A HISTORY OF NONVIOLENCE

— A documentary by Mathilde Fassin
52’ HISTORY
When I was shooting my first film in 2014, I came across the Southern Christian Leadership in Atlanta for the first time, an organization founded by Martin Luther King Jr in 1957. There, I interviewed Dr Bernard Lafayette, a civil rights activist since the 1960s who was a close friend to Martin Luther King. He still promotes nonviolence throughout the world today, and has even made it a way of life. When we met, he was just returning from Ferguson, Missouri, where he had given a training on nonviolence to help Saint Louis residents organize a strategic movement. Ever since I found out about this, I have been fascinated by the thinking put into building these strategies. It consists in a long-term form of elaborated mobilization, applied throughout the world, and yet rarely spoken of.

MATHILDE FASSIN
THE GIST
The film follows the elaboration of a nonviolent strategy by a group of African-American activists with a precise goal. This serves as an illustration of the use of nonviolence today in the United States, and also gives us the opportunity to go back in time to when and how nonviolence was imported to the US in the 1950s, and its role in the Civil Rights Movement.

AIRING
April 2018, for the 50th anniversary of Dr King’s assassination

SHOOTING LOCATIONS
Atlanta, Los Angeles and Ferguson, Missouri
A new Civil Rights Movement has been emerging in the United States since 2013 and it is worth comparing to that of the sixties. Today, the movement is no longer represented by an emblematic, charismatic, identifiable leader. Today, it includes women, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenders. Today, it gathers and mobilizes through virtual social networks. Today, the laws for equality are already in place, but the movement must change minds and habits. Beyond all these differences, there is one crucial legacy from the historical movement that abolished segregation: the philosophy of nonviolence. Whether it is a way of life or a purely strategical political action, it remains at the core of most current mobilizations and at the center of most activists’ concerns.

In April 2018, this legacy will turn 50: minutes before he was assassinated, Reverend King told his entourage that he wanted to institutionalize and internationalize nonviolence. What became of that last wish, half a century later?
A ROUGH DEFINITION OF NONVIOLENCE

It is first of all essential to grasp the concept of nonviolent action. It is more often than not associated in the collective psyche to a hippie, pacifist ideal. It is not related to morality either and is only rarely a way of life. In fact, nonviolence is a strategic action, made of a series of tactics with a rational and long-term vision. The goal is to remove the power from the pillars of the system by no longer cooperating with them. This political resistance method is both historical and very contemporary. Not resorting to violence is the result of critical thinking, in order to be as efficient as possible. As it doesn’t involve weapons, the strategy can be extended to many more people who can partake. It aims at massive mobilization. And thus avoids any international disapproval or any backlash in the form of repression — the authorities of which could only have a greater power of destruction than the activists. In other words, we are not talking about a flower-power vision that seeks to avoid conflict, but indeed about a strategy that provokes conflict.

It does so with precise, tangible goals. In the sixties, the goal was to abolish segregation, by tackling specific cases whether at diner counters or aboard buses. Nowadays, it is about obtaining a better representation for Blacks in city councils, courts of justice and police precincts; it is about indicting and sentencing police officers who kill civilians; it is about reforming a discriminating electoral system… Most of the time, nonviolent strategies are set up by local organizations that mobilize in their community.
A BRIEF HISTORY OF NONVIOLENCE IN THE US

As early as the 19th century, essay writer Henry David Thoreau had theorized civil disobedience as a sort of counter friction, to jam the clockwork. Around the same time, some abolitionists started organizing nonviolent protests to slavery, such as fiscal resistance by refusing to pay taxes.

In the 1940s and 1950s, a few African-American pilgrims went to India in search for emancipation techniques applicable in the United States. To Thoreau, civil disobedience was an individual initiative, but Gandhi applied it as a mass movement, a method that will influence the Americans. The said pilgrims later became civil rights activists and their work paved the way for Martin Luther King.

When they returned, led by James Lawson, they set up seminars and workshops that still exist today. Lawson met King in 1957 with the intention of turning nonviolence into a mass revolutionary movement. King had discovered the philosophy of nonviolence as an alternative to pacifism during a conference given by Gandhi in 1950. He himself went to India in 1959 and came back a convert — in every sense of the word, as he combined his quest for justice to a spiritual commitment.

THE CONTRAST WITH VIOLENCE

The «non-» prefix cancels out, but does not hide the word «violence». And the mind quickly wanders towards the stereotype of an excessively violent American culture. Already at the time, the Civil Rights Movement did not completely set aside all violence. This film also intends to reestablish the reality of that time, beyond a romanticized vision of the mobilization that occurred with a rewriting of history. Guns were quite common and helped protect the protesters. Dr King himself owned an arsenal for defense, after his home was bombed or he was stabbed during a signing in New York. At times, he doubted nonviolence. He wondered whether the right to combat could be a source of dignity and moral liberation for the oppressed… He also questioned the boycott technique as it harmed others according to christian ethics.

In Chicago, in the mid 1960s, he became close to gangs who protected him, without giving up on violence.

Many activists refused to cave in pacifically in the face of their violent opponents. Stokely Carmichael for instance is an illustration of the bitter activists who wanted to put an end to nonviolence and to racial diversity within the group. How could they be heard if not with strong, visible — and perhaps violent — actions? After James Meredith was shot in 1966, pragmatism gained all the more momentum. Some revived a radical tradition, self-defense and armed uprising. Led by Stokely Carmichael, those seceded even as they marched alongside Martin Luther King in Mississippi. It is the birth of the Black Power movement. King moved away from it and the media took this opportunity to describe the movement as dangerous.

Then came the birth of the Black Panthers and Nation of Islam, founded by Malcolm X (who, on the other hand, questioned often the capacity of violence to create political and social change). These organizations who also defended African-American rights and who survive today, were considered as radical and nationalist. Nowadays, they are closer and closer
to racist and far-right groupuscules, in their tone and in their intentions. We will consider their legacy as well, through the lens of the history of nonviolence.

**THE QUESTIONS RAISED IN THE FILM**

Where did nonviolence, imported to the US in the 1950s, come from and how did it make its way in the Civil Rights Movement? What part did it play back then? Where does the image of a nonviolent movement come from, opposed in popular culture to a supposed violence of Malcolm X and later the Black Panthers? And how can we deconstruct this simplistic image? What is left of nonviolence and civil disobedience today? How do they take shape? What can nonviolence actually achieve regarding discrimination and racism? What does the future hold for nonviolence?
DIRECTING: BACK AND FORTH BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT

The film relies mostly on the interviews, with the 1960s activists and those of today, with experts on the nonviolent strategy, trainers, members of the new organizations such as Black Lives Matter... Some will be confronted through the editing on the one hand, but also through actual encounters: we will organize cross interviews of these figures, to create debate between them. Along their speeches, when they explain the strategy and its history, its goals and its implementations, we will circulate in time, from the 1950s to today. We will use archive images of the strategies in the sixties, videos both of the trainings and of the actual aggressions that occurred during the sit-ins. They will echo the 2017 footage of the new trainings, adjusted to the current context and mobilizations, led by local organizations. Thus we will follow the elaboration of a strategy today. We will also return to sites emblematic of various demonstrations throughout the decades.
The imagery will be inspired by leaflets and posters from the sixties, mixed with the modernity of virtual Facebook "events" used to organize. The design will bring harmony to these two themes united by the form of the demonstration slogan. This aesthetics will accompany the film, serve as layout to introduce the characters, and stage the quotes from Martin Luther King’s speeches that will form a pattern alongside the narration.

Three pauses are planned within this narration. Art being at the heart of nonviolence as an exalted way sometimes to express a political opinion, we will make time for committed African-American artists, with a concert of soul music — the lyrics of which are inspired by Black Lives Matter —, with a performance referring to police brutality, and with the painting of a mural representing inequality. For a little less than two minutes each, we will feature the artist at work, for a grace-filled moment to illustrate nonviolent commitment.

As for music, think of Mahalia Jackson and Harry Belafonte meet NWA. For all of these diverse influences to live as much as possible in the film, there will be no voice over, no commentary by the writer-director, just a few occasional slides, in black and white, to bring some additional information here and there while the soul rhythms amplify.
MAIN CITY: ATLANTA, GEORGIA

It was one of the first Southern cities to establish segregation rules, in 1891. Martin Luther King was born and raised in Atlanta. The town is known for its prestigious Black universities since the Reconstruction period: they were considered a place of emancipation through social elevation. Especially as many of their law students for instance joined the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). Racial tensions were always strong in Atlanta, as the White were infuriated by this intellectual, social and cultural strength. There were also riots in the summer of 1966. In Atlanta, one can visit The King Center, the Atlanta civic and political league, the local offices of the Fellowship of Reconciliation and of the NAACP, the headquarters of the SCLC… And above all, Atlanta is today considered a (inter)national hub for nonviolence.
LOS ANGELES

We will mostly shoot the interviews of James Lawson and Clayborne Carson in L.A. But we will also take this chance to visit the neighborhood of the 1992 riots following the arrest and beating of Rodney King, and the neighborhood of Watts that gave its name to the 1965 riots.

FERGUSON

To cover the rising of Black Lives Matter with its very first members, to spend time showing how nonviolence is implemented and applied today, to meet the new activists… we will spend some time here in Saint-Louis, Missouri.
A FEW PROTAGONISTS

— **James Lawson**, who went to India in the 1940s to bring the philosophy of nonviolence back to the US and dedicated his life to it.

— **Bernard Lafayette**, a disciple of Dr King, who also dedicated his life to institutionalizing nonviolence.

— **Jackson Avery**, a Black Lives Matter activist in Atlanta.

— **Clayborne Carson**, a historian, expert of African-American history and of Martin Luther King.

— **Gene Sharp**, former political science professor, four-time nominee for a Nobel Peace Prize, founder of the Albert Einstein Institution dedicated to the advanced study of nonviolent action.

— **Kurt Shock**, head of the International institute for peace at Rutgers University, author of several books on nonviolent resistance and on unarmed rebellions.

— **Erika Chenoweth**, international authority on alternatives to political violence, and specialist of the empirical study of civil resistance.

— **Reverend Osagyefo Sekou**, a major figure of the movement in Ferguson.
MATHILDE FASSIN, DIRECTOR BIOGRAPHY

After earning a degree from the Lille Ecole Supérieure de Journalisme in 2010, Mathilde Fassin specialized in subjects about the U.S.A., where she lived until the age of seven. From 2012 to 2013, she lived in New York, where she worked in the print press, and has continued to write about American society since returning to Paris.

Her first film, "1961, The Road to Freedom" takes a look back at the Freedom Rides of 1961, an activist journey into the heart of the civil rights movement, between Washington DC and Jackson, Mississippi.