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The radical south: Grassroots activism, ethnicity, and literary form, 1960-1980

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THE RADICAL SOUTH:
GRASSROOTS ACTIVISM, ETHNICITY, AND LITERARY FORM, 1960-1980

A dissertation
presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in English
In the Department of English
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by

ELIZABETH FIELDER

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ABSTRACT

“The Radical South” examines the art and writings of Civil-Rights-era social movements and locates U.S. based political structures in a hemispheric and global network. I reveal that the Civil Rights Movement, ethnic nationalism, and second-wave feminism were not separate entities; rather, the cultural work of activists was an intersectional effort that defied national strategies, such as non-violent protest and race-based separatism, that were often determined by their urban counterparts. Thus, I argue that new political aesthetics emerged from grassroots activism and set in motion ethnic and racial cultural expressions that embraced multiple, even conflicting, identities. As much as this art was placed within a local context, its political and artistic aesthetics were also inspired by global revolutionary movements in places such as Cuba and the Caribbean, Spain, and Ghana. Whether I am looking at experimental theater, consciousness-raising documents, or novels, I show how this flexible approach to political ideology better represented the pragmatic realities of everyday life, even if it also meant challenging their popular-front vision of solidarity. “The Radical South” moves chronologically through Freedom Summer and the 1960s to early eighties “third world” feminism. In my first chapter, the Free Southern Theater, an integrated theater group established in Mississippi in 1963, emerges as a major innovator of what I call visual jazz, which combined avant-garde theater with civil rights activism. In the second and third chapters, I look at novels by Julian Mayfield and Jose Yglesias, both of which insist on the specificities of local forms of oppression, community memory, and familial bonds against the more abstracting vision of a global Marxist struggle. In the final chapter, I demonstrate how Toni Cade Bambara’s 1980 novel The Salt Eaters by embracing the paradox of what I call conflictual solidarity, a process by which dissenting voices collect together to challenge the structures that unite them.
DEDICATION
This dissertation is dedicated to
My parents Martha and Robert, who supported this journey;
Martyn, who always encouraged me;
My graduate student support group, who kept me balanced;
And my friends—especially my roommate—who unconditionally believed in me.
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INTRODUCTION: IMAGINING THE RADICAL SOUTH

I. The Legacy of Civil-Rights-Era Cultural Activism

In “The Greatest Love,” an episode of the HBO series *Treme* that aired in 2012, two of the main characters, Toni Bernette and her daughter Sophie, attend an outdoor production of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* in New Orleans at the London Avenue canal whose levee breached during Hurricane Katrina in 2005. As the characters from Beckett’s play wait for something that never comes, the experience evokes tears from Toni Bernette who—like so many citizens of New Orleans—had to wait for federal relief that proved to be as elusive as Godot himself in the years after Katrina. The scene in the episode is based on Paul Chan’s 2007 production that also took place in the Ninth Ward and featured *Treme* actor Wendell Pierce. Pierce explains the inspiration behind *Godot* in an interview for the Times-Picayune, calling the performance “a memorial, a community coming together” (Walker), yet he does not once mention Beckett. Rather he references a 1964 production of *Godot* staged in rural Mississippi by the Free Southern Theater (FST), an activist theater group and lesser-known part of Civil Rights Movement history. Pierce emphasizes the importance of the FST for New Orleans and the U.S. South and claims the FST’s legacy as a point of inspiration for the play to act as a social commentary. Building on the FST’s mythology, Pierce reflects, “At one performance in the Mississippi delta for sharecropper farmers, legend has it that at intermission a man turned to the director and said, ‘Godot? He ain't coming’” (Walker). The *Treme* episode recreates this scene with slight alteration when the audience member—a cameo played by one of the FST’s founding members, John O’Neal—turns to Bernette and mumbles, “Motherfucker ain’t coming…The
man, he ain’t coming” (“The Greatest Love”). Since many of these parallels would be unrecognizable to the viewer who is unaware of the FST’s legacy, it also evidences a lineage that exists beyond traditional narratives of the Civil Rights Movement.

Even though the Free Southern Theater emerged within SNCC networks during Freedom Summer, over time they expanded and evolved into a network of activist theater and cultural programs across the U.S. South with connections to other theater groups throughout the country. From a perspective of Southern performance and culture, Sixties-era activism did not die; rather, different organizations have adapted it to confront contemporary issues, such as the racism exposed in the aftermath of Katrina. Moreover, through Beckett’s *Godot*, the lineage gestures towards the transnational aspects of the Civil Rights Movement, where activists viewed their struggle for civil rights and equality as part of a global effort that included “Third World” liberation movements and historically unspecific narratives, like an Irish-French avant-garde play that allowed activists to adapt another culture’s aesthetics of protest for their own local crises. *Godot* evidences that Martin Luther King’s adoption of the Jainist tradition of *ahisma* (non-violence) was not the only transnational exchange occurring during Civil-Rights-era activism; nor were Yoruban philosophical traditions and aesthetics the only influence for Black Nationalism and the Black Arts Movement. As the *Treme* episode suggests, political, ideological, and cultural exchanges of Civil-Rights-era activism constitute a wide network. Trying to trace a singular hierarchy of influence flattens the Movement’s multifaceted history.

“The Radical South” focuses on grassroots cultural activism in the Civil-Rights-era through four case studies in the U.S. South that upend preconceived notions of the Civil Rights Movement as a contained, single-issue movement with a clear national agenda dictated by organized leadership—usually a group of men. In turning to artistic expression, this dissertation
enables us to rethink historical narratives of activism by examining the role of aesthetics in social justice movements. Cultural activism uses art to enact social change and to create new sets of aesthetics in order to imagine possibilities to transform political and social realities. I argue that artistic expression produced within or about local communities, such as the FST, reveals new information about and perspectives within Civil Rights-era activism. “The Radical South” contributes to a scholarly conversation that dismantles the grand historical narratives that have narrowed in on key figures and moments—such as Martin Luther King Jr. and the Montgomery bus boycott—at the expense of more chaotic networks of grassroots activism. I reveal that the Civil Rights Movement, ethnic nationalism, and second-wave feminism were not separate entities; rather, the cultural work of activists opened space for coalitional activism, even if the stakes of affinity were vehemently debated. Thus, a new set of political aesthetics emerged from grassroots activism and set in motion ethnic and racial cultural expressions that embraced multiple, even conflicting, identities. Whether I am looking at experimental theater, non-fiction “consciousness-raising documents,” or novels, I show how this flexible approach to political ideology better represented the pragmatic realities of everyday life, even if it also meant challenging the popular-front vision of solidarity that activists sought to build. This vision required a balance between their local communities across the U.S. South and sites of revolution in places such as Cuba and the Congo. Although the experiences in small-town deep South would vary greatly from the Marxist and anticolonial movements across the global South, many activists imagined their destinies to be linked—that an independence movement in Ghana or a revolution in Cuba could foment black liberation in the U.S. South.

I move chronologically through Freedom Summer and the 1960s to early eighties “third world” feminism and traverse between rural locations in the U.S. South to international conflicts.
The artists and authors within my archive used performance, sound, and text in order to experiment with the limits of political coalition through artistic collaboration. The broad stroke of my dissertation considers the aesthetic choices and techniques that connect moments of resistance at moments beyond the Movement’s temporal boundaries and beyond its direct goal of civil equality for African Americans. On the project’s more specific level, it looks at the small moments of tension reflected between individuals and characters speaking with one another across ideological and ethnic differences. By maintaining flexibility with geographic, temporal, ethnic, and generic boundaries, this project argues that these alliances were not harmonious expressions of solidarity, but rather contentious sites of dissent that challenge the historical record and a vision of homogenous social and artistic movements, such as the Black Arts Movement. By examining representations of coalition in activist art, I look beyond the view that positions the northern Black Arts Movement as the evolved cultural wing of the Civil Rights Movement—a linear narrative that elides the intersectional and regional branches of cultural activism that took place earlier. Cultural activism did more than engage people in social justice movements; it became a viable space for coalition through collaboration in a way that the political could not. While political coalition meant parsing through ideological difference, collaborative art—such as the long-lasting collaboration between the black theater group FST/Junebug Productions and the white Roadside Theater of Appalachia—could rely on alternate identities such as thespian or musician to open dialogue between different groups.

“The Radical South” addresses the discontinuity between the national narratives of the Civil Rights Movement, the global “Third World” struggles for liberation, and the local expressions of community activism where these national and international paradigms intermingled. In the shifting scope between the community and the world, a myriad number of
historical narratives emerge, often at odds with each other. In the South, stories of non-violent protest under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr., the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and North-to-South initiatives such as Freedom Summer have long dominated perceptions of the Civil Rights Movement, even though recent scholarship has revealed more nuanced threads of local activism. Narratives are shifting to make room for Fannie Lou Hamer and Ella Baker, to recognize Rosa Parks’s past activism at the Highlander Folk school and King’s futurist platform for economic equality with the Poor People’s campaign. Scholars have expanded the scope of the Movement beyond a struggle for African American civil rights to what Brian D. Behnken refers to as the “multiethnic freedom struggles” (1) that foregrounds the relationship between the Black Liberation Movement and Chicana/o, Latina/o, American Indian, and Asian American nationalist movements. In addition, movements such as the New Left, second-wave feminism, and environmentalism were also a part of, or have roots in, the Civil Rights Movement. In a post-Cold War atmosphere, scholarship has begun to acknowledge and address the contribution of militancy by incorporating groups like the Deacons for Defense and Justice and the Black Panther Party—as well as militant activists, such as Angela Davis and Stokely Carmichael—into the mainstream narratives of the Civil Rights Movement.

Within this critical turn towards the Movement’s radicalism, this project addresses many of these complications head-on by examining cultural activism in areas maligned in recent studies. Scholarship tends to list names of lesser-known activists and organizations as evidence of a richer landscape while neglecting further analysis of the ways in which they challenged or revised the Movement from within. For example, how do we understand the militant Deacons for Defense as part of the Southern civil rights movement predicated on the commitment to non-
violence? How do we integrate expressions of anger, mental instability, and regret as a central part of a historical narrative rooted in heroism? For too long the answer has been to reduce these complications into a digestible narrative and ignore the discomforts. My focus on political aesthetics enters into an emerging conversation in Black Liberation Movement historiography that argues for the importance of culture in social movement activism. Historians including Joe Street, Peniel Joseph, Charles Payne, Rhonda Y. Williams and John Ditter all focus on the local grassroots initiatives that constitute both the Civil Rights and Black Power movements and note what Street calls the “transformative power of these cultural forms” (Street 7). As previously unrecognized stories and voices emerge from the archives, scholarship has moved away from the major figures of King and Malcom X toward a deeper understanding of the impact of countless small organizers, especially women, in the struggle. “The Radical South” joins the historiographic pathways of James Smethurst, Manning Marable, and Joe Street in order to examine the intersections of culture and protest that created the social movements of this era.

Additionally, recent scholarship addresses how the Civil Rights Movement does not exist as an insular entity or a singular lesson-unit in twentieth century U.S. history but rather as an integral way through which the United States related to the rest of world. From the perspective of activists, this meant imagining themselves as part of a global 1960s, where liberation movements in places as varied as Cuba, China, the Congo, Algeria, and Ghana framed the ideological struggles taking place in the U.S. South. In turn, the movements abroad were deeply invested in the liberation struggles for African American equality. This global relationship was more than an imaginary; it manifested in the political bonds between the leaders of the self-proclaimed Third World who gathered in 1955 at the Bandung conference in Indonesia—a momentous occasion in the development of a global South sensibility. The U.S. government understood the power—and
threat—of the connection between marginalized peoples in the U.S. and anti-colonial movements abroad rapidly embracing a “Marxist-Leninist Third World” politics. Thus, liberation struggles at home and projections of these struggles abroad impacted and shaped Cold War political relations. Again, this was more than just the influence of media or the perceptions gained from artists such as Charles Mingus or Josephine Baker who spoke out against U.S. racism abroad. Julian Mayfield working as Kwame Nkrumah’s political aid, Fidel Castro inviting Amiri Baraka and black artists and activists to Cuba, and Mao and the People’s Republic of China housing Robert F. and Mabel Williams in refuge from the FBI were all results of global infiltrations into what Alan Nadel refers to as the “containment culture” of the Cold War. Also, as Jose Yglesias reminds us through his writing on Cuban migrant communities in the South, people from revolutionary areas living in the U.S. added their cosmopolitan politics to this “domestic” issue—the most famous perhaps being the Trinidadian Stokely Carmichael.¹ Despite the fact that the Civil Rights Movement has long been discussed as a part of U.S. domestic history, it is also a historical moment of global South development and solidarity.

The history and culture of Civil-Rights-era radicalism in the U.S. South is much too large, widespread, and complex for the scope of this dissertation. For the sake of space, the project must resist analysis of areas with histories of grassroots cultural activism, such as Miami, Houston, rural Appalachia, the Sea Islands, Memphis, and Atlanta. Instead, I offer case studies within rural Mississippi, New Orleans, Ybor City in Tampa, and the fictional places of Claybourne, Georgia and Gainsboro, a border city modeled after Monroe, North Carolina. Other possibilities that could only be mentioned in this project—such as the fiction of Alice Walker and John A. Williams, the theater of Afro-Arts Miami and El Teatro Campesino, Robert F. and

¹ For more on West Indian influences on the Civil Right Movement see (Smethurst).
Mabel Williams’ Radio Free Dixie, Julian Mayfield’s international writings from Ghana, and the emergence of documentary film from areas in rural Mississippi and Appalachia to Atlanta—all frame the context of what I was able to include here. I mean this project to be more introductory than complete, and to this end, I take a bold step towards building a discourse with which to better understand the political and artistic possibilities of grassroots cultural activism.

II. Locating Radicalism in the U.S. South

“The Radical South” draws attention to Southern radicalism in a way that challenges the binary logic that locates the U.S. South outside Black Arts Movement. Despite recent scholarship that proves the U.S. South’s integral part of social movement activism, movements in the urban North and West continue to be seen as more militant or radical than those in the South. Historically, this view elides examples of Southern radicalism: the phrase black power was first chanted in Mississippi; the official name of the Black Panther Party is the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, founded in Alabama; Radio Free Dixie called for nothing short of an armed revolution against the U.S.; and the Deacons for Defense and Justice black militia organized in Louisiana. And yet, the image of northern urban militancy persists, and many scholars that regard the Black Arts Movement as the cultural wing of the Civil Rights Movement turn their attention to the Black Arts Repertoire Theater/School run by Amiri Baraka, writer’s groups in Chicago and New York (OBAC and the Harlem’s Writers Guild, respectively), and the music of Nina Simone and Abbey Lincoln. In Rethinking the Black Freedom Movement, an overview of the period published in 2016, Yoruba Williams looks “beyond those individuals and organizations most associated with the standard narrative” (xv), and yet makes no mention of the grassroots cultural activism of the U.S. South in her section on art and politics. This is the most
recent example of how scholars have overlooked, or only briefly mentioned, the Southern network of cultural activism during the Civil Rights Movement, a network which continues to this day. Aside from notable exceptions in the work of Jerry Ward and James Smethurst, a false binary positions a civil rights-oriented, non-violent South against a Black Power-focused, militant urban North and West, a narrative that has produced the regional marginalization of Southern radicalism. Recent scholarship by Peniel Joseph, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, and James Smethurst seeks to rectify this historical misinterpretation, yet the dichotomy continues to shape our understanding of the two movements. As Smethurst notes in *Radicalism in the South Since Reconstruction*:

much of this grassroots success grew in part out of a sense of regional neglect by the broader movement... this sense of neglect was in many ways a source of strength, producing a degree of unity in the Black Power and Black Arts movements in the South that mitigated the factionalism that wracked them elsewhere, contributing to relatively long-lived institutions and allowing individuals with very different ideological outlooks to continue to work together in productive ways. (143)

Within this recent turn to the South within scholarship on radical politics and nationalist movements, my intervention shows how the community-based style of activism essential to Southern radicalism influenced artistic production and aesthetics. The activist-artists in the South—where traditional modes of textual production such as open-minded printers and publishers were limited—privileged performance based on collectivity as their platform because they depended on orality rather than literacy. This evidences how the landscape of the Southern movement—especially its lack of material resources—shaped an aesthetic of grassroots activism.

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2 In the introduction to *Radicalism in the South Since Reconstruction*, the editors note, "Southern radicalism is not only more than a dim reflection of radicalism elsewhere in the United States but also has been central to the development of a Left tradition since the demise of reconstruction" (Green, Rubin and Smethurst 6)
The authors/artists that I use to represent activist poetics—Julian Mayfield, Jose Yglesias, Toni Cade Bambara, and myriad participants in theater production—were global figures in their own right whose politics and writing extended well beyond the borders of the U.S. Yet, in the works selected for this dissertation, I focus on their choice to use the smaller-scale Southern community as their space of expression or object of study. I argue that the communities in their novels represent cosmopolitan locations of intersectional politics connected to global movements and thus defiant to visions of regional insularity.

I locate this project in the U.S. South because of the weight of the region as a symbol in the U.S. imaginary, especially during the Civil Rights Movement. Within Civil Rights Movement rhetoric, the South as an “underdeveloped country” (Dent, Schechner and Moses 8) emerges as a sentiment reflected in the authors and artists within this project, many of whom were northerners relocating to the South for the Movement, or in the case of Toni Cade Bambara, in an effort to prepare for Third World liberation. They describe their transition or journey to the U.S. South as if they are exploring a different country: the FST members’ journals struggle to understand their new environment, Bambara claims her need to learn a new language, and for Mayfield’s novel the deep South racism can infect communities beyond its borders. In the case of Yglesias, the U.S. South is a region existing just beyond the boundaries of Ybor City, a neighborhood in central Florida, thus suggesting that the U.S. South is both a geographic location and an idea. Indeed, the language expressed in their personal experiences depicts the South as foreign and uncharted. Yet, through their art they discover and portray urban, radical spaces that challenge perceptions of a pastoral, closed society. Southernness is at once an elusive and powerful identity that interrupts ethnic, racial and ideological categories.
This is why the South—as a conceptual “other” to urban-centric understandings of radicalism—is central to this project. By revealing and explicating radical literary expressions that emerged from the region, this project contributes to scholarship that challenges the notion of the South as an apolitical or conservative landscape, an assumption that has undoubtedly obscured many histories and left archives untouched. In fact, some of the major practitioners of grassroots, activist community performance—what James Harding and Cindy Rosenberg call the “American avant-garde”—emerged on the margins of their urban-centric counterparts (e.g. the Living Theater in New York and the San Francisco Mime Troupe). The locations in this dissertation manipulate the idea of the South and its boundaries and undo the black-and-white perception of Northern centrality and Southern marginality long before the advent of the New Southern Studies and its initiatives towards multiple Souths. This project engages with many overlapping Souths—Mayfield’s Gainsboro becomes a Southern town despite its proximity to Pennsylvania and the North, Bambara portrays a swamp in suburban Georgia as the epicenter of global South consciousness, for Yglesias’ community the South is north to Cuba, for the FST the U.S. South conflates with rural Spain and a boat on the Middle Passage. Indeed, these Souths are myriad, but its history of legally sanctioned racial violence and apartheid pushes the limits of “imagining” the South, for many people who lost their lives—including the three Civil Rights activists in Neshoba County, Mississippi who were murdered by both the Ku Klux Klan and the police—the U.S. South was a violent reality.

The radical South I present here is best defined as a system of networks that emerged in reaction to the violent atmosphere of the Jim Crow South. This network has its roots in predecessors such as Highlander Folk School, the communist-party-influenced sharecroppers union, and Black churches, however, with the advent of COFO (Council of Federated
Organizations that brought together groups such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE)) the South meant a series of local and intimate connections between communities that advocated social change. The FST plugged into this network for safe places to stay and perform and began to establish new branches based on cultures of performance across the U.S.—a network that Bambara enters decades later. Additionally, authors such as Jose Yglesias and Julian Mayfield evidence in their writing that the radical South extended beyond national borders and represents a global community connected through a series of intimate relationships. The artists and activists used this intimacy and the interpersonal nature of grassroots activism to critique the ideological structures of urban-centric aesthetics and politics. Equally influential was the rural South’s geographical distance from those urban areas, enabling them to challenge what Jack Halbertstam calls “metronormativity” (Herring 14), which is defined as the privileging of the urban over the rural in the formation of identity. Halberstam and Scott Herring use this to develop a Southern-based queer anti-urbanism, however, the concept is useful to imagine the privileging of places such as Oakland, Chicago, and New York in defining the cultural identity of the Black Arts Movement. Through the example of rural-based queer communities, Herring shows how regional marginality encouraged a critical eye towards urban expressions of group identity. Experiences at the local level also provided the grounds on which authors and artists could critique the urban-centric activism to which they felt subjected. By connecting the scholarship on southern activism and Herring's concept of “critical rusticity” (25), I complicate the reductive perimeters set around social movements: the Black Arts Movement and the Latina/o Movement in the northern/western urban centers, and the Chicana/o movement in California.

This project also locates the U.S. South within the global South through showing how
cultural activism reveals the intersections between resistance, liberation, and art—especially ritual practices that extend back through a long history of circum-Atlantic performance. Cultural memory emerges through performance pathways, stretching from Africa to New Orleans and other areas of the Deep South. Whether through funerary practices, ethnomusicology, or religious rituals, the connective tissue between cultural expressions has been well examined.\(^3\) This project examines how performance and orality relate to political protest by locating these rituals at the intersections of circum-Atlantic culture and protest theater in poor and rural areas. Beyond just the U.S. South, protest theater emerged throughout the hemisphere in the period between 1965 and 1970, an incredibly productive time of theatrical production in Latin America.\(^4\) When combined with Black Arts Theater in Northern urban areas, El Teatro Campesino, the San Francisco Mime Troupe and many others, the emergence of activist theater extends beyond Latin America as a hemispheric avant-garde.

“The Radical South” recognizes the global movements that influenced and engaged with U.S. activists, including the Cuban revolution, the Puerto Rico nationalist movement, and the Ghanaian independence movement. Therefore, it aligns with recent scholarship that considers how the global dimensions of radicalism offer important groundwork for historical


\(^4\) Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor highlights the groups comprising this canon including: *Grupo Teatro Escambray* in Cuba established in the poor and remote mountains in central Cuba, the revolutionary director Augusto Boal whose ideas behind his work *Theater of the Oppressed* were established in Brazil and spread political theater groups throughout rural, indigenous areas in Peru and Ecuador, the theater of other Latin Americans such as Enrique Bonaventura in Colombia and Osvaldo Dragan in Argentina.
recognition/revision. This scholarship reveals the sophistication of political networks and cultural nationalism emphasizing the broad fluidity of identity boundaries. By exposing intimacies that challenged the theoretical apparatus of diasporic-nationalist movements such as black nationalism, these authors and artists used artistic production within poor and neglected regions in the U.S. in order to provide the kind of “third world” commentary the global post-Bandung movement needed. Additionally, performance culture in the South counters the tenacious Sixties decline narrative by evidencing the persistence of activism and its cultural impact through theater groups from Houston to Miami and arts councils such as the Southern Black Cultural Alliance.

III. Temporal Borders and Political Boundaries

The debate on the temporality of the Civil Rights Movement has in recent decades, centered on the tension between the “Long Movement” approach and the desire for historical specificity. The “Long Movement” thesis, promoted through the work of Jacqueline Dowd Hall, Timothy B. Tyson, and Kozomi Woodard, extends the 1954-1968 timeline into the radicalism of the 1930s and the Black Power movement of the 1970s. The “Long Movement” blurs the temporal, ideological, and even the geographic differences between North and South. However, as Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang argue, the “Long Movement” “collapses periodization schemas, erases conceptual differences between waves of the BLM [Black Liberation Movement], and blurs regional distinctions in the African American experience” (265). Cha-Jua and Lang read the Long Movement as a hegemonic vampire, attempting to exist

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outside of historical context by transitioning into an “undead” status that consumes all into its whole.

In my examination of grassroots cultural activism in the South, I note alternate approaches to temporality beyond the long movement thesis through an examination of how memory and generational evolution create a temporality of activism. Toni Cade Bambara, in her reflection on the Civil Rights Movement in her novel *The Salt Eaters*, observes the tendency towards “selective memory” in activist history, which acts as a “chump way to excuse the self from the chaos of the moment, longing for a past or for a future as if there were no continuum” (98). Bambara warns against nostalgia for the past and reminds us that present conditions emerged from the same chaos of the previous generations’ activism. For example, those who fought for desegregation in the late 50s will have a significantly different approach to the Movement than those in the late 60s speaking out against the Vietnam War. The memory of a more stable or more whole past creates and sustains a cultural history that is shaped by a generational approach to protest and the intellectual tradition that informs it. Social movements are a method by which activists can demarcate time, by recognizing each generation’s historically specific issue and building progressively towards a new social order. However, artistic aesthetics such as the productions of *Godot* over the course of five decades, collapse time in order to evidence the continuation of oppression and its cyclical nature—even years after the Civil Rights Movement, Katrina proved the longevity of systemic racism. The Civil-Rights-era continuum balances the timeless qualities of aesthetics with the historical and political specificities of the local experience.

In addition to temporality, there is also a latitudinal debate over coalition activism that acts as a counterpart to the Long Movement thesis. The work of Jeffry Ogbar, Amy Sonnie, and
James Tracy on the “Rainbow Coalition” focuses on the alliances between radical groups such as the Black Panther Party, the Puerto Rican Young Lords, the white self-identified “hillbillies” of the Young Patriots, and others emerging within Asian American, Chicana/o, and American Indian communities. This scholarship has had to deal with the contradiction of ethnic or ideological essentialism against cross-dialogue—and even alliances between activist groups. Contrary to public perception, Brian Behnken argues, “there was no single civil rights movement in the United States. Rather, almost every ethnic group—blacks, Latino/as, Asian Americans, Native Americans—engaged in their own civil rights battles” (Behnken 2011 5). The framework of this scholarship informs the interconnections within my project. However, as the historiography increasingly breaks down boundaries of time, place, and identity, Civil Rights Movement scholarship is in danger of transcending the contextual specificities within which movements operated. As Peniel Joseph argues, “if ‘everything is everything,’ and the social landscape of oppression and resistance is undifferentiated, historians, oriented toward movement politics inadvertently absolve themselves of necessity of critically assessing the unique political, social, and ideological climate of their own time, and the limits and possibilities it poses” (qtd. in Cha-Jua and Lang 284). While this dissertation does focus on coalitional intersections between movements, I am careful to note the importance of specific group identities as politically empowering, even if constituents challenge group identity from within. These movements have been historicized and compartmentalized in order to protect the integrity of the preferred identification of their constituents; yet I argue that participants used aesthetic expression to connect to an undefined universal movement. Through examples of cultural activism, I hope to reconcile this tension between the possibility of intersectional coalition and the local specificity of narratives of grassroots activism.
“The Radical South” offers a new approach to the role of “multi-ethnic freedom struggles” in the Civil Rights Movement by examining how activist art created a “cultural front” across diverse political movements that shared more in terms of aesthetics than ideology. In borrowing this phrase from Michael Denning, I intentionally connect this cultural front to its Depression-era predecessor, a movement that imbued artistic production with a “laborist” aesthetic across multiple, loosely connected groups. My turn to expressions of “Third World” aesthetics in the Civil-Rights-era, however, contests the possibility of a Marxist-inspired global revolution when confronted with the lived daily experiences of oppression in the U.S. Many of the voices within this dissertation show how their racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, and regional identities could not be easily discarded for the sake of the revolution. And yet, the authors and artists working within the multi-ethnic cultural front of the Civil-rights-era used these identities as poetic devices that allowed characters to switch in and out of different categories.

This project emphasizes the value of activist literature and builds new vocabularies with which to discuss politically conscious texts that have been maligned or ignored, and those such as Bambara, which is celebrated but needs more critical attention for its ability to theorize social movement activism. From performance to the novel, these works reexamined and adapted the artistic possibilities within Marxism: such as collective production, defamiliarization, and the dialectic. Even though the literary expressions of activism that I discuss share political consciousness with turn-of-the-century naturalism, Depression-era proletariat literature, and the manifesto, the activist aesthetic emerging in the 1960s contains ambiguities and that expose the community as a fragmented—rather than whole—entity, thereby challenging the reductive categorization of "agitprop" or proletarian literature or even protest literature. Thus, the avant-garde suggests a more complicated and multifaceted terrain of political literature that combines
these aesthetic strands in a method that Erika Fischer-Lichte calls “transcultural weaving,” a process that highlights the confluence of influences while avoiding the term hybridity (Fischer-Lichte, Jost and Jain). As Kimberly Drake and the contributors of *Critical Insights: Literature of Protest* emphasize, the aesthetics of “protest literature” are “concerned rather with the creation of a style that reflects its subject matter, a style that sets it apart from the style and goals of ‘bourgeois’ or even mainstream subject matter” (8). Aesthetics, therefore, are an inherent aspect of politics as well as art. As Jacques Rancière argues, “there is no political life, but a political stage,” where aesthetics—such as the formation of a picket line, march, or the rhetorical cues of an orator—expose how politics is actually a “configuration of a specific world…a conflictive world” (Rancière 7). In this project, Rancière’s conflictive world of political aesthetics overlays the interconnected web of the radical South in order to show how region exists as a political ideology as much as a geographic actuality.

At the same time, the aesthetics of activist art are determined by the kind of political movement that informs it. The financial limitations of grassroots activism in the radical South affected the way activists produced art, as the creators turned from a representational reality to a surrealism that better reflected daily life as a minority in the U.S. Aesthetics of cultural activism were shaped, I argue, by its financial limitations. Tomas Ybarra-Frausto parallels this within the Chicana/o aesthetic *rasquache*, a term I use when describing the Free Southern Theater’s approach to performance, which he defines as “an attitude rooted in resourcefulness and adaptability” (qtd. in Taylor 127). In a contemporary parallel, Britney Cooper of the Crunk Feminist Collective reads this cheap, immediate, and in-your-face mode as “ratchet radicalism,” defined as the kind of spontaneous and somewhat inappropriate approach to activism “meant to be so over the top and outrageous that they catch your attention and exceed the bounds of
acceptable saying” (Cooper). Ratchetness or rasquache, with all their irreverence, emphasizes how cultural forms can affect political realities and must be taken seriously as an aspect of the avant-garde. Ratchet radicalism is at the core of The Grand Parade’s performative politics and Toni Cade Bambara’s descriptions of protest; however, beyond content, it also pushed the boundaries of form as authors took irreverent risks with their writing such as non-linear fragmentation and inconclusive plots.

Rather than viewing financial constraints as limitations, avant-garde cultural activism embraced its aesthetic possibilities and encouraged readers and audiences to imagine a new social order. Surrealism enabled artists to explore the ideological paradoxes of social movement activism, especially the contradiction between identity politics and universal solidarity. Unity is the backbone of social movements; yet, systems that force homogenization are oppressive, whether they are external, such as patriarchal capitalism, or internally produced—a subject of criticism from many authors writing from within the movement. Thus, defying this homogeneity through expressions of difference becomes a method of resistance, even though it is in direct conflict with the political goal of unity. In the texts that make up the archive of this project, there is a tension surrounding how to form diverse alliances without sacrificing individual experience. As Ian Baucom argues through Frantz Fanon’s writing about Algerian activist radio, “a subaltern collectivity produces itself—through listening and re-creating, paying attention and remaking” where personal interpretation of the radio’s message balances the individual and the collective. Baucom regards the process of subaltern collectivity as an answer to the crisis of the Left:

Solidarity, thus understood, demands both a ‘common’ narrative, canon of experience, or object of attachment and a set of differentiated reproductions of that common thing; a common consent to listen and a collective dissent of interpretation; not so much an
identity in difference as a differencing in identity. To my mind, this sort of performative solidarity provides a model (if admittedly a paradoxical ‘model’) for the ways in which intellectual workers might construct their ‘solidarity’ with one another. (Baucom 35)

In the manner that Baucom reads the power of radio as a model with which to explore performative politics and solidarity, “The Radical South” branches out to see the possibilities of art across media, including the novel.

Even through individual authorship, I argue that the activist-artists in this project exhibit a set of aesthetic practices that allowed space for ideological flexibility, a process I define as *conflictual solidarity*. By highlighting the tension between unity and dissent, the artistic record serves as a point of reference for pragmatic political action and shows that the activists were aware of the weaknesses of an ethnic nationalist discourse. Nationalism empowered its constituents and brought to relief the hypocrisy of their second-class citizenship status in the racist U.S., however, it was always in danger of replicating oppression as a totalitarian political structure. The fictional and non-fictional voices within this project shift between an ethereal universality and the historical specificity of the moment with reckless abandon. I look at moments where people attempted to search for new and alternative areas that would move beyond the individualism of writing a novel. What makes these narratives vastly different from a manifesto is the way in which they deviated from a single idea or cohesive political approach. Rather they presented an antithesis to the projected utopian vision, creating a dialogue that often showed a conflicted community, one that could not agree. Though many examples tried to show the possibility of a utopian society, others showed just the opposite: the community's myriad internal conflicts and the failure to maintain a utopian vision due to these inner conflicts because of diversity within the movement.
IV. The Archive and Methodology

“The Radical South” examines how cultural representations of activism converse with, and at times debate, the historical record. As scholars such as Mary Helen Washington, Peniel Joseph, and Mary Dudziak have noted, our understanding of the historical record must come to terms with to the extent to which the Cold War and specifically the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)’s Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) have falsified our knowledge. As Joseph argues, “historians still know too little about the period’s key actors and groups” and many of its groups and leaders “remain shrouded in mystery” (Joseph 774). Indeed, as I show in my chapter on Julian Mayfield’s The Grand Parade and especially in my chapter on Jose Yglesias’s writing on “Latin” radicalism, fictional narrative and art in general often became a method of truth-telling about local issues erased from the historical record. For example, in the essay “The Pathology of Racism: A Conversation with Third World Wimmin,” doris davenport questions the absence of—and possibility for—research on women’s psychological oppression. While her gesture towards a universal womanhood is problematic, her theory of women’s oppression challenges theoretical and scientific discourse as she claims, “So consider this as a thesis: They know” (Anzaldúa and Moraga 88). davenport takes on the role of researcher; she, herself, is the evidence. This not only actively resists traditional scholarship, but also comments on the futility and impossibility of recording the diverse psychologies of a global women’s oppression. davenport presents her individual experience with superior accuracy and value in the face of patriarchal science, which she argues is both biased and inaccurate. The unofficial record of women’s stories enables us to imagine space beyond recorded history and its relationship to the archive.
Art holds its own archive of moments that can recognize silence and non-lingual expression as an underlying mode of collective memory. Rather than falsely representing marginalized voices, the activist-artists in this project disrupt the idea of a monolithic marginalized and instead represent their own lack of access to the communities in which they operate. As readers we do not have access to the thoughts of the Ukrainian janitor in The Grand Parade (Chapter 2) who interrupts the climax of the novel, nor do we have access to the words of the lector’s speech in Yglesias’s The Truth About Them (Chapter 3) because the narrator claims, “I cannot remember them and I will not invent them” (Yglesias, Truth 137). In the Free Southern Theater archive, this means imagining a visual performance that we can never see. In representations of orality and music, Mayfield, Yglesias, and Bambara call on us to imagine a soundscape we cannot hear. As we open our imagination to what exists beyond the text, our minds follow davenport’s approach to theoretical discourse, which calls on us to imagine the unthinkable knowledge of they know.

With “The Radical South,” I am building a virtual archive of voices echoing throughout fictional narratives that express alternate truths about the Civil Rights Movement. These artifacts exist on a spectrum between “historical truth” and fiction and within them I see the answer to Jacques Derrida’s question about the possibility of removing actuality from the archived event: “Will we be obliged to continue thinking that there is no thinkable archive for the virtual?” (66). Derrida frames this in terms of the future and the impact of media, the Internet, and virtual life on the manner in which we archive. However, I apply it to the silences of the past and what Yglesias names a “casuality of history” (Double Double 26), a term he uses to describe a person absent from the archive. The way activist-authors chose to represent activism opens access to social movement thought in a way that manifestos cannot by challenging the connection between
the archivable act and the experiential reality of the event. For Derrida, the tension between “material truth” and “historical truth” drives his study of the archive, and he concludes that we must rethink our approach: “The moment has come to accept a great stirring in our conceptual archive, and in it to cross a ‘logic of the unconscious’ with a way of thinking of the virtual which is no longer limited by the traditional philosophical opposition between act and power” (Derrida 67). Derrida’s recognition of the power of the virtual archive connects with the ineffable nature of expression beyond the text, and further solidifies the relationship between culture and activism, between art and politics. I find these threads in Yglesias’s recognition of his inability as a male writer to gain access to matriarchal information and then, in Bambara, Anzaldúa, and Moraga’s elusive “spiritual activism,” which I examine in my final chapter. Just because it is impossible to catalogue a virtual imaginary, does not diminish its impact on social change. Thus, it is necessary to expose the artificiality of the archive’s power to represent social movements. As I consider the continuum of social movement activism in general, and the Civil Rights Movement in particular, the archive—even within this project—fails to accurately capture the ideological and temporal fluidity of the multi-ethnic freedom struggles and grassroots activism. Rather, the archive artificially breaks time into folders and separates entities into collections in different locations, making it impossible to see the whole.

V. Getting to the Grassroots

Through small case studies in each chapter, I build towards a holistic understanding of grassroots activism, whose properties are reflected in the lack of clear structure and difficulty in attribution. The initial chapter examines how the Free Southern Theater, an integrated theater group established in Mississippi in 1963, combined European avant-garde theater with civil
rights political platforms, creating new forms of expression that influenced black and ethnic experimental performance and literature. Through an analysis of this process, which I call *visual jazz*, I show how abstract avant-gardism was used politically in order to create radical dialogues between audiences and transnational conflicts expressed in European drama, such as the Spanish Civil War.

I turn to the novel in my second chapter, which considers the influence of the Cuban Revolution on the black freedom movement through Julian Mayfield’s *The Grand Parade*. I look specifically at his relationship with controversial activist Robert F. Williams who was exiled in Cuba and how Mayfield that fictionalized Williams’ hometown of Monroe, North Carolina as Gainesboro, a small city on the border between North and South. Within the political interactions of this community, I examine how Mayfield uses black identity to critique the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) and then uses that critique as a means to question the validity of all political and racial ideologies that operate to form a community politics. The third chapter further extends the hemispheric relationship to Cuba by examining the novels of Jose Yglesias, which center on Ybor City, a Cuban barrio within Tampa, Florida. Yglesias interweaves political issues, such as the Spanish Civil War, the Cuban Revolution, and the Civil Rights Movement, into the fabric of his close-knit radical community and uses memory to interrupt and challenge political history.

My fourth chapter examines how Toni Cade Bambara’s 1980 novel *The Salt Eaters* represents grassroots activism in a fictional Southern community. Bambara's novel fits within the activist aesthetic; she offers multiple, critical perspectives on the evolution of activist politics in the imaginary town of Claybourne, Georgia. *The Salt Eaters* extends a poetics of collectivism from the community to the individual body of Velma, a community activist who is suffering
from a mental breakdown. Bambara dramatizes Velma's internalization of dissent and political conflict as the community gathers to make her whole again. My reading of *The Salt Eaters* completes a kind of arc in the dissertation that connects community performance, dialectical community narratives, collective memory, and experimental forms to the genre of the novel. I relate Bambara’s involvement with ‘Third World’ feminist anthologies to what Gloria Anzaldúa termed ‘spiritual activism’ in order to trace the connection between the materialism of politics and its non-material spiritualities. My goal is to create a conversation between historical narrative and creative expression—what can and cannot be remembered or archived. The artists and authors that make up this project revolutionized the relationship between art and politics, and their innovative incorporation of non-linguistic elements such as music, orality, performance, and collective production created an aesthetics of activism that continues to influence contemporary expressions of ethnic identity and protest today.
CHAPTER 1: THE FREE SOUTHERN THEATER AND THE VISUAL JAZZ OF CULTURAL ACTIVISM

I. The Free Southern Theater and the Hemispheric Avant-Garde

For many artist-activists in the 1960s, political identity and artistic production were inseparable. The same impulse for freedom that incited activists from around the country to descend on Mississippi during Freedom Summer also inspired migratory artists who searched for ways to connect with the communities in the South. Culture became their method of protest. The Free Southern Theater (FST) was founded in Jackson, Mississippi by Gilbert Moses, John O’Neal, and Doris Derby, activists who had migrated South for the Movement. Their group exemplified the kind of cultural activism in the U.S. South that searched for new, egalitarian forms of art that would serve even their poorest constituents and “add a cultural and educational dimension to the present Southern freedom movement” (Dent, Schechner, and Moses 12). The FST also wanted cultural expression to reflect the traditions inherent within their communities, such as orality, music, and group participation, while mobilizing those communities in the spirit of the Civil Rights Movement. It was not enough to reflect an activist agenda in the content of their art; many felt called upon to innovate and use their myriad identities as part of the artistic process. FST participant Tom Dent justifies this method claiming, “This is what we need, for we must not only be black, which means accepting our reality, as artists we must use it; it must become a device, a lever, a power which applies to reality in general. Or other realities” (Dent, Schechner and Moses 60).
Theater became a popular medium in which artist-activists could experiment with new forms and engage more closely with their community—whether that be the Black Arts community, a labor camp or picket line, a feminist collective, or Appalachian white coal miners to name a few. Performance did what traditional forms of literacy could not—it provided a more immediate means of communication and a reason for people to gather together. As an integrated theater, the FST offered a symbol of the possibilities of black-white creative production. Yet within the space of the theater—and their endless arguments over ideological purpose—they exposed the limitations of affinity and exploded many of the main tenets of the Civil Rights Movement paradigm, including cross-cultural unity and even non-violence. Fifty years later, scholars continue to debate the lasting political impact of Freedom Summer and the Civil Rights Movement in the South. However, the cultural activist legacy remains extant through theater groups, performance collectives, and community arts workshops across the South that claim a lineage to the FST.\footnote{For more on this debate see chapters 10, 11, and the epilogue in Bruce Watson, \textit{Freedom Summer: The Savage Season that Made Mississippi Burn and Made America a Democracy} (Viking: Penguin, 2010) and Alice Walker, “The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?” \textit{In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens} (Harcourt, INC: 1983). These groups, such as Carpetbag Theater, Jomandi Productions, Dashiiki Project, AlternateROOTS, Afro Arts Miami, Sudan Arts in Houston claimed their lineage either at the 1985 FST funeral performance and conference: \textit{A Valediction Without Mourning: The Role of Art in the Process of Social Change} or at the FST 50th Anniversary celebration and conference in November 2013.}

The FST’s combination of theatrical practice with ritualistic community participation is by no means anomalous. The FST operated within a larger movement of community-activist theaters that includes Chicano theater groups such as El Teatro Campesino in California, Black Arts Movement theater in Northern urban areas in the U.S., the Bread and Puppet Theater in New York City’s Lower East Side, At the Foot of the Mountain’s feminist theater, the Roadside Theater in Appalachia, and A Travelling Jewish Theater in San Francisco. James M. Harding and Cindy Rosenthal position the FST within this as both “participant and producer” and argue that...
they “belong to a distinctly American activist avant-garde, one that has direct ties to an African-American community long excluded from histories of American experimental performance” (18). Moreover, as performance studies scholar Diana Taylor has shown, the period between 1965 and 1970 was also an incredibly productive time of theatrical production in Latin America. This period saw the emergence of revolutionary director Augusto Boal whose ideas behind his work *Theater of the Oppressed* were established in Brazil and spread political theater groups throughout rural, indigenous areas in Peru and Ecuador, as well as the establishment of *Grupo Teatro Escambray* in the poor and remote mountains in central Cuba, and other Latin American experimental directors such as Enrique Bonaventura in Colombia and Osvaldo Dragun in Argentina (Brecht and Latin America’s ‘Theatre of Revolution’). Indeed, according to Doris Derby’s journal from the FST’s initial meetings, they imagined the theater as part of a global movement. In addition to Moliere and Brecht, Derby’s journal mentions the “carpa” theater tradition of Mexico, the migratory theater in Puerto Rico, the Soviet Blue Blouse theater that used performance to “give the latest news from the front lines,” and the Chinese people’s theater.

However, this study of global performance exists side-by-side with Derby’s emphasis on theater that “arises out of our daily tasks and relationships,” including everything from the persecution of artists within the House of Un-American Activities to “the use of chemicals in food” (Derby). Thus I locate the FST as a locally-focused theater that also imagined themselves within a *hemispheric* avant-garde. As Harding argues, global emergences of the avant-garde are “not of derivative, but of independent parallels” from Europe and from each other (“From Cutting Edge” 28 emp. in original). Though these groups developed independently, many of them communicated or collaborated together in festivals and conferences, suggesting a vision of association that transcends racial/ethnic, linguistic, national, class, and gender differences. They
connect to each other through two interwoven threads that extend beyond regional or ethnic binds: the desire for revolutionary social change and the resistance to traditional forms of expression (i.e. writing, publishing, traditional art, classical dance, etc.). These groups took their lead from earlier European avant-garde dramaturgy, especially Marxist theatrical theorist Bertolt Brecht, and combined those elements with the traditions and materials within their communities, most notably jazz.

The theater did not exist independently from conditions of Mississippi during Freedom Summer—they were an integral part of the atmosphere of the Civil Rights Movement. FST productions integrated audiences and atmospheres into each performance. Part of this was organic happenstance: many audiences had never seen a theatrical production and thus did not restrict themselves by the “fourth wall” that separated performer from viewer. Additionally, the limited budget restricted the FST to unconventional performance spaces—such as freedom schools, rural churches, and cotton fields—which conflated the imaginative worlds of their plays with the reality of rural Mississippi. Unlike the theater of the European avant-garde that created environments and situations within the theater in order to attack/affect its audience, the FST’s style of audience interaction was vulnerable to its surroundings and sometimes determined by its constituents. The same production changed from place to place: from cotton fields, to college auditoriums in Atlanta, to country churches, to housing projects in New Orleans. The FST only received one rejection from their location requests for the 1964 tour from Neshoba County, Mississippi, which responded, “[T]he difficulties attendant upon the visit of an interracial group would be too great. Someday the county may be ready, but not just yet.” (Letter from Neshoba

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Project). Neshoba County became infamous worldwide that same year when local police and Ku Klux Klan members murdered three civil rights workers, an event for which the FST had to suspend performances in order to attend the funeral. Not only Neshoba County, but the whole state became symbolic with racial violence: Roy Wilkins described the Mississippi landscape as one of “inhumanity, murder, brutality and racial hatred” (Wilkins) after Medger Evers was murdered there in 1963; riots erupted at the University of Mississippi during the enrollment of James Meredith who would become the university’s first African American student; and in Birmingham, Alabama a church was bombed out of racial hatred. Nina Simone wrote “Mississippi Goddamn” in response to the Birmingham incident proving the extent to which Mississippi became a symbol for U.S. racial violence during the Civil Rights Movement.

Simone’s lyric, “I think every day’s gonna be my last” (“Mississippi Goddamn”) resonated with Southern participants in the Civil Rights Movement, as well as the Deacons for Defense, the Freedom Riders who were often arrested and beaten, and everyday black citizens. The FST did not only need a plan for theatrical productions, they also needed a plan for survival—even to the extent that their participation forms for actors and volunteers asked whether or not they would have access to bail money in case of an arrest.

Perhaps their message was not as amplified as Stokely Carmichael’s call for “Black Power,” chanted in Greenwood, Mississippi, but it is amazing what controversial material the FST were able to produce and organize beneath the cultural guise of entertainment. They performed plays that featured revolutionary heroes of black history (Martin Duberman’s In White America), scenes where black and white men embraced (Godot), and where black men triumphantly held up (prop) guns (Brecht’s Rifles of Senora Carrar). Their productions often ended in freedom songs or discussions in which audience members loudly protested oppressive
conditions—all in the context of the play. Entertainment allowed the FST to get by with minimal damage. In one such example, members of the Ruleville, Mississippi White Citizens Council sat through an FST performance of *In White America* with forty armed local policemen… and yet no violence ensued. According to actor Murray Levy, the White Citizens Council spokesman claimed that “they were very impressed by the quality of acting…but naturally they couldn't accept the play's comments.” When confronted with the fact that the play was actually a documentary, the white man replied, ”he felt there had been a bias in editing” (Letter from Murray Levy). According to the different accounts of this tense moment, the aggressors had no reason to act and thus left peacefully. A letter from performance scholar Erika Munk, who was at the event, describes the experience and states that the men were “unfriendly [sic], of course but not actively hostile…While it was impossible to tell from their faces whether these men were moved by what they saw, the fact that they stuck with it is a breakthrough—and that we were in no way harassed on our drive back to Ruleville after the show” (Letter from Erika Monk). Even though the FST were not completely immune from harassment from local police and often depended on the Deacons for Defense and Justice for protection, for the majority of their tours they were able to perform controversial material unharmed. Theater shifted and bent the boundaries of protest and through the guise of entertainment and the confusion of a play like *Godot*, communities could gather together.

Using their cultural integration of European avant-garde theater, specifically Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, I explore how they developed theatrical style and why it has remained so effective despite lack of critical attention in comparison with other Black Arts Movement theater. Amiri Baraka’s *Dutchman* was produced in New York City the same year as the FST’s *Godot*, and both were radical—and absurdist—plays with integrated casts; however,
the violent landscape of Mississippi, quite different from Greenwich Village in 1964, required a unique aesthetic approach comprised of the collaborative, subversive, and ephemeral processes that even today continue to resist the critical analysis I attempt in this chapter. Both plays had a significant amount of press and ignited their own local cultural scenes, however, the FST’s Godot is not anthologized as a major contribution to African American literature like Baraka’s Dutchman. In The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s, James Smethurst points towards what he considers a strange reason: “the resolutely anticareerist, localist, grassroots orientation of many southern activists” (365). This is an uncanny, even ironic, reason because the ideals of cultural activism should emphasize those very characteristics. This critical roadblock attests to the tenacity of individual authorship and regional biases even when dealing with the chronicling of progressive cultural expression.

This chapter seeks another approach—mainly through form and aesthetic—that further emphasizes the importance of the FST while also suggesting new platforms on which to discuss cultural activism. I build this approach by using jazz as a methodological inspiration to the FST. In other words, beyond simply incorporating jazz music or references into their art, the FST used the process of creating jazz—or jazz as a verb—as a blueprint for theater. As Robert G. O’Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin, state in the introduction to Uptown Conversations: The New Jazz Studies “jazz is not only a music to define, it is a culture” (2); the effort to define this culture contains its own discourse (jazz studies) that extends the musical process into poetics.8 I position the FST’s search for “new idiom, a new genre, a theatrical form and style as unique as blues, jazz, and gospel” (FST 12) as an exercise in jazz cultural practice.

Scholars such as Smethurst, Adam Gussow, and Kimberely W. Benston have examined the

cultural crossover of jazz styles to Black Arts rhythmic poetry and fiction, however I argue that this methodology went beyond listening to jazz as “the soundtrack to the Black Arts Movement” (Gussow 227) and deeper than replicating musical sounds through literature—although they engaged in these aspects as well. Rather, this chapter argues that the FST improvised off of European material, like Godot and thus replicated of jazz’s structural methods in an attempt to create a new genre of avant-garde theater through visual communication.

They translated this process to text through a textual documentary published in 1969, *The Free Southern Theater by the Free Southern Theater*, a collective autobiography of the theater edited by Gilbert Moses, Tom Dent, and Richard Schechner, who would later establish the field of performance studies together with anthropologist Victor Turner. As a “documentary of the South’s radical black theater with journals, letters, poetry, essays and a play written by those who built it,” the *FST by the FST* rejects any sense of individual authorship. It has become the centerpiece in any discussion of the FST, not only because it contains primary sources, but also because the FST included criticisms, financial troubles, and negative attitudes about theater and the movement. Rather than acting as a piece of art in itself, the documentary recorded the process of artistic creation, positioning the act of collaboration as central to their identity. As such, *The FST by the FST* provides a textual microcosm of Civil Rights Movement organizations by revealing the inner conflicts about their purpose and artistic vision, positioning conflicted collaboration as central to their identity. In the following examination of their performances, the textual documentary serves as my point of access. On one hand, this is antithetical to a performance studies approach, what Diana Taylor calls for when she states, “Instead of privileging texts and narratives, we could also look to scenarios as meaning-making paradigms that structure social environments, behaviors, and potential outcomes” (*The Archive and the
Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas 28) However, in order to access the holistic scenario, I depend on the move from performance to text and thus shift my artifact from the actual event itself, to the writings about the event—while remaining painfully aware that the editors of the documentary speak on behalf of their audiences in order to translate the ephemeral moment for the written record.

The chapter begins with further analysis of visual jazz as a method with which to understand Godot and the FST’s use of avant-garde theater within the Black Arts Movement. I then analyze how through Godot, the FST attempted to liberate audiences from a racially determined worldview. By encouraging audience interaction, they provided a space for political participation that mobilized members of the community for the Civil Rights Movement. Then I turn to Brechtian methodology in order to examine how the racially integrated cast transformed plays into a social commentary on race relations in the South. Through Bertolt Brecht’s Die Gewehe af Frau Carrar, translated by George Tabori as The Rifles of Senora Carrar, set in the Spanish Civil War, the FST made foreign locations of revolutionary conflict familiar to their Southern audiences. The chapter concludes with their production of Amiri Baraka’s Slave Ship directed by Gilbert Moses and performed in Mississippi and Louisiana in 1970, just as the FST began to move deeper into community workshops. By following their avant-garde arc from Beckett to Baraka, I examine how the FST used local environments to adapt surrealist, experimental theater to meet the specific needs of communities. Their productions contributed to an aesthetics of cultural activism, which I define as the process by which authors and artists experiment with forms of expression in order to critique political ideology. I argue that ethnic and cultural identity became a device with which to interrogate abstract theories such as Marxism or nationalism.
II. Visual Jazz and the Aesthetics of Improvisation

The FST’s experimentation placed them within a tradition of counter-mainstream art in the process of social change as well as within an arc of modernist innovations in literature, the visual arts and photography, and especially jazz. If we take the FST’s desire for a jazz aesthetic at face value, we find a parallel between the experimental innovations of bebop jazz at the beginning of the black freedom movement and the visual, or dramatic, jazz that similarly has aesthetic roots in improvisation, communal experimentation, and abstraction. Some examples of how Black Arts Movement artists blurred the lines between literature and music include the jazz fiction of Ishmael Reed, Amiri Baraka, and Toni-Cade Bambara; jazz performances of Ntozake Shange, Adrienne Kennedy, and Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach’s Freedom Suite, literature on jazz from Baraka’s Blues People to Toni Morrison’s jazz; the jazz poetry of Jayne Cortez, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Kalamu Ya Salaam, Haki Madhubuti, and the poetry jazz of artists such as Sun Ra and Charles Mingus. There is a mass of critical work dedicated to these intersections between genres and the political implications of jazz.

However, I see the FST not as artists who loved jazz music but as musicians themselves using their bodies as instruments to rewrite theatrical standards. This process pushes their theater beyond adaptation in the same manner in which Charlie Parker—and many other jazz musicians—did not merely adapt, but transformed Stravinsky’s classical ballet The Rite of Spring. The relationship between jazz musicians and Stravinsky mirrors the theatrical conversation the FST were having with the European dramatists. Jazz musicians found something in the “folk-inspired forms and melodies…[the] extreme experiments Stravinsky devised in meter, rhythmic syncopation and dissonance” (Jarenwattananon). Stravinsky’s avant-garde provided a language for musicians to translate as their own, as Beckett and Brecht created
with their own avant-garde playwriting. Critics have noted these adaptations to theater, such as the Bread and Puppet Theater’s use of “the obvious appropriateness of avant-garde traditions” (Bell qtd. in Harding and Rosenthal 381) and James M. Harding’s argument that transnational avant-garde traditions emerged as a global aesthetic. Their work explains why certain artistic material is attractive to others for adaptation—a question that applies to the FST as well.

I read the FST performances as visual jazz where the body, the audience, and the environment are instruments improvising performance. The relationship between the FST and their audiences reformatted the plays to a call-and-response dialectic between art (the FST’s production) and political message (what the audience perceived). Each performance existed somewhere between the artistic decisions of the FST and the vocalized response of their audience. To show how this new form developed, I employ the jazz composition device of a contrafact: a popular method of borrowing that enabled musicians to avoid paying royalties by writing new melodies over the harmonic structure of old standards that were often originally written by white musicians. A notable example is Charlie Parker’s “Koko,” that contrafacted Ray Noble’s “Cherokee” in order to avoid paying royalties on Noble’s song.\(^9\) What started out as an economic decision, evolved into an artistic tool that subverted legal limitations with an avant-garde sound—bebop—that some argued was inaccessible to mainstream (white) jazz audiences. Just as white musicians freely borrowed from black musicians in the jazz world, black musicians could use the contrafact as a method by which to respond.

Similarly, performing European material allowed the FST to avoid paying the royalties expected from plays such as Duberman’s *In White America* and Ossie Davis’s *Purlie Victorious*, which cost the FST at least two hundred and eighty dollars in 1965—a large amount for a

\(^9\) According to jazz lore, this began when Charlie Parker attempted to record “Cherokee”—a standard originally written by British composer Ray Noble—and was thwarted by the demand for royalties. Parker rewrote a new melody over the old harmonic structure, called the new song “Koko,” and avoided paying royalties.
financially struggling theater group. As far as their records show, the FST did not pay royalties for *Godot*—or any other material from Europe—thus their decision to contrafact new, independent performances from free material was also an economic one. While it is a less romantic story, economic necessity provided the impetus for many of the FST’s artistic innovations including their poetry performance shows, improvisation, and, most importantly, the in-house community writing workshops that would develop a new generation of dramatists willing to donate their writing to the FST. Money—and the need for subversion in a violent atmosphere—put the FST in a position to rework the scripts and create something independent. To return to the Stravinsky example, jazz musician Darryl Brenzel notes, “Stravinsky was also pushing things a lot harmonically and I think jazz musicians in general have an appreciation for this. We tend to want to take a tune that people know and see how far we can take the harmony and still retain the tune” (qtd. in Jaranwattananon). I view the FST’s productions as a contrafact rather than an adaptation in order to emphasize the performance’s independence, what Harding describes as “apostate adaptations [that] owe no allegiance to the integrity of their European origins and have become experimental precisely because of that experimentation” (“From Cutting Edge” 34). The FST’s visual jazz shows how non-textual elements communicated messages of resistance and thus it provides another avenue by which to understand the incorporation of European/Western material into black art, especially necessary economic maneuvers that pushed artistic creativity.

First and foremost, this was a methodology of necessity. However, this unique form of expression radicalized their participants and helped to define Southern cultural activism within the Black Arts Movement. Overall, theater and performance—so central to the Black Arts Movement—interrupts a vision of an insular black aesthetic and exposes the global roots of
African-American arts. Examples of this include the “Negro Unit” of the Federal Theater Project’s Haiti-meets-Shakespeare play, *Voodoo Macbeth*, in 1936; Zora Neale Hurston’s Bahamian Fire Dance in *The Great Day* (1932); Jean Genet’s *Les Negres* (1958) and Lorraine Hansberry’s *Les Blancs*—her response to Genet published posthumously in 1972; the absurdist techniques of Adrienne Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964) as well as those in Baraka and Bullins. Just as jazz musicians altered pieces from white composers who freely took from black jazz musicians, the FST walked into theater’s own realm of cultural borrowing. European dramatists, like Genet, established an avant-garde tradition by appropriating performance techniques from other cultures: Brecht imported vaudeville and American jazz music into his dramaturgy and Max Reinhardt was inspired by his experience with the vaudeville style production of *Shuffle Along* (1921) starring Josephine Baker, just to name a few examples.11

Therefore, the viewpoint that considers the FST’s avant-garde techniques as a European (or white) import, overlooks this longer history of performative exchange. As easily as one could say that audience involvement stems from Brechtian aesthetic theory, one could also point towards the setting of the local church, community center, or any other area that allowed people to participate openly. Or that Artaud, Beckett, and Brecht’s derisive attitude to formal language was suited to a community without access to formal literacy and education. Performance aesthetics draws from a variety of cultures without necessarily fusing them together, what Erika Fischer-Lichte calls “interweaving cultures”—a concept she intentionally choses instead of

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11 On African American cultural influence on Brecht and Reinhardt see Carol Martin and Henry Bial, eds, *Brecht Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 2. I am also partial to Diana Taylor’s rhetorical question on the use of Brecht in Latin American theater: “Why not do Brecht, still the most honored theatre practitioner in Latin America and, ironically, the world's greatest borrower?” (*The Archive and the Repertoire* 194).
hybridity ("Interweaving Cultures in Performance" 1). Tracing the history of modern theater though this process, Fischer-Lichte emphasizes how “the interweaving of cultures in performance has neither led to the westernization of non-Western performances nor to the homogenization of performances globally” (16). In other words, one culture can borrow from another without necessarily compromising its own set of aesthetics, thus rejecting the hierarchical idea of influence. When applied to the FST, the relationship between avant-garde techniques and local materials interweave together without being alloyed. Through the FST’s production of Godot, I reveal how the result of this cultural exchange was not always a smooth hybrid, rather, the overlapping of techniques and/or materials often caused discordance and discomfort. Yet these uncomfortable, even uncanny, moments evoke other intangible essences like the brushstroke that demarcates a work of art as part of the “black aesthetic” or the element that mobilized audiences to action.

III. Repositioning Race in Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot

In 1964 the Free Southern Theater (FST) performed Samuel Beckett’s Godot in a recently "bombed out" Freedom School in Ruleville, one of the stops on their Mississippi tour. The school was an unusual performance space, yet the FST was an unconventional theater group. Their integrated cast of actors and activists and mostly black rural audiences who defied the culture of fear that defined Mississippi that summer. The production was met with “enthusiastic, and often overflowing audiences across the South” despite the fact that Beckett’s play is an absurdist and philosophical drama about waiting for someone—Godot—who never arrives. During the intermission, activist Fannie Lou Hamer rose from her seat, turned to her fellow audience members and demanded that “everyone pay strict attention to the play because it’s due
to waiting that the Negro is as far behind as he is” (Dent, Schechner and Moses 53). Hamer incited audiences to shout, “We’re not waiting!” during and after the performance. Despite the FST’s initial efforts to remain culturally autonomous from a political agenda, the audience swept the play—and the FST—into the protest environment. The audience’s interruptions contested the boundary between politics and culture even though the FST claimed their focus was art, not propaganda. This unwieldy balance reflects the conflict black artists faced as they straddled the worlds of aesthetics and manifestos, trying to balance their identities as writers, sculptures, dramatists, and dancers with their political subject position as “black.”

Other accounts of the production are equally as concerned with the play's impact on its impassioned, entertained, and “befuddle[d]” audiences. Even though they performed a double bill with Ossie Davis’ *Purlie Victorious* and produced many other “black” plays over the next fifteen years, their tour of *Godot* remains one of their most remembered productions. The production caught national media attention including a centerpiece article in the *New York Times* titled “They’re Waiting for Godot in Mississippi, Too.” A central question of the *Times* article, "Why Godot?" was asked by journalists, audiences, and even FST members themselves. The FST was deliberate in their choice to overlook seemingly apt plays, such as James Baldwin’s *The Blues for Mister Charlie*, in favor of Beckett’s play, in which, to quote the famous criticism “nothing happens.” Negro Digest journalist Samuel A. Hay’s review of the play expressed his suspicion of their choice: “One wonders to what extent does the viewing of two dispairing [sic], vegetating clowns, engaged in the activity of waiting, contribute to the activation of Blacks to seek change” (Hay 12). Although some of the FST’s members expressed their confliction over Beckett’s play, the group as a whole defended *Godot* and its popularity with their audiences. Additionally, over the next few years, they continued to incorporate European avant-garde
material in their productions. In 1965—which the FST referred to as “The Year of Revolt”—they adapted Bertolt Brecht's *The Rifles of Senora Carrar*, Sean O'Casey's *Shadow of a Gunman*, and Martin Duberman’s *In White America*. They added Brecht’s *Does Man Help Man* (adapted from *Baden Lehrstück*) and the absurdist one-act by Eugene Ionesco, *The Lesson*, to their repertory the following year as a means to appeal to the audiences of the historically black colleges in the South on their tour.

The FST drew inspiration from the not-so-distant 1954 performance of the play at San Quentin prison in California, where the incarcerated audience enthusiastically embraced Beckett’s play as directly relevant to their own situation as prisoners waiting for release. The FST anticipated a connection between San Quentin to their own audiences claiming, “the play would be readily understood and welcomed in that larger prison, Mississippi,” evidence that the FST knew and welcomed the extent to which Beckett’s play could stir controversy and welcomed it. For the college-educated members of the FST that had migrated from the North, their rural Southern audiences were alien to their own position (Dent, Schechner and Moses 56-57) and *Godot* served as barometer for what their Mississippi audiences might see within Beckett’s enigma. Rather than mimetic plays on the urban experience—such as Baraka’s *Dutchman* that takes place on a subway train or Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* that takes place in a Harlem apartment—they preferred *Godot’s* bare setting of “*A country road, a tree*” and its ambiguity of place and time. The abstract settings in Beckett and Brecht’s plays allowed for a flexible environment that could manipulate geographic boundaries and gesture toward a global network of shared experience. The relationship between the written play’s

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universal theme of oppression and the local reality of the people and setting was better suited to
their new art than standard theater.

*Godot*, specifically because it was not written in or for the context of U.S. race relations,
gave the FST hope that their performances could change perspectives of racial identity and then
perhaps the social order. At the time the FST were involved in seminars on Brecht’s theories of a
Marxist theater that—according to Brecht—could upend the entire western tradition by
awakening audiences from the trance of suspended reality and empathetic relation to the
characters. In Brecht’s *verfremdungseffekt*, or alienation effect, the theater engages in the act of
making the familiar strange to audiences. Translated as estrangement or defamiliarization,
*verfremdungseffekt* created the emotional distance needed for analysis, guiding audiences away
from false consciousness. In an interview with Robert Penn Warren, Gilbert Moses paraphrases
Brecht’s approach and connects it to the struggle for social equality in the South: “art seems to
be the science of alteration, and transformation...having the people understand that perhaps
reality, or what they have been accustomed to as reality, is changeable” (Moses). Moses details
the usefulness of Brecht’s approach for the milieu of race relations in the South. Despite the fact
that Brecht did not write his plays or his dramaturgical theory with Jim Crow in mind,
*verfremdungseffekt* enabled the FST to upend the daily reality of racism in Mississippi through
theater. *Godot*, in all its abstraction, offered defamiliarized scenes that could open minds to a
post-racial future where bodies do not ‘act’ according to race, primarily because Beckett did not
write the play as a racial commentary. The FST hoped that the play in the context of rural
Mississippi could align with Brecht’s approach to drama that “treats social situations as
processes, and traces out all their inconsistencies[...] allowing the real motive forces to be shorn
of their naturalness and become capable of manipulation” (Brecht 180). The play’s tenacious
criticism that “nothing ever happens” must be revaluated in front of an audience for whom nothing ever happening is a daily—and absurd—reality. Suddenly, _Godot_ becomes an example of realism rather than absurdism.

Vladimir and Gogo’s interracial relationship, as represented in the FST performance by black actor Gil Moses and the white actor Murray Levy respectively, carries the taboo of black and white people waiting together, in a society that even segregated waiting areas. This upends the core of the play by transforming what is supposed to represent the mundane—sitting together waiting—into a transgressive act of protest just by being present on stage together. During moments in _Godot_, scenes created a visual dissonance, such as the affection between a black Vladimir and a white Estragon. According to Beckett’s script, they hug and hold each other; they do not want to leave the other person to wait alone. One can imagine how uncanny this image must have looked within the segregated South, and how those moments challenged the preconceived notions of how black and white people should be acting together. _Godot_ was meant to open audiences to an interpretation of their everyday racial milieu as absurd.

Within the first few minutes of the play, the black Vladimir establishes the dialogue of dependency that resonates between them throughout the play and comments to the white Estragon, “When I think of it...all these years...but for me...where would you be...?” (8). When Estragon contemplates their separation, Vladimir responds, “you wouldn't go far” (12), comically critiquing the white dependency on blacks in the U.S. South. For the audience—who understood the performance to be a kind of protest simply because the event was organized by SNCC—the conversation adopts an ulterior meaning. The critique is especially evident in the way that the relationship between Vladimir and Estragon does not progress towards their common goal:
ESTRAGON: Wait! (He moves away from Vladimir). I wonder if we wouldn't have been better off alone, each one for himself. (He crosses the stage and sits down on the mound.)

We weren't made for the same road.

VLADIMIR: (without anger) It's not certain. (35)

The characters’ dialogue abstractly represents the debate between integration and separatist approaches to U.S. social relations—and it does so with a degree of humor. As James Cromwell noted, the Mississippi audience “looked at Beckett’s play—right in the face—and they laughed right at the characters” (qtd. in Bean 108). Their laughter momentarily destabilized the oppressive social structure and yet, was a form of resistance less intelligible to the outside. Estragon argues for a separatist position within an integrated play and Vladimir’s indecisive response mirrors the skepticism inherent within the FST and other Civil Rights Movement groups that integration was a viable option in the South. Vladimir’s response would resonate with those in the crowd uncertain of integration’s promises.

*Figure 1: Still from the FST’s production of Waiting for Godot (1964)*
When the white actor playing Pozzo (James Cromwell) entered the stage in Act I with a rope tied around the neck of the black actor playing Lucky (John O’Neal) on his way to sell him in the market, the meaning was not ambiguous within the context of the South’s history of slavery; the appearance of their bodies alone communicated a subtextual meaning before the actors even delivered Beckett’s lines. As the play continues, the allegorical dialogue becomes so convincing that one would think Beckett did have U.S. race relations in mind when writing the play. When Vladimir approaches Pozzo and Lucky he exclaims, "To treat a man...(gesture toward Lucky)...like that ...I think that...no...a human being...no...its a scandal!" (Beckett 19, ellipses in original). The clown-like naïveté of Vladimir’s character gave a fresh reaction to this familiar image of oppression. During the production in McComb, Mississippi, an audience member interrupted the performance and stood up on the stage to shout, "slave...whupped him...no!" (Sourcebook 106, ellipses in original). This moment suggests not only audience recognition of the scene’s implications, but also a need for vocalized response to the representation before them. Imaginative resistance, the action where a subject is unwilling—not unable, but unwilling—to imagine a scenario that they find deviant to their moral worldview, counteracts the FST’s desire to transcend race. An entry in Penny Hartzell’s journal shows the effect of theater in this atmosphere: “The difference between their make-believe (TV and the movies) and real life becomes blurred during the plays. That’s why, possibly, they usually don’t listen to Pozzo. He is the white master and one need go no further than that; what could he possibly say to interest them?” (Dent, Schechner and Moses 57). Moreover, the audiences in Mississippi were in a position to interpret these scenes racially because the FST operated under the auspice of local civil rights offices. The FST did not expect such a politically charged result; rather, they explicitly stated that they wanted to help audiences “find the vocabulary” (Bean 68).
for critical discussion, and to have their audiences debate the meaning *Godot*. John O’Neal had argued that the man on stage could not articulate his ideas and thus O’Neal overlooked how the man rejected the scene before him through his direct “no.” The man’s reaction protests against *any* existential debate over meaning; for him, the only reading applicable is an affective response informed by the context of his life.

Beckett’s script contained the elements of universal oppression that resonated with Southern audiences, especially the relationship between blacks and whites strained by oppression and dependency. Lucky refuses to put down the bags he carries for Pozzo because, as Pozzo claims, "He wants to impress me, so I'll keep him" (Beckett 21). When pressed to answer whether Pozzo desires to get rid of him, he again claims that "you can't drive such creatures away" (32), thereby suggesting the psychological dependency on the master within the slave's mind. Conversely, Pozzo's identity is dependent on Lucky: "But for him all my thoughts, feelings, would have been of common things" (23). There is also a suggestion of an abusive reciprocity in Lucky when Pozzo has a mental lapse, admitting that “He used to be so kind...so helpful and entertaining...my good angel...and now...he's killing me” (34 ellipses in original). Comedy offers a moment of transgression as Pozzo and Lucky’s absurd relationship becomes blurred with the everyday absurdity of racism and dependency.

The FST’s stripped down theater with “[n]o cutain, no programs…no real set” (Mount 2) had the benefit of presenting this thin line between theater and reality. James Cromwell, who also directed the FST production of *Godot*, later reflected on how audience interpretations affected his relationship to the play: “The minister of the Baptist church in the black neighborhood in New Orleans said something to me that I had never heard really described as succinctly. He said the master is as tied to the slave as the slave is tied to the master — the
reciprocity of that relationship. That was the beginning of my understanding of the play” (qtd. in King). As much as the audience may have seen a dramatization of a traumatic history, they also saw this past within their own current context, much like Hamer did when she stood up during Godot’s intermission. In the second act of Godot, Pozzo’s blindness renders him completely dependent on Lucky who remains tied to him despite the change in their power relationship. One audience member interpreted this scenario as allegorical to the conditions of 1960s Mississippi: “Maybe in this race relations business we should take the rope off our necks after the master goes blind” (Dent, Schechner and Moses 54). With ease, the audience member creates a temporal shift from an image of a slave master to another master—suggesting the white Southerners who were losing power during the legal enforcement of integration. Rather than trying to reconcile racial difference, the member’s response argued for the more radical stance of separation and resistance beneath the seemingly innocent context of a play.

The audience reaction raises the question: What is the transgressive potential of entertainment? Beckett muses on this within Godot itself and, while critics have debated the play’s engagement with minstrelsy, an integrated cast only thinly veils an obvious commentary on black entertainment. When Pozzo forces Lucky to entertain the others with a dance, it broadcasts the familiar image of the minstrel: “Shall we have him dance, or sing, or recite, or think, or—?” (20). In the scene Lucky is forced to perform as Pozzo threatens him with a whip. Lucky’s (O’Neal’s) bad dancing transforms Beckett’s vaudevillesque scene into an anti-performance of minstrelsy and a political commentary on the restricted position of the black entertainer:
POZZO: He used to dance the farandle, the fling, the brawl, the jig, the fandango, and even the hornpipe. He capered. For joy. Now that’s the best he can do. Do you know what he calls it?

ESTRAGON: The Scapegoat’s Agony.

VLADIMIR: The Hard Stool.

POZZO: The Net. He thinks he’s entangled in a net. (27)

The disappointment in Lucky’s performance reverses the expectations accompanying the minstrelsy stereotype and pulls a commentary on minstrelsy to the surface of the original text. Beyond the humor, the FST performance and Mississippi context of the scene critiqued the behind-the-scenes reality of the exploitation of black performance through a comparison to the exploitation of slavery. Lucky’s performance makes a political statement instead of light-hearted entertainment, providing a meta-moment for the FST’s performance as a whole. This moment re-envisioned the body beyond its racial stereotype—a major factor in Black Arts performance that attempted to reverse stereotypes of minstrelsy. In a comparison to Black Arts dance, Thomas DeFrantz argues that choreographers, such as Alvin Ailey, endeavored “to make black bodies strange” and “destabilize stereotypical imagery of the Negro” (Bean 83) so that classically trained dancers could revise the image of black entertainers, using the movement of their bodies as powerful means of self-expression.

In the play’s most controversial scene, the moment where Pozzo commands Lucky to “think,” the FST production furthers the radical sub-narrative of the play. Lucky responds in a tirade of disconnected words and untied fragmented significations, which critics of Godot have analyzed for its hidden intertextual meaning, or its mockery of Joycean prose. However, this criticism would add nothing to an audience previously unfamiliar with the larger literary context.
Rather, the scene resonated with the audience’s *environmental* context. The image of the slave’s voice agitating his master and Lucky’s resistance choreographed in Beckett’s specific stage directions, “Lucky pulls on the rope, staggers, and shouts his text” (Beckett 29), adds to a specific message relevant to those in the audience without political voice. The words are meaningless and unintelligible, suggesting Lucky’s lack of authentic self-expression. Lucky refuses to stop shouting when the other characters attempt to physically restrain him, suggesting that even though the words he says are nonsensical, the *act* of speech is still a protest. Beckett separates language from action in Lucky’s tirade creating an independent narrative communicated solely by the bodies on stage. With the integrated cast, the audience sees actors restraining and holding down a black man struggling to break free; an unmistakable connotation to the overall struggle in the temporal and geographic context. Just as Lucky’s words in Beckett’s text are meaningless, John O’Neal intensified their lack of significance by expressing resistance through his body on stage.

Even further, when Lucky’s body goes limp and he refuses to stand or return back to work in the play, the physical actions of the actor John O’Neal connoted the same physical gestures of non-violent forms of protest endorsed by SNCC—a canonical image of the Civil Rights Movement. However, Lucky’s passive resistance fails as Pozzo forces Lucky to hold his bags and return to his position as silent slave. The scene transforms from a physically comic moment of violent resistance into a political commentary on the limitations of non-violent protest. Yet again, absurdity is aptly appropriate within the larger frame: the FST’s own contradictory dual dependency on the non-violent SNCC and the militant Deacons for Defense for armed protection, the risk of racial violence that actors and audience faced in order to attend a
play, and perhaps even sentiments of futility experienced by those trying to fight for equality in the Movement.

The director, Cromwell, became frustrated with the audiences’ persistence in this reading to the point where he decided midway through the tour to put the characters in whiteface as an attempt to “deal with the problem of racial hangups [sic]” (109) and to force “the audience to deal with something else.” O’Neal later reflected: “We had a white Gogo and a Negro Didi; two Negroes doing the roles would have been different, etc. But that’s implicit in our milieu. Cromwell couldn’t agree with that because he couldn’t accept the milieu” (109). Indeed, in trying to align too much with their original intention to provoke critical discussion, the FST ignored the tenacity of racial signification and the audience’s prevailing political reading of the bodies on stage. Cromwell himself later acknowledged, “The audience thought that was the stupidest thing they had ever seen” (qtd. in King) and the FST had to recognize how their didactic approach to theater was antithetical to the social change they sought. Thus the FST reevaluated the value of emotion in Brechtian theater and recognized that the audience’s imaginative resistance was not a failure. Rather, the audience reactions emphasized the effectiveness of the body in communicating a non-verbal narrative and proved that the audiences had an interpretive agency that the FST needed to understand.
Early playbills and promotional materials like the one featured above featured a section that guided post-show discussions with their audiences, a gesture leaning towards paternalism. As FST members admitted themselves, they lacked an understanding of their regionally and culturally alien audiences. An audience member, from Milestone, Mississippi, subtly articulated the FST’s top-down directedness in relation to the action of the play: “When Pozzo puts the cap on Lucky’s head to make him think, does that mean that the FST wants to put the thinking cap on us?” (FST 53). The audience member conflates Pozzo’s demand to “think” in the play with the FST’s parallel action as cultural activists, placing the FST in the position of the play’s oppressor, definitely not their intention. To their credit, the FST put this moment and other difficult criticisms in their auto-documentary. By doing so they engage in the education and class divides.
between members of the FST and the Mississippi audiences. The audience’s responses to
Godot—and their confusion over whiteface—educated the FST on their audience’s proficiency
in transforming the European avant-garde into plays about the black southern experience.

The FST put whiteface behind them and began to use “race” as a theatrical device that
foregrounded the visual as a means of communication beyond the script. They began to use the
European plays less as a method to achieve universal themes by ignoring race and more as a
structure to improvise, by using the local context of Mississippi. In the FST by the FST Tom
Dent observes the relationship between Brecht’s theories and how they worked within black
theater:

What happens on stage must define the emotions correctly, this is why Brecht’s Does
Man Help Man worked in 1966. It exploded basic emotions in the minds of our
audiences, though it wasn’t written racially and it isn’t contemporary. It touched
something deep in the social order— not just this social order but the larger national social
order—it hit race, then spiraled out similar conflicts like ever-expanding concentric
circles. This is what we need, for we must not only be black, which means accepting our
reality, as artists we must use it; it must become a device, a lever, a power which applies
to reality in general. Or other realities. (Dent, Schechner and Moses)

Dent perceived U.S. racism in the South as a universal story told through local experience, and
established a critical approach to race that both denies its reality, but also embraces its power to
“spiral out” and undo the social order. Harry J. Elam, Jr. develops a parallel image through a
phrase borrowed from Lorraine Hansberry’s Les Blancs, “The Device of Race.” Elam Jr. states,
“Every theatrical performance depends on performer’s and spectators’ collaborative
consciousness of the devices in operation and their meaning” (Elam and Krasner 5). The
collaborative consciousness of *Godot* changed the way the FST used their integrated cast in future productions, accepting the body’s ability to tell its own non-verbal story.

![Figure 3: Still from the FST’s production of The Lesson (1965).](image)

In the FST’s 1967 production of Eugene Ionesco’s *The Lesson*, the actors used race as an additional costume or a prop to layer the play with new meaning. By casting the white Murray Levy as the professor and the black Jacelyn Early as the pupil, the performance transcribes Ionesco’s critique of the oppressive absurdity of Western education to one that reflects on the experience of the black student within an education system that privileges white and Western forms of knowledge and systems of learning. In Ionesco’s script, whenever the pupil challenges the professor during the lesson she is silenced, belittled, and made afraid to interrupt or speak her mind; eventually the professor murders her. The FST’s version of *The Lesson* racialized Ionesco’s absurdist commentary on the violence inflicted through education—a contentious point to make at the historically black colleges where the FST toured the production. At the Tuskegee performance, the black dean in the audience critiqued the FST’s alteration of Ionesco’s text
asking, “‘Are you not doing violence to the spirit of Ionesco’s play by minor alterations in the script to give it a racial application?’” (Dent, Schechner and Moses 149). The FST “violently” appropriated Ionesco’s play in the spirit of the audience’s reaction to Godot.

However, the students found the performance all too familiar and commented to the FST privately after the show that “the Dean resembled Ionesco’s professor” (ibid) despite the fact that the actor playing the teacher was white and their dean was black. The FST’s version racialized an approach to education and yet the dean’s comment serves as a reminder that Ionesco’s play originally contained no racial signification. Yet, for the students at Tuskegee, the universal message about oppressive structures of education clearly emerged as they interpreted whiteness symbolically as an analog with which to discuss their own situation. While The Lesson offered no solution or utopian future, the message that their education killed (literally on stage) possible alternative modes of knowledge was both locally relevant and universal. Within this moment of agency, the students’ destabilized the naturalness of race and its power over the individual body. Thus, the students could equate a white actor with their black dean who they see as adopting the “white” persona of Western education that leaves little room for alternative modes of knowledge. In other words, if the dean could adopt whiteness, then racial identity is momentarily destabilized. Of course, this concept was a utopian fantasy in the U.S. South in the 1960s where people could not easily escape racism or take it off like a mask; the FST and their audiences could only do this through performance. However, they did embrace agency by producing art using the same racial signification that victimized them.

The potential of these performances to challenge the social order did not go unnoticed by Richard Schechner, one of the original board members and advocates of the FST and later a key founder of performance studies. The environmental factors involved in creating the FST’s Godot
are echoed in Schechner’s definition of performance as “the whole constellation of events...that take place in/among both performers and audience” evolving into his “broad-spectrum approach” that extends a performance into a myriad of social processes: “formal ritual ceremonies, public gatherings, and various means of exchanging information, goods, and customs” (Schechner 79). The broad-spectrum that frames the FST’s performances was a product of its environment that intermingled activist networks and unlikely locations with theater. Schechner’s theories germinated from his experiences with the FST in Mississippi and New Orleans before they later evolved into the discipline that influenced the aforementioned performance studies scholars, which is why the FST easily fits into a performance studies paradigm. Through their innovative use of environment, the FST anticipated what would become a central tenet of performance theory: that theatre can give us insight to social identity formation through its interaction with its surroundings.

IV. Brecht: Making the Familiar Strange, Making the Global Familiar

The FST, like many other activist theater collectives, captured the spirit of performance Brecht had envisioned: a theater that “presupposes a powerful social movement which has an interest in the free discussion of vital problems” (Brecht 27). Brecht saw logical discussion as the pragmatic approach to drama opposed to what he called an “emotional orgy” and yet, in 1963 he backed away from any structured interpretation of theater:

The works now being written are coming more and more to lead towards that great epic theater which corresponds to the sociological situation; neither their content nor their form can be understood except by the minority that understands this. They are not going to satisfy the old aesthetics; they are going to destroy it. (Parker 239)
With the audiences’ imaginative resistance to verfremdungseffekt, the FST in moved closer to Brecht’s vision of theater while also moving away from his theory. Brecht anticipated this evolution in avant-garde drama at the same moment the FST imagined destroying the old aesthetics as an evolution in social movement activism.

In 1965 the FST produced Brecht’s The Rifles of Senora Carrar in what they referred to as “The Year of Revolt” with a repertoire “heavily concerned with armed rebellion” (Dent, Schechner and Moses). Brecht’s play, like his masterpiece Mother Courage, moved away from his more didactic theater and makes an emotional appeal to its audience. It is inspired by John Millington Synge’s Riders to the Sea and like most of Brecht’s other plays, was written in collaboration with another woman, Margarete Steffin. Brecht and Steffin move the location Synge’s play from rural Ireland to a small fishing village in Andalusia. Carrar takes place during the Spanish Civil War where a group of villagers are debating whether or not to take up arms against the fascist Falange. The main character, Teresa Carrar tries to remain uninvolved throughout the play; she uses poverty as an excuse to remain external to the conflict and claims: “We’re poor; poor people can’t make war.” She also does not wish to see her sons sacrificed for ideological reasons from which she feels detached. Yet, her brother and the other villagers repeat the mantra in response: “If you do not act, you act for the enemy,” in order to incite Carrar to unearth the family’s rifles locked up and hidden away beneath the floorboards. After her son dies senselessly as civilian casualty of war, she commits to violent action and unearths the rifles, hands them to her sons and they leave for the front.
In the photograph, Emalyn Hawkins stands in front of a projected image of a Spanish peasant woman—not necessarily a fisher woman, but a woman in a field. The FST doubled the images on stage: the projections of the Spanish countryside connote the play’s original context, while the action on stage occurs within the local environment. The image reminded the audience that the play is about peasants elsewhere, yet the agrarian image also acts as a conduit. Both Hawkins and the projected image are Teresa Carrar, suggesting that there are multiple Carrars faced with the choice to become politically involved. Rather than asking the audience to forget the original script and become lost in the local context of the performance, the projections remind the audience that Brecht’s play is simultaneously here and elsewhere, and that the words spoken apply to rural Mississippi as well as Spain. This duality calls on the audience to recognize that the oppressive forces at work in Mississippi are not the same as the fascists in Spain, and yet the words apply to both.
The audience is expected at the beginning of the play to suspend a racial interpretation: the actress playing Carrar is white, and her sons are black. Yet the language of the play bridges the Spanish Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement. Within this comparison, the dialogue exhibits generational and ideological differences within the community as well as a heated debate over militancy and armed self-defense. FST artistic director Robert Cordier commented in an after-show discussion, “you can’t stand around and do nothing while people all around you are being shot, because you yourself will be shot” ("The Free Southern Theater Seeks" 15). Cordier makes us of the doubling of “you” as both a universal general “you” and the specific people in the audience that evening. The play makes the same gesture as it oscillates between the universal of political commitment and its application to Civil Rights Movement debates on non-violence.

*Figure 5*: Still from the FST’s production of *The Rifles of Senora Carrar* (1965).
Carrar’s son dies as a victim of the war’s gratuitous violence, provoking her to unearth her rifles from the floorboards and hand them to her remaining sons as they all head to the front. While the production presented multi-dimensional images of the debate over militancy, the FST presented a unique conclusion that foregrounded race: the image of black men holding rifles triumphantly. This image would have been unmistakable as a symbol of black militancy in the middle of a play calling for arms against the oppressor. To put this in historical context as well, this occurs in the year before Stokely Carmichael’s watershed “Black Power” speech in Greenwood Mississippi, that would give the words to what the FST was creating in a visual image a year earlier and not so far away. Brecht’s script called for arms against Franco, but the image on stage created a visual contrafact on the setting so that the structure of the play remained Brecht's but the familiar images of unnecessary violence on black bodies and the radical vision of black militancy were too pertinent to be ignored. The anti-fascist revolt reflected the shadow history of the Movement’s militancy mentioned above.

The projections and the emphasis toward the Spanish setting operated in two ways: first they created a platform for a transnational coalition that maintained the specificities of local oppression. However, a second and equally important reason is that their gesture to emphasize the original play offered a measure of protection in an atmosphere hostile to the play’s revolutionary message. Indeed, the “Year of Revolt” was not completely disregarded as innocuous artistic expression. Actor John O’Neal was arrested for draft dodging under the logic that he could not reject military conscription as a pacifist while performing in plays that advocated violence. However, using the guise of theater, the FST was able to subversively communicate radical messages on stage, contradicting the Civil Rights Movement’s commitment to non-violence. As much as we can read artistic agency within the production of the FST plays
and many other productions of radical theater, those decisions are coupled with necessity. These two reasons combine together in this and many other examples “The Radical South” to define the aesthetics of a cultural activism, where the production of art embraces the emergency of daily life.

For the avant-gardists in Europe and the U.S., geographic fluidity epitomized their greater sense of resistance to mainstream oppression in both politics and art: drama was not beholden to place. By estranging location of the play through images that continuously place the audience outside of Mississippi and in rural Spain, the FST created a moment of experiential affinity without collapsing into the hierarchies of comparison. In doing this they make a connection through rurality, making global locations of poverty familiar. Rather than a drawing an aesthetic connection to the urban black experience, their affinity to the global rural aligns with what Scott Herring calls “critical rusticity” in his study of queer anti-urbanism. The FST and the other examples of cultural activism in my project, balanced and often criticized the political stakes of the Movement with intimacy of experience, whether that be between two men on stage or in the smaller communities of the South.

For the FST, fluidity of location was relevant for the South and “Mississippi’s closed system” which they saw as a “vacuum” (Dent, Schechner and Moses 5). Any effort to liberate Mississippi from its global reputation would have been a revolutionary maneuver, and thus the FST infused rural areas with images of elsewhere, collapsing global sites of resistance with modest performance spaces in the South. The dramatic dialectic between here and elsewhere in *Rifles* allows the viewer to see the original narrative that pertains to militancy in Spain at the same time that they can see the narrative pertaining to their local context—that also concerned militancy. Or in the language of jazz, at times the original structure of the song is audible, but
only to deviate from it into the artist’s own innovative melody. The global network in which the FST saw itself was not connected solely through the abuses of worldwide capitalist development, rather, their global ties were bound with by shared ideological frameworks, from countercultural artistic expression to armed resistance. It reminds us that in the Sixties, efforts towards global connectedness were based on an idea of a third-world revolution and a sense of social reform rather than as a place of capitalist oppression such as the term global South connotes today.

The FST, like many other activist theater collectives, captured the spirit of performance Brecht had envisioned, which he saw as a pragmatic approach to drama rather than one that focus on the ethereal art of affect. In other words, theater should mobilize audiences for social change, rather than be the catharsis that expunged the need for political action. Audience member Gail M. Mount observed Brecht’s theories at work through her experience of the FST’s performances: “We were not swept up in false sympathy. We were not sentimentally at one with the play. We were the audience, observing, reaching, thinking. Just as there was an alienation between the actors and their various roles, there was a separation between the play and the audience. Not an uncommunicating gulf, but a grateful separation that enhanced thought and emotions.” Mount describes a paradox that sutures criticism and affect by claiming sentimental distance while also claiming that it enhanced emotion. A production of Brecht’s Does Man Help Man exposes the result of emotional hermeneutics. During the play two clowns alleviate the complaints of the third clown called “Mr. Smith” by dismembering him slowly. From this abstract scene of violence, the audience at Bethel Lutheran Church in New Orleans produced politically relevant responses: “Mr. Smith was variably seen as a symbol of the whites, the blacks, capitalism, and Viet Nam” (Prideaux). Another performance of the same show in Atlanta instigated even more aggressive debate as Tom Dent reflects how, “Does Man Help Man
provoked a SNCC staffer to threaten to slap down a Morehouse pre-freshman in Atlanta. As success means audience/community involvement, this was a measure of success” (Dent, Schechner and Moses 97). It seems counter-intuitive for a member of the Movement to claim threatening physical violence as a means of success; yet, it shows the extent to which the FST—and many other cultural activist theater groups—desired action and debate rather than passive group unity. This moment also highlights another paradox in the difference between the styles of activism: one that promoted unity versus another that promoted dissent, even within the same Movement. It serves as a reminder of a shadow history—an alternative collective memory—within the Civil Rights Movement that resisted non-violence such as the Deacons for Defense, the black militants who at times protected FST performances.

The mixture of different classes and ideologies often exploded as in the case with the SNCC worker versus the Morehouse student, or the Tuskegee dean versus his students, the byproduct of a free and open theater. In Brecht’s vision of theater, “The stage began to narrate. The narrator no longer vanished with the fourth wall…the background [made] its own comment on stage happenings” (22). However, as seen with Godot as well as many other FST productions the environment in which Brecht’s theories flourished existed before the FST began implementing them:

performers confronted with people, especially children, who wander in and out at will, under the best of conditions. And who feel free, as they should, to talk and react vigorously to what happens on stage. Productions that work best have clearly defined and evocative imagery, and I think this is the direction that black theater must develop. After all, black people are accustomed, in church music, to extremely emotional art, extremely demonstrative responses. (Dent, Schechner and Moses 158)
Dent’s description parallels Brecht’s style that resisted the major tenets of theater such as language, script, and the concept of a master author.

Through their unique endeavor to go out and find their audiences, the FST participated in a movement within the activist avant-garde—the pragmatic application of Brecht’s theories that brought theater to picket lines and protests. The FST was not the only theater group achieving this new form of drama. Groups that participated in this movement include Augusto Boal’s *Theater of the Oppressed*, which applied Brecht’s definition of theater as a political and didactic tool to “third world” communities as a means for local empowerment and El Teatro Campesino’s own interpretations of Brechtian theater for the picket lines. The parallel cultural traditions of the avant-garde and need for subversive abstraction innovated this new form of drama that was more avant-garde than the European avant-garde. Because of spontaneous audience intervention in the artistic process and the atmosphere of violent emergency, theater became the political tool Brecht had desired throughout his life. Mixing Brecht and the avant-garde to meet the needs of their communities exploded new methods of cultural production and out-did Brecht’s own abilities. Brecht and many of his experimental followers around the world tried in vain to close the gap between performer and spectator, something not easily obtainable within avant-garde theater that, as Paul Mann argues, is continuously appropriated by bourgeois culture.13 The FST’s distance from preconceived expectations of theater resulted in unique responses that expose how the environment and its audience improvised and *improved* the avant-garde.

V. *Slave Ship* and the Black Arts Avant-Garde

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13 Brecht complained about this and the bourgeois production of *Threepenny Opera* in his correspondence with Giorgio Strehler in *Collected Plays Two* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015): 320-323.
The FST’s visual jazz adaptations of avant-garde theater acted as a formal experimentation that deeply informed the Black Arts Movement in the urban areas in the North and West Coast. The FST understood their marginal status in the larger national Black Arts scene, and yet, they used their regional difference at a theme in their productions. However, the FST’s engagement with European theater left them vulnerable to the kind of criticism that Ed Bullins, a major participant within the Black Arts Movement, articulated as, “a higher form of white art in black-face” (Bullins 13). It seemed that any artistic production that did not reflect a nationalist ideology came under fire as counterintuitive to black identity. The legacy of this critical view has persisted through time and has impacted the view of the FST’s European adaptations. Contemporary critics still position these adaptations as the growing pains of a fledgling theater, an overbearing influence of what Genevieve Fabre called the “white god—white liberal, patron, playwright—for whom no salvation could be expected” (Bean 57) and a foil to more Black Arts Movement style that developed with the FST’s maturity. Similarly, Annemarie Bean argues that the FST “only came to artistic fruition when it rejected the integrationist platform in favor of the multiplicity of the black experience espoused by the Black Arts Movement” (269). By positioning the FST’s European adaptations within this narrative, critics too easily dismiss the FST performances solely as an attempt to expose audiences to higher art. The critical response is disconnected from the popularity and impact of the FST's productions of European avant-garde and absurdist drama. Indeed, the FST were called upon to revive Godot multiple times and they had to turn down people for their sold-out performances of Brecht’s Does Man Help Man with audience numbers up to three hundred people. Plays such as Beckett’s Godot and Ionesco’s The Lesson had the cultural capital—and the reputation as an
opaque work of “high-brow” or “difficult” art—but they also provided the opportunity to experiment with audiences.

Despite this critical disconnect, the Black Arts Movement dramatists in the North were not impervious to the Europeans and at times favored avant-gardists in the same breath in which they rejected Western or white drama as a whole. Exemplary of this paradox is Amiri Baraka’s manifesto on Black Arts drama, “The Revolutionary Theater,” that rejects the white dominant literary tradition and calls for the “conquest of the white eye” by channeling the French dramatist Antonin Artaud’s “The Conquest of Mexico”—the primary example the aesthetic theory titled “Theater of Cruelty” (1938) from which Baraka draws in his essay. Baraka, Ed Bullins, and Larry Neal each noted the value of avant-garde theater as a revolutionary form, yet found it necessary for a black aesthetic to come from the black community. As Mike Sell notes, “Lacking real estate, an ideologically unified model of community, and a sure foothold in the African American community, the most advanced segments of the Black Arts Movement chose the transient, situational, performative forms of avant-garde and theater to forward their goals” (Elam and Krasner 63). Even within the same text or interview, they would reject the Western forms they identified as revolutionary: “…the Revolutionary Theater, even if it is Western, must be anti-Western” (Baraka). The black aesthetic’s separatist-yet-not-quite paradox, what Clinton

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15 For more on the “‘community’ and ‘consciousness’” aesthetic in Black drama, see Abiodun Jeyifous, “Black Critics on Black Theater in America” in The Theater of Black Americans Volume II: A Collection of Critical Essays. Erroll Hill, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1980), 129-127. Ed Bullins rejected “white Anglo-Saxon Western art” then claimed “the Absurd people” (xii-xiii) as an influence. Larry Neal, one of the major definers of the Black Aesthetic, claimed in his 1968 essay “The Black Arts Movement” that “the most ‘important’ plays come from Europe - Brecht, Weiss, and Ghelderode” before qualifying that “even these have begun to run dry” and calling for change (Bean 60).
F. Oliver refers to as an “identity crisis” (23) in black drama, is indeed difficult to comprehend much less discuss.

Perhaps this explains why a group more open about their European connections—such as the FST—ends up on the margins of the movement. As Kimberly W. Benston argues in *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African American Modernism*, Black Arts Movement artists viewed their work “as not merely experimental but as an exploration of radically alternative cultural constructs” (5). Benston’s view of Black Arts Movement modernity appropriately describes many of the FST’s gestures: their “methexic or participatory and collective, practices” (20); their engagement with European avant-garde poetics of Brecht and Artaud; and their “syntax of enactment capable of mobilizing spectatorship as a simultaneously sensate and sense-altering body, capable at once of unruly critique and revolutionary revision” (21). Despite the FST’s exemplary status for revealing Benston’s theories, the theater group appears only as a footnote and they are overshadowed by discussions of Baraka, Bullins, John Coltrane, etc.—a common relegation of the FST in discussions of the Black Arts Movement. By overlooking these adaptations, critics have elided the potential inherent in Beckett’s text—and the other dramas—to resist a strictly highbrow identity through humor and abstraction. Over time the FST shifted towards producing more of their own material rooted in the black experience; however, the performances they processed from the raw material of European theater and an integrated cast in the “Deep South” had an impact on their audiences and deserve more critical attention. Their adaptations of avant-garde theater serve as much more than just a foil to set up a political transition to all-black nationalism. Rather, through the FST’s production of Amiri Baraka’s absurdist play *Slave Ship*, I show how the aesthetic goals of the avant-gardists and Black Arts Movement were often indiscernible.
The FST’s production of Amiri Baraka’s *Slave Ship*, directed by Gilbert Moses in New York City in 1969 and then Mississippi in 1970, did not deviate from the style of performance the FST had already established, even though Baraka has never participated in an FST production. Gilbert Moses’s brought the FST’s collective aesthetic up North in order to direct Baraka’s play and thus acted as a conduit between the stylistics developed down South and the urban Black Arts Movement. Despite Harry Elam Jr.’s claim that Moses “appropriated this technique” under the tutelage of Paul Sills, Peter Brook, and Richard Schechner, the emphasis Moses placed on the environmental experience—what he termed “emotional space”—and the audience provocation were techniques already established from *Godot* in Mississippi (*Taking It To the Streets* 79).

*Slave Ship* is an experiential performance piece that depends on sound and setting in order to recreate a surrealist Middle Passage. Baraka’s “script” thus contains more stage directions than lines and it blends Yoruba rhythms with a jazz soundtrack by Archie Shepp. Moses depended on the actors’ ability to communicate the heightened emotional state that would affect the audience: “Rehearsal rituals attempted to bring the performers together as a cohesive ensemble, the actors worked to develop a greater awareness of the social context of the performance and of the objectives of arousing the political consciousness and militant sentiments of their black audiences” (17). Moses encouraged actors to be politically active, in a sense recreating a SNCC or COFO atmosphere in New York. Instead of training activists to be actors, Moses’s direction in the North required him to train actors to be activists. In actuality this relationship was more complex, but Moses’s work with the actors in New York City exposes the pragmatism of both Baraka’s and Moses’s theoretical framework. Even though the two dramatists built on Artaud’s “Theater of Cruelty” and Brecht’s theoretical elements to create
Slave Ship, the ritualistic groundwork with the actors that further developed their political awareness modeled itself after FST’s audience involvement in rural Mississippi. Moses combined the Mississippi experience with Baraka’s nationalist agenda and Archie Shepp’s jazz to recreate historical scenes that moved audiences to the brink of their capability. As one reviewer commented, “There was no way for us [the spectators] to step outside of Gil Moses’s production of Imamu Baraka’s Slave Ship” (23). Moses was able to successfully recreate the experience of the FST, where theater combined with the entirety of the movement making it impossible for a spectator not to be a participant in political action. For this, Moses won an Obie award and much critical acclaim in New York’s theater world.

Black southern audiences, however, dictated their own level of participation and responded with visceral political action, and once again exceeded the expectations of the FST. Rather than any emotional catharsis, the play incited them towards a riot—a very different reaction from its first production in 1967 in Chelsea, New York City. In Greenville, Mississippi, the audience tried to revolt during the performance and had to be persuaded to return back to their homes. This reaction occurred despite the fact that the play overtly criticized the black church and the Civil Rights Movement, by using the same actor who played Uncle Tom to then also play a Tom-like assimilationist preacher. Eventually the actors “kill” the preacher character and his head is thrown out into the audience—an incredibly controversial action considering how close historically this performance was to Martin Luther King’s assassination. At the Slave Ship performance in West Point, Mississippi “the entire audience rose to its feet and joined with the actors waving fists and chanting, ‘We’re gonna rise up!’” (13) echoing the similar audience response to Godot. Slave Ship shows the method by which two paths of performance in 1964—
Baraka’s *Dutchman* in New York and the FST’s *Godot* in Mississippi converged together in 1969-70 to push the limits of black theater.

The FST in the years after *Slave Ship* continued to perform theater from nationally renowned black dramatists including those they previously rejected in the earlier years of experimentation, such as Lorraine Hansberry and Langston Hughes. However, this decade has been viewed by critics (and even its own members) as a period of decline, leading to the theater’s final performance in 1980. As the FST inspired a variety of satellite groups, different core members funneled their energies and finances into other community programs. The FST’s cultural work adapted to the urban New Orleans environment, developing arts programs in the community such as BLKARTSOUTH, established in 1968 as a community-based arts collective for local (New Orleans) artists. Even though this deviated from the FST’s identity as a theater and association with the Movement, BLKARTSOUTH continued the methodology that the FST established. As James Smethurst argues in reference to the performance/activism network of BLKARTSOUTH: “the circuits for certain sorts of grassroots political organizing and for grassroots, community-oriented arts performances were often the same” (*The Black Arts Movement* 351). This is just one example of myriad groups established from the FST’s network and that continue through today across the South, a phenomenon Harding and Rosenthal refer to as the “living legacies.” Within this network, the South becomes “a site where ideas and ideologies circulate in rigorous debate, where performance traditions endure the teaching of craft and technique, and where individual theaters… evolved over the course of decades” (15). In the final chapter of this dissertation, I examine how Toni Cade Bambara writes *The Salt Eaters*, her 1980 novel of grassroots activism within an active BLKARTSOUTH, a movement that she continues to build through her own cultural activism. Indeed, the FST’s impact on the South,
especially New Orleans, positions itself as a living legacy, as it did with the *Treme* episode that opened my introduction to “The Radical South.”

When the FST hosted their 50th anniversary in 2013, performance collectives, theaters, and activists around the country descended on New Orleans to celebrate their influence on cultural activism. Participants collaborated together from across different factions: artistic, activist, and academic, and the conference additionally included young community members encouraged to create the same kind of activist art initiated by the FST decades ago. The conference was more than a reflection or analysis; it worked to bridge Movement energies to contemporary New Orleans—from political issues to building more youth cultural programs.

Surprisingly, in the same year as the conference, the Cambridge Companion Series published their volume on African American Theater edited by Harvey Young, with little mention of the FST, or the black Southern theater movement at all. Yet, despite a dearth in more widespread cultural and literary recognition, the FST still impacts not only through its legacy and memory, but also through replications of its method. In addition to inspiring other groups, the method and *process* of the FST has continued as an integral part of cultural history—a living record of the Movement’s impact on artistic production.

I. Chips on Black and Red: Indeterminate Approaches to Activism

As journalist, writer, and international political activist, Julian Mayfield observed the U.S. Civil Rights Movement within the global revolutionary spirit of Third World liberation movements that he documented in both his fiction and non-fiction writing. His 1961 novel, The Grand Parade evidences what I read as an indeterminate stance towards political ideology during the Movement and attempts to captures expressions of dissent and doubt within the same breath that could also offer hope for social change. As with the Free Southern Theater, the novel focuses on the local community and uses artistic production to reflect historical moments and reveal truths about the surrounding political atmosphere. Both the FST’s productions and The Grand Parade document the Civil Rights Movement by blending fictional stories with historically specific realities. Mayfield forefronts the small-scale local community of Gainesboro, a fictional border city meant to represent Monroe, North Carolina in the aftermath of the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court decision. Mayfield’s emphasis on political systems locates the text within social realism and yet, he experiments with the form using performativity and what Kevin Gaines calls his "mordant sense of the absurd" (255).

Moreover, because Mayfield rejects totalizing ideological commitments, The Grand Parade emerges as a confusing text to any reader looking for consistency or a clear picture of political activism. In order to keep the integrity of Mayfield’s authorial gesture to document the Movement, this chapter juxtaposes scenes in the novel and the historical undercurrents that
informs them as means to reveal how Mayfield recognized the limitations of political systems. Mayfield’s personal writing—such as his unpublished biography—reveals his attitude towards events similar to moments and characters in the novel; and thus, I position *The Grand Parade* as an archive of activist sentiment that contains a confluence of voices represent differing ideological factions.

However, I do not read Mayfield’s ideological indeterminacy as apolitical, but recognize it as an effort to accurately capture the more complicated sentiments within social movement activism. Critically, Civil Rights Movement scholarship increasingly recognizes what was evident all along about the messy, chaotic and indefinable collection of different ideas, factions, and actions reduced into one movement. Mayfield exposes an unusual perspective of political indeterminacy that deserves scrutiny and understanding rather than critical judgment beneath contemporary models that privilege categories of definition. The characters in *The Grand Parade* reflect the crisis that many activists felt at the time: commitment to a group or singular ideology is limiting, yet there are no other choices in an atmosphere that demands solidarity against oppression. Mayfield, like the other examples in this dissertation, explores whether or not politics could contain specificity to local issues at the same time as universal solidarity.

The historical backdrop and Mayfield’s own life experiences contextualize the world of shifting ideological commitment while writing *The Grand Parade* between 1957 and 1960. Born in South Carolina and raised in Washington, D.C., Mayfield lived an incredibly international life as the husband of the Puerto Rican activist and physician Ana Livia Cordero; a political aid to Kwame Nkrumah’s government in Ghana and Forbes Burnham pan-Caribbean influenced government in Guyana; the founder of the international wing of Malcolm X's Organization for Afro-American Unity; a participant in Fidel Castro’s Fair Play for Cuba Campaign and Robert F.
and Mabel Williams self-defense movement in Monroe, North Carolina; and other international positions and initiatives. Within this sphere, a view of international coalitional activism emerged for Mayfield, who considered the black artist as existing “without a country” and, indeed, both his fiction and non-fiction writing are shaded by the tone of a peripatetic observer: “this very detachment may give him the insight of the stranger in the house, placing him in a better position to illuminate contemporary American life as few writers of the mainstream can” (“Into the Mainstream” xv).

For Mayfield, this detachment was twofold, not only did he observe US society as an African American without access to full citizenship within a racist society, but he also wrote his novels abroad from Puerto Rico during its nationalist movement amidst the radicalizing Caribbean. Exposure to Puerto Rican and Cuban Marxism that worked alongside cultural and ethnic nationalism made Mayfield an advocate for international efforts to eradicate racism while enacting social change. In a letter from Ana Livia Cordero to Malcolm X in 1964, she educates him on the Puerto Rican struggle for independence and the “need for unity” across the Caribbean and the US. Not only does Cordero break down nationalism as a model for African American communities in the U.S., but she also asserts Puerto Rico’s pan-African heritage and the “common oppressor” of colonial exploitation and racism in order to claim that “the Puerto Rican Liberation movement and the Afro-American nationalist freedom struggle are this intrinsically related and these movements should work together” (Letter to Malcolm). Cordero’s political vision acts in tandem with Black Nationalism as a U.S. social movement as well as an international movement being built within the global South. Mayfield’s personal relationship to Cordero and his geographic proximity to revolutionary Cuba emerges in his writing, especially as he positions Caribbean Marxism as different from Soviet Stalinism and how the
interventionist approach taken by places such as Cuba to eradicate racism shows a flexibility in priorities according to the regional demands of a place. Mayfield’s later literary works—mainly unpublished manuscripts such as “Fount of the Nation” and “Tales of the Lido”—examine a third world identity, what John A. Gronbeck-Tedesco describes as a “model of Left humanism…where various national, racial, and cultural classifications are understood to be unstable, unbordered, and polyvalent” (699-700). And yet, as early as The Grand Parade, Mayfield projected the possibility for these connections to occur on a local level within the US, continuously shifting focus between individual daily lives and global politics in an effort to bring attention to the demand placed on activists to have both a personal and public political life.

The U.S., and especially its black community, engaged with the international political scene. The year before the novel was published, Mayfield witnessed an unprecedented historical event at the United Nations summit in Harlem that shaped his perception of activism. During the summit, Fidel Castro and his Cuban delegation of about forty revolutionary communists left their midtown Manhattan hotel due to “degrading and humiliating treatment” by the hotel staff. Castro acknowledged this maltreatment as the US government’s conspiratorial imperative: a “notice to all hotels not to rent rooms to us, hostility, and under the pretense of security, isolation” (138). Castro made the public statement that he would sleep in Central Park if they continued to be mistreated which resulted in transnational acts of public solidarity as sympathizers from Cuba and New York slept outside in parks to join Castro’s protest. The Harlem Welcome Committee, in which both Malcolm X and Julian Mayfield were organizers, arranged for the delegation to stay at the integrated Hotel Theresa on 125th street in the heart of the black community. When he moved up to Harlem, Castro was met with teeming crowds of local supporters and visitors such as Nikita Khrushchev, Jawaharlal Nehru, Langston Hughes, Malcolm X, and Allen Ginsberg.
Castro himself was called out for “obvious pandering” to the US black struggle, including his gesture to rename Havana’s Riviera Hotel after Hotel Theresa as a means to show global partnership with Harlem and black militancy. At the height of the Cold War, this impromptu historic assembly in the heart of Harlem causes us reconsider how global coalition politics developed and manifested itself within the US and counteracts the vision of a landscape dominated by McCarthyism.

In a personal letter, Mayfield asserted his own version of the event. He carefully nuanced his representation of the crowds of black supports from the local community: “The people of Harlem had greeted him enthusiastically, not because they are pro-Castro, they know little about him like most Americans, but because they know something about being mistreated in hotels and having their rights restricted” (Letter to Maga). Rather than couch the public’s enthusiasm in a political framework, he focuses on the community's more immediate and impassioned response.

Hotel mistreatment existed in that moment as an object of universal oppression that mobilized across political boundaries and ideological differences with a disregard for race, class, education, nationality, and political commitment. One could tease out the various ideological differences and similarities and still arrive at the basic human right to be treated well in a public space expressed through an unquantifiable zeal of momentum. At the time of the Harlem reception, Mayfield had recently returned from Cuba after the first anniversary of the revolution and would have been in the position to compare the public enthusiasm—the same zeal that made such a strong impression on Amiri Baraka during the same visit. In Baraka’s essay “Cuba Libre” he describes the passion of the youth, “The unbelievable joy and excitement. The same idea, and people made beautiful because of it. People moving, being moved. I was ecstatic and frightened. Something I had never seen before, exploding all around me” (Jones 58). The fervor observed by
Baraka and the Fair Play for Cuba cohort would influence the spirit of nationalism and black consciousness back home. Castro’s historic late-night meeting with Malcolm X led to criticism from the Nation of Islam and Elijah Muhammad who “saw the entire event as a political charade and unnecessary public display of partisanship” (Marable and Felber 167). And yet, this sentiment caused Malcolm X and Castro to express ambiguous solidarity through the expression “We are brothers” without adhering to each other’s political principles. The spontaneous parade in Harlem reflected global solidarity grounded in oppression and a sense of affinity rather than ideological commonality, all of which framed Mayfield’s approach to both his activism and his fiction.

However, Mayfield did not readily embrace Cuban Marxism or Black Nationalism, which left him vulnerable to Harold Cruse’s criticism in Crisis of the Negro Intellectual as “trying to ride the different horses in opposite directions—Robert Williams and the Communist Left” (377). Cruse’s critical model permeates a U.S./Western approach to political analysis that still echoes the Cold War era mandates for identification. Even today, this approach continues to demand coherent political commitment from both historical figures and contemporary leaders and clouds our ability to see alternative modes of radical politics. Yet, this medley of various international and ideological approaches was not uncommon in the black activist experience. As historian Robin D.G. Kelley describes:

[T]hese black radicals created a kind of hybrid movement that combined Garveyism, Pan-Africanism, African American vernacular cultures and traditions, and Euro-American Marxist thought. Their actions and the ways in which they constructed their identities should lead us to question categories that we too frequently regard as mutually exclusive in African American communities: nationalism and communism, religion and
For this reason, many of the controversial figures within the Civil Rights Movement, such as Mayfield and his political confidant and friend, Robert F. Williams, lack historical recognition, not always because of controversial politics, but because their provocativeness is difficult to define and their ideologies evasive. Williams was an influence on Mayfield, not only in *The Grand Parade* which is modeled after Monroe, but also in Mayfield’s political indeterminacy. Williams was the leader of the NAACP in Monroe, North Carolina infamous for his advocacy of armed self-defense and was often depicted as a foil to Martin Luther King Jr’s platform of non-violence. In his memoir, *Negroes with Guns*, he articulated a philosophy that often gets overlooked in the critical tendency to align him with violence: “I wish to make it clear that I do not advocate violence for its own sake, or for the sake of reprisals against whites. Nor am I against the passive persistence advocated by the Rev. Martin Luther King and others. My only difference is I believe in flexibility in the freedom struggle” (R. F. Williams 40). Mayfield’s approach to “flexible ideology” derives from the political philosophy of Williams and stems from his direct observations of the movement. While Williams’ book would not get published until after *The Grand Parade*, Mayfield would have been exposed to these ideas through his involvement with Fair Play for Cuba and by the success of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara’s ability to create a social revolution out of a violent, political one. When Baraka asked Castro about the role of communism in the revolution, his response exposes the obvious impact on Williams and Mayfield’s approach, “I’ve said a hundred times that I am not a communist. But I am certainly not anti-communist. The United States likes anti-communists, especially so close to their mainland. I’ve also said a hundred times that I consider myself a humanist. A radical humanist” (Jones 68). Since Mayfield and Cordero accompanied Baraka and the others in Cuba
as interpreters on this trip, the words Baraka heard and recorded for “Cuba Libre” were most likely filtered through, or at least overheard by Mayfield.

In his personal memoirs, Mayfield dramatizes Williams’ “flexible ideology” in a scene that reveals his understanding of and approach to political pragmatism during the late 1950s, at the time he was writing *The Grand Parade*. At an apartment party thrown by actor Harry Belafonte, he meets Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. amidst a crowd of prominent members in black entertainment and politics—two worlds that often intersected one another:

He [King] knew I was committed to the self-defense movement of black people of Monroe, North Carolina, led by Robert F. Williams whom I had met in Cuba. So were half the other people in Belafonte's living room who, because of career considerations, loudly supported Dr. King's passive resistance and non-violence, while quietly slipping hundreds of dollars now and then to us crazy people of Monroe to buy guns. They were like gamblers in a casino, plunking a lot of chips on black and a few on red as insurance. (“Which Way” 22-23)

The “party” members struggled with their private doubts about non-violence which resulted in multiple and contradictory affiliations. Mayfield’s previous writings centered on the illegal numbers lottery that dominated the black community in Harlem; no doubt he understood gambling beyond its metaphorical value. Gambling acted as a method towards social uplift from the alternative economy on the streets of Harlem to the affluent black community placing ideological bets in Belafonte’s Upper West Side apartment. A central theme in Mayfield’s writings in general and *The Grand Parade* in particular, brings to relief the gap between the public political image and the private flow of money. There is no specific ideology or politics to which this gap belongs, and all are implicated. The scene takes on added significance
considering that Belafonte had recently bought the entire building as a means to circumvent a racist landlord who would not sell a single apartment to a black man. Belafonte triumphed in a dramatic capitalist gesture to beat the enemy at his own game. However, this inspirational move against racism would prove antithetical to the Marxist approach to revolution and thus highlights the conflicting intersections at the party between the Left and capitalism as opposing roads towards racial equality.

*The Grand Parade* avoids a utopian vision of coalitional activism by foregrounding conflict and miscommunication between these different ideological strains. Gainesboro counteracts a progressive linear narrative as it degrades into a place of racist civil unrest where things are getting worse, not better. The town comes under duress when a white supremacist from Mississippi named Clarke Bryant establishes the White Protection Council—a thinly veiled White Citizens Council—and transforms Gainesboro from relatively neutral territory that showed “no sign of strenuous opposition to the school integration plan” (Mayfield, *The Grand Parade* 82) to a place of riotous civil unrest with international attention on its racial incidents. The national and international repercussions frame the actions of the small community and the international pressure looms through the media presence during the integration crisis: “Suddenly Gainesboro was on the map, every newspaper reader knew where it was and what was going on there. Every television viewer was familiar with the faces of the principle actors in the Gainesboro drama. Around the world men and women who had only the vaguest notion of what an American city looked like engaged in spirited debates about Gainesboro in scores of different languages and hundreds of dialects” (310). Mayfield shows the vulnerability of a town as a system of networks that can easily be influenced by the outside (both governmental and international pressure) and he parallels the porous borders of the town with the process of
forming a group around an ideology. Thus, the novel offers an angle of black politics within the Civil Rights Movement that has been an uncomfortable point within the critical conversation because of its fundamental confusion. As Peniel Joseph observes in Neighborhood Rebels: Black Power at the Local Level: “Despite tortured debates over strategies and tactics, participants in one camp often shifted to the other, and certain groups and activists favored both approaches simultaneously” (2). Rather than devaluing the political system or standing outside completely outside it, activists maintained a more flexible relationship to their political identities—chips on both black and red.

Mayfield, as a journalist, embeds flexibility into his work with a neutral objective narrative style and uses indeterminacy as a platform for potential, especially for intersectional social movements dependent on compromise. Mayfield evidences in both the apartment party scene and in his oeuvre that the Movement was by no means unilateral or heading in one direction, but rather spiraled out in many paths simultaneously. Both his gesture and the gesture of the ideological gamblers that played both sides of the approach to civil rights—passive resistance and self-defense—destabilized the power of any one party or ideology being the "right" one. Black could be just as right as red and non-violence could work just as effectively as militancy in the freedom struggle. Mayfield exposes the systemic flaws of these fixed ideological factions (i.e. a political party) and creates space for a new approach by remapping political commitment as mobile and transitional. The chapter begins with further analysis of Mayfield’s narrative style and his experimental approach to social realism. Since the novel is so concerned with performativity, I use Bertolt Brecht’s theory of Marxist theatrical practice as a means to show how Mayfield uses this practice in his novel to interrogates the ideological basis for identity. Through performativity, the novel uncovers the economic and political realities of not
only the Civil Rights Movement, but also of any ideology attempting to be put into practice. Using his critique of the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA), I connect the novel to a tradition within African American literature that explores the limitations of fixed political entities—specifically Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. While Mayfield writes within this tradition, his novel also reveals how these critiques were not indictments of Marxism, but rather of Marxism’s inability to adapt to the needs of local communities. The chapter concludes with the possibilities of coalition and Third World solidarity through Mayfield’s populist approach to politics, where he sutures together ideological flexibility and dramatic performance—like that of Hotel Theresa—as a means to connect disparate communities through emotion. *The Grand Parade* carves out space for people to unite on a common mistrust of political leaders, systems, and commitment and use their adopted ambiguity to mobilize in their communities on the basis of human decency.

II. Politics and Stylistics: Mayfield’s Social Realism

*The Grand Parade* experiments with the aesthetics of the novel by overwhelming the reader with multi-vocal chaos rather than a central protagonist and creating a community narrative. Mayfield intertwines form with political philosophy in his narrative style, resulting in his effort to present objective portrayals of political systems and to replace the central protagonist with a spectrum of everyday community members. His relationship with the Williams emphasizes the imperative placed on Mayfield to disseminate true accounts of historical events that had been distorted by the media, a common enemy of black activists and communists alike. Mayfield, as a first hand witness to false media narratives that slandered Robert F. Williams and portrayed him as a kidnapper and traitor to the US, used his writing as a
necessary adjunct to the Movement as a means to do the cultural work of accurate story telling, since there were little outlets for truth at the time what Mabel Williams described as “our great need for a news media that would be able to tell the whole story” (Tyson 193). Within the Cold War media circus, narrative serves as a counterpoint of access to truth, whereas the media and the FBI placed current events within the realm of fiction.

Influenced by the events in Monroe, North Carolina, *The Grand Parade* provides a fictionalized snapshot of the town and yet, through Mayfield’s narrative tone—that of a detached observer—the novel’s social realism suggests what is left unsaid in media accounts of the Civil Rights Movement. Reviewers of the novel appreciated a “timely” novel about civil rights, yet criticized the fact that it contains “too many characters” or that “the characters are never fully developed.” The flood of characters act within various ideological stances and political factions from unbridled capitalism to the Communist Party. Saunders Redding, a prominent Black author and scholar, described the novel as an “ambitious failure” and criticized Mayfield's style to as a fault in form claiming, “It is artistic error to devote as much time and space to characters who have little dramatic significance...as to characters who have much” (Notices and Reviews). Because the reader cannot stay with any one character long enough, the novel is devoid of affective attachment towards any singular character and the novel emerges as part documentary and part experiment such as that found within avant-garde theater. I read Mayfield’s narrative style as his more journalistic or documentarian detachment, that writes from the gap between theory and pragmatism. From this liminal space he encourages two fronts: one that must adopt political performativity for the public fight and one must remain flexible beneath in order to serve the community.

Two positive reviews of the novel by the author Frank London Brown and literary critic
Joseph Blotner nuance Redding’s criticism and locate the novel within the extended tradition of social realism. Blotner’s review loosely labeled The Grand Parade as a roman-flueve, defined as a textual sequence intended to provide a larger social commentary. He compares Mayfield’s novel to John Dos Passo’s epic survey of American society, USA, and suggests that Mayfield bound together what could have been a series of novels about Gainesboro into one book. Brown contends that “Julian Mayfield's novel undertakes to depict the entire social system” and thus recognizes the author’s effort to craft a narrative through a variety of components within that system. As one reviewer put it, “the town is the main character” (Notices and Reviews) and yet Mayfield never offers a sense of community cohesion; one experiences the novel as a series of somewhat arbitrary interconnections between the characters, even within the black community. Within the black, white, and multi-ethnic communities of Gainesboro, the novel affords equal space and importance to minor characters aligns with the tradition of Marxist and proletariat literature in the way USA makes a similar gesture between journalism and story-telling. However, at the same time that Mayfield uses a Marxist aesthetic critique, he also brings to relief the similarities between communist and capitalist, working class characters and bourgeois ones and emphasizes their common human factors from which no champion or hero emerge.

It acts as a community novel without a coherent political angle, bending the genres between documentary and fiction. Since, no hero emerges and no path towards racial or social equality seems feasible, The Grand Parade offers little hope to a reader looking for an uplifting narrative of the Civil Rights Movement. Rather, it embodies the complicated process of political participation through everyday politics in the US with a focus on the pragmatic needs of the local community. Mayfield translates the scene from Belafonte’s living room to the community at large through middle class moderates, many of whom are neither black nor white, but rather
recent immigrants to the US. With the tone of a documentarian the narrator claims, “Nothing is so disillusioning to one who believes in the human potential than to observe the small businessman in a time of crisis”:

By day, during trading hours, they were firmly for integration, though most of them changed their tunes after they had scampered back to their families in the evening…[they] often felt compelled to contribute to organisations representing opposed viewpoints. Many held memberships in the NPA [Negro Progress Association] and WPC [White Protection Council] at the same time, silently deploring both for interfering with the normal operation of trade. *(The Grand Parade 297)*

Mayfield presents an unflattering view of moderates during the Civil Rights Movement, and yet he reflects the daily reality of those who could not afford to align themselves politically because they must prioritize themselves and their career in order to survive. In this way he documents the sentiments behind the political actors in Belafonte’s living room and fictionalizes them into small businessmen in the novel. His attempt to capture this lack of political consistency adapted the way he presented characters, fore fronting indeterminacy—not at the level of the individual mind—but as a group of individual minds all failing to fully represent their factions and existing within the same space. Mayfield’s refusal to provide a centralizing narrative perspective—one that might provide coherence—challenges how a story is bound together and, by proxy, what holds a community together.

The comparative elements to Dos Passos and a Marxist literary aesthetic, aligns *The Grand Parade* with what Barbara Foley describes as “the collective novel,” a subgenre within 1930s proletarian fiction that foregrounds "the treatment of the group as a phenomena greater than—and different from—the sum of individuals who constitute it” (400). The holistic focus,
what emerges in Mayfield’s fiction as a materialist approach to political systems, holds the potential to lead reader toward to the same result as the collective novel: “Readers who wish to understand the rationale for various characters' presence within a single narrative are thus compelled to look beyond the 'text itself’—and usually to Marxist class analysis—in order to grasp the text's principle of coherence” (400-1). As the narrative unfolds, Mayfield uses elements of proletarian fiction to confront the impossibility of a unified proletariat or anything cohesive in the multicultural diversity of the US and, more importantly, does not offer a solution to “the flood of violence that always simmers beneath the surface of American race relations” (*The Grand Parade* 331). Therefore, even though Mayfield employs Marxist narrative elements, one of his main targets is the Communist Party. The author’s detached journalistic tone demystifies, historicizes, and personalizes ideological development including the systemic development of inclusion and exclusion that defined both Communism and anti-communism during the Cold War.

Mayfield defamiliarizes political commitment by exposing an underbelly of other factors that drive people to their ideological beliefs: economic opportunism, misinformed education, misguided religious belief, psychological trauma from an abusive parent, to name a few. *The Grand Parade* follows Foley’s description of the collective novel in that it “opens up possibilities for voicing revolutionary politics because it engages the reader in a procedure of critical totalization” (Foley 441) and yet it does not neatly align with proletarian fiction, social realism, or with a New Critical approach to modernism. Foley distinguishes the collective novel from more “open-ended” attributes aligned with New Critical aesthetics claiming, “collective novels do not hold up indeterminacy as a political value or polyphony as a rhetorical strategy” (401). Thus, according to Foley, indeterminacy would be antithetical to a social realist aesthetic
and yet I would argue that *The Grand Parade* exhibits both political indeterminacy and polyphony as a political aesthetic and still maintains strong elements of social realism and collectivism. I read indeterminacy not as a means towards a more ambiguous, apolitical New Critical model, but as a radical political move under the umbrella of late modernism to reject clear alignment with any one idea or party.

Mayfield’s objective detachment and political indeterminacy enables the reader to critique all the political factions represented in the novel, from the Communist Party to the White Protection Council. Alonso (Lonnie) Banks represents the closest character to a Leftist hero—a Marxist intellectual recently expelled from the CPUSA that won’t compromise his principles and calls for internal reform of the Party. Yet halfway through the novel Mayfield reveals Lonnie’s back-story: that in his youth he raped a young girl, drove her to insanity, and never was held accountable for it. Lonnie is able to escape the crimes of his past through his membership in the Party, a move that highlights the gap between the Party and the black community. Lonnie evinces another gap that exists between a character’s ideological commitment and their personal moral failures. Thus, even though Lonnie is victimized during his expulsion from the Party, a reader cannot hold too much sympathy for him as a rapist and is reminded of a society where young rape victims are not brought to justice. Lonnie’s current girlfriend, a white comrade named Hilda, also faces sexist degradation at the hands of Party leader Lester Poole who would “let his eyes fall back to her bosom.” As Hilda reminds us, women—even if they are white—are relegated as prisoners of their bodies in a male dominant society where “by a single glance she could be thrown back in to the traditional position of women” (*The Grand Parade* 109). Not only is Lonnie’s morality is questioned and even his sense of persecution is questioned, but the Communist Party is exposed as imperfect and porous to the inequalities that it claims to have
eradicated within its bounds. Even if Lonnie has reformed by the time of the novel’s present, he compromises his ideological principles by turning to capitalism at its conclusion—even if it is black capitalism—and joining a real estate racket. Lonnie indicates how the narrative redefines political identity as a means to purchase one’s place in society rather than an internal set of ethics.

His brother, Randolph Banks, is supposed to mirror Lonnie’s stalwart political commitment through the opposite route of black electoral politics—a more “legitimate” approach to civil rights equality within the US. Randolph defends his role in the political machine to Lonnie and argues that black electoral politics is the correct path towards social equality, as a means to get hospitals and schools built: “we bourgeois niggers—as you used to call us—we did get that done…we’ll get more done for Greenpoint” (303). However, Lonnie responds strictly in economic terms claiming, “You know damn well you don’t care about the people of Greenpoint. All you care about is your nice little house and making your nice little salary and if you’re real good, mister white-Man Boss will invite you to his house occasionally and maybe give you a cocktail. I was trying to change the whole system from top to bottom. You just want to nibble away at it and live comfortably at the same time” (303-4). For Lonnie, Randolph’s fight for social equality is futile because it works within a capitalist system of self-interest. Yet, Randolph is not so different from his brother; Lonnie escapes the Communist Party to avoid the guilt of his past and he eventually capitulates to the real estate business. The two brothers are equally guilty of debasing their crusade for social equality with self-serving individualism. To drive the point further, the two brothers are also guilty of exploiting women. Randolph cheats on his wife with Patty Speed, a former lover that Randolph had abandoned in college because, as a dark-skinned, lower class black woman, she would not have been good for
his political career.

If adhering to ideology is an ethical or moral aspect during the Cold War and Civil Rights Movement, then the characters all suffer from their moral transgressions with the exception of perhaps Dr. Bishop, the representative of the Old Left who calls out the amoral zeitgeist of the novel’s present: "Do you know what depresses me...nobody really feels deeply about the moral issue involved here. Everybody is jockeying for position, acting out of pure self interest—even our so called leaders" (315). Characters on almost every level of the political spectrum in The Grand Parade compromise their political or moral positions making them less sympathetic to the reader without any stories of redemption. Thus, Mayfield’s approach to social realism is to reveal how political ideology is less about moral beliefs or ethics by exposing the performativity of politics.

III. The Politics of Performativity

Mayfield, as a performer himself, presents performativity in equally positive and negative tones through his characters. A typical character within The Grand Parade’s roster stands for an entire political system, such as communism or Black nationalism, and yet does so poorly as their individual lives cause them to contradict or compromise their principles. As this continues relentlessly throughout the novel, the focus shifts to how the characters represent—or fail to represent—as social subjects in a community. In this respect, he shares a close affinity with Marxist Avant-garde dramaturgy and epic theater developed by Bertolt Brecht and his company and Erwin Piscator that emphasized humor, the stock characters with peculiar morals, the indefinite conclusion, the value on entertainment as a means towards liberation. Mayfield's work emphasizes experimentation and, like avant-gardists, uses his medium as a kind of social
laboratory, “a way of treating society as if all its actions were performed as experiments” (Brecht 125). Like the plays of the epic theater, _The Grand Parade_ defamiliarizes audiences with their expectations of character and narrative and by calling into question the very structure in which they act. For Brecht, a responsibility of the epic theater is to shock the audience into recognizing that his character is always performed in order to create a critical rather than passive audience. Characters would often break the “fourth wall” to draw attention to the fact that they were playing a role. Brecht and the other proponents of epic theater, created transparency between the actor and their role, so that the audience was always aware of performance and the performativity of the body through allegorical characters and emotional detachment. The lack of sympathy or character empathy were necessary to undermine realism and create a critical audience “leave the spectator's intellect free and highly mobile” (121). The critical viewpoint taken by reviewers, that readers do not get the chance to attach to a character, is part of a parallel method taken by Mayfield as he undermines the moral integrity of his character, makes them unlikable, and distances them from reader’s emotions creating an avant-garde social realism in his novel. Brecht argued that the dramaturge has to “make what one might call hypothetical adjustments to our structure, by mentally switching off the motives of our society or by substituting others for them: a process by which leads real conduct to acquire an element of ‘unnaturalness’, thus allowing the real motive forces to be shorn of their naturalness and become capable of manipulation” (121). By nullifying characters’ morality on both ends of the political spectrum, Mayfield neutralizes assumptions of superiority. He forecloses the reader’s ability to recognize one character as positive and the other as negative in this political system. Brecht’s method positions readers to focus on what the characters represent as social subjects in a community just as Mayfield uncovers the paper-thin performativity of social justice.
Mayfield frames many of the novel’s scenes through the perspective of the media and the camera lens. In doing so, he exposes the performative nature of politicians by highlighting their scripted rhetoric. After an important court decision on integration, a reporter stops Randolph Banks outside the courthouse asking for a statement to which he responds:

“Human rights, said Randolph (in the exact language he and Joe [his aide] had carefully worked out) are too precious to be bargained away on a political platter.” That was the kind of statement a television news editor would want to run over his network. As he said it, Randolph looked directly at the camera and spoke the words in a clear, ringing voice. (*The Grand Parade* 314)

Randolph's performativity obscures any sense of sincerity in the statement as it is physically interrupted on the page by a reference to its own rehearsal and the focus on the camera; the performative element of Banks's statement contradicts its meaning. It becomes clear when Randolph notices that his political opponent "missed the boat" on an interview, that his focus on the competitive battle for votes overshadows his well-intentioned position on human rights. Parallel to Brecht's method that disrupts the audience’s belief in the character, Mayfield distances Banks as a person from Banks the civil rights reformer and thus renders the politician as performer. Even more disturbing is that the character matching Banks's media opportunism during the scene is Clarke Bryant, a white supremacist equally eager for the spotlight. For Banks, as well as for other characters in the novel, civil rights is indeed used as a pawn with which to bargain politically. To be clear, it is not that characters in the novel such as Randolph Banks are ambivalent to social justice and even civil rights, it is that their positions in a political system forces them to compromise or mitigate their convictions. At the very least, even their well-intentioned positions are unable to be extrapolated from how they affect votes.
The novel raises the question of whether or not one could act from a position of ethics in a competitive system, such as politics. Within the long-debated and ambiguous relationship between ethics and politics, Mayfield—through Brecht’s defamiliarization—separates the connection between political identities and one’s personal beliefs. In other words, that a person’s true opinion on a matter cannot be determined by their political position. For example, the guests in Harry Belafonte’s living room who vocally supported King and secretly financed Williams’ armament. Even though this question has been debated philosophically since antiquity, it has immediate importance for the Black community as it negotiates legal desegregation and the true motives behind movements for social equality from the US government to the Communist Party. Mayfield's performative politicians secretly lack the commitment they publically perform resulting in "no illusions that the player is identical with the character and the performance with the actual event" (Brecht 125). The performance outside the courthouse has less to do with the impact of desegregation on schoolchildren that it does the media sensation and who says what on camera. From there, one can draw the parallel to the larger event of Civil Rights and how much that depended on the US protecting their reputation during the Cold War. Scholars such as Mary Dudziak have observed how the U.S. government depicted Civil Rights as a moral issue, while also creating a “story of redemption” that “became an avenue for Cold War argument” (49) with the intention to promote democracy. Mayfield deconstructs the relationship between morality and politics on numerous, even unexpected levels, and grounds this in character, portraying them as actors within a grand parade of opportunism.

In this regard, Randolph Banks shares an uncanny similarity with a minor character, the racist prostitute Mary McCullough, as they both manipulate the media for socio-political uplift. Mary becomes an overnight media success after she falsely accuses a couple of black customers
of kidnapping and attempted rape and stirs up racial hatred in Gainesboro. She performs a speech at a White Citizens Council rally about her experiences meant to incite fear in the growing anti-segregationist community in Gainesboro that will ultimately lend her support and sympathy. Mary speaks the “carefully rehearsed opening sentence” of her speech within a few pages of Randolph Banks’s “exact language he and Joe had carefully worked out” (The Grand Parade 314) collapsing their ideological differences into a similarity of performativity. The desire for individual gain through race relations—a desire fueled by media sensationalism—crosses the color line in a disturbing way. Readers lose foothold since Randolph and Mary are on opposite ends of the spectrum and yet taking the same actions in front of the cameras; media acts as a great universal revealer of political and ideological performativity.

Even though Gainesboro is divided by race, there are moments in the novel where characters have more in common across racial divides than they necessarily do in their own community. The white mayor Douglas Taylor mirrors the mutual sense of idealism tempered with self-interest that Randolph Banks exhibits. Taylor roots out corruption in local politics while Banks fights for Civil Rights reform, and yet both are compromised by their desire to climb the political ladder. Similarly, Rosalia Stanley, a white elderly woman who conflates her philanthropy with political power, mirrors Edith Reason, a black prominent woman from Greenpoint who is "described as the coloured Rosalia Stanley…Both women were possessive and protective for their areas and both worked to keep their friction as a minimum" (175). The mirroring indicates the artificial process by which we assign racial difference and argues that beneath appearances, a politician is a politician and every community has its elderly philanthropist. The most controversial use of doubling in the novel centers on Mayfield’s comparison between the violent extremism of the Black Nationalist Chick Bolton and the white
supremacist Hank Dean. Both are zealous in their admonitions against integration and both are unafraid to resort to violence and act as lackeys to powers above who fuel their anger for their own self-gain. Both characters also are committed to their ideologies of racial superiority as inherent truth and attempt to win over their communities in a style akin to preaching. Typical of Brecht’s characterization, Mayfield’s character doubles deconstructs the ideological differences between them and suggest uncomfortable realities about racial and political identities. As Brecht argued, "The coherence of the character is in fact shown by the way in which its individual qualities contradict one another" (Brecht 124). This kind of anti-coherence—or a coherence—based on contradiction parallels characters that continue to fail to properly represent their faction and thus Mayfield succeeds in bringing Brechtian characterization to the novel. Emotional detachment from characters enables readers to critique the “entire social system,” and question how contradictions function within any coherent community, from the black fifth district to the Communist Party.

However, the novel does show the limitation of Brecht’s method of exposing the artificiality of identity and it does so by positioning blackness and racial disparity as a deep psychological factor in people’s lives whose real effects go beyond theory. Similar to how the FST’s audiences could not see beyond racial readings of characters, Mayfield shows that even Brecht’s alienation effect cannot apply to a system with racial disparity as it does not take into account the pervasiveness of American racism. The alienation effect and Mayfield's mirroring should place characters like Randolph Banks and Douglas Taylor on an equal platform, however, Mayfield exposes racism as too deeply suffused within the social fabric. The narrator reminds the reader of Taylor’s inherent sense of white privilege:

It had never occurred to Douglas that there might exist anywhere in the world a restaurant
or a hotel, and employer or a person who might reject him because of the colour of his skin, while to Randolph not only the possibility but the probability had been an everyday fact of life that had shaped his very consciousness. Thus, each of the men had been chiseled by distinct realities, and they were conditioned to see different images when they looked at the same object. (105)

This difference destabilizes the very act of ideological deconstruction and calls into question the ability for any kind of cross-racial social equality by highlighting the “distinct realities” that form people’s experience.

Mayfield takes this further by making Gainesboro itself a character in order to expose the inherent contradictions and performativity of US democracy. As the novel progresses forward, it reveals deeper, sordid money and power flows that move further and further away from the ethical-ideological battle of Civil Rights and increasing toward economic self-interest. In *Negroes with Guns*, Robert F. Williams refers to “peripheral forms of segregation” that “establish an atmosphere that supports a system” and pinpoints economics at the root of the system claiming, “the fundamental core of racism is more than atmosphere-- it can be mastered in dollars and cents and unemployment percentages” (75). In *The Grand Parade*, Mayfield tributes Williams’ point of view by bringing to relief the economic undercurrent that works within atmosphere of racism. The local real estate agent Mr. Pepper reminds readers that although integration was legally a black and white issue, socio-economically it involved a spectrum of ethnic representation, all ready to be exploited. He moves in the “Weintraubs and Piccinis, Oblonskys, and Gallovics” into traditionally white Anglo-Saxon Protestant neighborhoods and then “decided to clear the neighborhood again” (72) by moving in upper middle-class blacks. Within a novel of competing ideas of freedom, Pepper is portrayed as “the
only truly free man, holder of no prejudices, worshipper of nothing but the all-powerful American dollar” (72). In the strangest of places—the real estate market—Mayfield points out aspects of capitalism that value race and ethnicity differently from politics and can be used for or against the black population, like any other population. Randolph, in a compromise of his own moral integrity, is grateful for Mr. Pepper’s exploitative practices because it afforded him a nice house. While it might seems strange to offer real estate as a move against racism, the aforementioned scene in Harry Belafonte’s apartment party where Belafonte overcomes his racist landlord by buying the entire building, evidences how economic opportunism is an essential road towards civil equality in a capitalist society.

Mayfield’s case for social uplift through economic opportunity exposes a major problem that the Left and Marxist-based black internationalism would face within the US. The black community of Greenpoint depends on Patty Speed’s alternative economy. At the core is the numbers game that funds black politicians’ political campaigns and even offers last minute financial support to Randolph. Additionally, Speed controls the black real estate industry as she both aids and exploits blacks. She acts as the counterpart to Mr. Pepper in her manipulation of the color line for her own self-interest. Simultaneously, the gangster Patty Speed presents Lonnie with an alternative kind of legitimacy—or perhaps illegitimacy—in her Greenpoint shadow economy. Speed runs a mafia state based on the numbers racket and as a hyper-capitalist opportunist she provides a complete ideological opposite to communism. Even though she admits everything is for her own motive and self-aggrandizement, Speed does more pragmatically to help the black community than does the CPUSA in the novel. Beyond the jurisdiction of Blackburn and the local police, Patty Speed is the only person able to offer Lonnie a job and almost becomes a hero several times over in the story as she gives money to Lonnie, to
Randolph's campaign, manipulates the police, and calls out the seedy underbelly of politics. She keeps business within the black community by handing out loans, making donations and even using “violence to drive the Italians out of Greenpoint rackets” (75) so that the business could be black-owned, yet this is all for Speed’s own personal financial benefit and self-serving motive to prove to Randolph Banks and others that she could rise above her station. Speed explains her setup to Lonnie: “the banks in Gainesboro don’t lend money to Negroes…I’ve got what is called a factoring corporation. I make short-term mortgages at a pretty high interest. When they don’t pay, I foreclose” (308), thus making Patty Speed part owner of many businesses throughout the city. She is financially exploiting the black community for her own self-interest even if she helps a few others along the way. Speed's kleptocracy exists as another system for control: people who turn against Speed, or even try to act independently without her permission, fear for their lives. And yet, Lonnie, with a new suit and food in his stomach, joins Speed's operation and begins to learn the ins and outs of exploitative real estate.

If Gainesboro is a character, then its Brechtian performance exposes political corruption as the actor beneath the mask. Mayfield’s approach connects to the plot as a whole and sets up the entire integration crisis—the central plot of the novel—as a front for an individual’s political gain. A minor character barely mentioned in the novel, J.D. Carson, in fact acts as the man behind the curtain, driving the entire plot in his attempt to save his own political and financial career. Early in the narrative, we discover that Mayor Douglas Taylor has compromised Carson’s career after indicting many of his own political advisors and predecessors for embezzlement. Carson then uses racial unrest to a city-wide crisis that would “[t]ake people’s minds away from these investigations” (227). Indeed, it is revealed quite late in the novel that arrival of the white supremacist Clarke Bryant and the overall anti-integrationist movement was initiated and funded.
by Carson. It turns out that Carson crafted the dilemma because it is the most likely thing to polarize the community against the Mayor. When faced with opposition from his political aide, Carson responds, “Give me a better issue and we’ll use it. School bonds? No, sir, nobody’s interested. Wharf development? No drama in that. But race relations, mister, that’s something” (227). The movement for integration in Gainesboro and the drama that ensues is revealed as a petty war between white politicians—no small allusion to the role of the Civil Rights Movement on the Cold War battlefield. In this vein, the novel deconstructs the idea that race relations was an ethical issue in politics and the few characters with true ideological commitments, such as the DuBoisian enthusiast Dr. Bishop in Greenpoint, or the white supremacist disciple Hank Dean, are merely actors while behind the scenes lie economic greed and individual self-gain. The moral of the story bears no ethical weight; human rights are indeed bargained away on a political platter.

Mayfield argues that negotiating with opposing camps and making ideological compromises was a necessary means to push toward liberating the next generation. When the black community appeals to the mayor to assist in integration, they use the entire voting block of the black community as leverage got the mayor’s commitment to integration. Taylor’s aide gives him a sarcastic encouragement: “This is a great moral issue. We know you aren’t thinking about those fifteen thousand measly votes over in Greenpoint” (319) and his secretary encourages him along similar lines claiming, “It might make you a national figure. You might even get to be President” (319). Mayfield deflates the ethical commitment to the children’s safety and education instead focusing on how desegregation is being used as a political pawn, with parallel to the larger international game. As the mayor’s aide articulates in a pessimistic moment, “Doug, don’t you know there are no great moral issues in American life today? There are only political
issues and power struggles” (284). The Grand Parade frames the local issue of integration with the national (and international) civil rights progress within an overall distrust for the U.S. government’s motive: “The Vice-President of the United States, who hoped to be president one day, said the problems of Gainesboro had to be solved quickly because the Communist world was exploiting them for political propaganda” (310). At the forefront of social change and basic human rights is a twofold agenda: the first is concern over the U.S.’s international profile, but even darker is the Vice President’s own desire for political gain. This parallels how Douglas Taylor’s own beliefs on integration are secondary to how he can use civil rights as a political tool in his desire to become a senator.

The undercurrent of money makes political or ideological consistency impossible. In one of Lonnie’s job failures at the Urban League, his boss, an activist from Howard University, cannot secure a job for Lonnie even though the goal of the organization is to promote "harmony between the races" (246) through employment placement for black professionals. The activist explicates his lack of power in the City League: "I do run it, but they own it. Whose money do you think keeps this outfit going? The white folks. Who pays me ten thousand a year? The white folks...I can't afford to risk my ten thousand" (247). Mayfield reveals the truth about social progress and institutions: they depend on white money and thus controlled by white interests. The Black Nationalist in the novel, Chick Bolton, articulates these suspicions as coming down to issues of funding: “You can’t trust an ofay, man, even if he is a Communist. That’s the reason I don’t belong to the NPA. Too many white people give money to it, so you know there must be something wrong with it” (306). This prism of ideological viewpoints shows a fractured community—a pessimistic vision for the future possibility of unity. The money trail leads to either white business interest, such as the City League and the NPA or to the illicit economy of
Patty Speed, whose real estate ventures and numbers racket exploits the community. The common underlying thread equalizes all factions and proves that activism will never amount to actual change unless it can rid itself of opacity and separate itself from capitalist self-interest.

The process of uncovering motives reflects a Cold War society where platforms often had ulterior motives and the money trail led to ugly truths on funding. Recent epiphanies, such as the revelation that photographer Ernest C. Withers was a F.B.I. informant, serve as reminders of the difficulties that Leftist and black artists faced during the Civil Rights movement. In Washington's *The Other Blacklist*, she makes an essential observation that helps us to understand the stress and strain under which black writers were expected to produce their art through a particular historical event. Advertised as the first conference of black writers in the U.S., the American Society of African Cultures hosted a conference attended by major leftists black authors including Mayfield, John O. Killens, Lorraine Hansberry, Alice Childress and many others. Washington rebuilds the conference by including excised contributions and other conspicuous historical absences. She focuses mainly on a suspicious flow of money for the conference’s funding that in truth was secretly back by the CIA (Washington 251). Washington speculates on the awareness of the participants in this and other moments: "If there was anything writers on the Left understood well, it was that these debates on protest literature and over representations of black subjectivity were State-department authorized strategies to determine the kind of black literary production that would be sanctioned and promoted in the era of Cold War containment" (257). This view implies that debates and discussion over aesthetic and the identity of the black writer were complicit with the very system that exploited them. The novel exhibits Marxist forms that deconstructs the connection between characters and their social conditions, while acknowledging that there were other factors that apply to the situation of US racism that
Euro-Marxists did not anticipate when crafting class-based social theory—a point made loudly by many African American communist apostates.

IV. Ideology and the Cold War System: Towards a Populist Marxism

Black writers such as Mayfield not only understood the limitations of political commitment, but also used own subject identity as black to raise a skeptical eyebrow to identity politics of any kind. At the risk of offending leaders in the movement that worked closely with the government for Civil Rights reform, such as the NAACP, Mayfield builds a populist Marxism with the bravado expressed by one of The Grand Parade’s less reputable characters, “We’ve got to fight any way we can” (324). While Mayfield writes within social realism, political ambiguity diluted the extremism inherent within ideological arguments and offered a more nuanced vision that called for reform and questioning of political commitment at a time when their communities needed pragmatic changes and access to full humanity. As Mary Patillo argues in Black on the Block: The Politics of Race and Class in the City, the political actions of blacks within a community do not always align with “their more immediate, daily concerns [that] involve finding an affordable place to live in a safe neighborhood with good schools. People live locally” (2). This is true in The Grand Parade, as it juxtaposes the local life with political systems, highlights the depth of the disparity between theoretical and systematic efforts towards social equality during the Civil Rights Movement and their pragmatic realities. At a time when one of the U.S. government’s greatest concerns was to “rescue the image of America and promote a liberal internationalist view of America in the egalitarian world” (30), Mayfield countered their ideological promotion of a nation bravely overcoming their greatest defect with an image that shows how little progress is actually being made on the daily level. In this way, Gainesboro exists in tandem with global Cold War politics as Mayfield builds parallels between
localism and internationalism and Gainesboro becomes allegorical for the United States as a whole.

_The Grand Parade_ reflects the historical tangle of anti-Communist foreign policy and domestic racism that demarcates the Cold War period. Mayfield articulates in the novel what the US government feared: that racism was going to eventually promote worldwide communism through anti-American sentiment. Mayfield continues slips these red flags into the novel. One of the journalists that descends on Gainesboro during the height of its desegregation crisis comments, “I just got back from the Middle East. This publicity isn’t going to help us over there” (_The Grand Parade_ 296), reminding readers of the materialist properties of ethical issues. The critical work of Mary Dudziak, Penny Von Eschen, Thomas Borstelman, and others have focused on the international pressure and exposed the political underbelly that “civil rights reform was in part a product of the Cold War” (Dudziak 12) and “the widely shared sense that race was America's Achilles heel internationally” (Von Eschen 5). The US government’s main concern was to show that through a democratic system, racism could eventually be exterminated naturally without totalitarian government intervention. As Thomas Borstelman argues in _The Cold War and the Color Line_, “The essential strategy of the American Cold Warriors was to try to manage and control the efforts of racial reformers at home and abroad thereby minimizing provocation to the forces of white supremacy and colonialism while encouraging gradual change” (2). This put pressure on the US to create a performance of social change, often enacted through “evidence” that integration was working in order to present “American history as a story of redemption” (Washington 49). Despite Castro’s position as not-communist nor anti-communist and Robert F. Williams’ position, which was not against violence nor anti-non-violence, ideological flexibility was antithetical to a Cold War context and the media frenzy that
polarized people into categories. In their rejection of a consistent ideology, many politicians, artists, and activists revealed a contingent approach to politics—one that does not stem from philosophy or party, but rather from a situational need at any place and time.

Through the local community, Mayfield universalizes the experiential gap between legal efforts towards racial equality and the daily life of those persecuted. Thus in the novel, he tightly binds race relations with Cold War international public relations, arguing that there are always external variants and political motives applied to ethical issues. By refusing to favor any system or offer a hero or an answer, indeterminacy resists Cold War media polarization and counters propaganda-driven narratives while still maintaining the often inspiring political atmosphere that saturated daily life. Rather that being apolitical, the novel’s universal criticism of ideological systems is a radical gesture in itself within the loose genre of political literature. Mayfield’s relentless critiquing affords readers more autonomy to form diverse opinions independently of the author’s own political opinions. True, one can never be fully independent of authorial intent, however, the emerging aesthetic that tried to capture the confusing melee of activism through dialogue deserves recognition as authors—specifically the artists discussed within this project—presented ethical conundrums, then took a step back and offered no clear solution leaving readers to their own devices.

Adaptation of Marxism towards a more populist appeal does not fit within a system concerned with labels and partisan commitments. Lonnie exemplifies this disconnect when he makes a speech titled, “The Americanization of the Communist Party of the U.S.A.” that calls for “ideological and tactical independence from the Soviet Union” (The Grand Parade 109). He reacts to the Soviet Union’s crimes against humanity revealed by Nikita Khrushchev’s 1956 speech to the Twenty-Third Party Congress, an event that historically caused a global crisis
among the Left and demands that “the American party should publicly repudiate the Russians whenever they were wrong” (109), an adaptation that would create space for dissent. His suggested approach would also remap political commitment as mobile and transitional in that it seeks social change without the constraints of singular political commitment bound to subject identity. It is not anti-partisan, but rather multi-partisan allowing the various political identities to conform to the needs of the community. Therefore his "Americanization" of Marxism means more than internal reform as a result from Soviet crime; it also means transitioning Marxist ideals to a setting equipped to deal with racial inequality. Lonnie's subject position as an oppressed African American is not something to be ignored, but rather a tool with which he can recognize oppression in other locations and internally within the CPUSA. Thus, Mayfield points out how these competing versions of Marxism—Soviet, Cuban, American—fall into a capitalist model that competes for members and benefits only a small selection rather than the whole of oppressed people.

The novel highlights the gap between the CPUSA and the rest of American society. Although Lonnie was able to raise his status higher in the Party without the restraints of US segregation, he could not transition his progress outside the Party's structure. The very structure that allows him a modicum of equality disengages him from being able to improve the status of others. In Lonnie’s back story, Mayfield intertwines Lonnie’s involvement in the Party with a motivation for racial freedom: he was recruited during the war by a black soldier who scorns the Double V campaign claiming, “Don’t you cats dig that socialism’s the only way you’re gonna get your freedom?” (95). Yet he shows how this motivation that intertwines two ideologies—racial freedom and the liberation of the working class—fails to function together and does not address the needs of everyday people in the community.
When Lonnie meets Rachel, an old friend who works a menial job to support her broken family, he understands the disconnect between politics and the black community. She can barely recognize him and asks about his disappearance, "Somebody told me you were all mixed up with those Communists or something" (128) an accusation that Lonnie must deny in order to gain her trust. Lonnie reflects on this paradox: “How was it, then, that Rachel was almost a stranger to him? In a sense, all the picketing and meeting and fund raisers had been for her…How was it then that he was only ‘a Communist or something?’…He could not believe so, but if they had any effect on Rachel, he did not see it” (129). He realizes throughout the course of the novel “how completely his years in the Communist Party had isolated him from the people among whom he had been born and raised” (247-8). Even though Lonnie never capitulates to Ralph Blackburn, a former communist who turned informant and now works for the government, his inner thoughts agree with Blackburn’s vocalized dissent that, “all the years I had been in the Party hadn’t changed a damn thing” (132) positioning the Communist Party external to the oppressed black community that requires immediate social change. Controversially, the novel compares the CPUSA with the US government by noting how their institutional efforts against racism failed to make tangible changes toward social equality. Mayfield uses the Communist Party as a catalyst to unearth the failures inherent within partisan groups—including electoral politics, the communist party, and black nationalism—that defined themselves based on exclusionary processes, competition, and thus suffer under their inability to negotiate US racism.

Mayfield collapses these systems together and evidences how the lines between them were much more blurred, a sentiment he expressed years later while negotiating the ideological battlefield of Cold War Ghana: “[W]e had that point where we understood that sometimes you kept fighting for an ideal along a road which is no clearer than the enemy's” ("Tales of the Lido"
This motif courses through his oeuvre, particularly *The Grand Parade*. During Lonnie's expulsion the committee mirrors McCarthyism’s stifling denial of political dissent within the United States: “the expulsion sessions were the longest, sometimes lasting all night. Every person there took detailed notes as the charges and counter charges were spelled out.” The painstaking method by which Lonnie gets expelled reflects the image of HUAC court sessions. As the party members claimed, “it was the responsibility of the comrades on the county level to act swiftly to cut out this anti-Party sore before it became cancerous” (*The Grand Parade* 94) in a rhetoric that could easily be supplemented as something delivered by HUAC. Their policing goes beyond logical reason and takes on the tone of a witch-hunt. The mention of a previous expulsion of two party members for homosexuality and another expulsion for infidelity suggests a strange policing of sexuality—and the aforementioned sexism—that seems gratuitous in a political situation and thus mirrors McCarthy’s own practices.

Ralph Blackburn, the former communist turned agent in the Bureau of Security, blurs the line between friend and foe in an attempt to inveigle Lonnie to give up information on his fellow comrades in exchange for immunity. Lonnie rejects Blackburn’s pressure and refuses to compromise his integrity, an interesting parallel to the same compromises he was asked to make by the Party members who expelled him. Blackburn is committed to individualism throughout the novel, he advises Lonnie “look after yourself, number one” (250) and yet ends up compromising even this self-serving principle when he claims racial pride as his motivation—that he never ratted on a black comrade and his desire to get promoted and “become the first regular Negro agent in the Bureau of Security” (252). Blackburn goes so far as to bribe Lonnie with a hundred dollars; all of his approaches lead back to a self-serving intention. In both this scene and during his expulsion hearing, Lonnie is being asked to compromise his principles in
exchange for citizenship and belonging. At the time of his expulsion his fellow Party member, Lester Poole, informs Lonnie that he could remain a member so long as he renounces his ideas publicly, asking him, "Criticise yourself" to which Lonnie replies, “Don't give me that jazz man. I will not retract that report. I stand by every word of it...I won't compromise it” (112-3).

Through the intentional mirroring of these two events, Mayfield removes a sense of good and bad on the ideological spectrum, instead trying to remain critical of the manhunt techniques of the “age of unreason,” to borrow the journalist Ed Murrow's apt phrase, exposing the Communist Party as just as limiting as the U.S. government; neither has the ability to house dissent within its political body.

Lonnie's critical revelation falls into a genre of anti-Communist Party sentiment coming from black authors such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, John A. Williams, and Julian Mayfield himself, who had joined the Party in the 40s but later resigned citing the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary and “petty gossip.” The favored decline narrative currently under scholarly scrutiny shows how the Old Left's commitment to the CPUSA divaricated into leftist factions that resented and rejected communism. On one end, we have the CPUSA's commitment to full social equality of the oppressed black population as early as the 1920s and throughout decades after with the support of high profile names in the black community such as W.E.B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, Canada Lee, Lorraine Hansberry, and others. McCarthyism and the invasion of Hungary are examples of moments that fractured the Party; these were coupled with the criticisms from apostate African Americans in their public statements and their fiction. Richard Wright's essay "I Tried to be a Communist" published in the Atlantic Monthly in 1944 lambasted the Party's culture of conformity and suspicious paranoia by connecting it to his racial experience: “I had spent a third of my life traveling from the place of
my birth to the North just to talk freely to escape the pressure of fear. And now I was facing fear again.” He concludes that he cannot reconcile his membership with his position as a black individual, a similar stance taken by James Baldwin, who offered the public a complicated relationship between the Left, the CPUSA, and black identity through his ambiguous self-positioning. In a 1972 conversation with Joe Walker in *Muhammad Speaks* he states “I’m anti-Stalinist to be more accurate. I’m anti-communist because the Communist Party in the U.S. as I have witnessed it, is a party whose record intellectually and internationally is shameful” (Baldwin 141) Baldwin nuances his viewpoint, directing his criticism towards the structure of the Party and its failure to act out its ideals.

However, Baldwin paradoxically supported the network of the communist Old Left through frequent contributions to *Freedomways* magazine, even though he also straddled contributions to the Partisan Review the Leftist-anti-Communist schoolyard rival to *Freedomways*. As James Smethurst has argued, many former CPUSA members continued to support the communist network through and after McCarthyism, even while outwardly denouncing the Party. Mayfield did this himself in a 1961 issue of *Freedomways*, when he claimed, “I can say without hesitation that [Fidel Castro’s] new government, in the brief time it has been in power, has substantially eliminated racial discrimination on the island” (187). In this regard, indeterminacy allows for representations of Marxism and Communism that could support a politics based on Marxism—such as the above example—while also critiquing the limitations of the Communist party, such as Mayfield does in *The Grand Parade*. In this way, he is even closer to Brecht, who remained politically ambiguous throughout his life—and especially on trial in front of HUAC—but used Marxist principles in his art. Mayfield used fiction to create new roads of thought that could negotiate failed social integration in the wake of legal desegregation
and the ugly fact that African Americans were used as foreign policy pawns during the Cold War.

This style of ambiguous criticism reoccurs among African American literature; many of these authors channeled political doubt through the individual minds of protagonists from The Man Who Cried I Am’s Max Reddick, Invisible Man’s protagonist, Native Son’s Bigger Thomas, Bird at My Window’s Wade Williams. The most prominent example is Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man where the Brotherhood—a thinly veiled example of CPUSA—provides a context for The Grand Parade. The racial identity of Ellison's protagonist grates against the Brotherhood's political agenda; even the white organizer Brother Jack extols racial equality in the Party, the protagonist feels as though "He only wanted to use me for something" (Ellison 294), a sentiment Mayfield takes to the next level when Blackburn claims, “Didn’t they [the Communist Party] misuse the Negro movement for their own purposes?” (The Grand Parade250). While the two novels parallel one another in their articulation of the failure of Marxism’s “scientific approach to society” (Ellison 350) and that the CPUSA was ill equipped to negotiate both the diversity and the passion of the proletariat to which they were supposed to liberate. Just as in The Grand Parade, the motivation for racial freedom will not fit neatly or work effectively with scientific Marxism, which does not account for human relations and adopts the same processes of inclusion and exclusion that alienated Wright, Mayfield, and many other black writers and artists.

Ellison makes a strong case in the novel for a populist appeal to black audiences when the protagonist makes a passionate speech on racial oppression that stirs controversy within the Brotherhood. The protagonist is heavily criticized for his connection to home, identified as a kind of rural South politics what he calls the “old down-to-earth, I’m sick-and-tired-of-the-way-
they’ve-been-treating-us approach” that grates against the more scientific “theory and practice” of the Brotherhood (258-9). The protagonist’s speech calls for “an alliance” between factions using blindness as a metaphor for the indeterminate confusion of politics: “two blind men can get together and help one another along...[t]hey stumble, they bump into things, but they avoid dangers, too.” His speech instills a zealous fervor in the crowd by grounding in feeling “more human” (344) when reaching towards the uneasy affinity that would accompany a half-blind alliance for a new world order. And yet, the Brotherhood protests, arguing that the speech was the “antithesis of the scientific approach” since the audience is reacting with emotion, rather than critical thinking. Ellison's discordance between black identity and the Party paints the novel as an “anti-communist text” that has damaged perceptions of the “consciousness and radical historical engagement on the part of Harlem’s working class” (Foley, Wrestling with the Left 22). However, if we approach Ellison through Mayfield’s Brechtian-influenced indeterminacy, the protagonist’s speech in Invisible Man is not necessarily anti-Marxist, rather, it combines the sentiment of Marxism with the more religious-based passion for social change and posits an emotional appeal for human decency as the only method on which an alliance between racial and working class equality could be based. As one character argues, the revolution is not going to be organized “by a bunch of timid sideline theoreticians arguing in a vacuum” (Ellison 351) and thus reveals that when dealing with the many factions of oppression within the ethnically diverse US, there must be a degree of spontaneous passion towards common humanity.

Ellison is not alone; criticisms of interracial political solidarity run throughout much of African American literature even from those such as Wright and Hansberry that supported it politically. In John A. Williams’ The Man Who Cried I Am, one of the characters, a fictionalized Richard Wright expressed his sentiments on communism:
Karl Marx was not thinking about niggers when he engineered the Communist Manifesto; if he was why didn’t he say so? None of the 'great documents' of the West ever acknowledges a racial problem, tied to an economic problem, tied to a social problem, tied to a religious problem, tied to a whole nation's survival. And that's why, man, none of them, *unamended*, are worth the paper they were written on. (J. A. Williams 50 emp. mine)

Despite this rant looking like an absolute admonition against Communism, Williams uses the term “unamended,” which suggest adaptations of Western documents of revolution and social change. The Black experience offers the insight needed to understand the pervasiveness of oppression and unweave its complicated social tapestry. John A. Williams’s character mentioned above refers to the Party as “another version of white man's hell” (50) and *The Grand Parade’s* portrayal of the Party complicated Foley’s criticism by showing a working class embodied by Rachel and other characters that do not engage with the Communist Party.

As early as *The Grand Parade*, Mayfield was examining how to write this skepticism into a social realist narrative that could raise the question: Where does critical thought meet the emotional appeal required for coalition politics? He critiques the critical scientific approach of the CPUSA and yet also critiques unbridled passion as something that can easily become cult-like with characters such as the white supremacist Hank Dean and the black nationalist Chick Bolton as extreme and violent figures that would make universal social change impossible.

Mayfield picks up where Ellison left off, understanding that a person cannot exist outside society as he shows with Lonnie, who does not retreat into starvation but joins Patty Speed’s gang.

When Lonnie loses his membership and is denied democratic citizenship through his lack of FBI cooperation, he exists in a liminal social status that allows him to see the inevitable failure of
systems that do not make room for dissent or adaptation. In the expulsion scene, it is clear that criticism or dissent within the party—even against human atrocities—would not be tolerated. Lonnie soon begins to go hungry and he wanders the streets penniless and without purpose, echoing the wanderings of Ellison’s protagonist. Like with Hilda's issues with sexism, the Party is described as a world where the most successful actors are white males, thus refuting their entire ideological stance of equality based on their dependency towards exclusion. Lonnie’s former comrades forget him as he realizes that “the ten years he had spent in the Communist Party were a huge gap in his life that he could not explain” (The Grand Parade 245). This becomes an issue to his potential employers who fire him anyway after visits from the Bureau of Security (BS)—a thinly veiled version of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

The Communist Party and the US government prove to be systemically similar in their methods of inclusion and exclusion—and yet Lonnie wonders the extent to which a person must belong to a group: “Did every man have to chose his side? If one at last rejected the contradictions of the American Communists, must he then join the opposing camp, which was crammed with as many contradictions?” As he contemplates his social isolation he realizes that even his thoughts are futile: “His last thought as he fell asleep was more practical: he had no money for breakfast” (305). Lonnie’s literal starvation critiques the possibility for a black man to exist independently in the U.S. without affiliation or proof of legitimacy.16 Lonnie’s experience exposes communism as a part of the system rather than an alternative to it what Mayfield terms as “organs of the opposition” (14) reflecting the aforementioned critical totalization. Racial difference in the novel opens a passageway with which to view the sentiments of dissent

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16 Mayfield revisits this again several years later in his film Uptight! co-written with Ruby Dee, where he plays Tank, an ethically ambiguous alcoholic who is denied membership in the militant black party. As Tank wanders the streets alone without a community, he descends into self-hating madness. Such as with Lonnie, Mayfield reminds us of the powerful desire to belong to a group and a community and how that takes precedent over critical thinking or logic.
occurring historically. As Thomas Borstelmann notes, “for millions of Americans, the police were not a source of safety and courts did not provide a refuge from injustice. U.S. society was far from life under Soviet rule, but the two did have certain similarities” (56). These similarities took strongest ground when dealing with U.S. race relations, what J. Edgar Hoover recognized as a parallel iron curtain in the U.S. South with a suggestion that both landscapes are foreign to democratic ideals (Borstelmann 56). Partisan groups both globally and at the local level replicate the process of segregation through exclusion and assumptions of difference when in actuality, the common human factors of error render infallible commitment impossible. Mayfield's novel acts as a process of desegregating and serves to expose the sameness of groups posing to be antithetical to one another racially and politically. In direct repudiation to Harold Cruse’s admonitions of contradicting ideology, not only are the different horses of communism, nationalism, and any other organized ideology the same, but also the “opposite directions” all lead to the same place.

The failure of the Communist Party provides an important template that could reveal the limits of identity politics in the black freedom struggle as constituents were expected to align with either non-violent passive resistance or extremist militancy. This binary, highlighted by media exaggerations, even had its own set of stock characters in Martin Luther King Jr., Robert F. Williams, and Malcolm X whose more nuanced politics have historically been flattened to represent fixed factions. Mayfield sounds the warning for black internationalism not to make the same mistakes as the Communist Party, especially as black internationalism worked closely with third-world Marxism in a complicated affinity exemplified by Williams’ experiences in Cuba and Mayfield own accounts of Nkrumah’s Ghana. Again, he grounds his political philosophy in the local community, offering the suggestion that black internationalism starts at home.
V. Pop Cultural Populism and Third World Solidarity

Lest we feel that there is no hope for progressiveness in the future, Mayfield does offer performativity—and even entertainment—as hope from his ideological nihilism. The most racially harmonious and integrated moment in the novel exists outside the political struggles and takes place at a rock concert where a mixed-race band performs in the black neighborhood due to the segregation of music halls. All of Gainesboro’s youth, even those in racially exclusive gangs, celebrate the experience of music together harmoniously. Even when a white supremacist agitator arrives on the scene, the white youth gang beats him up and drives him out of the neighborhood lest he disturb their revelry or cause a disturbance that would prevent future concerts. Perhaps influenced by spontaneous support of Castro on the streets of Harlem, Mayfield draws attention to these spontaneous moments of solidarity that can be more powerful than intellectual political discussions. Popular culture acts as a space for coalition that cannot easily be defined or fit into a political category and yet can work alongside a revolutionary movement as a way to unite people. Mayfield upholds the spontaneity of community progress through populist means such as pop music, and maligns the politics of civil rights as a performative gesture for the media. Mayfield’s sense of humor, his sprinkling of sordid affairs, criminal activity, and violence mixes social realism with lower-brow entertainment.

The novel’s dramatic ending reveals the performative possibilities of politics as the school attempts to integrate in the midst of a pending riot. The black preacher Reverend Reeves Matthews concocts a last minute plan, which involves a dramatic gesture of solidarity between the white and black community: an integrated parade led by the Mayor. In an uneasy alliance, white parents and their children march side-by-side black parents and their children ensuring
their safety in the face of a confused mob. As the people walk together, a riot that intended to harm a young black child, would have most likely then also hit a white child, and vice versa. The parade, however impressive in its racial harmony, actually is a combination of self-interest and community interest. This alliance between factions of the black community and the mayor is based mostly on exploitation since they offer him the entire voting block of the black community and remind him of the negative publicity that Gainesboro is receiving worldwide due to the rise of racial violence. And yet, it is the move that assures both the safety of the children and the integration of the school.

Rev. Reeves Matthews exemplifies the kind of political angle Mayfield sees as most effective. As a local preacher, he stands peripheral to the political system and yet has significant influence on voters. Moreover, in his backstory Mayfield emphasizes the fact that Matthews initially wanted to be an actor and settled for preacher as the next best thing. Even though Rev. Matthews is an important political figure in the black community, he exposes his own indeterminate approach to politics when he claims, “I have long been of the belief that there is no great distinction between Democrats and Republicans...at least as far as Negroes are concerned. I'm sure we all want what's best for Greenpoint. So let's find out which of the candidates for Mayor is strongest on civil rights and let's support him, regardless of party. That way we won't be dividing our strength” (*The Grade Parade* 269). Rather than political nihilism, Reeves Matthews embraces opportunism and encourages multiple affiliations, and yet it is his distrust in the political system that allows him to play it out successfully by the end of the novel. He calls for the integration parade as a performance of protection and interracial solidarity. It does not work to stop the race riot that ensues after the parade enters the school, but it stalls the violence—while the riot rages outside, the young children all sign the national anthem together, a
promise for future hope with a touch of dramatic irony.

As a result of political performativity and instability within the partisan structure, a possibility for a more flexible approach to politics emerges, a tool that would be needed for a global turn towards revolution, where participants would have to remain both flexible and critical of approaches beyond their cultural or ideological beliefs. In other words, even though Mayfield critiques the political inconsistency of the moderate businessmen who have placed their chips on both the Negro Progress Association and the White Protection Council, he does not exclude them from the community of the novel. Mayfield parallels this within the local community through the multi-ethnic groups within Gainesboro that remain neutral during the crisis. During the tension of the final scene, Mayfield pauses his escalation of the riot and introduces the school’s janitor, “a bent old Ukranian with matted white hair” and details his morning ritual, which is unchanged from any ordinary morning. Which is why when he sees over two hundred rioters and their media frenzy on the front lawn, the janitor is taken aback in surprise, “His mouth opened in an audible gasp; then he shook his head and lumbered down the corridor to continue his morning duties” (326). In a typical Brechtian manor, Mayfield calls attention to the performativity of the riot in this almost humorous interruption that reminds the reader of those who must continue their daily life beyond the political drama. He is the common laborer, whose morning duties remain uninterrupted by the struggle for integration; none of the television cameras at the scene are pointed at him. As a Ukrainian immigrant, he is on the outside in a racially ambiguous space; he is white, but not white-American. He also represents the border territory of the Soviet Union. Mayfield reminds the reader of the disconnect between the civil rights struggle that exists before the cameras and the daily existence of the common worker and pays quiet homage to another constituent in the battle for integration, those whose actually provide the labor that keeps the
school functioning. Characters like the Ukranian janitor and Rachel grate against the big ideological and political gesture in the novel leaving the reader to question, where is the movement that incorporates them?

Mayfield makes an argument for appealing to citizens “whether of Italian, Jewish, Greek, or Anglo-Saxon Protestant origin” that he argues makes up most of society and that “often felt compelled to contribute to organizations representing opposing viewpoints.” The Chinese community in Gainesboro evidences this kind of political ambiguity as they try to blend in with the white community and yet recognize that, “If the atmosphere of colour hatred and fear thickened, might not the wrath of the whites turn against them?” (298). The novel does not condemn or judge those holding multiple memberships, but observes them as real constituents within the US that shared similar concerns—the improvement of their daily lives and economic conditions—what Ellison’s protagonist, Fidel Castro, and Martin Luther King Jr. all recognized as humanism.

Mayfield aligns the concerns of black internationalism at the local level suggesting that coalition politics should start with the multi-ethnic communities inherent within every small city in the United States and not just the northern urban centers or global community. By creating a parallel between world politics and the local community, he calls for the need for flexibility on both levels and a style of Marxism that could appeal to the common community member, regardless of race. The only way to make a post-Bandung coalition possible would call for people not to take their own politics as inherently correct and be able to share an affinity with other systems working for global human rights. Mayfield leads us there by universally denigrating political ideologies that try to cohere or remain pure, and placing his own bets on populism and performativity as a means towards a Third World or universal solidarity.
In the post-Brown vs. Board of Education moment when segregation shifted from its legal to cultural status, Mayfield's novel prepares his audience for basic questions of resources as they no longer can name their oppression as a legal document, but rather as a nameless shifting framework, or atmosphere, that must be fought against on multiple indistinct levels. Mayfield shift this beyond the biracialism of Williams and even black internationalism by focusing on the parallel between Third-World solidarity and the multi ethnic diversity of the United States. If the “Americanization of the Communist Party” could be realized, it would legitimize the facets of indeterminate activism: the scene in Harlem, the performance of global, revolutionary solidarity that incites the Harlem working class crowd, like Ellison’s protagonist’s speech in *Invisible Man*, or Radio Free Dixie’s revolutionary mixed-media jazz. Within the combination of different approaches, methods, and affinities, ideology could evolve into the flexibility to improvise on basic human feelings within a local community and yet continuously returning to the motif of freedom from oppression.

Within the scholarly turn that gives due attention to black political thought during the 1950s and the Civil Rights Movement, Mayfield's narrative form offers indeterminacy as a path to understand the shifting and at time contradictory weltanschauung of artists such as James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Gwendolyn Brooks, and most notably Amiri Baraka, who often stands in as an exemplary figure in shifting, mutating political thought. Of course, this extends beyond authors such as Zora Neal Hurston, W.E.B. Dubois, and John Dos Passos, who took uncomfortable ideological positions; as these narratives emerge from their out-of-print status and

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historical figures such as Mayfield, Robert F. and Mabel Williams, John A. Williams, Rosa Guy, and many others are currently being recognized and, more importantly, read, scholarship must address new definitions of political thought embedded within the pages and confront why political malleability is culturally experienced as irresponsible or unstable and how we can change our strategies in both reading and thinking about identity expression.

As I intend to show in the following chapters on Yglesias’s novel experimentations with narrative during this time becomes a model for understanding the community and its limitations. Like Mayfield, Yglesias is a journalist and global figure within the Civil Rights Movement who represents a local community—the Cuban-American community of Ybor City, Florida—in fiction. As a Castro-sympathizer and as a Marxist, Yglesias is concerned with how migrant communities understand their politics through collective memory and whether or not the global Left could be a political reality in the United States. It serves as a balance between the universality of narrative and the historicized realities from which it was created and has an impact on in scholarship. By recovering obscured Civil Rights Movement histories, these efforts to capture the unknown figures and lost stories that redefine fiction as an important archive of activism.
CHAPTER 3: “SEPARATE BEINGS IN THE UNITY OF ART”: THE TEMPORALITY OF MIGRATION AND LIMITATIONS OF NARRATIVE IN JOSE YGLESIAS’ THE TRUTH ABOUT THEM

I. Cuban Migration and the Civil Rights Movement

Julian Mayfield wrote The Grand Parade from Puerto Rico, amidst the Caribbean nationalist movement and in the aftermath of 1955 Bandung conference in Indonesia, a meeting that marked the first conference of newly formed states from Africa and Asia, inspiring a global sentiment of Third World Revolution.18 Yet, despite Mayfield’s proximity to the international wing of the revolutionary struggle for rights, he sets his novel in a Southern border town. Through the collapse of this small community and its competing ideologies, the novel evidences how the reality of daily life challenges the ideals of a populist, global revolution. Like Mayfield, author and journalist Jose Yglesias chronicled the Civil Rights Movement on a global scale born from hemispheric networks with the Caribbean and out across the Atlantic. Yglesias’s network mainly centered on the Cuban diaspora in the United States, yet extended to Latin America and Spain. His extensive journalism on the Civil Rights Movement and his non-fiction on radical movements around the globe earned him the New York Time obituary title “Novelist of Revolution” (Gussow M., 1995). Yet, Yglesias dedicates his most personal writing to a small ethnic enclave, Ybor City, a subsection of Tampa, Florida. For both Yglesias and Mayfield, the U.S. Civil Rights Movement was part of a dialogue for a new world order throughout the global

South and, for both, the history of global social movements is also the story of the small community.

While Mayfield looked across his fictional town of Greensboro to show the lateral variety that challenged unity, Yglesias explores the vertical lineage of generations and places the Civil Rights Movement within a long narrative of radicalism. He takes a generational approach to activist history and is invested in the continuous evolution of social change. Yet at the same time, he subjects activist history to the imperfections of memory and gaps in the historical record. This chapter focuses on Jose Yglesias’ fiction, specifically his 1971 novel The Truth About Them, a heavily autobiographical account of the relationship between the Cuban working-class revolution, the African American struggle for freedom in the U.S., and the radical Leftist culture of the author’s and narrator’s hometown. Tracing the history of a matriarchal family from 19th century Cuba, the novel follows their lineage through turn of the century Key West, depression-era New York City, and 1960s Ybor City. This history is revealed through the unfolding memories of the narrator Pini as he reflects on his childhood and contemplates the elusive collective memory stored within his family’s secrets.

The novel focuses on the tension between the narrator Pini and his son, Ralph, and envisions Sixties-era political movements as a place of tension between generations struggling to fit past approaches to activism into their present conditions. Ralph refers to Ybor as a “colony in the mother country” and a “pacified village in Vietnam” (Yglesias, Truth 185) and berates Pini’s self-serving gesture—being a journalist and author—that takes no direct action against U.S. global imperialism. Ralph voices the late-Sixties shift in Leftist ideology towards action-based activism, but does not see this shift as a clear schism, but rather as a messy dialogue that balances degrees of respect, misunderstanding, dependency, and disagreement with the previous
generation. Yglesias uses the father-son relationship as a microcosm of the generational misunderstandings that disrupts solidarity. Through David Scott’s theory of “generational time” (166), I look at how Yglesias balances the differences in perspectives among generations in an effort to portray the complicated landscape of Ybor and the Civil Rights movement. Scott’s essay “The Temporality of Generations” uses his extended conversation between generations of postcolonial scholars to show how political ideology is warped and destabilized by their perspectives, meaning that each generation looks at previous or future generations as incomprehensible and even alien. He argues that the lived experiences and perspectives that constitute separate generations actually overlap each other chronologically. Despite their contiguous temporality, Scott argues that differing generations perceive themselves as having separate ideological approaches based on their historically-specific relationship to the social structures of a community or movement. This temporality replaces traditional chronology as a way to understand the nuances of revolution and nationalism, and as a way to navigate the lived experiences that complicate reductive perceptions and historical narratives of liberation.

Yglesias’s narrative—which is of the Caribbean even though all of these ideological struggles take place on U.S. soil—looks backward as Pini considers the two previous generations of his family, but also looks forward at his son’s view of Leftist politics and shows how time functions to alter perspective over generations. In *Truth*, Pini’s subject position as a Southerner writing in the late Sixties shapes his memory and his perspective; his Civil-Rights standpoint differs from his grandparent’s Cuban nationalism, his parents’ working class struggles, and his

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19 In itself, generational conflict is a subgenre within the literature of the Civil Rights Movement including Philip Roth’s *American Pastoral*, Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, E.L. Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel*, and Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*, to be discussed in the next chapter. The friction within the family parallels that of larger national and international conflicts by exposing how members fail to relate to one another. Recently this has also emerged as a theme in the writings of contemporary Cuban-American authors such as Christina García and Ana Menéndez that seek to understand how the Cuban Revolution affected families split across the hemisphere.
son’s action against the war in Vietnam. Over the course of the novel, shifting political regimes and migration to different locations throughout the hemisphere disrupt generational continuity, creating separate spheres that seem impossible to reconcile. In this chapter, I place “generational time” within the framework of a migration novel to show ways in which memory must not only traverse temporally, but also hemispherically. The migrant trajectory from Ybor City via Key West via Cuba shows the way in which each generation creates a new place from which another exiles themselves, and thus I read generational time as inherently migratory where each generation generates an ideological and geographic space from which the next generation moves away.

In Truth, and in many other examples offered within this dissertation, the Civil Rights Movement connects with moments before and after the 1954-1968 framework, and in different locations beyond the U.S. South. Issues bleed into one another, with the potential to raise hypocrisies, such as the communist party’s lack of effective involvement in the black freedom struggle. However, at the intersections of these differences also exists the possibility for affinity among different groups. What Yglesias’s novel reveals in its perspective of Sixties activism is how activists and everyday people working within the movement adjust their own histories and versions of radicalism to define their political and ethnic identities. In Truth, events such as Cuban Independence, the Spanish Civil War, the 1959 revolution in Cuba, Jim Crow racism, and the late Sixties student protests collapse together in the narrative as a means to understand the fluid concept of “Leftist” politics, and how these could build towards a human rights initiative.

Through Yglesias’ novel, I argue that within the generational and hemispheric saga pivoting around Ybor City, he uses memory as poetic device with which to understand changes within New Left radicalism. As one of the Sixties most prominent journalists, Yglesias was in
the unique position to examine the intersections between historical truth and collective memory. He uses the novel to create a personalized journalism driven by the voices in the community, and thus, it not only chronicles the history of a family, but also the unrecognized history of transnational political movements in the U.S. South from the Cuban War of Independence in the 19th century, to the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, to the Cuban Revolution of the late 1950s, and finally the Vietnam War. As a journalist, Yglesias bent the boundaries of objectivity by chronicling events and locations through his own familial ties and political sympathies. He expresses this tension between personal and objective writing in a scene in *Truth*, when Pini, a thinly veiled version of Yglesias, recounts his personal bias while working as a journalist in Cuba: “Our only worry was how to achieve, in the articles we were yet to write, the dispassionate tone that our editors expected from us” (21). Thus Yglesias even though he was a Cuban-American journalist, reflects a overarching theme within this project: the tension between the objectivity needed to authenticate the truth about the Movement, while also recognizing how central personal narrative is telling that story. This chapter addresses how Yglesias uses the novel to question the ability for the written record to communicate historical truth within the Civil Rights Movement and other socio-political movements. Then I look at how his fiction uses memory to challenge the vision of political unity between generations of Cuban-Americans while also opening new spaces for unexpected connections between different ideological and ethnic groups. I conclude by showing how generational memory and Yglesias’ approach to coalition builds towards a hemispheric radicalism that connects the Civil Rights Movement to the Cuban revolution.

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20 His oeuvre extended beyond Ybor City and also chronicled Castro’s Cuban Revolution (*In the Fist of the Revolution*), the War for Independence and the Cuban Revolution as it manifested in the United States (*A Wake in Ybor City, The Truth about Them, Guns in the Closet*), the Spanish Civil War (*The Franco Years, The Goodbye Land*), and other revolutionary figures in Latin America from Peru to Chile (*Down There*), and revolutionary activity during the U.S. Civil Rights Movement.
II. Jose Yglesias: “Novelist of Revolution”

Jose Yglesias is not very well known despite his prolific and impactful writing over the span of his lifetime. He was born in 1919 in Ybor City, the location that Yglesias would chronicle as the “The Radical Latino Island in the South” ("The Radical Latino Island" 71). As Yglesias claimed about his own identity, “A typical Ybor City Tampan of my generation has, like me, a mother of Cuban parentage and a father from Galicia, uncles from Asturias and Cuba, and at least one cousin or sister or brother married to a Sicilian” (qtd. in Ingalls 11); thus he envisions himself as a synecdoche of Ybor City’s multi-ethnic and politically radical community. His life acts as a pillar for his oeuvre that includes his Ybor City novels as well as his memoirs and other non-fictional accounts of Spain, Cuba, and Latin America. Yglesias’s fictional writings about life in Ybor City presage a separate but connected conversation on memory and memory loss inherent in more contemporary models of Cuban-American narratives that deal with exile and relationships to Cuba over generations through what have been termed, “second-hand memories” (Hospital 66). However, despite the similarities in form and content, Yglesias was writing two decades before the Cuban-American boom, and came from a completely different political realm—one that supported Castro’s revolution, rather than escaping and rejecting it.

Ybor City was founded in mid-nineteenth century, when Cuban cigar factory owners moved their factories and their workers to the Florida Keys in order to avoid import taxes on cigars. One of the owners, Vincent Ybor, moved his business further north to the largely

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21 The phrase is from Carolina Hospital’s poem “Geography Jazz,” but the theme of lost or mediated collective memory runs deep in Cuban-American poetry and narratives from writers such as Christina García, Ana Menéndez, and Dionisio D. Martínez. Hospital’s iconic line “I write because I cannot remember at all” in her poem “Dear Tia” captures the sentiment that memory and memory loss is an inherent part of Cuban American literature. In an interview with Eduardo del Río for One Island, Many Voices, she argues that this is unique from other ethnic or immigrant narratives because of the “exile experience” (51).
undeveloped swamp of Tampa in order to further isolate his workers from what Yglesias poetically described as the “seeds of revolution” (*Truth* 38) that spread from Cuba to the Keys. These revolutionary sentiments were spread among a network of orality through the hemisphere and included worker’s rights, Cuban nationalism (independence from Spain), and the radical ideas communicated to the workers by the *lectores* (factory readers). Thus, radical politics were not left behind in Cuba or the Keys as workers joined together with other workers from Spain and Italian anarchists from New Orleans, all with their own ideologies grounded in revolution and workers’ rights. Even though the cigar industry largely collapsed in the 1930s due to mechanization, the community maintained its enclave status through social clubs, political activism, and finally in the twenty-first century, through tourism. While Ybor City stood as a pocket of both multiculturalism and radical politics in the U.S. South, it also serves as a well-recorded example of the hemispheric networks within the Caribbean and Latin America that expose the permeable nature of the U.S. border.

Even though *Truth* is set in the narrative present of late Sixties Ybor City, much of the novel is not beholden to a linear chronology and moves through time and geographical location. A common style emerges in Ygelsias’ use of historical fact and local community life: he makes connections between past and present moments by overlapping and intersecting multiple social

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22 The *lectores* were men elected and hired by the workers to read aloud in the factory while the workers rolled cigars and they formed the backbone of the community’s continued access to radical ideas. Their reading included news and writings from the Spanish Golden Age of literature, Emile Zola, and editorials from radical newspapers; the ideology and culture provided by *lectores* was enough to get them ban from factories by the *patrones* (factory owners) after the 1931 strike. The lector appears in many of Yglesias’ writing as well as from authors like James Weldon Johnson, Christina Garcia, Nilo Cruz and others. In the Pulitzer prize winning drama *Anna in the Tropics*, by Nilo Cruz, the factory workers contribute money from their wages to pay for the passage of a lector to move to Tampa from Cuba, connecting the tradition of migration with the global tradition of literacy in which the community engages. In the play, the lector reads *Anna Karenina*, catalyzing actions in the play and intertwining with its narrative. In the factory where Pini’s brother-in-law Abel works, Emile Zola’s *Germinal* was being read aloud to the workers. The *lectores*, especially after the strikes, inspired the community to feel empowered through literacy and defies the definition of literacy since many of the literate Yborians could not read or write. Yet, they were literate through oral culture and defended their access to education, that also led to further their fight for worker’s rights.
issues that are conventionally seen as separate. In Ybor City, Cuban political sentiment hybridizes with Italian anarchism, Jewish socialism, as well as the African-American and U.S. Southern experience. The image “seeds of revolution” describes a hemispheric network that belongs to Cuba by way of lineage, yet grows with the individuality of its locales and cross-pollinates with its surrounding environment. As discussed in the previous chapters, this confluence of ideas and identities does not merge into a legible whole, but rather manifests as points of conflicts in the cultural landscape of Ybor.

III. New Journalism and the Radical Novel

Yglesias was part of the “New Journalism” movement that peaked in the sixties and intersected reporting with personal and subjective experiences of events to create what Marianne DeKoven describes as “a highly complex, multiple, self-reflexive, self-conscious literary construct” (91). Yglesias’s journalistic travelogue, In the Fist of the Revolution, offered readers an intimate account of Cuba in the immediate aftermath of Castro’s revolution. Throughout his reporting Yglesias is reflective about his own identity as a Leftist, socialist Cuban-American and honest about his bias towards the revolution. It is a little-known exemplary work of New Journalism that reads like Tom Wolfe’s Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test or Joan Didion’s Slouching Towards Bethlehem, observing the spirit of revolution as it changes Cuban culture. The Truth About Them is marketed as fiction, and yet employs the same techniques as In the Fist in its use of autobiography and its personal account of the history of Ybor City. Truth interjects speeches from Jose Marti, oral histories from elder members of the community, and an accurate cartography as Yglesias overlaps his literary identities.
His personal approach to journalism enabled him to make the rarely noted connections between the Civil Rights Movement and the longer and wider arc of Leftist struggles—which he does in arguably his most important and oft-quoted article—his extensive *New York Times* Magazine profile of Martin Luther King Jr. and the Poor People’s Campaign published on March 31st, 1968, just days before King’s assassination and between his publication of *In the Fist* and *Truth*. While this helped shape Yglesias’ understanding of intersectionality, it also presaged an approach to the radical side of King’s politics that would only resonate decades later.23 In his analysis of the campaign that planned to march on Washington, Yglesias connected the intersectional class struggle and anti-Vietnam war rhetoric to more radical movements such as the Black Power Movement and stressed King’s more radical politics. After witnessing first hand the benefits of intersectional solidarity within the Cuban Revolution, Yglesias read the Poor People’s Campaign as multidirectional, inclusive, and universal:

Now the nature and the content of the demonstrations has changed: they are not speaking for blacks alone but for all poor people…they are out to get an Economic Bill of Rights. The tactics are nonviolent and the tone of the language in S.C.L.C. literature is moral, but the substance of the demands is revolutionary for America: class demands dramatically expressed through other than the democratic process. ("Dr. King's March" 57)

Despite King and Andy Young’s insistence on the moral, religious angle to helping the poor, King did admit that his campaign “calls for a redistribution of economic power” and would potentially “break perfectly reasonable and just laws to call attention to the situation” (qtd. in “Dr. King’s March” 57). Controversially, Yglesias compared King’s platform to the workers’ rights struggles of the 1930s that were largely backed by communists. During their discussion of

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the efforts to include Appalachian poor whites, Puerto Ricans, Mexican-Americans, and American Indians, Yglesias asks King if he has moved away from civil rights, to which King eloquently responds, “I’m in human rights” (57). Yglesias’ agenda emerges from his questioning as he connects the domestic struggle for civil rights into a global sphere of reform against poverty. Although the Poor People’s Campaign was unavoidably aligned with working class struggles and socialism, King’s language is grounded in religious rhetoric and focuses on ethics. He avoids strict ideology in favor of community-based pragmatism.

As a journalist, Yglesias’ inquiry extends beyond King’s public image in order to get to the depth of his politics. He balances the specificity of King’s ideology with broad and wide connections that suggest a universal radicalism. By emphasizing King’s method of activism as “class demands external to the democratic process,” Yglesias attempts to dismantle the fundamental definition of civil rights as a struggle for political equality and argues that economic equality is the path towards personhood. Moreover, by moving beyond democracy, Yglesias locates the goals of the Poor People’s Campaign as external to a nation-based paradigm, a maneuver that resonates with his writings of hemispheric Cuban identity and idealism. It also reflects his desire to find a pragmatic universal Marxism beneath the surface of ideological difference and calls for common ground in a populist revolution that could navigate the race-based conflicts in the U.S.

Yglesias connects King’s war on poverty to Depression-era working class populism, yet in his novel he explores the limits of coalitional activism. His perspective—inform ed by his transnational identity—extends beyond the national narrative of King’s Movement. As a multicultural community of radical politics, Ybor City provides a small-scale parallel to the “third world” revolution, and Yglesias shows the generational difference in approaches to
coalition. Pini’s grandfather views oppression as a universal constant by claiming “All bosses are alike” (*Truth* 106), expressing a commitment to the working-class struggle. For his generation, even the common language, Spanish, loses its significance for the workers, who align more with the Italian anarchists with who they share space on the factory floor and intermarry—creating a community that is pan-Latin and radical, rather than solely Hispanic or Cuban. In a conversation about Cuban-worker exploitation with his uncle, Papa Leandro, Pini reflects back through his memory and challenges of either ethnic or political affinity by understanding how oppression changes over time:

His was not the same Them or They that I had always known. My first knowledge of Them was long, and had gone through some changes. At first I thought They were those barbarians outside of Ybor City who had killed Sacco and Vanzetti…But during the Depression They castrated and tarred and feathered a socialist, named Shoemaker, who lived on the other side of Nebraska Avenue…They killed Americans too. They were Capitalists and I now saw Them as fewer but fatter. Yet They were still Americans, not Latins, and here was Papa Leandro telling me that They were also Latins (perhaps Spanish, not Cuban?). (128)

Pini also describes Them as “men wearing sheets and hoods,” an obvious allusion to the Ku Klux Klan who in Tampa called themselves the Citizens’ Council, targeting labor meetings and “Latins” in addition to blacks in the community. As Pini’s understanding of Them both narrows and widens to include bosses in the community who exploit the working class, all are implicated, including fellow anti-Castro Cuban refugees who begin to arrive when Pini is an adult, later in the novel. He struggles to understand the class divides that intersect the ethnic lines of the community, and through his capitalization of Them, the title of the novel shifts from a search for
truth about Pini’s family lineage to an exploration of who constitutes a threat within Ybor City and for progressives as a whole. As Pini fluctuates between the personal history of his family to the larger narrative of minority oppression, he evidences Yglesias’ need to explore King’s “human rights” initiative beyond the scope of objective journalism. Since marginal communities such as the Cuban migrant community in Tampa are largely absent from the historical record, Yglesias uses fictionalized memories to gesture towards alternative relationships that existed at the local level. Through the space of fiction, Yglesias writes a personal—but no less true—account of the role of the Civil Rights Movement in the hemispheric history of radicalism.

As a work of fictional journalism, *Truth* fits neatly within DeKoven’s observation that a New Journalist text “defies classification” by hybridizing journalism with the novel. However, Yglesias’s writing resists DeKoven’s insistence that New Journalism “still believes in truth and authenticity” (91). She states, “The new journalist rejects the authority and claims to objectivity of the profession of journalism not in order to give up on access to truth but in order to acquire it more legitimately and profoundly” (91-2). As a novel, *Truth* rejects objectivity to a certain extent, although Pini still believes in the power of writing to tell the titular truth about them. As the author, Yglesias uses the space of the novel to examine problematic concepts such as authenticity and legitimacy. The author Yglesias and the narrator Pini are both journalists with different relations to access to truth. Pini is denied access to history; both the history of his family, whose secrets have been communicated through a matriarchal orality and the history of Key West, whose geographic markers of the older community has disappeared. Yglesias, as a journalist who is writing fiction, does not cling to authenticity of the tools and methods of his trade, rather he critiques them through the imperfection of memory, orality, and the secrecy inherent within marginal communities.
Pini tries to comprehend the history and significance of Ybor City as both a journalist and a member of the community, and yet his efforts to record the past are interrupted by unreliable diasporic cultural memory of migration and exile. He searches for the true account of what happened within his family and community, but instead finds silences in the archive. The family’s Urtext, his grandfather’s diary, conspicuously omits Pini’s great-grandmother, the matriarch who migrated from Cuba to Key West, because she had ripped out the pages of her life herself. Her erasure from the record enlists her as a "casualty of history," a phrase that echoes Jacques Derrida’s reading of the archive as a place of violence and illuminates Yglesias’ sensitivity to the void of immigrant and female voices from the historical record. She removes herself from the record in an effort to erase a past tied up with personal wealth acquired from plantation slavery. As in many other stories from the U.S. South, the history of slavery emerges in the family ledger and haunts the characters. In a Faulknerian twist, there is an illegitimate branch of the family tree from the Afro-Cubans who were the family’s former slaves. As a woman and an immigrant, there are few paths for Great-Grandmother to have the agency with which to tell her own story and the accurate details of her life. The evidence of agency she leaves behind is in her ability to strike herself from the record altogether. Her historical presence lies in her gesture of absence, the negative space she creates in the text. This absence acts as the origin point for the narrative; as Adrienne Rich states in her poem, “Cartographies of Silence,” “It has a presence/it has a history a form/ Do not confuse it/ with any kind of absence” (Rich). Since Truth is predicated on Grandmother’s omission, the novel embodies the failure to create a complete family or community chronicle—an endeavor that echoes Luis Borges’ universal library—and thus, the truth of Ybor City can only exist in partiality. Moreover, as Pini tries to fill
in the absences, his misreads his Grandmother’s silence as unintentional, a mistake that his son Ralph also makes as they try to recuperate a past that does not necessarily want to be recorded.

Pini begins to understand the damage that historical recuperation can have, and registers this in relation to his desire to preserve the past, “I dragged Ralph to Tampa, taking him out of summer camps early, because I wanted that background of mine for him too…My background—it was the agony of others” (Truth 170). Pini faces the paradox of representation—he desires to enter his grandmother into the written record for a more complete truth, but in doing so he is committing a violent act against her decision to remain silent. As he struggles to uncover what has been lost through the process of migration, and thus, he cannot depend on written history for an accurate understanding of the past. Pini’s grasp of the past is subject to a culture of orality that existed on porches in Ybor City where the “girls regrouped and reinvented the recent past to fit the mood of sad, sweet nostalgia proper to a Florida evening” (167). As a male member of the family and as a U.S. citizen removed from Cuba, he is an outsider to the community within which he identifies; as a journalist, he is frustrated with the lack of access to information that prevents an accurate account of his “anomalous Southern community” (60). His efforts to record facts of political history are thwarted by nostalgia and the imperfections and emotions of memory: “It has taken me almost a lifetime to gather these few truths about them...They do not seem much after such a long a search” (2). Additionally, from Ralph’s perspective, Pini’s work is insufficient to bring about revolutionary change. Ralph copies his great-grandmother’s gesture, and removes himself from the record when he joins the Weather Underground, making himself a less visible and potentially a more effective activist.

Yglesias is dependent on previous generations for knowledge of the present, yet because of the nature of migration, personal and objective history becomes a “series of unanswered
questions,” what Yglesias as a journalist articulates through the gesture of titling his novel *The Truth about Them*. As David Scott observes, the act of critical writing is "a practice of situated remembering (or remembering and forgetting), an internal mode of worldly engagement in which a moral-intellectual tradition speaks and listens to itself in order to recall and quarrel with itself across the existential time of its successive and overlapping generations" (177). This echoes Pini’s realization in *Truth*: “That afternoon I unexpectedly grasped the knowledge that there was a past that does not yield to the questions I could pose” (41) as analogous to what Scott concludes as his own self-challenge to “hear something about a past that somehow belongs to me” (160). Yglesias, like Scott, argues for a different approach to previous generations, one that does not seek direct answers. Yglesias understands that “truth and authenticity” can only be approached through a recognition of the marginal voices obliterated from the written historical record. He implicates the objective realms of journalism, history, and I would argue narrative fiction,24 in being able to tell a complete and whole story.

IV. The Poetics of Collective Memory

In his writing, Yglesias perceives the connections between the two southern revolutions that he exists between—the working-class struggle and the Civil Rights movement—and yet he also observes the absence of dialogue between them. Yglesias uses memory, and the narrative process of *writing memory*, as a device to suture these gaps between movements and generations.

24 Claiming there is an “objective realm” to narrative fiction is a point too convoluted and complicated for this chapter, however, because Yglesias walks the line between the genres of journalism and fiction—and moreover because his novel is centered on characters such as the Grandmother who prefer to be stricken from the historical record and a silence in the archive—I do make the argument here that he is concerned with the limitations of narrative fiction and he uses his autobiographical protagonist Pini to describe the futility of telling stories that do not want to be told.
He balances between the pride of being the literary preservationist of Ybor City and the realization that his work is incomplete because his memory conflicts with the image that he desires to see: an alternative space in which to imagine harmonious, coalitional activism. The fragmented, alinear prose of *Truth* replicates the difficult process of trying to make whole a political and ethnic identity from flashes of memory and an oral historical record. Within the form of the novel, the logical order of time and historical progress has been thwarted by the geographic and political gap between Ybor City and Cuba. The novel creates new and unthinkable affinities between conflicts while avoiding hierarchical comparison. Pini’s difficulty in navigating the pronouns of oppression—the They and Them—shows the process by which it shifts in difference across generations yet maintains a common sentiment of oppression that is difficult to name and even harder to define. His personal remembrance challenges collective memory in a working class community that claims, “All bosses are alike.” Thus, remembering the past becomes an essential tool by which to communicate the history of this community, even though the subjectivity of family memory would render it an imperfect tool of journalistic reporting.

Memory acts as a poetic device with the power to raise political consciousness. Yglesias writes memory as an image of a significant, defining scene described like a work of art in the novel that I call *memorial ekphrasis*. Traditionally, ekphrasis means describing a work of art using language, and transferring the visual experience to text. Yglesias replaces the work of art with the tableau vivant of Pini’s memory, where his heavy description of the moment distances the reader from access to the actual event but rather emphasizes the emotional response produced, just as the reader cannot see the work of art described in ekphrasis and only has access to the author’s reception. By writing memory using ekphrasis, Yglesias suggests that memory is
as artistically fabricated as a portrait or a narrative, and yet carries a strong political significance for the characters. In a scene where the characters celebrate the “great secular funerals” and almost the entire community gathers, Yglesias connects the process of remembering—both Pini’s individual memory of the moment and the collective community memory of the person who has died—to the process of identification. The person conducting the funeral, El Maestro, is the most respected man among the cigarworkers, the lector (reader) from the factory whose job is to read news and fiction—many times radical subversive literature such as Emile Zola—to the workers as they roll cigars. He is both “the teacher” and a secular spiritual guide to the community, as well as an everyday worker who “played dominoes at the Cuban Club” (Truth 137). El Maestro replaces the role of priest as he directs the community in their mourning:

The words that followed one another were like a song, and how El Maestro connected one to another was a mystery and a wonder to me. I cannot remember them and I will not invent them...the power of the Spanish language that moved me, those swells and pauses that El Maestro conducted, an eloquence so unlike the prosaic commands of Aunt Titi and my mother; the gossip of the women on the front porch at night, the teasing, hectoring exchanges of the men over coffee, that it resolved our separate beings in the unity of art. (137-138 my emphasis)

In this memorial ekphrasis, Yglesias writes a scene that disregards the lingual to create an artistic image not unlike the description of a painting. The emotional experience of the visual and oral replace the literal words, the “swells and pauses” take precedence. In this gesture he supersedes text with image; it is not the words that matter, but the process of participation in the moment and its memory. El Maestro uses his speech to connect the different aspects of the community through the experience of orality and the funeral provides a ritual where the community can
collect together and momentarily suspend their differences.\textsuperscript{25} In both his Ybor City novels, the funerals honor unimportant characters that barely appear in the narrative; in \textit{A Wake in Ybor City}, it is a young child and in \textit{Truth}, Papa Leandro's mother. What matters is not the actual person who dies—at a jarring moment one of the non-Yborian, non-Latin members of the family notices this—it is the process of ritual community participation. The characters dust off their black lace veils and begin to conjure memories of other deaths in the community in a moment of solidarity under the oration of the reader from the factory, blurring the lines between the workplace and the home. Pini resolves that the disappearance of the “great secular funerals” (138) away from the home initiates the community’s breakdown, suggesting that rituals around death and oration serve a political function in the community—of pulling together differing factions and generations together. The scene evidences how protest can take many forms, such as theater and writing, and in this case, a funeral. The moment is pivotal for the young Pini in his identification with Ybor City, yet he refuses to record history or create a story by claiming that he will “not invent” the words being spoken. Thus he rejects the role of fiction writer whose role it is to invent those words and the role of the journalist, who should accurately report the circumstances.

Additionally, the ekphrastic approach to memory slows down and describes the process of creating a multidirectional collective memory, where characters reflect on their own personal experience with loss while also participating in collective mourning. Michael Rothberg describes memory as “a shared medium within which alone individuals can remember or articulate themselves” (15). \textit{Truth} redefines collectivity as a way to exist together while maintaining the individual codes of identity unique to each person’s experience, to be “separate beings in the unity of art.” This lays the poetic groundwork for its parallel in political activism. The “power of

\textsuperscript{25} For more on the importance of funeral and ritual see Roach, Chapter 1.
the Spanish language” suggests that that language exists independently from words, an important gesture in multiethnic coalition where a common sentiment must be communicated even if the definition of the words cannot be understood. When Yglesias claims that separate beings can be unified he shows that beyond the self-identification rampant among activists, togetherness is possible in the act of emotional participation and the act of listening.

This memory and the concept of “separate beings in the unity of art” provides the model Yglesias implements in his fiction—even if it is a fiction heavily based in historical fact—in order to create a new imaginary for political relations. Yglesias notes how within nationalistic expressions of cubanidad and the resilient, but separate, African-American community, there is a distinct but connected battle being fought, but he also explores the hypocrisy of racism in a community that defines itself on workers’ rights. Pini, from his narrative present within the Civil Rights Movement, interrogates his admiration of the older generations by criticizing race relations between the community of idealist working-class progressives and the reality of daily interactions between U.S. and Cuban blacks. Memory allows Yglesias to portray an image that contradicts the preferred narrative of racial harmony in Ybor, without disregarding the importance of their efforts towards building an activist community.

V. The Politics of Collective Memory

Through these overlapping images of interrelated past occurrences, Yglesias uses memory as a poetic device to make a political commentary. The process of remembering can at once be confusing and illuminating and Yglesias focuses on memory to interrogate what history and language fail to achieve in the crafting an accurate historical narrative. In one of the most complex scenes of the novel’s representations of memory, Pini recalls a moment when as a
young man during the Depression, he must drive his uncle, Papa Leandro, across Tampa. In the truck, Leandro warns Pini to be aware of his Spanish employers at the grocery store, because they will take advantage of him since he is Cuban. Pini detours through the black neighborhood, so that Leandro can avoid the potential for someone at the Works Progress Administration seeing him skip out on work. As Pini listens to unsolicited advice from his uncle, he begins to make connections between labor and racial oppression:

We were quiet—perhaps I should say I was—because they were reminder of our status. I had known for a long time that the Americans could, when we irked them, tighten their loose sweet drawl to spit out the words, “Cuban niggers.” These nigger streets, then, without a blade of grass, whose houses, older without paint where all the men were unemployed, seemed an abyss on whose edge we Latins geographically and spiritually teetered, and I was afraid to look to left or right and encounter those magnet eyes—enormous, staring involuntarily, expressing everything that their owners had suppressed from their speech and gestures when the white man passed—threatening, it seemed, to make me swerve.

“Never wear yourself out for them,” Papa Leandro said. “They pay you because they need you, they do not own you, remember that.” (127)

Leandro’s advice to Pini on his Spanish employers conflates with the uncle’s own resistance against the WPA and frames a scene of discovery for Pini who sees the economic exploitation of the black community. The indistinct pronouns suggest that the roles are interchangeable and “they” and “them” can mean multiple different forms of oppression. The expression in the “magnet eyes” of the African-Americans at the side of the road at once separates and connects the Cubans from the black community. The Cubans uneasily adopt the privilege of being
“white,” yet Pini claims that the eyes of the black community members express to him what they will not in front of the “white man.” The proximity to the black community is both geographic and spiritual, meaning that there is a deeper connection to be explored despite the difference in ethnicity. Papa Leandro at that moment encourages Pini towards a covert solidarity against his employer, further aligning them as Cuban working class with other oppressed groups. The fact that his employer is the U.S. government and Pini’s is a Spaniard does not have any relevance within the employer/employee relationship.

However, Papa Leandro does not make the extra step of solidarity towards the black community surrounding him. Like other scenes in the novel, this moment is a microcosm that shows the complicated relationship between the African American community and the mixed black and white Cuban community. The scene draws together the experience between Cuban immigrants and black Americans but does not err in an impossible comparison; the scene argues for an elusive affinity through Pini’s memory. Michael Rothberg’s theory of multidirectional memory claims that memory does not have to be competitive, but can be a creative force for coalition and affinity among different groups. Critical conversations about public memory have mainly been focused on the Holocaust, where the tensions of memory emerge as the debate between the individual or collective and the effects of public memorial. A controversial criticism within this debate is that the Holocaust—being a dominant cultural memory—creates a “screen memory” (Rothberg 12) that suppresses other historical traumas and raises questions about the reductive and exclusionary dangers of collective memory. In the course of comparative, or coalitional activism, screen memories emerge that obfuscate other struggles marginalized in social movements. Rothberg confronts comparisons between the Holocaust and colonialism and claims, “Comparison, like memory, should be thought of as productive—as producing new
objects and new lines of sight” (18-19) and moreover, it demands “openness to the possibility of strange political bedfellows” (18). Rather than criticize the disruptions of the past generation’s lack of understanding, Yglesias creates multidirectional scenes as an opportunity for memory to gain access to different expressions of resistance. While the diversity of perspectives between the generations remains intact, the emotion of Papa Leandro’s rejection of exploitative bosses spirals out towards Pini’s own sentiments on the exploitation of the black community.

Pini perceives this moment differently from others in his community because of his understanding of U.S. race relations and his contemporary perspective of the black freedom struggle. He signifies the difference one can have in perspective on a movement as a whole. This multilayered perspective of a moment is articulated by David Scott as a generational paradox that exposes the “contrasting sometimes conflicting ways prevailing intellectual, social and political circumstances are experienced by individuals who, while living at the same time and in the same milieu, are at different points in their biosocial lives” (163). Scott shows how the discourse of nostalgia is subject to generational time and personalizes intellectual history, drawing the political into the personal through intellectual genealogy. Yglesias, as an American and Southerner during the Civil Rights Movement, sees the hypocrisy inherent in the oppression of African Americans and Afro-Cubans within a community so concerned with equality and workers’ rights. This divide among the priorities of activism connects with the different methodological approaches to politics he observes in the novel. The Depression-era generation employs the strike, Pini advocates visibility through journalism, and his son Ralph desires direct aggressive action. Even though they are all fighting against “Them,” the differences threaten to fracture any sense of unity both in the familial and political lineage. The novel critiques a working-class approach that does not embrace the issues of the Civil Rights Movement while
avoiding a complete rejection of the important groundwork that past activists have contributed to.

Yglesias uses local acts of racism to critique Ybor City’s progressivism. In the midst of Jim Crow segregation, Ybor City stood as a space for racial flexibility as a mixed community living largely outside the jurisdiction of Southern racism. Cubans from different racial backgrounds intermarried and integrated certain social spaces.26 Historian Nancy Hewitt in her book on women’s activism in Tampa states, “Cubans challenged southern biracialism by allowing mixed-race individuals to identify as either black or white” (91), an image that Yglesias’s novels on Ybor City challenge with their small, paternalistic prejudices against the mixed members of the family.27 Cuban nationalist and hero, Jose Martí, visibly crossed the color line when touring Tampa by staying at the home of Paulina Pedroso, a black Cuban woman living in Ybor City. Martí’s continuous indictment of racism as a U.S. imperialist social structure had a serious impact on a Cuban nationalist identity that should embrace racial equality where resistance against segregation in the U.S. South became a point of Cuban pride.28 The fictional Ybor City reflects the exceptional mobility of Afro-Cubans; for example, an interracial marriage occurs in the community because “the Americans never looked too closely into what went on in

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26 In Ybor, Black Cubans formed the Sociedad de La Union Marti-Maceo and according to historian Frank Trebin Lastra, “They accommodated easily, yet they also proved to have great mobility” (75). However, Truth contradicts the historical record when the narrator breaks down the “social distinctions” between the largely Spanish Centro Asturiano and Centro Espanol, and the Cuban Club, where “they were less strict about blacks” (58-9).

27 Another historian Susan Greenbaum notes, "Cigarmakers' wages were based on skill, not color, and the workplace was integrated" (9) and thus, there was more mobility afforded to blacks in Ybor than in the Jim Crow U.S. The narrator of James Weldon Johnson’s Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man takes advantage of this in Jacksonville and rises to the socially significant position of lector, or reader, for the factories.

28 This was a major platform for the U.S. through Fair Play for Cuba and Castro’s government, both of which supported and funded African-American political figures and artists to visit the island. In the late Sixties people could tune into Radio Free Dixie, broadcast from Havana, Cuba and hear African American activist Mabel Williams claim that “integration is an established fact” in Cuba. Both her and her husband Robert F. Williams cited Jose Martí’s commitment to integration and the famous Afro-Cuban general, Antonio Maceo, who was, and still is, a national hero for Cuba, in order to criticize U.S. racism. The island became the scene of an imaginary that offered promises for a potential future for Leftists and blacks on mainland U.S.
West Tampa or Ybor City" (*Truth* 172). Yet, the novel complicates this suggested freedom by also including the times when characters are racialized and thus excised from full participation in certain social clubs or even in the family.

In a historical framework, Cuban racism in Ybor City was “usually practiced with an air of polite embarrassment” (9). The reality represented in the daily life of an immigrant family in *Truth* is filled with “social distinctions” such as the segregated social clubs and even deeper histories of slavery and “illegitimate” black family members in the hidden annals of Pini’s family history. Rather than demarcating social progression, Cuban racism separates the community and causes tension within the many families, including Pini’s, that have Afro-Cuban family members. The novel interrupts a vision of Ybor City’s cross-racial solidarity showing how the characters cannot see beyond race. When Uncle Candido accidentally hits an intoxicated black man with his car and cries out for an ambulance, another Cuban-American “shook his head and pointed a finger to his own hand and made a rubbing motion to let Candido know, without embarrassing anyone standing around, that the drunk was a Negro” (71) and, thus is unable to go to the local hospital. The scene exemplifies what Yglesias describes in the novel as an “air of politeness” that appears whenever the characters are confronted with the color line. Even though Candido “moaned through a troubled sleep” he quickly feels absolved of the issue. When his wife fears the legal trouble they will face, Candido replies that “the poor devil was only a…” and pauses in shame but quickly recovers to claim, “I am just being realistic about the Americans and what they will do” (72). American culture justifies their compliance with racial oppression, despite the fact that they otherwise criticize oppression within the U.S. as barbaric and do not hesitate to criticize the justice system when hero-anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti fall victim to the corruption of U.S. legal bias.
The older Yborians do not want to identify with the U.S. rejection of Leftist ideals, but at their convenience adopt the racist reality of Florida. Candido’s wife, Angela, in her guilt tries to send money and a basket to the victim’s family, who takes the gift without thanks. Aunt Angela is “stunned into a dry-eyed silence” (72), appalled at the lack of gratitude for her gesture. She cannot see the emptiness in seeking to compensate—with twenty dollars and a bag of groceries—a family that has received no legal justice for manslaughter. Sympathy for the family stops short of a larger understanding that their paternalistic gesture is a part of a larger system of oppression based on skin color. Aunt Angela’s patronization of the black family exposes the deeper cultural roots that can be traced back to their own family’s “illegitimate” black family members and the history of plantation slavery in the family ledgers. While tolerance within the Cuban community towards racism further exposes the ugliness of Jim Crow, the novel also shows how the Cubans in Ybor have not fully eradicated race—as both Martí and then Castro desired—and that their own nationalism is compromised by their willingness to adopt U.S. racial categories at the expense of black personhood.

This problematic Cuban paternalism illuminates how the history of plantation slavery extends beyond the South and throughout the hemisphere. Even though Ybor City exists as a “radical island” outside the U.S. South, the legacy of slavery knows no borders, and continues to racially divide the Cuban community in Ybor City. Jim Crow legally sanctioned racism and Cuban polite paternalism grate against each other and neither one emerges as a better, or more acceptable, method. The complexity of racism defies the positive spirit echoed in the many Leftist writers that believed in Cuba and its impact on the U.S. and even in Yglesias’ journalistic writing that tells an uplifting story of this sequestered culture of radical Latins. Despite the historical effort to view Ybor as a transgressive place for blacks, Truth nuances this vision of
racial equality with its portrayal of segregation, such that the novel becomes a space with which to explore the complexity of race relations in a multicultural community. Yglesias recognized, especially in his profile of King, the importance of binding the Civil Rights Movement struggle with third-world-revolutionary fervor, and yet he criticizes his community for their failure to fully connect the black struggle for freedom to their own working class as a means to show the complexity of community in the search for universal human rights. In the previous chapter, Mayfield’s *The Grand Parade* showed how racism existed in Leftist communities that rejected racial inequality such as the CPUSA, despite a major goal to eradicate both racial and gender oppression in both the CPUSA and during the Cuban revolution. Moreover, the desire to ignore racial and ethnic identity under the auspice of equality fails in communities such as Ybor, because it threatens a way of life for many of its oppressed constituents. Both novels criticize the impetus for fighting for a worldwide economic revolution when everyday local lives are not improving because of the climate of racism in the U.S.

VI. Generational Memory and the Migratory Community of Ybor City

Pini’s perspective tries to balance his admiration of the previous generation with criticism of their failures. Pini’s son Ralph criticizes his father’s approach to activism: to raise the visibility of Ybor City and its activist history through writing. Their relationship parallels the cyclical nature of generational perspectives that must be recognized and reconciled in order to progress forward. While Pini critiques the hypocrisy of the older generation for failing to truly understand their failure to properly address race relations, Ralph does the same to his father, by judging his inability to foreground the global struggle against U.S. imperialism. Like his generational distance from his Cuban identity, Ralph also shifts away from the political ideology
of the previous generation towards something new and different, while still carrying the genetic
lineage of both cubanidad and the Leftist ideas of his family. Ralph represents assimilation
within the narrative of migration; since Pini has moved to New York City, Ralph has grown up
as an emigrant from the Cuban community in Ybor City, evident from his poor Spanish skills
and a cultural distance from his family. As a student at Columbia University at the height of its
late Sixties radicalism, he is a member of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) that
occupied the university and later it is implied that he joins the Weather Underground movement
that committed terrorist acts in protest of the war in Vietnam. Ralph judges his father’s historical
and literary representations of Ybor City, claiming that Pini “sold them out” by writing about the
readers strike and not fighting to keep radicalism alive as an active member of the community,
claiming, “if you don’t work for the revolution then you’re just jiving” (185).

Ralph uses the visit as an opportunity to research his grandparent's generation and the
history of Ybor City and its Depression-era radicalism. He mirrors his father’s own intention,
who is using the trip to chronicle his grandfather’s life in Key West, from before the cigar
workers moved to Ybor. They both search to reconcile within themselves a vision of radical
cubanidad, only to be disappointed in the result. Ralph becomes frustrated when he finds a
family functioning in its daily life, unwilling to expose or open the past. His attempt to interview
his family for a research paper results in driving various members around Tampa on errands in a
very un-revolutionary way. The family shows pride in Ralph’s success as an intellectual, a pride
that simultaneously embarrasses and pleases him and puts distance between himself and their
working-class radicalism. Simultaneously, Pini arrives in Key West to discover a simulacrum of
a Cuban past created for tourists on the island that is “nothing like Grandfather’s town” (211).
Their searches are futile: Ralph cannot see his grandparents’ version of radicalism, which is the
everyday functioning of a family and community, while Pini has walked into a past made innocuous by the tourism industry void of all political history. Both give up when they realize that they cannot force the present into their imagined narratives of the past.

The central issue in Scott's article—how intellectual thought passes through generational time and critical traditions—is interrupted by the immigrant experience where generations view the previous generation as both different, or backwards. Both Pini and Ralph view Ybor as a provincial small community from which to move away both literally and intellectually, and yet they view their elders, such as the Italian anarchist Scolaro, as authentic veterans of wars and strikes that the younger generations can only write about and record. This parallels the paradox inherent within generational temporality that states that the younger generation looks critically at the previous generation, and yet must acknowledge the “inheritance” of a political and intellectual legacy and the debt owed to them for being pathmakers. Differing definitions of authenticity becomes further weighted within the immigrant model, where the older generations have memory and knowledge of Cuba that is unattainable to the Americanized youth, and ethnicity becomes conflated with political identity for generations growing up in the U.S. Yet, they are dependent on the previous generation for access to cubanidad and radicalism.

Even though Pini and Ralph operate through the same intellectual and emotional processes, they view each other as different, neither quite understanding the other. Pini’s effort towards visibility and his struggle to write and record history contributes to a fight against cultural hegemony. And yet, from Ralph’s generational viewpoint, Pini’s activism—that of the intellectual and journalist—fails to make an impact. Pini is affected by Ralph’s criticism and refuses to even look at his own book on Ybor City’s readers’ strike: “Worse, I decided that the very hope that I could pass on some sort of inspirational tradition was literary nonsense, an
attempt to compensate for the miserable facts of life” (186). And yet, this is same book that had informed Ralph on his past and inspired him to seek revolutionary action. What Ralph is unable to see is the extent to which he owes his knowledge to his father, even if he rejects his method of activism. Ralph critiques Pini’s career from above and views his attempts to represent and raise awareness of Ybor City as petty and ineffective. And yet Ralph’s research paper acts in the same method, as an attempt to record the previous generation’s experiences from the assumed loftiness of historical progress—that Ralph’s extremism with SDS is the effective means towards revolution.

Ralph’s impulse to publicly bring to attention his father’s “selling out” of Ybor City, prevents his father from sharing the completeness of his experiences. After an explosive moment where one of the family members berates a recent Cuban refugee in support of Fidel Castro’s revolution, Pini decided to withhold the information from his son:

I must not insist, I must not appeal to his new political sense by telling him about Mama Chucha at the hospital with the Cuban refugee. Not even an amusing anecdote. I realized there would always be this difference between Ralph and me in the way we feel about Ybor City. It was inevitable: He had never lived there as one of them and would never fight through the enveloping oppression of their attention and indifference to love them hopelessly. So why had I left? (211)

After feeling personally insulted by Ralph’s admonition about activism, Pini assumes that because Ralph cannot fully understand Ybor City from his outside perspective, that Pini should withhold information about him. The final question he asks himself reveals Pini’s own status as an outsider and his limitations to fully appreciate or understand his own role within the generational gaps. As much as Pini can see the distance between him and Ralph, his final
question reveals that he may recognize the gap between himself and the Yborian community, as he did through memory and the critiques that surface when he reflects on the paternal racism of his own elders.

Disillusioned, Ralph breaks from his family to go underground. Like his great-great grandmother, from whom the family saga generates, he erases his identity in order to start a new narrative. In a phone call, Ralph’s grandmother confronts him about being expelled from Columbia University during the student strike and provides the incentive for his maneuver:

Listen, Rafa my dear, of course you should have gone out on strike, no one is telling you different. But did you have to make yourself so noticeable? And now, why don’t you apologize to them the way they want you to? Tell them anything they want to hear—they do not have to know your thoughts. That is the way we have always survived. (212-3)

Ralph’s grandmother’s subversive approach to activism is informed by her experience as an immigrant within the U.S. The secrecy that protected the Ybor City migrant workers championing of their rights opposes Pini’s advocacy of visibility by his efforts to write Ybor into history. After his conversation with his grandmother, Ralph understands what Pini cannot: the political importance of removing one’s self from the record. The immigrant community, especially the women, show how the causalities of history were often able to be heroic and make changes specifically because of their anonymity. Truth, in its recognition of the absences and silences in the record, offers a counter-history to King’s fame as a public figure. The knowledge that King was shortly assassinated just days after the article was released reminds us of the consequences of public radicalism. Yglesias, as a journalist and novelist, brings public and private histories together in order to offer a more complete picture of the Movement.
After the conversation between Ralph and his grandmother, Pini appreciates the cyclical process of generational time. Pini recognizes that Ralph’s criticism is a part of his family’s identity, “it suddenly occurred to me—in the most joyous way—that of course the family had got through to him” (212). Ralph adopts the process that his family advocates—to be revolutionary and focus on reform, even at the expense of the previous generation. This expands on Scott’s challenge to listen across generations by reminding us that part of the identity to be gained from the knowledge of the past generations has been silenced. Even though Scott refers to a heavily recorded intellectual tradition and Yglesias focuses on everyday existence, both contribute to social memory and cultural identity, and thus both are implicated by absences. Yglesias's narratives suggest that even if one listens, only a fraction of information gets communicated and that intellectual tradition is incomplete without poetic representation of the alternative channels and subversion needed by those on the ground level who are not of the intellectual elite. His novelistic style of overlapping community memories provides a new understanding of political history that emphasizes the personal conflicts at the center of social movements and that show the generational method by which older perspectives and approaches remain in dialogue with new ones.

The absences, or losses, within the historical record offers potential for creative fluidity in identity. If facing the past was “the agony of others” as Pini claims, silence can also be a space of production for new forms of the self. Thus, generational memory, because of its fluidity, becomes a core component for activist identity in the novel. This opens towards a flexible understanding of identity that can adapt situationally and follows a pan-American paradigm, akin to Jose Martí’s concept of *Nuestra América* that envisions a hemispheric shared identity. In the novel, the U.S. South is a locus of a pan-American geography, bound to the Caribbean through a
shared understanding of racial inequality as well as the extensive network of anti-imperialist activism. His characters encompass a space that includes Cuba, New York, and Tampa and base their hemispheric nationalism on postcolonial nationalism and political solidarity. Rather than locate this culture of proximity based on ethnicity and diaspora, the connection between different leftist and immigrant groups across the hemisphere maintained specific identity-ties based on political identification.

Yglesias enthusiastically presents scenes of cross-ethnic solidarity through images of Cuban-nationalist rallies for Jose Martí’s fundraising network, Depression-era workers’ strikes, and the Latin community’s mutual disdain for the Americans they refer to as “barbarians,” or the white Floridians they call “crackers.” Moments of solidarity with the Italians are presented as mutual respect; when Pini’s grandfather takes him for a political education with “old man Scolaro,” he refers to him as “an anarchist and a bit impractical” but qualifies this by stating, “but, oh, how he knows about the revolution!” (89). Even though Pini is unable to reconcile the generational divide from his son, he does reach across ethnic and political categorical divides toward Scolaro, the older Italian anarchist. What connects him to Scolaro is the geographic/imaginary space of Ybor City, and his son’s existence outside Ybor overrides their political, ethnic, and genetic relationship. As in the above example when Papa Leandro is driving through the black neighborhood, Yglesias notes the proximity of geography and spirituality among the factions in Ybor City. Considering that none of the characters have any adherence to religion, by spiritual Yglesias means the ethereal realm of identity that is unable to be easily defined. Using geography as a locus for identification allows for a spiritual coalition among groups who may otherwise differ in the technicalities of their politics.
Ybor City is thus able to act as a microcosm of multiethnic, global Marxist populism, which appears in Yglesias’s writing as a sensibility or a poetic gesture more than a reality and moves geography into the realm of the imaginary. As hemispheric performance scholar Diana Taylor describes, “America is an act of passion or belief... conjured into existence” ("Remapping" 1421), and indeed, even though Yglesias writes about real people and political issues, he does so with familial emotion. His characters believe wholeheartedly in the global Left, and yet, their daily intimate politics within their community compromise a utopian vision of solidarity. The mantra, “we’re the children of cigarworkers and we have to be on the side of the workers” (Truth 89) echoed by many of the characters is compromised by internal prejudice against Italians, American and Cuban blacks and the volatile shifting understanding of Americanness. Markers of one’s ethnic identity—cubanidad—confl ate with one’s politics and indoctrinate political ideology into the fabric of family, memory, and nostalgia—not to mention the natural assimilation that occurs after many generations away from Cuba. Even if the community in Ybor is tightly knit, it cannot prevent Pini from being mistaken for an American when returning to the Cuban social club, Centro Austuriano, or for Papa Leandro and Mama Chucha and Papa Leandro’s children to forget how to speak Spanish. Papa Leandro laments this loss claiming, “After the first six were born, I used to say to your aunt, Mama Chucha, we are starting a whole new nation…but all we raised was just a bunch of Florida crackers” (157). The idealistic dream of a new nation echoes Martí’s sentimentality of a hemispheric Americas, yet Leandro illustrates what that actually looks like: a generation of loud, assimilated youth.

Yglesias desires to present a complicated view of the community of Ybor City that argues for both cross-cultural solidarity and acknowledges the imperfections and impossibility of unity as characters continuously fail to resist the race-and-ethnicity-based structures that separate
them. The novel approaches identity through two parallel processes: one that forms community based on ethnicity and one based on political ideology. Naturally, these two processes do not form a neat parallel, but rather conflate together or contradict one another. Just as in Mayfield’s novel, Yglesias critiques the process of labeling groups based on ideology or adhering too strictly within one’s identity category. *Truth* continuously complicates preconceived notions of labels—on the surface, the greatest one being that Cuban migrants would be anti-capitalist and pro-Castro, an anomalous position in the Cuban-American literary tradition. In a humorously dramatic moment, his aunt, Mama Chucha, shifts even her national identity towards the U.S. when she confronts a Cuban migrant fleeing Castro, complaining about the loss of her servants. She claims:

’Servants!’ she shrieked. ‘We never had servants. We have one another and our own two hands. That is the way it is in the United States. A pity you did not find out before you came. You have to work hard here and there are no little country girls you can hire for a dollar a week’ [...] ‘Did I tell her I like Fidel?’ Mama Chucha asked. ‘Well I love Fidel and maybe I should go in and tell her, the big whore. I was born in Brooklyn, I am an American and she comes here to tell me about her servants!’” (209-10)

Suddenly, the term American, which was previously synonymous with barbarian, transforms into a working-class ideal and—in Mama Chucha’s vision of the world—loving Fidel Castro is compatible with being an American. As she claims her citizenship using an unlikely set of assertions, Mama Chucha exemplifies the fluidity of identity within which the characters exist. Identity is not a constant for the characters in *Truth*; rather they adopt different versions of *cubanidad* and americanness depending on their situation and in confrontation with others. In the small community of Ybor, many U.S.-born characters never fully adopt a U.S. identity by
remaining loyal to Cuba through language and customs, such as the home funeral. However, within this liminal space of citizenship, identification with Cuban nationalism feels the strain of ideological difference upon the arrival of the recent, wealthier Cuban migrants.

Yglesias’ writing evidences the impossibility of maintaining consistency in political and ethnic identity across not only differing ideological factions, but also through generations within a migrant family. Part of Pini’s remembrance—and Yglesias’ use of fiction—is to bind together these contradictory actions and flexible ideologies that help him to understand both Them and also what constitutes “Us.” The major tension in the Cuban migrant community expressed in his writing as well as other Cuban-American authors and artists describes the tension within an ethnic identity that is politically divided. This tension, in reverse, exemplifies the struggle at the heart of Leftist, third world activism: how to resolve a political identity out of competing, diverse ethnic ones. For Martí, this meant connecting a geographically separate hemispheric network between Cuba and throughout Florida that was based on orality—gathering to listen to his speeches and then donating money to the political cause of Cuban independence.

Like the other activist-artists in this dissertation, turning to art is a political necessity in order to create spaces of unity and affinity without a binding commitment to a particular group or ideology. In the next chapter, this conversation takes place within Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*, where activists across racial, and economic status argue across the boundaries of text. Through a process that creates art from memory, Yglesias enables himself to have the freedom and flexibility for many controversial comparisons between conflicting and hypocritical identities and well as the “strange political bedfellows” that build a base for unlikely coalitions, especially the Civil Rights Movement and the revolutionary ideals of the Cuban/Latin radical community in Ybor City. What Yglesias’s novel offers in its perspective of the Civil Rights
Movement is ways in which activist and everyday people working within the movement adjust their own histories and versions of radicalism to define their political and ethnic identities.
CHAPTER 4: “COMING UNSTUCK FROM THE WEB OF TIME AND PLACE” IN THE BLACKSOUTH OF TONI CADE BAMBARA’S THE SALT EATERS

I. Art and Politics in Bambara’s Blacksouth

Previous chapters explored artists and authors who used art as a platform with which to engage global theories of a third-world Marxist revolution within the daily intimacies of the community. The Free Southern Theater used performance as a means to transpose global themes of liberation to Mississippi; Julian Mayfield criticized the ability of the CPUSA and theoretical Marxism to matter to the black community of Gainesboro, North Carolina; and Jose Yglesias deconstructed political and ethnic ideologies from the Cuban-American migratory experience in Ybor City, Florida. Similarly, author Toni Cade Bambara represents a global, activist figure who traveled to Cuba and Vietnam as part of her work. She was born and raised in Harlem and lived in Queens until 1974, when she upended her life and moved to Atlanta in order to focus on her writing and get in touch with what she thought of as her spiritual Southern roots. Her transition to the South proved influential on both her activism and writing, specifically her 1980 novel The Salt Eaters, a narrative that takes place in the fictional small town of Claybourne, Georgia and reflects on a decade of “post” Civil-Rights-era grassroots activism.

In this chapter, I read The Salt Eaters as a bridge between the Free Southern Theater’s BLKARTSOUTH cultural network and Bambara’s Blacksouth of Atlanta. The novel incorporates elements found in other chapters including overt connections such as a multi-ethnic avant-garde performance group (Chapter 1), critiques of ideology-based community organizing (Chapter 2), and representations of orality (Chapter 3). Moreover, the novel explores the
overarching themes that I have thus far examined, including the relationship between the
individual and the collective and how performance, orality, and other modes of communications
created collective memories external to the national narrative of both the Civil Rights Movement
and its transition to black and ethnic nationalisms in the Seventies.

Much like the other examples of cultural activism with which this project engages,
Bambara’s writing focuses on the grassroots mobilization and alternative narratives of the
Movement that expose a more complex—and multi-ethnic—version of the U.S. South than is
seen in conventional Civil-Rights-Era narrative that focuses primarily on King and non-violent
protest. The novel centers on Velma, a community activist who has mentally collapsed under the
pressure of her role as intermediary between separate political factions and has attempted to
commit suicide. The different factions of the community and generations of activists sit through
her healing session at the Southwest Community Infirmary in the fictional town of Claybourne.
In the previous chapter, we saw how solidarity was reconfigured through ritual gatherings and
through cultural means rather than political rallies. For example, the funeral scene in The Truth
About Them exposes how ritual becomes a political event, and Yglesias’s poetic descriptions of
orality and collectivism transpose to a theory of collective identity, what he refers to as “separate
beings in the unity of art” (Truth 138). Here, the Southwest Infirmary Center locates unity in
health through a ritual that weaves together activism and spirituality. Political activists and
medical professionals come face-to-face with practitioners of alternative medicine and circum-
Caribbean folk spirituality—including spirits that guide the healer, Minnie Ransom, through
Velma’s journey back to health. The novel shifts perspectives and voices with little warning and
creates a labyrinthine web of memory that simultaneously suggests interconnectedness between
the characters while submerging the reader in the chaos of their independent experiences.
Various factions must find common affinity, not only to heal Velma, but also to face the novel’s main concern: the local chemical plant, Transchemical, and the dangers of environmental damage and labor exploitation that target marginalized people and communities. Only in one scene do we encounter a male leader who “looked a bit like King, had a delivery similar to Malcolm’s, dressed like Stokely, had glasses like Rap” (*The Salt Eaters* 35), who emerges from a limousine to give a speech. The rest of the novel is devoted to behind-the-scenes women’s work, meetings, debates, and a flood of memories that guide the structure of the novel.

There is no cohesive agenda or manifesto in *The Salt Eaters*; the chaos of its form parallels the experience of grassroots activism as it spirals through arguments among and between activists of multiple generations. Thus, contrary to the popular notion that the Sixties in some way died, the novel reveals the persistence of grassroots activism through the Seventies, and in new styles and networks that evolved from the old. In her address to the Southern Black Cultural Alliance conference in Atlanta, Toni Cade Bambara states: "If the 60's were the dozens, the 80's will be the thirteens. We are moving again" (Archive 24). Indeed, Bambara understood writing and art as a “perfectly legitimate way to participate in the struggle” (Archive) and thus envisioned herself as a cultural activist. Her editor and literary confidant Toni Morrison noted:

> Any hint that art was over there and politics was over here would break her up into tears of laughter, or elicit a look so withering it made silence the only intelligent response. More often she met the art/politics fake debate with a slight wave-away of the fingers on her beautiful hand, like the dismissal of a mindless, desperate fly who had maybe two little hours of life left. (*Deep Sightings* ix-x)

*The Salt Eaters* pays tribute to the relationship between art and politics and reflects the complexity of that relationship through its structure. The novel swirls through overlapping
dialogue and memories that are unique to the large cast of the text, while simultaneously connected to each other. One of the characters, Obie, reflects on the state of the activist community, which he views as fractured in comparison to the past that seemed more efficient and whole. Past memories of activism inform present conditions: “Everyone seemed to be pulling in the same direction then. But that of course was selective memory, a chump way to excuse the self from the chaos of the moment, longing for a past or for a future as if there were no continuum” (The Salt Eaters 98). The chaos of the moment is thoroughly embedded into the novel’s form as well as the actions of the characters. As the reader moves back and forth between memories and dialogues that inform the present moment, the timeline of linear progress collapses to open a new perspective: that our cultural memory portrays a holistic version of the Civil Rights Movement when it was in fact, never whole.

For Bambara and for many women involved in social movement activism, this was a visceral reality—the Civil Rights Movement, Students for a Democratic Society and other Leftist movements, and Black, Chicana/o, Latina/o, nationalist movements all severely marginalized the women who were essential in pushing those movements forward.29 This is represented in the novel when women across different movements form a “Women for Action” committee in response to years of men in various social movements disregarding the women’s work: “carrying out the work, for getting the press releases, the mailings, for doing the canvassing, for organizing a base among campus forces, street forces, prison forces, workers, gathering the money, arranging for transportation” (39). As Velma is caught in the middle of the “old C.P. women,” “Ida B. Wells club,” “Coalition of the Black Trade Unionists,” and other groups, her mental

health begins to suffer as she is continuously “expected to break her hump pulling off what the men had decided was crucial for the community good” (25). The novel tells fictional stories that gesture towards the many other untold stories of women’s work in the Civil-Rights-era activism still in the shadows of the Movement’s major figureheads, such as King and Malcolm X. Characters in the novel debate between "good ole-fashioned” (242) identity-oriented organizing and the multi-platform alliance activism required to challenge an indefinable force like Transchemical. This flexibility embodies the theoretical approach to identity politics that I refer to as conflictual solidarity, an ideological apparatus that contains dissent within its whole. Even though the activists within the novel work within identity categories and argue over approaches, within the chaotic melee of the text, I argue, they find affinities through dialogue and storytelling.

Bambara’s search for a new methodology emerges in the difficulty of her prose, which is rich with language and rhythm but does not adhere to the constraints of traditional narrative form. The Salt Eaters is especially resistant to linearity, exposition, and conclusion; the reader is dropped into to a soundscape of voices that she must navigate. Bambara herself acknowledges the connection between her inconclusive, avant-garde style and the political atmosphere that informed her writing:

Perhaps we need to face the terrifying and overwhelming possibility that there are no models, that we shall have to start from scratch. Doctrinaire Marxism is basically incompatible with Black nationalism; New left politics is incompatible with Black nationalism; doctrinaire socialism is incompatible with Black revolution; capitalism, lord knows, is out. We need to reject too the opinions of outside 'experts' who love to explain ourselves to ourselves, telling the Black man that the matriarch is his enemy, telling
Black women through the mushrooming of b.c. [birth control] clinics that too many children is the Black family's enemy. *(The Black Woman* 133-4)

Bambara insists on starting an ideological base “from scratch,” not in order to add to the list of political approaches, but rather, in order to create something new that could serve a practical purpose for her community.

By “explaining ourselves to ourselves,” Bambara advocates a model with which to build theory from storytelling. The collection of dialogues and individual accounts serves the pragmatic goal of validating personal experience through literary production. She relates this to birth control clinics referencing the 1965 sociological study written by U.S. Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.” Otherwise known as the Moynihan Report, the study blamed black female dominance and the lack of a nuclear family as the reason for black poverty in the U.S. Although birth control empowered women through choice, at the time of her writing it was also a problematic branch of the sterilization movement that targeted women of color. Bambara positions storytelling as a means to *witness* truths about the sanctioned violence against their bodies, thus, countering the unchecked ideologies—found in the Moynihan Report—that harmed women’s lives.

Bambara’s ideological approach and emphasis on dialogue are influenced by her work with anthologies, which materially embodied conflictual solidarity. Her 1970 anthology *The Black Woman*—from which the above quote derives—is regarded as the first anthology of black feminist writing. The book’s participants debate and dissent the essentialist meaning of the category of the black woman by cataloguing their differences. Since the text literally binds these differing voices together, it acts as a material manifestation of the tension between individual expression and collective identity. Many of the contributions directly attacked the validity of the
Moynihan report through their personal experience and lambasted its consequences. It was a powerful maneuver to use the collection as a means to disprove a government-sanctioned racist myth as well as to validate personal narrative as having a legitimate—although not widely recognized—political function. What was presented as fact in the Moynihan report was indeed fiction, so to counter this, artist-activists used personal experiences as an antidote to social science reports; poetry, fiction, and recorded conversations offer readers a creative ethnography of Black womanhood with more accurate accounts than those appearing in purportedly scientific discourse.

The multi-vocal reaction against the Moynihan report serves as a nexus for Bambara’s development as an editor, because I argue that this greatly influences not only The Salt Eaters and her own writing, but an emerging canon of multi-ethnic and feminist writings. As Farah Jasmine Griffin observes in her essay on the impact of The Black Woman: “[Toni Cade Bambara] sends out the call to which two decades of black women’s creative writing would respond” (117).30 Entries that transcribed recorded rap sessions between women emphasized the natural tones of dialogue. In this manner, the anthology invited textual sounds of colloquial expressions and the natural musicality of conversation into the literary space. Bambara’s proximity to these anthologies and community production of art crossed over into the experimental form of The Salt Eaters, which continued to build on the intersectional vision from the anthology. To this end, her novel balances a myriad of voices—usually in conflict with one

30 By this, Griffin suggests a movement of other writings of ethnic women employing the methodology of blending theory, history, personal narrative, poetry, manifesto. This includes texts such as All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies in 1982 where one of the editors, Barbara Smith, also contributed to Bridge. Audre Lorde in the same year publishes her “biomythography,” Zami: A New Spelling of My Name, a blending of fiction and biography most likely influenced by Maxine Hong Kingston’s 1975 (other contributor to This Bridge) The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts another blending of fiction and non-fiction. Anzaldua went on to publish more anthologies Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color in 1990 and the influential Borderlands/La Frontera in 1989 that further influenced the methodological style of interdisciplinary study.
another—that mirrors the cacophony of community organizing creates a textual embodiment of a conflictual solidarity. As she transfers this technique to her fiction, Bambara incorporates the folk spirituality from her adopted Southern landscape into the Marxist-influenced collectivity of the anthology.

Another part of Bambara’s relocation to the South was the development of a folk-consciousness that would build a bridge between materialism and spiritualism. The self-expressed incentive behind the novel develops from the material/spiritual question that emerged from the anthologies: “I was trying to figure out as a community worker why political folk were so distant from the spiritual community…Why don’t we have a bridge language so that clairvoyants can talk to revolutionaries?” (Deep Sightings 234-5). This question would have personal relevance for Bambara who was raised by traditional Marxist parents who disavowed new age spirituality and the folkways that later informed her activism. In this way Bambara parallels what Gloria Anzaldúa called “spiritual activism,” a Chicana activist sensibility that used a faith-based worldview in the struggle for social change. Bambara was familiar with the Chicana movement, and her contribution to This Bridge Called My Back evidences her proximity to Anzaldúa and spiritual activism. However, in the U.S. South, Bambara developed her own relationship to spiritual folkways as literary aesthetic. By allowing the voices of her characters to guide the novel, Bambara engages in conjure writing—a process by which Bambara envisions herself as medium. Rather than mimetically copying voices, she sees herself writing characters that speak through her. For Bambara, being conjured by her character’s voices enables a writer to “find out what you know that you've been side stepping and overlaying with ‘opinions’” (“Working at It” 30). This approach to authorship bridges the material and the spiritual; it agrees with the Marxist bent of diminishing individualism to let collective, marginal voices speak, and it
does so through spirituality, allowing the authorial voice to be conjured by a community voice. As Marjorie Pryce argues, “In the 1970s and 1980s black women novelists have become metaphorical conjure women, ‘mediums’ like Alice Walker who make it possible for their readers and for each other to recognize their literary ancestors (gardeners, quilt makers, grandmothers, rootworkers, and women who wrote autobiographies) and to name each other as a community of inheritors” (5). Although Bambara fits within Pryce’s description of community, the cultural legacy emerging from the alternative spiritualities associated with conjure extends beyond black women and exists in a network that incorporates multiple genders and ethnicities. Many artists associated with ethnic nationalism have also revived the regional and circum-Atlantic folk traditions including Ishmael Reed, Sonia Sanchez, El Teatro Campesino, and Paule Marshall, to name a few. Bambara’s connection between conjure writing and activism allows her to use multivocalism to express collectivity through the individual voice.

I begin the chapter by exploring how Bambara’s move South influenced her writing style, which, as Gloria Hull notes, provides a “density that swirls the reader through multiple layers of sound and sense” (Pryse and Spillers 221). The musicality of her prose enabled Bambara to use the rhythms of dialogue in order to write beyond words and parallel the improvisation of jazz. The unique sounds of her character’s speech and “overlapping waves of scenic action” (Deep Sightings ix) come together as a composition—in this case a novel. Thus, Bambara combines jazz and blues stylistics as a way to approach the relationship between individuality and collectivity. Then, I examine how this relationship connects to activism—specifically the relationship between identity politics and a universal solidarity—through Bambara’s “third world” feminist ecocriticism, which engages with the global scope of environmental destruction. Finally, I turn to how the novel builds a theory of “spiritual activism” through the intimate
dialogue between women and their memories. Bambara transitions spiritual activism from theory to literary praxis by highlighting argumentative dialogue over ideological approaches. The narrative works intertextually with the anthologies to employ what Moraga called “the faith of activists” (Anzaldúa and Moraga xviii) in order to believe in wholeness built from expressions of conflict and difference. Thus, the universality of The Salt Eaters engages with the human rights perspective expressed within coalitional activism. Similarly to the FST, the novel shares a complex relation to Leftist solidarity by binding together individual perspectives that do not always agree on a collective vision.

II. Blacksouth Radicalism

In the summer of 1974, Bambara gave up her tenured position at Rutgers University in New Jersey and moved to Atlanta as a means to inspire her writing and activism. Her unpublished writings about the South both reveal the influence of place on her development as a writer and also locate the region as a cultural center for the Black Arts Movement, which has only recently received critical attention. Through her friendship with Tom Dent, a prominent and active member of the Free Southern Theater, Bambara plugged into their network that extended across the South, consisting of performance groups, small presses, the editors of Callaloo and Gumbo, and organizations such as the Southern Black Cultural Alliance and the Congo Square Writers. From these and the many other groups she lists, Bambara claims, “Blacksouth will become a major center for the production of useable works and the development of a hard-head critical audience” (“Working At It” 25). When discussing Southern literary history, Bambara takes care to differentiate the use of South as a cultural symbol versus the writing within its cultural-activist network:
Unlike the previous cultural breakouts of the 20’s, 40, 60’s—which recognized as John O. Killens likes to say that ‘We are a Southern People,’ that used the south as content/motif (homeboy in awesome big city/messed over returns south to the regenerative source), that acknowledged as Quincy Troupe is fond of reminding us ‘All real art is derived from the folk base,’ whose literary strivings were angled in the same direction as the arrows of migration … formulat[ed] a big city literature which culminated decades later in the works of [Richard] Wright, [Ann] Petry, [Ralph] Ellison, [James] Baldwin, Paul[e] Marshall, et al—this stage will emerge from and be based in our most fecundating matrix (as they say in the trade)—Blacksouth.” (25)

Bambara intentionally separates the literary tradition that represents the South from her contemporary cultural scene of the Seventies. By quoting the Southern author John O. Killens, who she refers to as the “father of the Neo-Black Arts Movement” (qtd. in Letter from Killens), she sutures together Southern literature with the Black Arts Movement, acknowledging its role in the Black literary tradition, even if its cultural influences had previously been coopted by “big city literature.” Indeed, the “fecundating matrix” to which she refers was established by the Free Southern Theater and the cultural offshoots of grassroots activism that fed into an activist network previously established by Civil Rights Movement groups such as SNCC across the South. The longevity between the FST’s network and Bambara’s matrix defines the radical South of this project, which I previously established as based on a series of community networks rather than a bordered geographic location.

With her move down South, Bambara walks into another tradition established during Freedom Summer—that of the outsider confronting the cultural distance between herself and the native Southerner. As reflected in the Free Southern Theater tour diaries, Northern college-
educated activists experienced a strong disconnect with their rural-sharecropper audience, despite their supposed common link of race. A decade later, Bambara faces a similar issue as she struggles to adapt to her surroundings and become a part of her adopted environment. She uses writing to develop a Southern voice that she experiments with in the short story “The Organizer’s Wife” in the collection *The Sea-Birds Are Still Alive*, which she compiled a year into living in Atlanta. The story was inspired by Bambara’s activist work in the Sea Islands land rights disputes, and she claims that she could not have written the story had she not “moved South and gotten involved, albeit in a modest and miniscule way, with independent farmers in the rural sector trying to hook up with tenants councils in the urban sector” (“Working At It” 27). Bambara argues that her style shifts when she writes Virginia, a character that speaks with silence and from the perspective of “a woman unknown” (*The Sea Birds* 18). Bambara claims that the story’s setting “demanded I mute my ole 6/8 bebop urban voice and let the character Virginia come through with hers” (“Working At It” 26). Unlike her witty talkative urban characters, Bambara “called up” Virginia in a method that confronts voices outside her purview. Indeed, Virginia in “The Organizers Wife” is quiet and mysterious in a way that her previous characters are not; Bambara write hers from a distance, as if she does not fully know her.

Bambara’s struggle with literary representations of regional voices disrupts a sense of solidarity based on black womanhood. Even though Virginia is also black activist, Bambara as an author finds it difficult to access her, and thus “The Organizer’s Wife” raises questions about the utility of black feminism as an identity category or how that discourse would even apply to Virginia. This parallels the issue of representation that Cherrie Moraga raises in *This Bridge Called My Back* (for which Bambara wrote the foreword the year before she published *The Salt Eaters*) and the role of literature for social change, “Cara a cara con el enemigo de que valen mis
palabras? (Face to face with the enemy, what good are my words?).” Moraga continues in an honest assessment of the insider/outsider status of radical women of color: “This is especially true for Third World women writers, who know full well our writings seldom directly reach the people we grew up with. Sometimes knowing this makes you feel like you're dumping your words into a very deep and very dark hole” (Anzaldúa and Moraga i). This anxiety has been reflected in much of the artistic production examined within this dissertation, such as the sharecropper audiences of the Free Southern Theater, Julian Mayfield’s character Rachel in The Grand Parade, and the silences in Yglesias' community of workers. In these texts, the marginalized stand just outside the narratives, resisting true representation and haunting the creator who writes from a position of privilege.

Bambara employs a variety of literary techniques that enable her to “expand the voice repertoire” (“Working at It” 27) and feel comfortable representing people and groups from across the regional and ethnic spectrum. As a woman-of-color activist, Bambara was perceptive to the power dynamic of representation; she criticizes her “linguistic clinkers,” “off-key phrasing,” and “misuse of voice” in The Salt Eaters, and continues to search for the “pitch perfect ear” that could represent cadences of the South in her writing.31 She does this by using language’s rhythm and tones, rather than words, which requires the author to listen for sound over meaning. She claims, “The move South certainly impacts me as a writer and a reader. I have a near pitch-perfect ear now for Julia Fields, Hurston, and a great many blues singers that used to make me mash my head against the speakers or the bandstand to make out the lyrics” (25). Her use of the term “pitch-perfect” positions listening as part of her writing process and established the connection between sound and character as it gives her the ability to represent voices that she

31 She continuously pairs her efforts with developing the Southern voice with the possibility of international writing, which she saw as essential to Black writing: “The Afro-American experience has always been cosmopolitan, in the strict sense of that word. We are everywhere on the globe” (30).
could not quite understand. In order to write Virginia, Bambara had to listen. Thus, like many of the other examples in this dissertation, Bambara incorporates orality into her text. The textual representation of orality connects with the funeral scene in Jose Yglesias’s *The Truth About Them*, which disregards words in place of the emotion they communicate. In the narrator’s memory of the funeral, he claims that the words spoken by the orator “were like a song” and “how El Maestro connected one to another was a mystery and a wonder to me. I cannot remember them and I will not invent them...the power of the Spanish language that moved me, those swells and pauses…” (*The Truth* 137-8). Bambara blends sound, text, and mystery together in *The Salt Eaters* and thus recognizes music as an alternative pathway of communication beyond the English language, which she argues is “better equipped for merchandising enterprises than it is for explorations of being” (“Working at It” 33). Later, her disregard for language as an effective means of communication would turn her away from words altogether as she became a pioneer—along with Julie Dash—in documentary film making.

However, before this, Bambara used jazz writing to incorporate rhythms that would create a soundscape connecting the U.S. South, pan-African cultures, and Caribbean cultures such as Cuba—one she hoped would develop as a “cross-border-talk” as a language of affinity that could overcome geographic and cultural differences (31). Her jazz writing must re-tune itself when she travels South, but her connection between dialogue and music enables her to hear and compose regional differences in her writing. As if to answer John A. Williams’ quote in *The Man Who Cried I Am*, Bambara does with the novel what “Charlie Parker was doing with music--tearing it up and remaking it; basing it on nasty, nasty blues and overlaying it…” (209), a process Gloria Hull articulates as Bambara’s “avoidance of a linear thing in favor of a jazz suite” (Pryse and Spillers 221). Jazz, as a writing process, liberated Bambara from the restrictions of
traditional literary form, and thus *The Salt Eaters*, as a jazz suite, changes time and rhythm, and incorporate a variety of influences. The result is a chaotic novel of the global South combined with the elements of Bambara’s own Northern “bebop” tones.

III. A Jazz Writer Sings the Blues

Critics such as Gloria Hull and Toni Morrison have compared Bambara’s prose style to jazz music in its complicated structure and overlapping references that are often hyper-specific to black culture and “make no effort at all to provide a white readership with any point of entry into the work” (“Working At It” 30). However, jazz acts as more than just a formal structure; it connects style and politics. Elsa Barkley Brown has related jazz structure and improvisation to feminist theoretical thought:

In this respect there is one other thing that jazz training might give us—a respect for each piece as unfinished, unended, waiting for the next musician to pick it up and play it a different way, an appreciation for how much we would learn from that, how exciting that is, how basic our work was to that possibility, how important re-creation and transformation is. (Brown 89)

A jazz approach to activism compliments Bambara’s historical view of Civil-Rights-era social movements as an unfinished continuum that is always being re-created and transformed. The process of writing sound into text is not only part of her literary style; as the editor of *The Black Woman* anthology, Bambara also included orality through the incorporation of conversation, spoken word poetry, and the rap session in order to represent women in conversation with each other. Even though the book exists as a text, it reminds readers of the centrality of oral culture in

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32 Bambara claims that this criticism was said by reviewers about *The Salt Eaters*. Additionally she states, “It has been pointed out quite often that I do not cater to or even seem to be particularly cognizant of white readers” (“Working At It” 30).
black feminist thought and constructs a theory that emerges from story-telling and debate, rather than individual pursuit.

The repetition of narrative in *The Black Woman* creates an ideological standard for theoretical riffing, the telling and retelling of historical narrative as a textual parallel for the “changing same” that Amiri Baraka saw in jazz music. As historical narratives of oppression are told again and again, different voices add their own unique stamp on the experience and innovate how one tells the story through genre and method. In the anthology’s section on the topic “The Black Revolution in America,” Pat Robinson and the group tell the narrative collectively, Grace Lee Boggs offers a straightforward historical account, Carole Brown tells a personal story of her family’s migration, and Francee Covington critiques the film *Battle of Algiers* to place the revolution in a global perspective. Themes emerge: the difficulty of merging feminism in one’s male-dominant culture, the danger in lack of communication among different groups of women, historical and cultural visibility, translating theoretical ideas to daily realities, and other motifs that emerge throughout the pages. The anthology’s form establishes a metaphoric parallel jazz music: the idea of revolution becomes a standard that is not meant to be played straight foreword in a linear, isolated format, but innovated and adulterated with other tunes and melodies from *other* songs. The anthology reflects this process, as its contributors “rap” on the theme of revolution but bring their unique concerns, such as motherhood, the education system, and socialism. The collective structure unearthed through different voices becomes a nascent, grassroots ideology and thus theory achieves the malleability and spontaneity of music, even as it is being recorded in text.

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33 For more on the changing same and Baraka’s theory of how black music has changed and adapted while still containing a continuum of essence, see LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), “The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)” in William J. Harris, ed. The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader (New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 2000) 186-192.
Bambara experimented with these possibilities in her fiction, transferring music into text and using it as a way to re-envision literary representation. Through an examination of music in her short story “Medley,” and her novel *The Salt Eaters*, I argue that Bambara finds a method by which to overlay her jazz rhythms with the blues in order to bridge multiple aspects of black musical tradition that have been separated by region. As she interweaves music and labor in her writing, Bambara sutures together the ethereal quality of music with an activist pragmatism and allows musicality to stay grounded in her Marxist roots. “Medley” (1977), which was reprinted in *The Jazz Fiction Anthology* from its original publication in *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*, offers an intimate portrayal of jazz in its style, structure, and content. Neither the protagonist, Sweet Pea, nor her jazz percussionist boyfriend, Larry Landers, are good musicians. Sweet Pea cannot sing and Larry’s bass is always off, and yet they find other spaces within which to make jazz. Sweet Pea finds the same properties of jazz aficionados in people’s labor. She claims, “I’m nobody’s singer...I’m an A-1 manicurist” (*The Sea Birds* 51) and continues to admire her own work and the work of one of her clients, a gambler who deals cards with finesse and grace. Another character, Hector, is “not what you’d call a good storyteller...But he’s an absolute artist on windows...Hector was a cat out there on the sill, making these marvelous circles in the glass...it was a pleasure to have coffee and watch Hector” (55). The narrative uses jazz language to re-envision under-appreciated and unrecognized labor as an art form. Despite the characters’ lack of success in the arts—singing, bass playing, storytelling—work becomes an art form and something to take pleasure and pride in.

Larry and Sweet Pea take pleasure in their jazz approach to lovemaking while in the shower. Even though “ole Larry couldn’t play for shit” he is “baad in the shower” (51):
He laid down most of the intricate weaving, walking, bopping, strutting bottom to my singing I even heard. It inspired me, Took that melody and went right on out that shower...took that melody right on out the room and out of doors and somewhere out in this world...So I came crashing down, jarring the song out of shape, diving back into the melody line and somehow, not even knowing what song each other was doing, we finished up together just as the water was turning cold. (64)

In the shower scene, Sweet Pea reverses the process of jazz: while jazz relies on sexual euphemisms as a conduit of expression, here sex allows the reader to understand and imagine music. The sounds spiral outward, merging into the be-bop style of conversation between Sweet Pea and her friends. Music saturates the narrative and reimagines relationships; men and women are asked to partner together like musicians, to compliment and respect each other for their own independent work in order to create together.

_The Salt Eaters_ combines the jazz elements of Bambara’s “Medley” while moving into a new territory of musicality that combines blues and jazz together. The novel is imbued with music: Velma’s healing ritual takes place in a music room and many of the characters—including the loa—play instruments over the course of the novel. Moreover, the narrator describes Minnie Ransom’s healing practice in terms of rhythm: “Minnie could dance their dance and match their beat and echo their pitch and know their frequency as her own,” while illness becomes visualized as “notes running into each other in a pileup, body out of tune, melody jumped the track” (_The Salt Eaters_ 48). Sweet Pea appears in Velma’s final memory before she begins to transition to health. In the scene, Velma is sitting in a park lamenting the failure of the present movement to complete the work of the past: “Thought the workers of the Sixties had pulled the Family safely out of the range of the serpent’s fangs so the workers of the
seventies could drain the poisons…But amnesia had set in anyhow…Something crucial had been missing from the political/economic/social/cultural/aesthetic/military/psychosocial/psychosexual mix” (259). As Velma ponders the answer staring at the “safety of her swollen feet,” she barely notices Sweet Pea, who had initially been friends and activists with Velma and had “come down from Syracuse to work with SNCC and find a husband because the men up North ‘have no politics’” (260). Sweet Pea reflects on the Movement with “jailhouse anecdotes and back-road remembrances, as if all that happened a century ago and the war was over” (261). She belittles Velma’s continued activist efforts by claiming that her “idealistic nonsense” will not “change anything in this country” and claims that returning down South (from D.C.) was like “being in a time capsule” (261). Sweet Pea admonishes the South’s continuum of Movement activism by conflating the region and the Movement in an archaic temporality.

Sweet Pea’s appearance in the novel also signifies Bambara’s development as a writer. If Sweet Pea is the “urban bebop” voice Bambara was so well known for in her previous writing, her limited perspective reflects the limitations of a singular voice. Through musicality Velma practices her need to balance the many overlapping perspectives of her activist community, and she does so by dancing to both jazz and blues music. When Velma leaves her memory of Sweet Pea and leads the narrative back to the healing ritual, she surprises the activists and the healers as she dances to a combination of an old blues standard “Wild Woman Don’t Have the Blues” and Charlie Parker with Coleman Hawkins doing “Now Is the Time” simultaneously. The “sassy twenties singer” that Velma calls a “signifyin sister” brings her to the “zzing of zimbi gourds” and the “spooky trees” (263) of the swamp near her home, connecting images of a circum-Atlantic Southern past. The overlay of jazz allows her to “listen to linears and verticals at the same time, new time, rhythm bam” (263). The temporality of jazz music thus also enables Velma
to understand the linear progression of historical time, that social movements of the past have progressed through history, but also the vertical connections that allow activists to suspend temporality in order to create a sense of activist affinity. This blend of blues and bebop, and the dancing that follows it, heals Velma by overlaying different forms of music to create a discordant cacophony of sounds. The cacophony is inaudible to both those participating in the ritual and the reader, who is left to imagine Velma’s rhythmic body in motion.

The ritual blends conjure, dance, and blues and gathers up the literary fabric into an arcade of sound and movement as Velma celebrates “those giants she had worshipped in all their terrible musicalness…standing up in their genius anyhow ready to speak the unpronounceable” (265). The ritual is dependent on an unreadable sound, much like the despidir al duelo funerary ritual in Yglesias, which is dependent on the lector’s oratory to make the community cohesive as “separate beings in the unity of art” (The Truth 138). Within these modes, in addition to the unseeable performances of the Free Southern Theater, Bambara and Yglesias represent the unrepresentable and intangible through writing the mysterious quality of their sound. For Bambara specifically, music gives testament to the invisible and un-theorized aspects of grassroots activism—not only the underappreciated women’s work, but also the work of collective memory, emotion, fervor, and spirituality.

IV. The Click of Intersectionality

Bambara uses a full spectrum of sound as a stand-in for the unspeakable, which allows her to experience the “linears and the verticals at the same time,” even if that sound is as simple as a click. As the community gathers together in the music room at the Southwest Infirmary, one of the members closes the door to the treatment room:
And there was something in the click of it that made many of the old-timers, veterans of the incessant war—Garveyites, Southern Tenants Associates, trade unionists, Party members, Pan-Africanists—remembering the night riders and day traitors and the cocking of guns, shudder. (The Salt Eaters 15)

Despite the various ideological and generational differences between the community members, the threat of external violence collapses their differences into an affinity for survival. Bambara’s use of the word click is intentional and significant. She would have recently read a conversation in This Bridge Called my Back called “Across the Kitchen Table: A Sister-to-Sister Dialogue” by Barbara Smith and Beverly Smith that discusses Jane O’Reilly’s concept of “the click” initially published in a 1971 issue of Ms. Magazine. The click describes a sudden moment of feminist consciousness that the Smiths adapt to their own situation as women of color:

They still talk about when you have an experience as a woman that makes you realize your oppression as a woman, makes you realize other women’s oppression, you know, some revealing incident in your life as a woman. That is a “click.” Well I mean. I guess there are ‘clicks’ among racial lines, but the thing is they’re so far back in terms of class that they’re almost imperceptible. It just feels to me like it’s a different kind of thing.

(Anzaldúa and Moraga 114-5)

Even though the click is initially supposed to be something simple, once the Smiths start rapping further about the permutations of race and class, it evolves into a “different thing” that is more complicated. Their recorded conversation—transposed to text—shows how informal dialogue laid the groundwork for theories of intersectionality years before Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the term into feminist theoretical discourse:
I think for the purpose of analysis and what we try to do is to break things down and try to separate and compare but in reality, the way women live their lives, those separations just don’t work. Women don’t live their lives like, ‘Well this part is race, and this is class, and this part has to do with women’s identities’ so it’s confusing. (116)

Confusing indeed. The idea of the click breaks down intersectional feminism into an imperceptible discomfort; there are aspects that are legible, yet some remain imperceptible, not fitting the mold. Bambara’s click of the door of the room of the infirmary connects different generations of activists. The groups have separate individual memories and yet, there is a commonality in their collective shudder. While collectivity provides a sense of solidarity, it also collapses the historical specificities of their experiences. A direct evaluation of those individual memories would be difficult to articulate without creating hierarchical comparisons between groups such as Garveyites and feminists. The silently shared experience of the infirmary door’s click suggests that the path to affinity might be better left unexplained.

Thus, instead of language, Bambara uses sound and orality to describe the process by which activists in the novel use memory as a conduit to coalition. This is similar to how in the previous chapter, Yglesias uses memory to paint an artistic image that aligns the Cuban and African American community of Ybor City while avoiding the pitfalls of comparison. Bambara does the same in *The Salt Eaters* by recreating conflictual solidarity and multivocal dialogism through the Seven Sisters, a radical “third-world” women performance group. The group of women activists represent a variety of ethnic groups—Sister of the Yam, Plantain, Rice, etc.—that both share and argue over their experiences. The Seven Sisters do not offer any solution for how coalitional activism can work, but their conversation—even if it is in danger of slipping into palaver—opens the potential for shared experience. When “Sister of the Yam” Cecile starts
explaining the fire rites of "macumba, condomble, obeah, shango, lucumi, sanitaria, winti, voodoo" (The Salt Eaters 223) it sparks memories for “Sister of the Rice,” Mai. Mai begins to unfold memories of her family’s past: “Something Cecile had said about the woman-charged culture of the Dahomey had sparked it, thrown a light into a dark corner… Perhaps the contrast of Mai’s story and Cecile’s, the two family stories rubbing against each other in Mai’s mind…something had flashed a light around in the jumble of those old told-to’s” (221). Even though it is based on difference, the stories allow Mai to reach back through the silence of the generation, “an old story passed down on Mai’s maternal side huddled together in the [Japanese/pan-Asian] interment camps of ’42, keeping themselves alive with stories” (222). This scene suspends the temporality of the click of healing room’s door as well as Ms. Magazine’s instantaneous moment of feminist awareness. It is slowed down in Mai’s mind and the collective mind of the Seven Sisters to show the intricate relationship between memory and political awareness. The women share individual trauma through images of memory that form connective pathways without having to compare their pasts or contemporary political situations.

The stories shared between the Seven Sisters act as reminders of orally communicated stories that carry a spiritual weight and have political significance in recognizing mutual trauma. As I argued in the previous chapter, Michael Rothberg’s multidirectional approach to memory works well with coalitional activism because he delineates how comparative memory is productive towards building consciousness about human-based oppression. Only when Cecile talks about her own traditions does Mai search back through the collective memory of her family and culture to find connections with Cecile and the other Sisters. Thus, collective memory can do more than define cultural boundaries; it can be an active process of sharing and building across cultural divides. However, “coming unstuck from the web of time and place” requires an
indeterminate suspension of our assumed reality, a process that seems antithetical to rank-and-file mobilization. In other words, why do these complicated processes of envisioning universality and collectivity matter?

The narrative makes a case for the importance of big picture universality through the material reality of environmental destruction, which calls for coalitional, multiplatform activism. As the Seven Sisters chapter flows together through a confluence of memories, a storm approaches in the background, heralded by the “crisp snap” of thunder, another click, reminding the Sisters of the protest against the Transchemical plant that the community is currently fighting against. The storm means destruction because “each rain meant contamination leaching inches ever closer to the water table, spelling the ruin of the Savannah River and all who lived in it, on it, by it, from it” (225). They are at the mercy of soil contamination, and they are reminded that the violence against local communities, like the click of the loaded guns, does not distinguish between identity politics; it kills all.

In The Salt Eaters, the oppressive forces of environmental destruction thwart single-issue or single identity politics. The little-understood connection between nuclear testing, waste dumping, labor exploitation, and people of color around the globe engenders planetary eco-feminism—creating a universality based on the human-rights approach for which many of the authors and artists in this dissertation searched. The Salt Eaters does, however, replicate this feeling of universality through a “third world” feminist approach to environmental activism. Bambara creates a dialogue that interweaves two black women activists, Ruby and Janice, who argue throughout the novel over their approaches to coalition activism and the role of environmentalism. Their conversation takes the dialogic tone of Barbara and Beverly Smith’s “Across the Kitchen Table” conversation in This Bridge or rap sessions of The Black Woman and
shows how conversation creates consciousness. The usually loud and abrasive Ruby argues for the “good ole-fashioned” approach to organized activism based solely on racial politics. She claims that “all this ecology stuff is a diversion” to which Janice retorts:

They’re connected. Whose community do you think they ship radioactive waste through, or dig up waste burial grounds near? Who do you think they hire for the dangerous dirty work at those plants? What parts of the world do they test-blast in? And all them illegal uranium mines dug up on Navajo turf—the crops dying, the sheep dying, the horses, water, cancer, Ruby, cancer. (242)

Janice builds the connections between environmental destruction and the pathways of race and class-based persecution in the community. Similar to the aforementioned dialogue between the Seven Sisters that slows down “the click” and delineates the process of coalitional memory, the narrative breaks down the process of understanding intersectionality: feminist consciousness builds not from an instant click, but rather a drawn out process of improvised association. The stakes are high when confronting the “many-headed demon of oppression” (Anzaldúa and Moraga 195) represented through Transchemical. Nuclear energy represents a more ambiguous force of oppression not quite understood by the community and thus calls on a similar structure of resistance: the mysterious danger requires that people believe it exists in order to fight it. Thus, coalition must mirror its enemy as an enigmatic and “many headed demon” of resistance.

Bambara’s third-world feminist environmentalism connects groups in relation to local issues that gesture towards the planetary. The water contamination and the Transchemical plant that the town organizes against is a location-specific issue; however, it is a part of the planet as a whole and the movement to preserve it. Although Bambara frames the campaign against Transchemical in terms of protecting/saving the planetary third-world, otherwise known as the
global South, environmentalism is a social issue that targets broad-based humanity. The environmentalist campaign parallels initiatives such as Martin Luther King Jr.’s Poor People’s campaign that extended the process of Civil-Rights activism and the political concept of economic reform as universal human rights platform so that the struggle of the Memphis sanitation worker relates to the war in Vietnam. Bambara works within this lesser-recognized aspect of the Civil Rights Movement that used protest as a process for multi-faceted definitions of equality. As Janice convinces Ruby, one must move beyond the comfortable position of what one knows because single-issue or identity-based politics are not adequate roads to coalitional activism. Environmentalism gives the activists in the novel the ability to move between multiple platforms: to be both individual and collective, to be local and universal, and it involved a leap into the unknown.

For Bambara and many of the other activists connecting the U.S. South with “third-world” liberation movements of the global South, spirituality acted as both a practice and a process that could bring communities and different factions together. Since the destruction of the environment so frequently aligns with oppression of the marginalized, the turn to the natural world through folkways is less about fetishizing autochthonous cultures than a political move to protect lives from both the threat of nuclear annihilation as well as the exploitation of workers at the Transchemical plant.

V. The Walking Wounded and the Path to Spiritual Activism
As if speaking directly to Velma, Gloria Anzaldúa argues in her preface to the 2003 anthology *This Bridge We Call Home* that the need for spirituality stems from the pressure faced by activists:

When you started traveling and doing speaking gigs, the harried, hectic, frenzied pace of the activist stressed you out, subjecting you to a pervasive form of modern violence. To deal with personal concerns while also confronting larger issues in the public arena, you began using spiritual tools to cope with racial and gender oppression and other modern maldades [maladies]—not so much the seven deadly sins, but the small acts of desconocimientos [unknowingness]: ignorance, frustrations, and tendencies toward self-destructiveness. (Anzaldúa and Keating 572)

Anzaldúa leaves the term “modern violence” undefined, but suggests that it stems from the pervasive micro-aggressions of daily experience that are difficult to name and fight against. Anzaldúa reminds us of the damage intersectional oppression has on the body and mind, as well as a little-recognized aspect of grassroots organizing—its toll on mental health. As Danielle Andersen argues in her study of mental health breakdowns of Civil Rights activists—euphemistically termed the “walking wounded”—they faced the traumatic repercussions of the abuse on their bodies and minds, which they were expected to bear passively. The stories of mental breakdowns, including those of Elizabeth Eckford of the Little Rock Nine and Fannie Lou Hamer, have been “silenced or forgotten” (67) because they do not fit the mold of the Civil Rights Movement that advocates the strength of heroes such as King (who also struggled with mental illness) in the face of their adversaries.\(^{34}\)

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\(^{34}\) Andersen goes further to show how this was a matter of micro-aggression even more than the larger singular issue: “Daily, or what I term singular stressors are occurrences that accumulate and increase the burden of chronic stress. This study posits that it is those singular stressors that lead to feelings of distress, more so than the chronic condition” (67).
Bambara sees this problem as having a lasting effect on social movement activism when she claims, “[W]e very much need something because we have so many walking wounded…people who are still stumbling around from the sixties who never were embraced enough, who got assigned things to do and then got left hanging, and are still walking blasted” (Deep Sightings 218). At the core of The Salt Eaters is Velma’s attempted suicide, which is attributed to the stress fractures resulting from trying to hold her community together and taking on too much work. Since disruptions to mental health are little understood and even less appreciated or respected socially, Velma must depend on the spiritual unknown to combat the desconocimientos described by Anzaldúa. Moreover, because Velma is symbolic of the community as a whole, spirituality offers a solution to the fracturing inherent in identity politics. Her return to the common origins of alternative holistic practice—as its name suggests—advocates for wholeness.

The novel’s framework of health and healing destabilizes our common assumptions about both spiritual and medical fields. Velma’s healing is a collaborative effort between the alternative holism of Minnie Ransom and Dr. Meadows and his medical students. Gloria Hull notes how “Without addressing the issue of belief in healings or giving anyone else a chance to do so, she posits its authenticity and describes it with the same faithful nonchalance that she accords to every other human activity” (Pryse and Spillers 219). In the following dialogue, the voices of the spirit guides enter without introduction or explanation; even their dialogue lacks attribution and only occasionally has a name to signify who is being addressed:
You mean you don’t remember? You said to check in the floor of the third ventricle. So I did and zapped a little energy up there near the pineal, good ole pineal, and those lavender beams commenced to glow, and she was right as rain.

I said which?

You said ‘Malignant ependymal attempting to take up residence in the base of the brain, Min.’ Old Wife, don’t you take notes on these sessions? Ain’t you getting it all down?

I got all there is to be got, Min excusing a tablet and a pencil. (The Salt Eaters 45)

The spirits diagnose their patient using medical discourse that is left untranslated to the reader. By neither explaining the medical malady, nor the confusion of its communication between spirits—or for that matter, what “lavender beams” could possibly mean—Bambara conflates these two aspects of health along a continuum. This has less to do with trying to legitimize the spiritual, but rather shows the incompleteness of the medical field. In an aside about a former patient, one of the spirits mentions a dead clitoral nerve as the root of the malady. This small moment in the text reminds the reader of the onetime condition of hysteria legitimized within the larger history of medical malpractice at the expense of women’s bodies for which science and medicine are culpable. This brings us back to the aforementioned Moynihan report and the evidence that women’s lived experiences are counter to male-based sociological or scientific practice, a paradox that opens space for validating the supernatural. For many women—misdiagnosed and sterilized—science is a dangerous fiction not be trusted that needs a formidable adversary.

In the healing room, the notable difference between the medical and the spiritual-holistic is the lack of “tablet and pencil,” which Old Wife renders as unnecessary for her memory. This kind of healing cannot be annotated, nor archived, and suggests an alternative path towards
collective memory that cannot be recorded. As I argue in my introduction, fictional representation of orally-based collective memory counters the narrative that public memory is essentially connected to the archive. Old Wife, Minnie, and a third unnamed spirit engage in a generations-old practice that is absent from the written record. Moreover, the process of healing that Minnie Ransom uses for her patients cannot be explained through text: “She simply placed her left hand on the patient’s spine and her right on the navel, then clearing the channels, putting herself aside, she became available to a healing force no one had yet, to her satisfaction, captured in a name” (47). The novel does not presume to name or explain the healing ritual, but witnesses the alternative knowledge passed down through generations, alluding to an unknown cultural memory of spiritual practice.

Thus, the novel’s spirituality serves a pragmatic function in that it undermines the concept of an authentic history of activism. In her writing, Bambara, like Mayfield, Yglesias, and the Free Southern Theater, looks for a version of Marxism that could mean something for local community members. In addition to environmental activism, Bambara uses folkways as a connecting force across different locations and traditions, just as the Seven Sisters are able to connect over stories of past rituals. As one of the Seven Sisters notes, “the material without the spiritual and psychic does not a dialectic make” (64). Her pithy statement uses the Marxist process of the dialectic to undermine its basic tenant of materialism. According to the Sister’s dialectic, the material world cannot exist without the spiritual/unknown, thus one cannot have a solely materialist approach to existence. Thus, she exposes the vulnerability of theoretical Marxism by showing that it is but one of many ideologies participating in the work of changing the social order. Spirituality offers a compliment to ideological structures that do not always meet the needs of the community.
In *The Salt Eaters*, Bambara examines the possibilities of what Ana Louise Keating and Gloria Anzaldúa together call “spiritual activism,” “radically inclusionary politics” that “offers a visionary yet experientially based epistemology and ethics” (Keating 53-4). Within this process, Keating (through Anzaldúa) argues, “Spiritual activism is spirituality for social change, spirituality that posits a relational worldview and uses this holistic worldview to transform one's self and one's worlds” (54). The term was not formally named until Keating’s essay published after Anzaldúa’s death, and yet these ideas were already emerging in *This Bridge Called my Back* and at the local level of many activists engaging with Southern religious traditions.

Conjure, as a loosely defined and often misunderstood cultural form and religion, is not antithetical to community organizing; rather it solidifies a relationship between action-oriented mobilization and interconnectedness—a possible path to imagining the linears and the verticals at the same time. As Marjorie Pryce argues in reference to black women writers in general and Alice Walker in specific, the artist “sees folk magic as art and fiction as form of conjuring” (Pryse and Spillers 5). While Bambara aligns with the tradition that Pryce acknowledges, she extends the circum-Atlantic network out to include the Seven Sisters and the myriad non-Western practices that make up a third-world cosmopolitanism.

The conversation between the spirits and Minnie Ransom becomes a debate like the arguments between the men and women activists, Janice and Ruby, and the Seven Sisters. Within this narrative, dialogue is as important to spiritual activism as it is to rank-and-file organization and adds another dimension to spiritual activism, which has thus far been concerned with self-exploration. As Ana Louise Keating claims, “Spiritual activism begins within the individual but moves outward as these individuals (or what Anzaldúa calls “spiritual activists”) expose, challenge, and work to transform unjust social structures” (57). However, as a “struggle
[that] has always been inner, and is played out in outer terrains” (Borderlands/La Frontera 82) spiritual activism is in danger of falling into the binary pattern it seeks to erase. Rather than view personal politics as between the individual and the collective, Bambara extends spiritual activism out from Anzaldúa’s theory and exposes a middle space in the conversations among activists. The narrator in The Salt Eaters describes the characters’ personal recollections as the “remarkable things each sensed but had no habit of language for, though they felt often and deeply, privately” (89) and yet they continuously have difficult naming or articulating the internal knowledge that is described as a noumena (89): “like reaching in the back of the drawer for the emergency twenty dollar bill that fallen down between the drawer and the back of the desk” (221). Spiritual engagement with the unknown and unanswered emerges from the intimacies of dialogue between women—which is necessary practice in order to articulate the indescribable. Rather than self-to-whole, woman-to-woman dialogue is necessary to understand conflict and difference as the root of collectivity.

Moreover, Bambara works to integrate this into the post-Bandung Third World liberation movement, which was largely based on Marxist principles. The confusion of balancing these seemingly antithetical identities becomes a point of humor in the novel. When one of the sisters describes another sister, Inez, as a “staunch Marxist-Maoist-dialectical-historical-materialist” she retorts, “But I’m not a materialist. I’m Chicana” (64), as if materialism were an ethnic identity. Beyond the humor, Inez points out the deeper-rooted identities that make Marxism difficult to transfer to a multi-ethnic community. Spirituality and Marxism found common—but uneasy—ground in the area of activism. At a time when religion was largely rejected by Marxist revolutionaries, creating a spiritual materialism meant taking a huge theoretical leap of faith that was not a “lazy faith” as Chicana activist Cherrie Moraga claims, but rather “the faith of the
activists” that means “believing that we have the power to actually transform our experience, change our lives, save our lives” (Anzaldúa and Moraga xviii). Bambara would have read Moraga’s words and witnessed first-hand the connections between the botanicas in Harlem that blend Catholicism (santaria) and indigenous Aztec deities, and the root work/hoodoo traditions in the U.S. South and how they all connected to circum-Atlantic pathways of alternative spiritualities while remaining specific to their local communities. Spiritual activism overlays Marxism with the flexibility it needed to move from political theory to pragmatic reality for marginalized communities within the U.S. by building a relationship between lived experience, collective memory, and political reform.

As both Bambara and Anzaldúa turn south, to Georgia and Mexico respectively, they seek a new mythology—as an alternative to Western theory—that could inform their political realities. Just as Anzaldúa used indigenous religion as a model for spiritual activism, Bambara turns to circum-Atlantic cultures of conjure in The Salt Eaters and connects the network of cultural activism in the South and the spiritual folk from the region. Even though this spirituality does not always align with the more Christian-based Civil Rights Movement or the militant culture of Black nationalism from which the Black Arts Movement emerged, authors such as Ishmael Reed, Sonia Sanchez, and Paule Marshall, incorporated elements of spirituality into their texts. Reed’s “NeoHooDoo Manifesto” provides a model with which to understand the complicated relationship between Black Arts Movement writers and conjure cultures of the South. He uses poetry to theorize conjure as an “American 'pantheon'” of hoodoo that “borrows from Haiti Africa and South America” (Conjure 22) with a “remarkable ability to blend with other religions, even those considered its rivals” (Shrovetide 9). Additionally, Reed points out Neo-HooDoo’s “Black Red... And occasionally White” (Conjure 25) ethnic makeup suspends
divisive ethnic categories, a sentiment often expressed through the symbol of the famous voodoo priest Marie Laveau and her ambiguous ethno-racial identity. Thus, religious practice offered a model of flexibility that could maintain spiritual consistency while also adapting to new situations and varied communities. Reed points out the difficulty in representing conjure in writing; he refers to hoodoo as a “litany seeking a text” (Conjure 25) and bends the boundaries between the manifesto-style of the nationalist paradigm and the religious ritual that defies words.

The spiritual presence in the novel, from the loa that intervene in the healing to the swamp where Velma has an ethereal spiritual experience, affects the narrative and creates a confluence of voice and image that is difficult to understand or process.

In the novel, Velma has searched for a way to “listen to linears and verticals at the same time” and to do this she needs a “new time, rhythm” (The Salt Eaters 264). Bambara overlaps temporality, activism, and the supernatural in the novel to represent a continuum unbound by linear progress. The generations sitting together in the music room of the Southwest Community Infirmary and throughout the novel—the Civil Rights Movement workers, Marxists, Garveyites, etc.—represent moments along a trajectory of historical time; however, spirituality works in the novel to suspend the tangible boundaries of time. Bambara uses the voices of older spiritual forms embodied in the loa that speak with each other throughout the narrative. However, they do not haunt the characters in a typical or expected way; rather, the spirits in The Salt Eaters are not relegated to the past but are “prettyin up to hop a bus to New Orleans” (43) for Carnival. These loa “ride buses just the same’s they ride brooms, people, carnival floats, whatever” (43) and evidence how various manifestations of the folk—such as Voodou, hoodoo, Neo-HooDoo, and conjure—adapt to their present situation in order to insure the survival of ritual acts through time. Spiritual activism is not so much concerned with preserving the past as it is with
interweaving past knowledges with present conditions. Rather than fetishizing indigeneity, Anzaldúa relies on her incomplete knowledge of her own cultural traditions to creatively adapt the past to the present; as Keating observes, “Anzaldúa re-members the past; she borrows from and alters a variety of belief systems and worldviews, creating an activist-based spirituality that is deeply informed by contemporary events” (56 my emp.). The healing ritual in *The Salt Eaters* does not disregard the present in favor of the past, or vice versa; rather, it raises questions about past and present as accurate or distinct temporal categories.

In a memory embedded within the text, Velma finds herself in a Georgia swamp a few minutes from where she grew up—a space that suspends time and collapses the ideological threads of spiritualties, history, and individual experience. She experiences the swamp as free from geographic and temporal boundaries, a “site of metamorphosis. River rain, underground spring, marsh…Things were active around her…Time not speeding up but opening up to take her inside” (*The Salt Eaters* 171). A series of correlations emerge in her mind to assuage her fear: “Panic. Pan. Pan-Africanism. All of us. Every. God. Pan. All nature. Pan. Everywhere. She was grinning, as she always grinned when she was able to dig below the barriers organized religion erected in its push toward a bogus civilization.” Within the swamp, Velma describes “things occurring to her rather than tracking her, haunting her, terrorizing her” (170), and so she finds solace in a universal perspective, an alternative view outside the structures of time and place.

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35 Ana Louise Keating notes the criticism to Anzaldúa’s “resurrection of the old gods (whether they be white or indigenous)” through the Benjamin Alire Saenz’s criticism of *Borderlands/ La Frontera* that claims, “To invoke old gods as a tool against oppression and capitalism is to choose the wrong weapon” (55). Many poets and writers, such as Ann Cook in *The Black Woman* disparaged folkways and criticized as inauthentic “mumbo-jumbo just like Hollywood would do it” and favored “hard organizing” (196). See also Richard Wright’s *Black Power* for a skeptical view of folk religion and as superstitious belief. For more on the lineage of African Americans who rejected folk traditions see Martin.
Velma’s experience in the swamp reflects her experience of global Southern activism more broadly. As a regional imaginary, the U.S. South bears a historical and cultural burden of an “imagined temporal divide between the region and the larger nation” (Duck 8). When Sweet Pea interrupts the narrative, she reinforces this temporal rupture as she locates Velma and the South as being stuck in a “time capsule” (The Salt Eaters 261). However, Velma finds a productive space within the South’s alternative temporality that allows her to see beyond the limitations of linear historical time. Rather, she engages with a spiritual cosmopolitanism connected to a global South network.36 The novel offers a complex, faith-based adaptation of theoretical discourse into the fluid and spiritual realm. However, the underside for Velma, and for us as readers, is the transience of her experience: “She found no words. Nor a brief passage of music. Nothing stayed fixed and available for later…the marsh visit had failed to inform her…Whatever has occurred, stayed behind” (172). The knowledge she accesses in the swamp cannot transition to her daily existence in the community that is bound by time and space; the personal interconnectedness she feels cannot transition to the collective.

This same paradox happens with the journalist Campbell, not in the swamp, but through his extensive study of mythology and nuclear energy, which has lead him to conclude that “all the systems were the same at base—voodoo, thermodynamics, I Ching, astrology, numerology, alchemy, metaphysics, everybody’s ancient myths—they were interchangeable, not at all separate much less conflicting.” Yet, he cannot translate this universal knowledge into conceptual thought. As much as he can “couch principles of thermonuclear dynamics in the language of down-home Bible-quoting folks,” he has difficulty getting it on paper:

36 As Duck argues, “southern temporal seclusion affected such writers’ efforts to articulate and advance southern cosmopolitanism during the early years of the civil rights movement” (178). This need for cosmopolitanism was not only necessary to criticize the national agenda, but also to begin to recognize the ties between the specificities of the local and areas throughout the global South that also faced oppressive governments and environmental destruction.
Damballah, he wrote, represents, he wrote, and scratched that out, Damballah is similar to, he wrote, and scratched that out, Damballah is the first law of thermodynamics and is the Biblical wisdom and is the law of time and is, Campbell wrote, everything that is now has been before and will be again in a new way, in a changed form, in a timeless time.

(249 my emp.)

Campbell’s manic writing is confusing and oxymoronic and his pride in being able to make connections fails him. The cryptic message of regeneration—that forward movement depends on adaptation and change—serves to open more questions on what that “changed form” is, or what the pragmatic steps are to his theory. Like the other journalist, Pini, from the previous chapter, Campbell cannot translate this mysterious knowledge within the confines of language or academic discourse. By connecting these two characters together, Bambara does not present a hierarchical relationship between Campbell’s course of study and Velma’s spiritual enlightenment; both function as access points to interconnectedness, and yet both fail to translate it from abstraction.

Bambara uses the South’s alternative temporality to open out towards the “timeless time” of interconnected universality. The novel itself warps time as it represents perhaps twenty minutes of the healing ritual’s historical or “real” time. Gloria Hull notes that in The Salt Eaters “Time (synonymous with timelessness) is not fixed or one-dimensional or solely horological; instead, it exists in fluid manifestations of its various dimensions. Past, present, and future are convenient, this-place designations which can, in fact, take place simultaneously” (Pryse and Spillers 222). In other words, the spectrum of voices speaking from different times and locations are also cotemporaneous, which returns to questions of past and present as categories of time. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the lived experience of the community challenges the linear
progress of the intellectual tradition. David Scott, who seeks to understand the relationship between the theoretical tradition of postcolonialism and generational time, observes a temporal paradox in how distinct generations overlap in a way that both informs and challenges the other. The telling of stories and old “to dos” connects Bambara’s artistic process to Scott’s theoretical one when he claims, “above all, I am listening” (Scott 160 org. emp.). By writing a text that also listens, Bambara forfeits a direct explanation of the loa, the healing ritual, or the timeless time of the swamp.

In this way, Bambara mis-represents the alternative folkways she writes about; she acknowledges the presence of “subjugated knowledges,” to use Michel Foucault’s term, without overwriting them. To be clear, mis-representation does not mean that the authors intentionally write an inaccurate portrayal of conjure or alternate spiritualties; rather, it uses opacity as a literary technique that adds to the mystery and avoids the pitfalls of actual misrepresentation. To this end, the author stands slightly outside the text she is writing and acknowledges a lack of access to knowledge. In the case of Bambara, she herself claims, “I aim for a narrator who neither poses as omniscient eye nor imposes order like a chess board arranger, but acts as a medium to let the design come through” (“Working at It” 6). Even she cannot understand her own representations of the folk in her novel as she claims, “I don't know nothing about the book. I’m still reading it. I’m still catching up with the wisdom of that book” (Deep Sightings 237). Just as when she writes Virginia, the main character from “The Organizer’s Wife” from an authorial distance, Bambara positions her authorial self as external to the novel. Bambara’s process of mis-representation places her within a larger trajectory of writing about Southern folkways. Mis-representation of conjure is its own trope within the Southern literary tradition including writers such as William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, Tennessee Williams, Alice
Walker, and Erna Brodber. They do not offer the exegeses of ritual practices in their texts, rather, they give us a glimpse into the swamp as a means to gesture that there are alternate temporalities beyond the scope of our knowledge. The swamp acts a geographic correlative to collective memory beyond the archive; the experience of it is there, but there is no way to capture it in the literary, or in that matter, to catalogue it within the recorded folders and boxes of recorded history.

VI. Alternative Literary Spaces within the Text

As a means of conclusion, I want to locate lack of access and mis-representation as a connecting point between very different modes of conjure writing/writing about conjure, a field that only recently began receiving serious critical attention as an aspect of cultural activism. Activist culture shares with the academy a disregard for the thoroughly misunderstood possibilities of conjure, what Keating calls “academic spirit-phobia” (55). By inviting in spirituality, Bambara challenges the activist Leftist idea that the spiritual is antithetical to social change. The connection between Bambara’s use of the spiritual and Anzaldúa’s closes the gap between folkways spirituality and the Black Arts Movement, where spirituality is assumed to be antithetical to a black nationalist discourse. Within a community seeking to define itself and solidify an identity, the ambiguity of spirituality would pose a threat to the “new black subject” emerging in the circum-Atlantic space of activism during the 1960s and 1970s.37

However, spirituality served a political function within the Black Arts Movement, not unlike the bridge between jazz and literary culture previously discussed in my chapter on the

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37 As Eve Dunbar argues in Black Regions of the Imagination, black nationalists or Black Arts Movement participants simultaneously held a global vision of liberation, yet desired to remain in the U.S. instead “these writers who claim a nation within a nation go about imagining the world of black liberation and self-determination that does not require them to flee the country. Rather, they plot …the nation's destruction from the inside” (170).
Free Southern Theater and visual jazz. The representations of conjure that emerge in texts associated with Black Arts Movement authors such as Bambara, Ishmael Reed, Paule Marshall, Sonia Sanchez, and others continue to destabilize concepts of community in a radically different kind of Southern literature that moves between the Caribbean and the U.S. South. This becomes a common trope in the connection between the folk and the Black Arts Movement writers who sought to reclaim and adapt “juju” and the oral tradition for literature; a desire that Sonia Sanchez reflects in “now poem. for us” that seeks to “record them talken their ago talk/for our tomorrows […] let them tell us about their juju years/so ours will be that much stronger” (Adoff, ed. 70). The “ago talk/for our tomorrows” parallels the memory “clicks” shared by the Seven Sisters and reveals the power of adapting stories for contemporary significance.

As expected, there is no direct conclusion about identity politics in The Salt Eaters; we only walk away with a story about a community and a metaphor to salt. In folk medicine, salt is used against snakebite to “neutralize the venom,” and yet, as one of the matriarchal characters explains, “To neutralize the serpent’s another matter.” The eating of salt, which can be both beneficial as an antidote and yet as toxic to the body as the venom that poisons it, parallels the adherence to identity that can be simultaneously useful and harmful as a method of resistance. As Anzaldúa concludes, “Words are not enough. We must perform visible and public acts that may make us more vulnerable to the very oppressions we are fighting against. But our vulnerability can be the source of our power—if we use it” (195). The answer is never offered, however, as to what can neutralize the serpent or how to properly use vulnerability. Even though identity-based social movements can actively fight the venoms of racial and gender oppression, the serpent, or as Anzaldúa calls it, the “many headed demon of oppression” calls for a separate set of tools. As if in response to Audre Lorde’s admonition that “The master’s tools will never dismantle the
mater’s house,” Bambara confronts the unknown and unnamed and offers us a confluence of musicality, spirituality—and a click—as alternate approaches beyond theoretical discourse.
CONCLUSION: THE NEW CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT
Modern social movement activism—from the late 19th and 20th centuries through contemporary movement—is part of a global and temporal continuum of social change. Although their historical and political specificities are unique, individual movements, from the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union and the Tampa cigar workers’ strike during the Great Depression to the Ferguson unrest in Missouri and the Black Lives Matter Movement in the 21st century, are not isolated from the movements that preceded them, nor are they insulated from proceeding generations that reshape and repurpose networks, resources, and ideas. Grassroots activism shows us that large and transnational movements are comprised of infinite small intimacies—an activist reserving permits for a protest or a eulogy at a funeral.

In the case studies provided within this dissertation, the network of these intimacies that I have referred to as the radical South has a legacy that lives on today. The 50th anniversary of the Free Southern Theater that took place in New Orleans in 2014, hosted active theaters and performance groups from around the South that emerged from the FST’s network and continue to use performance for community development and social change. Additionally, contemporary Cuban-American literature, such as the novels of Christina Garcia and Ana Menendez, address the Cuban Revolution with an unprecedented complexity that critiques the exile model of US Cuban migration in the same way that Jose Yglesias did through his novels decades earlier. Yglesias’ journalism on Martin Luther King Jr. contributes to a scholarly and cultural initiative to further examine major figures in the Civil Rights Movement. Julian Mayfield’s writing also contributes to this initiative as it adds new perspectives on the relationship between the Civil
Rights Movement and Marxism. Finally, in the wake of intersectional feminism, Toni Cade Bambara’s writing and the feminist women-of-color anthologies of the 60s and 70s anticipated interdisciplinary scholarly movements that incorporate memory and personal narrative into critical analysis. Rather than being an origin point for any of these movements or initiatives, the artists and authors above represent simultaneous continuity and adaptation through their art that maintains a legacy in areas throughout the U.S. South—a performance in the Ninth Ward, the contemporary urban renewal of Ybor City, or a writer’s workshop in Atlanta.

As the examples within this dissertation attest, artistic representation of Civil-Rights-era activism reveals how the many disputes over a movement’s ideological grounding and its method of action challenge a sense of unity. Framing these dissents is the set of aesthetics that can bond together factions within a movement, such as freedom songs or a style of writing in a collected anthology. Aesthetics also create a sense of continuum that enables alliances between generations and across ideological divides. As I hoped to show in “The Radical South,” there is tremendous power in aesthetics and the performative aspects of social movements are not decorative, but essential to social change.

Transnational protest aesthetics are now an integral part of what is being referred to as the “new civil rights movement,” a loose affiliation of a group of independent grassroots initiatives such as Occupy, the Black Lives Matter Movement, LGBTQ activism, and immigration reform movements. These movements are connected through aesthetics: the Twitter hashtag, the occupation of space from Zuccotti Park in New York to Maidan in Kiev, the rampant use of social media and the continued use of the term “grassroots.” In the many articles that contrast the new civil rights movement from its predecessor, the term grassroots is frequently used to denote that these movements do not have recognizable leaders. In an article
for *The Guardian*, one of the movement’s organizers, Alicia Garza, said, “If you’re only looking for the straight black man who is a preacher, you’re not going to find it,” suggesting that the contemporary movement is more multi-faceted and more democratic than its predecessor.

However, this claim is in danger of further solidifying the dominant narrative about the Civil Rights Movement that privileges singular leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X. Together with the new civil rights movement, “The Radical South” is part of a new discourse that show how Civil-Rights-era activism was always grassroots. The examples in this dissertation show how many of the social movement boundaries and expectations that the new civil rights movement hopes to undo, were already undone during the Civil Rights Movement, which was much more decentralized and complex than the historical narrative that still surrounds it. A further examination of grassroots activism during the Civil Rights Movement reveals the continuities between the two movements, especially in the relationship between art and politics—the aesthetics of protest.

For example, the image below was taken during a demonstration in Hong Kong in September, 2014, where students and members of the movement Occupy Central protested for a democratic election and government in the face of tear gas and pepper spray. In a unified gesture, they raised their arms in the “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” symbol used by protesters in Ferguson, Missouri in relation to the shooting of the young African American teenager Michael Brown by police in 2014:
Figure 6: Protestors in Hong Kong in September, 2014. Photo by Alex Ogle, AFP, Getty.

The symbolic gesture placed them in solidarity with the Ferguson protestors while also controversially appropriating a gesture meant to be symbolic of the historically-specific legacy of racism and police brutality in the United States. In the above image, “Hands up, don’t shoot” detaches from its context and becomes a symbol for the victimization of youth in systemic injustice. A critical perspective of this moment could observe the dilution and overshadowing of the context of Ferguson and would point out that perhaps these two movements do not have enough in common to warrant unity. Despite the political nuances of these two movements, the aesthetic gesture of protest reveals how a visual can create a moment of transnational solidarity as the protesters become “separate beings in the unity of art.” This protest aesthetic not only collapses geographic difference through a movement, but also reminds viewers of the global interconnectivity of social movement activism through social media. The networks created by Twitter and Facebook are vastly different than those created by SNCC or BLKARTSOUTH print culture, however, they represent people listening to each other across time and space and creating
adaptable communities that move in contingency with different issues.

Above all, social movements move. In order to survive over time, they adapt and improvise, which is why performance is so central to this project. The concept of visual jazz used in the first chapter applies widely as a method to read aesthetics of protest and gestures—such as the one above—as a form of political dance. Velma’s improvised dance at the conclusion of The Salt Eaters, reveals the importance of movement and artistic expression in political movements. Together with Julian Mayfield’s performative protest at the conclusion of The Grand Parade, the performative funerary rituals in Yglesias’s The Truth About Them, and the FST’s activist theater, the examples within this dissertation bring creative performance to the foreground of social change. The protesters in Hong Kong evidence the continued importance of aesthetics in the new civil rights movement and how the contemporary moment exists with the continuum of cultural activism that this project explores. Future scholars will debate whether of not our contemporary surge of activism was a continuation of the Civil Rights Movement, or its own separate entity. However, as the scholarly conversation moves forward, there will always be local people like Velma gathering together, organizing, making the phone calls, and telling their stories.


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Textual Analysis, 2012, Instructor of Record
Introduction to literature in English before 1800, 2012; Co-Instructor
Survey of American Literature 1900-present, 2013, Co-Instructor and Lecturer

Department of English, University of Mississippi, 2010-present
Instructor of Record
Writing 101: First-Year Writing, 2013 (online), 2015
Writing 102: Business Writing, 2016
English 223: Survey of American Literature to the Civil War, 2011

Teaching Assistant
ENGL 383: Shakespeare, 2014
ENGL 223: Survey of American Literature to the Civil War, 2013
ENGL 222: Survey of World Literature since 1650, 2011, 2012 (online)
ENGL 224: American Literature since the Civil War, 2011, 2012

Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, Columbia University
Topics in Latino History and Culture, 2009

SERVICE
**Ethnicity and Identity Research Group:** Founder of a graduate student focus group that coordinates workshops and seminars with invited guest speakers, Department of English, Germanic, and Romance Studies, University of Copenhagen, Denmark, 2014-15

**Works-in-Progress Seminar Series:** Founder and coordinator with the English Graduate Student Body of a series of public presentations by faculty and graduate students. English Department, University of Mississippi and University of Copenhagen 2013-2014

**American Cultures of Work Symposium,** Center for Transnational American Studies, University of Copenhagen, Denmark, assistant coordinator, Spring 2013

**ALLIES Program for LGBTQ Equality,** member and trained student instructor, 2012 – present

**William Faulkner Remembrance Day,** assistant coordinator, Spring/Summer 2012

**American Studies Graduate Student Body Representative,** Liberal Studies MA Board, Columbia University, NY 2008-2009

**Butler Library Graduate Assistant,** Columbia University, NY Spring 2009

**Project Pencratch,** Co-founder and director, after school literacy program affiliated with Binghamton University and the Binghamton Urban League, Binghamton, NY, 2006-2007

**LANGUAGES**
Spanish; Swedish; Danish

**AFFILIATIONS AND MEMBERSHIPS**
American Studies Association
Modern Languages Association
British Association for American Studies
Society for the Study of Southern Literature
Society for the Study of Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States
American Literature Society
American Comparative Literature Society

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