

STAGING CIVIL RIGHTS: AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE,
PERFORMANCE, AND INNOVATION

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines the relationship between African American literature and performance during the modern Civil Rights Movement. It traces the ways in which the movement was acted out on the theatrical stage as creatively as it was at those sites of embodied activism that have survived in intellectual and popular memories: lunch counters and buses, schools and courtrooms, streets and prisons. Whereas television and photography have served as the primary ways of knowing the movement, this project turns to African American literature, and the live performances it inspired, to provide a more complex framework for analyzing the movement's cultural arm.

Focusing in particular on African American drama and poetry, I argue that critically analyzing the intersections of literature and performance uncovers conceptual and epistemological frameworks that productively reorient traditional accounts of the modern Civil Rights Movement. In this vein, I examine the works of relatively well-known artists, such as Lorraine Hansberry, James Baldwin, Alice Childress, Langston Hughes, Margaret Walker, Amiri Baraka, and Gil Scott-Heron, and lesser known artists

and performance collectives, such as Paul Carter Harrison, Pearl Cleage, the Free Southern Theater, and the Broadside Press Poets.

Building upon this archival intervention, I argue that black writers and performers develop what I term acts of *black performative revealing*, in which they use their bodies, the stage, and literature to play with and challenge iconographies of race, gender, sexuality, nation, and modernity that circulated in U.S. public discourse and international media. Despite preoccupations with “making it new” in the realm of art, science, and technology, there was a troubling, diametrical desire to constrict people of African descent to antiquated modes of being in the domain of rights, equality, and justice. Yet, from the revered stages of Broadway to community theater performances that were produced in the cotton fields of Mississippi, blacks crafted innovative performance and aesthetic techniques that creatively challenged and repurposed the very lexicon of scientific and technological innovation. Utilizing these practices to reimagine race, gender, sexuality, nation, and U.S. modernity, the artists studied here invite more nuanced conceptions of the movement’s “classical” phase, which has, of late, fallen out of critical vogue because of a “dominant” narrative that the intersection of literature and performance fruitfully unsettles.

Contents

Introduction: African American Literature and Performance in the “Short” Civil Rights Movement		
Chapter One: Revealing Whiteness in the Black Theatric Imagination: Race, Visual Culture, and the Modern Civil Rights Movement		33
1.1	Visuality and African American Theater	42
1.2	The Politics and Aesthetics of Racial Interiority	49
1.3	Staging Black Disappearance	63
1.4	Decolonization and the White Ethnographic Gaze	80
Chapter Two: “Of Time, Space, and Revolution”: Performance and the Making of Modern Blackness in the U.S. South		87
2.1	Raced Temporalities and Chronotopes of Black Political Dissent	96
2.2	“They’ll Take Drama Into the South”	107
2.3	Waiting for Godot in the Global South	143
Chapter Three: Playing the Changes: Gender, Performance Poetry, and Maternal Pathologies		147
3.1	Living Archives and the Ontology of Poetic Performance	153
3.2	Slipping the U.S. Nation-State into the Dozens	158
3.3	Recording a New Paradigm of Black Familiality	172
3.4	Prophets for a New Day: Broadside Voices	183
Chapter 4: Experimental Leaders: Drama, Desire, and the Queer Erotics of Civil Rights Historiography		193
4.1	(Il)legible Black Masculinities	200
4.2	On the Black Queer Erotic Present	205
4.3	Scientific Experimentation and Queer Variables	214
4.4	“I Love My Mind, My Asshole Too”	230
4.5	Male-Male Sexual Assault and Civil Rights Activism	242
Coda: Specters of Equality: The Civil Rights Movement in a Color Blind Society		254
Works Cited		262

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: <i>Oscar Brown's Kicks and Co.</i> (1961)	10
Figure 2: <i>U.S.A. '65.</i> (Merton Simpson, 1965)	48
Figure 3: Singular White Woman on Montgomery Bus. (Villet, Grey, c. 1955)	65
Figure 4: White Bus Driver on Montgomery Bus. (Villet, Grey, c. 1955)	65
Figure 5: We Insist! :Freedom Now Suite [Album Cover]. (Max Roach, 1960)	104
Figure 6: <i>Freedom Now.</i> (Reginald Gammon, 1963)	105
Figure 7: <i>Map of Free Southern Theater Tours in the U.S. South, 1964-1967.</i> (1969)	108
Figure 8: Group Of Prominent civil rights activists assembled in front of the gate of Tougaloo. (Charles Kelley, 1966)	113
Figure 9: <i>A Mississippi Audience Watches a Performance by the Free Southern Theater</i> (Norris McNamara, 1965)	139

Introduction:

“African American Literature and Performance in the “Short” Civil Rights Movement”

In a 1960 letter to performance virtuoso Sammy Davis, Jr., Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. describes art as both an aesthetic enterprise and a vehicle of social change. “Art,” he suggests “can move and alter people in subtle ways because, like love, it speaks through and to the heart” (*The Papers* 582). King’s optimism concerning the social and political uses of art followed on the heels of attending a New York City production of *Kicks and Co.* (1961)—Oscar Brown, Jr.’s riveting play about the modern Civil Rights Movement:

To my knowledge, rarely has there come upon the American scene a work which so perceptively mirrors the conflict of soul, the moral choices that confront our people, both Negro and white, in these fateful times. And yet a work which is at the same time, so light of touch, entertaining—and thereby all the more persuasive. This young man’s work will, in its own special way, affect the conscience of vast numbers with the moral force and vigor of our young people. (582)

Just one year earlier, King had written another missive to famed African American poet Langston Hughes, in which he accords a similar social and political use-value to poetry. He was especially impressed by a piece entitled “Poem for a Man,” an occasional poem that Hughes had written for the seventieth birthday celebration of A. Phillip Randolph—the iconic civil rights leader whom King himself hailed as the “Dean of Negro leaders.” Hughes’s poem, King suggests, had “added another weapon of the pen to our struggle” (348). Interestingly, though, the poem was not confined to the page, but was performed at Randolph’s star-studded celebration by actor and playwright Ossie Davis, who, as

King points out, was then starring in Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 play, *A Raisin in the Sun*.

An acclaimed performer in the social drama of the modern Civil Rights Movement,¹ King knew all-too-well that certain modes of representation and strategic performance techniques were central to blacks' hopes of transforming the U.S. nation-state into a more open and just society. In April 1963, for example, he utilized his own body to stage a radical act of black political dissent that deliberately violated a Birmingham, Alabama, "injunction" against protest that sought to deter precisely this mode of embodied performance. Duly carted off to jail, King was placed in solitary confinement, where he penned his now canonical "Letter From a Birmingham Jail." In this rhetorically dazzling letter, King acknowledges the ways in which scripts and rehearsals influenced embodied protest in the moment of live performance. "[W]e would present our very bodies," he writes "as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and national community . . . [W]e decided to undertake a process of self-purification. We began a series of workshops on nonviolence, and we repeatedly asked ourselves: 'Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?' Are you able to endure the ordeal of jail'" (LFABJ 2)?

¹I borrow the term social drama from Victor Turner. Social dramas, he contends, are those moments of social cooperation and conflict that unfold through a four-part cycle of breach, crises, redressive action, and resolution. In addition to theorizing the movement as a "social drama," as is often the case," I argue that we should pay more careful attention to the actual literary "dramas" that unfolded during this historical moment, particularly because they afford new ways of knowing this watershed period of social change. See Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, (NY: PAJ, 1982).

I begin with King's observations about Oscar Brown, Jr.'s musical drama, Langston Hughes's poem, and King's own performance of protest (both written and embodied) because they index the centrality of literature and performance to the social, cultural, and political fields of the modern Civil Rights Movement. As King's letters make clear, acts of black political dissent were not restricted to those sites of performance that have taken precedence in histories and memories of the movement: prisons and churches; court rooms and public streets; lunch counters and buses, to offer a partial list. Rather, as this dissertation demonstrates, black artists transformed a range of textual and performance spaces into creative sites of articulation, utilizing writing and embodied performance to reconfigure grammars of representation² that have historically sustained rituals of racial exclusion.

Staging Civil Rights is a study of black writers and performers who worked at the nexus of literature and performance during the modern Civil Rights Movement. Using their bodies and the imaginative possibilities of literature, these artists tell valuable stories of race, gender, sexuality, nation, and modernity that are routinely occluded from traditional accounts of the movement. While King's time in prison has been enshrined in histories of modern civil rights activism, far less has been said about *Kicks and Co.* or the prolific writings that Langston Hughes produced in the thick of the movement; about Margaret Walker's "civil rights poems" or any of Frank London Brown's fiction that

²Here, representation refers to both the denial of political representation as well as discursive representations of blackness that have been mobilized to deny blacks access to the category of the human and the citizen. These related discursive and political practices constitute a dual "crisis of representation" that black artists engage through innovative performance and aesthetic techniques.

limns the diverse ideological and geographical dimensions of the movement.³ This list catalogues a small fraction of an innovative body of work that I term *literatures of the “short” Civil Rights Movement* (circa 1954-1976). By rethinking the familiar transition in African American literary history from Naturalism and Social Protest to the Black Arts Movement, this dissertation calls attention to the tide of black literary production that emerged during the intervening period—that is, the “classical” phase of the modern Civil Rights Movement. Indeed, black writers and performers during this historical moment often blurred the line between art and politics. As writer Kay Boyle observed in the September 1963 issue of *Liberation Magazine*, black artists knew “when to push the typewriter aside and march through the streets, in the cause of the redress of grievances” and when to use their art to be “articulately there” (Boyle 9). It is my contention that critically analyzing African American literature produced during the “short” Civil Rights Movement, and the diverse performances it inspired, reveals new epistemological frameworks that enable us to know this historical moment in different and innovative ways.

Necessarily interdisciplinary, *Staging Civil Rights* contributes to African American literary criticism, performance studies, civil rights historiography, and cultural criticism surrounding the modern Civil Rights Movement. It charts a broader trajectory for analyzing the movement’s cultural arm and, thereby, expands the ways in which we

³ These texts include, for example, Margaret Walker’s *Prophets for a New Day* (1970), which contains works that Walker calls her “civil rights poems,” Frank London Brown’s novel *Trumbull Park* (1959) and his short story “In the Shadow of a Dying Soldier” (1959), which reimagines the Emmett Till trial (which Brown himself travelled to Mississippi to cover as a reporter), and several Langston Hughes poems and plays, such as *Jericho Jim Crow* (1963) and *The Panther and the Lash: Poems of Our Times* (1967).

know, theorize, and remember this historic world phenomenon. This dissertation has three primary aims: (1) to expand the archive of black cultural products that inform intellectual and popular conceptions of the movement by examining the intersections of literature and performance; (2) to theorize the ways in which literatures of the “short” Civil Rights Movement, and their attendant performances, challenge the terms and assumptions of traditional histories of the movement, particularly by reconfiguring discursive categories of race, gender, sexuality, and nation; and (3) to rethink modernity and logics of modern innovation through the prism of rights, equality, and justice, instead of privileging familiar rubrics of scientific and technological progress.

Historiography and the Archive

My term “literatures of the short Civil Rights Movement” is in conversation with Erica Edwards’s notion of “civil rights fiction” and intervenes in recent historiographical debates about the movement’s temporal parameters. According to Edwards, “civil rights fiction” refers to “both the narratives written during the black freedom struggle of the post-World War II era . . . and the many post-civil rights narratives about the civil rights era” (Edwards 108). My term departs, however, by focusing in particular on those literatures that were produced during and about what has come to be termed the “short” Civil Rights Movement. To be sure, texts such as Richard Wright’s short story, “Fire and Cloud”—which Wright completed before World War II—incorporate marches and other acts of collective protest, engage civil rights leadership, and contain many of the staples that have come to define the movement and the literature produced about it. But black artists such as Margaret Walker and Langston Hughes often understood this period as a distinct social, cultural, and political moment. They point to the ways in which, during

the “short” Civil Rights Movement, there was a “structure of feeling” that was not limited, as historians often suggest, to white people who became conscious of the movement when images of black bodies poured into their homes on televisions and in other forms of media. Rather, this phase of the movement was also experienced and shaped by blacks, who also were affected by what they saw on their television sets, and many of whom were being introduced to civil rights activism for the first time.

These, among other things, encourage a rethinking of the impulse to begin the movement at an earlier historical moment and to suggest that blacks themselves did not perceive the “classical phase” as a distinct historical moment. In this vein, my understanding of the modern Civil Rights Movement intervenes in recent historiographical debates about the movement’s temporal parameters. In the last fifteen years, historians, in particular, have quite vigorously debated the movement’s historical origins. One strand of critical thought that has gained particular traction is the “Long Civil Rights Movement Framework.” Scholars such as Jacquelyn Hall, Nikhil Singh, Thomas Sugrue, and Glenda Gilmore, have indeed made it difficult to limit black civil rights activism to any formulaic narrative that is always already self-evident. More specifically, their scholarship troubles “commonplace” accounts of this historical moment that overemphasize a period that has come to be dubbed the “short” civil rights movement (Sugrue xiv). Beginning with the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, this truncated phase of the movement culminates with the passage of two significant legislative acts: the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. According to Nikhil Singh, these “short” and “King-centric” accounts of the movement tend to

foreground a “familiar cast” of historical actors: “a weary Rosa Parks, idealistic, well-dressed black students, and the charismatic minister” (Singh 5).

In sum, the “simplified story” of the “short” movement has obfuscated a set of more complex dynamics and realities—geographical and ideological, historical and economic—that unequivocally informed the landscape of modern civil rights activism. For example, the movement was not confined to the U.S. South, Communism, economics, and the “Left” played decisive, if underexplored, roles, and the movement’s origins go back as far as the 1920s (Gilmore 1). Advancing these among other propositions, scholars of the “long” Civil Rights Movement have labored to “make civil rights harder,” not purely for the sake of uncovering a concealed historical depth, but also to disrupt structures of discursive violence that utilize history as a motor of disingenuous storytelling that, at every turn, attempts to (re)produce a social order capable of protecting the interests, the property, and the desires of those sectors of the population that have historically wielded power and struggled to suppress any material change that threatens to undermine these uneven distributions of power (Hall 1235).⁴ *Staging Civil Rights* shares these investments. It differs, however, in method, which is to say: I am less inclined to suppose that making civil rights “harder” necessitates a turn away from the

⁴ Proponents of the “long” civil rights movement have rightly acknowledged the ways in which the legacy of the modern civil rights movement is quite frequently distorted by advocates of color blind ideology who often cite Martin Luther King, Jr.’s desire to end racism as “proof” that New Right logics of color blindness are the natural outcome of modern Civil Rights activism. I not only echo this criticism, but dedicate the epilogue to meditating on these kinds of historical appropriations.

“short” civil rights movement.⁵

In a sense, I find that there has been a troubling consensus within historical scholarship on the long movement to jettison the movement’s “classical phase,” as if the “dominant narrative” is the heuristic Alpha and Omega, the epistemic beginning and end (Hall 1233). It is my contention that the consequence of this gesture has been an ironic reification of the same reductionist narratives that historians are eager to complicate. In other words, by allowing traditional histories to stand in as metonyms for an entire historical moment—and to cite these accounts as a justification for a critical exodus away from the “classical” phase—is to discount alternative practices, bodies, and experiential realities that cannot be beholden to prevailing histories of the movement. In doing so, an entire corpus gets obscured not only in cleverly distorted histories that manufacture colorblind ideologies, but *also* in the about-face away from the movement’s classical phase that appears to be protocol in scholarship on the “long” Civil Rights Movement. In

⁵ Indeed, the LCM framework has had its share of critique, particularly for the ways in which it possibly operates as a metaphorical “Vampire,” a periodizing rubric that collapses historical divisions and, thereby, maps the status of the “undead” onto the movement. As the work of Martin Delaney, Frederick Douglass, Frances E.W. Harper, Ida B. Wells, and so many others makes clear, the lineage of organized struggles for African American civil rights certainly precedes the 1920s and 1930s. In fact, several of the criteria that justify moving the origins to the early twentieth-century resonate with black civil rights activism of the nineteenth century. To be sure, much of this criticism has come from those who seem more interested in defending the “New Right” that scholars of the LCM framework have critiqued. See, for example: Eric Arnesen, “Reconsidering the ‘Long Civil Rights Movement,’” (*Historically Speaking*, Vol. 10, No. 2, April 2009): 31-34; David L. Chappel, “The Lost Decade of Civil Rights,” (*Historically Speaking*, Vol. 10, No. 2, April 2009): 37-41; Brian Dolinar, *The Black Cultural Front: Black Writers and Artists of the Depression Generation*, (MS: Univeristy of Mississippi Press, 2012); and Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, “The ‘Long Movement’ as Vampire: The Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies,” (*The Journal of African American History*, Vol. 92, No. 2, Spring 2007): 265-288.

this vein, *Staging Civil Rights* asks two key questions: Does the problem of the “short” movement arise, in part, from continuing to predicate knowledge of the movement upon a decidedly circumscribed archive, even as we endeavor to chart more composite histories? Furthermore, what other archives and conceptual possibilities allow us to complicate civil rights history by articulating more dynamic understandings of the movement’s “classical” phase?

While we are certainly familiar with iconic photographs of protestors being arrested, sprayed by fire hoses, and violently attacked by dogs, far less is known about *Kicks and Co.* or James Hatch and C. Bernard Jackson’s play *Fly Blackbirds* (1961), about John Oliver Killens’s novel *Sippi* (1967) or Lorraine Hansberry’s play “The Arrival of Mr. Todog,” about the 1960s “Freedom Shows” at Philadelphia’s Uptown Theatre or Umbra—a cadre of black poets who met regularly on New York City’s Lower East Side in the 1960s, and made the modern Civil Rights Movement a central part of both their art and conversations. Without a doubt, these texts, performances, and artistic collaborations attracted substantial and diverse audiences. On its opening night, *Kicks and Co.*, for example, sold each one of the 5,000 theater seats that were in Chicago’s newly built McCormick Place, signaling the widespread interest Brown’s musical drama had stimulated. Having raised over \$400,000 in backing and \$100,000 dollars in advanced tickets sales, Brown donated \$15,000 to the National Urban League, joining



Figure 1: *Oscar Brown's Kicks and Co.* 1961. Photograph. "Kicks & CO. Opens in Chicago: Oscar Brown Musical Gets." By Larry Stills. *Jet Magazine*. Oct. 12, 1961, 59. Print.

Nina Simone, Langston Hughes, Sidney Poitier, and other black artists who contributed a portion of the proceeds from their performance to civil rights organizations.

Aesthetically, *Kicks and Co.* was equally superb, and "the audience applauded every moment" (*Jet* 59). Yet, commercially, it failed, and failed miserably. The critics snubbed the play, and ultimately crushed its almost certain hopes of making it to Broadway. But if—as Judith Halberstam has argued—failure and failed archives are productive sites for "generat[ing] new forms of knowing," then we might reclaim the cultural and political meanings that manifested in performances of Brown's play—meanings that are particularly valuable to the enterprise of constructing more complex histories of the movement (Halberstam 7). One hardly finds in Brown's play the seemingly predictable histories that have attracted so much antipathy for the movement's classical phase. Instead, audiences found representations of sex, discussions of

miscegenation, critiques of nonviolence, and love of the secular, all of which reflected the complexity of the modern Civil Rights Movement, even during its classical or “short” phase.

Recognizing the need to uncover similarly complex cultural products that thrived during this historical moment, *Staging Civil Rights* lingers in the “break” of the “short” civil rights movement. It assembles, critically analyzes, and revalues an archive of alternative stories that inhere precisely within the period that has given historians such pause. If narratives that privilege the “classical” phase of the movement have been “simple” and “dominant” and “commonplace,” then critically analyzing the intersection of African American literature and performance allows us to uncover what Houston Baker has called “new and surprising sites of resistance,” and, to which I would add, sites of self-making and sociality (Baker 16). Thus, instead of jettisoning an entire historical moment, constructing more multidimensional histories of the movement, and worrying the line of stealthy appropriations of the movement’s historical matter can be achieved by a willingness to modify the archival and conceptual schemas that have, heretofore, informed traditional histories of the movement.

My dissertation moves in this direction by excavating and critically analyzing a diverse archive of African American drama, poetry, and performance that has come to occupy the devalued epistemic category that Michel Foucault terms “subjugated knowledge”: “contents that have been buried or masked . . . a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as... hierarchically inferior” (Foucault 7). By moving this archive from the periphery to the center, I argue that African American literature, and the live performances it inspired, are key sites to which we can turn to

“make civil rights harder.” I pursue this line of inquiry by turning to African American drama and poetry—literary forms that assumed a noticeable currency during the modern Civil Rights Movement. In the throes of modern civil rights activism, poetry and drama, especially when fused with performance, could be produced relatively quickly (which accorded with the temporality of blacks’ desires for freedom “now”), were mobile (circulating in newspapers, on broadsides, and during live performances), invited and galvanized group assembly (reinforcing logics of racial collectivity that were at the core of black civil rights activism), and, in their performed iterations, did not require of their audiences a certain dexterity in reading.

Genre, therefore, was key to the articulation of black freedom dreams. During this era, African American theater and performance operated as “social weapons and tools of protest,”⁶ and poetry, in a similar vein, provided a “voice” of “opposition to social and political conditions and was an art “of the people, for the people, and by the people.”⁷ Recognizing the value that drama and poetry were accorded during the modern Civil Rights Movement, I bring to bear upon the task of making civil rights “harder” an expanded archive of African American poetry and drama: community theater, Broadway plays, audiotaped poetry recordings, performance poems, as well as off-Broadway theatrical productions, attending to both written and performed iterations. Examining these works not simply serves the additive function of multiplying points of accessing the

⁶See Harry J. Elam, Jr., “The Device of Race: An Introduction,” *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader*, eds. Harry J. Elam, Jr. and David Krasner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001): 7.

⁷See Jeffrey L. Coleman, ed. *Words of Protest, Words of Freedom: Poetry of the American Civil Rights Movement and Era* (NC: Duke University Press, 2012): 3.

movement, but reconfigures the epistemological grounds upon which knowledge about the movement has traditionally been cultivated.

By situating poetry and drama at the center of my analysis, this study also contributes to a body of scholarship that has begun to theorize the movement's cultural arm. Civil rights "signifies the cultural work of a mass movement,"⁸ as recent scholarship by Waldo Martin, Nicole Fleetwood, Scott Saul, Leigh Raiford, Ingrid Monson, Elizabeth Abel, Maurice Berger, Shana Redmond, Martin Berger, and others⁹ has quite convincingly demonstrated, in that "black cultural politics"¹⁰ were crucial to social and political imperatives at the heart of the movement. The modern Civil Rights Movement, these critics suggest, was not only a significant moment in black political history, but was also a seminal era in black artistic and cultural production. These interdisciplinary scholars have forwarded new ways of organizing and producing

⁸See Houston Baker, "Critical Memory and the Black Public Sphere," (*Public Culture*, Vol. 7, No.1, 1994): 16.

⁹ See, for example, Elizabeth Abel, *Signs of the Times: The Visual Politics of Jim Crow*. (CA: University of California Press, 2010); Martin A. Berger, *Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography*. (CA: University of California, 2011); Maurice Berger, *For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, (CT: Yale University Press, 2010); Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*, (IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *No Coward Soldiers: Black Cultural Politics in Postwar America*, (MA: Harvard, 2005); Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa*, (NY: Oxford, 2007); Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle*, (NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Shana L. Redmond, *Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora*, (NY: NYU Press, 2014).

¹⁰ See Martin 4. "Black cultural politics," Martin suggests, is "the inevitable politicization of culture and culturalization of politics among African Americans growing out of the imperatives of their ongoing freedom struggle."

knowledge from within the very parameters of the “short” Civil Rights Movement—from Abel’s analysis of segregation signs as materials objects that contain meaningful semiotic and epistemic value to Fleetwood’s theory of photographic practices of “non-iconicity” that challenged the movement’s obsessions with black icons. Far from “tired clichés,” these thinkers have extracted from this “short” historical formation alternative ways of knowing that productively reorient our thinking about the movement (Sugrue xxi).

With a few noticeable exceptions, however, literature has rarely figured centrally in discourses surrounding the movement’s “cultural front.”¹¹ To be sure, scholars such as Erica Edwards, Mary Helen Washington, Norman Harris, and Jeffrey Coleman have invited a more careful accounting of literature’s centrality to this historical moment.¹² Nevertheless, the prevailing tendency is to occlude, or even summarily dismiss, literature as a tenable framework. In this vein, Maurice Berger offers an instructive observation. Photography, film, television, and other forms of visual representation, Berger posits, possess a “unique ability to offer seemingly irrefutable evidence and testimony as an ‘objective record . . . of reality.’” But “words,” he continues, are “hampered by their

¹¹ Michael Denning coins the notion of a “cultural front” to theorize the relationship between culture and politics during the Popular Front Movement, focusing specifically on the “proletarian avant-garde of the depression.” See Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997).

¹² Jeffrey L. Coleman, ed., *Words of Protest, Words of Freedom: Poetry of the American Civil Rights Movement and Era*, (NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Mary Helen Washington, “Foreword,” *Trumbull Park*, (MA: Northeastern University Press, 2005). Erica R. Edwards, *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership*, (MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

physical and conceptual distance from reality: they are always and inevitably many steps removed from the corporeal world, the result of the translation of objects and events into a rigid linguistic system” (Berger 10). Berger imagines words to be disconnected from reality, decoupled from the body, and bound within a “rigid linguistic system”; however, the texts and performances that I examine throughout *Staging Civil Rights* exhibit far more intimate linkages among the body, the “word,” and reality. There is, of course, the obvious relationship between word and body that emerges in performance and weaves spoken language into the very architecture of the act. But even in written texts, words and bodies are often brought into close proximity. As W.B. Worthen has argued, writing “cannot determine its performance,” but it “frequently imagines the terms of an engagement with embodiment, representing, even allegorizing a vision of language as an instrument of enactment” (Worthen 139).

This study takes seriously these linkages between word and performance. It builds upon recent scholarship at the intersection of performance and African American Studies that has done important work to theorize the ways in which performance has the potential to recalibrate identity and repurpose conditions of oppression through a range of creative practices. Scholars such as Daphne A. Brooks, Tavia Nyong’o, Koritha Mitchell, Jayna Brown, Harvey Young, and Stephanie Batiste have explored the ways in which black cultural actors employ embodied performance to unmoor black bodies from rigid categories of social being that restrain the social, political, and ontological possibilities of black people. I contribute to these discourses by tracing the ways in which, during the modern Civil Rights Movement, black writers and performers used their bodies to stage various acts of what Jayna Brown calls “disruptive creativity”

(Brown 58). The body, Brown argues, “is a fundamental location to look for forms of response to regimes that are, in the first instance, based on the very fleshly practices of violence and physical coercion” (15). Thus, even as black bodies were assaulted, murdered, and traumatized during the modern Civil Rights Movement, they engaged in creative acts that dismantled the intransigent structures of power that fueled wanton desires to suppress the emergence of “new,” fully-righted black citizens.

In *Living With Lynching: African American Lynching Plays, Performance, and Citizenship*, Koritha Mitchell critiques the nearly impulsive turn to photography as the primary frame for viewing and knowing lynching and its cultural logic. The very construction of archives, Mitchell shows, is often an enactment of forgetting, and thus a discursive performance of violence, that has everything to do with elevating certain ways of knowing over others. Indeed, the archive is not an innocent repository of historical ephemera. As Jacques Derrida reminds us: “[T]here is no political power without control of the archive” (Derrida 4). What both Mitchell and Derrida point to are ways in which archives are entangled in a complex web of social power. Thus, we should examine why we traffic in certain modes of representation and not others. Such probing facilitates the expansion of archives, which, in turn, enables the production of new knowledge.¹³

¹³ According to Walter Benjamin, instruments of mechanical reproduction, such as cameras and televisions, have the potential to disrobe what he calls the “aura” of the work of art, its “authenticity,” that is to say. In other words, they “jeopardize . . . the authority of the object . . . and detach[] the reproduced object from the domain of tradition” (Benjamin 221). Ironically, television and photography have come to be imbued with their own “authenticity” in scholarly and popular accounts of the movement. They have assumed, quite paradoxically, something that borders closely on an “aura.”

This is the foundation upon which *Staging Civil Rights* builds. A sustained study of the complex relationship between literature and performance during the modern Civil Rights movement, this dissertation contributes to an already robust body of civil rights historiography, cultural criticism, and performance theory by uncovering alternative epistemologies that are afforded in and through critical analyses of the intersection of poetry, drama, and performance during the modern Civil Rights Movement. It demonstrates the ways in which Oscar Brown, Jr.'s play *Kicks and Co.*, for example, is not some ersatz epistemic source that is somehow inferior to photographic and televisual representations—which are as constructed, as situated, and, therefore, as discursive as Brown's play—but is an aesthetically innovative, culturally and politically significant, and downright hilarious play. With its creative fusion of written and embodied vocabularies, the play's complex textures allow us to unmoor critical and popular conceptions of the movement from those modes of representation that have been enthroned in positions of authority.

To be clear, I am not calling for the abandonment of those modes of representation that are customarily privileged in histories and memories of the movement. Nor am I suggesting that a binary relationship between these cultural forms and the archive of literature and performance that is at this center of this study. Rather, we should contemplate televisual representations right alongside the plays of Lorraine Hansberry, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Alice Childress, and Amiri Baraka. We should put the poetic traces left behind by Margaret Walker, Gil Scott-Heron, and the Broadside Poets in conversation with photographs that have assumed nearly iconic status. Paul Carter Harrison, the Free Southern Theater, and a host of black writers and

performers who worked at the nexus of African American literature and performance produced works that are just as politically tinged, affectively moving, and aesthetically innovative as freedom songs whose sonic matter fueled a people and a movement. In short, “literatures” of the “short” Civil Rights Movement, and the live performances they encouraged, should exist in an intertextual relationship with modes of representation that have traditionally had more currency. Somewhere in the dialectical tensions that emerge from these intertextual linkages lies a complexity that historians have been eager to locate.

Modern Innovation and the Limits of “Making it New”

The capacity of new archives to furnish new materials for emplotting more complex histories is particularly evident in the representations of race, gender, sexuality, nation, and modernity that emerge in the plays, poems, and performances that this dissertation centers. I argue that black writers and performers (1) creatively engage and refigure popular conceptions of modern innovation and (2) revise discursive conceptions of race, gender, sexuality, and nation that circulated in U.S. public discourse and international media—many of which attempted to impede any form of innovation that enabled black citizens to craft new modes of being by renegotiating their social and political positionalities.

At the same time that the U.S. nation-state was experiencing the rise of television, sending spaceships into previously unexplored territories, and circulating and touting jazz as a distinctly “American” art form, the social construction of racial identity operated as a discursive tool of anti-black oppression that attempted to constrict black people to antiquated modes of being. Thus, even as innovation became the rallying cry of the day,

there was hardly a serious investment in creating “new” black subjects who, in a modern world, could enjoy unmitigated access to the rights, privileges, and protections of U.S. citizenship. Certainly, this practice of utilizing identity as a vehicle of social exclusion was an intra-racial practice as well. Being black and woman, queer and black, or any combination of the two, often resulted in a similar straining against insidious plots of patriarchy and homophobia aimed to foreclose the freedom dreams of certain sectors of the black population.

Throughout African American literatures of the short Civil Rights Movement, black writers and performers probe and unpack these uneven commitments to modern innovation and the discursive conceptions of identity that sustain them. The artists that I examine throughout this dissertation reconfigure normative rubrics of modern innovation, expanding them beyond the familiar terrain of science and technology to incorporate into their measurements the progress that black people were making—or not—toward full citizenship. These artists suggest that the clarion call to “make it new” could not be restricted to the realms of aesthetic, scientific, and technological innovation. By revealing the U.S. nation-state’s selective commitments to the “new,” black poets, dramatists, and performers participate in a practice that I call *Afro-innovation*,¹⁴ through

¹⁴My concept of Afro-innovation offers a framework for capturing the various ways in which people of African descent have contributed to the project of U.S. modernity, in particular. I have found that there is a tendency to position black people outside of, or in opposition to, modernity, particularly within frameworks such as Afro-Modernity, counter-cultures of modernity, alternative modernities, and anti-modernity. I am less interested in imagining blacks as always already responding to modernity, or crafting an entirely different modernity, than I am in accounting for the ways in which blacks have been interlocutors in, and architects of, the project we call U.S. modernity. Afro-Innovation, then, accounts for the specificity of racialized engagements with U.S. modernity in which blacks can initiate as well as respond, and can occupy the inside as

which they challenged a formative aporia at the heart of U.S. modernity: a schismatic paradigm of modern innovation that occluded the fashioning of “new” black subjectivities from national logics of modern innovation, while science- and technology-centered investments in the “new” continued to gain traction.

According to Marshall Berman: “To be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction. It is to be overpowered by the immense bureaucratic organizations that have the power to control and often to destroy all communities, values, lives; and yet to be undeterred in our determination to face these forces, to fight to change their world and make it our own” (Berman 13). Blacks in the U.S. nation-state have been all-too-familiar with these contradictions. While surrounded by nationalist rhetorics that tout inalienable, God-given rights, they have constantly had to combat racist injunctions whose collective goal has been to police the territory of U.S. citizenship. Blacks, however, have continued to take U.S. modernity to task for its diametrical itineraries of modern innovation—contradictions that have produced material and violent consequences for people of African descent.

Afro-Innovation accounts for the social, political, and aesthetic practices that Afro-diasporic people employ to interrogate and engage these contradictions and to

well as the familiar position of the beyond. See, for example: Houston Baker, *Turning South Again: Re-thinking Modernism/Re-thinking Booker T.* (NC: Duke University Press, 2001); James C. Hall, *Mercy, Mercy Me: African American Culture and the American Sixties*, (NY: Oxford University Press, 2001); Dilip P. Gaonkar, ed., *Alternative Modernities*, (NC: Duke University Press, 2001); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic :Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Michael Hanchard, “Afro-Modernity: Temporality, Politics, and the African Diaspora” (*Public Culture*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 1999): 245-268; and Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (NC: Duke University Press, 2005)

achieve modern progress and innovation in the domains of rights, equality, and justice. The etymology of the term “innovation” is particularly useful for situating modern progress within a socio-political framework that accounts for blacks’ efforts to make their worlds anew. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), “innovation” is, on the one hand, the “introduction of novelties; the alteration of what is established by the introduction of new elements or forms.” This brand of innovation is certainly at work in the realm of aesthetics throughout this study, whether considering Langston Hughes’s epic jazz poem, *Ask Your Mama* (1961), or Paul Carter Harrison’s *The Experimental Leader* (1965), or Nikki Giovanni’s recording of her poem “All I Got to Do” (1971). But a second definition is equally significant. Innovation, the OED suggests, also refers to a “political revolution,” “rebellion,” or “insurrection.” While labeled “obsolete,” this definition captures the force of revolution that has animated and propelled black freedom dreams across time and space. During the modern Civil Rights Movement, black artists certainly produced innovative aesthetic forms and techniques, but political revolution was key to fashioning new black subjectivities and accelerating the rate at which blacks were making progress toward social, political, and legal freedom.

If modernity is an “unfinished project,”¹⁵ one of its unfinished components is the continued logics inferiority that get grafted onto black bodies and that which is imagined to constitute blackness. However, from the streets of Montgomery to theaters to Birmingham prisons, blacks mobilized transformative Afro-innovation techniques in

¹⁵ See Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity: An Unfinished Project,” *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, ed. Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves and Seyla Benhabib (MA: MIT Press, 1997): 38-55.

order to “make it new” beyond the terrain of aesthetics, science, and technology. To be sure, I am not suggesting there was an aversion to technology. In fact, throughout *Staging Civil Rights*, I argue that black artists utilized science and technology—both materially and symbolically—to articulate the limits of popular conceptions of modern innovation. Whether using tapes and LPs or modernist tropes such as time and space, interiority, and the scientific method, these artists utilized innovative performance and aesthetic techniques to recalibrate discursive representations of race, gender, and sexuality that contributed to the continued oppression of black people in the midst of modern innovation. I term these particular strategies of Afro-innovation acts of *black performative revealing*: innovative critical, aesthetic, and political acts of poesis that portray modalities of being that the prescriptive and normalizing parameters of identity categorization are far too often reluctant to recognize. Unfolding in both textual and embodied registers, acts of black performative revealing constitute a practice of Afro-innovation that focused on reimagining discursive representations of race, gender, and sexuality that circulated in U.S. public discourse and international media during the modern Civil Rights Movement.

Ralph Ellison and Martin Heidegger, two of the twentieth century’s most incisive theorists of being, shared a common interest in the idea of *revealing*. While occupying noticeably different social locations, both thinkers turned to the concept of revealing to theorize the mechanisms by which societies conceal and distort “truth.” In “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger explores what he calls the “essence” of technology. For him, technology’s essence is “revealing,” by which he refers to a process that facilitates “the presencing of that which at any given time comes to

appearance in bringing-forth. Bringing-forth,” he continues, “brings hither out of concealment forth into unconcealment” (Heidegger 11). The byproduct of this process of unconcealment is “truth.” While Heidegger praises modern technological revealing for its ability to uncover truth, he proposes art as an alternate form of revealing that is particularly suited to enabling “new” modes of looking. He queries: “Could it be that the fine arts are called to poetic revealing? Could it be that revealing lays claim to the arts most primally, so that they for their part may expressly foster the growth of the saving power, may awaken and *found anew our look* into that which grants and our trust in it?” (Heidegger 35; emphasis added).

Ralph Ellison articulates a similar concept of revealing in an essay entitled “The Art of Romare Bearden,” where he also emphasizes art’s ability to foster truth and “new” ways of seeing. For Ellison, revealing operates as a mode of articulation in which artists meld aesthetics and socio-political critique to unveil society’s “trained incapacity to perceive the truth” (“The Art of Romare Bearden” 689). Like Heidegger, Ellison meditates on art’s ability to recalibrate ways of seeing within societies that have been structured in dominance. Such work, he finds, can only be accomplished through “destroying the accepted world by way of revealing the unseen, and creating that which is new” (690). Romare Bearden’s visual art emerges as an ideal instantiation of revealing, as it combines form and content to provide new modes of representation that move over and against troubling media imagery of black racial identity (Ellison 694).

If Heidegger and Ellison perceive revealing to be an aesthetic mode of bringing forth, of unearthing truth, performance is particularly suited to achieving this work, namely as Victor Turner theorizes it. “Through the performance process itself,” Turner

posits, “what is normally sealed up, inaccessible to everyday observation and reasoning, in the depth of sociocultural life, is drawn forth” (Turner 13). He traces the etymological roots of performance to the Old French word *parfournir*, which translates as “to complete” or “carry out thoroughly,” or, more related to Heidegger’s and Ellison’s conceptions of revealing, to “furnish forth.”

Staging Civil Rights builds on this triangulated paradigm of revealing in which literature and performance can “furnish forth” that which is new, that which more closely approximates a certain “truth.” It takes seriously Ellison’s and Heidegger’s claim that technology and media are not singular in their capacity to furnish forth that which has been concealed, but share this ability to reveal with various forms of art. But what is this ‘black,’ one might ask, in the notion of black performative revealing? Here, “black” acknowledges the specific registers in which revealing unfolds within a creative economy of black writers and performers. Put another way, it indexes my interest in the ways in which the particularities of black racial experience inflect both the form and content of revealing in the art that this dissertation takes as its objects of study. To be clear, I am not presupposing a black homology that inevitably binds black bodies across a sea of experiential differences; scholars such as Paul Gilroy, Jacquelyn N. Brown, Deborah Thomas, Kamari Clarke, and Brent Edwards have pointed out the limitations of pining for a racial essence.¹⁶ What I am arguing, however, is that there has been a trans-

¹⁶ See Jacquelyn N. Brown, *Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail: Geographies of Race in Black Liverpool*, (NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Kamari M. Clarke and Deborah A. Thomas, eds., *Globalization and Race: Transformations in the Cultural Productions of Blackness*, (NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Brent H. Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*, (MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); and Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity*

historical effort among Afro-Diasporic peoples to use art as a means to retool the normative perceptual frames that are employed to read and invent social identity—frames that are habitually marshaled to sanction the subjugation of African-descended peoples, but are constantly probed, critiqued, and deconstructed through creative vehicles of black artistic production.

These acts of reconfiguration, and the conditions that foster their existence, signal the importance of the “performative” within acts of “black” performative revealing. At the outset, the very nature of racism and anti-black violence is performative; as Judith Butler has argued, performativity is the “reiteration of a norm or set of norms” (*Bodies* 12). Indeed, systems of oppression constantly rely upon various processes of repetition to reinvent themselves and, thereby, to ensure their longevity. Yet, as *Staging Civil Rights* demonstrates, artists such as Margaret Walker, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry, and Paul Carter Harrison, constantly disrupt white supremacy, patriarchy, homophobia, and other systems of human subjugation that use discourse and strategic acts of reiteration to manufacture discursive constructions of identity that serve their violent agendas. More still, these artists set in motion their own performative iterations of fashioning new subjectivities—writing and staging modes of being that, through acts of repetition, are imbued with the potential to revise normative conceptions of race, gender, and sexuality. Like the cast of actors in Daphne Brooks’s *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*, these artists devised ways of rendering identity “strange”—of “disturb[ing] cultural perceptions of identity formation” (Brooks 5).

and Double Consciousness, (MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

Harvey Young and Fred Moten have offered instructive observations that help to make sense of such competing uses of the performative and the ways in which the performative operates as both a vehicle of oppression and a radical maneuver toward realizing black freedom dreams. According to Young, a “remarkable similarity, a repetition with a difference, exists among embodied black experiences” (Young 5). This similarity of embodied experiences is not simply situated in the experience of oppression, but also in creative and liberatory acts of self-making. Thus, Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, and Fannie Lou Hamer, for example, are certainly linked by the shared experience of enduring white supremacist enactments of violence against the body—from slavery to the modern Civil Rights Movement. But their stories also congeal around a common experience of using embodied acts to remake themselves, a people, and a world, whether on the anti-slavery lecture circuit or protesting in the cotton fields of rural Mississippi.

These related stories of black embodied experiences recall what Fred Moten terms the “material reproductivity of black performance.” According to Moten, this is “an ontological condition . . . the story of how apparent nonvalue functions as a creator of value; it is also the story of how the value animates what appears as nonvalue” (Moten 18). The artists that I assemble in *Staging Civil Rights* recognize the performativity of violence and the ways in which blacks have endured its tragic outcomes. But they also use literature and performance to revalue categories of identity that have been burdened with what Hortense Spillers calls “overdeterminative nominative properties.” Social constructions of identity, Spillers contends, are often so “loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath to come clean. In order for me to speak a truer word concerning myself,” she continues, “I must strip down

through layers of attenuated meaning, an excess in time; over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness” (Spillers 203). It is this brand of inventiveness that *Staging Civil Rights* seeks to uncover by turning to the “short” Civil Rights Movement.

Throughout the chapters that follow, I foreground an archive of black plays, poetry, and performances that were produced during and about this phase of the movement. While I focus on drama and poetry, for reasons outlined above, genres such as the novel, the short story, and the essay were certainly central to the social, political, and cultural fields of the modern Civil Rights Movement—from Alice Walker’s prize-winning 1967 essay, “The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It,” to Lance Jeffers’s short stories “Tomorrow” (1961) and “Williebell” and his 1963 novel *Witherspoon*. And even as I center poetry and drama, I inevitably had to make decisions about which selections to include. In this way, stellar plays such as Langston Hughes’s *Jericho Jim Crow* (1964) and Loftin Mitchell’s and John Oliver Killens’s *Ballad of the Winter Soldiers* (1964), and poetry recordings such as Sidney Poitier’s album *Poetry of the Negro* (1955)—which includes liner notes by Lorraine Hansberry and readings of poems by Paul Laurence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, M. Carl Holman, and Armand Lanusse—are noticeably absent.

The works that I do analyze, however, are those that, in my estimation, most effectively articulate the innovative work of black performative revealing during the “short” Civil Rights Movement. To be sure, a similar work of revealing unfolds during the Black Arts Movement in poetry, plays, and performances by Haki Madhubuti, Nikki

Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Wanda Coleman, Ed Bullins, the Last Poets, Black Arts Southwest, and, indeed, many of the same artists, such as Amiri Baraka and Gil Scott-Heron, whose work was also central to the “classical” phase of the modern Civil Rights Movement. Indeed, the artists throughout *Staging Civil Rights* are not without company in their creative fusion of African American literature and performance. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the particularity of the historical moment that serves as a backdrop to their cultural work, as it informs the ways in which these artists reveal the “agents buried beneath,” peel back the “layers of attenuated meaning,” and afford different ways of imagining race, gender, sexuality, nation, modernity, and, ultimately, the period that has come to be known as the “short” Civil Rights Movement.

Chapter one, “Revealing Whiteness in the Black Theatric Imagination: Race, Visual Culture, and the Modern Civil Rights Movement,” takes as its point of departure the ways in which injured black bodies have been called upon to represent white violence during black social movements for rights and justice. From antislavery lectures to the fodder that Emmett Till’s murder provided international media, these efforts have produced what I term the *telescopic black body*—a trope of black embodiment that sets out to *reveal* the brutality of white violence but often achieves something of an inverse: the spectacularization of blackness. Black dramatists, I argue, suggest that this trope often conceals particular “truths” about white racial identity that could find clearer expression in and through frameworks of white embodiment. Using the stage, James Baldwin, Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, and Douglas Turner Ward craft aesthetic techniques that shift their audiences’ vision to embodied sites of whiteness, *revealing* concealed representations of white racial identity. While critics have demonstrated the

camera's significance to black protest, and the ways in which scenes of black activism get transmuted into source material for racial fetish, I expand this scholarship by pinpointing how black artists use innovative techniques to critique investments in black injury and to disrupt the processes through which whiteness eludes visibility.

During the modern Civil Rights Movement and global campaigns for decolonization, community theater was a key cultural and political vehicle for Afro-Diasporic peoples. Chapter two, "'Of Time, Space, and Revolution': Performance and the Making of Modern Blackness in the U.S. South," examines the ways in which blacks in the U.S. South utilized community theater to imagine and bring into being more modern forms of blackness and black citizenship. In particular, I focus on the Free Southern Theater (FST)—a product of Mississippi's local civil rights movement. By writing, rehearsing, and staging performances that hinged upon what I call *chronotopes of black political dissent*, black cultural actors in the U.S. South attempted to remake their racial, regional, and political identities. In other words, blacks in the U.S. South developed aesthetic and performance techniques to critique time-space logics of anti-black relations of racial power. Staging and repurposing plays such as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952), Ossie Davis's *Purlie Victorious* (1961), and Martin Duberman's *In White America* (1963), they contested the contradictions of societies that endorsed innovation—from modernism to NASA to accelerated turnover times of capital—while simultaneously admonishing blacks to “go slow” in their attempts to become full citizens who could move through space unmolested. I conclude this chapter by meditating briefly on the ways in which black South African playwright Gibson Kente used township theater and performative chronotopes of black political dissent—in plays

such as *Too Late* (1975)—to critique oppressive time-space logics that created a shared oppression between black South Africans and blacks living in the Jim Crow U.S. South.

Chapter Three, “Playing The Changes: Gender, Performance Poetry, and Maternal Pathologies,” examines the innovative ways in which black artists fused poetry and performance during the modern Civil Rights Movement. This generic syncretism enabled them to craft a mode of revealing that I call *playing black dissonance*. This term accounts for the forms of theatrical and technological “play” through which black poets critique patriarchy and discourses of black maternal pathology—whether performing a poetry reading or producing tapes, LPs, and CDs that listening audiences could play themselves. I examine Langston Hughes’s epic performance poem, *Ask Your Mama: Twelve Moods for Jazz*, as well as two of Hughes’s subsequent iterations of this work—a libretto and a poetic dialogue—that have received scant critical attention. I place Hughes in conversation with audiotaped poetry readings that Broadside Press—a black-owned and -operated publishing company—produced during the movement. These innovative forms of play, I argue, construct the U.S. nation-state, instead of blacks, as the pathological agent responsible for the malaise under which black families lived. Finally, I contend, these poems invite us not only to see the movement, but to listen critically to its innovative auditory dimensions.

In chapter four, “Experimental Leaders: Drama, Desire, and the Queer Erotics of Civil Rights Historiography,” I examine works that challenge the presumed heteronormativity of charismatic black male leaders. Unlike queer artists, activists, and intellectuals who were marginalized during the movement, precisely because of their sexuality, black queer men in the works that I examine take center stage. Using the very

discourse of marginality and invisibility, I utilize a mode of critical inquiry that peels back layers of traditional archives and moves beneath the surface of heterosexual performativity to uncover more complex textures of blackness and black desire. I argue that desire did not simply operate in the familiar register of the political, but was also erotic and quite often queer. While examining works by James Baldwin, John Oliver Killens, and Julius Lester, I focus in particular on Amiri Baraka's *The Baptism* (1964) and Paul Carter Harrison's *The Experimental Leader* (1965)—plays that have received little critical attention. I trace the ways in which these works refigure scientific frameworks and discourses to reveal sublimated queer energies that are housed in the bodies of black male civil rights leaders—many of whom are ostensibly heterosexual.

The coda meditates on recent civil rights memorials, fiftieth anniversary celebrations of major civil rights events, and the ways in which, in this era of neoliberalism, the U.S. nation-state appropriates histories of the modern Civil Rights Movement to showcase its ostensible commitments to equality. I examine Pearl Cleage's play *Bourbon at the Border* (1997), a contemporary work that returns to the movement. While civil rights memorialization projects have tended to articulate narratives of progress, gains, and exceptional leadership, black artists have used literature and performance to foreground loss, reversals, and the perpetuity of racial trauma, even into a putatively post-racial contemporary moment. Black performance, I show, remains a creative vehicle in African Americans' struggles for full citizenship and their efforts to transform the U.S. nation-state into a more equitable, just, and, thereby, modern society.

Chapter 1:

“Revealing Whiteness in the Black Theatric Imagination: Race, Visual Culture, and the Modern Civil Rights Movement”

“I am an American writer, too, and I know how it sets the teeth on edge to try to create, out of people clearly incapable of it—incapable of self-examination, of thought, or literally of speech—drama that will reveal them.

~James Baldwin, “Theater: The Negro In and Out”

“I know the whites.”

~Peter, Lorraine Hansberry’s *Les Blancs*

Alice Childress’s play *Trouble in Mind* (1955) foregrounds the slippery entanglement of race, representation, and embodiment during the modern Civil Rights Movement. Capitalizing on the formal possibilities of the “comedy-drama,” Childress wittingly crafts a play that is just as biting in its portrayal of racial inequality as it is comedic and entertaining for its audiences. Using a play-within-a-play structure, Childress critiques desires among whites to control material black bodies as well as their discursive representations—from theater to a much broader field of signification. The interior drama, *Chaos in Belleville*, announces itself as an anti-lynching civil rights play. Written by fictional white playwright Ted Bronson, *Chaos* incorporates a lynching scene that ostensibly decries white violence against blacks bodies. Nonetheless, Willetta Mayer—a black actor who, in both works, plays an accomodationist-turned-revolutionary protagonist—questions the politics of race and representation that undergird Bronson’s staging of a lynched black body.

In *Chaos in Belleville*, Bronson casts Willetta as a conciliatory black sharecropper (Ruby) who firmly objects to her son’s (Job) decision to become a registered voter,

fearing the retaliatory white violence that would most likely follow in its wake. Ruby's anxieties are certainly justified. When a white mob gets wind of Job's transgression, they swiftly orchestrate a search and excitedly anticipate performing the ritual act of lynching a black male body. Eventually, Ruby persuades Job to surrender himself to police, believing that Mr. Renard—the relatively liberal white judge for whom she works—can best protect him from an imminent black fatality for which the lynch mob so passionately yearned.

To be sure, Bronson utilizes drama to critique the ways in which white supremacism suppresses black citizenship and political desire. Bronson's play, however, troubles Willetta Mayer, who finds that the script harnesses her character to a problematic logic of black passivity. The glaring dichotomy between a liberal white man who shoulders the burden of protecting a fugitive black body and a black mother who, essentially, places her son in the hands of a lynch mob fuels Willetta's anger. "The writer wants the damn white man to be the hero," she contends. "[A]nd I'm the villain." "The story goes a certain way," the white director Al Manners responds." Hardly content with Manners's rebuttal, Willetta fires back: "It oughta go another way" (*Trouble* 106-107). Breaking down the fourth wall, Manners turns to the audience and discloses his rationale for perpetuating certain images of blacks within the theater: "Do you think I can stick my neck out by telling the truth about you? There are billions of things that *can't be said* . . . do you follow me, billions! Where the hell do you think I can raise a hundred thousand dollars to tell the unvarnished truth" (*Trouble* 108; original emphasis)? Manners gives credence to James Baldwin's claim that "American Theatre" is a series of "commercial

speculations,” admitting the restraints that capitalism places on performance and racial representation in the U.S. theater industry (*Blues for Mister Charlie* xiii).

Remaining unsettled and unconvinced, Willetta sends Manners into a frenzy when she accuses Bronson’s script of being “a damn lie.” Picking up the script and waving it angrily above his head, Manners retorts:

So maybe it’s a lie . . . but it’s one of the finest lies you’ll come across for a damned long time! Here’s bitter news, since you’re livin’ off truth . . . The American public is not ready to see you the way you want to be seen because, one, they don’t believe it, two, they don’t want to believe it, and three, they’re convinced they’re superior . . . Get it? Now you wise up and aim for the soft spot in that American heart, let ’em pity you, make ’em weep buckets, be helpless, make em feel so damned sorry for you that they’ll lend a hand in easing up the pressure. You’ve got a free ride. Coast, baby, coast. (*Trouble* 108-109)

Still not persuaded and refusing to “coast,” Willetta stages a one-woman boycott of the performance until the script is revised: “I’m playing a leadin’ part,” she contends, “and I want this script changed or else” (*Trouble* 111).

Trouble in Mind attests to Alice Childress’s commitment to using expressive culture to critique the structural inequities that often plagued black actors who worked in the U.S. theater industry. As several scholars have argued, the play contests all-too-frequent stagings of black characters in stock roles that often reify logics of black inferiority.¹⁷ However, there is much more at stake in Childress’s engagement with race,

¹⁷ See, for example, Kathlene McDonald, *Feminism, the Left and Postwar Literary Culture* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012); Mary Helen Washington, “Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, and Claudia Jones: Black Women Write the Popular Front” in *Left of the Color Line* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Donna Lisker, “Controversy Only Means Disagreement: Alice Childress’s Activist Drama” in *Southern Women Playwrights: New Essays in Literary History and Criticism* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002); “Celebrating the (Extra)Ordinary: Alice Childress’s Representation of Black Selfhood” in *Black Women*

representation, and black embodiment. During her quite lengthy career, Childress took issue with the mass media's proclivity to "single out" black bodies "as source material for a derogatory humor and/or condescending clinical, social analysis" ("A Candle" 112). Ted Bronson imagines precisely these types of embodied constructs throughout *Chaos in Belleville*, offering Job's lynched body as an analytical frame—a site of "social analysis"—through which theater publics could know and grapple with racism and white racial violence. While the practice of framing white violence through the contours of black corporeality has enjoyed a long shelf life in the archive of black social and political dissent, Willetta and Childress belonged to a larger cadre of black artists who, during the modern Civil Rights Movement, mobilized drama and performance to challenge investments in what I call the *telescopic black body*. These artists, I show, developed innovative aesthetic techniques that enable them to shift their audiences' gaze to whiteness and, thereby, to challenge international obsessions with representing black bodies as sites of "clinical, social analysis."

I develop a theory of the telescopic black body to account for the ways in which "injured" black bodies are often accorded a certain optical instrumentality and epistemic function during black social movements for rights and justice. Put another way, black bodies that have been tortured by white supremacist violence often serve as a lens through which global communities can "see" and "know" anti-black violence and the terms of its production. One can think, for example, of black slave bodies and the ways in which their various inscriptions of violence—from brands to lacerations—often assumed

Playwrights: Visions on the American Stage (New York: Garland, 1999); LaVinia Delois Jennings, *Alice Childress* (New York: Twayne, 1995).

value for the knowledge they produced about the “peculiar institution” of slavery. Or consider lynched black bodies, whose physical disfigurements became cornerstones of anti-lynching campaigns. And during the modern Civil Rights Movement, media projections of terrorized black bodies were central to strategies of black social protest. These images have historically provided international audiences “empathetic access” to black bodies, which has been crucial to rallying global support for African Americans’ fight for civil rights (Brown 73). Staged against the backdrop of Cold War struggles for the “hearts and minds” of global communities of color, this iconographic evidence of racial violence pressured the U.S. nation-state to pass more substantive civil rights legislation—so the story goes.¹⁸

The transhistorical nature of this political and representational practice indexes the ways in which the telescopic black body has long functioned as a trope—one that is differently imagined, frequently revised, and often tailored to the contextual particularities of certain historical moments and, necessarily, the shifting landscapes of black political desire. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has argued that tropes, particularly within the African American literary tradition, are created and adapted as they move across

¹⁸ Scholars continue to debate whether or not the evidence of U.S. racism that leaked into international communities through photography, newspapers, televisions and other cultural media during the modern Civil Rights Movement can be credited with having brought about serious legal and social reform. While scholars such as Mark Dudziak have argued that they should be, others, like Martin A. Berger, are less convinced. See, for example, Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000) and Martin A. Berger, *Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography* (CA: University of California Press, 2011).

historical boundaries. Gates terms this process “tropological revision.” By this, he refers to “the manner in which a specific trope is repeated, with differences, between two or more texts” (Gates xxv). If, as Gates contends, the “talking book” is the “ur-trope” of the African American literary tradition, the telescopic black body has been the “ur-trope” of African Americans’ campaigns for equal rights and full citizenship—one whose various iterations can be traced not only across literary texts, but across shifting historical contexts and diverse cultural forms.¹⁹ Yet, I am inclined to ask: What are the limitations of transfiguring black bodies into fleshly surrogates²⁰ that bear the heavy and slippery task of representing white violence? What are the ways in which such a practice can obscure as much as it reveals and, thereby, give new life to the very structures of power and social logics it sets out to deconstruct?

To be sure, those who produced these images were sometimes more invested in framing a narrative of black victimization than capturing the perpetration of white and State violence. As Saidiya Hartman, Jayna Brown, Elizabeth Abel and others have

¹⁹ The tropological quality of the telescopic black body gives it a certain proximity to performance, particularly as Richard Schechner defines it. Schechner argues that performance is “restored” or “twice-behaved” behavior (Schechner 35-36). That is to say, performance is an assemblage of behaviors that rely on and borrow from repositories of the past to craft new performance acts in the present. Therefore, just as black authors and literary texts within Gate’s formulation rely on their artistic predecessors, so, too, do contemporary social actors and performance artists.

²⁰ Joseph Roach’s notion of surrogation is instructive here. Roach has argued that those who survive “loss through death or other forms of departure” attempt to fit satisfactory alternates.” Historically, the telescopic black body has emerged in response to the loss of black life at the hands of white violence as well as the privation of rights that has long characterized the experiences of blacks in the “New World.” See Joseph R. Roach. *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. (NY: Columbia University Press, 1996).

argued, relations of empathy toward black bodies are often relations of power that rely on and reinscribe prejudicial readings of blackness and black corporeality.²¹ By training their gaze on what Hartman refers to as the “spectacular character of black suffering,” those who produced these images were sometimes overly invested in utilizing black bodily injury as the primary visual and epistemological frameworks for perceiving and knowing whiteness and white violence (Hartman 3). Thus, within this particular visual economy, spectacular configurations of black bodies captured the attention of observers, while white bodies often enjoyed the privileged position of opacity—neither attracting visual recognition nor inviting critical reflection upon what Langston Hughes called “the ways of white folks.”²²

This infatuation with the telescopic black body is precisely what *Trouble in Mind* engages, moving outside of this embodied construct to unmask and interrogate the fetishism that often drives its production. As Manners would have it, the lynched black body is the most tenable means of evoking public emotionality and translating these affective responses into black social and political progress. His admonishment to “aim for the soft spot in that American heart, let’em pity you, make ‘em weep buckets, be helpless, make em feel so damned sorry for you that they’ll lend a hand in easing up the pressure” delimits the acceptable modes of appeal through which black political dissent finds articulation. Within Bronson’s dominant script, there is little room for

²¹ See Elizabeth Abel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Jayna Brown (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); and Saidiya V. Hartman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²² See Langston Hughes (Vintage, New York, 1933).

improvisation or any innovation that shifts visual focus away from terror at the site of the black body. Manners gives credence to Deborah McDowell's claim that "black death has made good spectacle for [white] audiences who have relished it historically in every form from fatal floggings to public lynchings" (McDowell 168).²³

Willetta's desire for a "new" script, this chapter argues, indexes a certain "crisis of representation" that captured the attention of African American dramatists during the modern Civil Rights Movement. Like Willetta, black dramatists and performers recognized the limitations of staging telescopic black bodies. Examining James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964), Douglas Turner Ward's *Day of Absence* (1965), and Lorraine Hansberry's *Les Blancs* (1970), I trace the ways in which these artists developed innovative techniques to recalibrate discursive representations of race that were at the helm of the movement's "cultural front," particularly social constructions of whiteness.²⁴ To be sure, their representational strategies were diverse. But what links

²³ My goal is not to ignore the productive possibilities of black visibility for black social life. Indeed, civil rights protestors were, to some degree, fighting for visibility and against the invisibility that had contributed to their positioning outside of full U.S. citizenship. Grappling with this tension between visibility and invisibility, Michelle Wallace has argued that "[h]ow one is seen (as black) and, therefore, what one sees (in a white world) is always already crucial to one's existence as an Afro-American. The very markers that reveal you to the rest of the world . . . are visual. However, not being seen by those who don't want to see you because they are racist, what Ralph Ellison called 'invisibility,' often leads racists to the interpretation that you are unable to see." In this chapter, I am interested how symbolic and material black invisibilities contest the social and political invisibilities that produce and sanction black inequality. See Michele Wallace, "Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture." *Dark Designs and Visual Culture* (NC: Duke University Press, 2004): 364-378.

²⁴ Denning coins the notion of a "cultural front" to theorize the relationship between culture and politics during the Popular Front Movement. Denning's concept has much in common with Pierre Bourdieu's notion of a "field of cultural production," recognizing the constitutive place of various cultural forms in any given society. Yet Denning

them and makes their collective consideration productive is a common quest to revise racial tropes that shore up white superiority, and to structure the field of vision such that their audiences' gazes are shifted to whiteness and white bodies.

Similar to Childress and Willetta, Baldwin, Ward, and Hansberry offer new scripts and new frameworks of racialized embodiment through which social actors could imagine and engage racial injustice. These artists used the stage to “make it new,” certainly within the realms of aesthetics and performance, but also to imagine “new” paradigms of racial representation and “new” social and political futures for blacks throughout the African Diaspora—futures that would be more equitable and just and, thereby, as this dissertation argues, more modern. The convergence of aesthetic and socio-political innovation—or what we might call, following Ivy Wilson, innovative “political aesthetics”—was particularly poignant during the modern Civil Rights Movement.²⁵ In this era, blacks across national boundaries utilized drama to argue that the “center could not hold” in a world of gross injustice and spine-chilling racial

focuses specifically on the “proletarian avant-garde of the depression.” See Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997).

²⁵ Ivy G. Wilson coins the term “political aesthetics” to make sense of the intimate relationship between politics and various forms of art produced during the nineteenth century. This term is especially useful for theorizing a similar convergence that occurs in various black cultural forms during the modern Civil Rights Movement—from the visual art of the Spiral Collective to novels such as Frank London Brown’s *Trumbull Park* (1959). In this body of work, there is a similarly heightened attention to rights, citizenship, and democracy, particularly for people of African descent. See Ivy G. Wilson, *Specters of Democracy: Blackness and the Aesthetics of Politics in the Antebellum U.S.* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2011).

violence—a world in which societies continued to masquerade as fair and just, often when they were neither.

Visuality and African American Theater

In recent cultural criticism on the modern Civil Rights Movement, scholars have tended to occlude theater from the movement's archive of visual cultural products.²⁶ It is my contention, however, that theater is a pivotal visual technology that affords a different vantage point for theorizing race and representation during this historical moment. In *Visuality in the Theater: The Locus of Looking*, Maaïke Bleeker argues that “theater invites ways of looking and mediates in a particular relation between the one seeing and what is seen” (Bleeker 3). I am interested in the ways in which Baldwin, Ward, and Hansberry craft innovative “ways of looking” that renegotiate the normative terms that determine which racialized bodies are the “seeing,” and which racialized bodies are habitually constructed as the “seen.” For these artists, the stage functioned as an optic onto the social, offering a different lens through which audiences could envision race and contemplate its linkage to social relations. In this way, black drama and performance

²⁶ This occlusion of drama from conceptions of visual cultural is apparent, for example, in Martin Berger's *For All the World to See*. While Berger includes photography, television, film, and even hand fans, theater is noticeably absent. See Berger (New Haven: Yale, 2010). Its elision stands in sharp contrast to the prolific writing about the movement and photography and television. See, for example: Sasha Torres, *Black White and In Color: Television and Black Civil Rights* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Sasha Torres, ed., *Living Color: Race and Television in the United States* (NC: Duke University Press, 1998); Aniko Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time: Television and the Civil Rights Movement* (IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012); and Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011.)

pressured the representational logics that often governed the visual production of race during the modern Civil Rights Movement.

As a visual technology, theater renegotiates and bridges the distance between audience and performer, spectator and object of the gaze, that often animated practices of looking during this historical moment. Whether watching the events of the movement unfold on television or reading about them in a newspaper, audiences were often at a significant remove from the live stages upon which literal bodies were crafting watershed performances. Indeed, the telescope, as metaphor, reflects a mode of visual perception that not only accounts for routine practices of black bodily enframement that were central to projecting racial inequality, but it also signifies a politics of scale that is symbolized in the material distance that often separated audience and performer—a distance that these plays and their live performances productively bridge by bringing the material bodies of the “seeing” and the “seen” into close physical proximity within the space of the theater. In this way, black playwrights and performers reconfigure habits of seeing such that whiteness emerges as an important entity to behold.²⁷

²⁷ Here, I do not intend to advance an *a priori* theory of performance and visibility in which proximity in the moment of live performance always already hedges against problematic modes of looking and spectatorship. As Dennis Kennedy has argued, for example, a “good deal of the history of audiences . . . reveals that spectators often attended the theatre without attending to the play” (Kennedy 12). The “unwilling” or “reluctant spectator,” the spectator in a “bad mood or feeling poorly,” the accidental” spectator or the “snoring” spectator, Kennedy argues, are often psychically “removed” from the performance, even as their bodies are in close physical proximity. See Dennis Kennedy, *The Spectacle and the Spectator: Audiences in Modernity and Postmodernity* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 12-13.

According to Shawn Michelle Smith, the “paradoxical nature of white representational privilege [is] to be so ever present and yet so invisible.” “In order to begin to dismantle this privilege,” Smith contends, “one must continue to look at whiteness” (*Photography on the Color Line* 126). By employing creative acts of *black performative revealing*, the artists in this chapter strategically transform white bodies into performative objects of the gaze, thereby subjecting whiteness to aesthetic scrutiny and socio-political interrogation. These acts “bring forth” whiteness and white bodies from the privileged space of invisibility in which they were often ensconced during the modern Civil Rights Movement. According to Ralph Ellison, the mission of the artist is to “[destroy] the accepted world by way of revealing the unseen, and creating that which is new.” Innovative modes of revealing, he contends, enable artists to “bring a new visual order into the world” (Ellison 690). During the modern Civil Rights Movement, African American theater was an important genre through which black artists worked toward imagining a new visual order—one in which black bodies were not so impulsively conscripted into the service of representing relations of racial power.

While this chapter focuses on African American theater, it is important to note that the work of revealing whiteness was not limited to theater and performance during the modern Civil Rights Movement. On the contrary, it was a wide-reaching aesthetic practice that recurred in multiple forms of black cultural production. Richard Wright, for example, argued that “[o]f all artistic attempts, writing is the most exciting one; also the most revealing” (*Conversations* 166). In his understudied 1954 novel *Savage Holiday*, Wright undertakes the work of revealing whiteness. According to him, his early works were “almost wholly concerned with the reactions of Negroes to the white environment

that pressed in upon them.” However, Wright’s exile in France produced a greater desire to interrogate the “historical roots and the emotional problems of Western whites which make them aggressive toward colored peoples” (166). Indeed, *Savage Holiday* moves in this direction.

In this psychological thriller, Wright details the social dissent of Erskine Fowler—the white male protagonist—from insurance business executive to murderer. Fowler seems to embark upon a new existential journey after Longevity Life Insurance Company coerces him into retirement—ostensibly because he was “outdated,” but realistically because the company’s president wanted to secure a position for his own son. Since the age of thirteen, Fowler had dedicated the bulk of his time and psychic energy to Longevity, leaving him little room to explore the depths of his own subjective self beyond his career. “Work,” the narrator contends, had “made him a stranger to a part of himself that he feared and wanted never to know” (*Savage* 32). However, once loosed from the hold of Longevity, Fowler begins a new existential journey that forces him to confront dimensions of the self that had long been overshadowed and repressed by the monotony of his career.

On Fowler’s first day as a retired man, the quotidian routine of preparing breakfast and showering quickly devolves into chaos. Despite being nude, he attempts to discreetly retrieve his newspaper from the hallway. But just when Fowler prepares to reenter his apartment, the door slams shut, inducing an overwhelming fear of exposure. Afraid of being sighted by his neighbors, Fowler quickly covers his body with a newspaper. But his aversion to exposure is not solely a fear of revealing the exteriors of his unclothed body, but he felt as if “a huge x-ray eye was glaring into his very soul . . .

He had the sensation of being transparent” (*Savage* 43-47). To be sure, this revealing of Fowler’s body and “soul” is made possible, in part, through Wright’s careful fusion of psychoanalysis—with its access to psychic interiors—and the aesthetic possibilities of the novel. While critics such as Claudia Tate have rightly called attention to the psychoanalytic traces that run throughout *Savage Holiday*, I would add that Wright’s use of psychoanalysis functions specifically as a technique of revealing whiteness—that is, of interrogating what Wright calls “the psychological reactions of whites” (Tate 166).

For several critics, Wright’s decision to portray white characters affixes a certain quality of racelessness to the novel.²⁸ Within this logic, the presence of white characters in African American literature signifies the absence of race and a turn to “nonracial” themes. But such a gesture risks the deracialization of whiteness. It denies whiteness’s own status as a racial category—one that has, in fact, historically been the object of protection within the calculus of racial formation in the U.S. nation-state. Despite efforts to read race out of *Savage Holiday*, Wright confirms, rather clearly, that the stakes of the novel lie in revealing whiteness—in dealing with what he terms “the most important problem white people have to face: their moral dilemma.”

In a similar vein, African American visual art produced during the modern Civil Rights Movement also participated in the work of revealing. In her closing remarks to the 1991 “Black Popular Studies Conference,” Michelle Wallace recognized the marginal place of visual art and visual artists within black popular culture:

²⁸ Bernard Bell, for example, argues that *Savage Holiday* was a part of an epoch in which African American novelists turned to “nonracial themes and white protagonists.” See Bernard Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* (MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987): 189.

In the process of planning this conference, I anticipated that black visual art, art criticism, and artists would be neglected (even though the conference would be given by two fine art institutions). And so, I named my talk “Why are There No Great Black Artists?” to address this lack and to specifically challenge the wisdom of excluding regimes of visibility from discussions of black popular culture. (*Black Popular Culture* 339-340)

Lisa Gail Collins has termed this phenomenon “a visual paradox at the center of African American thought.” She argues that there is a “preoccupation with visual culture and a neglect of visual art and artists” (Collins 1). What Wallace and Collins are pointing to is especially evident in the paucity of scholarship surrounding the Spiral Art Collective—a group of artists that included Romare Bearden, Emma Amos, Hale Woodruff, and Norman Lewis and others who hoped to use visual art as a way of contributing to the modern Civil Rights Movement

Merton Simpson, who was a member of the Spiral Art Collective, crafts practices of black performative revealing in his painting “U.S.A ’65.” Using a black and white color scheme, Simpson’s painting calls attention to the racial binaries that have historically fractured society. Ensuring that the figures are recognizable, Simpson foregoes creating an abstract expressionist visual landscape—a popular genre among visual artists during the 1960s, particularly among Spiral’s members.

There is little space on the canvas that is not taken up by the robe-clad Ku Klux Klansmen, who themselves are portrayed with a mixture of human- and monster-like features, from their teeth to the distorted contours of their faces. The subtle incorporation of a moon that is surrounded by clouds hints at the nocturnal setting in which the Klansmen most often staged lynching and other forms of anti-black terror.

Simpson uses clocks for one of the Klansmen's eyes, conjuring up the politics of time (e.g., "Freedom Now" vs. "Go Slow"). He also incorporates a newspaper clipping that



Figure 2: Simpson, Merton. *U.S.A. '65*. 1965 Oil and collage on canvas. Merton D. Simpson Gallery, New York.

suggests "the world is watching." This use of collage anchors the image within the social milieu of the modern Civil Rights Movement. Most strikingly, though, Simpson paints the word "exposed" in one of the figures head, symbolizing a revealing of white psychic interiors.

But even as black performative revealing operated across cultural forms, theater is particularly interesting because of the wide and diverse publics that it created and the visceral relationship that it forged between audiences and performers. Erica Edwards has argued that "the visibility of civil rights spectacle" has been a "central theoretical problem for contemporary African American history and social movements" (Edwards 107). By expanding the archive of visual cultural products that have heretofore been at the center of this theorizing, this chapter offers new ways of engaging the "visibility of civil rights spectacle." Positioning African American theater at the center of these discourses provides a different optics through which to analyze the relationships between

visual culture and civil rights historiography, politics and embodiment, race and spectularity.

The Politics and Aesthetics of Racial Interiority

In August 1955, fourteen-year-old Emmett Till journeyed from Chicago to the U.S. Deep South to visit relatives in Money, Mississippi. In just a few days, Till would be reminded of the harsh realities of the Jim Crow South, after he was accused of “wolf-whistling” at Carolyn Bryant—the white woman proprietor of the small community store at which his transgression allegedly occurred. Accompanied by his half-brother, J.W. Milam, Carolyn Bryant’s husband, Roy, kidnapped Till in the thick of the Mississippi night. Milam and Bryant transported Till to a barn, where they proceeded to torture and eventually shoot him before callously dumping his body into the Tallahatchie River. When authorities recovered Till’s body, his mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, bravely elected to have an open casket funeral. It was her hope that “all the world could see” the unbridled workings of white violence upon black bodies, particularly within the (ostensibly) democratic borders of the U.S. nation-state.

In its September 15, 1955 issue, *Jet Magazine* published a shocking photograph of Till’s corpse, revealing punctures and lacerations in the flesh that quite literally exposed his bodily interiors to viewing audiences. Fred Moten reflects on this exposure of Till’s black interiors in this way:

[His face] was turned inside out, ruptured, exploded, but deeper than that it was opened. As if his face were the truth’s condition of possibility, it was opened and revealed. As if revealing his face would open up the revelation of a fundamental truth, his casket was opened, as if revealing the destroyed face would in turn reveal, and therefore cut, the active deferral or ongoing death or unapproachable futurity of justice. (Moten 198-199)

As Moten notes, the “revealing” or opening of black bodies was undertaken with the hope of similarly revealing the unbridled brutality of white violence, on the one hand, and subsequently approaching a “futura of justice,” on the other. Indeed, Till-Mobley’s desire for “all the world” to see Till’s body was a particularly effective political strategy. The barely recognizable geography of her son’s face gave rise to an international outcry of protest against racial violence in the U.S. nation-state.

During the modern Civil Rights Movement, such exposures of “injured” and “damaged” black interiors became a resourceful strategy in the struggle for African American equality. For example, in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the legal team for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People used the research findings of black social psychologists Mamie and Kenneth Clark to argue that segregation negatively affected the psyches of black youths. In their now-famous “doll study,” the Clarks presented African American youths with a choice between visibly white and black dolls; the majority of those tested preferred the former. For the Clarks, and subsequently the Court, this partiality for whiteness signified a damaged black psyche—or what Anne Anlin Cheng terms more recently “racial melancholia”—which resulted from white superiority and its related investment in maintaining black abjection.²⁹ Believing that

²⁹ In *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Anlin Cheng critically analyzes the ways in which minority subjects cope with feelings of loss that emanate from the felt social distance between the minority self and white racial ideality—an experience that often turns blackness into subjective deficit and inaugurates desires for whiteness. Using the critical insights of psychoanalysis, Cheng develops the idea of racial melancholia to account for the working of loss and how it structures both desire for and repulsion of the racial Other. While Cheng is particularly interested in racial melancholia among African- and-Asian Americans, she recognizes that whites, too, grapple with this phenomenon. Therefore, even as (usually white) dominant social actors perform aversion to certain minority

segregation produced psychic damage that “was unlikely ever to be undone,” the court reversed its previous endorsement of racial segregation that was at the core of its 1896 *Plessy V. Ferguson* ruling. Like Till’s corpse, then, the “damaged” interiors of the Clarkes’ adolescent subjects became a familiar topic during the modern Civil Rights Movement, and continues to be a constitutive part of the movement’s cultural and intellectual memories. In short, Till and the subjects of the Clarkes’ study became telescopic black bodies. They endured symbolic and literal openings of their own bodies in order to reveal evidence of racial injuries inflicted by whites and white racist violence.

However, much less has been said about the ways in which black cultural actors remarked upon and theorized *white psychic damage* and white interiority. In August 1965, the Johnson Publishing Company released a special issue of *Ebony Magazine* entitled *The White Problem in America*. John H. Johnson, founder and CEO of Johnson Publishing Company, imagined this issue to constitute a substantial shift in the discursive and representational fields of the modern Civil Rights Movement:

For more than a decade through books magazines, newspapers, TV and radio, the white man has been trying to solve the race problem through studying the Negro. We feel that the answer lies in a more thorough study of the man who created the problem . . . [W]e, as Negroes, look at the white man today with the hope that our effort will tempt him to look at himself more thoroughly. With a better understanding of himself, we trust that he may then understand us better—and this nation’s most vital problem can then be solved. (*White Problem* 3)

Positioning whiteness and white bodies as objects of social concern, this issue disrupts the popular practice of transmuting black bodies into frames that are always already

subjects, the very DNA of their social identity consists of strands of marginalized social identities.

employed to assess race relations. Of particular interest is an essay by Kenneth B. Clark, who, of course, is most widely remembered as the co-architect of the “doll study.” However, in his essay for the *Ebony* special issue, “What Motivates American Whites,” Clark reaches a conclusion about white psychic interiority that bears a striking resemblance to his findings in the doll study: *White minority identity, he argues, shapes whites’ behaviors and conceptions of self.* Here, minority identity does not function as a collective referent for the familiar line-up of racial and ethnic groups who tend to represent normative conceptions of minoritiness. Rather, Clark breaks through the discourse of the white “majority” to excavate the repressed fact of whites’ own minority status—that is, as people who have historically come to the United States as the dispossessed and the expelled—and the ways in which this psychic damage produces a desire to subjugate, precisely because of whites’ insecurities about their own “otherness.”

Clark was not alone in his interrogation of white psychosocial motivations for racism. In his 1967 address to the American Psychological Association, none other than Dr. Martin Luther, Jr. argued for careful investigations of white psychic interiors: “If the Negro needs social sciences for direction and for self-understanding, the white society is in even more urgent need. White America needs to understand that it is poisoned to its soul by racism and the understanding needs to be carefully documented and consequently more difficult to reject Negroes want the social scientist to address the white community and ‘tell it like it is’” (“The Role of the Behavioral Scientist” 1-2). James Baldwin was among the luminary artists and activists who contributed essays to *The White Problem in America*, and the work of revealing the “soul” of “White America” is

certainly his task in *Blues for Mister Charlie*—a play that he loosely based on the tragic murder of Emmett Till.

Blues opened on April 23, 1964 at the ANTA Theater on Broadway in New York City, New York, to mixed reviews. The play takes place in fictional “Plaguetown, U.S.A., now.” The plague, Baldwin argues, is race and Christianity. Divided into “BLACKTOWN” and “WHITETOWN,” the symbolic architecture of the play’s set mimics the racial-spatial segregation that plagued the social landscape of the U.S. under Jim Crowism. Despite the Deep South backdrop, Baldwin’s substitution of a nation-state (“U.S.A.”) for a state challenges problematic reductions of white racism to the U.S. South, and the play’s temporal frame (“now”) similarly contests any attempt to dismiss racism as a passé practice of an earlier historical moment.

Ultimately, *Blues for Mister Charlie* is a dramatic thought experiment in the ways in which a white man can murder blacks with impunity, especially in a country that touts itself as the quintessential beacon of equality. How, Baldwin asks, is the nation itself “responsible for the crimes that he commits” because it has “locked him in the prison of his color” (*Blues for Mister Charlie* xiv). Baldwin would have to fight tooth and nail to solicit enough private donations to keep the play from folding soon after it opened. To be sure, part of the commercial failure had to do with Baldwin’s insistence that ticket prices remain affordable for lower class blacks who could hardly afford to pay for the luxury of Broadway theater exploits. But I would argue that its premature closing had much to do with the sharp, unapologetic straightforwardness of Baldwin’s representations of white racial identity, which discomfited audience members and critics alike. As *Time Magazine* noted, *Blues* was “a hard play for a white man to take. . . and enough of them

have stayed away from the ANTA Theater to put *Mister Charlie* in imminent danger of folding.”

The *New York Times Review of Blues for Mister Charlie*, written by distinguished music and theater critic Howard Taubman, is instructive in this vein: “Mr. Baldwin knows how the Negroes think and feel, but his inflexible, Negro-hating Southerners are stereotypes. Southerners may talk and behave as he suggests, but in the theater they are caricatures” (Taubman 1). Taubman’s conflation of southernness with whiteness is interesting, but his use of the term caricature is particularly suggestive, as it connotes excess and exaggeration, and seems to suggest that Baldwin has, to put it bluntly, overdone whiteness. But this logic quickly folds in upon itself. If Baldwin has successfully portrayed both blacks and whites as they “behave,” a point that Taubman concedes, what motivates him to claim that whites are caricatured, while at the same time assigning a certain verisimilitude to the playwright’s representations of blacks? More still, juxtaposing Baldwin’s cast of white characters—liberals wrestling with their own endorsement of racism, women who falsely accuse black men of rape, ministers and communities who use social institutions to sustain racial oppression, men who murder blacks bodies that transgress boundaries of racial separation—with the historical record during this epoch suggests that Baldwin’s representations of whites are hardly caricatured in the ways that Taubman has imagined.

The premise of this review implies that one’s racial identity, more than any other variable, enables or limits artistic craft and ways of knowing. Baldwin’s blackness, then, serves an epistemological function, producing the knowledge necessary to stage authentically black bodies; as a black man, he “knows how Negroes’ think and feel.” But

this same mastery of the psychic and affective terrains of blackness, Taubman implies, constrains Baldwin's ability to represent "the ways of white folks" within the dramatic form. Taubman's critique evinces a certain discomfort with Baldwin's willingness to reveal whiteness, but couches its uneasiness in the lexicon of objective theater review. Indeed, Taubman lends credence to Baldwin's claim that "[w]hat is most terrible is that American white men are not prepared to believe my version of the story . . . In order to avoid believing that, they have set up in themselves a fantastic system of evasions, denials, and justifications" ("The White Problem" 77). The language of aesthetic shortcomings seems to mask a historical aversion to what Mia Bay calls the "white image in the black mind."³⁰ As bell hooks has argued, throughout history, whites have often presumed that there is "no representation of whiteness in the black imagination, especially one that is based on concrete observation or mythic conjecture" (*Black Looks* 168-69). But revealing the "white image" is precisely what is at stake for Baldwin in *Blues for Mister Charlie*.

The play opens in darkness, staging a mis-en-scene that disrupts the black bodily surrogation that typifies exhibitions of the telescopic black body. Following the sound of a gunshot, the lights come up slowly, revealing Lyle Britten—a white actor who happens to be the first performer whom the audience meets. After reaching down to pick up a human body "as if it were a sack," Lyle travels upstage where he subsequently deposits the body into a collection of weeds. His response, which happens to be the first utterance

³⁰ See Mia Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind: African American Ideas about White People, 1830-1925* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2000).

of the play, is startling: “And may every nigger like this nigger end like this nigger—face down in the weeds” (*Blues for Mister Charlie* 2). Lyle’s comments bring the natural landscape of a southern town into close physical and symbolic proximity to a black male body. Baldwin’s use of nature imagery subtly indexes similarities between weeds and the black male body, particularly in a social milieu that often relegates both to economies of excess, framing them as disruptions to carefully crafted social and physical landscapes and, thereby, justifying their management and erasure in the name of order and discipline.³¹ Linking the sonic terror of the gunshot to Lyle’s performance, the audience recognizes that Lyle endorses murdering certain kinds of black bodies, and, most likely, is the murderer himself.

While the terrorized black body is part and parcel of the opening dramatic action, it is quickly removed from the audience’s line of vision. The audience hears the sound of terror, but the darkness prevents them from witnessing the actual murder of the black body.³² When the lights come up, what the audience beholds, then, is not the terrorized black body. To be sure, they catch a glimpse of this body at the scene of subjection, but it

³¹ Historical constructions of black corporeality in the U.S. have long been encumbered by logics of excess and surplus, particularly within the context of sexuality and violence. As Robyn Wiegman and Nicole Fleetwood have convincingly argued, the propaganda of embodied black excess cuts across divisions of gender and has produced discursive constructions such as the “bestial excess of black masculinity,” to borrow from Wiegman, or what Fleetwood terms “excess flesh,” or “black female excessiveness.” See Robyn Wiegman (NC, Duke Press, 1995) and Nicole Fleetwood (IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011)

³² For more on the aesthetics of the sonic in Baldwin’s *Blues for Mister Charlie*, see for example, Soyica D. Colbert, *The African American Theatrical Body: Reception, Performance and the Stage* (NY: Cambridge, 2011) and Koritha Mitchell, “James Baldwin, Performance Theorist, Sings the Blues for Mister Charlie” (*American Quarterly*, Vol. 64., No. 1, March 2012): 33-60.

is quickly removed from sight. The opening scene, then, directs the audience's attention to Lyle Britten—a white man whom they later discover is the murderer and who encourages the eradication of transgressive black bodies as a means of ensuring white sovereignty, wishing death upon “every Nigger like this Nigger.” In so doing, Baldwin refuses to assign the black body a telescopic functionality. He opts instead to center whiteness within the visual field of the stage—a dramaturgical choice that invites the audience to understand this “wretched man.” “It is we,” Baldwin contends, “who have persuaded him that Negroes are worthless human beings, and that it is his sacred duty as a white man, to protect the honor and purity of his tribe” (*Blues for Mister Charlie* xiv).

Baldwin was apprehensive about dramatic technique while crafting *Blues for Mister Charlie*. His anxiety about form emerged from a desire to protect his own literary reputation and from a longing to deal cautiously with a historical event of such emotional heft, particularly in a social milieu burdened by thickening racial tensions. More importantly, though, Baldwin attributes this “fear of the form” to personal angst about his own capacity to represent whiteness and perpetrators of white violence in drama. “I absolutely dreaded committing myself to writing a play,” Baldwin asserts. “[T]here were enough people around already telling me that I couldn't write novels—but I began to see that my fear of the form masked a much deeper fear. That fear was that I would never be able to *draw a valid portrait of the murderer*” (*Blues for Mister Charlie* xiv; emphasis added). This work of drawing “a valid portrait of the murderer,” Baldwin concluded, would necessitate a break with tradition, not only within the context of imagining a new social paradigm of race, rights, and justice but also in terms of innovative performance and aesthetic techniques.

In fact, Baldwin contends, dramatists must do “violence to theatrical forms . . . to get [their] story told” (“Theater: The Negro In and Out” 23). This is precisely what he does in *Blues for Mister Charlie*, stretching the dramatic action over the course of four hours in a nonlinear temporal framework that moves seamlessly between past and present, interior and exterior. Baldwin drew sharp criticism for this experimental choice. Arthur Waxman, the general manager of ANTA Theater, for example, lamented the play’s “excessive length,” and several of Baldwin’s colleagues at the Actor’s Studio even recommended an “uptown experimental theater” instead of Broadway, because of the “violence” Baldwin had done to the script (Leeming 232). This aesthetic violence, however, enables Baldwin to challenge the dissimulation of whiteness that the telescopic black body tends to afford. Whereas the play’s opening refuses to spectacularize black injury and shifts attention to whiteness, Baldwin turns to various forms of interiority to perform a similar work of revealing throughout the play, recalling Merton Simpson’s symbolic rendering of the word “exposed” within the psychic terrains of the Klansman-like figure in “U.S.A. ’65.”

After the opening scene, the play shifts abruptly to a black church. Here the audience meets a pastor and congregation who are engaged in role-playing as a means of preparing for a civil rights demonstration. Some of the congregants imitate white behaviors, while others perform the role of black protestors. Baldwin, like Childress, uses the play within a play to reveal whiteness and to express blacks’ knowledge of whites’ behaviors.³³ While Baldwin intersperses similar flashpoints of interior access

³³ Gerhard Fischer and Bernhard Greiner’s observations about the play within the play underscore its formal usefulness in the work of revealing. It is a “prominent feature,”

throughout the play in order to reveal whiteness, I want to linger for a moment on the play's third and final act—what is perhaps its most illuminating and innovative occasion of revealing whiteness. Baldwin employs stream of consciousness within an interior monologue to interrogate what Kelly Oliver might refer to as the “psychic space” of whiteness.³⁴ The setting for act three is a courtroom, where Lyle Britten is on trial for the murder of Richard Henry. This movement into white psychic space within the courtroom is particularly symbolic, as various “truths” and untruths essay from the testimonies of those who take the witness stand. Some of these relate to the facts of the case, while others are more closely related to the verity or falsehood of normative social constructions of white racial identity.

The first witness to take the stand is Jo Britten, Lyle Britten's wife. While Jo's thought process is characteristic of the disjointed articulation that characterizes stream of consciousness, the audience is able to piece together important, recurring strands of thought. Among these is the repeated framing of the mind as a “citadel.” Whenever Jo's mind ventures into desired but socially prohibited territories, she reminds herself: “Don't let those thoughts into your citadel. You just remember that the mind is a citadel and you can keep out all troubling thoughts” (*Blues for Mister Charlie* 82). This construction of

they argue, of “political and anti-illusionistic theater,” and is a particularly useful aesthetic strategy for “self-reflection” and “moving beyond the masks of social roles” in the “context of cultural conflict.” These reflections are particularly instructive in analyzing practices of revealing whiteness during the modern Civil Rights Movement as working against illusions, occasioning the opportunity for self-reflection, and moving beyond “masks of social roles” within the context of “cultural conflict.”

³⁴ See Kelly Oliver, *The Colonization of Psychic Space: A Psychoanalytic Social Theory of Oppression* (MN: University of Minnesota, 2004).

the mind-as-citadel—a cognitive fortress that serves as a locus of protection for white racial identity—is key. As a fort, the mind is protected from invasion, but its protection also is meant to protect something beyond and in excess of its immediate borders. Here, I would argue, the larger object of protection is the social construction of white femininity and its attendant logics of white moral superiority. But despite Jo’s guarding of the white female “citadel,” Baldwin infiltrates its guarded perimeters to perform the work of revealing whiteness.

During her testimony, Jo claims that she narrowly escaped being raped by Richard Henry, which the audience knows to be a lie. One of the deeply entrenched social “truths” inherent within the racist symbology of whiteness is the sanctity and purity of southern white womanhood. Jo is emblematic of this icon, while Richard’s fate typifies the outcome of black men who contravene prohibitions against black male access to white female bodies—even if only allegedly. Baldwin fuses stream of consciousness with testimony to expose the fictions of pure white womanhood and the ways in which white men deploy this logic as a ruse to perpetuate racism and white male patriarchy. As scholars such as Dorothy Roberts and Jane Censer have rightly argued, racism and patriarchy have historically colluded to enact both race and gender oppression.³⁵

In the interior monologue that precedes her public testimony, Jo reveals the ways that her life is situated within, and constricted by, this nexus of racism and patriarchy.

Journeying through memory to a time before she marries Lyle, Jo poses an important

³⁵ See Jane T. Censer, *The Reconstruction of White Womanhood, 1865-1895*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003, and Dorothy E. Roberts, “Racism and Patriarchy in the Meaning of Motherhood.” *The American University Journal of Gender, Social Policy & the Law* 1, no.1 (1992): 1-38.

question: “Am I going to spend the rest of my life serving coffee to strangers in church basements? Am I?—Yes! . . . Oh, Lord, I’m tired of serving coffee in church basements!” (*Blues for Mister Charlie* 82). Because these thoughts emerge in the play’s concluding act, the audience knows, by this point in the play, that Jo has not spent the rest of her life serving coffee in church basements. Interestingly, though, she has spent at least a part of her life serving coffee in the home that she and Lyle Britten have built together—a home that finds her weathering his conspicuous patriarchal behavior.

Earlier in the play, for example, when Jo teasingly responds to a comment that Lyle makes about their son, whom he calls “pisser,” Lyle asserts: “You mighty sassy tonight.” “Ain’t that right old pissar?”, he asks his son. “Do you reckon your Mama’s getting kind of sassy? And what do you reckon I should do about it?” Jo then encourages the child to implore his father to end his late night outings that lead to early-morning returns home. “And you tell your Mama,” Lyle retorts, “if she was getting her sleep like she should be, so she can be alert every instant to your needs, little fellow, she wouldn’t know what time I come—*grunting* in” (*Blues for Mister Charlie* 8). This dialogue sheds light on Dorothy Roberts’s important claim that “[s]ociety’s construction of mother, its image of what constitutes a good mother and a bad mother, facilitates male control of all women” (Roberts 5). To Lyle, then, Jo’s right to question his whereabouts is negated by the obligations of motherhood.

Throughout *Blues*, the linkage of racism and patriarchy also subtends the rhetoric of protecting the white female body from the excesses of black manhood. This racist and patriarchal management of bodies is not solely about regulating acceptable forms of interracial intimacy, but is a means of structuring relations of power that position white

men as social superiors within both racial and gender hierarchies. In other words, this socially constructed fear enables white men to control both bodies. This is nowhere more apparent than in an earlier scene that finds Lyle and Jo's all-white church members visiting their home one Sunday morning in a mass show of support for Lyle (and his feigned innocence). The male church members strike up an interesting conversation:

Ellis: Mrs. Britten, you're married and all the women in this room are married and I know you've seen your husband without no clothes on—but have you seen a nigger without no clothes on? No, I guess you haven't. Well, he ain't like a white man, Mrs. Britten.

George: That's right.

Ellis: Mrs. Britten, if you was to be raped by an orang-outang out of the jungle or a *stallion*, couldn't do you no worse than a nigger. You wouldn't be no more good for nobody. I've *seen* it.

George: That's right.

Ralph: That's why we men have got to be so vigilant. (*Blues* 50; original emphasis)

Here the black male body gets constructed as a site of excess, just as Richard's body does in the play's opening. It is animalistic and threatens to deform the physical landscape of the white female body upon sexual contact. Excess is crucial to this attempt to solidify white patriarchal power. At least one among the cadre of concerned white men has witnessed the putatively large sexual organs of a black male body; therefore, any other comparative model outside of a paradigm of black male excess would yield an undesirable result: white male lack.

But even as the black male body becomes a default refrain of white male patriarchy, Jo's interior monologue evinces her own fascination with, and exploration of, precisely this kind of body. Within the chaotic stream of thoughts that animates her interior monologue, Jo sights one Mr. Arpino, whose body attracts her attention. "My--! He is big! And dark! Like a Greek! Or Spaniard! Some people say he might have a touch

of nigger blood.” But the idea that Mr. Arpino has “nigger blood” is unthinkable to Jo: “I don’t believe that. He’s just—*foreign*. That’s all” (82; original emphasis). Here Jo refuses to entertain the possibility that the body that has attracted her attention has any trace of blackness. In this moment of self-denial and self-policing, she substitutes the abstract category of “foreignness” for the categories of race and nation that had previously structured her inquiry. This move allows Jo to continue reflecting upon Mr. Arpino’s big, dark body over and against the possibility that it contains “nigger blood.”

Jo’s questioning takes her mind to the spaces of Mr. Arpino’s body that are hidden from public sight. “He needs a hair cut,” Jo argues. “I wonder if he’s got hair like that all *over* his body” (82)? This attention to hair functions as a subtle conduit through which Jo moves into proscribed territories of a male body that likely contains “nigger blood.” Hair is a telling symbol and mode of imaginative access. It is quite often a feature that runs the length of the body, linking private and public regions, especially on bodies as “hairy” as Mr. Arpino’s. Psychic space becomes a safe space for Jo, allowing her to covertly navigate the geography of Mr. Arpino’s big, dark body. But her mental journeying is interrupted when she reverts back to the self-policing that Michel Foucault recognizes as constitutive of contemporary formations of power—here the disciplinary power of white male patriarchy. “Remember,” she tells herself, “your mind is a citadel” (82).

Following her subversive imaginings of Mr. Arpino’s body, Jo laments the possibility of a future contained by domesticity. After these two pivotal moments, she finds the courage to enunciate her own desires: “I want, I want—.” But just as she is about to articulate these personal longings, Lyle Britten interrupts, finding his way over

to where she has been standing. Lyle's interruption of Jo's voicing of desire is particularly important because, as the audience knows, their meeting is eventually followed by marriage, which, it seems, serves as the perfect antidote to Jo's radical explorations of the big, dark body within the interior domain of her own.

Describing how actors move toward the witness stand in the play's sham of a trial, Baldwin writes: "Each witness, when called, is revealed behind scrim and passes through two or three tableaux" (*Blues for Mister Charlie* 81). This metaphor of partial revealing is certainly what Jo gives to the audience and the fictional court. Her social conditioning as a white southern woman becomes a "scrim" that leads her to repress parts of herself, limiting what she makes available to the exterior space of the dramatic present. But through this interior monologue, Baldwin moves beyond the scrim to "penetrate the psychologies of whites"—to reveal certain "truths" about whiteness that get obscured and buried in Jo's actual testimony (Roediger 3). By crafting an interior monologue and using stream of consciousness, Baldwin, as Heidegger might put it, "brings forth" that which has been hidden and opaque, thereby crafting a theatrical narrative that reveals conceptions of whiteness and its claims to racial superiority.

Staging Black Disappearance

During the modern Civil Rights Movement, African American dramatist Douglas Turner Ward joined Baldwin in the project of revealing whiteness and demonstrating theater's significance as a visual technology. After seeing the 1950s bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, a campaign of mass protest often cited as the origins of the movement, Ward was inspired to write a play that extracted its thematic content from this historical event. The result was a riveting play entitled *Day of Absence*, which opened at

St. Mark's playhouse in 1965 and ran Off-Broadway for 504 performances. According to literary critic Stephen M. Vallillo, "The image of empty buses continuing to run their routes remained with him [Ward], until he translated into theatrical terms the economic importance of blacks to the country" (Vallillo 267). Vallillo rightly points to Ward's recognition of blacks' categorical value to local and national economies. However, much more than blacks' economic indispensability is at stake in Ward's comical, politically savvy play. I would argue that Ward's representation of "absence" is not only, or even primarily, about blackness, but is as much about social constructions of whiteness and the ways in which discursivity becomes a key terrain in struggles to both perpetuate and disassemble fictions of white superiority.



Figure 3: (Villet, Grey). Singular White Woman on Montgomery Bus. c. 1955. Photograph. Retrieved URL: <http://listverse.com/2011/09/03/10-famous-boycotts/>

Figure 4: (Villet, Grey) White Bus Driver on Montgomery Bus. c. 1955. Photograph. Retrieved URL: <http://denverlibrary.org/content/legacy-rosa-parks/>

As various photographs of the Montgomery bus boycott suggest, the literal absence of black bodies on public buses called greater attention to white drivers and passengers who were left to ride in solitude. Thus, we might rethink popular media characterizations of this historical event, which often frame the visual encounter of black absence as a more totalizing absence, as if those whites who continued to ride the bus

somehow disappeared from view. However, in the face of black absence, the buses in Montgomery carried visible white bodies that were accorded a certain spectacular quality in the presence of black absence. In *Day of Absence*, Ward similarly empties the theatrical stage of visibly black bodies, using acts of black disappearance to lend a greater visibility to whiteness and white bodies.

Black disappearance is a thematic that recurs throughout African American literary and cultural production. Works such as Derrick Bell's science fiction short story, "The Space Traders" (1992), Tayari Jones's novel *Leaving Atlanta* (2002), and James Baldwin's novel *Just Above My Head* (1979), as well as his essay "The Evidence of Things Not Seen" (1995), all engage forms of black disappearance and situate this thematic within the context of physical and social violence against black bodies. "The Evidence of Things Not Seen" and *Leaving Atlanta*, for example, focus on the historical disappearance and murder of at least twenty-eight African Americans in the metropolitan Atlanta area between 1979 and 1981. In Baldwin's *Just Above My Head*, a member of the Harlem-based Trumpets of Zion gospel quartet disappears from an Alabama outhouse, after the group travels to the U.S. South to participate in the modern Civil Rights Movement.

Derrick Bell's *The Space Traders* chronicles a transaction between the U.S. government and extraterrestrial beings in which a dystopic and debt-ridden U.S. nation-state exchanges its population of twenty million blacks for "gold, minerals, and machinery" (Bell 13). Conjuring up haunting thoughts of millions of black bodies that disappeared from the African continent during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, this transaction returns blacks to a familiar experience of displacement. Having made the

transition, yet again, from person to property, their new owners retrieve them from a beach, and instruct them to “strip,” line up, and enter “holds which yawned in the morning light like Milton’s ‘darkness visible. . . Heads bowed, arms now linked by slender chains, black people left the New World as their forebears had arrived” (Bell 13).

But I am interested in the ways in which disappearance can function as a productive and revolutionary tool for people of African descent. Indeed one can the revolutionary potential of disappearance in Douglas Turner Ward’s *Day of Absence*, but also in other works such as William Melvin Kelley’s 1962 novel *A Different Drummer*. In this novel, Tucker Caliban, Kelley’s quite, child-like protagonist, surprises his fellow citizens and readers alike when he defiantly salts his fields, burns his house, kills his livestock, and leads a revolutionary mass exodus of black citizens out the state, making it “the only state in the Union that [could not] count even one member of the Negro race among its citizens” (Kelley 4). The state’s black population literally vanishes in a radical act of black disappearance. They search beyond the state’s oppressive borders for the possibility of a more equitable future. Like Ward, Baldwin, Childress, and Hansberry, Kelley employs innovative aesthetic strategies to reveal whiteness. For example, white characters serve as the novel’s narrators and Kelley uses stream of consciousness to provide the reader direct access to white interiority, while simultaneously refusing access to black interiors. Like Baldwin, Kelley also refuses to spectacularize black bodies that have been injured in acts of white supremacist violence. Although *A Different Drummer* concludes with the lynching of a greedy, attention-seeking “charismatic” black leader who happens to be the state’s only remaining black, Kelley refrains from recounting the gory details of the lynching to his readers. In lieu of a narrative or visual spectacle of

black terror, he incorporates a single scream, recalling a similar use of the sonic in the gunshot that opens Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie*. In this way, Kelley engages in the work of black performative revealing, using innovative aesthetic and narrative techniques that foreground whiteness, while also refusing reliance upon the telescopic black body to articulate the horrors of racial inequality.

Performance critic Peggy Phelan has theorized the ways in which disappearance can function as an act of subversion and possibility. She identifies disappearance as a strategy of resistance available to those who have been devalued and, thus “unmarked,” but, quite ironically, are at often risk of being marked as spectacle. “[T]he unmarked,” Phelan contends, “shows itself through the negative and through disappearance. I am speaking here of an *active* vanishing, a deliberate and conscious refusal to take the payoff of visibility” (Phelan 19; original emphasis). As I have suggested, images of anti-black violence ostensibly moved (inter)national communities to action during the modern Civil Rights Movement—“marking” or providing blacks with a previously denied sentience and humanity. But Phelan invites us to consider another visual paradigm—one that refuses to “take the payoff of visibility,” but continues to destabilize racist regimes through visual absence, through disappearance. In *Day of Absence*, Douglas Turner Ward explores the productive possibilities of a symbolic modes of disappearance, using various aesthetic and performance techniques to symbolically remove black bodies from the stage, thus absenting the “unmarked” in a strategic act of black performative revealing.

Day of Absence is “conceived for performance by a Negro cast, a reverse minstrel show done in white-face.” Though Ward has a preference for black characters (with the

exception of staging one white character to avoid any claim of segregation), he suggests that whites can be members of the cast “at their own risk” (Ward 29). The notes that he includes in the play’s script are instructive: “If acted by the latter [blacks],” he contends, “race members are urged to go for broke, yet cautioned not to ham it up too broadly. In fact—it just might be more effective if they aspire for serious tragedy.” Ward’s instructions for whites actors are decidedly different: “Only qualification needed for Caucasian casting is that the company fit a uniform pattern—insipid white; also played in white-face” (Ward 29). Black performers, then, are expected to reveal the tragic nature of whiteness, but in a subtle way that refrains from allowing the comedic to eclipse the gravity of Ward’s efforts to reveal whiteness. Ward enjoins whites, on the other hand, to purge their performances of vigor, encouraging shallowness over depth. Ward assumes that the tragedy of whiteness will inevitably surface within performances staged by whites actors, as if tragedy is inherent within whiteness itself.

Ward’s use of whiteface has much in common with Marvin E. McAllister’s understanding of whiteface minstrelsy as a “performance in which people of African descent appropriate white identified gestures, vocabulary, dialects, dress or social entitlements. Attuned to class as much as race, whiteface minstrels often satirize, parody, or interrogate privileged or authorized representations of whiteness”³⁶ (McAllister 1). Ward’s desire for white actors to perform in whiteface results in a satiric and parody of whites and acknowledges the disjuncture between idealities of whiteness and the realities that these ideals attempt to represent. While performers might be “white,” according to

³⁶ While McAllister interprets whiteface as a mode of “extra-theatrical performance,” I am concerned with the ways in which Ward uses whiteface within the theater.

racial logics that locate race in the skin, Ward's strategic use of whiteface, across lines of racial divisions, enables him to sever the "white" body from discursive conceptions of race.

The presence of whiteface masks on black bodies serves an important counter-narratological function when analyzed in relation to the long legal history of whiteness as property in the U.S. nation-state. In other words, there is an interesting relationship and an important negotiation between forms of property in *Day of Absence*: whiteface theatrical property on the one hand and white racial property on the other hand.

Whiteface as theatrical property labors to contest both whiteness as property as well as the attendant logics of white superiority that sustain its practices of exclusion. These two forms of property, therefore, exist in a dialectical relationship. In *The Stage Life of Props*, Andrew Sofer posits that certain props address a "semiotic crisis": a particular issue or dilemma concerning theatrical representation faced by the drama of its period." "Theater," he continues, "colonizes reality for its own ends, and in the case of the prop it does so by appropriating the object's *prior* symbolic life" (Sofer ix). If the "prior life" of whiteness has been one of excluding itself from racial and ethnic "others" through various juridical and social mechanisms, Ward uses whiteface to confuse the terms of ownership, enabling black bodies to symbolically trespass on the exclusionary property of whiteness.

Legal scholar Cheryl Harris has convincingly argued that one of the defining tenets of whiteness as property is "The Absolute Right to Exclude." I quote Harris at length here:

[W]hiteness has been characterized not by an inherent unifying characteristic, but by the exclusion of others deemed to be ‘not white.’ The possessors of whiteness were granted the legal right to exclude others from the privileges inhering in whiteness; whiteness became an exclusive club whose membership was closely and grudgingly guarded. The courts played an active role in enforcing the right to exclude—determining who was or was not white enough to enjoy the privileges accompanying whiteness. In that sense the court protected whiteness as any other form of property. (Harris 1736)

If Harris is right to argue that whiteness has historically taken on the attributes of property, and has thereby claimed for itself the right to exclude, whiteface performance in *Day of Absence* serves as a significant and symbolic critique and violation of this logic. In other words, whiteface provides black performers with symbolic access to a guarded form of racial property—one that historically has been denied, even when black bodies contained the epidermal visual coding generally linked to whiteness. Indeed, Joseph Roach argues that whiteface minstrelsy is, at its core, a mode of performance that mocks and critiques the exclusionary property investments that buttress socio-legal constructions of whiteness. Whiteface minstrelsy, he contends, riffs on the stereotypical behaviors of whites, “such as white folks’ sometimes comically obsessive habits of claiming for themselves ever more fanciful forms of property, ingenious entitlement under the law, and exclusivity in the use of public spaces and facilities” (Roach 236).

Whiteface allows the theater to become what bell hooks calls a “space of agency” for Ward’s black performers—a space in which they could “interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what [they] see.” In other words, by looking from behind the guise of whiteface, actors were afforded a unique vantage point that enabled them to perceive how whites behaved when confronted with “new” representations of whiteness that perhaps contradicted their own perception of racial

selfhood. If the empathetic access to black bodies that newspapers, television, and other cultural media provided often risked feeding into pornographic and fetishistic investments in black spectacularity, whiteface functions as a disruptive agent that tempers this cultural tendency within the theater. Therefore, by shifting the gaze to whiteness, black performers put white audience members into the position of what Elin Diamond terms “looking at being looked at ness”—that is, of looking at one’s self “through the eyes of others.”³⁷

Added to this, Ward’s use of minimalism creates a performance space in which costuming and performers’ bodies become visual focal points and, thereby, call attention to whiteface and its symbolic representation of whiteness. In the “Notes on Production” that precede the play in its written form, Ward offers quite intriguing instructions about the plays set: “No scenery is necessary—only actors shifting in and out of an almost bare stage and freezing into immobility as focuses change or blackouts occur.” He continues later: “All props, except essential items (chairs, brooms, rags, mop, debris) should be imaginary (phones, switchboard, mop, eating utensils, food, etc.)” (Ward 29). I read this absence of props as a minimalist aesthetic gesture that contributes to the work of black performative revealing, particularly the project of revealing whiteness.

Minimalism is a slippery term that has been hard to pin down. Eric Strickland defines it as a “movement, primarily in postwar America, towards an art—visual, musical, literary, or otherwise—that makes its statement with limited, if not the fewest possible resources” (Strickland 7). James Meyer, however, argues that minimalism is

³⁷ See Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis* (NY: Routledge, 1997): 52.

“neither a clearly defined style nor . . . a coherent movement that transpired across media during the postwar period.” Rather, he argues, it is “a debate, an argument . . . a shifting signifier whose meaning altered depending on the moment or context of its use” (Meyer 3). Strickland and Meyer typify the range of definitional excursions that attempt to explain minimalism. One is left asking, then: Was minimalism a movement or not? If it was indeed a movement, was there a cohesive aesthetic program?

More still, many of the artists that scholars and art critics most closely associate with the minimalist movement vehemently rejected the idea that there was any “politics of affiliation” that pointed toward an artistic movement with practitioners committed to a similar set of ideas and outcomes.³⁸ While these questions and denials should continue to exist in productive tension, and while minimalism is indeed a “shifting signifier,” there does seem to be a consensus among scholars about a few core traits that characterize artistic production associated with the varied and various conceptions of minimalism. Two of these that are particularly valuable for thinking about *Day of Absence* are what we might call an aesthetics of bareness, which privileges the simple over the abstract, and a commitment to creating a more intimate visual experience between art object and audience.

In *Minimal Politics: Performativity and Minimalism in Recent American Art*, Maurice Berger agrees that minimalism contains these qualities, but interestingly, he creates a linkage between minimalism, performance, and revealing (as I have been theorizing it):

³⁸ See Denning (NY: Verso, 1997): xix.

The performative nature of minimalist art and dance is in its freedom from the conceits and historical allusions of traditional art objects, its foregrounding of the viewer as an equal player in the aesthetic experience, and its creation of phenomenological games in which the self is explored through unscripted temporal interactions with external forces and objects. This performativity has made it remarkably well suited to examining the social and cultural contingencies of representation and identity and to contesting the repressive ways in which meaning, and even selfhood itself, are dictated by *a priori* constructions. (*Minimal Politics* 16)³⁹

Similar to the play within a play, minimalism functions as an ideal mechanism of self-examination that can move beyond the “mask of social roles.” According to Berger, then, minimalism enables Ward to shake the very foundations of “repressive,” “*a priori*” constructs of white racial identity through careful examinations of whiteness, which itself is more clearly revealed within the context of both an almost bare stage and the intimate visual negotiations that unfold between performers and audience within the space of the theater. If performativity often demands what Judith Butler calls the “reiteration of a norm or set of norms,” then Ward’s use of minimalism as a technique of revealing undercuts the reiterative proclivities of whiteness that ultimately attempt to ensure (and insure) its superiority and normativity through citational hegemony—a citational practice structured in power that allows whiteness to infiltrate and shape various nodes of public

³⁹Minimalism is often seen as a “new critical” art that does not refer to things beyond itself. If Berger seems to propagate that school of thinking here, elsewhere he certainly argues for the importance of social and political context to analyzing minimalist creative production. He writes, for example, “Despite such interconnections, art historian and critics most often have reduced the minimalist ethos to questions of style and form, ignoring minimalism’s ideological motivations, even though the very aesthetic form from which all of this work emerges was itself often underwritten by social and ideological issues.” *Ibid.* 66.

discourse, which is made easier, *A Day of Absence* suggests, by the uneven distribution of power over the means of production itself (*Bodies* 12).

Like Baldwin, Ward uses a non-linear temporal framework, moving between past and present, dream and reality in a style that refuses any fixed distinctions between either. He masterfully blends satire, fantasy, comedy and white face minstrelsy to stage a riveting production whose plot centers around the sudden disappearance of a southern town's black population, right under the radar of white surveillance. This vanishing act disorients the town's white population, who are as dismayed by the absence of black laborers as they are by the ways in which this disappearance destabilizes logics of white superiority. The panicking white citizens, from the Mayor to the "Clan" to the heads of local social clubs, frame black disappearance as a state emergency, and entreat the federal government and black civil rights organization alike to intervene and aid in recovering their blacks. The audience soon learns that the more urgent emergency is whites' forced confrontation with the fictive nature of white superiority that becomes apparent in the face of black disappearance. The town's white citizens discover that a few blacks have been left behind in the segregated hospital. But their excitement wanes quickly when they learn that each one of them is in a deep coma; thus, they have all psychically disappeared even as their bodies remain physically present. In the face of total black disappearance, whites—both in the fantastical plot of the play and in the audience—are invited to confront and critically grapple with the illogics of white superiority, even as the performers invite laughter with their admittedly comedic performances.

Situated within this complex web of black performative revealing, the play's content similarly critiques discursive constructions of whiteness that have pervaded the

U.S. cultural imaginary. The setting of the play's opening closely resembles that of William Melvin Kelley's *A Different Drummer*; both works begin with a cadre of white men who are assembled in front of a store. Unbeknownst to them, they are just a short time away, from the "*strategic withdrawal*" of their towns' black populations ("A Vanishing Race 291; original emphasis). *Day of Absence* opens with a dialogue between Luke and Clem, who are engaged in a quite monotonous dialogue about family, weather, women, and the state of their businesses. But Clem constantly interrupts their conversation, querying whether or not Luke "feel[s] anything—funny." Baffled, Luke initially responds with a rather trite and accusatory dismissal: "Maybe it's in your haid?" But Clem continues to have a "funny feeling somp'ums not up to snuff . . . Like somp'ums happened—or happening—gone haywire, loony" (Ward 32). Still unconvinced and growing "increasingly more annoyed," Luke retorts:

Now look here, Clem—it's a bright day, it looks like it's go'n' get hotter. You say the wife and kids are fine and the business is no better or no worse? Well, what else could be wrong? . . . If somp'ums go'n' happen, it's go'n' happen anyway and there ain't a damn fool thing you kin do to stop it! So you ain't helping me, yourself or nobody else by thinking 'bout it. It's not go'n' be no better or no worse when it gits here. It'll come to you when it gits ready to come and it's go'n' be the same whether you worry about it or not. (Ward 32)

Luke continues to dismiss Clem's suspicions, suggesting that whatever has catapulted him into this unusual state of "feeling funny" is inevitable. Soon after, however, Luke confesses that he, too, believes "[s]omp'um is peculiar," and the audience learns that this "peculiar" thing that is "not up to snuff," that has deviated from Luke's and Clem's sense of normativity, is the mass disappearance of the town's black population.

After this scene blacks out, the action shifts abruptly to the home of John and Mary, a married white couple who, like Luke and Clem, come to the conclusion that

something is awry. Much like Baldwin, Ward guides the audience's sightlines into a symbolic interior space in which the behaviors of "whites" challenge historical constructions of white racial superiority. This scene opens with the ear-piercing screams of John and Mary's infant child, whom they ignore as long as possible. But the seemingly incessant wails eventually rouse John from his sleep, leading him to grow increasingly more perturbed. Untrained, perhaps uninterested, in rearing their own child, John and Mary are baffled by the baby's cries, which indeed seem unfamiliar to them. These cries become sonic signifiers that alert the couple to the absence of Lula, their black servant, who most likely has been the child's primary caregiver.

Lula's absence creates a space in which John and Mary are compelled to confront dimensions of the self that they could previously ignore. The disappearance of the black body, in other words, creates the conditions of possibility for white self-examination and the production of a new self-knowledge. Without Lula's body as a mediating site, John and Mary seem to face themselves and each other for the first time.

In a patriarchal fit of anger, John yells to Mary: "GET UP! . . . NOW GET UP! MARY . . . [G]et up and muzzle that brat before she does drives me cuckoo!" (Ward 33-34; original emphasis). Ward's less than flattering image of John is matched by equally unfavorable representations of wife. Still hung over from a late night of excessive drinking, Mary orders John to "SMOTHER IT [the baby]!" (Ward 36; original emphasis). Unlike Jo in Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie*, Mary unapologetically resists the strictures of white patriarchy and the attendant obligations of motherhood and domestic competency.

Eventually other white citizens realize that Lula's and other blacks' absences are a part of a collective larger black disappearance that leads to a larger municipal pandemonium, mirroring the domestic chaos of John and Mary's home. Eventually, all of the town's lines of communication are taxed by excessive calls from its white citizens—whose daily routines are in disarray because they depend on black labor—and outsiders who are intrigued by the phenomenon of black disappearance. The absence of black bodies, then, disrupts and explodes the natural order of things both in terms of the town's daily functionality as well as its normative social (read racial) order.

The town gradually descends into dystopia as confusion turns into anger and anger into racist longing for a pre-black disappearance moment when whites could easily know, predict, and control black bodies. When Clem, for example, has an inclination that “somp'um not up to snuff,” a part of his suspicion was rooted in a previous knowledge of the ways of black folks, namely how they tend to navigate their social landscapes:

Just think, Luke! . . . Look around ya. . . . Now, every morning mosta people walkin' 'long this street is colored. They's strolling by going to work, they's waiting for the buses, they's sweeping sidewalks, cleaning stores, starting to shine shoes and wetting the mops—right?! . . . Well, look around you, Luke—where is they? (Luke paces up and down, checking.) I told you, Luke, they ain't nowhere to be seen. (Ward 36)

Black disappearance, however, ruptures the perceived epistemological certainties that index whites' mastery of blackness. Each time the town's white citizens mobilize their professed knowledge of blacks in hopes of coercing blacks to reappear, this knowledge fails to yield the desired results.

Indeed this is the case when the town's white citizens discover that some of the departed blacks had been passing for white, which disrupts popular practices of relying

on the skin's pigmentation to know racial identity. The mayor of the town learns this lesson all-too-well when Woodfence, his brother-in-law and Vice Mayor, fails to appear for work. "Where's Vice-Mayor Woodfence," he spouts off. "[T]hat no-good brother-in-law of mine?!" (Ward 38). Eventually, the mayor has to face the painful reality that his brother-in-law is a part of the town's mass black disappearance and, therefore, is black. Of course, this means that a black man has been married to and sleeping with one of the South's revered white women right under the eyes of the white majority.

Realizing that black disappearance has left both whites and the town in disarray, white representatives turn to the radio with hopes of coaxing blacks into returning. Most of these appeals do little more than expose racist ideologies that contributed to blacks' decision to leave. "Clan," for example, is only perturbed because blacks' orchestrated a mass disappearance without the sanction of the town's white citizens. When the announcer highlights the contradiction between his anger over blacks' departure and white supremacists' ostensible desire for this very disappearance, Clan retorts that they should have left "[w]hen we say so and not befo'. Ain't supposed to do nothing 'til we tell 'em. Got to stay put until we exercise our God-given right to tell 'em when to get.!" (Ward 47). Denying blacks any semblance of agency, his qualm emerges from the exercise of black agency required for disappearance; he even attributes the success of this disappearance to Communism. An equally racist cohort of citizens follow Clan, from Mrs. Aide, the Social Welfare Commissioner, to Reb Pious, a minister, and eventually the Mayor himself. All of them share the common belief that blacks were inferior, "pleasure-loving" and "amoral," practitioners of "heathen magic," as they continue to project their own problematic conceptions of race onto the absent black bodies.

As the play closes, the viewers recognize that whiteness itself is at stake in black disappearance. Indeed, whiteness has always and only been possible when configured through the calculus of racial opposites; in the wake of black disappearance, then, whites become subjects of racial loss. If white characters throughout the play have occupied the role of stereotypical white social actors—Mayors and Klansmen, social club presidents and businessmen—by the time the play concludes, they are in the process of becoming quite different—zombies, in fact, who slowly drift into a dizzying stupor: “The city: exhausted, benumbed.—Slowly its occupants slinked off into shadows, and by midnight, the town was occupied exclusively by zombies. The fight and life had been drained out. . . . Pooped. . . . Hope ebbed away as completely as the beloved, absent Negroes” (Ward 56).

By removing blacks from the theater’s visual field, Ward creates a perceptual and epistemological framework that challenge the normative terms of utilizing the telescopic black body to articulate critiques of whiteness and white violence. When the black body refuses to become spectacle, looking through the masks of whiteface, it uncovers and critiques the subterfuge of socially constructed paradigms of white racial identity, while all the time remaining aware of white audience members’ responses to their acts of black performative revealing.

Decolonization and the White Ethnographic Gaze

In May 1961, Jean Genet’s play *Les Nègres* (The Blacks) made its U.S. debut at St. Marks Playhouse in New York City, New York, after a successful run in Genet’s native Paris. A riveting critique of colonialism and racial inequality, *The Blacks* was the longest running off-Broadway show of the 1960s. Its U.S. cast included actors such as

Maya Angelou, James Earl Jones, Cicely Tyson, and Roscoe Lee Browne, who would all go on to become quite notable actors. Despite its commercial success and popular appeal, Lorraine Hansberry, one of the nation's foremost and talented playwrights, was far less celebratory of Genet's play, taking serious issue with the French playwright's racial representations. In *The Blacks*, Hansberry concludes, "the oppressed remain *unique*. The Blacks remain the exotic" (Hansberry 42; original emphasis). According to Hansberry, even as Genet critiques the ruinous effects of colonialism on people of African descent, he continues to spectacularize black bodies.

On its face, *The Blacks* is among the mid-twentieth century dramatic productions that engage in the work of revealing whiteness. Genet includes a prefatory note in the written script that explains the complex techniques that enable the play to reveal whiteness:

The play is written, I repeat, by a white man, is intended for a white audience, but if, which is unlikely, it is ever performed before a black audience, then a white person, male or female, should be invited every evening. The organizer of the show should welcome him formally, dress him in ceremonial costume and lead him to his seat, preferably in the front row of the orchestra. The actors will play for him. A spotlight should be focused upon this symbolic white throughout the performance. But what if no white person accepted? Then let white masks be distributed to the black spectators as they enter the theater. And if the blacks refuse the masks, then let a dummy be used. (Genet 4)

Perhaps Genet seems even more explicitly invested in revealing whiteness than either Ward or Baldwin. The strategic placement of raced bodies in the audience and the use of costuming and lighting to shift the audience's attention to embodied sites of whiteness is certainly crucial to the work of revealing. Yet, even as Genet is self-reflexive about his own white racial identity, and even as he is ostensibly committed to "spotlighting"

whiteness, *The Blacks* ultimately cannot shake itself of a fetish for the “spectacle of the dancing Negroes” (Genet 9).

Genet, like Ward, suggests that black actors use whiteface, but he curiously notes that “the mask is worn in such a way that the audience sees a wide black band all around it, and even the actor’s kinky hair” (Genet 8). Such a spilling over a black bodily attachment beyond the borders of whiteface costume potentially creates for Genet’s audience the occasion of seeing representations of themselves that are staged by racial “others.” That is to say, “kinky hair,” as a particular metonym of black racial typology, calls attention to the gaze that Genet’s black actors are casting toward the white audience, as they grapple with perceiving representations of whiteness that move beyond the normative discursive limits of white racial identity. Yet, Genet’s reductionist representations of “kinky hair” attaches a certain mock seriousness to his grand commitment to revealing whiteness, and occasions an opportunity to reflect on his own entrapment within normative racial epistemologies.

Lorraine Hansberry argued that *The Blacks* “is a conversation between white men about themselves” (Hansberry 42). On one level, this is certainly true. On another level, *The Blacks* is a conversation between whites about blacks. Indeed, the first words uttered in the written version of the play, and initialed by Genet himself, are telling: “One evening an actor asked me to write a play for an all-black cast. But what exactly is a black? First of all, what’s his color?” (Genet 1). I would argue that *The Blacks* sets out in search of answers to these queries about the essence of black being and is, thus, more interested in revealing blackness than participating in the cultural project of revealing

whiteness. Throughout the play, Genet mobilizes a troubling mode of ethnographic encounter to answer his query of racial ontology: “what exactly is a black”?

Ailing from a long battle with cancer, Lorraine Hansberry spent the last period of her life writing a play that would challenge the theatrical brand of “ethnographic visualization” that undergirds Genet’s visual production of race (Rony 6). Though she died before completing the entire script, Hansberry gave to the world *Les Blancs* (The Whites): a timely work of revealing and a brilliant counternarrative to Genet’s *Les Nègres*. By re-scripting Genet’s original play, Hansberry produces a work that positions the ontology of whiteness as the central object of inquiry at a time when televisual representations of blacks had a “troubling tendency to slide into forms of . . . ethnography” (Torres 12). In so doing, Hansberry uses drama to perform a “reverse ethnography,” as the “formally colonized” casts their gaze toward whiteness, revealing things about this dominant racial category that are far too often submerged beneath the depths of opacity (Grovogui 54).

Les Blancs opened at Longacre Theatre in New York City, New York, on November 15, 1970. Set in Zatembe, a fictional African country that closely resembles mid-twentieth century Kenya, *Les Blancs* meditates on the interrelated themes of racism, colonialism, and decolonization, and the transnational reach of socially constructed models of white superiority and white violence. Like so many artists, activists, and intellectuals, Hansberry underscores the interconnected freedom dreams of people of color around the globe. Most of the play is set in a Missionary compound that imagines itself to be the bringer of modern humanity to backward Zatembe residents. Certainly,

the audience learns that the priest, doctors, and other staff believe themselves to be innocent whites unwaveringly committed to a project of tempering black dispossession.

But Hansberry reveals the limitations of this school of thinking. Perhaps this is nowhere more evident than in dialogues between Charlie, an overzealous white liberal journalist from the United States, and Tshembe, a native son of Zatembe who leaves home to lead a cosmopolitan life of black intellectualism before settling down with a white wife in London. Charlie, like so many white journalists who travelled to sites of black social protest and shifting political landscapes during this era, journeys to Zatembe to “write a story.” Tshembe, played by James Earl Jones, consistently refuses to grant Charlie access to his interiority. He critiques the ethnographic gaze and troubling desires to probe blackness that Charlie brings to his craft in Zatembe. Tshembe challenges the trope of the telescopic black body and, in the process, reveals whiteness:

I have had—(*Mimicking lightly but cruelly*)—too many long, lo-o-ong “talks” wherein the white intellectual begins by suggesting not only fellowship but the universal damnation of imperialism. But that, you see, is always the beginning. Then the real game is begun. (*With mock grandiloquence*) The game of plumbing *my* depths! Of trying to dig out *my* “frustrations”! And of finding deep in my “primeval soul” what *you* think is the secret quintessential—‘root’ of my nationalism: “SHAME”! (*As Swiftly dropping it*) But, you see, I have already had those talks and they bore me. (Hansberry 96; original emphasis)

While Charlie works adamantly to convince Tshembe that they are both committed to the same ideals of freedom, Tshembe consistently argues that Charlie is trapped in ways of viewing race that reduce blackness and blacks to a singular, knowable racial category. Tshembe’s observations ring as true for Genet as they do for Charlie: “No matter what delusions of individuality infect *my* mind, to *you* I am not an individual but a tide, a

flood, a monolith: The *Bla-a-acks*. . . Now go, sir, write your book! The whole damned world is waiting” (164; original emphasis)!

Charlie attempts to stage an ethnographic encounter in which blackness as otherness is probed, interrogated, and revealed—its depths “plumbed.” Yet, through a strategic recalibration of the racial category that serves as the object of Genet’s quest for knowledge, Hansberry turns a “third eye” to Charlie, Genet, and *Les Nègres*. According to Fatimah Rony, the third eye “turns on a recognition: the Other perceives the veil, the process of being visualized as an object, but returns the glance” (Rony 213). Hansberry, Ward, and Baldwin all use the stage to turn a “third eye” to whiteness during the modern Civil Rights Movement.⁴⁰ Even as black bodies were routinely transmogrified into human epistemological frameworks through which whiteness and white violence could be known, these artists craft innovative theatrical techniques to frame whiteness as a tenable lens for envisioning its own substance.

While television and photography have opened up fruitful avenues for remembering and theorizing the modern Civil Rights Movement, this critical enterprise would do well to pay closer attention to African American civil rights drama, and the

⁴⁰ I have opted to use Rony’s concept of “third eye” here, instead of a term like Nicholas Mirzoeff’s “countervisuality.” As I argue in the Introduction, blacks are often positioned in the act of responding or resisting rather than initiating, which the language of “counter” threatens to reify. According to Mirzoeff, countervisuality is an attempt to “reconfigure visibility as a whole.” A “performative claim of a right to look where none exists,” he argues, “puts a countervisuality into play.” Indeed, this is precisely what the artists in this chapter achieve by employing innovative acts of black performative revealing. But with the exception of Hansberry, who directly seeks to counter Genet, the logic of “counter” is less illustrative of the impetus that drives these artists’ visual practices. See Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

ways in which this form also functions as a significant visual technology. Such a gesture not only expands the archive, but offers interesting, often divergent, ways of theorizing race, representation, and embodiment during the modern Civil Rights Movement. Rather than creating divisions between these cultural forms, though, we should think about their intertextual relationships—that is, how they converse with each other, often enacting conscious revisions. To be sure, the camera’s obsession with black bodies precedes the modern Civil Rights Movement. Indeed, scientific and technological modernity have long relied upon “looking” at black bodies to forward the project of modernity. These visual violences have certainly wreaked havoc on black bodies across time and space. Yet, we must “abandon that theoretical discourse which sees “the gaze,” and hence the act of seeing, as a singular or one-sided instrument of domination and control” (Poole 7). Alice Childress, James Baldwin, Douglas Turner Ward, and Lorraine Hansberry use dramatic literature, the body, and the stage during the modern Civil Rights Movement to craft innovative acts of black performative revealing that turn the gaze to white bodies and reconfigure discursive representations of whiteness—moving reading publics and live audiences into the depths of what W.E. B. Du Bois calls “the souls of white folk” (Du Bois 184).

Chapter 2:

“Of Time, Space, and Revolution”: Performance and the Making of Modern Blackness in the U.S. South

“A *real* revolution introduces a new time and a new space and a new relation to both time and space. And within that shifting space-time continuum men who stand still find that they no longer occupy the same coordinates in relation to a moving reality.”

~Lerone Bennett, Jr., “Of Time, Space, and Revolution”

“The history of social change is in part captured by the history of the conceptions of space and time, and the ideological uses of which those conceptions might be put. Furthermore, any project to transform society must grasp the complex nettle of the transformation of spatial and temporal conceptions and practices.”

~David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*

On October 4, 1957, the Soviet Union launched into orbit Sputnik 1, the world’s first artificial satellite, and followed, nearly a month later, with the launch of Sputnik 2. These technological feats surprised and dismayed the United States, the Soviet’s Cold War foe. Fueled by the hubris of a nation-state that imagined itself to be the quintessential superpower, the United States vowed to surpass the Soviet’s triumphs—a declaration bolstered by legislation and supported by millions in tax dollars.¹ This historical conflict set into motion the Space Race. In this fierce battle between nation-states, outer space became the new frontier in a modern, imperial battle to access spatial locations that were once beyond human contact. In a 1962 speech entitled “We Choose the Moon,” U.S. President John F. Kennedy touts the construction of a cutting-edge U.S. spacecraft that would measure over three hundred feet long, would be made with “new

¹ On July 29, 1958, President Dwight Eisenhower signed the National Aeronautics and Space Act, which established NASA and provided this new organization with a 100 million dollar budget.

metal alloys, some of which have not yet been invented,” and would travel at an astounding 25,000 miles per hour (Kennedy 1). Kennedy’s dream would come to fruition when in 1969 U.S. astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin landed successfully on the moon.

These watershed innovations in space technology were matched by advancements in financial systems that sped up the turnover time of capital, by newly built interstates that reduced the time required to travel from one place to another, by modernized television news cycles that moved freely and quickly through time and space. This historical moment, then, seemed to be characterized by a deeply entrenched ethos of discarding the old and embracing the new and of reducing the time required to move through space. It reflected modernity’s disposition toward a “peculiar form of acceleration,” as the pace of social life rapidly increased, from daily commutes to the rate at which individuals received local, national, and international news (Koselleck 11).

But alongside these investments in time-space compression,² there was a serious effort to slow down the rate at which African Americans would acquire full citizenship, and a hard fought battle to preserve segregation barriers that delimited which social spaces blacks bodies could occupy. Put another way, in the midst of a rapidly modernizing global landscape, those individuals who imagined themselves to be at the helm of modernization were often stubbornly wedded to antiquated social logics, when

² In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey uses the term time-space compression to account for what he sees as a speed up in social life and how this acceleration reduces spatial barriers. For Harvey, the goal of time-space compression is to speed up the turnover time of capital in a rapidly globalizing society in which capitalism was becoming increasingly more dependent upon international markets. See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (MA: Blackwell, 1990).

African American rights and justice were the topics of consideration. David Harvey is right, then, to argue that the “history of social change is in part captured by the history of the conceptions of space and time, and the ideological uses to which those conceptions might be put” (Harvey 218). In other words, time and space are important heuristics for grasping histories of social change and comprehending the social logics and behaviors that drive these changes.

John Oliver Killens captures the tension between technological modernity and quests for modern black citizenship in his 1967 novel, *Sippi*. In the prologue, Jesse Chaney, a late-fifties black sharecropper, sets out on a symbolic run across the sweltering Deep South landscape of rural Wakefield, Mississippi. While occasionally slowing down to “almost a walk,” his body moves forward in space, as if fueled by an unrelenting yearning for speed. Jesse’s running puzzles his longtime “friend” and white employer, Charles Wakefield, who watches from his front porch as Jesse approaches. “That black bastard is hauling,” Wakefield contends. “[W]hat in the hell was anybody doing running like that in all this God-forsaken heat . . . Especially a poor-ass Negro?. . . Must be the devil chasing him” (*Sippi* ix).

To Wakefield’s surprise, Jesse was not engaged in a retreat from the “devil.” Instead, his journey began after the Supreme Court, in its 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, ruled segregation in public schools unconstitutional. Emboldened by the court’s watershed ruling, Jesse sped from the cotton field to the restricted space of Wakefield’s front porch, where his seemingly epic journey comes to a startling halt. Standing on the porch with resolve, Jesse stages a radical act of critical stillness, experimenting with a new racial-spatial paradigm that now had the endorsement of the

nation's highest court.³ By refusing to enter through Wakefield's back door, he unabashedly undermines the rigid social customs and laws of the Jim Crow South.

Once on the porch, Jesse is surrounded by material objects that might be perceived as the apotheosis of southern modernity. For example, he positions his body precisely under one of the four electric ceiling fans that his employer-cum-friend had recently installed. According to the narrator, "[e]ven before the Supreme Court decision, Wakefield had come to the conclusion that "it was not slavery time anymore, and you could not expect Negroes to pretend it was and stand around and do your fanning for you." Alongside these dispositions and symbolic objects that ostensibly index progress, the reader also learns that Wakefield's wife, who is on the porch to witness Jesse's radical performance, is an admirer of "modernistic novels," and the Wakefield manor contains "all the modern amenities." Jesse's journey toward equality, then, culminates in a southern place that indicates at least a modicum of commitment to technological, cultural, and socio-political innovation. But this ostensible embracing of the "new" stands in sharp contrast to Wakefield's desire for Jesse to continue operating within outmoded social paradigms. That Wakefield's modern fans are attached to a "plantation" house—a relic of an ostensibly passé system of oppression—is telling (*Sippi* viii-x).

³ In *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body*, Harvey Young explores the ways in which blacks have historically been subjected to "enforced" acts of stillness, whether in the bellies of ships during the middle passage, while posing on the auction block during slavery, or while suspended during violent acts of lynching. However, Young traces the ways in which blacks have engaged in performances of stillness that invert relations of subjection, thereby reclaiming the stillness of the black body in order to inhabit a position of power.

In utter disbelief, Wakefield attributes Jesse's act of resistance to the extreme heat, which somehow must have "got[ten] the best of him." Put another way, Wakefield is gripped by a certain cognitive inhibition that refuses to recognize black social and political dissent. Yet, Jesse offers a forceful and telling retort that challenges Wakefield's unwillingness to acknowledge his stand-in as a critical act of resistance: "The Supreme Court done spoke! . . . Ain't going around to the back door no more. Coming right up to the front door from now on And another thing—ain't no more calling you Mister Charlie. You just Charles from here on in. Or Jimmy Dick." Wakefield grows increasingly perturbed at what he now perceives as blatant impudence, leading him to hurl a familiar racial expletive at his long-time friend: "Nigger, don't you know you're in Mississippi?" "That's another thing," Jesse retorts. "Ain' no more Mississippi. It's jes' 'Sippi from now on!" (Killens xiii).

This opening scene in *'Sippi* symbolizes the social and political import of time and space during the modern Civil Rights Movement. It foregrounds the ways in which black social actors used time, particularly speed, to hew new subjectivities from oppressive landscapes, while imbuing these spaces with new meanings by staging a range of creative performances. The question that Wakefield poses to Jesse—"Nigger, don't you know you're in Mississippi?"—is less a genuine inquiry than a proclamation about the discursive meanings of Mississippi's physical and social geographies. To be sure, Jessie was certainly aware that he was still physically located in Mississippi. But in the performative act of renaming the state "Sippi," as opposed to Mississippi, he revises the meanings of a geographical space that, for so many people, was the epitome of anti-black racism and black oppression.

This chapter examines the ways in which blacks in the U.S. South, much like Jesse Chaney, mobilized performance to transfigure oppressive southern landscapes into what bell hooks has called sites of “radical openness.”⁴ Alongside their concerns for remaking space, however, was a serious effort to contest and revise oppressive temporal ideologies that constructed blacks’ journey toward full citizenship as time “in advance of itself” (Harvey 225). As Wakefield’s anger makes clear, blacks’ desires to rapidly eliminate racial-spatial segregation posed a significant threat to the architecture of white superiority and illuminated the vicissitudes of power. Thus, slowness became an essential element in the political toolbox of those who, like Wakefield, were stubbornly wedded to delaying the emergence of modern blackness in the U.S. South.⁵

The use of a racialized strand of “chronopolitics”⁶ to unsettle black political desire certainly undergirded the thinking of Nobel Prize winning author William Faulkner, one of Mississippi’s own native sons. In “A Letter to the North,” which appeared in the

⁴ According to bell hooks, sites of “radical openness” are spaces that enable an opportunity to “redeem and reclaim the past, legacies of pain, suffering, and triumph in ways that transform present reality” (hooks 147).

⁵ Deborah Thomas uses the term modern blackness to account for a “racialized vision of citizenship,” particularly in Jamaica. Modern blackness, she contends, is the “urban popular expressions of blackness that had been marginalized within the cultural policy designed at [Jamaican] independence,” but have nevertheless become pivotal to the particularities of Jamaica and Jamaican identity. If, as Thomas argues, modern blackness in Jamaica is presentist and does not “posit a revolutionary future,” modern blackness, as I am use the term, is rural as opposed to urban, and is built upon the premise of bringing a revolutionary future—one that includes full citizenship—to fruition for black in the U.S. South. See Deborah Thomas, *Modern Blackness: Nationalism, Globalization, and the Politics of Culture in Jamaica* (NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁶ George W. Wallis defines “chronopolitics” as “the relation of time-perspectives to political decision-making.” See George W. Wallis, “Chronopolitics: The Impact of Time Perspectives on the Dynamic of Change,” (*Social Forces*, Vol. 49, No. 1, Sep. 1970): 102.

March 5, 1956 issue of *Life Magazine*, Faulkner critiques the rapid pace at which African Americans were courageously deconstructing spatial barriers of segregation, particularly in the U.S. South. He spells out, in no uncertain terms, a clear desire for blacks to stall their journey toward full citizenship:

So I would say to the NAACP and all the organizations who would compel immediate and unconditional integration: Go slow now. Stop now for a time, a moment. You have the power now. You can afford to withhold for a moment the use of it as a force. You have done a good job, you have jolted your opponent off-balance and he is now vulnerable. But stop there for a moment. (“A Letter to the North” 51-52)

Curiously, in the midst of a rapidly accelerating global landscape, Faulkner argues that black social change should move to a slower tempo, a different rhythm. He misnames the “power” that black southerners possess and strategically inverts the realities of which racial subjects are—and have historically been—vulnerable in the U.S. nation-state. In this way, he anticipates contemporary deployments of what we might call strategic vulnerability, which aims to reverse the gains of the modern Civil Rights Movement by arguing that one’s dominant position is becoming increasingly vulnerable. It is not surprising that *Sippi*’s narrator suggests that Wakefield had “emptied many a bottle of Scotch and bourbon” with the fictional “Willie Faulkner” (Killens viii). Indeed, both Wakefield and Faulkner were confounded by the rate at which blacks’ were transforming discursive and material meanings of southern space.

Lerone Bennett, Jr.’s observations about the interconnection of time, space, and revolution are instructive. A “*real* revolution,” Bennett argues, “introduces a new time and a new space and a new relation to both time and space. And within that shifting space-time continuum, men who stand still find that they no longer occupy the same

coordinates in relation to both a moving reality” (Bennett 31; original emphasis). The shifts in black subjects’ ontological and socio-political realities that were being wrought by modern civil rights activism left Faulkner and Wakefield fearful of the new coordinates, or social locations, that they were coming to occupy. They realized, perhaps, the fungibility of their own conceptions of self in the face of a historic disassembling of white power and the suturing of social and legal cleavages that sustained logics of white supremacy.

Faulkner’s injunction to “go slow,” and his not-so-subtle scare tactics, drew the ire of none other than fellow National Book Award Winner, Ralph Ellison. In a letter to his longtime friend and writer Albert Murray, Ellison critiqued Faulkner’s efforts to control time and space, and, quite importantly, representations of blackness. I quote Ellison at length here:

Bill Faulkner can write a million Letters to the North as he did recently in LIFE, but for one thing he forgets that the people he’s talking to are Negroes and they’re everywhere in the States and without sectional allegiance when it comes to the problem. The next thing that he forgets is that *Mose isn’t in the market for his advice, because he’s been knowing how to ‘wait-a-while’—Faulkner advice—for over three years, only he’s never been simply waiting, he’s been probing for a soft spot, looking for a hole, and now he’s got the hole.* Faulkner has delusions of grandeur because he really believes that he invented these characteristics which he ascribes to Negroes in his fiction and now he thinks he can end this great historical action just as he ends a dramatic action in one of his novels. (Murray 117; emphasis added)

In this pointed critique, Ellison accuses Faulkner of rendering invisible a large swath of the very population whose bodies he seeks to control through strategic uses of time. Indeed, Faulkner forecloses the possibility of southern blacks joining this dialogic exchange by identifying a distinct regional addressee: “the North.”

Moreover, the always sharp-witted Ellison contends, Faulkner's advice is wholly unwelcomed and unwanted among blacks, and his attempt to turn back the hands of time on blacks' social and political progress emerges from a desire to construct a social space that mirrors his own subjective conceptions of race and society—just as he can in the world of fiction. Indeed Faulkner's injunction to go slow bears a striking resemblance to the words of the fictional Gavin Stevens in Faulkner's 1948 novel *Intruder in the Dust*: “[I]n time he will vote anywhen and anywhere a white man can and send his children to the same school anywhere the white man's children go and travel anywhere the white man travels as the white man does it. But it won't be next Tuesday. Yet people in the North believe it can be compelled even into next Monday” (*Intruder* 151-152). But Ellison articulates the sentiments of so many black cultural actors in the U.S. South who had grown leery of the centuries-long game of waiting for full citizenship. As he suggests, however, blacks have “never been simply waiting,” but have been “probing for a soft spot.” The performances that I examine in this chapter were a part of a larger cultural “probing” that transpired among black artists during the modern Civil Rights Movement. I analyze the creative ways in which black actors and dramatists used the “stage” to experiment with time, space, blackness, and citizenship in the U.S. South.

Engaging Mississippi as the primary geographical stage upon which a particular brand of black performative revealing transpired, this chapter examines the work of an influential cultural organization that was forged on the very soil of Faulkner's native Mississippi: the Free Southern Theater. More specifically, I track the ways in which this black community theater utilized dramatic literature and performance to reconfigure the

social, legal, and cultural landscape of historically oppressive southern geographies, and, thereby, to create a social order in which blacks could access and exercise the rights, privileges, and protections of full U.S. citizenship. Through innovative acts of black performative revealing, these artists “bring forth” paradigms of black being that were strategically repressed by the violences of Jim Crowism, which infringed upon the freedom dreams of black southerners who were fervently fighting for full citizenship.

Raced Temporalities and Chronotopes of Black Political Dissent

If blackness has often been figured through a calculus of inferiority, black southern identity has historically been attributed additional properties of inadequacy. In other words, southern blackness has been scripted with inferior racial meanings, and simultaneously made to bear a subordinate regional identity. In *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double*, Lindon Barrett argues that blackness, as a category of racial identity, has been emptied of value through various processes of violence. Value, he contends, is “an impeachment of the Other, the willful expenditure of the Other in an imposing production of the self” (Barrett 26). In *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora*, Michelle M. Wright reaches a similar conclusion about the ways in which blackness, as socially constructed deficit, allows the West to “posit itself as civilized, advanced, and superior.” Western discourse, she writes, must endlessly reify Africa and the Black as its binary opposite” (Wright 27).

Just as blackness has been emptied of value, and used to reify imagined conceptions of white racial superiority, the South has weathered similar processes of “Othering” within hierarchies of regional geography. It has become what Houston Baker, Jr. and Dana Nelson have called an “abjected regional Other” (Baker and Nelson 236).

The editors of *The South as An American Problem* argue that, more than any other region, the American South is perceived as a region at odds with normative systems of value in the U.S. nation-state. In this way, it has become “a special problem” (Doyle and Griffin 1). Such constructions of the South as a distinctive and problematic region tend to structure the epistemological frameworks through which individuals come to know the infamously deviant South. Their understandings of the region, then, are often (over)determined by its histories of racial violence and its perceived commitments to tradition and stasis and antimodernity. From these troubled and troubling histories, a mythology of the South has emerged—one that situates, and sometimes confines, southerners within its discursive limits.⁷ In this way, the region has long been understood through a psychic process that Edward Said calls “imaginative geography”: the “practice of designating in one’s mind a familiar space which is ‘ours’ and an unfamiliar space beyond ‘ours’ which is ‘theirs’” (Said 54-55).

It is within this fraught nexus of marginal racial and regional identities that black southerners have often found themselves, being marked by a certain “sociogeographic materiality,” or, in other words, scripted by their social and geographical placement (Young 8). Yet, they have historically uncovered ways to contest the legal, social, and discursive violences that tend to shape the experiential realities of subjugated groups. Fred Moten has argued that the “history of blackness is the testament to the fact that

⁷ John David Smith and Thomas Appleton argue that “more than a region,” the South “is an idea, an abstraction, and to some—an obsession” (Appleton 1). If we take this argument seriously, the South is as much a mythic and symbolic landscape as it is a physical geographical space.

objects can and do resist” (Moten 1). This poignant observation rings especially true for those blacks—from slavery forward—for whom the South has been a regional home

Southern blacks, in fact, have managed to use the very space of the U.S. South to make the move from objects of property to subjects and to create what Thadious M. Davis terms “southscapes.” Davis’s concept accounts for the ways in which black southerners, even in the face of legal and social stricture, have used their southern spatial location to “imagine, create, and define new and unproscribed subjectivities,” to “transgress regulatory boundaries that counter racial exclusion,” and to initiate the “flow of ideas and empowerment of actions” (*Southscapes* 2-4). In mapping southscapes, black southerners engage in aesthetic and political processes of revaluing the devalued flesh of black southern bodies, and “counterinvesting” the category of southern blackness (Hartman 51).

During the modern Civil Rights Movement, one of the key ways in which black southerners attempted to create “new” subjectivities,” and indeed a “new” South, was by crafting what I call *chronotopes of black political dissent*. By this I mean to signal the ways in which blacks in the U.S. South turned to intellectual and cultural production to reconfigure oppressive logics of time and space that perpetuated asymmetrical relations of power and inhibited blacks’ acquisition of full citizenship. I borrow the concept of the chronotope from Mikhail Bakhtin, who defines it as the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (Bakhtin 15). But I expand Bakhtin’s formulation to include other modes of intellectual and cultural production, such as performance, music, visual art, and the aesthetics of political dissent

itself.⁸ I also depart from Bakhtin's privileging of time over space, which, as Henri Lefebvre, Doreen Massey, and others have suggested, undermines the significance of space, particularly the ways in which it produces, and is produced by, social relations.⁹

One can see the operation of chronotopes of black political dissent, for example, in Margaret Walker's collection of "civil rights poems," *Prophets for a New Day* (1970). Walker was a native black southerner who spent the majority of her life working as a professor and poet in Jackson, MS. She knew the state's history of anti-black violence all-too-well, especially after her neighbor, civil rights activist Medgar Evers, was viciously gunned down in his own driveway. As the title suggests, the poems in Walker's collection are concerned with "making it new," both in terms of imagining a "new" South and new subjectivities for black southerners. Consider, for example, the inaugural poem, "Street Demonstration":

Hurry up Lucille or we won't get arrested with our group.
An eight-year-old demonstrator, 1963

We're hoping to be arrested
And hoping to go to jail
We'll sing and shout and pray
For Freedom and for Justice

⁸ While bodily gestures such as walking and marching might seem trite, artists and theorists have recognized in these quotidian acts important aesthetic characteristics that can transform relations of power. African American poet Gwendolyn Brooks, for example, writes that "[e]very Negro poet has something to say . . . His mere body . . . is an eloquence. His quiet walk down the street is a speech to the people." In a similar register, Michel de Certeau identifies a poetics of the body within acts of walking, recognizing how these performances can effect spatial transformations: "The long poem of walking," he writes, "manipulates spatial organization no matter how panoptic they might be." See Brooks (ID: Indiana University Press, 1964) and de Certeau (CA: University of California Press, 1984).

⁹ See Lefebvre (MA: Basil Blackwell, 1991) and Massey (1992).

And for Human Dignity
 The fighting may be long
 And some of us will die
 But Liberty is costly
 And ROME they say to me
 Was not built in one day.

Hurry up, Lucille, Hurry up
We're Going to Miss Our Chance to go to Jail. (Walker 55)

Written in free verse, the poem avoids meter restrictions that have the proclivity to (over)determine the movement and pace of the poem itself. The content of “Street Demonstration” evokes the urgency that undergirded blacks’ quest for full citizenship during the modern Civil Rights Movement. The phrase that opens the poem, “Hurry up, Lucille,” is repeated with a difference in the closing couplet, reappearing with a doubling of the speaker’s command: “Hurry up, Lucille, Hurry up.” In this way, the poem’s vertical extremes foreground a grammar of speed. However, the speaker’s allusion to the time required to build Rome, one of history’s most fabled empires, might temporarily render the poem’s conception of speed ambiguous. On the one hand, this line could reflect the speaker’s endorsement of reducing the rate of blacks’ journey toward full citizenship. This analogy, that is to say, possibly operates as an indictment of quickness: if Rome was not built in one day, one certainly could not expect the rapid making of a “new” South.

An alternative reading, however, might consider the speaker’s reference to Rome as a critique precisely of such injunctions to go slow. This reading seems especially logical when one considers that the desire for slowness emanates from someone positioned outside of the community with which the speaker has been affiliated throughout the poem. Notably, this line contains the only appearance of a third-person

pronoun, which stands in sharp contrast to the numerous collective first-person references that recur throughout. This grammatical shift signals both interpersonal and ideological distance. If, by chance, the lengthy time required to build Rome functions as an implicit admonishment to go slow, the speaker immediately counters this injunction with the concluding couplet: “Hurry up, Lucille, Hurry up. We’re going to miss our chance to go to jail.”

Whereas “Street Demonstration” advances a critique of oppressive uses of time, the collection’s second poem, “Girl Held Without Bail,” is more explicit about the ways in which civil rights activists transformed oppressive southern spaces into sites of radical openness. The desire for jail that the speaker in “Street Demonstration” voices has come to fruition, as the speaker joins a community of women protestors who have been arrested:

*In an unjust state the only place
for a just man is in jail.*

I like it here just fine
And I don’t want no bail
My sister’s here
My mother’s here
And all my girlfriends too.
I want my rights
I’m fighting for my rights
I want to be treated
Just like *anybody* else
I want to be treated
Just like *everybody else*

*I like it just fine in Jail
And I don’t want no Bail.* (Walker 56; original emphasis)

For Michel Foucault, the prison is a space of total domination. Walker, however, offers a quite divergent perspective.¹⁰ Like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in his canonical “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” Walker and the women in the poem transform oppressive spaces of confinement into sites of creative production and political articulation. The poem begins by riffing on Henry David Thoreau’s *Civil Disobedience*—a text that endorses nonviolent protest strategies that most often get associated with men like Thoreau, Mahatma Ghandi, and King himself. But the “new prophets” that Walker imagines are communities of women who rewrite the meaning of time and space through embodied performances of protest.

In the third poem, entitled “Now,” time and space are brought together in hopes of pointing the way toward making what the speaker calls “new southern history.”

Time to wipe away the slime
 From inner rooms of thinking,
 And covert skin of suffering;
 Indignities and dirt
 And helpless degradation;
 From furtive relegation
 To the back doors and dark alleys
 And the balconies of waiting
 In the cleaning rooms and closets
 With the washrooms and the filthy
 Privies marked “For Colored Only”
 And the drinking soda fountains
 Tasting dismal and disgusting
 With a dry and dust flavor of the deep humiliation. (Walker 57)

¹⁰ See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, English Translation, (NY: Knopf Doubleday, 1995).

The speaker catalogues spaces that have long served as sites of oppression for blacks in the U.S. South. These spaces are not limited to “backdoors,” “balconies,” and “fountains,” but also include “inner rooms of thinking” and “covert skin of suffering.” Thus, even as blacks labored to remove spatial restrictions that compromised equal access to material spaces in the U.S. South, a true transformation of society, the speaker suggests, must necessarily include a transformation of its subjects through the remaking of both minds and bodies, or “psychic space” and “body space.”¹¹ Moreover, the time for these spatial reconfigurations is “now,” as the poem’s title suggests.

Walker was not alone in crafting chronotopes of black political dissent. She was joined by myriad black artists who used expressive culture to represent time and space in relation to African Americans’ fight for equal rights. One can see the operation of performative chronotopes of black political dissent, for example, on the cover of Max Roach and Abbey Lincoln’s 1962 album *We Insist!: Freedom Now*. The cover of this album contains an image of three black men who, like Jesse Chaney, are in the act performing critical stillness as a means of contesting racial-spatial segregation in Greensboro, North Carolina.

¹¹ See Oliver (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) and Duncan (London: Routledge, 1996).



Figure 5: Roach, Max. [album cover]. 1960. In *We Insist !: Freedom Now Suite*.

The urgency with which their protests—which are often considered to be the first sit-ins of the modern Civil Rights Movement—were staged propelled Roach and Oscar Brown, Jr. to record *We Insist!: Freedom Now* with a similar sense of speed, as they completed and released the project well ahead of schedule in the wake of the sit-ins.

We can also see the working of chronotopes of black political dissent in Reginald Gammon’s painting “Free Now.” Gammon, a black visual artist and Spiral Art Collective member, captures the centrality of time and space to black political desire. This painting portrays a cross-section of political actors and the space of protest in which they are performing. The canvas is divided such that half of its surface portrays feet, while the other half is filled with images of heads. The feet are literally casting shadows on the ground, marking the ways in which bodies are transforming space, while two of the three signs are emblazoned with the word “Now,” suggesting a sense of temporal



Figure 6: Gammon, Reginald. *Freedom Now*. 1963. Acrylic on Board. Afro-American Museum, Wilberforce, O.H.

urgency that moves against Faulkner’s and others’ desires for slower rhythms of black political dissent and black self-making. Protestors collide and overlap, visually evoking a sense of community as they transform the social meanings of space with each step they take.

The idea of creating a “New South” and the use of chronotopes of black political dissent were not limited to art, but were also constitutive to other forms of black intellectual and cultural production. For example, the editors of a 1962 collection of essays entitled *The Angry Black South: Southern Negroes Tell Their Own Story* argued that the “dark history of oppression and degradation in the South is now being challenged and overcome by the relentless efforts of its own Negro citizens. These pages are a record of the beginnings, presaging the realization of a new South” (Mitchell and Peace 1). But only by speeding up the rate at which African Americans were moving toward full citizenship, they suggest, could a “new South” come into existence. In the collection’s lead essay, “The Long Struggle,” Charles B. Robson argues that blacks had grown wary of the “snail-like pace” of social and political change and were no longer

“satisfied with the age-old warning, ‘you should not push things too fast’ (27). In a similar tenor, Robert B. Gore writes in his essay, “Nonviolence”: “Negroes have been told to ‘wait a little longer’ or ‘let’s not go too fast’ for so long that it is ludicrous. What white men mean when they say this is ‘don’t push me at *all*.’ To say that the time is not right for equality for all American’s is to deny all that America stands for” (143).

By mapping such a broad political and cultural field in which chronotopes of black political dissent operated, I am suggesting that the performances I examine in this chapter were a part of a larger milieu in which blacks were revising spatial and temporal paradigms that worked at cross-purposes with their journey toward full citizenship. It is unfortunate, however, that within this diverse field, dramatic literature and performance are often marginalized, even as they were critical sites of black political dissent and self-making, particularly throughout the U.S. South. In this chapter, I am especially interested in the ways in which the Free Southern Theater fused the imaginative possibilities of literature with embodied performance to expose a troubling aporia at the heart of U.S. modernity: the disjuncture between the nation-state’s commitment to innovation, in matters of science and technology, and its contradictory efforts to tether people of African descent to antiquated modes of being, in matters of rights, equality, and justice. They rehearsed and staged plays that wrestled with and critiqued the nation’s uneven commitment to the “new” and fomented black political desires for full citizenship. Thus, from the cotton fields of the Mississippi Delta to the campuses of historically black colleges, blacks were using the “disruptive creativity” of the body in performance to remake southern blackness and to bring into existence a more equitable and modern state, region, and national democracy (Brown 58). It is this story of performance that chapter

two begins to tell.

They'll Take Drama Into the South

In 1963, Doris Derby, Gilbert Moses, and John O'Neal decided to add a new weapon, perhaps an unlikely one, to the arsenal of civil rights activism in Mississippi: black regional theater. Like scores of college students and recent graduates, they had resolved to take the risky journey into the belly of the Jim Crow South, lending their time and bodies to blacks' historic fight against inequality. While Derby and O'Neal worked as field directors for the Jackson, Mississippi office of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, SNCC, Moses was a writer for the Mississippi Free Press. They were all linked, however, by a shared passion for the stage, and a common desire to create a black southern theater in which performance would function as a mode of political activism and a vehicle of cultural awareness. With scarce financial resources and theater accouterments, Derby, Gilbert, and Moses transformed these hopes into a fledgling, but ambitious, community group that would eventually become the Free Southern Theater.

Excited about the possibility of introducing black southerners to live theatrical performance, the founders crafted a "General Prospectus for the Establishment of a Free Southern Theater."¹² This founding document frames the organization's emergence as a pivotal addition to the cultural and political fields of the modern Civil Rights Movement. According to the Prospectus, it was their hope that the theater would "open a new area of

¹² "A General Prospectus for the Establishment of a Free Southern Theater." Box 6, Folders 12-13. Free Southern Theater Papers, 1960-1978. Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA. 25 June 2013.

protest [and] add a necessary dimension to the current civil rights movement through its unique value as a means of education.”



Figure 7: *Map of Free Southern Theater Tours in the U.S. South, 1964-1967.* In Thomas Dent et al. *The Free Southern Theater by the Free Southern Theaters: A Documentary of the South's Radical Black Theater.* New York: The Bob-Merrils Company, 1969: xvi. Print.

In a similar register, the Council of Federated Organizations—a coalition of major civil rights collectives—released a “Special Report on the Free Southern Theater” in 1964 that built a similar bridge between the theater and the modern Civil Rights Movement.¹³ The Free Southern Theater, the report suggests, is as much a “product of ‘the movement’ as voter registration, community centers, or the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.” Thus, a major part of the theater’s mission was to integrate theatrical performance into an already robust cultural apparatus at the core of modern civil rights activism.

¹³ “Special Report on the Free Southern Theater.” 1964. Box 52, Folders 2. Free Southern Theater Papers, 1960-1978. Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA. 27 June 2013.

Unfortunately, the founders sometimes imagined themselves, according to Gilbert Moses, as “bringers of culture to the masses” (Dent et. al 37). In this vein, they often articulated their vision in a tenor that smacked of a civilizing mission. Within this framework, they not only envisioned black southerners as different, but advanced social-Darwinist-like theories of black southern underdevelopment. According to the prospectus, the “Mississippi Negro” was living in a “cultural desert,” and, therefore, had been “unable to develop naturally.” The archive, however, evinces the founder’s genuine respect for, and commitment to, black southerners and their culture; thus, we can attribute much of this civilizing rhetoric to a profound ignorance, to a narrow definition of culture, and, quite plausibly, to a larger historical impulse to scapegoat the South by detaching the region’s racial violence from the historical norms of U.S. racial protocol.¹⁴

Indeed, Gilbert Moses strikes a different tenor in a 1964 letter to Carol Feinman. There, he critiques the very lexicon of an underdeveloped South. Bemoaning a 1964 SNCC advertisement that appeared on the back cover of *Progressive Magazine*, he takes issue with the way in which the South is represented as “another country, an underdeveloped country, South Africa, apartheid, the SNCC Mau-maus” (Dent et. al 8). Moses adamantly resists the idea of an underdeveloped South, even to the point of severing familiar connections between the region and other global South geographies of racial violence. While the founders of the Free Southern Theater were subject to human contradiction and often slipped into dominant modes of engaging “regional others,” they

¹⁴ See, for example Leigh A. Duck (GA: University of Georgia Press, 2006); Riché Richardson (GA: University of Georgia Press, 2007), and Jennifer Greeson (MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

were fully committed to the project of using live theater to aid black southerners in their quest for full citizenship.

Whereas dramatists such as James Baldwin, Douglas Turner Ward, and Lorraine Hansberry used drama to engage a “crisis” of white racial identity, as I argue in chapter one, the Free Southern Theater found southern blackness to be lingering in a similar state of crisis and mobilized drama and performance to confront this dilemma. Both of these crises, black artists show, fueled and were fueled by a larger system of U.S. governance that, despite claims to the opposite, sanctioned black southerners’ marginality, precisely until its Cold War desires for imperial power rendered this position untenable. In other words, the problem of southern blackness, the Free Southern Theater found, was endemic of a broader crisis of laws and social customs that tinted the lens through which blacks viewed themselves, as well the frames that structured how others would perceive them.

The Free Southern Theater’s prospectus foregrounds how such a position of partial citizenship affected discursive perceptions and representations of southern blackness, citing, in particular, the ways in which racially segregated schools not only entailed uneven distributions of educational resources, but also allowed the exercise of racist desires to control and police representation itself. This goal was often accomplished by placing textbooks and school programming “under constant supervision and pressure.” Such restrictions on representation were especially amplified in Mississippi’s “mass media,” the prospectus concludes:

The newspapers in Mississippi are not a source of information concerning the activities of the community or of the state. The distortions of these newspapers are twofold: (1) What is not printed—any valid information about Mississippi’s economic and politics; (2) what is printed—highly distorted and biased articles supporting the Mississippi “way of life.” The

two Negro weeklies, excluding the *Mississippi Free Press*—financed, and in one case controlled, by the same association which owns the white newspapers, fail to convey true information to the Negro community and are virtually useless and retrogressive in purpose.¹⁵

In a similar register, the founding document contends that television is “[c]ontrolled and almost never admits controversial topics,” and that Jackson, Mississippi’s sole Negro radio station was “dedicated to rock-and-roll.”

Following this logic, Mississippi’s educational and cultural institutions propagated racial hierarchies and policed bodies of knowledge that had the potential to undermine logics of white superiority. The result, the founders believed, was a glaring deficit of black cultural institutions, particularly those that were not “controlled by the state.” Ultimately, “*Mississippi’s closed system effectively refuses the Negro knowledge of himself*, and has stunted the mental growth of the majority of Mississippi Negroes.” Only through radical reformulations of the means of representation itself, they believed, could this crisis of southern blackness be resolved. But as the theater constantly reiterated, representation was not limited to the domain of cultural production, but necessarily included the problematics of black political representation as well.

If James Baldwin, Alice Childress, Douglass Turner Ward, and Lorraine Hansberry utilized performance to recalibrate discursive conceptions of whiteness, the Free Southern Theater attempted to reconstruct southern blackness by creating a theater whose ideologies, repertoire, and performance techniques would be built upon the rich

¹⁵ “A General Prospectus for the Establishment of a Free Southern Theater.” Box 6, Folders 13. Free Southern Theater Papers, 1960-1978. Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA. 25 June 2013.

cultural heritage of people of African descent. Staging socially relevant plays, they hoped to invent theatrical forms that would be “as unique to the Negro people as the origin of blues and jazz.”¹⁶ Innovation at the level of performance practices and aesthetic technique, then, were put in the service of crafting new political, racial, and regional subjectivities for black citizens living in the U.S. South. Even if the Free Southern Theater underestimated the vast cultural resources that black Mississippians had at their disposal, or even if its founders could not shake the impulse to civilize, the theater was categorically committed to using performance as a means of aiding black southerners to achieve modern blackness, to reconfigure the socio-political landscape of the U.S. South, and to urging the U.S. nation-state to become a truly modern democracy—one that was as invested in making progress at the level of rights, equality, and justice, as it was committed to innovations in science and technology.

With its foundational ideologies hammered out, the Free Southern Theater began to host workshops in the playhouse of Tougaloo College—a historically black college in central Mississippi. Eventually, the college would come to be dubbed by many the “cradle” of Mississippi’s civil rights movement. This reputation was pivotal to the college’s ability to attract both everyday activists and prominent civil rights leaders alike. In many ways, Tougaloo was an ideal base for the theater’s operations. Its status as a private college allowed it to exist, as one of the theater’s playbills put it,

¹⁶ Ibid.

“outside the jurisdiction of the state legislature.”¹⁷



Figure 8: (above) Group of prominent civil rights activists assembled in front of the gate of Tougaloo College. In the front row left to right are: the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, Juanita Abernathy, Mrs. Coretta Scott King, Dr. Martin Luther King, James Meredith, Stokely Carmichael of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (looking back) and Floyd B. McKissick, national director of the Congress of Racial Equality.¹⁸

In 1964, the theater began to solicit participation in its “Summer Stock Repertory Theater,” circulating brochures among both blacks and whites that announced calls for actors, dancers, singers, directors, technicians, designers, and “angels” (people with money). “Checks should be made payable to Theater Project, Tougaloo College,” one of them reads. “We still need \$15,000.”¹⁹ This ten-week pilot program would run from May 30-August 22, and travel to various towns and cities that were primarily located in

¹⁷“Free Southern Theater Acting Brochure: Interested?” Box 33, Folder 2. Free Southern Theater Papers, 1960-1978. Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA. 25 June 2013.

¹⁸“Charles Kelly. 1966. Associated Press. “Ralph Abernathy, Coretta King, Martin Luther King, James Meredith.” <http://bigstory.ap.org/photo/ralph-abernathy-coretta-king-martin-luther-king-james-meredith>. Web. 12 Mar. 2013.

¹⁹ Ibid., 1.

Mississippi. In addition to performing plays by established artists such as Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, John O. Killens, and Ossie Davis, and working with directors such as Richard Schechner, Ted Shine, and Frank Greenwood, the company would also perform the published and unpublished work of “young playwrights, Negro and white.”²⁰ Recognizing that black Mississippians’ resources were often as scarce as their own, the theater opted not to charge a fee for admission, and imagined a range of performance spaces that would accommodate their productions. “Our Stage,” the brochures announce, will be “community centers, schools, churches, and fields of rural Mississippi and of the South.”²¹

From the pool of interested applicants, the company would select ten women and fifteen men. The sobering reality for those who joined the theater was that the company’s performances would not hinge solely upon an ideology of theater for theater’s sake. Certainly, there was a stated commitment to aesthetic innovation and craftsmanship, but politics would be constitutive to the theater’s platform. Moreover, the brochures illuminate the imminent dangers of participating in an integrated theater—especially one that was so intimately linked to the movement in the very heart of “Dixie.” In addition to requesting that applicants provide their names, mailing address, present occupation, and whether they hoped to pursue a career in theater, the brochure also requested the “[n]ame, address and phone number of person(s) to contact in the event of your arrest.” The

²⁰ Ibid., 1.

²¹ Ibid., 1.

follow-up question was even more suggestive: “Would they be able to send you as much as \$500 for bail bonds and fines on short notice if necessary?”²²

To be sure, the Free Southern Theater often performed under threats of terror that were orchestrated by police and vigilantes alike. In a September 1964 letter, actor Albert Murray, for example, noted: “The bombings in McComb yesterday fill me with rage and I wish we were ready to play now. McComb I think will be our first stop” (Dent et. al 35). Actor Denise Nichols recalls that in McComb, someone threw a bomb at the stage, and that the company had to sleep under armed watch that evening (Holsaert et. al 260). The group was shocked at its Indianola, Mississippi, performance, by the surprise visit of forty-two “white helmeted police.” These officers of the law escorted a group of twenty-five white men—most likely members of the White Citizen’s Council—into a production of *In White America*. While refraining from physical acts of violence, members of the group ultimately concluded that the Free Southern Theater was influenced by the Communist Party—a familiar refrain among those bent on suppressing the emergence of modern black citizenship (Dent et. al 26).

In Beulah, Mississippi, an interracial group of Free Southern Theater actors were not so fortunate. After their performance, two black police officers, with revolvers and a rifle drawn, stopped this unsuspecting, interracial group. After several white officers made it to the scene, the actors were taken to the police station, where they were interrogated not about a crime, but were asked questions such as: “What are you doing down here, Pretty Boy?”; “How is that black pussy?”; and “How does it feel to screw a

²² Ibid., 1.

white woman?” After they were finally released at 2 a.m., the police informed the Ku Klux Klan that “two nigger lovers and a nigger were loose—“so pick them up for us.” For three hours, the actors endured “abject terror,” crawling along country roads, hiding in weeds, dodging the beam of flashlights in an effort to elude their captors (Dent et. al 86). By some act of fate, they managed to escape without physical harm. It is important to note, however, that police brutality and racial terror were not limited to Mississippi, but continued well after the theater moved its base to New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1965 (Dent et. al 48). In New Orleans, in fact, the property of host families was bombed, and actor Denise Nichols barely escaped being shot in the head by a white police Officer (Holsaert et. al 262). With these terrifying events transpiring, Richard Schechner, a Tulane drama professor and editor of *TDR* who was influential in the theater’s development, decided to keep a list of lawyers readily accessible.

In the face of violence, the Free Southern Theater began its pilot project by touring Martin Duberman’s play *In White America* (1964). The company performed in relatively populated Mississippi cities such as Jackson, Biloxi, Vicksburg, Hattiesburg, and Meridian, as well as smaller towns such as Milestone and Ruleville; they also made two stops outside of the state at the historically black LeMoyne College in Memphis, TN, and in New Orleans, LA. In many ways, *In White America* was the ideal play to inaugurate the Free Southern Theater’s existence. It reflects Ellison’s suggestion that blacks have known how to wait for a while, as Duberman traces blacks’ oppression from slavery to the height of the modern civil rights movement. As the play’s concluding lines suggests: “The Negro American has been waiting on voluntary action since 1876. If the thirteen colonies had waited for voluntary action this land today would be part of the

British Commonwealth . . . We can't wait any longer . . . *Now is the time*" (Duberman 68-69).

In White America is an innovative docudrama that explicitly fuses history with the imaginative possibilities of performance. Duberman includes within the written version paratextual materials that provide a certain legitimacy and materiality to the play's particular historical narrative.²³ The temporal trajectory along which the dramatic action unfolds is telling; it begins in 1964, revisits the middle passage in the eighteenth century, and moves in a linear progression through historical time. The *dramatis personae* range from everyday black and white citizens, situated in the present, to iconic historical figures such as Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Thomas Jefferson. A seemingly omniscient narrator facilitates the play's movements through time and space, bridging the historical and social distance that separate Duberman's diverse cast of actors.

Within this conjoining of disparate historical moments, one can locate just beneath the play's linear structure what I call the *cyclicity of anti-black violence*. By this I mean the ways in which violence against blacks often subsides, takes new forms, creates new assemblages, but persists, nevertheless, in its dispossessive effectiveness. In other words, even as historical time moves along a linear continuum, social actors return to ostensibly passé logics of black subjection to create modern forms of violence—forms that carry traces of the old into the present. Indeed, artists such as Amiri Baraka and Toni Morrison have positioned the cyclicity of black violence at the fore of African

²³ Duberman includes, for example, excerpts from Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), correspondence between a slave mistress and an ex-slave, and a speech that was delivered by a U.S. Senator.

American literary works such as Baraka's *Dutchman* (1964) and Morrison's most recent novel, *Home* (2012).

Amiri Baraka's play *Dutchman* (1964) is set on a subway—a symbol of repeating paths—in New York City. Clay, a middle-class black man, spirals into a journey toward madness, after Lula, an Eve-like seductress, harasses him until he retaliates with acts of violence that align with her conceptions of black masculinity. Clay eventually slaps Lula, after which she produces a knife and fatally stabs him. After Lula tosses his body from the train, she eyes another black man who has boarded. While the play concludes, Baraka seems to suggest that this scene of violence will repeat itself infinitely. In *Home*, Morrison traces the reverse underground railroad-like journey that Frank, her black male protagonist, takes in 1950s America. As he takes this journey, Morrison links biomedical violence against his and his sister's body to Jim Crowism and slavery. Racism, then, finds expression in the contemporary moment not by devaluing bodies through racial slavery, but rather through the seemingly innocent guise of medical experimentation.

For Walter Benjamin, the angel of history, ever moving toward the present with his face fixed on the past, represents a version of this tension between progress and past historical moments. "Whereas we perceive a chain of events," Benjamin writes, "[the angel of history] sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage." Benjamin goes on to suggest that the angel of history "would like to say, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed" (*The Work of Art* 257). When thinking about Wakefield, Faulkner, and so many others who lamented blacks' progress toward full citizenship, one finds a similar longing for restoration and wholeness—a desire to resurrect an era in which black political participation was more

firmly contained. The catastrophe for them, though, was a particular outlook on the progress that blacks were making toward full citizenship and modern blackness, with each legal victory, each piece of legislation, constituting a symbolic “piling of wreckage.”

“The story of the Negro in the United States begins with the slave trade,” asserts the griot-like narrator of *In White America*. The play’s historical narrative opens with images of black slaves being captured, transported to Africa’s coast, shackled in the bowels of ships, and, ultimately, transformed into objects of property. As the play moves forward in time, the actors discuss historical events that range from emancipation and U.S. Reconstruction to the whipping and lynching of black bodies in the post-Reconstruction era. This history culminates with a timely and pathos-laden performance that is based on the school integration conflict that unfolded in Little Rock, Arkansas, nearly seven years before Duberman completed *In White America*. “No nigger bitch is going to get in our school,” a white mob lashes out as a black fifteen-year teenager attempts to enter the segregated school. “Drag her over to this tree! Let’s take care of the nigger” (Duberman 66).

In White America opens, then, with images of black bodies trapped in the violent, subterranean space of slave ships. Its denouement finds a young black woman being taunted by whites, solely because she dared to take the nation’s highest court seriously when it declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional. Placed in relation to the numerous acts of anti-black violence that intersperse the play, these scenes—which begin and conclude Duberman’s version of “Negro history”—reveal the continuity not only of racial violence, but of the dogged determination that has subtended efforts to deny people

of African descent full citizenship and equality. If we follow Duberman's cyclical history, blacks have long been, and continued to be, subjected to oppressive spatial constraints—from shackles during the middle passage to the restrictions of Jim Crow segregation. Thus, even as historical time struts along in a linear, teleological path, racial violence and inequality tend to circle back, picking up fragments of antiquated social orders, refashioning them into modern tools of anti-black oppression. As David Harvey argues, “power relations are always implicated in spatial and temporal practices” (Harvey 225).

But why would the Free Southern Theater, with its worries about whites' control of representation, begin its “experiment” with a white-authored play geared toward a white audience? Certainly, Duberman's goal of describing “what it has been like to be a Negro in this country” aligns with the Free Southern Theater's hopes of educating black Mississippians about histories and ways of being that were often repressed and contested within racially separatist societies. One cannot help but notice, however, that Duberman seems to participate in the cultural project of revealing blackness that I critique in chapter one. He writes:

I chose to tell this story on the stage, and through historical documents, because I wanted to combine the evocative power of the spoken word with the confirming power of historical fact. The spoken word is able to call forth the binding emotions of pity and sympathy. Men would feel, not merely understand the Negro's story. His experience might thereby become our own, past reality might enter into present consciousness. The resulting compassion would be further validated by the documentary format. (Duberman ix-x)

Duberman identifies the orality of performance as a key mechanism that can “call forth the binding emotions of pity and sympathy” from the audience. Surely, affect has been

one of the strongest weapons that Afro-Diasporic peoples have deployed in their historical fight for full citizenship, from written and performed appeals to white mothers during slavery to mid-twentieth century performances of civil rights protest that elicited sympathy from local, national, and international audiences.

But Saidiya Hartman has rightly called for a closer examination of the multiple registers in which affect can work in processes of representing blackness. Affective identifications, she points out, can inadvertently consolidate existing structures of power, even within seemingly well-intentioned acts. Following this logic, Duberman's attempt to evoke "compassion" by convincing audience members that the Negro's "experience" might become their own is suggestive. One could, perhaps, regard this invitation as a call for the audience to recognize that *In White America* is as much a "history of white people," to borrow from Nell Painter, as it is a play about "Negro history."²⁴ The play certainly invites this interpretation of intertwined histories. But experience is a key and operative term. White audience members for whom the play is written will never endure the experiential particularities of anti-black violence, precisely because they are white. Any effort to do such risks reifying paradigms of racial power that have produced and sustained the violent history at the center of the dramatic action.

But how does performing this play within the specific socio-political landscape of 1960s Mississippi, possibly enable certain disruptions and refashionings? What does it mean to perform *In White America* with a primarily black cast for a predominantly black audience? How does the very site of performance and the historical backdrop of the civil

²⁴ See Nell I. Painter, *The History of White People* (NY: Norton, 2010).

rights movement inscribe the performances with new meaning and contribute to certain kinds of reception? If, as the Free Southern Theater argued, blacks were strategically left unaware of certain historical events and, therefore, often inured to tactics that conspired to deny them equality and full citizenship, the theater's performance of Duberman's play attempted to put that ignorance, or capitulation, to flight. The play was not only a new cultural excursion for most of those who attended, but it was a major step in an effort to produce more modern, fully rightsed black citizens in the U.S. South.

If the founders expressed a desire to produce aesthetic forms that would be unique to blacks' experience, they also performed in theatrical spaces that were part and parcel of the milieu in which black southerners lived. This was certainly the case with the company's 1964 performances of *In White America*. The productions were generally "simple—with a few lights and one platform" (Dent et. al 17). In fact, at its Ruleville, Mississippi, performance, there was "no curtain," and lights were not necessary, because of the mid-afternoon outdoor setting. The stage was the back porch of the kind of small frame house that was common to the rural landscape of the Mississippi Delta. While the porch might seem an unlikely, and perhaps undesirable, site of performance, it allowed the theater to incorporate the experiences of its audience into the dramatic action itself.

In the U.S. South, porches have historically functioned as key sites of communal formation and cultural production. As Trudier Harris argues, they were one of the "primary stages for interactive storytelling" among black southerners (Harris xii). Thadious M. Davis situates southern porches within a more complex web of social, cultural, and political use-value. In many ways, Davis suggests, the lack of porches on the shacks in which black sharecroppers lived helped to sustain the social control of black

people. Such an absence “meant a limited possibility for congregating and the lack of a social space for gathering undermined the possibility of uniting for sharing grievances and thereby building an aware, alert political community” (*Southscapes* 81).

Within this context, the back porch-as-stage is not simply a makeshift site of performance that reflects the subpar conditions under which rural black Mississippians lived. Rather, the transformation of the porch into a viable site of performance invites the assemblage of bodies who, in everyday and theatrical performance, can carve out spaces of resistance, pleasure, and survival from within the oppressive geographies that they inhabit. In short, the porch is bell hooks’s site of “radical openness; it is Davis’s “southscape.” Its ability to facilitate community was pivotal to building stronger network of relations and chains of communication among black southerners, as the Free Southern Theater set out to do.

While the stage for the Ruleville, Mississippi, performance was unconventional, the seating was as improvisational. The mostly black audience sat in folding chairs, benches, cots, and some even watched the play while sitting on the ground. In her 1964 article “Theater of the Meaningful,” which appeared in *The Nation*, Elizabeth Sutherland writes of Free Southern Theater audiences:

Much of the irony and humor eluded them and they occasionally laughed when they were not supposed to, or vice versa. They clapped equally for Booker T. Washington delivering his conservative ‘five fingers speech’ and for Black Nationalist Marcus Garvey. Members of the audience who started to join in singing with the cast would sometime be hushed by others more decorous. (Sutherland 26)

But these kinds of visceral and improvisational irruptions are precisely what the founders had in mind when envisioning the distinctive functions and characteristics of the Free

Southern Theater. That these reactions often operated outside of scripted protocols of audience behavior should not have warranted Sutherland's negative judgments about black southern audiences. Quite contrarily, they are better regarded as performance practices that resonate with the testimonial and call and response aesthetics of black religious practices; they are the dissonance and riffs of jazz performance; indeed, they are like blues patterns and the cathartic releases made possible in and through this musical art form that was forged, like the Free Southern Theater, upon the oppressive landscape of rural Mississippi.

Free Southern theater audiences, in fact, were invited to partake directly in the dramatic action. "You are the actors," John O'Neal would tell them. In Greenville, Mississippi, one audience member tested O'Neal's proclamation, when he interrupted a play, in a bold act of improvisation, and took a spot on the stage. Language, however, eluded this ambitious actor, as he stood there, perhaps excited, but ultimately speechless (Dent et. al 29). Elsewhere, audience members shouted out: "That's right!" "Amen!" "You tell it!" Sutherland writes of Ruleville, Mississippi, resident and civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer: "There was no need to tell her 'you are the actors,'" referencing Hamer's willingness to add her voice to the theater's performances (Dent et. al 26). The lines between actor and audience, as Hamer's gestures suggest, were productively blurred. The Free Southern Theater, in short, placed a high value on its audiences, whom they described as "articulate" and "active." "[N]o one who has seen a FST performance," they assert, "can fail to recognize that the audience is the most important and expressive element in it. If the FST can ever match the beauty and virility of its audience it will be a great theater" (Dent et. al xii).

When the Free Southern Theater staged *In White America* in Milestone, Mississippi, they performed in a community center that was partially completed. One of the walls, in fact, was still missing. As a result, the stage literally reached out into one of Milestone's cotton fields. The symbolism that emerges from this meeting of the stage and the field is ironic, even radical, when situated within a longer history of laboring black bodies that harvested fields under systems of total and partial domination. This extraction of black labor, of course, was a cornerstone of slavery. But it was all-too-familiar to audience members, such as Hamer, who had labored under the weight and exploitation of sharecropping—a system that Douglas A. Blackmon terms “slavery by another name.”²⁵ Thus, as Free Southern Theater actors utilized the bodily vocabularies of performance to reveal more modern forms of southern blackness and to recalibrate the discursive meanings of southern space, the materiality of the field, of the site of performance, conjured a different tableau of performing bodies. Evoking what Toni Morrison calls a rememory,²⁶ the field recalled ancestral black bodies that were forced to move to a different, more constrictive rhythm, as they performed the work of cheap and free labor.

²⁵ See Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*. (NY: Random House, 2008).

²⁶ In Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, Sethe explains rememory to her daughter Denver as something that is “about time.” “Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory—but out there in the world . . . [E]ven if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.” Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (NY: Random House): 43.

Free Southern Theater actor Robert Costley had a similar encounter with rememory during one of the theater's performances at Tougaloo College. As he stood on the campus—a former slave plantation—he was enthralled by a tree that was rumored to be 800 years old. According to Costley, the tree conjured up the ghostly presence of black slaves who had once lived upon the land: “It stood straight and tall while hundreds of slaves bent under the lash . . . As I stood sheltered by its great arms, in my mind's eye a panorama of days long gone rushed by me and for a few moments I could hear the sound of the lash, the singing and crying of those in bondage.” For Costley, this performance was “the best yet” (Dent et. al 81).

The theater's transformation of the materiality and symbology of porches, cotton fields, and slave plantations into creative sites of performance index an engagement with what we might call “scriptive spaces,” riffing off Robin Bernstein's concept of “scriptive things.” Bernstein provides a “method of reading material things as scripts.” Her goal is to “discover not only what any individual actually did but rather *what a thing invited users to do*” (Bernstein 11; emphasis added). In thinking about a former slave plantation or a rural Mississippi field, I am interested in the ways in which black actors in the U.S. South ignored the invitations of material spaces and created their own innovative terms of usage through what we might call “unscripting scriptive spaces.” Indeed, these spaces were stages upon which Free Southern Theater actors crafted innovative chronotopes of black political dissent that challenged anti-black spatial violence as well as the interrelated logics of black waiting that *In White America* put on display for black southern audiences.

The fields of the U.S. South, much like the porch, were familiar sites of performance during the Free Southern Theater's tours of Mississippi. Like the porch, "the field functions dually as inhibiting or enabling" (Davis 80). This tension between the "inhibiting" proclivities and the "enabling" possibilities of southern space (Davis 80) was certainly apparent in the Free Southern Theater's productions of *Purlie Victorious*—Ossie Davis's 1961 satiric comedy. *Purlie* is set in the state of Georgia, in fictional Cotchipee County. While violence, racism, and sharecropping color blacks' quotidian experiences, the play's black actors recalibrate the meanings of southern space and chart a speedier path toward full citizenship. In the opening pages of the script, Ossie Davis highlights the play's symbolic spatial and temporal settings. The "place," we learn, is the "cotton plantation country of the *Old South*," while the time is "the *recent past*." The play's setting reflects the ways in which the rural South often gets imagined as an archaic regional space—as the quintessential site of the "old." More still, most of the dramatic action unfolds within "an *antiquated*, run-down farmhouse," and the stage props similarly link the region to that which is outmoded: "[A]n *old* dresser," the stage directions tell us, "stands against the Right wall between the window and the Down stage door" (*Purlie* 5).

The audience soon learns that the "antiquated" farmhouse and the "old" dresser are symbolic of the timeworn relations of power that characterize the social structure of Cotchipee County, particularly within the context of race. As the play progresses, however, black performers—like scores of other black activists throughout the South—staged creative acts of protest that reconfigured the social meanings of southern space. Their theater of protest, however, was not the bus, it was not the lunch counter, the courtroom, the street, or other familiar sites that have animated the traditional stories we

tell about the social drama of modern civil rights activism. Rather, it was the theatrical stage.

The first actor whom the audience meets is the eponymous protagonist, Purlie Judson, who later renames himself Purlie Victorious. Purlie is “tall, *restless*, and commanding.” He is “a man consumed with that *divine impatience*, without which anything truly good, or truly bad, or even truly ridiculous, is ever accomplished in this world” (*Purlie* 6). Thus, even before the dramatic action begins, the stage directions attach to Purlie’s character a certain aversion to waiting. His antipathy toward delay, in fact, is configured as a sacred posture. Purlie’s “divine impatience,” the audience learns, is fueled by an unrelenting desire to reclaim Big Bertha—a space that had once served as a church for the county’s blacks, but had since been pilfered by Ol’ Cap’n Cotchipee—their white landlord and employer, who not only transforms this space of worship into a barn, but vowed to raze it before restoring it to his black sharecroppers.

Spatial inequalities were becoming increasingly less desirable and accepted among Cotchipee’s (both the county’s and the man’s) blacks. Indeed, the glaring differences between their own domestic spaces and Cotchipee’s were difficult to ignore. “You see that big white house, perched on top that hill with them two windows looking right down at us like two eyeballs,” Purlie asks? “That’s where Ol’ Cap’n lives.” “And that ain’t all,” Purlie continues. “[H]ill and dale, field and farm, truck and tractor, horse and mule, bird and bee and bush and tree—and cotton!—cotton by bole and by bale—every bit o’ cotton you see in this county!—Everything and everybody he owns!” (*Purlie* 9). That nearly the entirety of Cotchipee county’s physical geography and built environment is owned, and therefore controlled, by one man is striking. Even more

shocking, though, is Purlie's claim that Cotchipee also owns "everybody." Such a statement might seem hyperbolic in a post-slavery moment in which trafficking in human bodies had been outlawed. But one cannot ignore the ruses of power and the tricky calculus that kept scores of blacks' indebted to landlords, and thus confined to peonage, well into the mid twentieth century. As Purlie puts it: "the longer you work . . . the more you owe at the commissary; and if you don't pay up, you can't leave" (*Purlie* 8-9). Such a condition of entrapment worries any neat line between personhood and commodity, subject and object, freedom and subjection.

The lure of reclaiming Big Bertha and crafting new forms of southern blackness provoke Purlie's decision to return to his native South. Twenty years prior to this homecoming, Cotchipee had beaten Purlie violently with his legendary bullwhip—a weapon steeped in Cotchipee county lore, because of its keen ability to ensure the subjection of black bodies through the material threat of fear; this is what Elaine Scarry calls the "expressive potential of the sign of the weapon" (Scarry 17). Following this violent encounter, Purlie quickly fled the South. His return is both an odyssey for personal revenge as well as an attempt to inculcate enough collective political consciousness among blacks to reclaim Big Bertha. In these acts of personal and communal redress, Purlie attempts to cull a new black southern subjectivity from the same oppressive southern landscape upon which he endured an unforgettable trauma. Within this new way of being in the world, flight was no longer tenable—a message of revelation that was necessary to revealing a more modern black subject position within a geographical space that carried such heavy baggage of the "old."

Purlie attempts to bring this goal to fruition by plotting a strategic series of cunning performances that could dupe Cotchipee into parting with a five hundred dollar inheritance that he had embezzled from Bee, Purlie's deceased cousin. Reclaiming Bee's inheritance would yield enough money to purchase Big Bethel. The key performer in this ruse is Lutibelle: "a girl from the backwoods" who carries a "greasy shoebox" and an "out-moded handbag" (*Purlie* 6). Purlie has recruited Lutibelle to stage an impersonation that could dupe Cotchipee into believing that she was indeed Cousin Bee, the official inheritor of the five hundred dollars in question. In this performance of mimicry, Lutibelle—who seems to be just as outdated and "outmoded" as the framehouse in which the play is set—has to make the symbolic leap from a "backwoods girl" from Dothan, Alabama, to the educated and socially graceful woman that was Cousin Bee. Thus, as much as Purlie is attempting to remake himself and the southern landscape of Cotchipee County, Lutibelle, too, has to undergo a serious transformation. She has to find a new model of black southern subjectivity that will not betray her performance, and, thereby, the contrivance that Purlie has orchestrated to recover Big Bertha.

If the Free Southern Theater often invoked a civilizing rhetoric, the codes of patriarchal authority at work in Purlie's artifice similarly confirms that the project of remaking southern blackness was not without its own intra-racial hierarchies of power. When Purlie arrives in Cotchipee county, he proceeds immediately to the cabin where his brother and sister-in-law, Gitlow and Missy, were living. He was boiling over with excitement, because he had "stumbled upon an "Ibo Prize," a "Zulu Pearl," a "long lost lily of the black Mandingo," whom he had acquired as a stand-in for Cousin Bee (*Purlie* 15). Missy initially does not recognize Lutibelle's resemblance to Cousin Bee, and

therefore is skeptical about her ability to perform the role; however, she eventually capitulates and agrees to go along with the trickster-like act of redress.

Purlie's masculinist superiority toward Lutiebelle resembles the real life hierarchies that plagued the modern Civil Rights Movement. He constantly refers to Lutiebelle as an object or addresses her as a commodity. Quite frequently, Purlie praises Lutiebelle for being his "dark and holy vessel," but this praise masks the patriarchy brewing right beneath the surface. On one occasion, Purlie passionately laments how black women who possess Lutiebelle's beauty are too often reduced to serving as "common scullion[s] in the white man's kitchen." Their beauty, he argues, has been "split for Dixiecratic pigs" (*Purlie* 15). This opposition to black women's careers as domestics in "the white man's kitchen" emerges not so much out of a singular concern for the dignity of black women, but out of a consideration of how their dignity, or the lack thereof, bears upon black men's claim to patriarchal authority in a racist society. Indeed, as the play continues, the symbolic conflict between Purlie and Cotchipee is fought at the site of Lutiebelle's black female body. Ossie Davis, then, joins writers such as Jean Toomer who, in his vignette "Blood Burning Moon," captures the ways in which the struggle for male dominance in the U.S. South is often waged over the black female body.²⁷

While Lutiebelle is the lead actor in this performance of redress, ultimately she can only be Purlie's subordinate. In fact, Purlie writes the script that Lutiebelle uses to stage her imitation of Cousin Bee. Often critiquing her performances and feeding her

²⁷ Jean Toomer, *Cane* (NY: Norton, (2011)(1923)).

lines, he conspicuously solidifies his place as both playwright and director. Lutiebelle, however, interjects and shares outlooks and quotes that she had learned from her former white employer, Miz Emmy Lou, who, even though absent, seems to be directing Lutiebelle's actions and feeding her lines, just as Purlie had begun to do. When Lutiebelle informs Purlie of what "Miz Emmy Lou sez," he vehemently condemns the ways in which a white woman serves as Lutiebelle's primary way of knowing the world. He constantly disrupts what he perceives to be a violent framework of race, power, and epistemology. But the audience is left to wonder, however, if Purlie simply desires a transfer of power—from Miz Emmy Lou to himself—over black women's ways of knowing. This gendered power differential plays out in overt form when Lutiebelle assumes that Purlie is about to propose marriage. He, however, has a different question in mind. "Would you be my disciple," he asks—attempting to establish a relationship in which the power dynamic is already inherent, as the biblical metaphor of discipleship suggests.

Purlie's and Lutiebelle's performance comes to a startlingly end when Cotchipee, who has detected the ruse by now, orders Lutiebelle to sign a receipt for the inheritance. Slipping out of her role, she writes: "Lutiebelle Gussiema Jenkins," Cotchipee summons the sheriff and instructs Purlie to "drop [his] britches" so that he could finish "[s]omething [he] started twenty years ago with [his] bullwhip" (*Purlie* 51). When the sheriff arrives, he attempts to assault Purlie. But Lutiebelle kicks the sheriff in the shin, which allows Purlie to escape. Thus, she resembles scores of black women who were the engines of modern civil rights activism, but were often relegated to subordinate positions. Later in the play, in fact, Purlie, reports that he had whipped Cotchipee and recovered the

five hundred dollar inheritance. But Idella, Cotchipee's black maid, reveals that Purlie had told "the biggest lie since the devil learned to talk" (*Purlie* 73)! Disappointed, Lutiebelle asks: "Why did you have to preach all them wonderful things that wasn't so" (*Purlie* 74).

With his not-so-subtle indictments of black male preachers-turned civil rights leaders, Ossie Davis strikes at the heart of "charismatic" black leadership. Davis's play not only questions charismatic leadership, but also interrogates the foundation of nonviolence as a tenable framework of black political protest. "How come," Purlie asks, "the only cheek gits turned in this country is the Negro cheek." In a similar register, Gitlow argues that whites "got the president, the governor, the courthouse, both houses of congress—on his side . . . The army, the navy, the marines; the sheriff, the judge, the police, the F.B.I . . . Not to mention a pair of brass knucks and the hungriest dogs this side of hell." Therefore, Gitlow concludes, blacks cannot be expected to "go up against all that caucaustic power empty-handed!" "Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel," Lutiebelle asks. "Of course he did," Gitlow retorts, "[B]ut lions is one thing and white folks is another" (*Purlie* 64). While this questioning of nonviolence signals a growing concern among blacks about the limits of nonviolent direct action and desires for integration, the play's integrationist resolution puts forth a rather overt endorsement of interracial collaboration in the project of seeking full black citizenship.

Eventually, Purlie recovers Big Bethel, thanks to Charlie, Cotchipee's liberal son, who undermines his father when he registers the deed to Big Bethel in the name of Purlie Victorious Judson. Despite being reared as a white man in a racist southern milieu, Charlie musters up enough courage and conviction to believe that blacks were entitled to

equal rights, and dedicates a part of his life to making this a reality. Like numerous white liberals who participated in the movement, he was a target of white terror and the victim of its assaults against the body. Alongside Purlie's efforts to remake southern blackness, then, Charlie was working to craft a new paradigm of white (male) southern identity—one that would be the inverse of both his father and his “ol confederate” grandfather (*Purlie* 38).

As the play concludes, Purlie assumes the mantle of leadership for the “Big Bethel, Church of the New Freedom” and Charlie becomes the “first candidate for membership to Big Bethel on a [*sic*] integrated basis”—a resolution, that deviates from the more tentative visions of integration staged in civil rights era plays, such as Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964) (*Purlie* 79-80). But with its fusion of political awareness, black sermonic aesthetics, slapstick comedy, and black gospel music, and a setting that was familiar for black southerners, *Purlie Victorious* was a hit among Free Southern Theater audiences. In the words of Gilbert Moses, *Purlie* “laid the audience in the aisles with laughter” (Dent et. al 52-53). But this aesthetics of comedy and laughter operated in a register quite different from minstrelsy. Here the performing black body endeavored to deconstruct logics of black abjection and inferiority, and to disassemble the social-darwinist-like theories of blacks' unfitness for citizenship that were part and parcel of the minstrel tradition. If minstrelsy mobilized black performance to undo the “new” black subject that emerged in the wake of Reconstruction, pining for the “old” Negro, the Free Southern Theater's itinerary of black comedic performance had a starkly different project in mind: one of crafting a new, more modern black southern identities.

As was often the case, the Free Southern Theater found themselves performing *Purlie Victorious* in outdoor, makeshift theaters—sometimes not by choice, but because their original site had been destroyed through acts of white terror. In a 1964 letter to the New York Fundraising Committee, the Free Southern Theater writes:

Last month in Indianola we gave an outside performance of PURLIE VICTORIOUS [sic]. We set up our playing area on a field next to the Indianola Freedom School which had recently been condemned by city officials due to a fire which had ‘mysteriously’ broken out in the building. COFO workers say that firemen watched the building burn, and that after finally deciding to put the fire out, they destroyed a lot of equipment in the building with water hoses and axes. (Dent et. al 55)

But the Free Southern Theater transformed this scene of terror into a site of empowering and comedic performance. The letter to the Fundraising Committee goes on to note that the outdoor setting was “especially appropriate for the character Gitlow who, for the first time, literally ran on stage from the cotton field spewing cotton from his pockets.” In recollecting this performance, actor Denise Nichols writes: “In one town we performed the play right next to a cotton field. There’s a scene where a character comes running through the rows of cotton pitching cotton bolls into the air. It was real cotton. It was wild.” “The theater,” she continues, “Purlie in particular, allowed for another way of venting—through comedy—and people loved it. They laughed and laughed” (Holsaert et. al 263).

As much as *Purlie* entertained its audiences and was an artistic success, the implications of its political views cannot be sidelined. While blacks in Cotchipee county attempted to “write a new page in the annals of Negro History Week,” as *Purlie* puts it, the cyclical nature of anti-black violence continued to loom over the integrated southern society that emerges in the play’s denouement (*Purlie* 66). Certainly, the temporal

setting in the “recent past” is a warning, as it locates the racial violence and inequality that is at the play’s core within a historical moment that is in close proximity to the present. Davis captures this reality in the metaphors of Old Cap’n Cotchipee’s death. When Charlie signs the deed to Big Bertha over to Purlie, Cotchipee dies, symbolizing, perhaps, a material vanishing of the “Old South.” However, Cotchipee dies standing up, hinting at a potential resurrection, and signifying the cyclical proclivities of anti-black violence, which, somehow, tends to always find its way into the current historical moment.

While Ossie Davis’s *Purlie Victorious* is particularly concerned with recovering and remaking southern spaces, it also foregrounds the centrality of time to the search for modern blackness. Purlie is moving so swiftly toward reclaiming Big Bethel that his sister-in-law, Missy, worries about his timing. “Great leaders,” she argues, “are bound to pop up from time to time mongst’ our people—in fact we sort of look forward to it. But Purlie’s in such a hurry I’m afraid he’ll lose his mind.” (*Purlie* 19). But the Free Southern Theater’s most explicit engagement with the politics and violences of time was in its productions of Samuel Beckett’s modernist play *Waiting for Godot* (1952), which placed familiar scenes before a people who were decidedly accustomed to waiting.

Like Ossie Davis’s *Purlie Victorious*, the setting of *Waiting for Godot* resonates with the geography of the U.S. South. The details that Beckett gives are sparse: the play is set on a “country road,” it is evening, and there is a tree (Beckett 1). The country road not only resembles the landscapes of many of the rural towns in which the Free Southern Theater performed, but it represents the possibility for movement through time and space, although, as the play reveals, this movement can be both forward and backward, not to

mention the possibility of stasis. This uncertain mixture of possible paths captures the changing forms of black citizenship in the U.S. nation-state, as bouts of progress tend to be followed by structural regressions as historical time marches along.

In addition to the symbolism of the setting, the play sheds light on the game of waiting for full citizenship that blacks had been playing for decades. Estragon, one of the two main characters, is sitting on a mound, trying unsuccessfully to remove a boot that, for some reason, is stuck on his foot. Right as Estragon is beginning to forfeit the struggle, Vladimir, his co-protagonist, appears just in time for Estragon to vent his frustrations:

ESTRAGON: [*giving up again*] Nothing to be done.

VLADIMIR: [*advancing with short, stiff strides, legs wide apart*] I'm beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying, Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle. (Beckett 1)

Estragon had begun to succumb to defeat, believing that there was no hope for successfully removing the boot. Vladimir, too, was beginning to grow hopeless, and consigns the sentiment that not much else can be done. His pessimism, however, is not related to a single incident, but rather reflects his feelings about the conditions of life, at least within the context of his own lived experiences. But instead of buying into a fatalistic view of the future, Vladimir manages to retain some semblance of hope, and “resume[s] the struggle” (Beckett 1-2).

As the two continue to dialogue, Vladimir asks Estragon where he had spent the past night. Estragon, he learns, had slept in a ditch. “And they didn't beat you,” Vladimir asks? “Beat me. Certainly they beat me.” In these opening minutes of the play, Vladimir and Estragon are not only caught in a seemingly interminable process of

struggle and hoping for change, but at least one of them sleeps in a ditch—a less than ideal resting place—and is a victim of physical violence, though the aggressor goes unnamed. Therefore, even with the dizzying, disjointed, sometimes-hard-to-follow trajectory of the play, Free Southern Theater audiences, from the outset, were in the company of a performance that reflected so much of their own experiential realities of violence, inhabiting deplorable spaces, and enduring waxing and waning hopes for change in the U.S. Deep South.

The audience learns shortly after that Estragon and Vladimir are waiting for the arrival of someone named Godot. They are puzzled, because, despite their waiting, Godot has failed to appear:

ESTRAGON: He should be here.

VLADIMIR: He didn't say for sure he'd come.

ESTRAGON: We'll come back tomorrow.

VLADIMIR: And then the day after tomorrow.

ESTRAGON: Possibly.

VLADIMIR: And so on. (Beckett 6)

They are anticipating, then, a person who has relayed mixed messages about his imminent arrival. In fact, the duo is uncertain if Godot has even promised that he would come. In the face of their uncertainty, they agree to return “tomorrow . . . And then the day after tomorrow . . . And so on,” entering a perhaps infinite cycle of waiting that holds no guarantees of Godot's arrival. As they continue to tax their minds to recall which day of the week, if any, Godot promised to arrive, Vladimir looks “wildly about him, as though the date was inscribed in the landscape (Beckett 7). Despite their persistent waiting, Godot never appears.

To be sure, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* baffled and even bored some Free Southern Theater's audiences. Penny Hartzell, one of the company's actors, notes in her journal that *Godot* "mystified, amused, bored, [and] shocked" many of those who had come to see the play. Not only did audience members register their dissatisfaction by walking out before the play's ending, but at the Greenville, Mississippi, performance, a group of children even threw spitballs at the stage (Dent et. al 53). John O'Neal uses the term "befuddlement" to describe the audience's reception of *Godot*: "Yes, the adjective is befuddlement. That's the way they respond to *Godot*" (Minor 1). However, for many black southerners, Estragon and Vladimir's fruitless patience symbolized the ruse of U.S. inequality and its manipulative uses of time to delay blacks' acquisition of full citizenship.



Figure 9: McNamara, Norris. *A Mississippi Audience Watches a Performance by the Free Southern Theater*. "They are Waiting for Godot in Mississippi" By W.F. Minor. New York Times, Jan. 31, 1965.

The play's larger themes of waiting, delay, power, and violence were certainly not lost upon Mississippi civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer. In a 1964 Ruleville, Mississippi, performance of *Godot*, Hamer exclaimed: "[Y]ou can't sit around waiting. Ain't nobody going to bring you nothing. You got to get up and fight for what you want. Some people are sitting around waiting for somebody to bring in freedom just like these men [Vladimir and Estragon] are sitting here. Waiting for Godot." At the November 28, 1964 performance at Williams Chapel, Hamer had come back from Chicago, Illinois, and decided to attend a performance. Echoing her earlier sentiments, Hamer tells the audience that "everyone should pay strict attention to the play because it's due to waiting that the Negro is as far behind as he is" (Dent et. al 53).

Within the "theater of the absurd" genre, in which *Waiting for Godot* is often situated, absurdity often implies an absence of meaning. The Free Southern Theater and its audiences, however, seem to have operated with a starkly different definition of absurdity in mind. Rather than a signifier for meaningless, absurdity appears to reference the unconscionable condition of blacks' partial citizenship in a country ostensibly built on promises of equality and inalienable rights for all—regardless of social identity. Despite these promises, the U.S. nation-state, like Godot, seemed intent upon delaying African Americans' journey toward full citizenship:

ESTRAGON: So long as one knows.
 VLADIMIR: One can bide one's time.
 ESTRAGON: One knows what to expect.
 VLADIMIR: No further need to worry.
 ESTRAGON: Simply wait.
 VLADIMIR: We're used to it. (Beckett 29)

This knowledge of one's ability to bide time is precisely what Godot, the U.S. nation-state, and private citizens like William Faulkner seemed to know. That is to say, in the absence of black political dissent, hope can function as a tool of power that is not called upon to produce any significant change. As long as hope portrays the illusion of change, and those in power have knowledge of this, the social actors who stand to benefit most from change are left, like Vladimir and Estragon, in an endless cycle of waiting. This is racialized chronopolitics at its best.

Moreover, those in positions of dominance often dispatch proxies and insubstantial shards of hope in order to manage desires for change. While Godot never appears, he sends in his stead a "boy," who attempts to persuade Vladimir and Estragon to continue waiting for Godot's impending arrival. "It's not my fault, Sir," he contends. Estragon, however, pressures him to announce exactly who deserves blame for Godot's delay—but the boy was afraid. "Afraid of what," Estragon replies? "Of us." Vladimir joins in: "I know what it is, he was afraid of the others" (Beckett 40). Indeed, fear of "the others" has been the rationale for countless arguments for racial segregation and acts of anti-black violence—certainly from emancipation forward.

When the play reaches the second act, the actors and audience find themselves in a very familiar place. The setting is almost identical. Godot still has not come. Vladimir and Estragon continue to wait. However, when this act begins, the simple tree on the country road has grown leaves, suggesting that time had continued to pass as the pair persists in their waiting. This repetition with a difference not only resonates with the cycles of blacks' waiting for rights, but points to what I have called the cyclicity of anti-black violence, as Estragon, the audience learns, has been beaten again. Perhaps, the

most poignant message for black southerners who attended the Free Southern Theater's productions of *Waiting for Godot* was Vladimir's forceful call to action:

Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! [*Pause. Vehemently.*] Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally are needed. Others would meet the case equally well, if not better. To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late!" (Beckett 70).

This apocalyptic language of running out of time recurs throughout African American cultural production during the modern Civil Rights Movement, from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *Why We Can't Wait* (1963) to James Baldwin's *The First Next Time* (1963). As Vladimir argues, "the hours are long, under these conditions" (Beckett 70).

In her now classic civil rights anthem, "Mississippi Goddamn," music aficionado Nina Simone draws a map of oppressive and violent geographical spaces that constitute the U.S. Deep South, namely Mississippi, Tennessee, and Alabama. Yet, Mississippi alone emerges as the exceptional space of violence—what we might call the ur-scene of subjection, to riff on Saidiya Hartman. This imagining of Mississippi, as the epitome of racial violence ran deep in the U.S. cultural imaginary. In a similar tenor, Malcolm X claims that the U.S. should "get Mississippi straightened out before we worry about the Congo."²⁸ Indeed, the construction of Mississippi as a synecdoche for anti-black violence abounded during the era of modern civil rights activism. But the Free Southern Theater turned to literature and performance to make Mississippi, the U.S. South, and black southerners anew. From its stages to its gestural vocabularies, the theater folded

²⁸ See Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. Breitman (NY: Merit, 1965): 90.

the culture of black southerners into dramatic representations that were both artistic and political and dared to reimagine and remake a region, a people, and ultimately a nation by creating innovative chronotopes of black political dissent.

Waiting for Godot in the Global South

The U.S. South has long been linked to global south geographies that sanction the oppression of people of African descent. In his ethnographic travelogue *A Turn in the South* (1989), V.S. Naipaul recognizes these points of connection: “And for the first time it occurred to me that Trinidad . . . would have more in common with the old slave states of the Southeast than with New England or the new European-immigrant states of the North . . . What I had heard as a child about the racial demeanor of the South had been too shocking. It had tainted the United States, and had made me close my mind to the South” (Naipaul 24). Like blacks in the U.S. South, however, people of the African diaspora in various global locations were using performance to rethink discursive constructions of blackness and to challenge racial apartheid during struggles for civil rights, decolonization, and independence. Indeed, there was a proliferation of black theaters that cropped up during the era of modern civil rights activism—from Canada’s Black Theater Workshop (1972), to the Negro Theater Workshop in the United Kingdom (1963), to the Trinidad Theater Workshop in Trinidad and Tobago (1959).

One theatrical enterprise that especially resembled the work of the Free Southern Theater, however, was the tradition of township theater performance in South Africa, particularly those performances orchestrated by black South African playwright Gibson Kente. Like the Free Southern Theater, Kente dedicated his artistic talents to the most marginalized black people in the most marginalized spaces (South African townships),

with dreams of using performance to radically transform a closed society into a more open and equitable democracy. Kente began his career in the music industry, but quickly developed a love for theatrical performance. He turned to the environment of South African townships to create performance and aesthetic techniques that would reflect the vibrancy, vitality, and energy of the geography and its black inhabitants, even as these performances revealed their pain.

While Kente and much of his work are often considered to be apolitical, the political force of his art tends to lurk just beneath what meets the eye. Kente has said of the role of politics in his plays:

I have been a critic of the political scenery for a long time. I think one of my most popular shows, that even Mandela, Buthelezi and such people know very well is *How Long?* This was the most popular play in terms of reflecting life in the townships under the old regime . . . That was not the only one, because I had plays like *I Believe*, where I was saying, ‘I believe that if the government can take note of the anger of the youth—if they can act now, we might save ourselves a lot of hardships in the future.’
(*Alternative Theatre in South Africa* 83; emphasis added)

One of the ways in which Kente attempted to transform South Africa’s political landscape was by using time and space creatively to critique South African racial apartheid and anti-black violence. In a grouping of three plays that are often considered to function as a trilogy—*How Long* (1973), *I Believe* (1973), and *Too Late* (1975)—Kente constantly returns to the pronounced spatial inequalities that characterize blacks’ lived experiences and violent, racist uses of time.

Throughout his oeuvre, Kente incorporates chronotopes of black political dissent to counter racist uses of chronopolitics that seek to delay the crumbling of South African apartheid. This is particularly evident in *Too Late*— a play whose apocalyptic title hints

at its content. *Too Late* details the poverty and abject terror under which blacks in South African townships lived. Kente incorporates representations of immoralities such as drinking, selling, and smuggling liquor. But rather than link these “vices” to blackness, as if they were indigenous behaviors, Kente conceives of these activities as the byproducts of a racist and oppressive environment that leaves blacks little options for much else. In addition, representatives of the State beat Kente’s black characters. They are sexually assaulted. They are imprisoned for outdated or absent reference books—state documents that literally police who can move through space. And, more shockingly, State actors murder them with the least display of remorse, as the police killing of the young, innocent, and disabled Ntanana reveals.

But as the “Doctor” in the play suggests, “unless something is done about this pettiness, the law is going to end up with a hot potato in its hands. Can’t something be done to curb the bitterness in both young and old before it’s TOO LATE?” (Kente 122). Like black artists in the U.S., Kente suggests that the State’s slowness in guaranteeing blacks full citizenship will perhaps result in something akin to apocalypse. Kente seemed to be somewhat of a prophet, as the Soweto riots broke out in full force less than one year later. Thus, whether in rural Mississippi or in the townships of apartheid South Africa, black actors were using their bodies to create a “New South” and new models of black citizenship with a fervent sense of urgency. As the narrator of *’Sippi* suggests, the modern Civil Rights Movement was “one of those moments all over the world when time caught up with history . . . [f]rom Johannesburg to Birmingham, from Rangoon to Ouagadougou, from Timbuktu to Lenox Avenue” (Killens v).

Indeed this sense of urgency and changing paradigms of blackness is visible in Saint Lucian poet and playwright Derek Walcott's 1970 play, *Dream on Monkey Mountain*. Walcott's protagonist, Makak, asserts: "I was a king among shadows. Either the shadows were real, and I was not King, or it was my own kingliness that created the shadows. Soon, soon it will be morning, praise God, and the dream will rise like vapour, the shadows will be real" (Walcott 304). Makak articulates a vision of recovering a forgotten history of black "kingliness," and embraces the possibility of bringing this form of blackness into the contemporary moment. Walcott's play was performed not only in Trinidad, but also in Canada by the Black Theatre Workshop and in the United States by the Negro Ensemble Company in New York City, New York. While the play presents itself as a drama, Walcott argues that it is a "physical poem with all the subconscious and deliberate borrowings of poetry." The next chapter tracks the ways in which various writers and performance collectives, such as Langston Hughes, Gil Scott-Heron, and the Broadside Press Poets, fused poetry and performance to craft innovative aesthetic and performance paradigms. These innovative artistic practices, they believed, were a prerequisite to realizing a new model of black citizenship and a new, more equitable U.S. nation-state. Using these innovative techniques, black poets, I show, challenge and recalibrate discursive constructions of black pathology that gained forceful traction during the mid-twentieth century as blacks were staging one of history's most formidable social and political dramas.

Chapter 3:

“Playing the Changes: Gender, Performance Poetry, and Maternal Pathologies”

“[T]he Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is too out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole.”

~Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action”

“That is why this apparently modest notion (listening does not figure in the encyclopedias of the past, it belongs to no acknowledged discipline) is finally like a little theatre on whose stage those two modern deities, one bad and one good, confront each other: power and desire.”

~Roland Barthes, “Listening”

In his 1966 article “Negro Rights and the American Future,” civil rights leader Stokely Carmichael accuses the U.S. nation-state, and its white racial majority, of slipping African Americans into dozens. During a historical moment in which blacks were significantly redefining black citizenship and re-scripting discursive meanings of blackness, “white folk,” Carmichael contends, were crafting discourses of black maternal pathology in order to calcify the linkage between blackness and inferiority and to fasten the yoke that bound black people to second-class citizenship. I quote Carmichael at length here:

Now, after 1960, when we got moving, they couldn't say we were lazy and dumb and apathetic, and all that, anymore so they got sophisticated and started to play the dozens with us. They called conferences about our mamas and told us that's why we were where we were. Some people were sitting up there talking with Johnson while he was talking about their mamas. I don't play the dozens with white folk. To set the record straight, the reason we are in the bag we are in isn't because of my mama, it's because of what they did to my mama. That's why I'm where I'm at. We have to put the blame where it belongs. The blame does not belong on the oppressed but on the oppressor, and that's where it's going to stay. (Carmichael 57-58)

According to Carmichael, whites were engaged in a “sophisticated” form of play—one that sought to stifle the coming into being of a new black citizen. In other words, the U.S. nation-state and its white racial majority engaged in acts of black maternal dissing that attempted to unsettle black social and political progress and, ultimately, to destabilize the new modes of black being that emerged during the modern Civil Rights Movement.

Thus, while the movement triggered a certain kinesthesia of the black social body (“when we got moving”), the strategic pathologization of black mothers and families operated under the aegis of broader project that yearned for a form of black inertia that would reduce the speed and scope and black political progress. Using the dozens as a conceptual metaphor, Carmichael lays bare the ways in which social constructions of black familial pathology worked at cross-purposes with blacks’ desires for full citizenship, as well as their efforts to reconfigure discursive conceptions of black racial subjectivity. In short, during this watershed era of black social and political gain, tropes of black maternal and familial pathology were mainstays in the rhetorical toolboxes of those who labored to construct blackness as racial otherness.

According to Fred Moten, the “cultural and political discourse on black pathology has been so pervasive that it could be said to constitute the background against which all representations of blacks, blackness, or (the color) black take place” (“The Case of Blackness” 177). Daniel Patrick Moynihan, an accomplished sociologist, senator, and overall statesman, was a key architect of these cultural and political discourses of black pathology that cleverly slipped blacks mothers and families into the dozens. More specifically, he argued that the alleged backwardness of black families was a product of black maternal pathologies, in particular. The “Negro” community, he posits, “has been

forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is out of line with the rest of American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well” (Moynihan 12). To be sure, Moynihan’s lambasting of black families, and the specific aim that he takes at black mothers, have not gone unremarked. Scholars and everyday cultural actors have acknowledged the ways in which such outlandish claims operated within much broader “powers of distortion that the dominant community seizes as its unlawful prerogative.” According to Hortense Spillers, these distortions “conceal” black mothers and families beneath “overwhelming debris” (Spillers 210). But despite the discursive and ontological violences that discourses of black pathology have performed, black citizens have not simply acquiesced, but have devised innovative ways, as Carmichael suggests, of “put[ting] the blame where it belonged.”

Focusing on the complex intersection of black poetry and performance, this chapter examines the ways in which black poets utilized these modes of expression to contest discourses of black pathology and the national ethos that furnished and sustained their discursive power. During the modern Civil Rights Movement, artists such as Langston Hughes, Gil Scott-Heron, Margaret Walker, and Nikki Giovanni exposed this “overwhelming pile of debris” for the invested fiction that it was, sifting through a mound of rhetoric that strategically concealed particular iterations of black racial identity. More specifically, I argue that these artists developed innovative aesthetic and performance techniques that enabled them to reveal alternative representations of blackness, especially black motherhood and black familiarity, which were especially targeted by Moynihan and his interlocutors. According to Meta D. Jones, black poetry is

an “ultra-discursive field of signification” that “enables some of the most compelling articulations of the politics and poetics of representation, imagination, and the improvisatory performance of identities” (*The Music is Muse* 5). Recognizing this potential of poetry to (re)articulate performances of identity, I trace the ways in which the artists that I examine in this chapter imagine alternate conceptions of blackness vis-à-vis a form of black performative revealing that I term *playing black dissonance*.

By this, I refer to written and performed modalities of anti-racist play that challenge discursive constructions of black maternal and familial pathologies. If the U.S. nation-state and its white racial majority were playing the dozens with black mothers and families, as Carmichael suggests, black poets fused poetry and performance to craft their own innovative vocabularies of play that—when placed alongside rhetorics of black pathology—enacted a symbolic and sonorous dissonance.¹ More still, their styles of play reveal the ways in which blacks, even in the face of racial inequity, have managed to build healthy familial bonds and to forge black socialities over and against any efforts to reduce black citizens to what Giorgio Agamben calls bare life.²

The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers several definitions of “play” that inform my use of the term here: (1) playing as a creative manipulation of words and language; (2) as

¹ Dissonance, as I use it here, aligns with both musical and psychological conceptions of the term. From psychology’s concept of cognitive dissonance, I borrow the sense of conflictual ways of perceiving the world, and from music, I borrow the similar sense of absent harmony, but especially how it plays out at the level discordant sound.

² See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (California: Stanford University Press, 1995) and *State of Exception*, Trans. Kevin Attell (IL: University of Chicago, 2005)

“dramatic or theatrical performance staged before an audience” or an “acted representation of an action or story; and (3) “an act of playing a record, video cassette, or compact disc” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Blending these somewhat disparate registers, play, as I use it here, accounts for theatricality and performance, the use of sound technologies to “play” a mechanically reproduced performance, as well as innovative “word play.” Play is also a useful framework for making sense of the U.S. nation-state’s investments in producing black pathologies as well as the ways in which black artists have mobilized poetry and performance in ways that have unsettled these discursive practices. In this vein, the OED offers two additional definitions of play: (4): “a trick” or a “treacherous, crafty, [and] underhand” act and (5) “free or unimpeded movement of the body.”

Taken together, these disparate meanings of play shed light on the dialectical struggle over racial representation that was at the crux of the modern Civil Rights Movement. If social actors such as Daniel Patrick Moynihan employed violent forms of play to malign black mothers and families, black artists crafted their own innovative styles of play that articulated narratives of black motherhood and black familiarity that were markedly different. Using these techniques, they imagined a greater freedom of black movement, both real and symbolic, even as black freedom dreams were constantly threatened by “treacherous, crafty and underhand” acts of play that often masqueraded as objective sociological inquiry. Whether staging poetry readings in studios, producing a written performance poem, or using tapes, LPs, and CDs to record and disseminate poetry performances, black poets, I show, crafted innovative forms of poetic play that recalibrated discourses of black maternal and familial pathology and critiqued practices

of racial injustice by slipping the U.S. nation-state itself into the dozens. Indeed, these artists give credence to Richard Schechner's claim that play has both a "profoundly aesthetic quality" as well as a "social function" (*Schechner* 47-48).

Examining Langston Hughes's epic jazz poem, *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz*, (1961) and Gil Scott-Heron's *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox* (1970), I trace the ways in which black poets utilized poetry and performance to recalibrate discursive representations of blackness as well as social constructions of U.S. national identity. Hughes and Scott-Heron expose the ways in which discursive constructions of black maternal and familial pathologies were socially constructed ruses that were steeped in racial power and decidedly connected to much longer histories of anti-black oppression that have traditionally relied upon logics of black difference for their own sustenance and survival. Hughes and Scott-Heron also advance a forceful and dynamic critique of U.S. modernity. Using modern technologies, particularly various vehicular modes of transport, and domestic space as metaphors, they reveal the ways in which the violences that have come to define the project of modernity have deliberately manufactured oppressive social conditions that are misleadingly cited as irrefutable evidence of black pathology and are, subsequently, mobilized to translate this deviation from "American" (read white) norms into convenient racial fictions.

This chapter also acknowledges the ways in which attacks against black women were not limited to cross-racial relations.³ In this era of socio-political change, black

³ For scholarship on the vast inequities that black women faced during the civil rights movement as well as revisions of civil rights histories that better account for black women's roles, see, for example, Vicki L. Crawford, Jacquelyn A. Rouse, and Barbara Woods, eds. *Trailblazers and Torchbearers: Women in the Civil Rights Movement, 1941-*

women also weathered *intraracial* gender hierarchies that often produced discursive violences that cut as sharply and deeply as Moynihan’s logics of black maternal pathology. Black women artists, however, used poetry and performance to imagine formations of black womanhood that not only challenged Moynihanian logics of black female pathology, but disrupted black men’s attempt to confine black women to ancillary locations—both within everyday social contexts as well the modern Civil Rights Movement. In this vein, I conclude the chapter by reflecting on a collection of audiotaped poetry performances that Broadside Press—a black-owned and -operated publishing company—produced during the modern Civil Rights Movement, tracing the ways in which black women artists such as Margaret Walker and Nikki Giovanni creatively fused poetry, technology, and performance to critique patriarchy, to undermine efforts to contain black female bodies, and to revise narratives of charismatic black male leadership by foregrounding the central place that black women occupied in the modern Civil Rights Movement.

Living Archives and the Ontology of Poetic Performance

The very nature of what constitutes a performance has been a point of serious contention throughout performance studies discourses. At the center of this debate has been a formative question: “How can we think about performance in historical terms, when the archive cannot capture and store the live event” (Taylor xvi)? As Diana Taylor’s poignant question suggests, the life and afterlife of performance have become

1965 (GA: Georgia State Press, 1990); Peter Ling and Sharon Montieth, eds., *Gender in the Civil Rights Movement* (NY: Routledge, 1999); and Danielle L. McGuire, *At the End of a Dark Street: Black Women, Rape and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (NY: Vintage, 2010).

contested topics that have at stake the very idea of what constitutes what Peggy Phelan has called the “ontology of performance.” For Phelan, performance’s “only life is in the present,” which is to say that performance:

“cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations. Once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance’s being, like the ontology of subjectivity proposed here, becomes itself through disappearance” (Phelan 146; original emphasis).

To be sure, my second chapter mobilizes this provocative and valuable notion of performance as disappearance to theorize the ways in which Douglas Turner Ward utilizes various aesthetic techniques to symbolically absent black bodies from the theater’s visual field, thereby shifting attention to whiteness during a historical era in which cameras were fetishistically invested in representations of injured black bodies. I am less inclined, however, to limit the ontology and temporality of performance to the present—to narrow its life to a singular moment of being in time. To do so, I think, risks reifying what Walter Benjamin calls the “aura” of the work of art, which tends to assign the original instantiation a certain primacy and, by extension, to de-legitimize subsequent iterations of that work of art.⁴

In a quite different tenor, scholars such as Fred Moten and Philip Auslander have argued that performance can, indeed, exist beyond the temporal boundaries of the present. Moten, for example, argues for what he terms the “material reproductivity of black performance,” suggesting that this particular, racialized mode of performance

⁴ See Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. (NY: Schocken, 1969).

transcends the temporal boundaries of the present (Moten 18). At stake in Moten's conception of what I might call the multi-temporal character of black performance is a particular concern for black ontology, namely the ways in which black performances—which are necessarily concerned with both the past and the future—enable black social actors to invent forms of being and to create social worlds in which “nonvalue functions as a creator of value” and one in which value “animates what appears as nonvalue” (Moten 18). In other words, the reproduction of performances has been germane to blacks' attempts to “be”—to exist, that is to say, beyond the normative logics of social, legal, and cultural paradigms of black being.

In a similar register, Phillip Auslander expands the ontology of performance beyond the limits of the present. Theorizing what he terms “mediatized performance,” Auslander examines how mechanically reproduced performances survive beyond the primal moment of “liveness.”⁵ Whereas Phelan conceives of liveness as performance's condition of possibility, Moten and Auslander move against these temporal constrictions to refigure performance's temporality as well as its ontology. This chapter builds on two key observations that emerge from these efforts: (1) Moten's claim that the repetition of black performance has been a key facet of blacks' historic struggle to revalue the devalued category of blackness and (2) Auslander's recognition of the ways in which performance circulates and survives beyond liveness through various media.

⁵ Auslander defines “mediatized performance” as performance that is “circulated on television, as audio or video recordings, and in other forms in technologies of reproduction” (Auslander 5).

Just as the temporality of performance has been a central issue in performance studies, the relationship between poetry and performance has been as hotly debated, as scholars grapple with the tensions between “the page and the stage.” According to Nathaniel Mackey, moving poetry from the page to the stage is a “bothersome” act for “writerly poets,” particularly because performance has “become synonymous with theatricality, a recourse to dramatic, declamatory and other tactics aimed at propping up words or at helping them out.” Mackey, however, contends that even on the page, words are “being made to perform by the poet, allowed or trusted to perform (Mackey 228). Unlike this group of “writerly poets,” performance theorist E. Patrick Johnson finds value in moving poetry from the page to the stage. This gesture has the potential to become what Johnson terms a “living archive”—a project in “public anthropology . . . that does more than just disclose events in people’s lives, but encourages them to think about how these life narratives intersect with the histories, experiences, and events in their own lives” (*Going Home Ain’t Always Easy* 56). According to Johnson, then, the act of staging a performance can facilitate an intersubjective relationship between audience and performer, revealing mutualities that connect bodies across individual difference at the site of performance.

African American literary critic Stephen Henderson assigns a similar value to the stage. In a much more pessimistic tenor, however, Henderson frames the page as a particularly toxic site. That the page is a product of mechanical reproduction, he posits, is a “reminder of our compromise with a cold technology” (Henderson 30). When one considers the ways in which technological modernity has been made possible in and through violence against black bodies, Henderson is certainly justified in harboring such

suspensions of “cold technology.” But as Alexander Weheliye has argued, sound recording and reproduction technologies have also “afforded black cultural producers and consumers different means of staging time, space, and community in relation to their shifting subjectivity in the modern world” (Weheliye 20). In this vein, artists such as Nikki Giovanni have been more open to building bridges between poetry, performance, and technology. It would be “ridiculous,” Giovanni writes, to live in “an electronic age and not choose to electronically transmit my voice.” “Our obligation,” she continues, “is to use whatever technology is available” (Giovanni 119).

Like Giovanni, black poets were using the very tools and symbols of modernity to contest its violences against black bodies and the deprivation of rights that colored the experiential realities of African descended peoples. During the modern Civil Rights Movement, black poets not only turned to recording technologies, but also to the stage as well as the page, using black poetry to produce “living archives” that were both written and performed, textual and embodied. While the modern Civil Rights Movement is often remembered and articulated throughout the visual, black poets working at the intersection of poetry and performance reveal the centrality of the auditory to the movement’s cultural and political fields. According to Mark M. Smith, “we seem to have lost sight of other ways to understand beyond vision and, in the process have quietly endorsed the long-standing Western tendency to denigrate the nonvisual, ‘lower’ senses” (Smith 2). This chapter calls more attention to the role of the auditory in African American literary production and performance that emerged during the modern Civil Rights Movement,

“[I]istening closely *in* the archives and close listening *to* the archives” (*The Music is Muse* 19; original emphasis).⁶

Slipping the U.S. Nation-State into the Dozens

In Langston Hughes’s epic *tour de force*, *Ask Your Mama*, nation-states become mothers. The poet slips nations into the dozens, subjecting them to a serious game of “roasting,” or—we might say—critical reflection. The dozens are often imagined as an aggressive and sometimes violent form of play—one that functions as a coping mechanism for black youths who are trapped within impoverished, crime-laden environments.⁷ However, Robin Kelley has invited us to see the dozens as “more than responses to, or products of, oppression . . . to acknowledge the artistry, the fun, the gamesmanship that continues to exist, if not thrive, in a world marked by survival and struggle” (Kelley 4). The dozens, Kelley suggests, are not reducible to the familiar narrative of black resistance that often entangles blacks in a reductive web of responding to and not initiating.

⁶ According to literary critic Aldon Neilsen: “The critical and historical work done on sound poetry has grown considerably in recent decades, and yet it has been almost wholly restricted to the works of white artists. If there is any shibboleth extant within the field of African American literary study, by critics both black and white, it is the presupposition of a dominance of performative orality in the formation of black literary structures, and yet the critical literature on black poetry in performance seems unable to bestir itself to move beyond the rather narrow channel it has so far navigated between the sermonic and the slam.” However, scholars such as Neilsen himself, Meta D. Jones, and Carter Mathes have begun to pay significant attention to performed iterations of African American poetry.

⁷ See for example, Roger Lane, *Roots of Violence in Black Philadelphia, 1860-1900* (MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), Roger D. Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia* (IL: Aldine, 1970); and Herbert Foster, *Ribin’, Jivin’, and Playin’ the Dozens* (MA: Ballinger, 1986).

Fusing poetry and performance, Langston Hughes tapped into the “fun” and “artistry” of this genre of social intercourse, borrowing from its dialogic form, its aesthetics of humor, and its inherent logics of social critique. More specifically, Hughes transforms the game of the dozens into an innovative mode of national critique and anti-racist poetic expression. He constructs the U.S. nation-state itself as a pathological mother—a trope that challenges Moynihanian logics of black maternal and familial pathologies throughout the poem. Geneva Smitherman has argued that “[i]n playing the dozens in the title, Hughes is slyly alluding to America’s unacknowledged racially mixed genealogies” (Smitherman 131). I would add to this that Hughes is as invested in revealing the strategic ways in which nations have also produced genealogies of racial separation and exclusion that have strategically marginalized people of African descent.

Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz is an innovative, experimental work of poetry that baffled audiences and reviewers alike. Hughes’s unconventional synthesis of Afro-diasporic musical forms, sometimes-elusive word play, and layered historical references coalesced into a fragmented poetic work whose form evokes the sense of uncertainty that has often characterized the experiential realities of black people, whose citizenship has been in a state of flux since the days of emancipation. As Hughes was writing *Ask Your Mama*, the U.S. nation-state continued to strategically orchestrate jazz tours that traveled throughout global communities. Enticing black jazz musicians to serve as U.S. cultural ambassadors, the nation used black art that was strategically coopted and transformed into “American” art to legitimate its rhetorics of equality within international communities, even, quite ironically, as these musicians continued to endure overt acts of

anti-black racism within the nation's borders.⁸ In *Ask Your Mama*, however, Hughes plays a different tune and is invested in a radically different cultural and political project. More specifically, his "12 moods" put jazz in the service of a project that contradicted the performative premise of U.S. jazz tours. In other words, they critiqued a nation whose rhetorics of equality hardly accorded with its actions, and whose logics of modernity failed to account for black social and political progress.

Recent scholarship has done much to prevent Hughes's epic poem from languishing in the archive. These analyses have thoughtfully explored Hughes's formal innovation, his transnational consciousness, and his cross-generic, trans-geographic synthesis of cultural forms. Despite the poem's title, however, surprisingly little has been said about Hughes's engagement with the maternal, notwithstanding common linkages to the art of playing the dozens. But Hughes's use of the maternal is that and so much more. It certainly borrows from the African American art form of "playing the dozens," but Hughes also transforms this vernacular art into an innovative, experimental poetics through which he constructs the U.S. nation-state as a pathological mother—a representation that stands in sharp contrast to Moynihan's paradigm of black maternal pathology, offering a new object of analysis.

Hughes composed *Ask Your Mama* in the wake of the 1960 Newport Jazz Festival, which closed prematurely when a mob of angry, intoxicated, mostly white fans rioted after they were denied access to the festival's sold-out events. In addition to summoning the National Guard to restore order, pathways into and out of the ritzy

⁸ See Penny Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

Newport community were heavily guarded and monitored. Hughes was slated to introduce a program on the history of the blues the day after the riot. But in the wake of these contentions events, he turned to his pen, writing a performance poem whose life would far exceed the live events of the Newport Jazz Festival. After Hughes completed *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz*, he used parts of this poem to produce two additional works that borrow from the original but are noticeably distinct: *Ask Your Mama: A Dance Sequence for a Man, a Woman, and Two Narrators* and *Ask Your Mama: A Poetic Dialogue for a Man and a Woman* (which he composed for actors Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee in order to promote the original version). While the last decade has witnessed a flourishing of scholarship that analyzes the original poem, the new iterations have received virtually no critical attention. To be sure, these poems were not widely performed and, thus, survive in the archive primarily in written instantiations. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “[s]o much of our [African American] literature seems dead on the page when compared to its performance” (Gates 32). Yet, as Koritha Mitchell has demonstrated, critically analyzing written performances can open up productive conceptual and theoretical avenues, as we continue to grapple with the ephemerality of performance and the silences of the archive.⁹

In 1963, Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee recorded a performance of *Ask Your Mama: A Poetic Dialogue for a Man and Woman*. A fraction of the original text, the script is a mere sixteen pages; the recording is even shorter. At just over two minutes, it focuses, in

⁹ See Koritha Mitchell, *Living With Lynching: African American Lynching Plays, Performance, and Citizenship, 1890-1930* (IL: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

particular, on a section of the “Ode to Dinah” mood of the original poem.¹⁰ Davis and Dee read individual lines, but throughout the performance, their voices merge, producing symbolic sonic articulations of black male/female unity that undermine Moynihan’s logics of the overbearing black woman and the infantilized black man who are at odds in a strained domestic relationship. This recording, however, does not replace Moynihan’s paradigm with an equally problematic mode of black male/female engagement that is steeped in patriarchy. In fact, the lines are divided, the performance time and space are shared, and Dee’s place in the poetic performance is as central as Davis’s. Hughes builds upon and significantly expands this imagery of black male/female interrelationships and collaboration in the libretto version of *Ask Your Mama*.

A pastiche-like fusion of poetry, music, and dance, *Ask Your Mama: A Dance Sequence for a Man, a Woman, and Two Narrators* is a libretto that riffs on Hughes’s original poem, while venturing into different and innovative territories. In this version, poetry continues to rely on performing bodies to articulate Hughes radical critique of racial inequity. At the level of form and content, this syncretic work of art troubles Moynihan’s apocalyptic portraits of the personal relationships between black women and men. In particular, it stages moments of black male/female collaboration and healthy black familial relations that run counter to Moynihan’s dreary framing of motherhood and

¹⁰ *Ask Your Mama a Poetic Dialogue*. JWW MSS 26, Box 272, Folder 4475. Langston Hughes Papers, Series V. General Writings. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. October 2013.

black familiarity. In the libretto, in fact, nation-states emerge as the pathological mothers who are in need of intervention and critical reflection.

Aesthetically, the libretto is a performance poem that combines two forms of dialogue: a dance duet and a conversation in poetry, which are performed simultaneously by two male/female duos. Whereas the original poem is comprised of twelve “moods”—a clear nod to both the dozens and the twelve bar blues form—Hughes’s reconfigured libretto contains only ten sections. While Hughes does not use the dozens as this version’s organizing framework, he continues to craft a poetics of anti-racist critique that relies upon a symbolic framing of nations as mothers. Indeed, “ask your mama,” the cornerstone of the dozen’s linguistic repertoire, continues to function as a refrain through which the speaker renders the U.S. nation-state as a pathological mother.¹¹ In addition to its critique of nation, the poem offers significant representations of black male/female collaboration, struggling against the centuries of oppression and violence that have targeted networks of black intimacy and kinship.

MAN: IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES— WHERE THE DOORS ARE DOORS OF PAPER— DUST OF DINGY ATOMS BLOWS A SCRATCHY SOUND	A Man and a Woman
WOMAN: AMORPHOUS JACK-O-LATERNS CAPER	move against
MAN: AND THE WIND WON’T WAIT FOR MIDNIGHT FOR FUN TO BLOW DOORS DOWN.	the sky,

¹¹ I am not suggesting that Hughes and the other poets in this chapter are responding directly to Moynihan’s report. Rather, I argue that their innovative experimentations with poetry and performance provide alternative conceptions of U.S. national identity and blackness that Moynihan chooses to ignore in his construction of black pathologies.

WOMAN: BY THE RIVER AND THE
RAILROAD.
WITH FLUID FAR-OFF GOING,
BOUNDARIES BIND UNBINDING
A WHIRL OF WHISLTES BLOWING.

perhaps on

a levee,

as a river

mist rises

like a

ghostly

MAN: NO TRAINS OR STEAMBOATS GOING
IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES,
BUT THE RAILROAD AND THE RIVER
HAVE DOORS THAT FACE EACH WAY,
AND THE ENTRANCE TO THE MOVIE'S
UP AN ALLEY UP THE SIDE.

WOMAN: *TELL ME HOW LONG
HAVE I GOT TO WAIT? CAN I GET IT NOW—
OR MUST I HESITATE?*

curtain of

the past

half-veiling

*(The MAN joins HER in repeating
the Blues as both sing)*

BOTH: *BABY, HOW LONG
HAVE I GOT TO WAIT?
CAN I GET IT NOW—
OR MUST I HESITATE? (Ask Your Mama: A Dance Sequence 539)*

ancient

memories

The “quarter of the Negroes” remains the primary metaphor through which Hughes places Afro-Diasporic bodies in space. These domestic spaces are marked by experiences of confinement and separation, which are too often realities for those whom nation-states exclude, or include provisionally, on the basis of race. Hughes, however, maintains his long devotion to representing black social life in the face of social death, and exposes how desires for black abjection is the very product of U.S. modernity’s contradictory logics of progress.

In particular, Hughes’s use of sound and passageways—from doors to railroads to rivers—foregrounds the intimate relationship between modernity’s revered technologies

and its violent investments in restricting black bodies. Using two of modernity's most prided symbols of progress, the train and the steamboat, Hughes contrasts the cultural symbolism of these vessels with modern schema to stall black socio-political progress. According to the speaker, the "soundscape"¹² of technological modernity is audible, as whistles announce the comings and goings of modern vessels along "fluid" paths. Yet, these freely moving objects stand in sharp contrast to the repressive quarters in which Negroes live. Hughes brings the doors of the river and the railroad, which "face each way"—and, thereby, signify openness and freedom of movement—into close proximity to the movie entrance "UP AN ALLEY UP THE SIDE" in a clear nod to Jim Crow segregation and its containment of black bodies in public space. Railroads and rivers, then, double as symbols of freedom, movement, and opportunity, on the one hand, and constriction, delimitation, and unfreedom, on the other, especially for those who inhabit the "quarter of the Negroes."

But Hughes's creative delineation of black inequity at the nexus of sound and passageways takes on an even broader form, such that the entirety of the "quarter of the Negroes" is framed by "door of papers." If one compares "doors of paper" to common doors of metal or, perhaps, wood, an image of comparative lack potentially emerges. Paper is more fragile and ephemeral than metal, but when juxtaposed with wood, "doors of paper" are even more interesting. Both objects derive from the same ecological source

¹² I borrow the idea of "soundscape" from R. Murray Schafer, who posits that a soundscape is "the sonic environment." See R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*. (VT: Inner Traditions, 1993).

(trees), yet they are certainly not created equal within capitalist logics of value. Wooden doors require more substantive portions of trees, while “doors of paper” come into being through a fraction of the material source (not to mention the cost) and, thus, carry less value when figured through capitalism’s calculus.

Alongside doors that conjure up thoughts of inadequacy, the “quarter of the Negroes” is characterized by “scratchy sound” and “dust of dingy atoms.” These visual and sonic images are colored (“dingy”) and tuned (“scratchy”) in a way that indexes deficiency and lack, similar to the “doors of paper.” In the third stanza, however, the male narrator puts pressure on such linkages by revaluing precisely that which is ostensibly undesirable. “THE WIND WON’T WAIT FOR / MIDNIGHT / FOR FUN TO BLOW DOORS DOWN” (*Ask Your Mama: A Dance Sequence* 539). Black fun refuses to be contained or held hostage to time, much like those in the “quarter of Negroes” who similarly reject such confinement. Hughes constructs the wind as a symbol of leisure and links it to the “dust of dingy atoms” that appear in the first stanza of the poem. Not only are the two connected by the recurring word “blow,” but the wind is the agent that brings dust into contact with the “doors of paper,” most likely producing the “scratchy sound.”

For some, the “doors,” the “dinginess,” and the “scratchiness” that are etched into the landscape of “Negro” life might evidence abjection, or perhaps the gripping effects of bare life. But the doors and the dust are both linked to the wind, a symbol of fun, we will remember, but also, I would add, an element that is difficult to contain and a symbol of that which is free to move through space. Hughes, then, sheds light on the ways in which blacks have negotiated oppressive spaces and invented forms of pleasure and sociality

that anti-black racism labors to deny. In this vein, the conclusion of the poem's second "mood" is instructive:

WOMAN: HIP BOOTS DEEP IN THE BLUES—
 MAN: AND I NEVER HAD A HIP BOOT ON!
 WOMAN: HAIR BLOWING BACK IN THE WIND—
 MAN: AND I NEVER HAD THAT MUCH HAIR!
 WOMAN: DIAMONDS IN PAWN—
 MAN: AND I NEVER HAD A DIMAOND
 IN MY NATURAL LIFE
 WOMAN: YOU IN THE WHITEHOUSE—
 MAN: AND NEVER HAD A BLACK HOUSE
 WOMAN: DO, JESUS!
 MAN: LORD!

BOTH: AMEN!

Here the narrators paint an image of lack, not only of material objects and valued bodily features but also a lack of access to one of the nation's preeminent spaces of political power. Yet, the two performers remain faithful, choosing prayer and hope over dejection. Thus, rather than lament the "quarter of the Negroes," as Moynihan perhaps would, Hughes indexes how blacks have managed to "make a way out of no way," moving over and against systemic racial inequality to create strong relationships, fun, and sustaining cultural practices, much like the actors in chapter two who transform southern spaces into sites of radical possibility.

It is against this backdrop that we should read Hughes's male/female duos. Even in the narration of trauma and dispossession, black cross-gender collaboration continues to operate simultaneously in multiple expressive forms, pushing against mythic constructions of hostility that position black men and women worlds apart. Moreover, dance functions in the poem as a liberatory, embodied art form that expresses desires for

freedom, hopes for a brighter future, and fondness for a past that is as beautiful as it is traumatic. Farah Griffin has argued that during the mid-twentieth century:

Dance provided a new medium for the expression of protest against segregation, and it was a particularly effective challenge, in that dance is not bound by one or two dimensions. The dancer can move across planes of space; she can lie flat on the ground, writhing . . . And she can defy gravity, leave the ground, shoot into the air, into space” (Griffin 25).

For Griffin, then, dance is a mode of performance through which one can protest racial separation and transcend and transform bounded spaces. If, as the poem’s speaker suggests, “boundaries bind unbinding,” dance is a mechanism that enables unbindings of bounded spaces, such as the “quarter of the Negroes.”

Hughes’s dance duet is an embodied form of black/male collaboration and revealing. “A Man and / a Woman,” he writes, “move against / the sky / perhaps on / a levee / as a river / mist rises like a / ghostly / curtain of / the past / half veiling / half revealing / ancient / memories / recalling / ancient / longings” (*Ask Your Mama: A Dance Sequence* 539). Whereas Moynihan senses black/male female divisions, Hughes stages collaborative dance performances in which bodies move together, signifying unity, even as the dialogue exposes the challenges of being in a social space that is fraught with sentiments of black inferiority. The duo moves *against* the sky, suggesting not only transcendence, but also indexing what we might interpret as an oppositional gestural vocabulary. Read this way, their bodies seem to work in contradistinction to a massive space (the sky) that encompasses the entirety of human life; a space whose various configurations and changes are framed as natural and inherent to a given cosmos.

Moreover, the bodies of the male and female dancers are positioned on a levee, a symbolic, elevated space that affords protection in the midst of disaster. This imagery of

a rising black male/female couple is mirrored in the similarly climbing “river midst,” which is “like a ghostly curtain of the past” that “half-veils” and “half-reveals” “ancient memories” and “longings.” Interestingly, what the poem reveals is certainly not images of black pathology but rather representations of amiable black relationships and, rich, if traumatic and marginalized, histories of blackness. Indeed, Hughes’s “ghostly curtain of the past” sets out to corroborate a claim that the male narrator makes in the poem’s sixth movement: “THE SHADOWS OF THE NEGROES ARE GHOSTS OF FORMER GLORY” (*Ask Your Mama: A Dance Sequence* 545). In this vein, Hughes incorporates Afro-diasporic deities and historical actors such as Shango, Papa Legba, Frederick Douglass, and Toussaint L’Ouverture, revealing black genealogies that refuse the pathologization of black difference, and, in fact, exposes how black difference is the product of carefully crafted systems of racial value and their related schema of social ordering.

When we juxtapose the histories of blackness that surface in Moynihan’s report and Hughes’s *Ask Your Mama*, we recognized their shared concern with how black being has come into existence through violent modes of ontological production. Moynihan’s historical narrative, which runs from U.S. slavery through the modern Civil Rights Movement, uses the black family as a hermeneutic through which to gauge blacks’ progress (or lack thereof) through time and space. Under slavery, he finds, blacks were “were placed in a completely dependent role [and] all of their rewards came . . . from absolute obedience.” But more importantly, Moynihan contends, “Slavery vitiated family life . . . Since many slave owners neither fostered Christian marriage among their slaves nor hesitated to separate them on the auction block the slave household often

developed a fatherless matrifocal (mother-centered pattern) (Moynihan 8). Moynihan's narrative goes on to offer more of the same male-centered history of blackness, in which repressions of black masculinity—whether caused by segregation or migration—produced an undesirable surplus of women-headed households, which ostensibly accounts for the “tangle of pathology” in which contemporary black families existed.

Moynihan wholly ignores the ways that blacks have historically challenged dominant racial ontologies and crafted alternate forms of black being—how they have used various forms of play to create a dissonant relationship to normative ideological constructions of blackness. Not only is his historical narrative steeped in patriarchy, but its limited imagination cannot conceive of and measure black family relations beyond normative rubrics such as marriage. Had Moynihan read *Ask Your Mama*, perhaps he would have recognized the tenuousness and pure illogics of his assumption that black mother-child relationships under slavery were somehow inviolable. On this front, the poem's eighth movement is telling. The male narrator begins “humming DEEP RIVER” and pretends to be a “very old Negro,” while the woman “becomes a young girl inquiring of the past.” Assuming different personae in this interior performance, the actors create an extended family. Hughes writes:

WOMAN: GRANDPA, WHERE DID YOU MEET
 MY GRANDMA?
 AT MOTHER BETHEL'S IN THE MORNING?
 I'M ASKING, GRANDPA, ASKING.
 WERE YOU MARRIED BY JOHN JASPER
 OF THE DO-MOVE COSMIC CONSCIENCE?
 GRANDPA, DID YOU HEAR THE
 HEAR THE OLD FOLKS SAY HOW
 HOW TALL HOW TALL THE CANE GREW
 SAY HOW WHITE THE COTTON
 SPEAK OF RICE DOWN IN THE MARSH

LAND
 SPEAK OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS' BEARD
 AND JOHN BROWN'S WHITE AND LONGER
 LINCOLN LIKE A CLOTHES BRUSH
 AND OF HOW SOJOURNER HOW
 SOJOURNER
 BARED HER BOSOMS, BARED IN PUBLIC
 TO PROVE SHE WAS A WOMAN?
 WHAT SHE SAID ABOUT HER CHILDREN
 ALL SOLD DOWN THE RIVER—
I LOOK AT THE STARS AND THEY LOOK AT THE STARS
AND THEY WONER WHERE I BE
AND I WONDER WHERE THEY BE. (*Ask Your Mama: A Dance Sequence* 548)

This passage paints an intimate portrait of black extended family, as the young girl inquires about familial history, particularly the origins of her grandparents' relationship. The speaker reveals the ways in which black kinship was violently disrupted under slavery through strategic black familial separation. While Moynihan would have us believe that slavery posed little threat to black mother-child relationships, the speaker offers a contrasting narrative. Moreover, rather than a domineering mother, absent father, or pathologized child, we find a caring black family, engaged in meaningful dialogue and recollections of the past.

Hughes's alternate imagery of blackness, however, refuses any attempt to position *Ask Your Mama* within a narrow framework of black respectability that was often a central part of black activist discourse and performance during the modern Civil Rights Movement. As is the case throughout so much of his poetry, Hughes is concerned with the ordinariness of black social life. He refuses to shun experiential realities that may not fare well within social Darwinist-like rubrics of blacks' fitness for citizenship and ideas of respectability. Indeed, the "quarter of the Negroes" contains "seagrams and four roses / five dollar bags" (*Ask Your Mama: A Dance Sequence* 539). But instead of linking

these alcoholic and narcotic objects to black pathologies, or making a moral judgment with reductive racial overtones, Hughes foregrounds how the racialization of behaviors masks deeper national practices of racial inequality.

Despite its absence from critical discourses, Hughes's libretto is an innovative performance poem that reconfigures the discursive terrains of blackness, critiques the racial violences of U.S. modernity, and argues for black social and political progress. In the "quarter of the Negroes," the woman narrator asserts, "AMORPHOUS JACK-O-LATERNS / CAPER." To be sure, the cultural symbolism of jack-o-lanterns aligns with social constructions of blackness, namely the scary face and the emptying and refilling of black interior space with external materials. But as the woman speaker suggests, the jack-o-lanterns are amorphous, unclassifiable, eluding fixed typologies. Thus, while black bodies had been devalued precisely because of their blackness, and while black mothers and families were being relegated to human pathologies, *Ask Your Mama* "TEARS THE [black] BODY FROM THE SHADOW," revealing alternate configurations of black maternal and familial relationships.

Recording a New Paradigm of Black Familiality

In the summer of 1970, poet and songwriter Gil Scott-Heron stepped into a New York studio to record his debut album, *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*—an LP that would serve as a "recorded chronicle of the era" (*The Last Holiday* 157). Sitting in folding chairs, a small audience listened and watched as Scott-Heron fused music, poetry, and performance to produce an innovative album whose reach and influence would far exceed initial expectations. The lines between audience and performer were audibly blurred. The audience, in fact, often completes the poet's lines before his resonant, baritone voice

can speak them—a voice surrounded by layers of symbolic musical instrumentation. As Kermit E. Campbell has suggested, Scott-Heron’s album has a “strong performative quality to it” (Campbell 46). The strength of the performative, though, lies not only in the brilliance of the artistic act, but also in the performative nature of Scott-Heron’s poetic revisions of race and nation, particularly representations of blackness and U.S. national identity that sustained practices of racial inequality.

Attracting audiences from California to New York, Scott-Heron, like Langston Hughes, troubles discursive conceptions of black maternal and familial pathology, and offers a strong critique of U.S. technological modernity. In “Whitey on the Moon,” for example, Scott-Heron combines poetry and performance to underscore the glaring contradictions of a nation-state that endorsed a diametric model of modernity in which a concern for rights and justice is subordinated to desires for technological progress:

A rat done bit my sister Nell
 With Whitey on the moon
 Her face and arms began to swell
 And Whitey's on the moon

I can't pay no doctor bills
 But Whitey's on the moon
 Ten years from now I'll be paying still
 While Whitey's on the moon

You know, the man just upped my rent last night
 Cause Whitey's on the moon
 No hot water, no toilets, no lights
 But Whitey's on the moon

I wonder why he's upp'in' me?
 Cause Whitey's on the moon?
 Well i was already given him fifty a week
 And now Whitey's on the moon

Taxes takin' my whole damn check

The junkies make me a nervous wreck
 The price of food is goin up
 And if all that crap wasn't enough
 A rat done bit my sister nell
 With Whitey on the moon

Her face and arms began to swell
 And Whitey's on the moon

With all that money i made last year
 For Whitey on the moon
 How come I ain't got no money here?
 Hmm, Whitey's on the moon

You know I just about had my fill
 Of Whitey on the moon
 I think I'll send these doctor bills
 airmail special
 To Whitey on the moon. (*125th and Lenox*)

Using a deceptively simple “abab” rhyme scheme, Scott-Heron refrains from cloaking his radical critique of U.S. technological modernity in the garb of poetic mystification.

“Whitey on the Moon” begins with an image of family, oppression, and a black female body under attack. The speaker—who in this performance is Scott-Heron—laments a lived reality in which vermin have invaded and disfigured his sister’s material body.

Added to this, medical care, for those who live within the boundaries of poverty, signifies less of a healing salve than a looming economic crisis whose devastation will far outlast the bodily trauma of the primal attack. In other words, further incursion of debt would exacerbate an already precarious black social reality—one characterized, as “Whitey on the Moon” suggests, by rent gouging, unfair taxes, and deprivation of hot water, toilets, and lights.

By the poem’s conclusion, the poet returns to Nell’s attack, continuing to call attention to her ever-swelling body. Each return to this embodied site of trauma

symbolizes the performativity of anti-black of oppression and seems to function aesthetically as a sonic iteration of what Roland Barthes terms the “punctum.” In *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Barthes attempts to articulate an affect-centered paradigm of experiencing and interpreting photography. For him, the Latin word *punctum* encapsulates the “accident” that “pricks” and “bruises” the reader—that which is “poignant” to her/him when reading a photograph (*Camera* 27). Shifting Barthes formulation from photography to performance poetry, from the visual to the sonic, reveals the ways in which the literal “prick” and “bruise” that the rat leaves on Nell’s body has the capacity to “prick” Scott-Heron’s audiences, much like Barthes’s photograph.

The pained black female body, when positioned against the backdrop of technological progress, reveals the contradictions and structural inequities that continued to plague the U.S. nation-state in the wake of the modern Civil Rights Movement. When the poem concludes, “Whitey is on the moon,” but the audience is left to wonder if Nell will ever have access to medical care, or if her body will continue to swell and remain fixed within a social body that is as burdened with pain and poverty as her own. This portrait of lack and denial stands in sharp contrast to U.S. space travel, which gets so much of Scott-Heron’s attention. The anaphoric repetition of “Whitey’s on the moon” in each alternating line underscores the ways in which the U.S. nation-state unabashedly invests in technological progress, while its citizens languish in pain and poverty.

Interestingly, Scott-Heron’s “rat attack” recalls the opening scene of Richard Wright’s novel *Native Son*. Like the speaker’s sister, the Thomas family is similarly terrorized by rats who disrupt an already miserable domestic space—a “one-room

apartment” that the family likens to a “garbage dump” (*Native Son* 4-8). “Get up here,” the mother yells. “Don’t let that thing *bite* you” (4; original emphasis). The Thomas family describes the rat as “a sonofabitch [that] could cut your throat.” Yet Bigger Thomas somehow manages to defeat the “big bastard” that threatened the Thomas family’s bodies and home alike. However, by the time Scott-Heron records *Small Talk* nearly thirty years later, the rat attack has transpired, and Nell’s black female body was the unfortunate target.

If Scott-Heron and his sister watch modern vehicles soar to unprecedented heights, even as they remain confined within the lowest rungs of society, the black characters in Richard Wright’s *Native Son* wrestle with a similar paradox that was at the heart of U.S. modernity. Both Wright and Scott-Heron use aircraft to expose the tensions between technological progress and the failure to construct a modern experience that includes comparable advancements within the context of rights, equality, and justice, especially for people of African descent. Squinting to catch a view of an airplane, Richard Wright’s Bigger Thomas, who is accompanied by his friend, Gus, engages in an revealing moment of reflection that borders on a dream. “Them white boys sure can fly,” Gus asserts. Bigger’s response is telling: “They get a chance to do everything . . . I *could* fly a plane if I had a chance . . . God I’d like to fly up there in that sky” (17; original emphasis). Although Gus, Bigger, Nell, and Scott-Heron (as performer) occupy a space in which attacks on black bodies are common to the fabric of everyday life, they struggle and hope and dream of a way up and out, pushing against structures of power that are as modern and inventive as the technologies that place “Whitey on the moon.” Their interface with U.S. technological modernity certainly lends credence to the poignant

conclusion at which the speaker of Scott-Heron's poem, "Space Shuttle", arrives:
 "Space Shuttle/ raising hell down on the ground! / Space Shuttle/ turning the seasons
 upside down. / Space Shuttle/ and all the hungry people know / all change sho''nuff ain't
 progress when you're poor" (*So Far, So Good* 15).

Landing on the moon, as I suggest in chapter two, became a national priority, intended to index U.S. progress and global dominance. However, by juxtaposing the nation-state's obsession with desires to explore new outer space territories and the ghastly conditions in which the speaker and his sister live, Scott-Heron sounds these dissonances loud and clear to the live audience that has assembled in the studio as well as the listening audiences who encounter his brilliance through mechanical reproduction. Brandon LaBelle has argued that sound engages in the work of "displacing and replacing the lines between inside and out" (LaBelle xxi). The black dissonance that Scott-Heron plays for his listening audiences sets out to blur the lines between "inside" and "out"—between those who have historically been positioned on the margins of the U.S. body politic and those who have not—and those who have been the subjects of modernity and those who have constantly faced the threat of becoming the racialized objects of U.S. modernity and its logics of progress.

The recording studio has certainly has not been a familiar site on the map of black civil rights activism that is often foregrounded in contemporary memories of the modern Civil Rights Movement. But like those activists who took to the streets, the lunch counters, and other canonical sites of performance, Scott-Heron utilized his body to stage innovative and radical performances that intervened in practices of racial injustice that plagued the U.S. nation-state. Like many of these demonstrators, the poet utilizes his

voice to sound black freedom dreams. His theater of protest, however, was a recording studio. Indeed, Heron's audience, whether in the studio or in the comforts of their living rooms, could hear his embodied desire for justice in the "grain" of the poet's voice. According to Roland Barthes, the grain of the voice occupies the "dual posture" of language and music. It is "the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue; perhaps the letter, almost certainly *significance*." There is something in the voice, Barthes continues, that is "beyond the meaning of the words, their form . . . the style of execution: something which is directly the . . . body, brought to your ears in one and the same movement from deep down in the cavities, the muscles, the membranes, the cartilages . . . as though a single skin lined the inner flesh of the performer and the music he sings" (*Image, Music, Text* 181-182). Fusing poetry, song, and instrumental sound throughout his album, Scott-Heron occupies the "dual posture" of language and music that characterizes the "grain" of the voice. More still, his baritone voice, recalling the sonic textures of fellow poet Yusef Komunyakaa, constantly indexes the presence of the poet's body, with tones that are often slightly off-pitch, with a raspiness that recalls Billie Holiday and Etta James, with a vibrato that conjures Nina Simone, and through improvisatory interactions with the audience that hardly seem to be confined to the domain of Henderson's "cold technologies," but are rather the improvisatory matter of black life itself.

According to Jody Berland, the act of listening itself is an embodied act. The "sound, entering the body, located both internally and externally, is immersed in the listener . . . [I]n being so immersed, body and brain are brought to something or someone beyond the self, and the sound in turn is drawn into the body and the mind (Berland 34).

Berland's insights reveal the ways in which Scott-Heron's audiences were not simply engaged in passive acts of audience reception. But, like the performer, they used their own bodies to foster an embodied dialogic encounter in which performer and audience relied upon their bodies to articulate and receive the sounds of black freedom dreams. One can hear on the album sonic traces of an engaged audiences whose own voices are as central to the performance as Scott-Heron's or the musical instruments. Thus, within the studio, the performance poet and his audience used their bodies and their voices to stage significant acts of black political dissent and self-making that cannot be excluded from the archive of creative, embodied performances that have come to define the era of modern Civil Rights activism.

By the time Scott-Heron recorded *Small Talk*, he had already survived his own violent encounters with U.S. technological modernity. In his memoir, *The Last Holiday*, Scott-Heron recalls the construction of a new highway in his rural Jackson, Tennessee, home, and how this symbol of modernity wreaked havoc on people of African descent. “[F]our lanes were rolling through what had been blocks of aging residences,” Scott-Heron writes. “Soon it would all be gone. I could imagine rows of gas stations and fast food joints lining what had been my backyard . . . In a way this was a prelude to a larger funeral. The Paving of America constituted a symbolic burying of the hatchet, a signal that the northern CEOs and southern See\$ers were at long last [*sic*] seeing eye to eye” (*The Last Holiday* 3). Homes, histories, and livelihoods quite literally become the sacrificial lambs of modernization. The progress that highways signify is only made possible in and through a seismic displacement and violent uprooting of black bodies—experiences that were all too familiar to New World blacks.

It has certainly been tempting for some to cite the legal and legislative victories of the 1950s and 60s as evidence of U.S. modernity's investment in rights, equality, and justice. In his memoir, Scott-Heron recalls when he and a cadre of black colleagues integrated a formerly all-white school. "Together with Madeline Walker and Gillard Glover," he writes, "I had initiated school desegregation in Jackson. And factories would be built. And highways would uncoil like rattlesnakes from Maryland to the Gulf of Mexico. And Jim Crow, the bastard who had swung a thousand nightsticks and set a thousand crosses on fire, was not dead. But he'd been wounded" (*The Last Holiday* 4). What Scott-Heron points to is the desire, even in the face of modernity's linear move forward, to stall black social and political progress, and, ultimately, yoke black people to outmoded paradigms of civic belonging and racialized being. While highways, factories, and other fixtures within the U.S. nation-state were brought into being and transformed through innovative processes of modernization, efforts to avert black social and political innovation continued to thrive. Yet, as Scott-Heron shows, if Jim Crowism and racial injustice retained a noticeable virulence, blacks continued to strike important and revolutionary blows that forced the U.S. nation-state to reckon with the place of rights and justice within its logics of U.S. modernity and to confront representations of national identity that hardly accorded with the preferred images that it habitually cultivated and exported despite their fictive content.¹³

¹³ One might wonder how Gil Scott-Heron, whom scholars have consistently linked to the Black Arts Movement, has found his way into a project about performance during the modern Civil Rights Movement. But, as I argue in the introduction, in developing historiographies of the movement, it is crucially important to consider how movement participants themselves defined its historical parameters. On this front, Heron suggests that what was "special about the 1960s was that there was only one thing happening, one

If Moynihan underplays the U.S. nation-state's complicity in producing and sustaining environments that ravage Nell's body and destroys black families' homes in the name of national progress and modernity, and if he constructs blacks as self-defeating agents who simply need to restructure familial arrangements in order to evade the traps of poverty and abjection, Scott-Heron is much less flattered by these convenient fictions. In many of his performances, the poet seems to be having an obvious dialectical exchange with Moynihan himself as well as the nation that sponsored the social scientist's "objective" report. Consider, for example, his song-poem "Who'll Pay Reparations on My Soul":

Many suggestions
And documents written.
Many directions
For the aid that was given.
They gave us
Pieces of silver and pieces of gold.
Tell me,
Who'll pay reparations on my soul?

Many fine speeches (oh yeah)

movement. And that was the Civil Rights Movement. There were different organizations coming from different angles because of geography, but in essence everybody had the same objective" (*Last Holiday* 290). While the logic that undergirds Heron's historical framework might seem reductive, his and so many others' personal histories must necessarily find a way into the archive and figure more prominently in recent efforts to rethink the temporal framework of the modern Civil Rights Movement. As a student at Lincoln University, Scott-Heron was at the forefront of civil rights struggles, organizing protests and using the nexus of poetry, music, and performance to effect social change. To be sure, he would go on to more closely align himself with calls for a "black aesthetic" that gained traction during the Black Arts Movement. Yet, by Scott-Heron's own admission, *Small Talk* comes to fruition during a historical moment that Scott-Heron himself dubs the Civil Rights Movement; many of its poems, in fact, were written precisely during the 1960s.

From the White House desk (uh huh)
 Written on the cue cards
 That were never really there. Yes,
 But the heat and the summer were there
 And the freezing winter's cold. Now
 Tell me,
 Who'll pay reparations on my soul?

Call my brother a junkie 'cause he ain't got no job (no job, no job).
 Told my old man to leave me when times got hard (so hard).
 Told my mother she got to carry me all by herself.
 And now that I want to be a man (be a man) who can depend on no one
 else (oh yeah).
 What about the red man
 Who met you at the coast?
 You never dig sharing;
 Always had to have the most.
 And what about Mississippi,
 The boundary of old?
 Tell me,
 Who'll pay reparations on my soul? (*125 and Lenox*)

While Scott-Heron uses his sister to portray violence against the black family in “Whitey’s on the Moon,” here he completes a black family portrait by incorporating a “brother, mother, and father” into his performance.

Like Alice Childress, the poet rejects the ways in which black bodies continuously become the subjects of “clinical, social analysis,” even as the experts who spearhead these investigations ignore the larger socio-political landscape that contributes to the oppression of black people. Scott-Heron, as performer and speaker, clearly references Moynihan’s “documents written,” but finds that neither these reports nor presidential speeches exist outside of routine discursive modes of anti-black play that pass themselves off as objective research and “findings.” They are, in fact, essential methods of discursive violence that work in tandem with more overt formations of racial

oppression. Perhaps Scott-Heron puts it best in his poem “Coming from a Broken Home”:

I come from WHAT THEY CALLED A BROKEN HOME,
 But if they had every really called at our house
 They would have know how wrong they were.
 We were working on our lives
 And our homes and dealing with what we had,
 Not what we didn't have.
 My life has been guided by women
 But because of them I am a Man.
 God bless you, Mama. And thank you. (*So Far, So Good* 5)

Despite the structural inequities that produce “broken homes” throughout black communities, Scott-Heron identifies a fugitive commitment to modes of black being that index blacks’ commitments to social life, even in the face of rampant desires for black social death. Despite the violences of U.S. technological modernity, Scott-Heron utilizes technology and poetic performance to craft innovative modes of black performative revealing that challenge discursive representation of race and nation. Whether using innovative forms of written poetic wordplay, or crafting sonic art objects that could be played by his audiences, Scott-Heron voices a symbolic dissonance that reveals the tensions between the ways in which the U.S. nation-state imagines itself and the harsh realities of U.S. racial inequity that the poet reveals through a pointed critique of discourses of black maternal and familial pathologies and U.S. technological modernity.

Prophets for A New Day: Broadside Voices

In 1965, black poet and librarian Dudley Randall founded Broadside Press—a flagship, black-owned publishing company that was pivotal to black literary production during the modern Civil Rights Movement. With only twelve dollars to his name, Randall laid the foundation for one of the twentieth century’s most significant black

cultural institutions. Based in Detroit, Michigan, Broadside published the work of both rising and established black poets, from Sterling Brown and Sonia Sanchez to Haki Madabuti (Don L. Lee) and Etheridge Knight to Margaret Walker and Pulitzer Prize winning poet Gwendolyn Brooks. A novice publisher with little business experience, Randall carefully contemplated the most effective means of producing and disseminating black literature. Not only did his and much of his audience's income limitations render the affordability of Broadside's literary products a chief concern, but Randall searched for modes of production and dissemination that would best allow Broadside to push its readership beyond "college professors and other poets" into a broader, more diverse community of black readers.

Curiously enough, Broadside's founding was, in large part, a welcomed occasion of happenstance. While reading a newspaper, black New York folk singer Jerry Moore stumbled upon a reprint of one of Randall's civil rights poems, "Ballad of Birmingham." Memorializing the tragic 1963 bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, Randall joined the company of black poets such as Gwendolyn Brooks who had used poetry to give voice and vision to occasions of anti-black terror that transpired during the modern Civil Rights Movement.

(On the bombing of a church in Birmingham, Alabama, 1963)

"Mother dear, may I go downtown
 Instead of out to play,
 And march the streets of Birmingham
 In a Freedom March today?"

"No, baby, no, you may not go,
 For the dogs are fierce and wild,
 And clubs and hoses, guns and jails
 Aren't good for a little child."

“But, mother, I won’t be alone.
 Other children will go with me,
 And march the streets of Birmingham
 To make our country free.”

“No, baby, no, you may not go,
 For I fear those guns will fire.
 But you may go to church instead
 And sing in the children’s choir.”

She has combed and brushed her night-dark hair,
 And bathed rose petal sweet,
 And drawn white gloves on her small brown hands,
 And white shoes on her feet.

The mother smiled to know her child
 Was in the sacred place,
 But that smile was the last smile
 To come upon her face.

For when she heard the explosion,
 Her eyes grew wet and wild.
 She raced through the streets of Birmingham
 Calling for her child.

She clawed through bits of glass and brick,
 Then lifted out a shoe.
 “O, here’s the shoe my baby wore,
 But, baby, where are you?”

With its masterful transmutation of historical tragedy into poetic beauty and its fusion of loss and anti-black terror, maternal love and adolescent innocence, irony and visceral imagery, it is no surprise that “Ballad of Birmingham” gained widespread currency and circulated broadly during the modern Civil Rights Movement. So inspired by the poem, Moore created a musical accompaniment not only for “Ballad of Birmingham” but also for a second of Randall’s poems, “Dressed All in Pink,” which, in a similar tenor, mourned the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

Randall, however, wanted to ensure that he would retain the legal rights to his work. He was elated to learn that broadsides—inexpensive poems that were printed on a single sheet of paper—could indeed be copyrighted. In light of this discovery, Randall used the broadside format to publish “Ballad of Birmingham” and “Dressed All in Pink.” Moreover, the process of printing these two broadsides produced in the poet-turned-publisher a desire to print black poetry on a grander scale, giving rise to the formation of Broadside Press. With little money and no advanced print technology, Broadside Press was not only convenient, but they had a history of political influence that aligned with Randall’s vision of black artistic production.

If Randall envisioned a black-centered poetics that would appeal to a mass black audience, he also devoted considerable energy to the aesthetics and visual attractiveness of the material texts themselves. The fledgling publisher hoped to “make the format of the Broadside harmonize with the poem in paper, color, and typography.” To achieve this harmony between poetic word and material text, Randall often relied on the expertise of black visual artists. Among this cadre was Shirley Woodson, who “wanted [her] art for Broadside to be more than an illustration—[she] wanted it to transmit the power of the poetry visually.” (Thompson 64). To be sure, the focused attention to visual aesthetics accorded with broader cultural investments in visual representation during this historical moment. The confluence of photojournalism, the modern Civil Rights Movement, and television’s mass accessibility, as I argue in chapter one, had taken the historical interconnection of race and representational technologies to new heights and to broader publics.

This linkage between visual aesthetics and material textuality was constitutive to Broadside's attempt to reach a mass black market. Yet, sonic innovations were equally vital to the company's historic use of black literature to bring into being more self-aware and fully righted black citizens. This is nowhere more evident than the press's Broadside Voices Series—a collection of twenty-five books of poetry that were sold with accompanying taped recordings of Broadside poets reading their respective works.

The March 1969 issue of *Black World/Negro Digest* carried a short but telling column entitled “New Broadside Venture.” It details the formation of the Broadside Voices Series in this way:

Broadside Press' new release is directly related to the company's publication of black poetry. Publisher **Dudley Randall** has introduced a series of tapes of poets reading the works in their volumes, an ideal innovation for group sessions for entertaining young people . . . The tapes have been issued in limited numbers, only fifty for each volume, all autographed and numbered, and they augur well to become collectors' items. The tapes sell for \$5 each, all elegantly encased in boxes especially designed to match the covers of the volumes of poetry.
(*Black World/Negro Digest*, March 1969, 86; original emphasis)

The article reinforces the centrality of visual aesthetics to Broadside's production of black poetry, as the “elegantly encased” boxes in which the tapes were shipped “transmit the power of poetry visually,” much like the covers of the poetry collections themselves. Moreover, the column creates a linkage between print and sonic iterations of Broadside poetry, suggesting that the two are “directly related.” Yet, these poetic forms come into material existence through decidedly different modes of mechanical reproduction. It is at this site of technological difference that I want to linger for a moment, particularly to think about how the tape, as a specific mode of mechanical reproduction, opens up both aesthetic and socio-political possibilities.

The article is right, then, to describe the Broadside Voices series as an “ideal innovation.” At the writing of this article, Broadside had released three tapes of Broadside poets reading from their collections: James Emanuel reading from *The Tree House and Other Poems*, Etheridge Knight from *Poems from Prison*, and Dudley Randall from his collection *Cities Burning*. Randall’s tape also included recordings of two of his earlier poems—“Ballad of Birmingham” and “Dressed All in Pink”—that had been set to music by black folk musician Jerry Moore. Randall had long been interested in the relationship between sound and poetry. “When I was four years old in Baltimore,” he recalls, “I heard a band concert and was impressed by the big instruments like the bass drum and the bass horn. I composed words to the song, “Maryland, My Maryland.” This was a formative moment for the future publisher and poet; it was, in fact, his “earliest memory of . . . trying to put words together.” On another occasion, Randall suggests that he has always been interested in the “music of poetry—for the music carries part of the meaning. Sometimes, I have thought of writing a volume of poetry to be entitled, *Songs Without Words* that could be set to music. In this context the musical qualities would be more important than the meaning of the words.”

Nikki Giovanni’s *Re:Creation* (1970) was among the printed and audiotaped poetry collections that were produced in the Broadside Voices series. The inaugural poem of this collection introduces readers and listeners to a speaker who is on the heels of being created anew. The speaker’s journey into motherhood engenders a new mode of being, and the conjoining of a newfound maternal identity with the existing self propels her into a decidedly different ontological location—one in which being for the self gives way to being for the son and requires a renaming of the subject.

to tommy who:
 eats chocolate cookies and lamb chops
 climbs stairs and cries when I change
 his diaper
 lets me hold him only on his schedule
 defined my nature
 and gave me a new name (mommy)
 which supersedes all others
 controls my life and make me glad
 that he does (Giovanni 1)

What one finds in the “entrance” to *Re: Creation* is hardly the havoc-wreaking black mother who takes center stage in Moynihan’s sociological drama. Quite contrarily, Giovanni crafts a poem in which the gendered relations of power are quite the inverse. Tommy, in all of his infant manhood, exerts a conspicuous and forceful power over the mother—one that “defined [her] nature,” “gave [her] a new name (mommy)/ which supersedes all others,” and “controls her life.” Thus, the formation and existence of the black maternal subject hinge upon the desires of the young male child, and the child’s desires (re)create a black mother who seems to exist, as the title suggests, primarily “For Tommy.”

Re: Creation, then, offers up representations of black motherhood that run counter to Moynihanian logics of black female abjection. There is no trace of the overbearing black matriarch who—in being out of sync with the protocols of white western maternity, and by extension, white western modernity—forecloses the possibility of black boys becoming black men. Rather, one meets a mother who is on the verge of deference in catering to the desires of the young male child; what is more, “this make [her] glad.”

While *Re: Creation* has received scant critical attention, it should occupy a central place in the literary and social landscapes of the modern Civil Rights Movement. In this

creative fusion of poetry and performance, audiences not only read Giovanni's divergence from Moynihan's construction of black motherhood, but they heard it. In many ways, Giovanni seems to be using poetry to stage a heated dialectical exchange with Moynihan. A central part of Moynihan's construction of the abject black mother is the implication of black female promiscuity and hyper sexuality. In his study, promiscuity is gendered and raced and mapped onto the black female body. But Giovanni calls this racialization of sexual looseness into question in "Poem for Unwed Mothers":

it was good for the virgin mary
it was good enough for mary
it was good enough for me (48)

Mary, a revered symbol of Christian theology, is rendered in a perhaps uncomfortable but revealing relationship to an unwed black mother who gives birth out of wedlock. Linking the sacred to the secular, and revealing narratives that have been buried beneath, Giovanni broadens the scope of social discourses to reveal how extra-marital births, for example, are far more universal and have a much longer histories than Moynihan's fictions of black pathology would suggest. While the archive offers little in the way of audience reception, one can imagine that Giovanni's black listening audiences readily recognized, and perhaps appreciated, the dissonance that Giovanni's audiotaped poetry recording played.

Certainly, the range and complexity of thought among Broadside's women poets eludes any attempt to tether black female identity to predictable patterns of artistic production. It would be misleading, then, to imply that the sum of this cadre was similarly invested in challenging normative hierarchies of gender. Consider Gwendolyn

Brooks's *Family Pictures* (1970), for example—a collection that signals the ways in which some black women poets even reified male-centered hierarchies of black communal authority. In this collection, Brooks paints a revolutionary “picture” of Afro-Diasporic kinship, moving across geographic boundaries to envisage a transnational picture of black familial collectivity. Quite interestingly, however, the family pictures that Brooks crafts in poetry portray great, heroic men, while reducing the collection's women—with the exception of one—to lovers and mothers who subdue their own articulation of anti-racist dissent. Brooks dedicates individual poems to South African poet Keorapetse Kgositsile, Don at Salaam, and Walter Bradford, each appearing under the sequentially numbered headings “Young Heroes—I,” “Young Heroes—II.” Yet, unlike Margaret Walker's *Prophets for a New Day*, which inverts normative gender hierarchies by foregrounding black women's civil rights activism over Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Medgar Evers, and other charismatic black male leaders, Brooks essentially ignores women's contributions to the movement and uses the volume to construct a patriarchal black family that fits the mold of Moynihan's ideal “American family.”

But Broadside poets such as Nikki Giovanni and Margaret Walker joined Langston Hughes and Gil-Scott Heron in using poetry and performance to craft innovative acts of playing black dissonance that revealed strikingly different representations of race and nation. Using various innovative modes of fusing poetry and performance, these artists challenged discursive constructions of black pathology, which were aimed at black mothers and families in particular, and recalibrated images of the U.S. nation-state that strategically obscured the gross inequities to which the U.S. subjected its black citizens. In short, these artists used poetry and performance to play

the changes, using the language of black motherhood and familiarity in their poetic performances, but improvising upon pathological conceptions of these tropes in order to craft a poetic, “audio-racial imagination”¹⁴—one in which blacks would not be slipped into the dozens and their desires for social and political progress no longer positioned outside of U.S. of modernity.

¹⁴ According to Josh Kun, the “American audio-racial imagination” is “the extent to which meanings and ideas about race, racial identity, and racialization within the United States have been generated, developed, and experienced at the level of sound and music.” See Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. 26.

Chapter 4:

Experimental Leaders: Drama, Desire, and the Queer Erotics of Civil Rights Historiography

“[I]f history makes demands on flesh, flesh makes demands on history. The demands flesh makes on history are not always easily met: the further down you go, the more vivid this truth becomes.”

~James Baldwin, *Just Above My Head*

“[T]o ignore the multiple subjectivities of the minoritarian subject within and without political movements and theoretical paradigms is not only theoretically and politically naïve, but also potentially dangerous.”

~E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*

To speak of the successes of modern Civil Rights activism is to speak of the triumphs of desiring black bodies. Black social and political desire were the engines of modern civil rights activism and the body a crucial instrument for articulating blacks’ longings for full citizenship. To be sure, the archive of black civil rights protest is replete with representations of desiring bodies—on streets, in buses, at lunch counters—that dared to contest U.S. logics of racial inequity by staging embodied acts of political dissent. Embodied articulations of blacks’ desire, though, were not purely social and political, but were also sexual, erotic, and—as quiet as it’s kept—queer. In his 1976 novel *Just Above My Head*, James Baldwin paints a moving portrait of the ways in which sexual economies of queer desire thrived right alongside, and within, the more well-known paradigms of (political) desire that have dominated the stories we tell of the modern Civil Rights Movement.

Baldwin maps these circuits of black queer desire most poignantly in a heart-rending love story between Arthur and Crunch, two black teenage boys who—like

Mahalia Jackson, Nina Simone, Odetta, and scores of other black vocalists—travel across the U.S. South, invigorating the movement with impassioned performances of “freedom songs” that drenched southern landscapes in the sounds of black freedom dreams. In fact, Baldwin uses a freedom song as a narrative framework that allows him to capture the flow of erotic desires that bind Crunch and Arthur into an assemblage of black queer love. The narrator recounts the stirring rendition of the gospel song “Take Me to the Water” that the “love birds” perform in a black southern church, joined by their itinerant, Harlem-based quartet.

Take me to the water

Crunch moaned,

yes take me to the water!

He heard Red’s witnessing falsetto, but he answered Crunch’s Echo,

*take me to the water
to be
baptized. (Just Above My Head 199)*

This “freedom song” operates within at least two economies of desire. It is, on the one hand, a part of the revolutionary soundtrack that inspired and translated blacks’ desires for full citizenship. On the other hand, Baldwin transmutes this sacred ballad into an innovative aesthetic framework through which black queer yearnings can be expressed. With his eyes closed, Arthur eventually begins to trust “every second of this unprecedented darkness, knowing Crunch and he were moving together, here, now, in the song, to some new place . . . his voice in Crunch’s sound, Crunch’s sound filling his voice” (*Just Above My Head* 200). Imagery of closed eyes and kinesthetic unity (“we

were moving together”) intersect with sonic metaphors of moaning and interlocked voices to produce a dynamic scene of black queer desire and intimacy—one that foreshadows a sexual encounter in which voices not only fill voices, but bodies fill bodies.

Here, Baldwin innovates upon the aesthetic and symbolic possibilities of “call-and-response,” queering a black cultural form in which embodied voices merge and leaders and followers enter and exit. The participants move, both individually and collectively, toward a moment of sonic culmination—much like Arthur and Crunch, who end their song “together, as though on a single drum” (*Just Above My Head* 201). This formal queering, or queering of form, also shapes the poetic strategies that Baldwin uses to weave the written lyrics of the hymn into the narrative. The stanza-like structure contains words that move back and forth, in and out, across the space of the page. While the stanza is initially short, it grows suggestively more distended, ultimately contracting to a size that resembles its original girth. These quite telling layers of erotic and phallic symbolism enshroud Crunch and Arthur’s musical performance, as the duo passionately articulates their mutual desires (“I want”) to be baptized.

After the performance, they return to their rooming house, and Crunch joins Red and Peanut—the other two members of the quartet—for a night out at the local pool hall. Complaining of a “little headache,” Arthur decides to stay behind. But Crunch eventually returns ahead of the group, and immediately makes his way to the space that he and Arthur are sharing. Awakened by his roommate, he inquires if Arthur is feeling any better. Soon enough, Arthur’s head finds its way to Crunch’s lap, and the room “gr[ows] darker,” returning both of them, and the reader, to the “unprecedented darkness” of their

prior “moving together” while performing “Take Me to the Water” (205). Older and more confident, Crunch locks the door, and removes his shirt and belt; his trousers and underwear follow, revealing a “miracle of bone and blood and muscle and flesh and music” (206). While Arthur is more reluctant to undress, Crunch does the honors for him, and, thus, sets in motion an affectionate round of queer sex that culminates in their simultaneous oragasming: “Crunch’s sperm shot out against Arthur’s belly, Arthur’s against his, it was though each were coming through the other’s sex” (208).

Using images of overlapping and concentrically joined bodies, the narrator’s vivid description of this climatic moment of queer intimacy recalls the earlier irruptive highpoint that punctuates Crunch and Arthur’s musical performance. After a flirtatious round of sexual banter, the couple “curled into each other, spoon fashion” and fell asleep, only to engage in an even more adventurous round of sex soon after:

Arthur’s tongue descended Crunch’s long black self, down to the raging penis. He licked the underside of the penis, feeling it leap, and he licked the balls . . . He took the penis into his mouth, it moved with the ease of satin, past his lips, into his throat . . . [T]he organ was hard and huge and throbbing . . . [Crunch began to] thrust upward, but carefully, into Arthur’s mouth . . . Curious, the taste as it came leaping, to the surface: of Crunch’s prick, of Arthur’s tongue, into Arthur’s mouth and throat . . . He wanted to sing. (210-212)

Ultimately, then, the duo’s desires to be baptized come to fruition. This baptism, though, is a secular and sexual immersion—one that is black and queer and intensely erotic.

Crunch and Arthur’s mutual articulation of black queer desire—precisely within the geography of civil rights activism—occasions an opportunity to expand our conceptions of the forms black desire took during the modern Civil Rights Movement. Desire, Baldwin shows, was not limited to the province of socio-political gain, but was experienced in and through erotic acts that accorded with the transgressive logics of black

embodiment that came to animate modern civil rights protest. According to Audre Lorde, “[r]ecognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama” (Lorde 59). Following this instructive line of thinking, this chapter traces the power of the erotic—the black queer erotic—that manifests in literatures of the “short” Civil Rights Movement. In so doing, it pushes beyond the “weary drama” that often represents the movement’s “classical phase,” charting more complex articulations of black desire and more multifaceted paradigms of performing of black masculinities.

The work of creatively imagining a multidimensional field of black desire certainly was not limited to *Just Above My Head* or even the novel form itself. Rather, *Just Above My Head*—as well as other Baldwin novels such as *Another Country* (1962) and *Tell me How Long the Train’s Been Gone* (1968)—belongs to a larger body of African American literature in which authors creatively imagined articulations of black queer desire, and modes of black queer being, during the “short” Civil Rights Movement. As this chapter demonstrates, drama, in particular, was a key genre through which black artists portrayed representations of queer desire during this historical moment. While many of these works have received scant critical attention, plays such as Lorraine Hansberry’s *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window* (1964) and Ed Bullins’s *Clara’s Old Man* (1965) push beyond the terrain of imagining political desire to also envisioning forms of queer desire that circulated during this era of social change.

Paying particular attention to Paul Carter Harrison’s 1965 play “The Experimental Leader” as well as Amiri Baraka’s play “The Baptism” (1964), I argue that African

American drama is an important heuristic through which we can expand conceptions of black desire and, thereby, rethink paradigms of (straight) black being that have been at the forefront of civil rights historiography and cultural criticism. As E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson have argued: “[T]o ignore the multiple subjectivities of the minoritarian subject within and without political movements and theoretical paradigms is not only theoretically and politically naïve, but also potentially dangerous” (Johnson and Henderson 5). By utilizing what I have called black performative revealing, Baraka and Harrison bring forth black male queer desires that have often been concealed within histories of the modern Civil Rights Movement. Thus, they join the black writers and performers in earlier chapters of this project who used innovative aesthetic and performance techniques to reconfigure normative conceptions of identity, specifically black identity.

Interestingly, Harrison’s and Baraka’s plays have hardly received the kind of critical attention and accolades that have been given to Adrienne Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of a Negro* or even Baraka’s *Dutchman*, both of which opened in 1964, received Obie Awards, and have generated a prolific body of intellectual discourse. Quite contrarily, *The Experimental Leader* and *The Baptism* have rarely figured in traditional narratives of the movement, and, in a sense, have become discarded knowledges. But how do we recover and center these works in theorizing the cultural front of the modern Civil Rights Movement? What new epistemologies can emerge from such a gesture? In this chapter, I rely upon a mode of critical inquiry that peels back layers of traditional archives and moves beneath the surface of heterosexual performativity to uncover more complex textures of black desire. In this vein, Baldwin’s narrator offers an instructive

observation: “The surface is misleading, is perhaps meant to be misleading, or perhaps cannot help but be—the truth is somewhere else, far beneath the surface” (JAMH 189).

This probing beneath the surface, in hopes of reaching a more complex “truth,” takes two primary forms in this chapter. It is, on the one hand, an archival probing through which I analyze literary works that have hardly received critical attention—works that sometimes are housed in a Dutch periodical or languishing in an archive but, in either case, have been conspicuously occluded from traditional accounts of the movement.¹ But this method also involves a penetration beneath heterosexual surfaces that labor to expurgate traces of black queerness in hopes of concealing them from public view. In short, reading and theorizing beneath archival, textual, and indeed embodied surfaces enacts a mode of critical discovery that privileges finding and critically analyzing traces and fragments of what E. Patrick Johnson has called the black “quare,”² which, as I demonstrate, was part and parcel of black desire during the movement.

¹ Paul Carter Harrison’s play the *The Experimental Leader* was published in the Dutch periodical *Podium Magazine* in 1965. There is also a copy of a script of the play in the Paul Carter Harrison papers at Emory University. See Paul Cater Harrison, *The Experimental Leader*. Box 13, Folder 9. MCN 927 Paul Carter Harrison Papers, Hatch/Billops Collection. Manuscript and Rare Book Library, Emory University Libraries, Atlanta, GA. 13 June 2013.

² Using a black southern vernacular pronunciations of “queer,” E. Patrick Johnson coins the terms “quare” to imagine a queer studies project that can better account for diverse racial and class identities and destabilize “stable notions of identity.” “Quare studies,” he contends, “is a theory of and for gays and lesbians of color” (1). See E. Patrick Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother,” *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (NC: Duke University Press, 2005): 124-157.

Baraka and Harrison reveal the ways in which black flesh was so much more than a target for mobs, police dogs, fire hoses, and other icons of white supremacist violence. Black flesh was not simply ripped, torn, and prodded in racist acts that became front-page stories and breaking news. Rather, black flesh sexually desired and was desired. It desired freedom, but also bodies—sometimes, bodies of the same sex. But how do we articulate a narrative of the modern Civil Rights Movement that accounts for this modality of embodied desire, and its queer realities? “[I]f history makes demands on flesh” Baldwin writes, “flesh makes demands on history. The demands flesh makes on history are not always easily met: the further down you go, the more vivid this truth becomes” (*Just Above My Head* 397). The plays in this chapter reveal the demands that flesh, black queer flesh, is making on our histories of this historical moment, demands that we can only meet by traveling “further down” in hopes of unearthing a more “vivid truth”—one that reveals the centrality of the black “quare” to the cultural and political fields of this historical moment.

(II) legible Black Masculinities

To be sure, the suppression of queer black male desire within histories of modern civil rights activism is inextricably linked to a larger web of social, political, and cultural discourses that work to constrain the ontological possibilities of what Maurice Wallace terms the “black masculine.”³ Particularly crucial to this project has been a discursive

³ Maurice Wallace uses the phrase “constructing the black masculine” to account for the “artifactual/architectural logic of black male representation,” emphasizing the social construction of black masculinities (82). See Maurice Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men’s Literature and Culture, 1775-1995* (NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

practice that Ronald Jackson calls “scripting the black masculine.”⁴ Indeed, from New World Slavery to the present, there has been no paucity of black masculinity “scripts” that have entered into public discourse through powerful networks of white supremacist desire—from “Uncle Tom” and the “buck” to “the Communist” and “the rapist” to the sneers routinely hurled at the U.S. nation-state’s Commander-In-Chief, Barack Hussein Obama (e.g., foreign, birth-certificateless, Muslim-affiliated). This brand of discursive violence has sought to limit the claims that black men can make upon the category of full citizenship.

Against this historical backdrop, it is hardly surprising that black men have attempted to imagine themselves beyond the bounds of such typologies. Black male bodies, as Marlon Ross suggests, have long been “in motion, changing their cultural-historical placement by struggling against the terms of their stigmatization” (Ross 5). But alternate conceptions of the black masculine regularly envision white masculinities as racialized idealities that are worthy of sartorial, elocutionary, and other performative modes of mimesis. Indeed, the ruse that envisages white masculinities as social norms has certainly not been lost upon black citizens. Yet, the conspiracy to fabricate superior white masculinities has continued to inculcate desires among black men to approximate

⁴ Like Wallace, Jackson, II also theorizes the social construction of the “black masculine.” But he is particularly interested in the role black male bodies play in the social production of the black masculine. In particular, he examines discursive practices—both oppressive and revolutionary—that allow the scripting and re-scripting of the black masculine in popular media. See Ronald L. Jackson, II, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media* (NY: SUNY Albany Press, 2006).

white male masculine idealities that have come to stand in as metonyms for proper citizens.

As a result of this discursive force, performances of black masculinity that exceed or fall short of these idealities have often been subjected to various processes of “othering” and rendered inferior within racial and gender hierarchies of social being by those who wield the power to construct and police identity. In *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities*, Mark Anthony Neal critically examines the ways in which social meanings are strategically grafted onto black male bodies, generally covering them with hieroglyphics of racial stigma. Not only does this process negate the complexity of black masculinities, but it creates a value system whose influence renders alternative masculinities unthinkable. Neal sets out to “look for Leroy,” rendering “so-called illegible black male bodies—those black male bodies we can’t believe are real—legible.” The act of looking for Leroy is “like the search for Langston [Hughes] before him, [and] might represent a theoretical axis to perform the kind of critical exegesis that contemporary black masculinity demands” (Neal 8). Neal is especially interested in those illegibilities that encumber black queer men. By queer, he refers not only to the “ambiguities associated with queering sexualities . . . but also to queerness as a radical rescripting of the accepted performances of heteronormative black masculinity”—two definitions that capture my deployment of the term here (Neal 3-4).

This chapter engages in a similar critical praxis of “looking for Leroy.” More specifically, I am interested in mapping and critically analyzing literary articulations of black queer masculinity in literatures of the “short” civil rights movement. I focus, in particular, on the ways in which drama and the theatrical stage functioned as key sites for

making queer black masculinities legible in the thick of the modern Civil Rights Movement. To be sure, staging queered representations of black civil rights leadership was no small feat. As black civil rights leaders Bayard Rustin and Aaron Henry would learn, these grammars of black masculinity were not only socially stigmatized and often met with reproach, but were also criminalized. Rustin would confront this reality in 1953, when he was arrested in Pasadena California for allegedly having sex with two men in a car, shortly after he had delivered a lecture to the Pasadena Athletic Club. When Rustin appeared in court the following day, a Pasadena judge charged him with performing a lewd and lascivious act—a conviction that landed him in a Los Angeles County prison for two months.

Prominent Mississippi civil right leader Aaron Henry met a similar fate on March 3, 1962, when the Clarksdale, Mississippi, police Chief arrested him as his wife and daughter watched from their home. Allegedly cruising near Mound Bayou, Mississippi, Henry was reported to be on a prowl to find a “white woman,” but supposedly turned his sexual energies to a white male hitchhiker who refused to help him in this search. The conversation purportedly “moved to other forms of sex” in which the hitchhiker would have to “play the role of substitute” (Howard 159). In the trial, however, there was no mention of a white woman, and queer desire trumped miscegenation, emerging as the more taboo and perverse form of desire among the two. In this vein, Henry was convicted of “placing his hand on the leg and private parts of the said Sterling Lee Eilert,” and sentenced to six months in prison and a hefty \$500 dollar fine (159). As Aaron Henry recognized, “queer baiting” was a strategic collusion of white supremacism and heterosexual patriarchy to maintain hierarchies of racial and sexual identity. “No

longer were bigoted officials satisfied with trying to brand us as communist,” Henry argues. “That charge . . . had lost its punch. Standard charges were getting old . . . So they picked up a new charge—detested equally by whites and Negroes—homosexuality” (Howard 161).

While Henry would go on to be a quite successful state legislature who continued to have intimate relationships with men, the institutional othering of black queer being, and the attendant social stigmas that were tethered to alternative sexual desires, posed a formative threat to Henry, Rustin, and other black civil rights activists whose very power and presence were threatened in the act of articulating male-male desire. According to E. Patrick Johnson:

The representation of effeminate homosexuality as disempowering is at the heart of the politics of hegemonic blackness. For to be ineffectual is the most damaging thing one can be in the fight against oppression. Insofar as ineffectiveness is problematically sutured to femininity and homosexuality within a black cultural politic that privileges race over other categories of oppression, it follows that the subjects accorded these attributes would be marginalized and excluded from the boundaries of blackness. Despite the imperialism of heteronormativity in black culture, however, it cannot disavow the specter of the black fag within. (Johnson 51).

Feeling somewhat walled in by the criminalization of black queer desire and the pressures that police what Johnson calls “the boundaries of blackness,” Bayard Rustin reached a telling conclusion: “I know now that for me sex must be sublimated if I am to live with myself in this world longer” (Rustin 155). Rustin’s decision to sublimate black male queer identity is a useful analytic through which we can make sense of a much larger campaign to sieve out queerness from the “black masculine,” but also to theorize its return in the garb of expressive culture. According to Sigmund Freud, sublimation is a

process by which social actors channel less acceptable forms of human behavior, desire, and satisfaction into modes creative production. In particular, sublimation enables erotic energies to be expressed by situating them within frameworks that accord with prevailing sentiments of socially acceptable behavior.⁵ If art is an arena in which sublimated desires return with a force, African American literary production is certainly a productive site at which we can uncover—or reveal—sublimated black queer energies that have been written out of traditional histories and memories of the movement. It provides an optic through which we can more carefully engage black masculinities that have been rendered (il)legible and reveal “the specter of the fag within.”

On the Black Queer Erotic Present

Baldwin’s novel and Rustin’s and Henry’s arrests underscore another key argument that I make throughout this chapter. That is: We must necessarily embrace the “here and now” of black queer desires. In his groundbreaking study *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), the late Jose Esteban Muñoz critiques a strand of critical thought that, in his estimation, too casually empties queer futurity of any semblance of hope. More specially, Muñoz takes issue with Lee Edelman’s forcefully argued polemic, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004)—a text that, according to Muñoz, posits the future as “the province of the child and therefore not for the queers” (Muñoz 11). Indeed, Edelman is incisive in probing the ways in which futurity has been wedded to logics of heterosexual reproduction and how the figure of the child, the human product of this reproductive assemblage, emerges as the quintessential

⁵ See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, (NY: Penguin, 2004(1930)).

icon of futurity. Even against this violent backdrop, though, Muñoz wants to hold on to the promises and possibilities of queer potentialities—of queer futures that might be “not-yet-here,” but are, nevertheless, on the “horizon.”

Such a project, Muñoz concedes, is certainly not simple, but is vitally necessary. Navigating those blockades that elide queer bodies from the time and space of futurity, he finds, requires a method of “hope,” “critical idealism,” and a serious faith in the utopian. While Edelman perceives an antisocial queer present as the most tenable mode of queer being within homophobic social orders that deny queer futurity, Muñoz is less celebratory of the present. He argues, instead, for the critical importance of both the past and future:

Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there* . . . Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (Muñoz 1).

But must the “here and now” always already function as a “quagmire” and “prison house”? And must queerness necessarily entail a “rejection” of the present?

Texts central to this chapter reveal the necessity of embracing the “here and now” in formations of black queer desire as well as black queer theorizing. James Baldwin’s novels are certainly instructive in this vein. If we return to *Just Above My Head*, or consider other Baldwin novels such as *Another Country* (1962) or *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone* (1968) that portray queer black male sexual desires during the modern Civil Rights Movement, the precarious nature of black queer futurity becomes clear. Whether considering the tragic suicide that ends Rufus’s life in *Another Country* or the

heart attack that leaves Leo Proudhammer dead on the stage, or Arthur Montana, who was found dead in the basement of “some filthy London pub,” all three novels entail a tragic, relatively early death (both in terms of age and the sequence of events that drive each novel’s plot) for each of these protagonists—all of whom happen to be black, queer, and male (*Just Above My Head* 4). In short, black queer futures are routinely eclipsed by a web of social forces that make the future far more uncertain for those who inhabit the intersection of blackness and queerness. Added to this, Baldwin persistently exposes how black pasts have long been burdened by the formidable weight of slavery, Jim Crowism, and other forms of anti-black oppression, that, even in the present, continue to inform the shape of black futurity and, thereby, the temporality of black life.

For a people for whom the past has been enormously traumatic and the future has long been precarious, there is something poignant—revolutionary, even—about black queer socialities and desires that are forged in the “here and now,” especially when they contain a liberatory substrate that loosens heterosexuality’s formative grip on possible modes of being. To be sure, I am certainly not arguing that black queer subjects should dwell in the reclusive space of the antisocial, apolitical, anti-futuristic present that is Edelman’s preferred ontology of queer being. This would be dangerous on a material level for subjects whose very bodies and lives are vulnerable to the interrelated logics racial and sexual subjugation, both of which have been anchored in what Achille Mbembe calls necropolitics, or social and political practices that are “deployed” to create deathscapes” for certain sectors of the population.⁶ Thus, unless one denies the reality of

⁶As scholars such as Sharon Holland have argued, death has the potential to be an equalizing and productive space. “[O]ur proximity to death as human beings,” Holland

a present in which black death-worlds continue to thrive with impunity, we must certainly acknowledge the precarity of the “here and now,” especially for those who are black—more still, for those who are black and queer.

But can we locate a black queer temporality that exists somewhere along the spectrum between Edelman and Muñoz? In this chapter, I am interested in mapping a black queer time that does not eschew the present in order to emphasize the past and the future, and one that refuses to foreclose the future in order to facilitate a nearly nihilistic present propelled by the death-drive. What I am after, then, is a space and time that I call the *black queer erotic present*—a spatio-temporal paradigm that more carefully attends to the black queer socialities and desires that get articulated in the “here and now.” Within this spatio-temporal paradigm, black queer desire exists as a fugitive force, maneuvering through a social world that is exceptionally oppressive at the crossroads where black meets queer.

argues, might mark the queer space in us all because the possibility of an impending death is something we all share.” But Holland recognizes the importance of “discovering who resides in the nation’s imaginary ‘space of death’ and why we strive to keep such subjects there” (Holland 179-180 and 8-9). In a similar tenor, Achille Mbembe theorizes the politics of death that determine who lives and who dies and when. In particular, he calls into question the ancillary position that Michel Foucault assigns to death in his theories of biopower. “The notion of biopower,” Mbembe writes, “is insufficient to account for contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death” (Mbembe 39). Centering death in his analysis, Mbembe proposes a model of *necropolitics* to theorize the ways in which sovereignty is deployed toward the goal of destroying certain members of society. See Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” (*Public Culture*, Volume 15, No. 1, 2003): 11-40 and Sharon P. Holland, *Raising the Dead: Reading of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

It might seem, perhaps, that embracing black queer desire in the “here and now,” in the face of necropolitics, would require a brand of hope and affective structures that produce what Lauren Berlant has called “cruel optimism”: “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility” (Berlant 24). Like Mbembe, Berlant is interested in the quotidian nature of violence, and the ways in which these conditions render ordinary, everyday realities an “impasse shaped by crisis in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on” (8). Thus, violence is best understood not through a lens of an exceptional traumatic moment, but rather through a framework that Berlant calls “crisis ordinariness” (10). Indeed, this ordinariness of crisis, and the optimism that sustains desires for the “good life,” even in the face of destruction, is, for people of African descent, hardly a product of post-1980s neoliberalism, but has instead been constitutive of blacks’ experiential realities from the moment Africans were transformed from subject to objects, from persons to property. As Berlant demonstrates, there are certainly “patterns of adjustment” to these conditions of crisis that are “collective” (9). But, as the history of blackness suggests, some patterns are far less similar, because of the particularities of racialized and other lived experiences, even as these crises come into being through similar structures of power.

Recognizing the specificity of black racial oppression, I am interested in the forms of optimism that have sustained a race who—for more than four centuries—has lived in a constant state of crisis. More specifically, though, I wonder what form of optimism is required to embrace and value black queer desires that are exchanged in the “here and now,” even as they are threatened by the ordinariness of crisis. What is

needed, and has certainly been invented, is what we might call black queer fugitive optimism. By this I mean a brave willingness to embrace “stolen” moments of desire and intimacy in the black queer erotic present, just as blacks have engaged in transgressive acts of stealing life itself in the face of death, from the Middle Passage to the present (*In the Break* 179). If the historical present is an “extended now,” the black queer erotic present captures those abbreviated snippets of black queer desire and intimacy that are transacted within the historical present (Berlant 4). These moments are certainly fleeting, but they must be fingered, held, and nurtured, as the future of black life itself is as precarious as the future of this short moment of erotic desire that has managed to steal enough time and space to exist—if only for a moment.

Within the black queer erotic present, black queer desire rubs up against “straight time”⁷—which imagines futurity through a narrow optic of heterosexual reproduction—as well as the temporal imperatives of anti-black racism, which attempt to delay or altogether foreclose black futurity.⁸ The histories of violence that have subtended and

⁷In queer theory, straight time refers to hegemonic conceptions of time that are both linear and heterosexual, and are, therefore, doubly “straight.” This study joins scholars who are engaged in a project of mapping “queer” times.

⁸Indeed, the focus on the “here and now” of black queer desire accords with the spatio-temporal logics that animated the later phases of the modern Civil Rights Movement, captured in the rallying cry: “freedom now.” As the history of blacks in the U.S. nation-state has revealed, the “here and now” is a crucial moment in black experiential realities, as the future has too often promised a recursivity of anti-black violences and oppression that certainly plagued the past, but have managed to re-form themselves and persist into the future. As I argue in chapter two, during the twentieth century, global communities experienced an acceleration in the pace of social life, thereby moving more swiftly toward the “future.” Yet, U.S. social actors, from William Faulkner to President Dwight Eisenhower, consistently implored blacks to “wait” and to “go slow” in their own search for more futures that were more hopeful and just.

produced “deathscapes” for people of African descent have much in common with histories of alternative sexualities, which, too, are laden with profuse social desires for their destruction. If black masculinity has been perpetually devalued, and blackness and queerness are constantly summoned to death, the intersection of blackness and queerness has been a doubly precarious and stigmatized social location, such that the act of revealing a black queer self becomes a dually perilous enterprise. In fact, as scholars such as Siobhan Somerville and Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman have argued, Blackness and alternative sexualities have been mutually constructed as ontological deficit, particularly since the nineteenth century.⁹ Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien are certainly right to claim that the “prevailing Western concept of sexuality already contains racism” (Mercer 106).

With the institutionalization of academic disciplines that the nineteenth century ushered in, intellectual discourses began to play a formative role in the production of social knowledge. Science and medicine, in particular, were central to the violent project of producing hierarchies of racial masculinities that reinforced broader taxonomies of race and sexuality. Knowledges of human difference, then, were institutionalized in new ways and, subsequently, circulated throughout public discourse with the legitimizing authority of scientific facticity. Under this aegis, phrenology, psychiatry, sexology, and a range of other disciplines produced a vibrant stream of intellectual and pseudointellectual

⁹See Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, *Against the Closet: Black Political Longing and the Erotics of Race* (NC: Duke University Press, 2012) and Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

discourses that attempted to explain away sexual and racial difference through a lexicon of perversion, and, ultimately, inferiority.¹⁰

Thus, as blacks were attempting to build upon the momentum of U.S. Reconstruction—fighting white supremacist plots to abrogate blacks’ newly acquired rights—modern innovations in science enabled the construction of “illegible” racial and sexual subjects,¹¹ and these individuals, in turn, enabled practices of modern innovation, serving as objects of “scientific” experiments whose ultimate agenda was to produce various forms of knowledge. There was not, then, a vast ideological gap separating this “higher” order of bodily violence from the ostensibly more gruesome violence against black bodies that was the centerpiece of race-inspired lynchings. In praxis and ideology, both modes of inflicting violence on black bodies were committed to achieving a similar

¹⁰ Examining what he calls the “medicalization of the sexually peculiar,” Michel Foucault has argued that the “medical examination, the psychiatric investigation, the pedagogical report, and family controls may have the over-all and apparent objective of saying no to all wayward or unproductive sexualities, but the fact is that they function as mechanisms with a double impetus: pleasure and power.” Indeed, Baraka and Harrison, as well as two black novelists whom I examine at the end of this chapter, reveal the ways in which violent attacks against alternative sexualities are not solely about power and delimiting acceptable forms of being, but are equally concerned with garnering pleasure in and through these violent acts. See Michel Foucault, “Volume I,” *The History of Sexuality* (NY: Vintage, 1978).

¹¹ According to Cathy J. Cohen, the “sexual subject” in queer theorizing is “understood to be constructed and contained by multiple practices of categorization and regulation that systematically marginalize and oppress those subjects thereby defined as deviant and ‘other.’” This definition also captures the regulatory practices that have attempted to oppress black racial subjects—a duality that further elucidates the double bind of black queer identity and desires. See Cathy J. Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics,” *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (NC: Duke University Press, 2002): 21-51.

outcome: the disciplining and subjugation of those bodies that were imagined to be “other.”

To be sure, the pathologies that were grafted onto black and queer bodies through the strategic medicalization of blackness and queerness shaped public ideas of normalcy and, thereby, provided modern “proof” that certain bodies deserved inferior treatment and were bankrupt of value. Interestingly, however, I find that black dramatists writing during the modern Civil Rights Movement often utilized scientific frameworks to challenge processes of “othering” blackness and queerness and the points at which they intersect. Male-male sexual desires, they show, often reside in the least expected quarters, even in the bodies of those subjects who perform “legible” masculinities. By repurposing science and scientific discourses, Paul Carter Harrison and Amiri Baraka develop innovative aesthetic and performance techniques that enable them to push beyond the surface legibility of heterosexual black masculinities. These scientific discourses and frameworks enable them reveal assemblages of black queer desire that link the bodies of black men to other male bodies, forging black queer collectivities that—much like marches, sit-ins, and other forms of embodied protest—were passionate, transformative, and radical.

Whereas Baraka queers Cartesian dualism, or the mind/body split, Harrison uses the scientific method to reveal concealed traces of black queer desire. Both authors, however, tap into scientific thinking to frame the black male body as a key site for uncovering black desires that are often repressed under pressures to perform “legible” masculinities. If Aaron Henry and Bayard Rustin have emerged as exceptional black queer men in histories and memories of the movement, Baraka and Harrison suggest that

queered modes of black masculine being operated with a greater vitality than has been previously recognized. If these stories have been silenced in the photographic and televisual archives that are at the forefront of intellectual and popular memories of the movement, these dramatists tell a different but necessary story, and reveal the centrality of the black queer erotic present to the articulation of black queer desires and erotic conceptions of black queer flesh.

Scientific Experimentation and Queer Variables

Oft regarded as “the spiritual and philosophical father of black theater,” Paul Carter Harrison has gained a reputation as remarkable writer, director, and scholar (Hill 238). Born in 1936 to black southern parents who migrated to New York City, Harrison would go on to earn a B.A. in Psychology from Indiana University, and, in 1962, an M.A. in phenomenology from the New School for Social Research. As racial tensions continued to escalate during the modern Civil Rights Movement, Harrison relocated to Europe, where he would live as an expatriate for the next seven years. While based primarily in the Netherlands and Spain, Harrison continued to produce plays that engaged racial realities that were yet plaguing the U.S. nation-state. Among these works are *Pavane for a Deadpan Minstrel* (1963) and *The Experimental Leader* (1965)—two one-act plays that were published in the Dutch Periodical *Podium Magazine*. According to Steven R. Carter, “both of these plays are minor, containing some silly dialogue and sophomoric humor, especially *The Experimental Leader*, which is also muddled and poorly developed” (Carter 135). Carter is among the handful of scholars who have made reference—usually in passing—to the *Experimental Leader*. Where the play has not been met with silence, it has often encountered less than favorable criticism and cavalier

dismissal. *The Experimental Leader* is certainly not an artistic masterpiece, having serious aesthetic limitations, particularly in the arena of plot development. However, the play warrants far more critical analysis, as it provides one of the most complex and intriguing engagements of black queer desire and civil rights leadership that emerged from the cultural field of the modern Civil Rights Movement.

Upon entering *The Experimental Leader*, one encounters a scene that is simultaneously familiar and mysterious. A civil rights leader occupies the stage. He speaks and gestures. His body is key to the performance. Perhaps this is Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., waving his arms, as he so often did, with utter bravery and passion, using his body to kindle the fires of black political desire. Indeed, one would be justified in picturing this leader in a subtle, dark suit, a crisp white shirt, and a simple but elegant tie—embodying the quintessence of respectable, heteronormative black masculinity. This iconography of black civil rights leadership, mired in a politics of black respectability, saturated television networks and newspapers that circulated throughout global communities.

In *The Experimental Leader*, however, one finds a decidedly different portrait of black male leadership. When the curtains open, the audience meets a character appropriately named Leader, who is the de facto head of the revolution that festers throughout the play. But the audience quickly discovers that Leader is not only black, but is also decidedly queer: He has “effeminate gestures and voice,” and only wears underwear as he strikes a series of “suggestive” poses (*The Experimental Leader* 1). Like so many others who were at the helm of the modern Civil Rights Movement, Leader’s body is essential to his performance of leadership. Nevertheless, it hardly evokes the

masculine poise, the vocal sonority, and the elegant sartorial simplicity that often epitomized the embodied performances of civil rights leadership. In fact, the queered vocal intonations and gestural vocabularies that animate the play's opening scene are suggestive aesthetic choices that refuse to reinforce logics of legible black masculinities in which performances of civil rights leadership were so often rooted.

The play's setting and props also contribute to Harrison's construction of an innovative site of performance in which blackness, queerness, and civil rights leadership can be thought together and materially envisioned. The play takes place entirely in a large room, "ostensibly a hotel room," that is filled with garish, seemingly "old world" props: jasmine and a gold-leafed mirror; colognes and perfumes; an antique coffee table; a "worn-out quasi-period" couch; and a glass chandelier. These objects collectively suggest a "pseudo-French atmosphere" (TEL 1). The setting and the props seem to extend the line of effeminacy that Leader's body sets in motion, and the hotel room foreshadows a sexual conflict at the heart of the dramatic action. But one prop, in particular, takes on heightened symbolic importance: a tape-recorder. On the one hand, the recorder is a metaphor through which Harrison critiques Leader's troubling demagoguery, which is concealed in his charade of committed civil rights leadership. As the play continues, the baroque props and recorder point to the ways in which political desire gets replaced by desires for money and material goods. In the case of Leader, logics of capitalist desire succeed, and the commodification of black civil rights leadership is accomplished through the allure of money and things.

According to the stage directions, the voice that speaks from the recorder is a "cold, resonant detachment of a Television announcer." At times, the voice appears to be

prerecorded, scripted such that the Leader is able to anticipate responses that further intoxicate him with power:

LEADER:

Who is the leader?

VOICE:

YOU ARE THE LEADER.

LEADER:

Who is the leader?

VOICE:

YOU ARE THE LEADER.

LEADER:

Who do I lead?

VOICE:

YOU LEAD THE PEOPLE. (1)

But eventually the voice seems to operate more on its own volition within their dialogic exchange. It shifts, in particular, from a register of reinforcing Leader's sense of authority to exposing how Leader has been transformed into a "symbol" and a "product," and is complicit, moreover, in allowing black protest itself to be commodified. Indeed, as television cut its teeth on the modern Civil Rights Movement, images of black protest, narrated by the "cold" voices of television announcers, attracted international audiences, which, in turn, attracted advertisements, and thereby fetched dollars. According to VOICE, the reactions of the masses, who were "seeth[ing] in hatred," translated into profit; as VOICE puts it, "that SELLS PRODUCTS" (3). Thus, the recorder, a

technology that owes its existence to scientific innovation, becomes a vehicle through which Harrison critiques black civil rights leadership and its attachments to power and greed.

On the other hand, however, the recorder foreshadows Harrison's use of science and technology to reveal queer dark energies. Despite the egregious historical conspiracy between science and white supremacy, Harrison transmutes science into an aesthetic and epistemological source that drives the dramatic action of the play. More specifically, he utilizes the scientific method to excavate queer sexual desires that have been suppressed, perhaps intentionally, within the bodily interiors of a civil rights leader who claims a heterosexual identity. While the scientific method has been mobilized to facilitate violent productions of racial and sexual knowledge, and to stigmatize that which is black and queer, Harrison's play creatively repurposes this method, using it as an innovative structuring structure to produce another kind of knowledge. In short, the value of Harrison's play lies—at least in part—in its capacity to reveal “illegible” black masculinities and queer black male desires that might have, otherwise, continued to masquerade in the garb of heterosexuality.

Recalling the conventions of Greek tragedy, Harrison incorporates a young character named Messenger, who, as his name would suggest, relays messages to Leader, among them being the report that the masses, who are offstage, are growing increasingly more impatient, and that a tragedy is indeed on the horizon if the leader can't produce a palliative. Recognizing the masses' increasing restiveness, T.S. and Samantha, two representatives of the Society for Humane Integration Techniques (S.H.I.T.), have decided to meet with the leader, claiming that they have developed a “program to relieve

the whole stinking mess” (8). When the “two S.H.I.T.’s” enter, they find the Leader “elegantly attired, his face generously powdered and eyes penciled” (9). From the outset, Leader’s keen interest in T.S., and undisguised disdain for Samantha, are foreshadowed in the amiable greeting that T.S. receives and the cold shoulder that Leader turns to Samantha.

This encounter begins, then, with a noticeable fusion of queer patriarchy and black queer desire. The leader is both sexually interested in T.S. and dismissive of Samantha’s place as a woman in the movement. “I am always surprised to find a woman in the struggle . . . I should think that Sam would have more urgent feminine functions to discharge” (9) . But Samantha fires back, subtly suggesting that Leader himself is a woman: “As you much know, sir, when you get use to it, there’s nothing to it, really” (10). After this tense and awkward introduction, Samantha and T.S. unveil their program to contain the “masses [who] are on the move.”

T.S.

Their frustrations are exploding on the streets . . . their energies spilling into the gutter.

SAMANTHA:

Like confused children

T.S.

All that energy kindled, set into motion, and dissipated in useless efforts.

SAMANTHA:

You get the picture? A waste of energy. We’ve got the plan for channeling it toward more satisfying ends.

T.S.

And that’s why we’re here, sir.

SAMANTHA:

Think of the ends? . . . (tangentially) . . . I'm sure you often do . . . however we must do something before malice turns into slaughter and absolutely pointless . . . sex crimes. You do agree, don't you? (11)

Hardly impressed with the "S.H.I.T's" scheme, the leader retorts: "You two sound like two buglers sharing the same mouthpiece. Sounds all off key to me, somehow" (11).

But the masses, Messenger interjects, are indeed growing restless, as Samantha and T.S. are suggesting, "asking less and less for the leader." "Course there're still some who're keepin-the-faith," Messenger continues, "but their voices done gone hoarse on 'em with that 'Marchin' Christian Soldiers' cry . . . and their feet done got tired from walking 'em streets . . . and you know how they get when their corns start to hurt . . . they even starting to look queer" (13). Receiving a blast of confidence from Messenger's report, the "S.H.I.T.'s" continue marketing their program to Leader. With renewed self-assurance, T.S. exclaims: "It's time for action, sir." But Leader has another kind of action in mind, as he turns to Samantha and offers an interesting suggestion: "Tell you what, baby, why don't you go out and pacify them while he and I get down to serious business." Hardly capitulating, Samantha retorts: "Any business concerning you and him, most certainly is my business" (13).

With the clock ticking, Samantha begins to detail an experiment that she and T.S. have conducted, which will—according to their results—quell the masses' social and political unrest by rerouting their "energies" into more productive channels. According to their hypothesis, the people's "good" energy was being wasted in the "streets," and restoration of this energy to its "natural nature" would, ostensibly, contain the anxieties of the masses. When Leader casts doubt on the experiment as well as Samantha's relevance to the entire project, T.S. suggests that they are all "grouped in an essential

threesome.” “Listen, baby,” Leader replies suggestively. “I’m not aware of any essentials beyond the merits of two . . . no resolution can be held by three. Too chance . . . (places arm around T.S.’s shoulder)” (15). In both language, gesture, and touch, Leader continues to articulate his desires for T.S., which decidedly upsets Samantha, who constantly labors to conscript T.S into a heterosexual world in which sexual desire is much less fluid than T.S.’s body ultimately reveals.

Eventually, the duo informs Leader that the two of them had participated in the experiment and found “positive results” (15):

SAMANTHA:

“As exhibits A and B we manifest body tension at no less and no greater than the 0 plus or minus tension threshold. Isn’t that grand??? This means that our energy has been equally displaced through a fixed channel of the body. Thus, no wastage and our energy is restored. The Conservation-Recouperation quotient is then maintained constant at 99.9%. It’s that extra 1/10% that does the trick. (16)

In this experiment, then, energies are sublimated, redistributed into strategic channels of the body. Simply put, their results suggest that heterosexual sex is the key to controlling the rampant energies of the masses. Offering themselves as evidence of the experiment’s success, T.S. asserts: “Look at me, sir, I can even walk a straight line.” “He walks a beautifully straight line,” Samantha adds. The metaphor of the “straight line,” which recurs throughout the play, allegedly corroborates the successes of their experiment. But Leader is not so certain that T.S walks as “straight” of a line as he and Samantha are suggesting. When this doubt becomes clear, Samantha implies that Leader is impugning their integrity. “It’s not your integrity I want to expose,” Leader replies, “only your methods” (18).

Particularly interested in the experiment's variables, Leader learns that the first variable is "energy," which is housed "[i]n the body." "So body and energy," he asks, "make up one independent variable since energy is house in the body. The body is a kind of generator, right" (15)? "That's about right," T.S. replies. After this confirmation, Leader instructs T.S. to remove his jacket—a part of the new experiment that visibly infuriates Samantha: "I don't see what any of this has got to do with organizing those wretchedly confused people out there." Looking at T.S.'s body in a suggestive manner, Leader tells Samantha that she has "no interest to the movement," and invites her, once again, to "evacuate the "premises" (19). Beginning to massage T.S.'s neck and shoulders "very gently," eventually moving his hands to his chest, Leader begins "testing" their results. "Now is this the body you speak of," he asks? "And inside this Body is the immutable, independent variable?" T.S. confirms these parts of the experiment and, as the stage directions suggest, begins to speak "phlegmatically, "relaxing" and appearing drowsy" (19).

The leader is shocked to learn that the only dependent variables in the experiment were "man" and "woman." "Is that all," he asks? "What are you trying to give me? Man and Woman . . . and you call this a controlled experiment? Take off your pants" (20). Disgusted, Samantha protests vehemently. Running between them, she sticks out her chest, grabs Leader's hands, forces him to rub her breasts, and ultimately raises her skirt in what seems to be a desperate effort to coerce the leader into expressing heterosexual desire as a way of interrupting an exchange of black male desires that are beginning to ignite queer pleasures in T.S. body, which reveals the limitations of the "S.H.I.T.s" experiment. Informing Samantha that her particular "part of the experiment

doesn't interest" him, Leader returns to his own experiment, asking T.S. again to remove his pants. When Samantha "senses a loss of control over T.S.," she strips his shirt and tie off, leaving him in his underwear, socks, and shoes, dressed much like Leader in the opening moments of the play (21).

The leader asks, yet again, if there were any other variables in the experiment, and T.S. stands by his original answer: "No." With T.S. undressed, Leader continues touching this young activist's body and orders him to strike a series of poses: "Arms out to side at shoulder length . . . Arms forward . . . Hands on waist, one half turn right . . . Hands-on-Wrist-Bend-Forward" (23). Fixated on T.S.'s thighs and buttocks, Leader eventually reaches the conclusion that the "S.H.I.T.'s" original "variables are rigid," and that there was still "one variable untested" (24).

LEADER:

I'm for any program that thoroughly liberates tension. You must know that, T.S. (he continues to rub T.S.'s chest) . . . I'm for your program, but only when it is fully tested and approved.

SAMANTHA:

The program is already proven. Now your only concern is to give it to the people.

LEADER: (T.S. breathes harder)

Now baby, are we going to get ourselves together so we can initiate a real program?
(T.S. nod affirmatively)

The folks are counting on us, right?

SAMANTHA:

T.S. honey, remember what we've been through. Be careful, now.

LEADER:

I think we understand each other, don't we? (T.S. nods) (25).

Hoping that T.S. will admit the limitations of the S.H.I.T.s' previous experiment, particularly its variables, Leader invites him to have "a man-to-man talk." "You've got this Man-Woman variable," he contends. T.S. nods. "[W]ell, what's missing?" "Nothing," Samantha interjects, and commands T.S. "not to say another word." But Leader persists in seeking an admission from T.S. that other variables are indeed needed: "C'mon, Man-Woman . . . Woman . . . Man...let's have it, what's left . . say it for me . . . C'mon it's on the tip of your tongue. On the edge of your mind. Let's hear it! I'll help you . . Man-Woman. . . and now, Man . . . yes...Man..." "Man-Tan," Samantha blurts out. "We forgot about Man-Tan." (25-26). Annoyed, Leader tells T.S. rather matter-of-factly: "[A]s long as she is holding the reins to your zipper, I'll be damned if I'm going to endorse such a program for the folks" (26).

At this point in the play, Leader's experiment has already revealed the limitations of the heteronormative results that Samantha and T.S. have offered as a remedy for the "wasted" energy of the masses. By using gestures such as nods and bodily responses such as increasingly hard breathing, Harrison frames T.S.'s body as the key source of the new experiment that Leader is conducting—an experiment that quite successfully sets out to reveal a queer energy that was unthinkable within the parameters of the "S.H.I.T.'s" original methods. "Queer approaches" Siobhan Somerville contends, "bring into question received notions of evidence, proof, and argumentation" (Somerville 6). Utilizing the scientific method, Leader inserts a queer variable into the mix, tests the "S.H.I.T.s'" original findings, and uses T.S.'s body as evidence as well as a vehicle to communicate the radically different results that this "queer approach" has yielded. If "it is possible to detect what's on somebody's Mind in the attitude expressed by the Body,"

as Paul Carter Harrison has suggested, T.S.'s body is an important epistemic source that, despite his and Samantha's attempt to occlude the possibility of queer desire, reveals the ways in which an ostensibly legible masculinity is, in reality, far more illegible than either Samantha or T.S. would like to admit, possessing what we might call a "queer nommo." (xix)

While in the Netherlands, Paul Carter Harrison had a series of important encounters with students from Surinam that would shape his political and aesthetic visions for years to come. In particular, his interactions with this group imbued him with a passion for African drama and a keen interest in theorizing the relationship between New World blacks and African retentions. Influenced by his training in phenomenology and psychology, Harrison was especially attracted to exploring the ways in which African retentions produced and inflected structures of experience and consciousness that, in his estimation, were shared among blacks across the African diaspora. These surviving forces, Harrison believed, were key to remaking black subjectivities in the era of modern Civil Rights activism:

There is . . . [a] rumor turning corners these days that says a nigguh is more than the sum of his Babylonian acquired parts, a force that, owing to its African cosmological orientation, its unique world view, defies sociological explication and is growing strong, a force gaining the momentum of ancestral wisdom that is determined to break the cultural mode that has locked its energies, its expressions, its authentic vision of reality into an immutable relationship with massa's boot in the butt, the kind of identification of self that comes from the influence of the Patriarch's relentless need for authority, his inclination to oppress alien forces, his desire to conquer the universe, rather than live with it: they say niggus just ain't goin' for that SHIT no more. (*Nommo* xi)

Harrison, thus, joined the ranks of black intellectuals and activists who, during this historical moment, saw immense value in "New World" blacks forging literal and

symbolic connections to continental Africa. This connection to an originary geography would ostensibly enable blacks to recover an historical “African” force that, when deployed in the present, had the potential to unlock “energies” that have been contained by a dominant, patriarchal “cultural mode.”

The name that Harrison assigns to this force is “nommo.” “[I]n the power of the Word—spoken or gesticulated . . . [Nommo] activates all forces from their frozen state in a manner that establishes concreteness of experience. Reality.” When Nommo is “activated properly,” Harrison suggests, “Muntu demonstrates the power to designate all life forms, be they glad or sad, work or play, pleasure or pain, in a way that preserves his Muntuness, his humanity” (*Nommo* xx). The activation of nommo, in essence, reveals energies, affects, and ontological possibilities that have been hidden from view, quite often, by the prevalence of “cultural modes” that come to represent ideas of the (ab)normal. Unlocking these repressed energies facilitates connections to alternative “modes” that are crucial to “preserving” one’s “humanity.” Nommo is a useful analytical framework for making sense of the repressed black queer desires and pleasures that are ultimately unlocked in the experiment that Leader conducts on T.S.’s body, “testing,” and ultimately debunking, the certainty of the young activist’s heterosexuality and, thereby, the rigid heteronormative variables that are at the core of the “S.H.I.T.’s” experiment.

Recognizing that both Leader and Samantha are invested in his body for their own selfish reasons and hardly concerned with finding a solution for the masses, T.S. breaks out of the spell of black male queer desire, returning the group to the task that is supposedly at hand:

T.S. (shouts violently at first)

Stop it! . . . I said stop it! Hell, I must be going crazy. I can't believe what's going on here. What are you two trying to do, confuse the issues? This is a meeting, And we're supposed to be planning . . . organizing. We've gotta make some decisions. Now! For those people out there. To Hell with who's on the lead. We got a job to do, have you forgotten? We must act with speed, it's our only chance to be redeemed in the eyes of the people. (*The Experimental Leader* 29)

But a telling Freudian slip interrupts T.S.'s moment of moral clarity: "We gotta move forward together. The end can't be too far now . . . the journey is not far to the threshold of . . . *erection* . . . er, I mean, resurrection" (29; emphasis added). Following this slip, the leader, quite curiously, decides to retrieve a gun from his chest. Putting the gun in T.S.'s hand, he attempts to persuade T.S. to shoot his fellow "S.H.I.T.," as if the young activist's most recent statements have provided the answer to the missing variable. Leader "races over" to T.S., grabs the hand that holds the gun, and a bullet flies into Samantha's side," bringing their experiments and triangle of mixed sexual desires to a tragic but telling end (35).

With Samantha dead, Leader attempts to retrieve the weapon, but T.S. refuses to "give up [his] power," informing Leader that Samantha was not alone in seeking to control him: "And what do you want," T.S. asks. "Don't you want a piece of me too? . . . You cheap phoney. I wouldn't waste a fart on you. In fact, you're full of more SHIT that [*sic*] I am. Once you were sitting high on the crown, now you're being flushed down the drain with the rest of the leavings. I'm so mad. I'll never bend my ass over a stool again" (35-37). When T.S. storms out of the room, the leader retaliates by phoning the police, informing them that a "mad Negro has just slayed a White lady . . . I think it was a passion killing" (37). When Messenger also abandons the leader, he runs back

“hysterically” to the tape-recorder that captured his attention in the opening moments of the play:

“Who is the Leader,” he asks?

VOICE

YOU ARE THE LEADER.

LEADER

Who made me the Leader?

VOICE

I MADE YOU THE LEADER.

LEADER

Why am I the Leader?

THAT SELLS PRODUCTS...THAT SELLS PRODUCTS...THE INNER-DIALOGUE
IS . . . I MADE YOU THE LEADER...IF HE HOLLERS LET HIM GO...YOU ARE
THE LEADER...CURSE US...THAT SELLS PRODUCTS....

(the Leader holds tape-recorder to his
breast; he listens anxiously; confused:
the machine has broken down).

...THE PEOPLE ARE ANGRY...YOU ARE THE LEADER...YOU ARE THE
LEADER...MAKE THEM NIGGERS OF MEN...YOU ARE A SYMBOL...THAT
SELLS PRODUCTS...THAT SELLS PRODUCTS. (37-38).

In this intensely engaging play, Harrison offers one of the most complex imaginings of black queer desire and critiques of black civil rights leadership that emerged from the cultural front of the modern Civil Rights Movement. As the recorder makes clear in the play’s opening and closing, the leader eventually becomes a demagogue who put his own desires for power and material things before the needs of the masses, who were growing “evil as a witches-tit . . . ‘bout to burn a hole in the pavement”

(31). Thus, the battle between a white woman and a civil rights leader for T.S.'s body symbolizes the ways in which both Samantha and the leader remain more invested in their own selfish desires for "flesh" than in the rapid deterioration of the masses, who, as the historical record reveals, were indeed on the verge of "burning a hole in the pavement."

But what is equally as pivotal is the queer variable that the leader writes into the previously rigid heterosexual experiment. Retooling a scientific method that was only able to hypothesize "man" and "woman" as tenable variables, Leader crafts a new experiment—one that yields results, through gesture, breath, and other embodied evidence, that are hardly as "legible" as Samantha and T.S. initially thought. The fluid pleasures and desires that are transacted between T.S., an ostensibly heterosexual man, and the leader, an overtly queer civil rights activist, reveal queer energies that had been locked within T.S.'s body by the coercive pressures of heteronormativity. These pressures constantly crop up—through self-policing and Samantha—and threaten to interrupt the visible, embodied pleasures that T.S. experiences in the new experiment that Leader conducts—an experiment that expands the "S.H.I.T.s" variables beyond man and woman. While T.S. never supplies the new variable, "Man-Man," his embodied responses confirm the rigidity and limits of their original variables.

T.S. interrupts and forecloses the queer pleasures and desires that he and Leader exchange throughout the experiment. He hardly seems interested in carving out a place for a queer variable within the radical future of civil rights leadership that looms on the horizon, which his attachment to the gun and lambasting of the leader suggest. T.S., in fact, seems to be burdened by a sense of shame for having publically basked in the

pleasures of black male queer desire, for having “ben[t] [his] ass over a stool,” and compensates by performing a hyper-heterosexual masculinity that entails a necessary detachment from the queer civil rights leader. These reactions cannot be chalked up to an individualistic shame alone. Rather, the social pressure to perform legible black masculinities certainly plays a role in this foreclosure of a queer black male futurity. Indeed, Samantha’s constant interruptions and coercion to embrace heterosexual desire are telling.

But this reality points to the necessity of embracing black male queer desires in the “here and now.” T.S.’s past, as far as the audience can tell, was characterized by rigid, heterosexual variables”: man and woman. Yet, the leader’s impromptu, but revelational, experiment occasions a unique opportunity for the putatively straight young activist to embrace the black queer erotic present and to enjoy queer pleasures and desires while working to change the material conditions of the masses—like Arthur Montana, Bayard Rustin, Aaron Henry, and perhaps a string of other civil rights activists whose stories, like Harrison’s play, are hidden beneath the surface but are awaiting their moment of articulation, their moment of revealing.

**“I Love My Mind, My Asshole Too”:
Amiri Baraka and Black Queer Flesh in the Present**

Amiri Baraka’s “Civil Rights Poem” sheds light on the rampant homophobia that was often woven into the fabric of black political discourses during the 1960s:

*Roywilkins is an eternal faggot
His spirit is a faggot
his projection and image, this is
to say, that if i ever see roywilkins
on the sidewalks
imonna*

*stick half my sandal
up his
ass.*

The speaker's machismo resembles the more widespread excoriation, during the modern Civil Rights Movement, of black masculinities that were ostensibly queer. President of the NAACP, Roy Wilkins is constructed in the poem as an infinite "faggot," whose afterlife, in fact, continues to occupy the fraught terrain of the black "quare." To be sure, much of Baraka's work produced during the late 1960s bears similar homophobic traces, and found company in works of fellow black thinkers, such as Eldridge Cleaver, Jayne Cortez, and Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee).¹² Here, however, I am interested in an earlier Baraka—one who produced art that portrayed far less violent representations of black queer identity, as well as an earlier Baraka who, himself, was not so critical of black men who articulated sexual desires that escaped the confining boundaries of heterosexual "norms." In particular, I am interested in Baraka's 1964 play, *The Baptism* (1964), which offers much more complicated imaginings of black queer masculinities, with a particular knack for imagining the queerness of black male leadership.

¹² In Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*, he attacks James Baldwin's relationship to "homosexuality," which, according to Cleaver, is a "sickness, just as are baby-rape or wanting to become the head of General Motors" (136). See Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Random House, 1968). For other examples of homophobia in African American cultural production that target black men, in particular, see Jayne Cortez, "Race," *Pisstained Stairs and the Monkey Man's Wares* (New York: Phrase Text, 1969) and Haki Madhubuti, *Don't Cry Scream* (MI: Broadside Press, 1969). E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson have also argued that during this historical moment, the formation of Black Studies itself as an intellectual project "largely formulated by dominant black male leadership" enabled the cordoning off of "all identity categories that were not primarily based on race." See Johnson and Henderson eds., *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

While Baraka is often, and rightly, linked to the Black Arts Movement, the more “traditional” era of modern civil rights activism also influenced both the artist and his work. Explaining the place of politics in his art, Baraka contends: “[A] lot of what had moved me to make political statements were things in the real world, including poetry I read, but obviously the civil rights movement upsurge, the whole struggle in the South, Doctor King, SNCC, and the Cuban revolution—all those things had a great deal of influence on me in the late fifties and early sixties” (Prenshaw 173). Although Baraka would go on to unyoke himself from the “traditional” civil rights movement, here he communicates the ways in which this phase of the movement impacted his development and inspired his artistic practices of revealing: “It’s the . . . whole Civil Rights thing again. The majority in America are satisfied with what they think America is. But there is a part that isn’t, the Negro. That’s why things are so difficult for the Negro writers: because the others, the whites, don’t want to credit their versions of the world. If they credited it, they would shoot themselves” (Prenshaw 11).

Much like Baldwin, Baraka imagines black writers to be engaged in a collective project of revealing worlds and experiential realities that run counter to whites’ cosmic idealities. But these counter narratives, I would argue, have not simply unfolded within a cross-racial context, but have also entailed producing counter narratives that articulate the cosmic realities of those who embrace alternative sexualities. If Baraka’s portrayal of a black “faggot” in “Civil Rights Poem” is divisive and coarse, in much of his earlier work he reveals black queer desires in a much less venomous and far more complicated fashion. Take, for example, *The Toilet* (1963)—a one-act play that, like *The Experimental Leader* and *The Baptism*, is also interested in the relationship between

queer desire and black male leadership. In this play, a cadre of black high school boys are on a hunt for a white male student who has ostensibly written a love letter to Ray Fooks, the leader of the group, in which he calls Fooks “beautiful” and expresses desires to “blow him” (*The Toilet* 56). Seeking revenge, the groups concocts a plan to “jump on” James Karolis, the author of the letter, in one the school’s restrooms (*The Toilet* 47).

While Karolis constantly eludes capture, the boys eventually detain him, beat him, force him into a restroom, and deposit his badly beaten body into a corner. Interestingly, as the boys await Foot’s arrival, Ora—the ostensibly tough, hyper masculine member of the group who is also known as “Big Shot”—begins to articulate his own queer desires for Karolis, while, quite ironically, taking the lead in punishing Karolis for expressing precisely this mode of sexual desire:

ORA (*bending over as if to talk in KAROLIS’ ear*): Hey, baby, why don’t you get up? I gotta nice fat sausage here for you.

GEORGE: Goddam, Big Shot . . . You really a wrong sonofabitch!

ORA: Look man. (*Now kneeling over the slumped figure.*) If you want to get in on this you line up behind me. I don’t give a shit what you got to say.

LOVE: Man, George, leave the cat alone. You know that’s his stick. That’s what he does (*laughing*) for his kicks . . . rub up against half-dead white boys.

All laugh.

ORA (*looking over his shoulder . . . grudgingly having to smile too*): I’d rub up against your momma too. (*Leaning back to KAROLIS.*) Come on, baby . . . I got this fat ass sa-zeech for you!

All laugh.

ORA (*turns again, this time less amused*): Fuck you, you bony head sonofabitch. As long as I can rub against your momma . . . or your fatha’ (*laughs at his invention*) I’m doin’ alright. (*The Toilet* 50-51)

As this passage reveals, “Big Shot”—a putatively heterosexual black man—openly solicits sex from Karolis, who, as the group suspects, is a queer white boy. Despite the ironic cause of the group’s assembly in the restroom, Ora seems incapable of repressing his desires to have queer sex with Karolis. When the group takes Ora to task for these articulations of queer desire by slipping him into a game of the dozens, Ora tries to redeem himself. Firing back, he slips one of his challengers into the dozens, articulating desires to “rub against” his “momma.” Ora’s attempt to repress his queer desires through a comic game of the dozens, however, falls flat when he adds a telling remark: “As long as I can rub against your momma . . . or your fatha.”

But before Ora is able to share his “fat sausage” with Karolis, Ray Foots joins the group. Upon discovering Karolis in the corner, Foots’s reaction is far from the anger one would expect from a man whose masculinity has been so badly impugned by a queer love letter that he and his friends felt compelled to orchestrate an elaborate plot to “jump” the perpetrator. Rather, Foots “goes over to Karolis and kneels near him, threatening to stay too long. He controls the impulse and gets up and walks back to where he was” (52). When Foots discovers that “Big Shot” is responsible for Karolis’s injuries, he “looks at Ora quickly with disgust but softens it immediately” (52). Transforming his anger into a comedic line of inquiry, he probes Ora about what has happened, before attempting to convince the group that Karolis is in no condition to fight. “No, but he might be able to suck you off,” Big Shot fires back, returning to his earlier queer yearnings. While the group urges Foots to get revenge by fighting Karolis, he insistently refuses, until Karolis rises and surprisingly insists upon fighting. This visibly startles Foots. “His eyes widen momentarily, but he suppresses it”:

KAROLIS: I'll fight you, Foots! (*Spits the name.*) I'll fight you. Right here in this same place where you said your name was Ray. (*Screaming. He lunges at **FOOTS** and manages to grab him in a choke hold.*) Ray, you said your name was. You said Ray. Right here in this filthy toilet. You said Ray. (*He is choking **FOOTS** and screaming. **FOOTS** struggles and is punching Karolis in the back and stomach, but he cannot get out of the hold.*) You put your hand on me and said Ray! (60)

Recognizing that Karolis is getting the best of their leader, the group joins in, and proceeds to pummel Karolis, who musters up enough breath to yell out in a desperate tenor: “No, no, his name is Ray, not Foots. You stupid bastards. I love somebody you don't even know” (60). Soon after this violent encounter, the play's resolution reveals that Karolis is, in fact, right. In other words, behind the veneer of heterosexual black male leadership, Ray Foots was in love with a man. This becomes inescapably clear after the group leaves Karolis lying on the floor of the restroom, and Foots returns. “He stares at Karolis' body for a second, looks quickly over his shoulder, then runs and kneels before the body, weeping and cradling the head in his arms” (62).

While Foots has had to repress his desires for Karolis—which Baraka brilliantly captures through gestures such as his walking away from Karolis and softening the look of anger that he directs at Ora for attacking Karolis—the play's denouement affords him a private, seemingly sacred moment in which he and his male lover can exchange desires and affections that were policed in the presence of the larger group. “Ray,” the black man who was bold enough to grab Karolis's penis in the restroom, finally regains a similar boldness and peace, cradling his lover's head in his arms—a gesture that resembles Arthur and Crunch's embrace in Baldwin's *Just Above My Head*. As Jose Muñoz has argued, this ending seems to index the possibility of a queer future. But I would add to this that it also indexes the necessity of the here and now, of the black queer

erotic present. Who knows if the gang will return? Or if “Foots” will continue to suppress “Ray”? Or if the gang’s violence will, in fact, result in Karolis’s death at some point in the future? What Baraka does allow us to hold on to, for sure, is the beauty and certainty that enshrouds this particular moment of queer desire, of black queer erotic desire, that binds male flesh to male flesh in the here and now—a powerful queer temporality that is pivotal to the articulation of black queer desires that Baraka also stages in *The Baptism*.

On March 23, 1964, *The Baptism* opened at the Writers’ Stage Theatre in New York City, New York. Directed by Jerry Benjamin, the play offers a scathing critique of religious hypocrisy, portraying a church that is plagued by arrogance, opportunism, and the commodification of the sacred for personal gain. Like Harrison, Baraka pays particular attention to black leadership, chronicling a minister’s shameless quest to secure and enact power. On this front, there is an interesting aesthetic linkage between Harrison’s critique of black civil rights leadership and Baraka’s parallel criticism of a black leader’s yearnings for profit and authority. If Harrison uses a tape recorder to critique black civil rights leadership, Baraka also accords sonic technologies symbolic value, using these props to reveal concealed dimensions of black leadership that are rooted in troubling desires for power.

The Baptism is set in a church that has a sound speaker, two microphones, and a plaque that is attached to the wall. The plaque is inscribed “WHBI radio,” suggesting that the services are broadcast publically. Much like Harrison’s experimental leader, Minister uses his voice as a tool for self-gain, which is representative of a larger economy

of devious performance that Minister, by his own admission, uses to cloak his subterfuge in the guise of religious leadership:

Break the chain of ignorance. Lord, in his high place. What returns to us, images, the tone of death. Our cloak of color, our love for ourselves and our hymns. (*Moves to center of the stage bowing, with folded hands at his chin.*) Not love. (*Moans.*) Not love. The betrayed music. Stealth. We rise to the tops of our buildings and they name them after us. We take off our hoods (*Removes red hood*) and show our eyes. I am holy father of silence. (*Kneels.*) (*The Baptism* 11)

These lines that open the play stage an act of revealing, foreshadowing the ways in which *The Baptism* excavates nefarious practices of black leadership that are concealed in and through religious performance. The sounds and images generated during these performances, and exported to the public through the radio, enter a symbolic feedback loop, returning as “images” and “tones of death” that are motivated by a love that is “not love,” but a love of self that, as the play goes on to reveal, amounts to narcissism. More still, the hymns are also “loved,” but are “betrayed” by a preoccupation with self-gain—a selfish project in which the minister is imbricated: “We rise to the tops of our buildings,” he contends, “and they name them after us.” In this kinesthetic imagery of rising, “stealth” reflects secrecy and difficulty to detect as well as a sense of rising, both of which are key to Baraka’s critique of black leadership and his project of revealing black queer desires. Indeed, as the audience learns soon after, the gesture of removing his hood is symbolic of the alternative, queer desires that the “holy father of silence” represses throughout the play.

Following his gestural and spoken acts of revealing, a character tellingly named “Homosexual” engages in a striking dialogue with Minister:

HOMOSEXUAL: Not love. (*Moans.*) Not love. The man kneeling is only suppliant. Tarzan of the apes of religion. Lothar in the world. Weakling and non-swimmer. Manager of the Philadelphia Phillies. Not a good person to sleep with. *Gags on all flesh. The flesh hung in our soft sleep. That thin Jewish cowboy.* (emphasis added)

MINISTER: (*rising, doing slow dance step with leg raised*): Precious. Precious. This is a deception. A laggardly music, again, that image. (*Leaps.*) The place of the soul, my kindly queen, is wherever it rests. I fuck no one who does not claim to love me. You are less selective.

HOMOSEXUAL: (*starting to run in place*): Action. Camera. (*Stops.*) Stop! Stop! Where are my critics? Where are my father's friends with their bowling bags? I refuse to make a spectacle of religion without my most perceptive allies present. (*Raises arm.*) We will speak of politics or be forever silent.

MINISTER: (*running in place*): The place of the soul is its virtue. It is man's music. His move from flesh. When you are strapped in sin, I pray for you, dear queen. I stare with X-ray eyes into your dark room and suffer with you. I smell your lovers, and pray that you be redeemed. I bathe them in my holy water, and they are as baptized as children. (*The Baptism 11-12*)

This opening scene is certainly set in the church, but operates as an off-script moment that is not so policed by the rigid protocols that govern those performances that are staged with the church's radio public in mind. In other words, Baraka interrogates behaviors and desires that are routinely excoriated from public religious performance, especially those that fall under the rubric of carnal lust. Much like Harrison he is especially interested in revealing the complexities of black leadership and the nuanced shades of black masculinities, which become clear in this exchange. While Minister seems to be invested in taking the moral high ground when comparing himself to Homosexual, he ultimately emerges as a greedy shape-shifter who, according to Homosexual, has sex with other men, but is not a "good" sexual partner: "He "gags on all flesh. The flesh hung in our soft sleep" (11). This symbol of hanging flesh in the minister's mouth foreshadows the

ways in which the religious leader's sexual desires are as queer as Homosexual's, even as he labors to disguise them.

Interestingly, when a character named *Boy* enters the church, Minister reverts back to a performance that is more acceptable within a sacred religious space. The boy has come to be baptized and weeps and sprawls on the floor, recalling John Grimes from James Baldwin's semi-autobiographical novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953). While the Minister kneels down to comfort Boy, Homosexual begins to run in place, and soon removes his pants, revealing red leotards. The young man begins to confess his sins and requests to be baptized, but the leader notices that something seems to have caught his attention. The boy, he discovers, is looking "looking over Minister's shoulder at HOMOSEXUAL" (13). This symbolic looking past upsets the leader and, in a seemingly jealous fit, he "rushes" HOMOSEXUAL, and they "scuffle." "You are becoming unpleasant Miss Cocksucker," the minister contends, "and I don't like it" (13)

As the play progresses, Boy has peaked the sexual interests of both Minister and Homosexual, and like Samantha, T.S., and Leader, they are caught in a violent love triangle in which queer desires occupy a central place. While Minister constantly encourages Boy to "fall on me, my son . . . fall on me praying," Homosexual asks him for a dance and encourages Boy to "fuck everything and everyone" (15-19). This field of desire expands even further when a character named "Old Woman" enters the church. She accuses the young teenager of sinning, having witnessed him masturbating while standing in her window—an accusation to which he confesses. But, like Homosexual and Minister, she, too, is sexually attracted to Boy, and asks him to join her in a "slow off-time seductive dance" that she performs while removing her skirt—revealing intimate

parts of her body in a manner that interrupts the exchange of black queer desires, much like Samantha in *The Experimental Leader* (20). In a quick turn of events, Minister, Old Woman, and a group of women who have joined them at the church decide to murder Boy, as they believe that he has misled them into thinking that he is the Son of Christ. Homosexual, however, refuses to participate in the murder. In fact, he attempts to intervene on Boy's behalf, but is quickly kicked and thrown out of the way by the mob of worshippers who are thirsty for Boy's death.

When the parishioners refuse to forgive Boy and persist in their attempts to murder him, he reveals that he is, indeed, the Son of Christ. Removing a silver sword from his bag, the boy "strikes his attackers down," killing all of the other parishioners, with the symbolic exception of Homosexual (29). Hoping to catch a bar before last call, Homosexual makes his way to 42nd Street, and as he struts off into the night, Baraka seems to suggest the possibility of a queer futurity—one that will perhaps include a future for Boy and Homosexual. Certainly Boy shows at least a modicum of interest in Homosexual throughout the play. But when a messenger descends from heaven and informs Boy that he has to return to heaven, Messenger makes a startling announcement: The "man's destroying the whole works tonight. With a grenade," suggesting an imminent and apocalyptic foreclosure of a queer futurity (30).

Thus, the here and now is key to the articulation of queer desire among the black male characters who are all obsessed with male "flesh" throughout the play. The minister, who cannot contain his sexual desires for Boy, is dead, and Homosexual, as the audience knows, will be dead shortly, making the exchange of queer desire that animated the black queer erotic present far more valuable in the face of death and total loss. What

becomes inescapably clear throughout Baraka's play is the import of flesh, particularly queer flesh in the here and now. As I argue in chapter one, flesh was key to narrating the violences to which black bodies were subjected during the modern Civil Rights Movement, especially when it bore traces of race-inspired torture. But flesh was also yearned for sexually, even as blacks attempted to suppress the sexual energies of black bodies by adorning them in attire that ruptured the positioning of black people in the body category of the Cartesian mind/body split.

Black activists set out, through strategic sartorial performances, in other words, to represent blacks as thinking subjects who were deserving of the rights, promises, and protections of U.S. citizenship. To be sure, people of African descent have long been denied the right to think and the possibility of being able to engage in higher level reasoning. But Baraka is less invested in the mind's ascendancy over the body. He, in other words, assigns value not merely to flesh, but to black queer flesh. "The pride of life is life," Homosexual argues. "And flesh must make its move. I am the sinister lover of love. The mysterious villain of thought. I love my mind, my asshole too." Throughout the play, love of flesh is constantly derided, and Homosexual comes to represent a "hot demon of flesh" (15). According to Minister: "The place of the soul is its virtue. It is man's music. His move from flesh" (12). But Baraka refuses to believe that this move is necessary, and reveals, in fact, the ways in which those who claim to despise flesh, actually embrace it, often in queer ways, as Minister's pursuit of boy makes clear. Thus, Homosexual's love of his mind and his "asshole" enacts a dual love that challenges racist desires to limit black people to embodiment and destabilizes logics of black respectability that deny the body and flesh in hopes of increasing the social worth of black minds. This

love of the “mind” and the “asshole” was certainly not breaking news or on the front page of a newspaper during the modern Civil Rights Movement. But it exists among those depths that must be explored as we engage in the necessary project of revealing more complicated understandings of the “classical” phase of the modern Civil Rights Movement.

Male-Male Sexual Assault and Civil Rights Activism

While I have been interested in the fugitive space that is the black queer erotic present and the productive possibilities it holds for expanding conceptions of black desire, it certainly is not my intention to miscalculate the ways in which violence is habitually cloaked in the garb of desire, especially in relation to race. In her aptly titled study, *The Erotic Life of Racism*, Sharon Holland argues that we “can’t have our erotic life—a desiring life—without involving ourselves in the messy terrain of racist practice” (Holland 9). “[R]acist practice,” Holland continues, “limits human desire by attempting to circumscribe its possible attachments” (Holland 43). I would add to these keen insights that in addition to circumscribing potential attachments, the racist pedagogy of desire likewise trains its pupil in a logic of racist desire that enables rather than forecloses. That is to say, racist practice not only delimits acceptable modes of attachment, but encourages a forging of erotic bonds that are steeped in violences of anti-black racism that attempt to safeguard the staying power of white supremacy. This has been especially true for people of African descent in the historically violent field of cross-racial sexual desire, in which black bodies are routinely imagined as ever poised to satiate (white) yearnings for black bodies. It is important to point out, however, that racist articulations of desire have not been exclusively heterosexual. Writers such as John

Oliver Killens and Julius Lester have quite brilliantly captured in African American letters white males' sexual desires for black male flesh, even as they perform aversion to these very bodies.¹³

In his 1967 novel *Sippi*, John Oliver Killens recounts a scene in which a mob of five white men are on a hunt for flesh, or what they call a "nice piece of tail." Initially, their desire manifests as heterosexual yearnings for female bodies. One member of the gang prefers "[s]omething about fifteen years old, a pure divine white virgin." "I'd like to bust that cherry," he asserts, "and feel the blood all over my old joy stick, I deswear fore God I would." Otis Millgate, on the other hand, desires "some good juicy black stuff." "Ain't nothing in the whole wide world," he claims, "like a nigger cherry. Fourteen years old and red hot as cayenne pepper. You can smell it a mile away. Great god A'mighty! Put ten long extra years on to your life" (*Sippi* 218). Interestingly, however, the mob's discussion of their desire for "tail" rather abruptly shifts registers, straying from the articulation of heterosexual desire to the expression of queer yearnings for the "nuts" of a "nigger."

Interestingly, this hope of locating black male genitals is linked to the suppression of black civil rights activism. "We oughta go out into the bottom," Sam Rawlins proposes, "and find us a nigger and cut his nuts out and hang em on a telegraph post and put up a sign saying, 'This Poor Black Ignant Bastard Insisted on his Civil Rights'" (218).

Attempting to defuse what could quickly become the preface to a lynching, Lionel

¹³ While it has become common to theorize lynching, often using psychoanalysis, as an expression of white male queer desires for black male penises, Killens and Lester use the novel to portray far more literal articulations of these desires that move beyond the realm of metaphor.

Sanford reminds the crew that that they “[a]in’t had no trouble outa [their] niggers here lately about that civil rights mess, so [they] better let well enough alone.” His recommendation, however, falls on deaf ears, and has even less hope of prevailing when the mob stumbles upon an ideal victim, Uncle Bish. The rambunctious, sexually-charged mob accosts the black Mississippian, forcing him into their car, where he is beaten, pistol-whipped, and driven to a remote clearing north of town.

In the clearing, the mob’s sexual energy does not dissipate, but is converted into a queer energy—one that takes the form of white male sexual desire for Uncle Bish’s black male body. Rawlins sets the queer affair in motion: “I hear tell all you black boys got great big black ones, boy.” “Yeah,” Millgate joins in. “Pull that black thing out, boy. I want to see is it true what they say about Dickie.” With multiple pistols aimed at his head, Uncle Bish eventually reveals his penis, shocking the mob as they stand gazing like eager spectators. “Goddamn,” Matthew Billings shouts. “He got something hung on him like a co-cola bottle! That black bastard got a mule dick” (*Sippi* 220). But this is not enough for Rawlins, who orders Uncle Bish to give the mob an “exhibition” by masturbating in their presence—a demand that Bish initially refuses: “I don’t play with it like that, sir. They say that’ll run you crazy.”

Bish’s refusal to engage in a queer performance of masturbation steeped in racist spectatorship fuels the mob’s anger. Their responses go forth into the space of the clearing as a chorus-like refrain that links white male queer desire to the containment of black civil rights activism: “Play with it, you civil rights bastard,” Millgate yells. In a similar tenor, Rawlins adds his own threat to the mix: “All right, Mister Civil Rights, you don’t give us a little ole exhibition, I’ll cut it off all the way up to your asshole!”

And, to conclude, one of them orders: “Fuck your fist, you black civil rights bastard.”

This final command, though, is an untagged moment in the narrative. In the refusal to establish a clear link to any one member of the mob, it seems to index a collective desire to transform the black male penis into the central prop in this queer scene of racial subjection—a performance staged with the hope of containing black civil rights activism.

Terrified, Uncle Bish continues to deny having any affiliation with “silver rights.” But, ultimately, he acquiesces and begins to masturbate in the presence of the mob. Despite pouring with sweat and “pumping faster,” Bish cannot muster up enough sexual energy to force an erection. This moment of black masculine failure, it seems, should have registered as a decisive victory for a group of racist white men who, in the wake of Emancipation, were ever plotting to subdue black male virility, whether through castration or the denial of social and political rights. The mob ultimately concludes that a naked white woman would be the perfect antidote for Bish’s impotence. But without a single white woman in sight, Millgate—who has hardly been silent about his desire for Bish’s body—willingly volunteers to engage in a startling performance of drag.

In this act, he supplies the raced and gendered body that seems so essential to the mob’s goal of coercing Bish’s penis to register (queer) desire. Killens’s description of Millgate’s performance is telling:

Millgate dropped his trousers and his drawers and tucked his penis out of sight between his legs and shuffled toward Uncle Bish, wiggling and twisting, imitating a flamboyant faggot. ‘Just make tend I’m a woman, black boy, and a pure white woman at that. That oughta make your nature rise . . . ‘That’s the best-looking pussy you’ve ever seen, ain’t it, nigger?’ He waltzed around Uncle Bish and did a little dance. Millgate came up very close to Uncle Bish and rubbed his pubic hairs against Uncle Bish’s manhood. ‘That oughta git it up quick enough, I reckon” (*Sippi* 222).

Killens frames Millgate's body as a symbol of queer desire. Performing an act of white male drag, his body crosses lines of gendered divisions in order to force Bish's penis into a state of erection—one that will index the black body's own openness to queer desire, while satiating the mob's queer yearnings for black flesh. By removing his penis from the visual field, Millgate contorts his body to simulate the corporeal geography of a female body. Similar to Harrison's and Baraka's works, gesture and touch are especially important to this enunciation of white male queer desire as well as the hoped for activation of queer desire in Bish's own body. The "shuffling" and wiggling," the "twisting" and "waltzing" are key, queered bodily vocabularies that Millgate utilizes to encode his body as female and, ultimately, to incite black male queer desire. When this strategy fails, Millgate turns to touch, rubbing his pubic hairs against Bish's penis, propositioning Bish with the "best-looking pussy" he had ever seen.

But the curtain soon closes on Millgate's comedic performance of white male drag. As he returns to his "normal" masculine self, the laughs disappear and Millgate assumes a hardened white supremacist posture, much like T.S. While Millgate turns away from the gesture and touch of femininity, his penis reenters the narrative, emerging from the hidden space between his legs. As a "man," however, Millgate's desire for Bish's black body is no less queer and even more violent. His performance quickly descends from an ostensibly comical act of banter and white male drag into a viscous act of sexual assault, in which he shoves his penis into Bish's mouth, forcing an act of queer fellatio. "You bet not bite down on it, else I'll send your black ass straight to hell!" (223). For Sanford, Millgate has crossed the line of socially acceptable sex and entered into the terrain of the queer. "I didn't mind what you did to the nigger," Sanford contends, "but

you sure did make like one of them funny fellers. I mean a man doing it with another man” (223). Millgate’s response is telling: “He ain’t no man. He’s a nigger. That’s the point I was making”—a point that Millgate follows up by wrestling and threatening to shoot Sanford for so badly bruising his white male ego.

Yet, is that the sum of Millgate’s performance in the clearing? That is: Is Millgate’s exclusive goal to prove that Bish, and by extension other black males, are not actually men? Where did Bish learn to slip into white queer masculinity so well? And if these acts are improvisational, has Millgate, previously, had similar queer Jam Sessions, and with whom? To be sure, the mob transforms the clearing into what Saidiya Hartman terms a “scene of subjection,” in which racial violence thrives under the aegis of fun and enjoyment.¹⁴ Like lynchings, this act of queer sexual violence assists the mob in doing what they do best: “to make a example outa one of [the blacks] . . . [so] they don’t get no more funny notions in they head” (219).

But lest we forget the mob’s original intention, “to find a piece of tail,” we cannot reduce this scene to a racist economy violence that elides the central place of queer sexual desire. When Bish stumbled upon the mob, he encountered a group of desiring white men who were on the prowl for flesh and sexual gratification. To be sure, their initial objects of desire were female bodies. But once Bish arrests their attention, what the crew ultimately latches onto was not female “tail,” but rather a black male penis. The mob’s sexual energies do not randomly vanish into thin air when they turn their attentions to Bish. Rather, these energies find their way into the clearing, an opening surrounded by

¹⁴ See Saidiya V Hartman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

bush and pine and cypress trees. The sexual imagery made available in this string of nature metaphors assumes heightened symbolic value in such a sexually tense narrative moment. Entering the symbolic opening that is the clearing, the mob does not find satisfaction that is heterosexual in nature. Yet, even in the absence of women, they experience a suite of “pleasures” that often subtends sexual acts: release (laughter), power and domination (over black male bodies), and colliding flesh (sexual assault, rape, and wrestling). In the clearing, then, white male desire is not wholly foreclosed, but is reformed into a sexual energy that is conspicuously queer.

The black male body functions as a landscape upon which the mob’s “monstrous intimacies”¹⁵ can be acted out, but the larger setting in which these scenes take place is also significant to the mob’s performance. More specifically, the mob’s release of queer energy is situated within a material space that, according to the narrator, is located well beyond the borders that separate the mob’s hometown from the space outside of its geographical limits, almost as if to suggest that the normative geography of everyday life is ill-equipped, or simply not willing, to accommodate queered white male desire, especially one that is so explicitly aimed at black male bodies. But borders are permeable and often serve as a point of connection as much as a site of division. Indeed, the history of white sexual violence in the New World reveals the frequency with which whites, in matters of sex, have been eager to ignore lines of racial separation, even as they

¹⁵ I borrow the term “monstrous intimacies” from Christina Sharpe, which she defines as a “series of repetitions of master narratives of violence and forced submission that are read or reinscribed as consent or affection: intimacies that involve shame and trauma and their transgenerational transmission” (4). See Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

vigorously advocate for racial segregation. Fusing irony and queer sexual imagery, Killens quite masterfully underscores this historical paradox at the heart of segregationist logics, and exposes the fluidity of sexual desire. The group initially kidnaps Bish in order to suppress the spirit of black civil rights activism. But they ironically enact the very integration of bodies to which they are so staunchly opposed, staging violent performances of queer desire that move across the color line in a fugitive choreography—one that is set in what we might call the *white queer erotic present*.

Killens is certainly not without company in pondering the interrelation between white male queer desire and anti-black racial violence that transpired against the backdrop of the modern Civil Rights Movement. In his brilliant but understudied contemporary novel *And All Our Wounds Forgiven* (1994), Julius Lester considers this association most explicitly in a scene that bears an uncanny resemblance to Killens's treatment of the topic in *'Sippi*. At the center of this scene is a black civil rights activist named Robert, who is better known as "Card." Like Uncle Bish, Robert is detained in a rural Mississippi, town. However, Robert has been taken into the custody of a sheriff, who appears to be far more good-natured than the mob in *'Sippi*. The sheriff claims, in fact, that if he were "colored . . . [he'd] be doing what [Robert] and the others [were] doing . . . We all know that segregation is a stupid system and it is not going to last the decade" (Lester 116). This moment of identification, though, is soon interrupted when the sheriff realizes that his own lived practices are hardly sympathetic to blacks' campaign for rights, equality, and justice. Quickly backpedalling, he sets out to justify his own complicity in anti-black racism. It would be pointless, he argues, to arrest whites

who perpetuate anti-black violence, as there was the least semblance of hope that any all-white jury would arrive at a conviction.

Despite the seemingly cordial interactions that Robert has with the Sheriff, the scene quickly grows more strained when the sheriff shifts the conversation to a topic that, initially, seems irrelevant. In particular, he informs Robert of his decision to release five prisoners earlier that day in order to prepare for a “party” he would host later that afternoon. “Don’t you worry none,” he explains to Robert. “I ain’t going to kill you. In fact, I’m not going to leave a mark on you. But I guarantee you when I get done, you’ll never forget me” (117). Shortly after this rather bizarre and seemingly random moment, two black men, Wiley and June Boy, suddenly seize Robert by the arms, carrying him to a jail cell, where they force him onto a blanket that is waiting on the jail cell floor. When the Sheriff arrives, he kneels close to Robert’s body, which, at this point, has been completely restrained by Wiley and June Boy.

With little warning, the Sheriff begins to unbuckle Robert’s belt, eventually pulling his pants and underwear down to his ankle. He takes Robert’s penis into his “soft hands,” stroking it “tenderly,” as Robert closes his eyes, and his penis begins to swell, becoming “stiff and rigid.” Soon after, the sheriff retrieves a knife from the pockets of his pants, using the sharp edge to “gently strok[e] the head of Robert’s penis.” Lester recounts this moment with a graphic detail that is worth quoting at length:

Robert opened his eyes and stared intently at the paint peeling from the ceiling, hoping that by doing so he could subvert his body but the excitement rose in him, and despite himself, his body twitched involuntarily as the sheriff continued stroking his penis with the knife blade, lightly, barely touching the skin so that the penis hungered for the next touch as they blade went from the head down to the trunk of the penis, farther and farther down until it came to the base and then slowly

back up, again and again and again until the orgasm came and it was more intense than any he had ever had with a woman and his will and determination not to scream his pleasure were not enough and the release was total and complete, his aspirated screams echoing off the stone walls of the jail cell, his body arching as the semen spurted out down his rigid penis like milky tears. (118)

To be sure, Lester crafts a scenario that has much in common with Uncle Bish's sexual assault. Both scenes stage an unrestrained articulation of queer white male desire that turns to black male bodies to deposit its queer energies. But there are also important and symbolic differences.

If Uncle Bish's penis refused to register any semblance of queer desire, remaining flaccid even when colliding with Millgate's pubic hairs, Robert's response is strikingly different. As the sheriff's "soft" white hands stroke his penis, Robert's flesh quickly grows erect, "hunger[ing] for the next touch." Here, as in Killens's novel, touch and gesture function as important narrative strategies and queer epistemologies. In *'Sippi*, gesture and touch are constitutive to Millgate's embodiment of white femininity in a drag performance that is as racist as it is queer. Although Bish fails to strike any pose that indexes pleasure derived from the mob's violent assault, Robert's body finds erotic pleasure in the Sheriff's similarly queer and sadomasochistic assault. But, as the narrator puts it, Robert struggles to "subvert his body," hoping to keep his queer dark energies ensconced within his bodily interiors. But, in a refusal to be disciplined, Robert "twitches involuntarily" while the sheriff strokes his penis with the blade of the knife. In this violent arena of sexual assault, interracial queer energies are nurtured and exchanged, ultimately generating erotic pleasures that crescendo into an orgasm that is "more intense than any [Robert] had ever had with a woman."

Sheriff Simpson invited Wiley to “lick [Robert] clean.” Replying with a ready “yassuh,” Wylie leans over and begins “licking and sucking on Robert’s penis, licking and sucking until another orgasm came” (118). While Robert begins to cry, his “penis didn’t give a shit about the stimulation,” and he laid there on the floor “limp, exhausted, sexually satisfied and intent on his own death” (119). Upon seeing Wiley and June Boy later that night, Robert, with no warning, hit Wylie over the head with a chair, and when he fell kicked him in the stomach “again and again and again, until Wylie puked everything inside him”(119). He then repeated the same attack on June Boy. Robert’s response to this violent queer sexual encounter is telling. Physically, he enjoyed every moment of it. But something within him leaves him, like T.S., with an overwhelming sense of shame—one so strong that he considered death. To be sure, the stigma of black male queer desire certainly contributed to this shame and desire for death. But the jouissance that Robert experiences in the queer erotic present, the here and now, doesn’t survive past that moment of pleasure, and certainly has dissipated by the night, when he stages his violent attack.

In “*Sippi and All Our Wounds Forgiven* Killens and Lester underscore the ways in which white racist violence, especially during the modern Civil Rights Movement, often served as a conduit for white male sexual desire. Rather than supply the familiar narrative of white male/black female rape, however, they craft scenes of male-male sexual assault that are no less violent, no less racist, and no less invested in utilizing sexual violence to perpetuate hierarchies of racial exclusion. Queer desire and racial violence, they show, are not easily disaggregated. The violent actions of the mob and the sheriff, in other words, are not simply, or even primarily, about containing black civil

rights activism, but are rooted equally in the desires of “heterosexual” white men who are eager to release queer white energies at the site of the black male body. By narrativizing these acts of violence, Lester and Killens excavate, or reveal, white queer energies, and through Robert and Wylie, Lester also reveals queer dark energies that are housed in the body of an ostensibly heterosexual black male civil rights activist—energies that thrive with a physical vitality as the sheriff satiates his own white queer erotic yearnings.

The works that I examine in this chapter shed light on the dangers of ignoring or minimizing the possibility for queer vitality during the temporal moment of the here and now. All of these writers imagine the importance of the black queer erotic present for black male leaders during the modern Civil Rights Movement. As their works make clear, the pressures of white supremacy and homophobia that have required rigid heterosexual constructions of the black masculine often decrease the chances that black queer desires will survive in order to realize a future. Their texts are key to expanding conceptions of black desire and revealing the centrality of black queer identities to the social, cultural, and political fields of the modern Civil Rights Movement, which are too often occluded or marginalized in discourses surrounding the movement. We have to continue to locate these traces of the black “quare” that have been written out of traditional histories and to search for other engagements with the flesh. Perhaps, contact with these buried historical materials will activate and reveal something of our own energies.

Coda:**Specters of Equality: The Civil Rights Movement in a Color Blind Society**

[B]lacks have achieved the surface changes they had first fought for . . . Beneath the surface, however, change does occur more slowly than we wish, is more difficult to assess, and is not immune to unanticipated consequences and dismaying reversals”

~Tom Dent, *Southern Journey: A Return to the Civil Rights Movement*

The modern Civil Rights Movement was a watershed era of social, cultural and political change that reformulated the premise from which “America” could be thought. The nation’s boundaries of racial exclusion were challenged; its fictions of black inferiority unveiled; and its stubborn commitments to white supremacy boldly and creatively disrupted. This study has argued for and furnished an expanded archive of black cultural products from which we can extract and produce different ways of knowing this life-altering campaign for rights, equality, and justice. To be sure, the modern Civil Rights Movement certainly does not suffer from any shortage of critical or popular interest, as the tide of recent scholarship and the erections of civil rights memorials, for example, suggest. This study, however, has invited a more careful consideration of the ways in which certain cultural forms and modes of representation routinely serve as the primary optics through which we know the movement’s social, cultural, and political fields. While television and photography have assumed a noticeable salience in this vein, *Staging Civil Rights* demonstrates how critically analyzing the intersections of African American literature and performance yields new conceptual and epistemological frameworks that productively reorient familiar conceptions of the movement.

Building upon the critical insights of African American literary criticism, performance studies, civil rights historiography, and criticism surrounding the movement's "cultural front," I argue that this archive of literature and performance elucidates the multifaceted nature of the movement's "short" or "classical" phase—a period that, of late, has been cavalierly dismissed and evacuated of its varied complexities. Historical scholarship on the "long" civil rights movement, in particular, has tended to frame the movement's "short" phase as a period marred by narrow ideologies, constrained by restricted social behaviors, and plagued by a set of delimited political practices. Yet, African American literature, and the live performances it inspired, reveal much more complicated stories that are neither reducible to, nor entirely divorced from, those "dominant" narratives that historians critique on the way to retreating from the movement's "classical" phase. In short, analyzing literature and performance allows us to return to this period with eyes and ears that are calibrated to see, to hear, and ultimately to know the modern Civil Rights Movement in different and innovative ways.

More specifically, this study brings together a cadre of black writers and performers whose symbiotic fusion of literature and performance challenged discursive conceptions of race, gender, sexuality, and nation that circulated in U.S. public discourse and international media. More still, these artists critiqued and strategically recalibrated the goals and rubrics of U.S. modernity. The project of modern progress, they suggest, must necessarily exceed scientific and technological advancement, and take into account innovations that were made—or not—on the terrain of rights, equality, and justice, particularly for people of African descent. In this way, the work of Lorraine Hansberry,

Alice Childress, James Baldwin, Douglas Turner Ward, the Free Southern Theater, Langston Hughes, Gil Scott-Heron, the Broadside Poets, Margaret Walker, Paul Carter Harrison, and Amiri Baraka intervenes in a dual, interlinked crisis of representation: one of discursive representations of race and the other of black political representation—both of which labor mutually to constrain the ontological, social, and political possibilities of black being.

By crafting what I call acts of *black performative revealing*, this cadre of black writers and performers worked innovatively at the nexus of African American literature and performance to improve black people's social and political realities. Like marches, sit-ins, and other embodied acts of political dissent, their art boldly contested uneven distributions of power and struggled to “reveal” more modern subjects as well as a more modern U.S. nation-state. It was their hope, though, that the United States could move toward and embrace a brand of modern progress that would enable blacks to enjoy the rights, the privileges, and the protections of full U.S. citizenship—at a rate as lightning quick as the nation's willing investments in scientific and technological progress.

This story of reimagining the U.S. nation-state, indeed of bringing “America” into being, lives on in contemporary history and memory with a forceful vitality—from intellectual production to corporate advertisements that (re)turn to the movement during black history month to quotidian memories of everyday people that are kindled at sites and scenes that served as a stage for modern civil rights activism. But even now, the times demand that we continue to diversify the archive that structures and informs our conceptions of the movement. As several scholars have pointed out, the contemporary moment is plagued by daunting and tragic reversals and contemporary forms of

oppression that threaten to reverse the gains of the modern civil rights movement.¹ The legacy of the movement itself, in fact, has become fodder for certain political and ideological camps who are intent upon returning the nation-state to a moment in which rights, equality, and justice for people of African descent were more delimited and firmly contained. In this contemporary era of “color-blindness,” Dr. King’s hope that one day his children would be judged by the “content of their character” and not the “color of their skin” has been mobilized to sustain precisely those practices of inequality that King scarified his life to combat. Quite ironically, as the nation is entering an “ostensibly” post-racial moment, there has been a proliferation of legal and extra-legal measures that negatively and disproportionately affect people of African descent.

Where the legacy of the movement has not been marshaled to roll back rights, it has often been mobilized to celebrate the innate “good” of the U.S. nation-state. Indeed, recent celebrations surrounding the fiftieth anniversaries of major civil rights events and activist have served as platforms for these occasions of national self-congratulation. On February 27, 2013, for example, a suite of state dignitaries, from President Barack Obama to junior senators, assembled in the U.S. Capitol for the dedication ceremony of a Rosa Parks statue, which would remain in the chambers of the nation’s highest legislative halls. The statue, as House Speaker John Boehner suggests, would be the first of an African American woman to be placed in the capital. “Every now and then,” Boehner

¹ See, for example, John Jackson, Jr., *Racial Paranoia: The Unintended Consequences of Political Correctness* (NY: Basic, 2008); Imani Perry, *More Beautiful and More Terrible: The Embrace and Transcendence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (NY: New York University Press, 2011); and Sharon P. Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (NC: Duke University Press 2012).

contends with seemingly nervous pauses, “we have got to step back and say to ourselves: what a country. This is one of those moments. Because yes, all men and women are created equal, but as we’ll hear during this ceremony, some grow to be larger than life, and to be honored as such.”²

Later in the program, Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell echoed these sentiments, but layered on even more rhetoric of U.S. greatness and promises of U.S. individualism. I quote McConnell at length:

Rosa Parks may not have led us to victory against the British. She didn’t give a single speech in the Senate or the house. Or blast off into space. Or point the way West in the western wilderness. Yet, with quiet courage, and unshakeable resolve, she did something no less important on a cold, Alabama evening in 1955. She helped unite the spirit of America, which the founders so perfectly and courageously expressed in the opening words of the Declaration of Independence. With a form of government they so brilliantly outlined in our constitution . . . We have had the humility as a nation to recognize past mistakes, and we’ve had the strength to confront those mistakes, but it has always required people like Rosa Parks to help us get there. Because of the changes she helped set in motion, entire generations of Americans have been able to grow up in a nation where segregated buses only exist in museums, where children of every race are free to fulfill their God-given potential . . . and where this simple carpenter’s daughter from Tuskegee is honored as a national hero. What a story. What a legacy. What a country.³

Interestingly, both Boehner and McConnell weave into their comments the same pat on the back for the U.S. nation-state: “What a country!” But their celebratory fantasies grossly overestimate the nation’s commitments to right, equality, and justice, and suggest that with hard work, barriers can be overcome within the frameworks of U.S. democracy.

² Rosa Parks Statue Dedication Ceremony. Online Video Clip. *C-SPAN*. C-SPAN, 27 Feb. 2013. Web. 11 November 2013.

³ *Ibid.*

Parks, indeed, emerges as a carpenter's daughter-cum national hero, whose relation to Christ, a carpenter's son, is most likely not without intent in this rhetorical flourish. Continuing to place the United States on the moral high ground, McConnell argues that the nation has been "humble" and "strong" enough to "recognize" and "confront" the "mistakes" of the past. More still, he suggests, segregated buses are relics of the past, and in our contemporary moment, there is nothing that prevents "Americans" from realizing their "God-given potential." The society that McConnell imagines is a commendable one, but one that hardly such a given experiential reality for people of African descent.

Contemporary African American literature and performance continue to unsettle these triumphalist narratives, exposing contradictions and shortcomings and alternative realities that are often obscured by the "dominant narratives." In 1991, for example, Tom Dent, who became a key player in the Free Southern Theater after the group relocated to New Orleans, completed a tour of the U.S. South, assessing the changes that had unfolded in the wake of the modern Civil Rights Movement. "On one hand," Dent concludes, "blacks have achieved the surface changes they had first fought for. Where once were FOR WHITES ONLY signs, explicit or implicit, now such racial proscriptions are only a memory, though a vivid one . . . Beneath the surface, however, change does occur more slowly than we wish, is more difficult to assess, and is not immune to unanticipated consequences and dismaying reversals" (*Southern Journey* 75-76). Indeed, this reality is at the core of Pearl Cleage's 1997 play, *Bourbon at the Border*, which was commissioned by The Alliance Theatre Company in Atlanta, Georgia, where it premiered.

Cleage's play pivots around the lives of May and Charles Thompson—both of whom traveled, as college students, to participate in the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project, also known as Freedom Summer. 1995 finds May awaiting Charles's return from a psychiatric hospital, where he has been suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Shortly before Charles returns home, May's friends ask why Charles has been in the hospital. Her response is telling: "He got hurt in Mississippi a long time ago . . . Freedom Summer" (Cleage 16). The audience soon learns that Charles's PTSD resulted from a traumatic encounter in which Mississippi police officers forced him to beat May with a belt, before they viciously gang raped her as her future husband was forced to watch. Ultimately, Charles goes on a mass murder spree, killing whites throughout Detroit as a means of retribution for the violences that he and May had endured while participating in Freedom Summer.

Bourbon at the Border reveals the ways in which the traumas of the modern Civil Rights Movement continue to shape the lives of those who put mind and body on the line to reshape the landscape of U.S. nation-state. These memories and histories, Cleage suggests, must be remembered and articulated, if we are to complicate the selective triumphalist narratives that fill what McConnell calls the "halls of national memory." More still, the play signals the ways in which racial inequality continues to pervade the landscape of contemporary life. It beckons audiences to think seriously about the prison-like conditions of Charles's psychiatric treatment; to take seriously the apartment in which the Thompson's live, which closely resembles that of the Younger's in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*; to contemplate what it means that this apartment looks out upon the Ambassador Bridge, which connects Detroit to Canada—a place that has

long served as a symbol of freedom and escape from anti-black violence in the U.S. nation-state. Cleage's play and other contemporary works—such as Katori Hall's *The Mountaintop*, which opened on Broadway in 2011—continue to take up Jacqueline Hall's challenge to “make civil rights harder.” Indeed, these texts and performances, much like those that were produced during the movement, provide new ways of seeing, new ways of hearing, and new ways of knowing a movement that is so well studied, a movement that is so well remembered, and, ultimately, a movement about which we believe we know so much.

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