parker, the Richards Professor of American History at the University of Delaware. Regular listeners may recall that Dr. Parker previously joined us to discuss "unceasing militant" Mary Church Terrell, and today she's back to discuss her next book that she's currently working on about Civil Rights activist Mary Hamilton. So let's start off with an introduction to her work and her place in history, because this is one of those people that I hadn't heard of, and that always intrigues me.

[Listen to Dr. Alison Parker on Mary Church Terrell](#) or [read the transcript](#).

AP: One of the things that was exciting for me is that I had also not heard of Mary Hamilton, and I heard about her on a podcast, talking about her in the context of race and racism in the United States. And it was focusing on just one aspect of her life, which is that she was somebody who got arrested a lot because she was in the Civil Rights movement, and she was involved in a lot of nonviolent civil disobedience protests. And in that context, they would often get arrested. And in one of the cases where she was arrested, and they would be charged with things like disorderly conduct or blocking the sidewalk or whatever it was. So she and her fellow protesters in the Congress of Racial Equality or CORE in the 1960s were in jail for protesting in Gadsden, Alabama, so a small Alabama town. And when they were brought before the judge for the trial, the white lawyers and the white judge all referred to the Black people who were protesters by only their first name, Mary or Allison, but not Dr. Parker, Ms. Tyra, whatever it would be. They didn't use any honorifics whatsoever. And so Mary Hamilton refused to respond to the judge or the prosecutor until he called her Miss Hamilton. And so it was in that context that she was really drawing on a whole long tradition of the significance of calling Black people by their first names or by derogatory names like "boy" to a man or an older man. And so this really hit a nerve for African-Americans at the time, because it was a question about respect and about dignity and self-affirmation. So this case ended on that day with her getting a fine and getting sent back to prison. So she did not get the results that she wanted. And when the case was appealed to the Alabama Supreme Court, the Alabama Supreme Court said it's totally fine to treat Black people differently from white people and call them by their first names. And so when it was appealed by the NAACP up to the Supreme Court, the Supreme Court ruled that in fact it was mandatory to treat everyone the same in a courtroom setting. And from that point forward, when you're studying law in the United States, you learn that you must address everyone with an honorific. And so at the time Mary Hamilton was actually quite well known. She appeared in papers throughout the nation because of the fact that she had won that case. And she was on the front cover of Jet magazine, one of the most popular African-American magazines of the time, and was covered in Newsweek and in Ebony and other publications. So she wasn't a complete unknown then, but she was a complete unknown afterwards. And so what I wanted to do is to go beyond this one moment in her life, although that's certainly a chapter in the book, but wanting to know more about who she was and how this one moment in her career fit into this larger picture, is what I was aiming to do with the book.

AT: Now on a previous conversation with Jessica Scott where we were discussing queer rights activism specifically, one of the things that came up was that a lot of activists may have this idea that same-sex marriage rights were the most important thing. And other people might disagree, they might want to focus on other priorities. And so with that in mind, I'm looking at her situation and thinking about all of the many aspects of life that the Civil Rights movement was fighting for at the time and to an extent is still fighting for today. And so you've got education, employment, housing, all of these aspects of daily life that it seems like a lot of those things would have been much more impactful to be focusing energy on. So you touched on this, but could we dig a little more into why her Supreme Court case, why was this one thing so important given all of the other things that people were fighting for?

[Listen to Dr Jessica Scott on queer activism in the US South and South Africa](#) or [read the transcript](#).

AP: I think what she would say is it's just one piece of her activism. And if you look at

the history of African-Americans and naming and derogatory names, it's always something that gets brought up. It's something that really bothered people. You can see it in naming practices even today, where if somebody is named Queen or Princess or things like that, it's actually part of a longer-term project of giving people a name that almost has an honorific in it. So this is something that matters. For Mary Hamilton, one of the things that's important for her is that she is a very light-skinned African-American woman who grew up in the Midwest. She's born in 1935, so she's living in the '30s and '40s and '50s in places like Des Moines, Iowa, and other towns where there's not such a huge Black population, but Blacks are in all of the places where she lived. So she's in this liminal space as someone who can pass for white but is Black, identifies herself as Black, and is aware of racism because when she's in white spaces, including at some Catholic schools where she's maybe the only Black child there, she's tied to trees and kids call her the N-word. In other cases, they're trying to make her play jungle games and have her be the monkey. There's just nonstop racism in that way. Then sometimes, Black kids beat her up because she's too white. So she's trying to understand "what does being Black mean, especially if I look white, and how does this all play into it?" She's being raised by a white-looking Black grandmother who, if you're following the American "one drop makes you Black" concept, so she's maybe an eighth Black and therefore is Black in the American context, but her grandmother doesn't want to be seen as Black and tries to raise her as somebody who can pass as white. So she's really conflicted and torn by all of this, and then when she finds out about the Congress of Racial Equality, and when she finds out about a social movement that is really starting to make big change, she wants to be part of it. She's teaching at a private Catholic elementary school in Los Angeles, and she's working for CORE, and she's picketing Woolworths to try to encourage them nationally to understand that it's in their best interest to stop segregating lunch counters in the South. So she's in Los Angeles participating in this, and when she finds out about the Freedom Rides, she wants to quit her job and go on a Freedom Ride. And the Freedom Rides are this attempt to drive from the North or from a place like New Orleans, interstate travel across borders into another Southern state. In this case, the buses went to Jackson, Mississippi, and this was in 1961, and the issue was whether they could travel across those boundaries as interstate commerce safely. It was a federal law that they should be able to travel in integrated buses, but when the buses first went, the first Freedom Riders were attacked, the buses were burned, people almost died. As they were choking and trying to get out of the burning buses, they were beaten by white mobs with heavy metal pipes. It was a total disaster in some ways, but it was also really inspiring to Mary Hamilton because she wanted to be part of a radical protest movement. And so she left her job as a teacher at the end of June, so she waited until school was out, and then she went and was a Freedom Rider and was immediately put in jail in Jackson, Mississippi, and ended up in one of the most notorious jails in the South, Mississippi's Parchman Prison, which was for people with death sentences, and was full of really hardened criminals, and they were trying to scare the Civil Rights activists by putting them in a prison that was not really designed for them. It's in that context that she becomes a Civil Rights activist, and so it's not just about one idea of dignity and self-respect, it's about a whole series of other things, and they're really trying to challenge the entire system of Jim Crow segregation. That's what they're after.

AT: So it's about the broader use of the, I'm going to say quote-unquote "justice system" against Civil Rights activists that she's drawing attention to.

AP: Yeah, the case is just one piece of her life. She becomes a field organizer for CORE, and as a field organizer, she's the first Black woman to be assigned that position. There was one other white woman who was a field organizer before her in CORE, but she's also the first woman who becomes a field organizer in the South. And I think, partially they were thinking that the South, which is true, was a more dangerous and difficult assignment. And one of the things that I actually want to explore in the book is this question of what it means to be a Civil Rights organizer and a movement organizer, and how does it work? What are the challenges that organizers faced, and what are some of the strengths of the positions that they had? And she's a really

interesting case study in it, because as an organizer, the idea that they had is that you would come into a town or a city or a village, even, and try to help organize a CORE chapter. So the Congress of Racial Equality would bring in, in a sense, a professional person to come in, work with the local people who had written to the national office and ask for help. But then this person has to take on the role of learning all about this town, this state that they've never been to before. They have to learn all this material, and then they have to help the local people create a movement. So she would see, what's the point that they seem to care about the most? What's the issue that we might be able to move on? And also, what can we do when we first organize a CORE chapter that might be successful? Because you don't want to take on the hardest thing first. So if the people in the movement were most upset because they were young and they wanted to go see the movies and they only got to sit in the balcony, or they only got to go on a Tuesday and sit in the balcony, or whatever the crazy rule was in whatever town, they would set up a picket line and picket, and then boycott the movie theaters, and then eventually attempt to physically integrate them in a test case. And usually that's when they were arrested is when they tried to go in and integrated groups. But she would get arrested almost every place she went, because she had to show and be part of the movement and be part of the frontline troops to get arrested, so that people would have a sense that this was something that could be done, so that she could help them understand the process and even help them once they were in jail. There are letters that she writes from in jail, where she's writing back to the national headquarters telling them, because she's with the women and girls. So she's saying "there are young girls in this prison who don't have supplies for their menstruation, and they need to be given help and equipment. They can't be without it. We need showers." So she's advocating on behalf of the people, and she's able to rally their spirits and also call out abuses within the prison systems as she's seeing them. And so I'm very interested in how she was able to navigate this role of being the instigator of the action. And sometimes once they got the movie theater organized, they would start thinking about other issues. And she would say, "what are the other things that really are of concern to you?" And so if it turned out that it was that there were pressures on housing and they didn't have enough access to decent housing, then they would start fighting on the housing issue. Or if it was a question of the sanitation and lighting or the street repairs, she was interested in trying to pull on all these quality of life issues that had to do with systemic racism and with a lack of resources being put in Black communities. So that's a big part of the story is, in fact, that it's definitely not just one dimensional and it's not just about a court case or just about this, but that she's fighting for Civil Rights in a wide variety of contexts.

AT: As you're describing what a field organizer does, something that's really standing out to me is that, at least from my perspective, I would think that one of the most important aspects of that job is listening. And it's reminding me of a previous episode that I did with Dr. Robin Spencer-Antoine about Patricia Robinson. And we talked about how listening to other people can be incredibly powerful in these activist movements because it's not just about the external actions, it's also about taking care of your community, in her case, in the communities that Mary Hamilton was coming into, and accepting that your needs are not just these practical things, it's also what is going to make your daily life more livable. Maybe it's a mental health question of just knowing that people care about what is happening to you and they want to help and they are there to listen. And I would imagine that there were some activists who, both then and now, I would say, who would come into a community and say, "okay, here's what we're going to do, I know exactly what you need, I know exactly what we need to be doing," rather than asking. They're telling, they're not asking, "what do you want? What do you need?" And then "here's how I think we can go about getting that, what do you think?" That involvement of the community when you're trying to rally them to do something, I think is probably very important. So I'm curious because obviously that's not strictly gendered or strictly about race, but I would imagine that an African-American woman might be more effective in that capacity than, say, a white woman who would be seen as an outsider or if you did have a Black man who maybe had more of an attitude of

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"I know what's best and I'm going to tell you that." So like I said, obviously this is not strictly racial or gendered, but it feels like her race and gender might have made her more equipped to play that role.

AP: Yeah, that's a really excellent question. And I do think that listening was really important. It's hard to know if that's a skill that one group has more than another, although certainly culturally speaking, women have been encouraged over the generations to be a little more quiet and listen a little more and men have certainly been encouraged to be the talkers. However, her personality was such that a lot of people describe her as having a very strong and assertive and fearless personality and call her a leader. But one of the other sides of it, though, is that she describes herself in an oral history interview that's at Columbia University that was done in the 1990s. She describes herself as somebody who really felt very comfortable with people of all classes and races and who felt comfortable in these small towns that sometimes some people might feel very uncomfortable in. But she didn't care if she was talking to a sharecropper or if she was talking to the principal of a high school. And so she was very good at breaking through people's shells and making them feel comfortable about talking with her and definitely this listening approach.

It's interesting, I have her field reports from all the places that she visited because she had to send them to the national office of the Congress of Racial Equality because that's how the field organizing worked. And these reports are incredibly detailed. And what's so fascinating about them is that each time she arrives in a new place, she does an enormous amount of research on the place. When she's in places like Louisiana, in really small towns in the backwater bayous where it's very rural and very dangerous, but she's describing all the aspects of how many Black people can vote there. How many people have their own houses. How many schools are there for Black people in the area. How many churches are there. And then she'll go through and she lists the number of police cars, whether there are unmarked vehicles. And then she even describes the topography of the area for the national office, describing things like the fact that this one area that's called Plaquemines Parish, where she worked in Louisiana, it's really like a tiny, long, thin peninsula that comes out really right south of New Orleans. And it's a one lane each way road. And so it was incredibly dangerous because African-Americans couldn't get in and out safely. And if the police were after them, or if the police wanted to block a protest or block the protesters, there was literally no other way out because there was water on both sides of this peninsula. And so she's getting into this granular level of detail. But it's what makes a good organizer is you do have to spend time listening, studying, understanding. You can't just come in and assume that what you did in Memphis or Nashville is going to work in Plaquemines Parish in really the most rural place possible.

But one of the things that I've been doing that I've found really exciting is, unlike with my biography of Mary Church Terrell, where there was nobody around to interview about her life because she was born in 1863. And so even though she lived a long time, there were not people who could tell me about her. Therefore, I did not conduct oral history interviews. But this time, I've been able to conduct oral history interviews because there are still some folks around who worked with her in the early '60s. And it's been very interesting because I've been able to ask them questions that I feel like I have a different understanding talking with them, comparing that to what's in the field reports, and then also comparing it to her own oral history interview and just trying to put it together. But the question that I've been asking is, did it matter? Did it help that she was a woman or Black or from the Midwest, meaning not a Southerner? Did it hurt that she was any of those things? And especially that she was a Black woman who presented as white, meaning looked white, even though she didn't ever try to identify as white. So just trying to figure out all those questions. And it's been very interesting because she herself in her oral interview says her race and her gender didn't matter. And then the people who worked with her as field organizers, too, also say that her race and gender and even the fact that she was from the Midwest and the West didn't matter. So there seems to have been in the early part of the Civil Rights movement, according to what the interviewees are saying thus far, is there was such a relief that someone would come to help and that someone was interested in trying to deal with the problems of people living in a town or a parish in Louisiana that no one had ever heard of, that they were welcomed with open arms by the

Black community, who did not discriminate on the basis of race or sex, ironically, in the way that the white community did. And so some of the examples that people are giving me is like, well, in the Freedom Summers, how did they manage to bring almost 1,000 white kids down from colleges in the North? There, of course, were Black students who came and also students who are from the South. But there were many, many hundreds who came from the North and they ended up being housed in the homes of African-Americans and being welcomed as people who could help them achieve what they wanted to achieve, whether that was voting rights or other kinds of integration efforts. And so, those are really notable things because there was just a lot of trust and appreciation for those who were putting themselves in incredible danger, as were the community and the residents who allowed them in. But they were already basically in danger if they had tried to do anything to change or improve their lives. But they recognized that the people who are coming from other places were voluntarily taking on that risk. And so it actually really gave them a lot of credibility in the eyes of the community.

AT: Well, let's dig more into the violence that was so common during this era against not just activists, but as you were saying, people just trying to live their lives. As we've discussed, she was a member of CORE and one of their core values, shall we say, was nonviolent direct action. But as you were describing earlier with the Freedom Rides, and of course, there was police violence. So particularly, as you were describing, they're setting the buses on fire, and then these mobs are beating people as they're trying to escape the buses that are now on fire. And let's be honest, there were almost certainly cops in these violent mobs, possibly even in uniform. And it was making me think of Bloody Sunday, which for anyone who's not aware, was the walk from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. The first attempt at that walk ended in just complete and utter police brutality, violent beatings. There's plenty of documentation of kids being physically beaten as well in different points in the Civil Rights movement. So this idea that, first and foremost, I have to assume that any organizer is aware that coverage of this violence is going to help their cause in the long run. There is a strategic value to that, to this imagery of people who are doing absolutely no harm to anyone being viciously attacked, including by authority figures. But that is a lot to ask of anyone, and I would assume particularly for a field organizer, who, as you said, they're happy that someone has come in and wants to help, but then the things that that field organizer may be asking you to do are extremely difficult. If they're being honest with you about, "look, we all know the likely outcome of this is that there's probably going to be violence, you are probably going to be locked up, you may even die." That is a lot to ask of anyone to say, "and we need you to not fight back."

AP: Yes. And it's a real tension in the movement. And one of the things that's so interesting is that CORE was founded before World War II, and at first, it was called the Fellowship of Reconciliation. And so from the beginning, it was actually an interracial group in the North, in Chicago, with women and men involved. And they believed strongly in nonviolence, and nonviolence and pacifism was a huge part of their movement. And it was kind of the core value. And so taking this idea of nonviolence, linking it to civil disobedience, which sometimes they called it direct action. But so you take direct action and nonviolence and you link it together. And it is a form of power, because it does create a whole set of imagery that's quite amazing, of young people dressed very, very respectably in their best clothes, or at the very least, always dressed impeccably. The young men in shirts and ties, nobody came dressed, and people anyhow in 1960 weren't really wearing blue jeans. But it's not the hippie movement. This is not what's going on. And it's earlier than that. And so they're dressed really well. And that's part of what they're doing on purpose, because then they sit down at these lunch counters. And they are being attacked viciously, as you say, and brutally, by white mobs who are burning cigarettes into them, who are throwing ketchup and mustard all over them, who are being so incredibly violent. And they sit there and they respond, not at all. And they're trained to do that. They learn how to not respond. And it's incredibly hard to do that. And it's incredibly hard to train people to do that. But Mary Hamilton was one of the people who had to train people in how not to respond to the violence that is being inflicted upon you in those protests that they did. And of course, that helps because the images that go

out show crazed white mobs with nonviolent, dignified protesters of both races sitting there. And so that is the power, the moral power of it comes from the horrible contrast. But it is both emotionally and physically draining and dangerous and potentially life-threatening and sometimes did end up killing people. And it doesn't just come from the white mobs. As you said, the police were involved. The police usually arrested the protesters, not the rioters who were white. They also would beat the protesters in all kinds of ways, including with bats and batons, but also eventually in Birmingham and elsewhere, they started using electric cattle prods and they would aim for protesters' genitals. And they cause lots of long-term problems, including for Mary Hamilton, who was beaten so severely in her stomach region that she had to have surgery in 1964. And that's part of the cost, the price that people were paying for the activism that they were involved in.

So this is the sanctioned method. But then what Mary Hamilton says about this is that she never believed in nonviolence. And so, you know, the first time I read that, I thought, "what does that mean?" Because she's teaching it, she's insisting upon it. And what she meant is she didn't believe in it dogmatically. She didn't believe in it as the only possible response or the only possible strategy. She said nonviolence was a brilliant strategy. It was a tactic. And while it was working, while it was bringing all that public international attention to the movement, while it was helping to mobilize more people into activism, it was a good thing. However, she never believed that people should be subjected to violence in their homes or on the streets. This was something that they really trained people to use as a nonviolent direct action protest.

And so one of the things that I found is I was talking to another friend of mine who's a historian, Nikki Brown. And she said, "Oh, have you seen the photograph of Mary Hamilton with a long rifle that she's holding and pointing?" And I said, "No, I have not seen that, actually. But I would be very interested." And I'd seen quite a few other photographs from the same photographer who was taking photographs in West Feliciana, Louisiana, down during the 1963 battle for the voting rights in a parish and a town where no Black person had ever been allowed to register to vote. And so they were trying to register the first person. And so there are many pictures of her with the first person, Reverend Joseph Carter, when he manages to register to vote, there's a picture of her next to him with another activist, Ronnie Moore, and the two of them are celebrating with him with all the white hostile racists from the courtyard, right in the background, because it's in front of the court. And so in that context, I certainly had seen those photos, but I hadn't seen the one with her with the gun. And so I was able to do an oral history interview with Ronnie Moore, who's pictured with her standing behind her while she's pointing the long gun to say, "what's up with this? And how can we make some sense of this?"

And what some of these oral histories have told me, as I've been interviewing people, is that it's really a question of the fact that they're believing in self defense. They don't believe in violence, but they believe in self defense. And so if people have to have guns to defend themselves against the KKK, when the KKK is coming to their house and burning across on the front yard, then okay, you're going to get out your gun. And so to me, I still think it's really interesting that she agreed or decided to pose like that with a gun to a national white photographer in the middle of the movement, because it does suggest that she's also saying "we do condone at some level, the fact that people are going to bring out their guns when white mobs come to attack them at their homes." And in fact, the articles that get published in Ebony magazine have other photos from the same photographer, Bob Adelman. And those photos are mostly of local Black residents, male, Black men with guns. They do show that, but they don't publish the photo of this Black woman holding a gun in Louisiana in 1963. So she's an interesting character, because she's willing to think about how to navigate this question of nonviolence and self defense in a time when some people were trying to be more cut and dry about it. And when you interview people who were up in New York City at the national office, they don't understand the photo at all, they can't make sense of it, because they think CORE was 100% about nonviolence. And to them, it doesn't make sense. But then when you go back and you look and you ask people who were working out of and lived in and were born in Louisiana, they have a different story to tell. And so that's part of what's been so fascinating, and why I've been really enjoying the oral histories.

But the other thing to do with the question of violence that you brought up is that Mary Hamilton and a lot of the other people experienced a lot of police violence in the jails. So she was beaten severely in Gadsden,

Alabama, which is the same place where she took the case all the way up to the Supreme Court about the question of dignity. From what I can gather, it looks like the really severe beating that she received by the jailers there, which was in an elevator. And so they had her in the elevator, and they said, "No one can hear you scream." And then they tried to get her to scream, and she refused to scream. So they just persisted in beating her. So this beating that she had to endure there, really, I think, gives her this sense that the risks that you have to take in the movement are high, and they're physical. It's not just mental and emotional. And she gets a reputation as somebody who's fearless, in part because she's willing to put her body on the line. And that becomes part of the way that she gains all this respect in the community is through the kind of fearlessness that she shows in the face of violence.

AT: And I do want to address as well the gendered nature of different forms of violence that women in particular would have been facing at this time. So whether that's sexual harassment, whether that's sexual violence, I have to assume that any woman who is putting her body on the line is aware that she is doing it in a different way than her male colleagues. And even beyond that, we know that even progressive organizations that claim to be fighting for everyone's rights, there is still sexism in those organizations, just like we know that there's been racism in feminist movements. This isn't specific to any one kind of cause. But, for example, the March on Washington notoriously was organized largely by women. And then they didn't let any women speak. They didn't let the women come to the White House to meet the president afterwards. So in what ways was Mary Hamilton, who keep in mind, she was a young woman. (AP: Absolutely.) She was in her 20s, when she was with CORE. So I have to assume that she was experiencing these types of behaviors.

AP: Yeah, it's so interesting, because when she is in the experiences of the time, and when she's writing her field reports, she basically never mentions anything. And the only time when she ever mentioned her sex as an issue was when she was organizing in a small town called Lebanon, Tennessee. And she got some taskforce workers were assigned to come work with her, because she was so successful. And the town was doing a lot of really important organizing. So they gave her more workers basically to come and work with her. And they were two young men, one Black, one white. And she wrote back and she said, "they're really helping me. And one of the things that they can do is they can go and build relationships with people at the bars and taverns that I can't go into without it becoming an issue." So that was really interesting to me, because that's the only time at the time where she said something that suggested that there was some kind of disadvantage that she had based on her sex. However, in the oral history interview that she conducts with a woman named Sheila Michaels, who was a white woman who was a friend of hers, and another fellow activist from the time. Sheila Michaels is someone who went through the trajectory of fighting for Civil Rights and then becoming a feminist fighting for women's rights. And in that context, she also is the one who kind of coins the term Ms. And it actually comes out of a piece of mail that's addressed to Mary Hamilton, her roommate, and Mary Hamilton is addressed as Ms. in the mail. And she thinks, "well, that's kind of interesting. This is a great way to avoid the question of always having to identify a woman based on her marital status. If only we could have something like Mr. for women, how about Ms." And so she files that away in her brain. And then later during the feminist movement says this in a room with people like Gloria Steinem, and suggests that in a way that turns into the development with Gloria Steinem's Ms. magazine. So the point of all this is that it's Sheila Michaels who's interviewing Mary Hamilton. And she is thinking about it from a feminist perspective.

So she's asking her all kinds of questions about sexism in the movement, what it was like to be a woman assuming that she's going to get a lot of it was really difficult, etc. And almost all of the time, Mary Hamilton is like, "it wasn't an issue for me. I never noticed it. I paid no attention. I did my own thing. No one ever tried to stop me from doing anything." She really pushed back. However, there were the occasional moments where she would even say to Sheila Michaels, "Oh, well, since you're constantly asking me about this, there was this one time..." So one of the things that she talks about is a couple of incidents where it seems like it was, in some ways, an issue not exactly in CORE, but in some of the other groups associated with the Civil Rights

movement. And for her, it was there's a group called SNICC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, there's SCLC, which is the Southern Christian Leadership Conference that's headed by Martin Luther King Jr. And then there's CORE and the NAACP. So those four are the big group groups in the movement. And SCLC, the group that's mainly Black male ministers, turns out to be the most problematic when we are talking about questions of sexual harassment, and some of those other issues. And she finds herself in what she thinks is just a dinner party at, it might have been a hotel in Memphis, because they were having a conference, but either an apartment or a hotel. And as the evening is going on, people start going into the different rooms, and she's not understanding what is happening until the one of the minister says to her, "this room is for you and Dr. King, and he's sitting next to her talking to her." And she's completely shocked, totally appalled, and literally runs out of the room and leaves the dinner party, because she didn't expect to be having to sleep with anyone and didn't understand that that was the plan.

So she says, "I was so naive, I didn't understand it." She's kind of blaming herself for not understanding or not being aware. But the reality is it was a very bad situation for her. And then another example that she thinks about and really plays over in her mind is an example where she's working with the SCLC again, and they're in Birmingham, Alabama, at this place called the Gaston Motel, which is where they always had all their meetings and would converge for their conferences. And they left their doors open, unlocked, and people came in and out to talk all the time. And then all of a sudden, one of the men who she actually liked perfectly well came into her room and lay on the bed and tried to repeatedly proposition her. And she was like, "you're married, you have kids, what are you doing here?" And this went on and on and on. And she finally called Dr. King on the phone because he was in a different room and said, "get this guy to stop." And he said to the guy, "you have to leave her alone." But then he also kind of said, "if you need anything else, I'm here for you anytime, Mary." So it was one of those things where she was aware sometimes of these problems, but she didn't feel like it overall impeded her in the movement. And in fact, that guy who wouldn't leave her bed ended up being somebody who she worked really closely with in Gadsden, Alabama, because she said he was a great organizer. And that's what she cared about.

So she was able to compartmentalize and deal with the things that did happen to her and work with the people who she thought were effective and good. Even when she's talking to Sheila Michaels decades later, she is able to say, "Oh, this is probably the kind of thing you were talking about. This is probably sexual harassment. This is probably a problem." But but she wasn't thinking about it. And it wasn't determining her actions is what she was trying to say at the time, like, "this is not going to stop me from doing what I'm going to do. I'm going to get this guy out of my room, and I'm going to work with him next month. But I didn't like it." And you can tell she's been thinking about it over the years, because she's like, "I didn't ask who it was, I didn't lock my door." So she was doing that thing where you blame yourself and try to think of all the reasons of like, what could I have done differently? So you can tell that it bothered her. But she still wasn't going to stop doing the work.

AT: My understanding is also that when she was arrested in 1961 in Jackson, Mississippi, one of the many mistreatments that she experienced was, "invasive and unnecessary vaginal exams," which, in this context, just sounds like pretty blatant sexual assault by authority figures.

AP: Yes, absolutely. This was something that she was just outraged by. And what's interesting is that there are different stories of this. And at the time, when she got out of prison, she wrote part of a pamphlet that was called Freedom Riders Speak for Themselves. And so it was basically an attempt to get the voices of the Freedom Riders who were in prison and capture that through them writing narratives of their own time in prison. So in that she talks about these vaginal and anal examinations as being an abomination, being completely unacceptable, being a violation of their rights, being targeted at the women in a particular way. And she also said it was incredibly unclean and unsafe because they were using the same instruments for every single woman. So she talks about it like that at the time. Later in the 1990s, she says she successfully resisted it and fought and screamed so loudly and fought so hard that she personally wasn't examined. I'm not sure

what the truth is. It's interesting to me that at the time she doesn't say that she resisted it and that later she says she did. I wonder if that's just a case of in her own mind, the outrage over the incident turns into her having said "no way" in an effective way. And I don't know that we can ever know that, but I think it's interesting that in the end she thought she didn't have it personally happen to her. But it's somewhat debatable given the earlier testimony that she complied even as she objected and fought it.

But I think the larger question is that it got her aware from the very beginning of her very first time in prison at age 25 that this is a very blatantly abusive system and that they're going to do anything possible to degrade you. And so it followed through once the women were in their cells and she calls them girls. And to some degree that's true because the locals were often high school girls. So when you're talking about who's in prison, it's a mix of people, but they're all very young and she's only in her 20s. And so she was objecting to the fact that the male jailers would just walk into the cells at any time. And these young women were trying to preserve their clothes, which they only had one set of by sometimes hanging their shirts on a line that they had created. And they were trying to not wear them in the boiling hot jail that was so filthy. And when the jailers would come in, they would all feel exposed and in danger. And she was saying, "you need to knock before you come in to our cells. You need to let us know that you're coming in and then we'll put back on our shirts." And in the end, the prison authorities came and said, "you have to wear your shirts and you can't try to preserve them for court in 30 days. Sorry, no luck." But they also didn't give them in that particular prison, they were in three jails in the end because she started in a city jail, ended up in a county one, and then ended up in Parchman. So she has multiple prison experiences within her first 30 days in the movement.

And so just imagining all these young people having these kinds of experiences from the get-go, you can imagine that they became quite radicalized in a way. They were willing to go as far as they needed to go with the movement. And ironically enough, sometimes that meant being incredibly nonviolent in the face of horrible violence. But she was always trying to get better conditions inside the prisons for the people who were there with her because she could see that it was a way to try to break them too. And she was trying to keep their spirits up because they were trying to keep them in jail for the entire time. The concept was "jail, no bail." And partly that was to save the movement from bankruptcy because if they had to bail out every single person, that would be a problem. But also they were trying to put pressure on the prisons in the South because they were literally filling them to the gills, to the brims. And so this is part of the strategy is it's expensive for everybody if you're arresting sometimes hundreds and sometimes thousands of people in a single protest. So that's kind of mind blowing, but that's what was happening.

AT: I just want to come back to this question of the ways that we tell our own stories. And particularly in this instance, I feel like we've had a couple examples where, "oh, did you experience sexual harassment?" "Oh, no. Oh, well, actually, since you keep asking, is this what you mean?" And it's like, "yeah, that's really pretty clearly what we mean." But that's not how she wanted to remember it. That's not how she wanted to see these men that she probably respected, that she had to work with. And so when it comes to recounting her own assault or attempted assault, depending on which version you're going with, I could see both versions in the sense that if she did scream and protest and was able to not be violated, I could see her framing it one way to fit with CORE's messaging, to say we don't fight back and we let them do these things to us. But then I can also see a trauma survivor later rewriting that in her head to say, "no, this is what really happened. I was able to fight back. I didn't freeze. I didn't let them do that to me," which of course we know is absurd. No victim should ever feel like it is in any way their fault that assault happened to them. But we also know that that is often how society presents it. So when we're talking about how reliable of a narrator is someone of their own story, particularly when you're talking about, this was an advantage that you had compared to your Mary Church Terrell research is having these oral histories. But when it comes down to it, not just the passage of time, but all of these different psychological factors can impact how we view reality both at the time and in retrospect.

AP: Yeah, that's a really great point. And I actually appreciate your idea about how for the Freedom Riders

Speak for Themselves, she might have been framing it differently in terms of this, “we don't fight back” thing because she in fact was pulled out of the jail early by four days. So she didn't serve, I think it was actually 43 days or something. There was a certain amount of time that they all knew they had to spend in jail in order to not have to pay bond. And so she was pulled out four days early and she was completely upset and confused and didn't understand because she was ready to stay for the entire time. So this really bothered her that she was pulled out early. And when she got to New York, because the national office of CORE brought her up there and she was like, “why did you take me out early?” And her version of it is they said, “well, you were a troublemaker, you were making trouble.” And so in fact, the idea that she might have shifted the story in the official publication kind of makes sense from that perspective because she had been told, “well, you're a troublemaker.” But she thought of that as being a punishment or a sanction, as in that's bad. But I don't read it that way because what I hear when I hear her saying “I was told that I was a troublemaker” is, okay, so they brought you up from being a troublemaker where you were protesting conditions and doing all this stuff and getting the people organized and trying to get better food, etc. etc. And then they hired you in the national office. Sounds like maybe they actually wanted you as a troublemaker. So is troublemaker good, like the good trouble that John Lewis talks about, or is troublemaker bad?

And I wasn't even sure that CORE meant it as an insult. I think that they actually meant it as “we see potential in you.” And so she worked in the national office there. She was involved in labor organizing in a fight for hospital workers. And she also was involved in a whole lot of different kinds of sit-ins and sympathy boycotts and protests and sometimes for actually getting Black workers hired in New York businesses. So it's not all just about a Woolworths trying to get conditions better in the South. It's also that there are problems in the North, of course, and they're working on housing, all kinds of stuff like that. And within a few months, she's offered this really big position, which is one of the most important things you could be inside of CORE, which is a field organizer. So she works as a field organizer in New York City for a few months, but the plan is always, and she says to them from the beginning, “I want to work in the South.” And that's the kind of prize, that's where you want to go. And she ends up first being given the so-called mid-South. And so she's in Tennessee, she's in Arkansas, she's in Kentucky, and that's her region. And then she moves in to Alabama and to Louisiana. And that's the deep South. That's the hardcore situation. So you can see her trajectory. But because they hired her the second she arrived in New York, I don't think the fact that she was a protester and that she was a troublemaker was actually a problem for them. But she interpreted it in that way. And sometimes she says, “I was raised as an obedient Catholic schoolgirl.” And so she often is hearing something like troublemaker and may not hear that as also a compliment. I do think these narratives can be interpreted in multiple different ways. And I don't think there has to be one interpretation of them. But I think opening up the memories from the 1990s, plus the descriptions that happened right after, and thinking about the possibilities that it's something that a trauma survivor would say, and that it's something that somebody who's being strategic and wants to protect core would say at the time, all those things could be true in some ways.

AT: Well, let's go back to the experience of being a field organizer, because I would assume in theory, the idea is that you come in, you get things going, and then hopefully, you're able to build something sustainable where they can manage on their own. And then you move on to the next place. And my understanding is that Mary Hamilton was responsible for entire regions, not just one location. So I'm assuming she's having to bounce around to different places and troubleshoot and all sorts of things, which sounds like a huge responsibility, not even getting into the nature of what they were fighting against and what they were fighting for, which I assume would also be extremely taxing, both physically when we're talking about all that travel and stints in jail, as you do, but also the emotional toll of just having to face this injustice constantly.

AP: Yeah, it's really interesting. And it's one of the things that I've found particularly fascinating is thinking about this whole question of what it's like to be a field organizer. And in my mind, it's also what it means to be a movement organizer. And especially at the larger level beyond a city or a town, somebody who is doing this

kind of coming in, coming out. And she saw it as having both strengths and weaknesses as a strategy for organizing. And in one case, you can be a catalyst for change by coming in as an outsider. You can have fresh ideas, you can have a daring perspective, you can unite people who never talked to each other before. You can talk to the ministers and the field hands and the janitors and get everybody on board. So there's something to be said for the outsider coming in. But then she would have to go, as you say, to the next town, the next state. She did go back and forth in the period of basically like four or five years that she was doing this, it wasn't long. And that timeframe, she's in multiple, multiple cities and states. And I have this timeline that tries to chart it by the month. And sometimes she's in multiple places in the same month. And I can barely figure out how, because I have newspaper articles saying that she's in Tallahassee, Florida, in Birmingham, Alabama, in Lebanon, Tennessee, etc, etc, in one month. And so I have to actually do it by the day, to try to see how did she manage and where the heck was she on any given week. And so one of the things that she says, when she's thinking about it, is this is a problem with the movement is that it's really hard to do follow through. "We didn't get to call back up and say to the people, in Lebanon, Tennessee, is your movie theater still integrated? Did it work? Or did it only last as long as the time we were all really gung ho? And also, have you done anything else? What are the other protests that you've done?" So sometimes she would come back in to regenerate and start a new protest to get something happening, so that it could go from a question about housing to a question about employment. And so sometimes she would only have to be there for a short amount of time to get them back on track and start an entire new cycle of protest. But sometimes she didn't have the time to check on it. And so she doesn't really know when she's being asked by Sheila Michaels or 40 years later is she doesn't really know what happened. And so that's an interesting situation. And so that was something that she talked about.

But she also did see it as an advantage because she could take her knowledge and her experience in all these different settings, and she could know what to do. So when she was in small towns that were near big cities, she would try to focus on people who had jobs in the big cities as the people who might be the face of the movement. Because if they had a job in a big city, the white people in the small town couldn't persecute them as well. They couldn't fire them from their jobs. They couldn't make their lives as miserable. And in fact, there were examples in going down to Louisiana and the small villages and towns down there. Some people survived after they were attacked for voting by literally never shopping in the place where they lived again. They never went to the local white store ever again. They drove somewhere else to do anything that they had to do. And that was a permanent situation. So the consequence of going once to register to vote, even if you didn't end up getting the right to vote, might mean that you could never shop in your town. And so she also had to find people who could, in a sense, afford to do that, who could manage if they got fired from the job they had, what would happen to them? Or could they be in Nashville and work in Nashville and live in Lebanon so that it didn't matter as much because their job was safe? So she was constantly trying to protect people, even as she moved the movement forward, trying to understand the dynamics. And some of this was working with labor unions, working with the Black press, working with ministers who didn't want to put their name on the movement, but who might be willing to loan out a room in the church for a meeting, things like that. So she was getting donations of printing presses everywhere she went, usually from the unions, maybe a typewriter, things to set up an office. So it's a lot, a lot of that kind of work to make it happen.

So one of the things that Mary Hamilton talked about in her interview with Sheila Michaels is that she thought that one of the biggest problems in the movement, and especially for movement organizers, was the question of burnout. And she really regretted that she only lasted about five years in the movement, but she said it was just so incredibly stressful. And she described people as being nervous wrecks and running on adrenaline. And because they were always fearing for their lives and always having to wonder what was happening with the Klan or even the FBI as a potential problem for them, all these different sources of anxiety that made it really hard to work. And she said that as a field secretary, she wished that she had had regular vacations. And I thought, "oh, that's interesting. What does that mean to be a movement organizer who can take vacations, take time for herself, do something to restore?" And she felt she could have lasted much longer in the movement

and been a leader for much longer if she had had that opportunity. But then as I've been interviewing people who were in the movement with her, their responses universally, "you can't take a vacation when you're in the movement. How does that work?" And some of them said, "if you're living in the South, and you're Black, there's never a vacation. You're Black all the time. You're always potentially at threat, you're always potentially in harm's way, you're always in danger at the time." And so what does a vacation mean? They said these, "we were warriors, we were at war". And then Mimi Feingold-Real, who was a white woman who was involved in the movement, she said evil "didn't take vacations, the KKK didn't go on vacation" as far as she could tell. And so they were very dismissive about the idea of burnout as a real thing. But I think today, a lot of people are much more aware, and thinking about mental health, and trauma, and stress, and burnout as being multi-layered. It's not just "I'm tired," but this is really emotionally scarring and draining. And maybe today's organizers would be more sympathetic with her than the folks in their 80s and 90s, who are being able to interview, and who are very dismissive of this concept of finding a way to have a different kind of balance as an organizer. And they were basically saying, "if you gave five years to the movement, and that's all you could do, then that was great. And the fact that you got out alive is wonderful," and so they were they just weren't willing to consider it. So I thought that's been a very interesting part of the moral history component to this.

AT: I do feel like I need to point out here when we're talking about burnout, is that a lot of the men in this movement had wives doing all of this invisible labor behind the scenes. And I mean that both in terms of practical aspects, like the men don't have to worry about raising their own kids because the wives are handling that, they're making sure that, your laundry gets done so you have a nice suit for your next event ready to go. But they're also providing a lot of emotional labor. So Martin Luther King Jr., when he wasn't sexually harassing young women working for the movement, could go home to his wife, Coretta Scott King, and I assume unload a fair bit of that onto her. She was there, when she wasn't doing activism in her own right, let's not forget that. But these men had wives that they could go home to who were not only providing them with a home. They had a family and a place that was their own that they could come back to because these women were keeping everything running and they could then, in that safe space, let a lot of that emotional labor then fall on the women who were getting no credit for their part in this. And so this is one of the other things that came up in the conversation about Pat Robinson is that emotional labor aspect of Civil Rights movements and other rights movements, of being the person who can take some of that load off of other people and how important that is but also how undervalued it is. So I do think we need to point out that, if she's leaving CORE when she gets married, presumably her husband would not have been providing that same type of support that we see in the wives of Civil Rights leaders.

AP: Yeah, that's interesting. I think you're right about the fact that women did a lot of emotional labor for the men in the movement, and that's especially true for the ministers and so especially true in SCLC. The people in CORE, the field organizers, a lot of them are really young and the young men like Dave Dennis and Ronnie Moore were often single and then spent a large amount of time in jail too. And so, they were in somewhat comparable situations, probably. I know that Dave Dennis got married at some point during that time. But I think your general point is very well taken. And I think that in her case, getting married was one reason why she may have left the movement, but she also got really sick. And she was just appointed in 1964 to be the Southern Regional Director for CORE, which is huge. It was a very big promotion and it was a new position for the women in the movement. And so I think that's a very important position they were creating basically a Southern national office in New Orleans and she was going to run the Southern Region for Core. And then she had two surgeries in a row. And one of them was due to these beatings. So basically her back, her abdominal region and her back and that this whole area of her body was so brutally attacked more than once that she ended up having to have these two huge surgeries. And I think that that might have been the precipitating force that pushed her out of the movement.

The person who she married was Walter Young. He was a dentist who was Andy Young's brother. And he had

actually been very involved in the movement himself, but not as a full-time organizer. So he did work as a dentist. So he wasn't doing it every day of his life. But she met him in New Orleans when she went originally to be trained in the nonviolent civil disobedience actions, including the whole notion that you would roll up in a ball and protect your innards, in fact. They would teach you some basic skills to avoid having your head and your face hit, for example. And he was there doing fundraising. So she met him right away in 1961. And then they reconnected at various points, probably when she was spending some time in Atlanta, because she had an apartment there for when she wanted to go away for a retreat. So that was a way that she had a kind of "vacation." And then when she moved to New Orleans to lead the movement there, the national office for CORE was right across the street from his dentist's office.

And she went and eloped with him. He was married. He had kids. He left the business one day. And his wife called the FBI because she thought he had been attacked by a white mob or something. And he left patients behind. And then everybody was like, "where's Mary Hamilton?" And turned out that they had eloped. But they had to go to Reno in California to get married because they had to have a quick divorce too for him. So I don't know what to say about that. But the way she moved out of that position of authority may have been about the marriage, but the marriage may have been precipitated by the incredible health crisis that she had. So I haven't quite figured that out yet, but I know she ended up back in Denver, Colorado, where she or her mother lived. And they got involved in CORE again there. And she also got a job working in one of the new federal government offices for Lyndon B. Johnson's war on poverty campaign. So even as she "leaves" the movement, she doesn't really leave the movement. She's moving out of that high visibility leadership position, though. And maybe that took enough of the pressure off.

AT: I would also hope that Denver is a bit safer, not saying that racism is only in the South. That's obviously a myth. But I would have to assume that Denver is going to be a safer place to be doing this kind of activism.

AP: Yes, I think that's true. Definitely.

AT: So what was it about Mary Hamilton in particular that made you say, "yes, I need to write a whole book about this person?"

AP: I think for me, it's this interesting idea that there's this woman who's a field organizer, who plays this major role in the movement, who has a Supreme Court case that she wins, who's featured on these magazines and in newspapers. And I had never ever heard of her. And that's exactly the kind of thing that gets me going. If I can figure out a way to uncover the life of a woman who hasn't been examined or explored. And actually, one of the things that's been super gratifying as I write to people asking them if I can do oral history interviews, is uniformly they'll write back and they'll say, "absolutely, Mary Hamilton is an unsung Civil Rights heroine, and she's my hero." And that's been really striking to me, because not one single person has said, "Oh, I don't know why you'd write a book about her. She's not worth a book." You could potentially find somebody who somebody would say that about. But fortunately, people have really been so enthusiastic and so interested in trying to contribute to talking about who she was and why they think she was so important. And that has really motivated me even more to do the work is to see how excited they are about the prospect of it.

AT: It is fascinating that she leaves CORE and moves to Denver and gets married, all this stuff, 1964, the same year that her case was decided by the Supreme Court. You would think that, "okay, I've just been the victor in a Supreme Court case, that's going to launch my career" rather than that's when she stepped back from it.

AP: Yeah, in fact, I mean, she sees the irony in this situation, because she's in a hospital bed in New Orleans when she gets the news of the Supreme Court decision. So the reporters are coming to interview her in her hospital room. And so I think it also highlights for her the costs of the movement too. And so she doesn't leave

it, like I said, she joins the Denver chapter of CORE and continues to work. And then fairly quickly gets divorced and moves to New York, which is another chapter in this. But when she is in New York, she goes back to labor union organizing before becoming a teacher and ends up as a teacher teaching English for 20 years. So that's the trajectory of her career. So it takes a while for her to really, really move out of the orbit of CORE, but the main leadership roles, she steps away from when she moves to Denver. And it is ironic that it happens at the exact same moment that she wins this court case and has her picture on the cover of Jet magazine.

AT: But that is such a striking juxtaposition of "you just want a Supreme Court case," but also the costs, as you were saying, of this activism means that you are in the hospital at the time, having just had surgery. And that must have been such a visceral experience.

AP: Yeah, exactly. And so, it's been a real joy to be learning about her and to be uncovering all of the different aspects of her life and career. And so thank you for letting me share it with you and your audience.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast. And remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.