

‘Thoughts that Burn but Cannot be Spoken’:  
Re-Imagining the Political within Histories of Feminist Activism

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## Abstract

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*‘Thoughts that Burn but Cannot be Spoken’: Re-Imagining the Political within Histories of Feminist Activism* is an interdisciplinary cultural study of feminist activism, from 1840 to the present moment, that focuses on exploring how the figure of the feminist activist and her corresponding activist practices are differently imagined in discrete historical moments. Parallel to the history of the 501 (c) 3 non-profit corporation, I move across the disciplines to track how the institutionalization of various forms of activism has differently (re)produced certain kinds of activist subjects whose social imaginaries inform the limitations and possibilities of social movements strategies for social transformation. Rather than constructing a social history of non-profit activism or a sociological study on particular feminist NGOs, my project is interested in tracing how the feminist activist *subject* is differently imagined in a variety of cultural and institutional domains, ranging from non-profits themselves and academic disciplines, to literary fictions produced in time with social movement activism. More specifically, this project is intent on exploring differing activist sensibilities and “alternative” forms of agency particular to black feminist political traditions in and against the current political context dominated by NGO and non-profit activism.

In order to expand contemporary political imaginations of anti-racist feminist activism, I strive towards three larger and related ambitions. First, this project resituates the current debates on NGOization and the Non-Profit Industrial Complex (NPIC) within a longer, critical cultural study of anti-racist feminist activism that interrupts the temptation to ahistorically or transhistorically universalize the present regime of NGOization as always the case. In this way, I consider how the NGO and non-profit have produced power accommodating activist subjects to different ends, in order to more broadly consider how institutions in civil society are historically and unevenly imbricated in furthering the expansion of state power. Second, my work to explore now “alternative” feminist activist subjects’ imaginaries correlates with different theorizations of the relationship between citizens, the state and (global) civil society. In liberal and neoliberal traditions, civil society—and institutions in civil society like the non-profit—are presumed to inhabit a sphere separate from state and economic interests. Turning away from such theories, I follow Antonio Gramsci’s work to investigate how institutions in civil society are *subject making* and world shaping. In a moment where non-profits and NGOs are uncritically celebrated across the disciplines as the most logical mode of social change, and are figured as the preeminent form of political agency for responding to state violence, globalization processes, and inequality at the local, national, and international level, this project considers the distinct ways these institutions are historically (though differently) bound up in what Gramsci calls the “educative function of the state.” Finally, while I heavily rely on the work of feminist social scientists and social movement histories to think critically about NGOization and corresponding transformations in state power, this dissertation centers on literary production as an alternative site for thinking critically and historically about feminist activism and moreover, for (re)imagining new ways of *being* political. Reading historically, across disciplinary formations and “against the grain,” I

position the literary narratives of social movements as invaluable to emerging histories of feminist activism that, under NGOization, are either disappeared, or in some cases even memorialized in the service of legitimizing the dominant political logics of the present.

For those in struggle against the many iterations of racial, gender, sexual, economic and national violence, who dare to imagine political dreams that, at times, are painful and even unthinkable.

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Finally, I wish to acknowledge the superior intellect, insight, creativity, and humor of Professor Eva Cherniavsky. Without your support, Eva, I would not have been able to survive graduate school. I cannot thank you enough for challenging, inspiring and encouraging me to create a project that begins and ends before and beyond my graduate studies, and that connects the essential questions I (still) struggle with in the productive tensions that lie between the discourses of “academic” versus “activist,” “theory” versus “practice,” and the “university” versus the “community.” You model pedagogical, research, writing, and social practices that I feel so fortunate to have witnessed, experienced and connected with over the last eight years. I will never be able to thank you enough and I am sure my gratitude will only expand in my post-graduate studies world.

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## Prologue

### **‘Thoughts that Burn but Cannot be Spoken’: Re-Imagining the Political within Histories of Feminist Activism**

I begin *‘Thoughts that Burn but Cannot be Spoken’: Re-Imagining the Political within Histories of Feminist Activism* by reflecting on how I was organized to know the political in my own non-profit activism in order to surface the tensions, questions, problems and passions that continue to animate my work today, and remain at the very heart of this dissertation. For, in most of the writing that follows, it is the significant moments in my life as an “activist” that to varying degrees frames, or at least haunts the approaches, arguments and literature of the individual chapters. For instance, my own socialization as an anti-racist white “activist” in the anti-fascist movement is, in part, what contributes to both the limitations of my close readings of “alternative” black feminist imaginations of activism, and to the continuation of my genuine devotion towards the central stakes of this project. My contribution to the existing feminist scholarship on the NGOization of social movements looks critically at non-profits and NGOs as activist subject-making institutions that shape the landscape of how activist formations in different historical moments (myself included) imagine the horizon of social transformation—the strategies and sensibilities of what counts as political labor in their specific historical moment. I have always known that we have to have alternatives to the non-profit form and I have experimented with multiple modalities of organizing over the past 15 years, yet I did not realize (and perhaps still do quite not understand) the wide, inescapable swath that the regime of NGOization casts not only across the so-called “3<sup>rd</sup> Sector,” but also across institutions such as universities (and the many different forms of disciplined knowledge produced on the political), corporations, government structures, “radical” organizing projects of all kinds, and

more obviously, philanthropic foundations, just to name a few. For instance, I thought I could be outside of NGOization if I started a group with a different legal form. I also thought I could be outside if I focused on cultural organizing instead of “capacity building” and “outcomes.” Like so many others, I thought not working for a non-profit meant I could inhabit a revolutionary place outside of the arms of NGOization and state power, just like the magic of global civil society taught me, passed down through various “activist” and “academic” discourses, and that if I had the right theory, the right text, and the right organizing strategy I am somehow not implicated. But I have come to understand that very impulse to be part of NGOization. Though I argue that today the NGO marks the horizon of how dominant feminist social movements imagine social change, NGOization and the Non-Profit Industrial Complex is ubiquitous; it is not just dominant, elite Western feminists who are blinded or have false consciousness, where I, as the critic, can step outside of my own social formation and point out all of their problems. It is challenging, across the board, to even think of other ways of being political in the contemporary moment, and I am not free of these challenges in my work here.

I say this not to discount or invisibilize the many creative anti-racist, anti-imperial feminist struggles happening across the globe—I am inspired by these labors. I only want to suggest the difficulty of imagining alternatives to the NGO today for it is not just the NGO legal form, but all of the discourses, logics and rationalities that accompany it. I find the challenge of this work connects deeply with the current reign of neoliberal political theory that assumes a necessary separation between “the state,” “the economy,” and “global civil society.” It is also linked to how different disciplines imagine and historicize social movement struggles, and the corresponding presentism (that appears neutral or transhistorical) embedded in such forms of knowledge production. It is a problem of common-sense, of political desires being cast onto

political histories and political futures and, importantly, it registers at the level of the body too. I can think of countless moments where, even armed with the best critique and full of creative inspiration and good intentions, the group meeting to talk politics hits a wall: a circuit misfires in the brain, bodies shift sometimes with shame, sometimes with excitement, and the conversation cannot help but circle within the seemingly neutral assumptions of what constitutes political work, and who is properly equipped to be a political actor. This work is painful and unsettling. It hurts sometimes and sometimes it feels great because sometimes too, the administrative tasks particular to NGOization can be rewarding, even pleasurable—it feels like you are really getting something accomplished. There is empirical evidence of your activist labors and you tell yourself you’ve really done something because you can check a task off “the list of things to do” to meet your yearly projections. But I believe that even within the constraints of the present, there are so many other possibilities for *being political* and that it is critical to carve out the much needed space to grow new imaginations of activism in the present moment. There has to be other ways of knowing, being, doing and feeling activism. In fact, part of what I find to be rewarding about this dissertation, part of what keeps the wheels churning, the list growing on my wall of possible collaborations, and the infinite number of texts to teach me to un-know my own political present, is the seemingly endless archive of challenging and provocative alternatives to the NGO and non-profit, housed in the cultural production of feminist social movements.

More specifically, this dissertation is inspired by the “alternatives” to NGOization in the literary narratives of 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century black feminist political traditions. Beyond the dissertation, while I do not think this project is limited to exploring U.S. black feminist activist subject formations per se, the histories and political sensibilities tracked here are absolutely, boundlessly invaluable to the fundamental questions and stakes of this work. Furthermore, I find

these particular political traditions offer critical insight into thinking historically about feminist activism and feminist activist subjectivity more generally. My chapters emphasize how these histories differently insist on the importance of the body for activism; they distinctly forefront cultural production as central to activism; and they are histories that do not necessarily assume a distinct 3<sup>rd</sup> sector or a singular, rational or revolutionary political actor. The black feminist political traditions in this project insist on a theoretical vantage that forefronts race, gender, sexuality, class and national violence as knowledge that is integral to mapping the political field and to forming “coalitions” and other ways of being political, and they are histories that do not necessarily presume institutionalization as the end goal of social movement struggles. Not surprisingly, these political imaginaries and histories of activism have been, at least partially, written out of dominant feminist struggles of today, or sometimes instead, remembered and/or memorialized in the service of legitimizing NGOization. Yet, even as I struggle within my own political present in the readings that frame each chapter, I find the archive of this dissertation, and the opportunity to develop alternative activist resources, to be continually insightful and motivating. Through the combined efforts of this project, my teaching, cultural organizing and community building, I hope to cultivate a similar feeling of critical, insatiable, inspiration that is also contagious.

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### **Reflections on NGOization from within the Non-Profit Form**

In the mid 1990’s, during my first year at Western Washington University, two students of color were jumped by Nazi skinheads a few blocks off of campus. Half of the primarily academic community wanted to ignore the problem and, as they rationalized, did not want to give the white nationalists power by acknowledging their violence and terror. A smaller group

insisted that this kind of activity was intentional, strategic and part of a larger social movement intent on securing the Northwest as a white homeland, what was declared in the 1980's as the "Northwest Imperative," and that a visible, institutionalized opposition was urgently needed. In response the Whatcom Human Rights Task Force (WHRTF) formed, and though I did not particularly connect with the older generations tactics and visual logics—slogans like "Joining Hands Against Hate" with an image of multi-colored hands held in a circle—I did appreciate the analysis they provided that I had not encountered in my classes and other social justice projects. These people were talking about white nationalism as an "opposition social movement," whereas "social movements" to me had always only signaled a progressive, lefty or radical phenomenon. They also, in an all too familiar way, framed all social movement struggles as necessarily outside of the arms of the State. Dr. Vernon Damani Johnson, a professor in the Political Science department and one of the founding members of the WHRTF, mentored me in the classroom and through many hours of volunteering as the WHRTF institutionalized as a 501 © 3 non-profit corporation. Though a former Black Panther who I'm sure continues to experience ongoing isolation and tokenization in the very white town of Bellingham, WA, "Doc. J" as he likes to be called, is a grassroots activist and political scientist who (oddly enough) invests everything in the alluring promises of "civil society," where the non-profit is positioned as the best suited, neutral institutional vehicle by which social movements can leverage their grievances against the State—a State that presumably will listen and even act accordingly. At the same time, within his particular context, I consider Doc. J to be radical, one of the only people consistently speaking out against white nationalist attacks in the Whatcom County community, and as also one of the few black faculty members at WWU, someone who is *always* organizing, whether he wants to or not. Though Doc. J urged me not to go into the humanities (insisting on an inherent relationship

between the social sciences and social justice), he took me into his home, and is to this day a dear friend and ally.

My relationship with Doc. J and my work as a volunteer for the WHRTF is how, in 2000, I got a job as one of two new Ford Foundation funded interns for the Northwest Coalition for Human Dignity (NWCHD)—a 6-state research and organizing coalition of over 120 human rights taskforces (mostly non-profits) in the rural and suburban regions of the Northwest states. The Ford Foundation granted NWCHD a substantial year-long funding stream that allowed the newly formed institution to expand its staff, base, national and international anti-fascist research and organizing, and to support the merger between two long time human rights organizations with very different organizational cultures: The Northwest Coalition Against Malicious Harassment and the Coalition for Human Dignity. Northwest Coalition Against Malicious Harassment’s strategy was to start up, organize, sustain, and direct non-profits across the rural and suburban Northwest as an institutional opposition to white nationalist organizing, and as alternatives to the kinds of “community” envisioned by neo-Nazi enclaves popping up all over the region. The Coalition for Human Dignity specialized in creative opposition research, meaning researchers most often attended white nationalist events, and even joined groups “undercover” to garner information on attendants, strategy, and other sorts of covert relationships; researchers, therefore, were most often white men. Research was romanticized as the most dangerous and valuable commitment that one could make to the anti-fascist movement. But organizing was also dangerous because these people, the majority of whom were middle-aged rural white women,<sup>1</sup> were speaking out against groups like the Aryan Nations, who literally lived next door in small towns where no one has the privilege of anonymity. In fact, I have always wanted to write a history of anti-fascism in the Northwest, one that visibilizes it as

primarily a rural women's history—a history that is always eclipsed by the vanguard of researchers who obviously took extreme risks but whose activism, at least in my opinion, is overvalued in a social movement that loves to understand itself as romantically dangerous. Though research was always positioned as more important and more dangerous within the movement, without the network of grassroots organizations that moved local communities on the ground against white nationalism, the research could only go so far—or so the theory went that positioned the merger as an institutional match made in heaven. I inherited the political sensibilities of these combined institutions.

During my time at the NWCHD, because I am white I conducted opposition research on numerous occasions—some staff members even joked that throwing a woman into the neo-Nazi meeting might be a way to “get more out of them.” Mostly I think my co-workers were trying to scare me, or better, toughen me up; it was a hazing sort of thing. It worked. I was scared and I did feel tough. Eventually I also took charge of organizing and maintaining the 120 some odd non-profits and community groups scattered across the Northwest, organizing and facilitating curriculum, hosting speaking and film tours, responding to hate crimes, and moving (rights based) issues like reproductive rights, immigrant rights, gay rights and tribal sovereignty within a pretty conservative constituency. I also became more and more interested in cultural organizing and the relationship between cultural production and social movement struggles, more specifically how white nationalists were significantly recruiting new young members through the growing white power music industry. I began thinking more about how cultural organizing, regardless of the social movement, was a powerful strategy for shaping, contesting and imagining anti-racist *and* white nationalist political landscapes, and I started to focus on

collaborating with music and art communities, which I discuss further in Chapter One and Chapter Three.

The 1999 merger between these two long time human rights organizations was based on an imagination of “coalition” particular to NGOization. The Board of Directors was organized by “representing” different racial groups or political interests: a spot for labor, a place for education, a seat representing Asian-Americans, Jews, African-Americans, and so on. We often joked publicly (and as a way to acquire support) that “no one could agree about anything,” except that taking a stand against the white nationalist movement was essential to decreasing violence against people of color, queer folks, Jewish communities and women, and for furthering human and civil rights in the greater Northwest. For my purposes here though, this is especially interestingly because it was the institutional structure itself that held together members (and difference) who might otherwise be on opposite sides of any given political issue; the institutional structure was the coalition, and preserving or expanding institutional structures is, in this model, considered to be coalition building. Unlike the political imaginaries of “coalition” that, to differing degrees, frame the focus of the chapters that follow, at NWCHD coalition meant establishing institutional relationships: sharing resources, constituencies, and “turf” in order to have a larger presence that theoretically leads to the institutional stability that funders so often desire, even demand. Yet this coalitional approach ended up having dire consequences within our external organizing and research priorities and within the internal power dynamics between staff and board, and ultimately led to the demise of the only organization on the West Coast that researches and organizes against white nationalism.<sup>2</sup> The racism, sexism, transphobia and homophobia foundational to the hostile inter-staff dynamics and board and staff relations was prohibited to speak of because we were all supposed to make sacrifices for the greater movement

and the “real enemy” was “outside.” No one would dare, for example, call out the Executive Director or the MacArthur “Genius” Award recipient “godfather of anti-fascism” for their sexism and racism in hiring practices, work distribution or personal relations. There is a code of silence within many activist communities that disallows naming the violence, intimate and institutional, that (unavoidably) circulates within social movement struggles. This is also why I always bristle (or shout) when I hear terms like “safe space,” because it is a political imagination that assumes it is possible to check complex, shifting power dynamics at the door, within the given context.

Of course our internal power dynamics absolutely spilled over onto how the program and research was or was not prioritized, and framed our relationships with different constituencies.<sup>3</sup> There was no sense of “how we do the work, is the work,” a sentiment that I look at especially in my third chapter through Alice Walker and Bernice Johnson Reagon’s theorization of the inescapability of power as *always* circulating within social movement struggles. There was no encouragement to question the relationship between the form of the social movement we were participating in and the power we were contesting—something I focus on in great depth throughout the dissertation. There was no organizational culture that could even begin to think through the power dynamics at play even within the staff alone, and once the Ford Foundation ( I look more closely at this particular foundation in Chapter One) withdrew its funding after 9/11 because the “terrorist” was no longer an internal figure, eventually every single one of us either had a “break down” of some sort or left in some other heartbreaking way, knowing that leaving meant we were considered traitors by the real activists who stayed. The message was loud and clear: if you leave this institution you are not truly committed to the work.

I still struggle with questions of commitment and accusations of betrayal—with how I was socialized to believe that a white ally truly committed to anti-racism would stay regardless

of the conditions, regardless of violence. I understood white allyship as something sacrificial, that because my existence literally and historically means the premature death of others, I should never speak up or complain about the conditions within the anti-fascist movement. This martyr-activist-sensibility in my organizational culture was ubiquitous and I understood my work and my body as a sacrifice (I know this sounds ridiculous, it is ridiculous) for the movement in a way that still manages to uncritically over-privilege white, straight, male bodies. All of this for institutional preservation. This is one of the reasons why I am so invested in imagining new models of anti-racist allyship and new (and old) ways of thinking about coalition, forms that take into account the multiple and changing fields of power that differently frame every way of being political (being an ally, being anti-racist), depending on the context. Forms of coalition that, perhaps, are dangerous and painful but not romantic, or martyring—not the pure revolutionary activist subject positioned on the outside of the political field. This is also why, in part, I am particularly interested in and challenged by the figure of the “traitorous activist” that I spend time with in my final chapter. In Octavia Butler’s work, because she already presumes the political to be compromised and contaminated and therefore, disallows an outside vantage, the activist is always already embedded in the structures of power particular to her political field. I am captivated by the political potential of betrayal and complicity, for within Butler’s political imaginary, it is never possible to inhabit a purely revolutionary outside position, untouched by violence, and free from the constraints of the particular social formation. Yet there is always hope, there is always activism, however “alien” and disparaging it may seem to readers (like me), but it is certainly *never* a way out.

The “body” and to use Octavia Butler’s term, “body-knowledge,” is also a central piece of this dissertation and connects to the concerns I outline above. Body-knowledge situates the

body as an index of how differing constellations of power come together within a given political terrain, where the body and bodily feelings are central to not only mapping complex and sometimes unknowable (alien) structures of power, but also to imagining forms of activism specific to the context at hand. Body-knowledge helps locate the political possibilities of a particular context and the body's communication (affect) is, in itself, a form of activism. Butler says that body-knowledge is not a solution per se, for it is always possible to both "de-hierarchize" and "re-hierarchize" the body, but that there is potential in the political practice of "re-imagining and re-assembling it within an ethics of survival." While at first I attempted to avoid questions of the body and affect, I kept coming back to it in my readings of Butler, Hopkins, Reagon and Walker because for one, the body as a communicator, as a register, as part of political labor, is in many ways depoliticized and disarticulated from "real activism" under NGOization. In my non-profit work I was taught a lot about the body. It was something to master and ignore and at the same time hurting the body physically was a sign of commitment. You aren't really a committed anti-fascist unless you, at the very least, have shaky hands, migraines, insomnia, and other kinds of physical battle scars. Betraying the logics of the institution in most any way can also feel like betraying your best friend or someone you love deeply, it hurts physically. Betraying the institution also feels like if you leave for a three day weekend, everything will fall apart—like you are that important, the issue at hand is so dire (racism won't be there tomorrow?) that everything rides on your sloped shoulders, every second of every day. Thus, taking care of your physical and mental health within the Non-Profit Industrial Complex, even using the excellent vacation package that is part of the rationalization of your incredibly low pay, is considered self-indulgent and is evidence that you are not truly committed to the work, you are weak; it is shameful. Likewise, "giving your all" rewards you with a feeling of

importance, that you are un-replaceable and that your work matters. Or, on the other end of things, today you can access the neo-liberal, individualized, depoliticized dominant self-help discourses circulating everywhere to think about the body. But these popular discourses inaugurate yet another (related) set of problems that again, always reaffirms the white bodied individual who succeeds because she mentally and physically transcends her circumstances. These models of self-care are disarticulated from the relays of power shaping social movement landscapes, and therefore imagine self-care as something you do “outside” of activism, rather than as an integral part of activist work.

It became almost impossible for me to avoid the body in this dissertation and impossible for me to ignore my own body-knowledge as I continue to study and write. In fact, when I first started focusing on the feminist social science work on Transnational Feminist Networks (Chapter One) for Priti Ramamurthy’s “Feminist International Political Economy” course, I mentioned in a presentation that the way dominant feminist social scientists figure, calculate, and map feminist activism makes me feel sick. She told me to remember that feeling because the feeling of sickness was important to this project. Eva Cherniavsky has also, over the years, continued to push me to think more about the differing relationships between affect and activism in my individual chapters and admittedly, this is an ongoing problem that I have not fully worked out. I suspect it will be a problem I continue to (gladly) struggle with beyond the dissertation. Nevertheless, through the body-knowledge metaphors of “agitation,” the pain of “coalescing” and the pleasure of “enfolding” as different bodily ways of being political, the literary texts in this dissertation challenge the way I was socialized to know what counts as activism, and I expect they will continue to be generative in future endeavors.

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## **Reflections on NGOization from within the University**

I came to graduate school after being chewed up and spit out by a non-profit I would have done almost anything for; it was my primary relationship. I felt betrayed, heartbroken, angry, and guilty—to this day, the most painful and lengthy break-up of my life. Soon after I left NWCHD, I was offered organizing positions in the labor movement and in movements against domestic and sexual violence, but when the time came for me to accept the job offers, I could not. Instead I felt panic rising in my chest and nausea churning in my stomach as a headache rose from the knots of my neck, spread over the dome of my head and settled itself into my eye sockets. Executive directors made it clear that they did not appreciate me turning down these job offers, that I'd wasted their time. I remember one labor organizer in particular told me in a shaky rage that I was selfish and would regret my decision for the rest of my life. I told myself that graduate school was a compromise, in a way. If I could not physically return to the non-profit sector, and to my ex-non-profit in particular, at least I could continue its' mission, and I could carry out my commitment to anti-racist, feminist cultural organizing in a different capacity. Plus I was always interested in teaching and I knew that white nationalists were increasingly targeting college campuses, so maybe I could start some kind of project on campus that would demonstrate my commitment to the anti-fascist movement. I came to the English Department with a utilitarian understanding of cultural production and teaching—that literature was an organizing tool and that I was still an organizer, only within the space of the classroom. Granted, my initial approach to cultural production and pedagogy has (thankfully) changed, or at the very least, is far more complicated today. I do think, however, that my attempts to recreate a certain imagination of political labor within the graduate program speaks to, in part, some of the struggles I had (and continue to have) in this dissertation, and to the ways I attempted to remedy

the tensions that I originally found to be debilitating: the polarization between what counts as “activist” versus “academic” knowledge production, and the spatialization of the “university” versus the “community.”

In graduate school I was surprised and alienated by my cohort that had little to no experience or interest in anti-racist organizing, and while I never ever would have called myself an “activist” during class introductions, within this context it was the identity that was imposed on me, and it was also the identity I often took up and felt I even had to defend at times. I felt that some of the graduate student-led theoretical conversations about “the political” and social movements were flippant, too abstract, and patronizing. I’m certain now I was overly defensive, but it bothered me that many of my peers uncritically and unsympathetically devalued the knowledge produced by various social movement struggles—they were too dismissive and even righteous at times. I was also bothered by the other contingent of graduate students that romanticized and even worshipped anything related to the “real work” of social movements. It didn’t help that I was persistently haunted by the voice of my former mentor from NWCHD: “Why study a social movement when you can join one?” A few of my friends that supported my studies to this day are confused as to why I am in English and not Social Work or Sociology. But most of my former colleagues did not understand what I was doing in graduate school whatsoever when there was so much of the “real” work to be done, and that, perhaps rightly, I was cashing in on my white privilege to take a break from the so called “real work” of activism. Looking back, it is fascinating that within these responses there are some stark assumptions about the value of critical thinking for activism. Critique, at least in this context, appears to be disconnected from present day dominant notions of what constitutes proper feminist activism. And the university, on either side of the “academic” or “activist” debate, is interestingly

positioned as neutral or outside of social movement struggles, and as also outside of state projects and transformations in global political economy.

I fumbled to figure out my place, to locate where my efforts were most effective and most in line with the social movement I was beholden to, but in a way that also genuinely engaged my graduate studies. I initially responded to the tension between the “academic” or “activist” binary through attempting to position myself as a kind of bridge person—perhaps, and this now seems so egotistical, I would be best suited as acting as a kind of translator across this differing political sites, a person that can put people in conversation that might not necessarily interact outside of their own particular domains. I had also just read the Incite! Women of Color Against Violence edited book, *The Revolution Will Not be Funded*—a popular, critical anthology on the Non-Profit Industrial Complex, and was participating in exhilarating conversations on the NPIC outside of academia that gave me a lens for understanding some of my experiences at NWCHD. At the same time, in Eva Cherniavsky’s “Theories and Representations of the State” course, I encountered Antonio Gramsci’s work that situated institutions in civil society as subject-making institutions, as absolutely bound up in bourgeois hegemony projects that organize common-sense and the political sensibilities of its subjects. In some ways, the dissertation began here. I imagined a project that could bridge the activist conversations on the NPIC with the questions and critique I explored in my course work, as I worked to historicize the relationship between the non-profit and the State within a Marxist political tradition. But I struggled with (and clearly still struggle with) understanding my own position within this particular archive of political theory, and I think this is a limitation evident in my organizing projects and in my close readings in the chapters that follow. For instance in 2006, I co-founded a Seattle based collaboration, If You Don’t They Will, that provides trainings and resources for

communities responding to white nationalism. We intentionally did *not* form a non-profit, thinking avoiding the legal form will keep us out of the reach of the NPIC, but as I write in Chapter One, even organizing projects on the outskirts of the NPIC are still very much embedded in the logics of NGOization, even anti-non-profit projects like ours. Likewise, as I attempt to detail black feminist political traditions as alternatives to the NGO dominated imaginations of the present, I assume that, even inadvertently, I cannot help but to reproduce the limitations of my own political present in my readings of these literary texts.

If You Don't They Will's first tactic was to illuminate how white nationalists are increasingly targeting college campuses, and how through cultural organizing, students and faculty can generate creative, anti-racist responses. Through workshops, blogs, and community specific designed curriculum, this strategy was my way to both organize on UW's campus and invest in undergraduate education and, at the same time, uphold my commitment to NWCHD's mission. Though we facilitated workshops for numerous educational institutions (across the departments of UW's campus), bookstores, academic and activist conferences, bars and music clubs, and for many non-profits, it was hard to get "buy in" without the 501 ©3; in fact some people were even angry because technically we were a "business," not a non-profit corporation. Not surprisingly, we received little to no support from the good old boys of the anti-fascist movement—we were the disobedient girls who knew a little too much and who stepped out of line; we were merely having fun in Seattle. If You Don't They Will is, of course, not a solution to the tensions that made me feel like a traitor, and constantly displaced or defensive, but it has been useful to recreate my relationship with "activism," and how I think about cultural organizing, the NPIC and the anti-fascist movement.

Right after I started *If You Don't They Will*, I heard about the Simpson Center for the Humanities "Institute for the Public Humanities" and I thought, naively, this could be perfect for my work in academia, and that maybe it will help me locate myself as a "bridge scholar." This was around the time when my peers were increasingly talking about the potential of the "public humanities." It was almost a fad amongst us English graduate students, a buzz word. Finally, many hoped, this might solve some of the critiques that the students in the social sciences waged against students in English (for being overly intellectual, abstract, inaccessible, and for not talking to real people) and that, finally, Cultural Studies could be "legitimate" outside of the University and in the "community." We can all be "organic intellectuals!" But, among the many structural problems of the Institute, the way that the relationships were formed between the non-profits involved and institute participants was particularly horrifying for me. Though perhaps unintentionally, the "academic" or "activist," "university" or "community," and even "research" or "organizing" polarization was only reified. I did encounter some amazing people from other disciplines that I continue to meet with on a regular basis as kind of consult/therapy group, but the Institute, and how dominant conceptions of the "public humanities" are imagined today (and I realize I'm generalizing here), is really underwhelming.

Thus, a year later I partnered with other graduate students and formed the Race/Knowledge Project (RKP), a Simpson Center for the Humanities sponsored Research Cluster. We have worked together for over 5 years attempting to critically model a different kind of "public humanities," one that engages the social movement struggles particular to this campus but in a way that also understands the enthusiasm that backs the term "public humanities" as part and parcel of histories of global decolonization, post 1970's transformations in the University and the State, and the rise of the regime of NGOization under late capitalism. We understand

cultural production as critical theory, essential for mapping our contemporary moment, and as an archive to build and grow new imaginations of “public humanities,” “anti-racism,” “coalition,” and what counts as “activism” and “academic” labor. Working with the RKP, however, was also incredibly challenging especially around institutionalization and the funding we received from the Simpson Center. Many members had little to no experience organizing public events and working, writing and facilitating collaboratively. Some members were also invested in receiving institutional validation and these tensions surfaced in our meetings that often overly privileged tasks and outcomes—so much so that I dreaded them, I felt sick before and during every meeting, and fantasized regularly about quitting the RKP. But because achieving the outcomes set up by the grant was embedded in the requirements to receive funding, it easily became the priority of the group, eclipsing all of the other imaginations that once fueled the formation of the collective initially. In many moments, we forgot the friendships, passions, and problems that brought us together, and RKP felt only like work, another chore on a long list of “things to do;” an irritation even. We consistently struggled with internal power dynamics and with how to be allies to each other, but in a way that moved beyond the kind of identity politics that always, for example, positions certain subjects as necessarily “revolutionary.” We even worked with two outside facilitators on these issues and today most of us have come to believe that working through internal dynamics is absolutely part of the work and cannot be disconnected from the collectively produced public scholarship and events—the tasks that generally represent the “real work” of an activist group.

Thus, while the RKP and If You Don’t They Will did not help me find the “right place” for my scholarship, activism, and political commitments, nor did either group resolve *any* of the problems I discuss above (I think we surfaced more problems), I did come to grips with

something important. The tension between “community” versus “university,” “research” versus “organizing,” and “activist” versus “academic” is not something to overcome—it cannot be. But it is a productive tension and it is one that threads through the entirety of this dissertation project. Ultimately, these dynamics fuel my larger effort to expand the extremely narrow and violent normative assumptions about the terrain of the political, what is presumably political work, and who is imagined to be the appropriate political actor—or, who is the best suited, “most likely to succeed” activist.

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## **Chapter Contours**

Admittedly, this project only offers the beginnings of a genealogy of “alternative” feminist activism, for clearly my aspirations, interests and commitments to developing a cultural study that critically historicizes and expands what counts as political work for feminist activism far exceeds the parameters of this dissertation. As a snapshot of a potentially longer, more sustained future project, Chapter One, ““Velvet Triangles or ‘Bermuda Triangles’”: Transnational Feminist Networks, Global Civil Society and Alternative Feminist Political Imaginaries,” works to detail my foundational framework and lays out the over-arching arguments and stakes of the entire dissertation, including why and how I privilege the literary narratives of black feminist cultural production for historically gauging political imaginaries that exceed the non-profit and NGO legal form. I begin by first describing the contemporary state of dominant transnational feminist activism and I explore the most prominent feminist social science theorists who have, since the mid-1990’s, privileged the Transnational Feminist Network (TFN) as the primary, most efficient and desirable form of activism for global feminist social movements. I tend to the small body of existing feminist social science criticism on NGOization

and TFNs as well as the critical scholarship on the Non-Profit Industrial Complex (NPIC) that is (slowly) growing in both academic and activist circles. I consider the rise and dominance of a certain understanding of “global civil society,” a theory that is assumed and reified by most every proponent (and even some critics) of TFNs, and I look to alternative political traditions that do not presume a necessary distinction between the State and civil society, and that have a different approach to theorizing power. More specifically, I turn to Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci to situate the NGO and non-profit as subject-making institutions that are absolutely entangled in furthering State projects and rationalities. I end this chapter with a claim for the value of literary production as central to both mapping alternative political terrains and critiques, and to emerging feminist imaginaries that do not necessarily presume institutionalization as an NGO or 501 © 3 non-profit corporation as the horizon of social change struggles. In this spirit, I close with a reading of Gloria Naylor’s 1992 novel *Bailey’s Café* to exemplify how literature can surface a multiplicity of activist histories as well as generate alternative imaginations of feminist solidarity in the contemporary moment—imaginings that from a Transnational Feminist Network standpoint, are virtually unintelligible.

The following three chapters ruminate on the political sensibilities and body-knowledge of three different black feminist activist subject formations, in three discrete historical moments. I consider Pauline Hopkins call for “agitation” at the end of the nineteenth century, Bernice Johnson Reagon and Alice Walker’s painful vision of “coalescing” in the late 1970’s-early 1980’s post-Civil Rights era, and Octavia Butler’s metaphor of the pleasure of “enfolding” in the early twenty-first century. Chapter Two, “Contending Forces: Social Work, Non-Profit Incorporation, and Agitation in Black Women’s Progressive Era Club Activism,” situates Pauline Hopkins’ activism, her editorial work at the *Colored American*, her club work and her

novel *Contending Forces* within the (rising) dominant political imaginary of the Progressive Era: the consolidation and institutionalization of Social Work (and social workers as professionals and experts) positioned as the best equipped, rational and effective pathway for responding to the social, political and economic problems of the late nineteenth century. To understand how black club women like Hopkins differently contested and embraced the rising dominance of Social Work discourses, I develop a historical context that notes shifts in nineteenth century conceptions of “scientific charity,” from 1840-1895, as well as transformations in the legal history of the non-profit 501 © 3. Alongside these differing histories, I detail the astonishing growth within the women’s club movement in the 1890’s, attending to the often under-historicized increase in black women’s club work in particular, where I look specifically at the political strategy of the National Association of Colored Women, the first nationally recognized black women’s club formed through a merger between the National Federation of Afro-American Women and the League of Colored Women in 1896. Within a context that forefronts the rising influence of professionalized social science forms of activism, I consider the specific political imaginary that Pauline Hopkins’ novel *Contending Forces* demands: *agitation*. While literary scholars most often presume to already know what constitutes black agitation at the turn-of-the-century in Hopkins’ novel, this chapter instead considers the transformations in dominant conceptions of the political, Hopkins’ participation in the club movement, and her “public work” as editor for the first African-American literary magazine, and offers an in-depth reading of the novel and, moreover, the black feminist internationalist imagination of agitation that it powerfully implores. In this way, I position *Contending Forces* as both a critical rejoinder to the limited historical resources on black women’s club work, and at the same time, understand it to

offer critical insight into the multiple modalities of “being an activist” circulating within black political struggles of this moment.

“Stop Thinking Properly: Feminist Activism and Coalescing with History” is the third chapter in this project and focuses specifically on the late 1970’s-early 1980’s imagination of coalition and coalescing differently evident in Bernice Johnson Reagon’s 1981 speech, “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century,” and Alice Walker’s 1976 novel *Meridian*. In this chapter I read these two cultural texts, and their corresponding visions of coalition, with present day dominant feminist theorizations of coalition in mind—the Transnational Feminist Network. I am especially interested in how, under NGOization, these “alternative” imaginations of coalition are either written out of contemporary feminist social movement memories, or misremembered in the service of legitimizing present day NGO rationalities. Moreover, Reagon and Walker offer challenging and provocative accounts of coalescing that I believe are integral to my longer genealogy of feminist activism for, as my narrative details, their visions of coalition are almost impossible to think and feel today under the regime of NGOization and the Non-Profit Industrial Complex. While currently coalition is most often imagined to be a relationship between two institutions, Reagon and Walker both differently position coalescing as a form of body-knowledge, a way of being and feeling political, where bodily pain and danger are indispensable to social movements’ vitality and futurity—a memory I suggest has been evacuated from dominant theories of feminist coalition today. Interestingly, Reagon and Walker also suggest critical potential in feminist politics rooted in collective and historical social movement memories of trauma and violence, and at the same time, imagine alternative understandings of political futurity and of the possibilities of coalitional solidarities bound by collective pain. As Reagon writes, “I feel as if I’m gonna keel over any minute and die. That is often what it feels

like if you're really doing coalition work. Most of the time you feel threatened to the core and if you don't, you're not really doing no coalescing."<sup>4</sup>

In my fourth and final chapter “‘We’re All a Little Co-opted’: Comfortable Strait Jackets and the Politics of Pleasure,” I move across science fiction writer Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis* series (late 1980’s) and the *Parable Series* (mid to late 1990’s) to one of her last short stories, “Amnesty” (2004), in order to detail how her feminist activist subjects differently understand the relays of power specific to their distinct worlds. I consider how Butler differently imagines the relays of power shaping the political field in 2004 and how activists, such as main character Noah Cannon in “Amnesty,” struggle within and against a complicated terrain where both reform and revolution are foreclosed as political possibilities. I read for how Butler’s “traitorous activists” imagine political transformation and for the political potential of an activist subjectivity that acknowledges her position as out rightly compromised and deeply embedded within her varying political contexts. I note the importance of the body and the changing forms of body-knowledge across Butler’s different texts, and how through their bodily, historically grounded experiences of pain and pleasure, the activist subject understands the political field and organizes accordingly. What does activism look like when political allegiances and loyalties are *presumably* compromised and always contaminated—when, as in the story, the activist is literally employed by the very forms of domination she seeks to destabilize or simply live through? What might perhaps differently count as “activism” when the alien structures of power are ambivalent, at best, to securing its’ subjects consent, when the alien “Communities” do not require a general incorporation or assimilation into their logics in order to dominate planet Earth? In “Amnesty” it is the domination *and* pleasure that accompanies the body-knowledge of “enfolding,” the feeling of a “comfortable strait jacket” that occurs when the alien powers

physically enfold the human contract workers, that is central to the possibilities of Butler's political imaginary in 2004.

While now, as I suggested, this dissertation is an incomplete snapshot of a longer history of feminist activism, I imagine this work to be a springboard for several future projects that will expand this cultural genealogy of "alternative" feminist political imaginaries. A longer project will begin in the eighteenth century and consider the political labor of colonial women missionaries as both an early formation of feminist activist subjectivity, and as precursors to the legal entity, 501 © 3 non-profit, first established in 1819 as Dartmouth College. This provides my overall genealogy a historical framework that understands 19<sup>th</sup> Century U.S. social movements beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, and non-profit activism as, in many ways, an extension of imperial practices. I would also like to sustain a focused consideration on the relationship between philanthropy and development and how philanthropy functions as the suture for the predictably devastating violent effects of capitalism across the globe; the violence of "progress" requires, even presupposes the necessity of philanthropic projects. Most certainly a larger project will also include an emphasis on early nineteenth century abolitionism as well as a more expansive consideration of the post-Reconstruction Era. Furthermore, I am interested in reading Charlotte Perkins Gilman novel, "Herland," alongside the early twentieth century suffrage movement materials, and the greatly under-theorized role of white nationalist women activists in the Ku Klux Klan—how they understood themselves as "feminists" and yet organized to successfully dismantle the (momentary) cross-racial and class solidarities in the women's movement, simultaneously working to further white women's rights within the racist movement more generally.

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<sup>1</sup> Many NWCHD activists identified as rural queers, Jewish, and/or people of color, but the rural Northwest, and NWCHD's constituency, is demographically really white.

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<sup>2</sup> Only now am I starting to understand that dismantling the institution was a good thing. Institutional allegiance, and sacrificing everything to keep the institution going no matter what, is a really difficult thing to unlearn.

<sup>3</sup> There is some good new work on this issue. See South End Press's anthology, *The Revolution Starts at Home: Confronting Intimate Violence Within Activist Communities*, edited by Ching-In Chen, Jai Dulani, and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha .

<sup>4</sup> Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century," in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983) 343.

## Chapter One

### **‘Velvet Triangles’ or ‘Bermuda Triangles’: Transnational Feminist Networks, Global Civil Society & Alternative Feminist Political Imaginaries**

#### **Introduction**

*‘Thoughts that Burn but Cannot be Spoken’*: *Re-Imagining the Political within Histories of Feminist Activism* is intent on exploring differing activist sensibilities and “alternative” forms of agency particular to black feminist political traditions in and against the current political context dominated by NGO and non-profit activism. To do so, I strive towards three larger and related ambitions in the dissertation. First, I hope to resituate the current debates on NGOization and the Non-Profit Industrial Complex (NPIC) within a longer, critical cultural study of feminist activism that interrupts the temptation to ahistorically or transhistorically universalize the present regime of NGOization as always the case. In this way, my genealogy considers how the NGO and non-profit have produced power accommodating activist subjects to different ends, in order to more broadly consider how institutions in civil society are historically and unevenly imbricated in furthering the expansion of state power. My call for a longer history of feminist activism is deeply connected to my investments in emerging “alternative” imaginations of what constitutes proper feminist political labor and correspondingly, who is granted political agency. For, in the contemporary moment, I find that NGOization and the NPIC has a severe impact on feminist social movements’ historical memories and that, in some spaces, it is almost impossible to recall or imagine non-NGO-centric visions of the political.

Secondly, because “global civil society” (as the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector, free from the desires and demands of the State and global economy) theoretically substantiates the logics of NGOization, I consider political traditions that do not presuppose a distinction between the “State” and “civil

society” in order to better historicize the differing functions of the NGO within particular State formations and social movement struggles. Following Antonio Gramsci’s work on the relationship between the State and civil society, I position NGOs and non-profits as *subject-making* institutions, where specifically here in Chapter One, I consider the kinds of feminist activist subjects produced by Transnational Feminist Networks—arguably the most privileged form of feminist coalition in the present moment. In the following chapters, I explore three historically different black feminist subject formations (and their corresponding political imaginaries) that challenge the logics and rationalities of NGOization. How do these subjects (differently) understand themselves, the political terrain of their moment, and what constitutes anti-racist feminist activism within their varying contexts? These engagements are all part of a larger, never-ending commitment to expand the contemporary dominant feminist imaginary of “the political” that is, I argue, extremely limited in its consolidation around the NGO and non-profit as preeminent forms of activism for feminist social movements.

Finally, while I heavily rely on the work of feminist social scientists and social movement histories to think critically about NGOization, the NPIC, and corresponding transformations in state power, this dissertation centers on literary production as an alternative site for thinking critically and historically about feminist activism and moreover, for (re)imagining new ways of *being* political. In the chapters that follow, literature functions as a critical rejoinder to the underdeveloped histories of black women’s club work in Chapter Two, for example, and it offers vital insight into the varying political fields and particular constellations of power that each chapter attempts to detail. Reading historically, across disciplinary formations and “against the grain,” I position the literary narratives of social movements as invaluable to emerging histories of feminist activism that, under NGOization, are

either forgotten, or in some cases even memorialized in the service of legitimizing the dominant political logics of the present.

Specifically, this chapter intends to provide the overarching framework for the entire dissertation by detailing the theories and rationalities integral to the Transnational Feminist Network (TFN)—or, what I argue to be the dominant feminist coalitional imaginary under the contemporary regime of NGOization. I begin by describing the work of the most prominent theorists in the social sciences who have, since the mid-1990’s, situated the TFN as the most logical form of coalition for feminist social movements across the globe. I describe the existing feminist scholarship that is critical of NGOization and the Non-Profit Industrial Complex (NPIC), and I unpack the theoretical underpinnings central to NGOization logics: the uncritically celebrated concept “global civil society” that is currently paraded across the disciplines as well as within many social movement struggles. I share some of my own organizing experiences—on the outskirts of the NPIC—and demonstrate the limitations and possibilities of the logics behind my cultural organizing approach in the contemporary moment. Finally, I end with a reading of Gloria Naylor’s 1992 novel, *Bailey’s Café*, to exemplify the limitations of my own political labors and imaginaries, and more to the point, as a way to model why and how literature can contribute to the existing critical scholarship on NGOization and the NPIC, and to imagining alternative forms of feminist activism in the present moment.

### **The State of Dominant Transnational Feminist Activism**

“In a word, transnational feminist networks are the organizational expression of the transnational women’s movement, or global feminism.”<sup>1</sup>

Valentine Moghadam

In contemporary sociological discourses, transnational coalitions are heralded as the “counterweight” to globalization processes and the “top-down flow of capital,” and are figured

as the most logical and effective form of “globalization from below” because of their abilities to construct a healthy, vibrant global civil society—free from state and market interests—through connecting activists across nation-state borders all the while maintaining a decentralized, anti-hierarchical form of coalition.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, many proponents of transnational coalitions and global civil society, as well as dominant theories of globalization, labor, economic restructuring, and development, have neglected to think specifically about women in the larger historical context of shifts in capitalist world systems and global decolonization. They have, and continue to, ignore the large-scale feminization of labor and the specifically gendered forms of violence and exploitation differently experienced by women across the globe. They have also neglected, as feminist scholars point out, to research and explore the kinds of feminist organizing and theories of transnational solidarity emerging in response to the gendered processes of globalization.

In a now canonical text, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink’s 1998 text was a significant intervention against the homogenizing theories of transnationalism and transnational social movements emerging out of the social sciences in the 1990’s. Their theory of Transnational Advocacy Networks (TAN)—or for feminist social movements, more specifically referred to as Transnational Feminist Networks (TFN)—is now the primary mode of coalition assumed by feminists across the disciplines as the most effective and logical form of transnational feminist organizing. TFNs are part of the categories that social scientists created to understand and theorize social movement organizing across nation-state borders and, alongside what are termed global civil society organizations, transnational advocacy networks (more generally) and transnational social movement organizations, are understood to “constitute the making of a transnational public

sphere.”<sup>3</sup> Currently, the Transnational Feminist Network is recognized as the foremost form of feminist organizing as it is thought to be most in line with a kind of dominant feminism that values flexibility and anti-hierarchy, while simultaneously maintaining decentralized yet professional, participatory systems.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1990’s, where followers of “world polity” theory furthered an understanding of transnationalism in which nations around the globe adopted similar conceptions of the State and the citizen, and global civil society (presumably located in the West) was privileged as the site in which “world culture” emanated from, Keck and Sikkink’s theory of transnational advocacy networks offered a more complex, multi-layered vision of transnational social movements and international politics. While these differing social science theorizations both favor the NGO as the most logical spokesperson for global civil society, “world polity” thinkers positively position NGOs as enactors of world cultural norms who disseminate Western logics of universalism, individualism, “rational volunteeristic authority,” human purpose and world citizenship.<sup>5</sup> Keck and Sikkink, on the other hand, attempted an anti-monolithic theorization of transnational coalition in which NGOs are actors struggling in fragmented, contested spaces with profoundly different visions of liberation, political allegiances and goals.

Keck, Sikkink and many other feminist social scientists acknowledge that transnational feminist organizing in general is not a new phenomenon but rather a contemporary manifestation of a longer history of feminist internationalism. They do, for the most part, however, maintain that the network model of transnational feminist organizing is particular to the contemporary moment because they understand TFNs as, unlike their predecessors, uniquely un beholden to nationalist strategies and visions of transformations and, at the same time, are not accountable to “due paying mass mobilization membership.”<sup>6</sup> Emerging from the UN declared Decade for

Women, from 1975-1985, Transnational Feminist Networks, and the now dominant understanding of transnational feminism, arose as a solution to the struggles and contestations between Western feminists and Third World feminists during the UN sponsored conferences in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985), and Beijing (1995). Women from the Global South demanded that Northern women prioritize feminist analysis and organizing strategies rooted in anti-racist critiques of development, nationalism and neocolonialism, whereas Western feminists favored questions of legal equality and sexual autonomy. Furthermore, in addition to the “political and ideological differences among women delegates and participants, a characteristic of the early years of the Decade was that delegations often were made up of men rather than women.”<sup>7</sup> In *Globalizing Women: Transnational Feminist Networks*, Valentine Moghadam writes that following the UN Decade for Women this new form of coalition has gained increasing significance and effectiveness for feminist organizing across borders and is essential for bridging divides amongst activists in the “North-South” divide. This general sentiment amongst dominant transnational feminist activists has led, in the larger context of what critics are calling the NGOization of social movements and the Non-Profit Industrial Complex (NPIC), to the proliferation of powerful TFNs globally, and is privileged amongst the social sciences, Women’s Studies, and many mainstream social movements as the most logical and effective form of transnational feminist coalition. Thus, according to Moghadam, providing a nice middle-ground between overly bureaucratic organizational models and the “structurelessness of the 1960’s-style feminist process,”<sup>8</sup> Transnational Feminist Networks are imagined to bridge the divides between the often highly educated and middle class Western feminists and their corresponding professional organizations, and Third World feminists, “informal” organizations, and grassroots perspectives. Indeed, they have come, for dominant

feminisms, to represent the “organizational expression of the transnational women’s movement, or global feminism.”<sup>9</sup>

Transnational Feminist Networks—or the “3rd mode of economic organization,” “different from markets” and “lighter on their feet than hierarchy”—are characterized by their voluntary, reciprocal and horizontal patterns of communication and exchange. They are structures organized above the national level to unite women from at least three different countries that work to influence international and national policy through inserting and normalizing a feminist perspective into transnational politics.<sup>10</sup> In short, their goals more generally focus on changing the behavior of states, international governance and organizations. Transnational Feminist Networks are described as networks with multiple channels of access into international politics and social movements that network disparate voices, alternative visions and perspectives across international and domestic spaces thus transforming, for Keck and Sikkink, activist practices of national sovereignty and attachments to the nation-state.<sup>11</sup> Networks are theorized as “communicative structures” that are motivated by “values” rather than “material concerns or professional norms,” and are significant for feminist organizing because of their ability to network “nontraditional international actors” in an effort to “persuade, pressure and gain leverage” over governments and intergovernmental structures, pushing for alternative development frameworks that take gender seriously. Heavy emphasis is placed on the networks ability to hold complex interactions among “actors” and though networks emerge from common values and goals, different identities, interests, economic, racial and national positions are said *not* to be dissolved or collapsed into the interests of dominant feminisms. NGOs play a prominent, if not the central role, in all theories that favor Transnational Feminist Networks as the preeminent form of feminist social movement organizing.

Keck and Sikkink outline networks as most often composed of the following “major actors”: 1) international and domestic nongovernmental research and advocacy organizations; 2) local social movements; 3) foundations; 4) the media; 5) churches, trade unions, consumer organizations, and intellectuals; 6) parts of regional and international intergovernmental organizations; 7) parts of the executive and/or parliamentary branches of government; and 8) NGOs. Unlike “world polity” thinkers of the 1990’s, the network contextualizes the NGO within a broader coalition of state actors, intergovernmental organizations, grassroots movements and international organizations, and this allows Keck and Sikkink to complicate theorizations of the NGO as simply the disseminator of Western rationalities. Yet the NGO’s powerful role as the principal networker within the network is never approached with a critical lens—never a cause for concern—and feminist network proponents further the notion that networks “perform optimally without having to become formal or bureaucratic;”<sup>12</sup> that networks are a preferred form of organizing because they are “flexible and conducive to change” and can “create transnational social spaces;”<sup>13</sup> that networks’ “innovative organizational strategy eschews nationalist preoccupations;”<sup>14</sup> that networks are the preferred form of coalition because they reflect women’s “collective consciousness, identity, experience and aspiration;”<sup>15</sup> that networks provide an invaluable space for the “self-empowerment of women through organizations” that is “crucial for transforming societies into a world women want;”<sup>16</sup> and finally that the network model of feminist organizing is most consistent with feminist values and goals of inclusivity, anti-hierarchy, and participatory democracy.

Keck and Sikkink describe the way transnational networks organize as a boomerang pattern:



change,” and general state behavior.<sup>20</sup> Though figured as the answer to accusations of women’s movements being “overly exclusionary, overly broad, and less attractive forms of mobilization,”<sup>21</sup> Keck and Sikkink do note that networks are not egalitarian structures per se. “Power is exercised within networks, and power often follows from resources, of which a preponderance exists within northern network nodes.” Yet the dominance of Northern women’s perspectives and political sensibilities in networks is often justified because “all are transformed through participating in the network,” and political agency manifests from the “network structure from the relationships between differing nodal points.”<sup>22</sup> Or, for Moghadam, who admits that most network members are middle class highly educated women, the networks most important objective is to “challenge the ideas, attitudes, politics, and decisions of large sophisticated organizations,” therefore the “presence of highly educated women advocates” is “necessary and effective.”<sup>23</sup>

Before I look more specifically at the role NGOs play in TFN theory, paralleling theories of global civil society, and the feminist criticism on TFNs that has recently emerged out of Sociology and Political Science, I would like to briefly point out some of the inconsistencies I’ve found within Transnational Feminist Network theory that, notably, do not appear to raise red flags for most supporters of these networks. Interestingly, while networks are supposed to be fluid, anti-hierarchical and flexible, some contradictions are apparent within the celebratory theories themselves. For instance, Keck and Sikkink note that networks are most effective when they are “strong and dense,” where bodies within the network have a “regular exchange,” and when the network has a more permanent institutionalized structure. In other words, networks network best if they are grounded in more formal institutions which shifts, I think, what “decentralized,” “anti-hierarchical,” and “flexible” means in this context. Or, though

theoretically networks merge differently located “actors” with diverse perspectives and divergent goals into a political space—or a “joint enterprise”—that is participatory and anti-hierarchical, primary proponents of TFNs note that networks most often involve small numbers of activists that are already attached to institutions and rarely engage in or support mass mobilization (with the exception of boycotting). And though they are supposed to reflect the interplay and combination of paid professional NGO workers and unpaid activists (an interesting distinction in itself), networks do not necessarily have, nor do they need to have, grassroots mobilization behind them.<sup>24</sup> Funding for network actions rarely comes from due paying members but rather from private philanthropic foundations, other NGOs and state and intergovernmental structures. I will argue later that this reliance on private and government funding sources shifts and reorganizes program goals, priorities, and strategy to suit the demands and interests of the philanthropic foundation, and yet the politics of NGO funding is never broached by network theorists for the NGO is, again, presumed to represent and further necessarily moral forms of social transformation.

### **TFNs, NGOs & the Magic of Global Civil Society**

“Transnational NGOs by definition bring women from different countries together to create a platform of solidarity that crosses national boundaries.”<sup>25</sup>

Myra Marx Ferree and Aili Mari Tripp

“A ‘global associational revolution’ is under way around the world, a massive upsurge of organized, private, voluntary activity in virtually every corner of the globe.”<sup>26</sup>

Lester Salamon

Under the current regime of NGOization where, this dissertation argues, the NGO marks the horizon of activist struggles and is “common-sense” for feminist activist subjects, the powerful, complicated relationships NGOs have with state projects, global capital and social movements receives little to no scrutiny. While there is certainly dissent and disagreement

amongst feminist theorists of Transnational Feminist Networks in general, overall the NGO remains uncritically celebrated as the superlative and seemingly neutral, best suited institution to both represent the “grassroots” perspective in global civil society, and likewise, negotiate with states, intergovernmental institutions and feminist social movements from a location imagined to be distinct and impartial to state and global market interests. The NGO is understood as the central “node” for linking, stabilizing and legitimizing TFNs because it is said to be the necessary organizational body to forge links between the national and the international, between local governments, national governments and intergovernmental structures and importantly, because of its abilities to build solidarities between the grassroots “actor” and the professional political entrepreneur from disparate locations across the globe. Thus, even though the Transnational Feminist Network model of feminist coalition claims to be sensitive to the complex, contradictory links between actors in the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector, theories of global civil society, states and international social movements, transnational and domestic NGO’s are still central to the formation and effectiveness of networks, and the fundamental role the NGO plays in network theory is never questioned. Instead, as Myra Marx Ferree and Aili Mari Tripp write in *Global Feminism: Transnational Women’s Activism, Organizing and Human Rights*, NGOs are crucial to articulating the “social movement webs—the elaborate connections among feminists located in diverse social and political spaces” for they are the “key nodal points” through which spatially diverse, “fragmented forms of organizing” and a multiplicity of perspectives are organized, managed and consolidated into a platform of feminist solidarity that crosses national boundaries.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, it is the networks of NGOs—not the other social movement participants—that are praised for their ability to efficiently network, share information, and consolidate political issues. NGOs are credited with building a healthy and vibrant global civil

society for they are the institutional vehicles that most efficiently (and morally) provide infrastructures, pathways and vocabularies through which disparate parties can communicate, organize, and institutionalize “global public discourse.” Working in the Latin American context, Sonia Alvarez argues that NGOs have been “vital in fashioning and circulating the discourses, transformational goals and ethical-political principles that are *constitutive* of the movement,”<sup>28</sup> while Ferree and Tripp’s research credits networks of NGOs as contributing to the “formation of global civil society, providing communication infrastructure, fashioning transnational feminist identities and spearheading global public discourse.”<sup>29</sup> The privileged position occupied by the NGO is justified in network theory (and in other social movement theory across the disciplines) because of the assumption that the work and priorities of NGO actions are initiated by, and necessarily represent, activists in grassroots, localized social movements. Further, NGOs are central in all networks because they are imagined to be politically neutral when initiating, framing and brokering actions between differing organizations, governments and social movements—in Keck and Sikkink’s boomerang model, for example. Thus, Transnational Feminist Network proponents must invoke and rely on a logic that situates that NGO as not only the best spokesperson for *all* feminist activists, but also as necessarily outside of state and global market interests, and a clear alternative organizational framework for those seeking significant social transformation.

The logic that serves NGOization, in general, and the uncritical celebrations of Transnational Feminist Networks as the most effective form of feminist organizing, relies on a theory—an imagination—of a sphere called global civil society. Global civil society, a term now paraded with great enthusiasm across the disciplines, is the contemporary version of civil society and is said to uniquely combine a private structure with a public purpose that connects citizens,

in a flexible way, in order to “empower the disadvantaged and bring unaddressed problems to public attention,” foster “bonds of trust and reciprocity that are necessary for political stability and economic prosperity; and generally to mobilize individual initiative in the pursuit of the common good.”<sup>30</sup> Yet unlike liberal theories that locate civil society in a space between the nation-state and the market, the spatial boundaries of global civil society are imagined to be autonomous from and above and below the nation-state and therefore, the logic follows, allows for different networking openings and the construction of new political spaces. Indeed, as Ronnie D. Lipschutz, one of the leading theorists of global civil society argues, network participants in global civil society may and most often do interact with states and intergovernmental structures, but they are “not constrained by the state system itself,” for networks extend across and beyond state-centered analysis and borders.<sup>31</sup> Global civil society, the theory goes, recognizes states, but inherently denies state sovereignty. Rather, it is, as John Keane describes, a “vast interconnected and multi-layered social space” that combines hundreds of thousands of “self-directing” or non-governmental institutions likened to a “dynamic biosphere.”<sup>32</sup> Global civil society purports to be expansive and full of “horizontal push and pull” that values compromise and vertical conflict because of the “bewildering variety” of interacting forces: NGOs (the most visible, effective and powerful force), civic and business initiatives, social movements, networks, universities, self-help groups, health clinics, religious communities, sports clubs, and more. For Lipschutz, this version of civil society is global because of the cross national networks that make up this “3<sup>rd</sup> sector” and because of what he wants to call the growing “global consciousness” experienced and furthered by members of global civil society.

Interestingly, in the recent anthology edited by Amrita Basu, *Women’s Movements in the Global Era: The Power of Local Feminisms*, some social science feminists are contesting the

commanding role the NGO plays in transnational feminist social movements and are, likewise, critical of Transnational Feminist Networks, finding that in some cases, the category of activism identified differently as “women’s movements” is more “committed to solidarity building, consciousness raising, and negotiating the different interests and identities of their members.”<sup>33</sup> These thinkers admit that NGOs have in some ways “strengthened and complimented women’s movements. However, NGOs are neither movements nor surrogates for them.”<sup>34</sup> They also note, like other critics of NGOization, NGOs “may undermine movements’ transformational character” because they tend to be more active in “service delivery and issue-specific activities” rather than mass mobilization and political contestation. Yet, while this anthology raises much needed critical inquiry on the relationship between feminist transnational social movements and NGOs, many scholars continue to reify the so called 3<sup>rd</sup> sector of global civil society. In fact, such critics find theoretical resolution to the NGO problem by removing the NGO from global civil society and by spatially locating NGOs in their own NGO sector, different from global civil society. And while some debate whether global civil society is democratic or conservative, noting that it can be a site for “counter-hegemonic organizing [...] but it can also reproduce social norms,”<sup>35</sup> the general assumption is that global civil society, “unlike the NGO sector, neither prescribes one best way of action nor enforces any one agenda. Rather it provides an inclusive space for diverse, indigenously inspired initiatives to conduct public dialogue with the state”<sup>36</sup> or with other “non-state” organizations. Thus, while these feminist social scientists are (somewhat) critical of NGO’s tactics and relationships to states and funders, for example, the role of global civil society is upheld almost automatically as a “space for multiple forms of collective action.”

### **Critical Feminist Scholarship on NGOization**

While Transnational Feminist Network supporters understand themselves to be fighting the violent effects of neoliberal governmentality on global women specifically, and as Peter Evans argues in “Counter-Hegemonic Globalization: Transnational Social Movements in the Contemporary Global Political Economy,” claim to enhance political and economic equity and justice, in “Transnationalism: the Face of Feminist Politics Post-Beijing,” Manisha Desai draws attention to the limitations of what she calls the new transnational social imaginary for feminist organizing invested in TFNs. Though TFNs have succeeded at the level of discursive representation (such as the 1995 Beijing Declaration of Platform for Action 9 which ensured and normalized a “gender perspective” in programming), Desai argues the politics and practices attached to these networks have been depoliticized, moving away from redistribution to policy and discursive changes, resulting in “(some) women’s agency is visible everywhere even as (most) women’s lives remain mired in multiple inequalities.”<sup>37</sup> Maintaining that TFNs privilege educated and middle class activists, Desai calls TFN’s “globalization from the middle” where the network is more likely a circuit of middle class educated professional activists, and hardly the horizontal network representing the “grassroots” imagined by Keck and Sikkink. Devaki Jain describes network participants in “Feminist Networks, People’s Movements and Alliances: Learning from the Ground,” as a “velvet triangle,” a relationship between “femocrats and feminist politicians, academics and experts and non-governmental organizations,”<sup>38</sup> a circuit of professional feminists that cycle between and link state projects, universities and NGOs. Consequently, though there are “Southern” women and NGOs sometimes represented in the networks, it is not clear that the networks can articulate and internally respond to deeply rooted inequalities between “Northern” and “Southern” women. And because TFN professionals make education a top priority, there is friction between those formally educated and those who are not,

and this inequality is reproduced within the organizational structure that in turn, severely impacts organizing strategies for social change. In fact, Aaron Pollack argues that there is “little epistemological openness” in such movements and that “Southern” women are often confined to their “specific contribution” and not seen as an integral part of defining program or setting organizational agendas.<sup>39</sup>

Rather than building coalitions across national, economic, racial and sexual divisions between women in the “first world” and women in “developing” nations, for instance, Desai argues that the network actually seems most capable of circulating “activists from the academy to UN agencies to International NGOs.”<sup>40</sup> In her recent book *Gender and the Politics of Possibilities*, Desai describes these professionals as a “transnational activist class,” a “terrain of activism, given its reliance on information technology and expert knowledge, cross-border travel, and dialogic gatherings, [that] privileges educated middle-class activists.”<sup>41</sup> Neera Chandhoke’s work in “The Limits of Global Civil Society” points out that most often TFN’s employ professional feminist activists who generally find the answers to contemporary struggles to be found in apolitical notions of governance—namely managerial techniques. This includes privileging institutional longevity and expanding administrative apparatuses as demonstrative of one’s commitment to social change (often at the expense of community organizing); streamlining analysis into single-issue organizing strategies to court and retain foundation funding (most often in service of Western/Northern/middle class needs); capacity building; and furthering analyses that both deny systemic inequality and at the same time individualizes complex and intersecting social, economic, cultural, and political inequalities. Consequently, Chandhoke argues, these professional transnational feminist activists imagine coalition and social change within “inherited structures of power that they may modify but seldom transform.”<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, Sabine Lang's research in "Organizing Political Advocacy: Transnational Women's Networks and Gender Mainstreaming in the European Union" reveals the internal "lack of networking among networks" where organizations within the networks do not prioritize the creation of multi-issue coalitions with one another. Instead, this form of feminist coalition maintains distinct, single-issue analysis organizing projects that occasionally involves collaboration with other professionals in the network. Lang's work also demonstrates that TFN professionals make little effort to extend their "grassroots" membership base. Instead, NGOs and networks replace other forms of activism and civic participation and because of the normative function of the NGO sector, by its very nature [the NGO] is assumed to be most capable of "foster[ing] broad civic capacity building and participatory democracy."<sup>43</sup> Lang also argues that TFNs provide supranational governances such as the European Union, in her case, with an alibi, a convenient response to demands for greater transparency and accountability, and the UN, the WTO, the World Bank and the EU reacted to such demands by creating greater space for NGOs and network participation, even drawing attention to and highlighting their cooperation and engagement with TFNs. In short, Lang's research finds that NGOs are supposed to represent the "blueprint for a European Public," nullifying other forms of social movement practices and simultaneously strengthening governing structures like the European Union, and that this form of professional feminist organizing is, at this point, the "most visible and active component of a European public sphere."<sup>44</sup>

While feminist organizing across borders is certainly not unique nor is it exclusive to responding to contemporary shifts in global capital and decolonization struggles, Desai points out that the category "transnational feminism" *is* new. Indeed, the term "transnational feminism"—now widely used<sup>45</sup>—did not circulate outside of the academy until after the 1995

Beijing conference. Calling attention to how transnational feminism has been responsible for *describing* as well as *shaping* these forms of feminist solidarity, Desai marks the Beijing conference as a “shift from contention to solidarity” where participants—despite their differences—found a common ground in human rights discourse and frameworks.<sup>46</sup> Yet shapers of this form of transnational feminism participating at events like the Beijing conference were largely “middle-class educated women from INGOs, donors, academics and activists.” In fact, at the Beijing conference, Desai notes that “grassroots” women were present but participated in their own conference located outside the main workshops because Chinese authorities restricted most Chinese women from participating, resulting in the fact that the actual women shaping and coalition building at this event were professional middle class activists representing differing international NGOs and donors. The UN conferences and other meetings like the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, then, became the primary site for transnational feminist activism, and the strategies and theories of Transnational Feminist Networks that most often privilege rights discourses and professional activists, has also prioritized the UN and intergovernmental institutions (such as the European Union) as the priority site of activism.

Desai outlines four structural and ideological limitations to centering transnational feminism on the UN: 1) the UN’s relationship with differing countries relies on the ideology and language of development; 2) the UN is an “inter” governmental structure that focuses on the nation at the principal arena of action; 3) countries such as the U.S. see the UN as a space to “aid” developing countries, rather than a space for nations to come together on equal footing; and 4) participation is confined to registered NGOs. The inequalities embedded in the UN system coupled with the location of the UN in New York, Geneva, and Vienna (with one 2004

convention in Nairobi), means that NGOs and professional NGO activists in the U.S. and in western Europe have more access and familiarity with this form of feminist networking, and furthermore, most of these NGOs focus on women in the Global South, reproducing “the sense of the UN as a space for helping women of developing countries rather than for seeking gender justice in their countries.”<sup>47</sup> Therefore, Desai concludes, the structures and ideologies embedded in the UN mode of coalition building is directly reproduced in the NGOs (and the feminist NGO workers) that are then reproduced in Transnational Feminist Networks.

### **Non-Profit Industrial Complex (NPIC) Scholarship**

Incite! Women of Color Against Violence recently edited a collection of essays, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex* that is critical of what activists and scholars are calling the Non-Profit Industrial Complex (NPIC). In general, like feminist critics of NGOization, discussions on the NPIC acknowledge the complex and overlapping relationships between non-profits and state power, as well as the effects that privileging institutionalization (in the last 40 years) has had on the internal structures of non-profits which has resulted in depoliticized single-issue program, a professionalization of activist culture, and a general narrowing of social movements’ imaginations of liberation. These thinkers also point out that the normalization of institutionalization as a 501 © 3 non-profit corporation has led to a narrowing of strategies for social change, where efforts are expressly more restrictive and predictable and less flexible or experimental.<sup>48</sup>

For instance, Dylan Rodriguez and Ruth Wilson Gilmore understand the astonishing growth of non-profits as directly related to both transformations brought on by radical social movement struggles of the 1960’s and the rise of the U.S. neoliberal state power. They describe the NPIC as a strategy to manage and control social movement protest and dissent through the

incorporation of radical organizing against state violence into the State apparatus. Dylan Rodriguez explains a symptom of the NPIC as one in which the State forces non-profits to organize “reactively, in response to new state policies and practices” and finds that such assimilation into the NPIC “actually *enables* more vicious forms of state repression.”<sup>49</sup> According to Rickke Mananzala and Dean Spade in “The Nonprofit Industrial Complex and Trans Resistance,” this reorganization of non-profit activism tends to favor service-based policy and reform (that produce “real data”) rather than base-building social justice strategies. They describe the dramatic increase of CEO and CFO positions within the internal organization of non-profits and argue that these structures are arranged in ways that reproduce rather than challenge white supremacy. Non-profits are increasingly following a “business model of management” in which top-level staff (with hierarchical pay scales) most often institutionalize race, gender, class and education privileges in their leadership and board structures, placing the creation and implementation of strategies for social transformation in the hands of “educated elites (e.g. lawyers, administrators, social workers, experts)” rather than in the “hands of those bearing the brunt of oppression.”<sup>50</sup>

Interestingly, in *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life*, Nina Eliasoph’s work on suburban American volunteerism looks at how powerful institutions (like social service agencies) shape the tone and cadence of public debate, and finds that contemporary voluntary associations are socializing subjects to avoid public discussions about social justice, and to resist developing a complex structural analysis that understands multiple constellations of power and oppression. Eliasoph’s study exemplifies a shift under the NPIC in activist culture, a move away from valuing critical discussion during meetings and events, to a political sensibility that is less likely to express politically progressive, critical and creative ideas

in public. Whether at board meetings or with the media, Eliasoph's research found that political discussions were depoliticized and curtailed to private, individual one-on-one conversations. "At each step in the broadening of the audience, the ideas shrank. In a strange process of political evaporation, every group fell into this strictly patterned shift in discourse: what was announced aloud was less open to debate, less aimed at expressing connection to the wider world, less public-spirited, more insistently selfish, than what was whispered."<sup>51</sup> The volunteers in Eliasoph's study often felt that political visioning, analysis and creative organizing strategies were a "waste of time" and not part of the "real work," and meetings were consistently task-oriented where the activity itself (such as fundraising) functioned as proof of the volunteers' commitment, and group members worked diligently to avoid disagreements because contestation over political ideas and tactics was considered "bad manners." In fact, the most taboo subject one could bring up in public was to talk about a political issue in terms of "justice." Instead of discussing potentially upsetting issues (like neo-Nazi's recruiting in their high schools, as in Eliasoph's case study), "most meetings featured in depth discussions of practical fundraising projects."<sup>52</sup>

Furthermore, in "Race, Identity and Political Activism: The Shifting Contours of the African American Public Sphere," Steven Gregory details the co-optation and reorganization of black activist organizations in the post-Civil Rights era in Corona, Queens, NY. In Gregory's context, incorporation into the State apparatus as a 501 (c) 3 non-profit (or a social service agency) led to the depoliticization of racial inequalities, and has altered the possibilities that opened up after Civil Rights struggles to "be disproportionately responsive to middle class homeowners" which simultaneously "shaped the political effects of deepening black class divisions."<sup>53</sup> Part of incorporation as a 501 © 3 meant that within the political analysis and

program of black activist groups in Corona, race and other systemic inequalities were disarticulated and depoliticized in local activist spaces and, consequently, within the greater black public sphere. He attributes the depoliticization of race (and the politicization of a more abstract notion of poverty) as the result of “the harnessing of the public sphere of African American neighborhood life to state-sponsored mechanisms of political participation, established in the wake of civil rights era activism and urban unrest;”<sup>54</sup> namely non-profits and social service agencies. The professionalization and bureaucratization of activist projects into “legitimate” non-profits has many consequences, including, as is the case in Gregory’s essay, a restructuring of the black public sphere into privileging black middle class identities, sensibilities and desires. Further, Gregory suggests that incorporation into a 501 © 3 non-profit forecloses systemic critiques and multi-issue power analyses to the extent that public discourses on inequality are now structured in a way that excludes radical race critique almost completely. In other words, in Gregory’s context, attention to racism is not included as generally relevant to struggles against poverty within black professional activist projects in Corona under the Non-Profit Industrial Complex.

Looking specifically at the history of the feminist movement against sexual violence, Kristin Bumiller’s research in *In an Abusive State: How Neoliberalism Appropriated the Feminist Movement Against Sexual Violence*, considers the shifts in movement goals, leadership, strategy, and analysis in tandem with transformations in U.S. (neoliberal) state power in the late 1970’s. Bumiller’s work points out that although anti-violence feminist organizations who received state funding were contesting state power in complex ways, ultimately they “had to make compromises and structural changes to remain in compliance and to take advantage of available resources. [...] Over time, this led to rape crisis centers and shelters functioning

bureaucratically and relying on professionals” to continue to secure funding,” which, in part, resulted in the “broad-scale expansion of the instrumental capacities of the State to address sexual violence.”<sup>55</sup> Bumiller’s book points out the many, sometimes even unintentional feminist alliances with the State in the movement against sexual violence (including the reorganization of programmatic goals towards prioritizing legal reform and state recognition), ultimately resulted in the “incorporation of the feminist anti-violence movement into the apparatus of the regulatory state,”<sup>56</sup> and a “joining forces with a neoliberal project of social control.”<sup>57</sup> As social services for survivors of domestic violence are increasingly privatized and/or dismantled by the U.S. neoliberal state, Gilmore points out that non-profits, as state sanctioned institutions, function under the NPIC as a provider of many of these services but in a depoliticized way that does not challenge state power and interests. This results in a kind of activism that “is real but without significant political clout, forbidden by law to advocate for systemic change, and bound by public rules and non-profit charters to stick to its mission or get out of business and suffer legal consequences if it strays along the way.”<sup>58</sup>

### **“Follow the Money”: Non-Profits and Philanthropic Foundations under the NPIC**

Many critics of the NPIC note the proliferation of non-profits in the post-Civil Rights era has paralleled the growth of liberal philanthropic foundations, and urge more attention to these deeply and historically entangled relationships. Philanthropic foundations began in the early 1900’s by John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie and Russell Sage in a strategic effort to protect their dollars from taxation. The first foundation that provided charitable deductions was initiated by Margaret Olivia Slocum Sage who began the Russell Sage Foundation in 1907 with her seventy million dollar inheritance. Soon after, Rockefeller and Carnegie modeled their foundations in a similar fashion. Initially, the foundation structure received some criticism and

generated quite a bit of public controversy. In 1916, for example, The U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations warned Congress that “foundations were a ‘grave menace’ because they concentrated wealth and power in the service of ideology”<sup>59</sup> that worked to only further the interests of their capitalist backers. The report articulated the dangerous hegemonic power foundations accessed through their sheer amounts of concentrated wealth, imagining foundations’ role in civil society to be unrestrained; an “all pervading machinery for the molding of the minds of the people.”<sup>60</sup> These kinds of public accusations encouraged early foundations to partner with third party organizations such as universities and 501 (c) 3 non-profit corporations, and philanthropic foundations began to look more and more to such intermediary institutions to produce research and policy propositions (rather than directly producing it themselves) in an attempt to distance the foundation’s interests from the research inquiry, and conceal their investments in promoting particular policies and ideologies.

Though this system of “charitable giving” began in the early 1900’s, the 1960’s experienced substantial philanthropic foundation growth. In fact, one study reveals that 1200 new foundations formed every year<sup>61</sup> as financial and economic magazines heavily promoted foundations to wealthy capitalists as a “tax-shelter tool” because through foundations, corporations could avoid taxes and simultaneously allow wealthy families to pass along their inheritance without paying estate taxes. In 1969, the IRS began requiring foundations to donate a fixed percentage of their assets, much of which started flowing into the growing non-profit sector, and while foundations grew, so did the number of non-profits competing for foundation funding. Since the 1970’s, most social change institutions now function under the 501 (c) 3 legal status which permits donations made to the particular institution to be tax deductible and also positions non-profits as available candidates for foundation funding. Today, foundations’ wealth

(and their coinciding ideological and political power) leads Nicholas Lemann in “Citizen 501 (c) 3” to write, “[t]heir magnitude, along with their desire to affect the course of events in the United States and in the world, has made foundations one of the handfuls of major actors in society.” However, one of the many dangers particular to this kind of concentrated, poorly monitored source of power is that of the “handful of major actors” today, foundations are also often “the one that draws the least public attention.”<sup>62</sup>

For the most part, philanthropic foundations historically fund organizations that focus on policy and legal reform or “general research” and higher education, and tend to favor professionalized organizations with individual staff members holding advanced degrees in academia, rather than grassroots groups who employ strategies for mass-based organizing. In the post-Civil Rights era, as foundation funding became increasingly central to many non-profits annual budgets, more and more non-profits seeking this funding streamlined their missions, visions and strategies to fit into the proposals foundations would most likely fund. This streamlining and reorganization of program, vision and analysis (to cater to the interests of the foundation) is often necessary to annually secure foundation funding leading non-profits to, more often than not, produce depoliticized, single-issue program that can be empirically tracked as evidence of “change.” Andrea Smith argues that the relationship between the growth of progressive philanthropic foundations and the proliferation of the non-profit sector redirected social movement priorities from “social change to social reform,”<sup>63</sup> from mass mobilization to individualized services, and from intersectional analysis and coalition building to single-issue program.

[F]oundations like Carnegie, Rockefeller and Ford have a corrosive influence on a democratic society; they represent unregulated and unaccountable concentrations

of power and wealth which buy talent, promote causes, and in effect, establish an agenda of what merits society's attention. *They serve as "cooling-out" agencies, delaying and preventing more radical, structural change.* They help maintain an economic and political order, international in scope, which benefits the ruling-class interests of philanthropists [...]<sup>64</sup>

In "Black Awakening in Capitalist America," Robert Allen explores the relationships between the State, social movement organizing strategies and progressive philanthropic foundations, looking in particular at the Ford Foundation's tactics to deliberately neutralize, "cool off," and redirect Black Power leadership in the late 1960's. Allen argues that the Ford Foundation "courted the black bourgeoisie" and actively supported leadership promoting black self-determination through black capitalism and political autonomy through electoral politics and legal reform which, in turn, resulted in "radical Black liberationists and revolutionaries [...] easily criminalized and liquidated."<sup>65</sup> Ford's pecuniary overtures towards the black middle class tenets of Black Power organizations was part of a larger effort to "cool-out" the increasing political unrest in the late 1960's through liberal business projects. Furthermore, the incorporation of black bourgeois activist practices (and the subsequent abjection of black radical critiques) allowed the Ford Foundation to destabilize the more radical contingencies of the black liberation movement. For instance, as Allen details, while SNCC and CORE were calling for "Black Power," the leaders of the Ford Foundation funded other black capitalism projects in an effort to neutralize black radicals and restore law and order through the spread of liberal capitalism. Acknowledging that Black Power organizing had the potential to radically disrupt and alter the structures of the State, "to set the torch to every major American city and seriously disrupt the functioning of the economy,"<sup>66</sup> the Ford Foundation invested nearly 10 million

dollars towards the construction of black capitalism in the late 1960's alone, and even issued a declaration in 1966 in "support" of black struggles.<sup>67</sup> The statement located the solution to the "Negro problem" in black capitalism and emphasized "strong minded business leadership," establishing a criteria of priority funding in areas of "research, communication, patterns of cooperation among whites and Negroes—business, labor and government" that could potentially bring new levels of investment in black communities.<sup>68</sup> Former Ford Foundation president Harold T. Heald describes the strategy behind supporting certain black struggles (over others), and articulates the role of the foundation as one that can support American interests in forwarding liberal capitalism through its unique ability to occupy certain spaces the State might not necessarily be able to access.

[P]rivate foundations could serve as a kind of advance guard, paving the way for later government activity, not only in the usual fields of education and scientific research, but also in the area of 'social welfare.' Hence, the private foundation can act as an instrument of social innovation and control in areas which the government has not yet penetrated, or in areas where direct government intervention would draw criticism.<sup>69</sup>

According to Dylan Rodriguez and other critics of the NPIC, the Ford Foundations' monetary and discursive support of black capitalism shifted these organizing strategies away from radical critiques of white supremacy and state power, and towards a "reconsolidation of a white civil society that had momentarily strolled with the specter of its own incoherence."<sup>70</sup> The small but growing body of scholarship that is critical of the parasitical relationships between non-profits, NGOs and private foundations all note that the NPIC marks a significant shift away from

grassroots, multi-issue social movement building tactics, and towards individualized and highly regulated social services, and bureaucratic modes of creating and imagining social change.

## **Project Interventions, Contributions, Stakes and Aspirations**

### **I. Historicizing Feminist Activist Subjects' Political Imaginaries**

Sonia Alvarez's essay "Advocating Feminism: The Latin American Feminist NGO 'Boom,'" engages many of the critiques I outlined above, acknowledging that "when feminist NGOs are critical of the government" they are less likely to receive funding and that, clearly, "resources are skewed towards those deemed politically trustworthy."<sup>71</sup> Yet Alvarez still holds onto the political utility and necessity of NGOs for transnational feminist social movements and argues that feminist NGOs are "hardly doomed" to become "handmaidens of neoliberal planetary patriarchy," and that often such "blanket assessments" fail to capture the "ambiguities and variations" of differing NGOs in distinct contexts.<sup>72</sup> Instead, she maintains that if NGOs "reaffirm their commitment to widely consulting actors in the feminist field," they can "serve as more genuine intermediaries for larger civil society constituencies."<sup>73</sup> For, in Alvarez's final analysis, NGOs are salvageable for feminist social movements in the Latin American context. I take Alvarez's point to heart, that critics of NGOization should be wary of totalizing and over-generalizing theories of TFNs, and should be more attentive to the differing roles and political potential that NGOs might offer within distinct socio-economic, political and historical contexts. I also take seriously the questions I am often asked when presenting at academic and activist conferences or when I explain my research to friends over coffee: "Yeah, but what about this NGO? Or, that NGO? I know this one NGO in \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank) and they are doing really good work. Isn't it irresponsible to discount their labor? Aren't you working against the aims of anti-racist feminist social movements, instead of contributing?" I agree, in part. There

are many NGOs and non-profits doing critical work within the confines of their institutional context, some in spaces where they are the only people providing much needed, life and death kinds of services. This dissertation is not about discounting or invisibilizing the truly amazing, creative work of feminist NGO and non-profit activists around the globe. Nor is it a project working to (re)discover the perfect “replacement” model for feminist social movements—yet another (impossible) question I am often tasked with: “Well, if you take away the NGO, what do you suggest is a better model for global anti-racist feminist protest?” It *is* a project, however, that insists on the importance of critical thinking and demands a systemic critique of feminist activism in the contemporary moment. One of the “symptoms” of the NPIC and NGOization, so to speak, that is furthered in the often angry or defensive questions I receive is the idea that being critical of dominant feminist strategies and political imaginaries of social transformation is counter-progressive, dismissive, and/or traitorous. In these questions, critique is somehow figured as neither a political practice nor a priority for feminist activists, and I believe this is certainly a cause for concern. This resistance to thinking critically about dominant feminist activism not only completely misses the larger intentions of this project—to expand feminist imaginations of what constitutes political labor and political agency—it, more importantly, is bound up in the logics of the NPIC and NGOization that understands activism within a very narrow, bureaucratic, institution-centric political terrain.

Furthermore, my project insists on understanding the regime of NGOization within a larger historical context that is attentive to transformations in state power and critical of the related rise and force of neoliberal theories of global civil society in the contemporary moment. I attempt to begin a genealogy of feminist activism that works to demarcate to what extent the conditions of the present moment correlate historically to differing relations between feminist

activist subjects and social movements seeking radical transformation. For example, as I described earlier, under NGOization and the NPIC, NGOs are increasingly streamlining their analysis into single-issue campaigns that are more palatable to foundation funding sources and state interests, yet lack critical theoretical frameworks that illuminate complex relationships between race, sexuality, gender, nation and class. To cater to the demands of liberal philanthropic foundations, state funding and/or intergovernmental contracts, NGOs today often prioritize securing the growth and sustainability of the institution itself (through “safe” and watered down theoretical approaches that produce recognizable results) rather than furthering radical social and economic justice. Conversely, the 19<sup>th</sup> century U.S. Charity Movement—whose racialized and gendered political aspirations rationalized and naturalized the colonization and incorporation of communities of color and poor populations into the national body—relied heavily on scientific discourses to reform and professionalize the “inefficient” organizational structures and imprecise analytics of the past, as they worked to determine the *multiple* and *variant* causes of poverty. Reading historically and against the grain, though the Charity Movement’s practices are hardly worth celebrating in many ways, it is striking that unlike many NGOs today, activist subjects of the Charity Organization Movement searched out the multiple causes and issues (including attention to structural inequality) for understanding and ending poverty. In fact, according to Frank Dekker Watson in *The Charity Organization Movement in the United States: A Study in American Philanthropy*, this social movement understood itself to be working *for its own extinction*.<sup>74</sup> Unlike today’s “transnational activist class” of mostly Western, highly educated, middle class feminists, the Charity Movement was not occupational, and activists understood themselves quite differently than current non-profit and NGO workers that increasingly have advanced degrees in non-profit administration or other areas of

specialization. In fact, because NGOization also signals an ever growing economy of NGOs that is self-generating and self-regulating, the Charity Movement's logics of working for their own extinction is almost unthinkable today. I will return to this history in Chapter Two, but I do find this brief example suggests that current critiques of NGOization and the NPIC might be more generative and elucidating if understood and grounded historically in order to open up larger questions about the relationships between NGOs and non-profits, changing, complicated power relations between the State and global civil society, and feminist activist subject formations working for social transformation.

Furthermore, I follow Antonio Gramsci's work on civil society in the *Prison Notebooks* to expand the existing criticism on NGOization by approaching NGOs and non-profits as *subject-making* institutions, and I turn to literary production in particular to supplement my genealogy of feminist activism and to engage, across discrete historical moments, alternative feminist activist political imaginaries. In general, developing a cultural history of feminist activist subject formations is a way for me to index different systems of power in particular historical moments and track the ever-changing overlapping relationship between the State and institutions in civil society. Attention to feminist activist subjects furthers existing criticism on NGOization because the subject is a marker for understanding how differing matrixes of power are organized, converged and naturalized through institutions in civil society (like the non-profit and NGO) in discrete historical moments. Exploring the cultural, political and social imaginaries of different activist subject formations elucidates how they (differently) imagine social change in their particular historical contexts. For, these are subjects that understand themselves to be critiquing the dominant social formation as they organize and grow social movement imaginaries of liberation and radical transformation. In the words of Robin D. G.

Kelley, these are the subjects that dream revolutionary dreams that “erupt out of political engagement; collective social movements are incubators of new knowledge”<sup>75</sup> that impact how social change strategies are envisioned and enacted. This kind of historical attention to different feminist activist subjects’ political imaginaries will, I hope, begin to work towards expanding the very limited figuration of what dominant feminist social movements consider counts as “political” labor in the contemporary moment.

From this vantage, I suggest that the problem with dominant imaginations of feminist coalition (as the Transnational Feminist Network) and the analogous depoliticized program and elite circle of professional feminist activists is not *only* that TFNs most often actually reflect the desires and visions of their own class of privileged women—a rather familiar critique of white Western feminism pointed out by scholars and activists in different and multiple historical moments. The problem, I think worth underscoring, is *also* that Transnational Feminist Networks remain the panacea for imagining feminist activism for the majority of mainstream transnational feminist thinkers responding to the many forms of racialized and gendered violence in the present moment. In other words, it is not solely that Transnational Feminist Networks are populated by subjects who imagine coalitional social change to be mostly focused on discursive projects and framing in UN policy, for instance. Rather, the problem, as articulated by Desai and other critics of the NGOization of social movements, is that Transnational Feminist Networks have become the “dominant face of the women’s movement.” What are the implications for social movement struggles and imaginations of feminist coalition when the NGO-centric Transnational Feminist Network marks the horizon of feminist activist imaginaries? What does it mean for anti-racist feminists if we (perhaps unknowingly) confine our modes and imaginations of liberation to models of coalition centered on solidifying relationships between institutions, to

institution building, longevity and security, and state-sponsored tax-statuses? What histories of struggle are lost (or distorted) when coalition as a network of non-profits or NGOs—most often focused on law and policy reform—is figured and felt as unquestionably the most logical, mature form of activism?

The force of this dominant feminist political imaginary that normalizes both what counts as political labor and who is granted (proper, effective, mature) political agency is, I believe, deeply violent. This dissertation, and what eventually might develop into a larger project, works in its admittedly minute way to attempt to join the challenges against the totalizing, ahistorical, violence of dominant feminist political sensibilities that most often privilege middle class Western, white, heteronormative, bureaucratic, reformist visions of transformation. While I offer here only the beginnings of an “alternative” feminist activist genealogy, my attention to feminist activist subjectivities and the differing kinds of political imaginaries that have been produced over a longer historical arc—in and beyond the non-profit corporation—works to support and expand the growing critiques of NGOization and the Non-Profit Industrial Complex that currently circulate within the academy and within a variety of social justice movements.

## **II. Why Literature for Re-Imagining Feminist Activism?**

At academic and activist conferences, in meetings, over coffee, and even at the bar, I am often asked by an array of people, why and how (on earth) am I located in the English/Cultural Studies department. Even my own department, at times, is uncertain as to how literature functions in this genealogy of feminist activism and how, specifically, I read and write about activism in a literary context. While my archive most certainly draws from and relies on texts from the differing disciplines of Sociology, Political Science, History, Women’s Studies, and American Studies, I rely heavily on the literary narratives of social movements to illuminate

histories of struggle and anti-racist feminist activism that have been written out of dominant sociological and social movement histories. Black feminist cultural production in particular is central to this project's aim to emerge alternative conceptions of what constitutes anti-racist feminist activism and who is considered an "activist," across racial, national and economic lines and in different historical moments. I privilege literature in this genealogy because cultural production does not necessarily assume the liberal distinctions between civil society and the State, and because literature and cultural texts can hold together different and contradictory discourses that might open up spaces for new critical work on feminist activism and social movements more generally. Unlike the social science discourses (I describe above) that often presume, even require, formulations of global civil society as a space necessarily outside of state and market interests, I find that literature can disrupt the naturalization of these binaries and simultaneously carve out a space for new critique. Because I am deeply invested in emerging a multiplicity of social movement histories and subjectivities to expand what counts as activism for dominant feminisms in the present moment, in the following chapters I consider the works of black feminists Pauline Hopkins, Bernice Johnson Reagon, Alice Walker, and Octavia Butler because they represent alternative activist practices and social imaginaries that have often been eclipsed (or rewritten to serve the logics of NGOization) from dominant feminist social movements' historical memories due to, in part, the ascendancy of the NGO as the preeminent mode of creating social transformation. I turn to literature to explore the historically different relationships between non-profits, NGOs and feminist activist subjects' activism in order to consider who and what has been disappeared from political society in order to cohere today's common sense way of thinking about political and social change. Further, a focus on cultural production allows me to trouble the very concepts of the "political" and "civil society," and to

think critically about which subjectivities and what histories, practices and imaginations were excised in order to unify the categories themselves. I conclude this first chapter with a rather lengthy example of how I understand and approach the animating questions and stakes of this project through a close reading of black feminist Gloria Naylor's novel, *Bailey's Café*.

### **III. Unpacking Neoliberal Visions of Global Civil Society**

To restate, this project furthers the critical conversations emerging in academia and in activist circles on the Non-Profit Industrial Complex and the NGOization of social movements by focusing on “alternative” black feminist activist subject formations in literary narratives in order to emerge historical memories (and forgettings) of feminist activism that the dramatic proliferation, legitimization, and figuration of NGOs and non-profits as the most logical mode of social change in the post-Civil Rights era, has, at best, marginalized from mainstream feminist memory. This legitimization, as I suggested earlier, is rooted in the normalization—across the board—of neoliberal conceptions of global civil society, where the NGO is imagined to both necessarily represent the “grassroots” as well as inhabit a “3<sup>rd</sup> sector” full of healthy civic contestation, but far removed from state and market interests and nationalist attachments. In liberal political theory, distinctions between civil society and the State is formulated as a critical and necessary division, thus civil society and global civil society are conceptualized as separate spheres populated by public organizations, non-profit corporations, and non-governmental organizations: an “arena [of] uncoerced collective action and shared interests.”<sup>76</sup> For liberal political theorists like Alexis De Tocqueville, civil society is a sphere of freedom and publicness, and the ideologies and practices associated with both civil society and global civil society are thought to be autonomous from state and market interests (though global civil society is theorized as un beholden to nationalist preoccupations, and located differently, as I pointed out

earlier—above and below the State). Under this logic, institutions imagined to be part of civil society (and/or global civil society) are understood as neutral or ambivalent to state investments in the sense that they are supposedly free from state sponsored ideologies and thus, are assumed to be easily distinguishable from state projects or for-profit, economic driven corporate interests. Within this tradition of political theory, “voluntary associations” are essential to upholding liberal and neoliberal individualism (and the distinctions between state, market, and civil interests) because, the rational goes, through a voluntary contract, individuals realize themselves fully in collective action with other free individuals. Non-profits and NGOs protect the individual from the State through collective voluntary association and, simultaneously, reflect the values and demands of individuals, uniting multiple individual interests into a single channel, and socializing the multiplicity of individual needs, desires and demands into a disciplined and unified singular end. Global civil society differs from civil society, as Lester Salamon suggests, because it combines individuals who are no longer attached to nationalist preoccupations into a mobilized (but still individualized) global consciousness, and moves them to support what is conceived of as transnational “public good.”

Interestingly, Neera Chandhoke writes in *The Conceits of Civil Society* that though today this neoliberal meaning of civil society may appear to be self-evident, historically it has been a contested and problematic concept with distinct theoretical frameworks. “There was a time, in other words, when civil society was an essentially contested concept. Today it has become a consensual concept, ‘a hurrah word,’ and a matter of tiresomely unanimous acclaim.”<sup>77</sup>

Chandhoke’s work suggests categories such as “civil society,” “democracy” and “coalition” have been differently flattened out, abstracted and emptied of histories of struggle, contradiction and contestation. This, in part, explains the tendency many Transnational Feminist Network theorists

uncritically employ today: presupposing the concept “global civil society” as always signaling “voluntary agencies and what is euphemistically called the third sector,”<sup>78</sup> where the ambiguities historically embedded in the term have been removed, leaving global civil society to be an arena solely associated with goodwill, altruism, self-help and liberal notions of solidarity. Chandoke’s work also points out that present-day formulations of civil society (as global civil society) additionally rely on the assumption that it is not only a separate sphere from the State, *it is also an alternative to the State*, a space where social movements can mobilize, organize and theorize free from state interests, where theoretically the State is not even necessarily the target of such interventions.

Meanwhile alternative genealogies of the category civil society *presume* the overlapping, dialectical relationship between the State, global civil society and the market, and situate the role of institutions associated with global civil society as absolutely entangled in state interests. For how is it, as Chandoke questions, that global civil society is outside of the State when the “condition of civil society” or the rule of law which regulates the sphere, is institutionalized by the State, and civil transactions require state regulation? “Not only are the state and civil society a precondition for the other, but the logic of one constitutes the other.”<sup>79</sup> Turning away from political traditions that presuppose and/or rely on a clear distinction between the State and civil society, I look to Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci for alternative theorizations of state power that complicate the relationships between the State, the market and (global) civil society, in order to think critically about the role that institutions like NGOs and non-profits have historically (and differently) played in producing state power accommodating citizens—or what this dissertation calls more specifically, feminist activist subjects. A Marxian framework refuses to distinguish between “private” and “public” interests, and finds the relationship between the State and civil

society to be one that is constantly overlapping, mutually reinforcing and dialectical. For instance, in “On the Jewish Question,” Karl Marx troubles the distinction between the State and civil society:

The perfected political state is by its nature the species-life of man in *opposition* to his material life. All the presuppositions of this egoistic life continue to exist *outside* the sphere of the state in *civil* society, but as qualities of civil society. Where the political state has attained its full degree of development man leads a double life, a life in heaven and a life on earth, not only in his mind, in his consciousness, but in *reality*. He lives in the *political community*, where he regards himself as a *communal being*, and in *civil society*, where he is active as a *private individual*, regards other men as means, debases himself to a means and becomes a plaything of alien powers. The relationship of the political state to civil society is just as spiritual as the relationship of heaven to earth.<sup>80</sup>

As Marx suggests, by emancipating itself from difference or particularity, the State posits itself as “universal” and consequently relegates difference and individualism to the space of civil society. Through the universalizing language of citizenship, “man” achieves formal rights to own property and participates in the political sphere as an abstracted “communal being.” This universalization of equality through formal access to private property simultaneously renders civil society a discrete sphere but one that is tethered to difference, for civil society is constructed as the domain of the particular, the “material life” of man, and the realm of the individual. The political sphere, or the State, is universalized and access to formal equality offered through the State presupposes the notion that there are no material differences between “men”: everyone is equal, everyone is an “imaginary member of a fictitious

sovereignty.”<sup>81</sup> Thus, a Marxian analysis, which names the State as inherently invested in the institutionalization, legitimation and (re)enforcement of property rights, collapses the notion that the State, the market and civil society are necessarily distinct spheres. For, if the State regulates universality through property rights (via the universal right to property), the foundations for such universal rights are based in particularity; namely, for Marx, class differences and distinctions. In other words, the State must presuppose class divisions in order to create formal equality and universal property rights and subsequently, though civil society’s interests are “private,” based on particularity and material life, the “public” state is necessarily invested in reproducing these “private” interests. Within this theoretical framework, then, liberal spatializations of the State, the market, and civil society as autonomous and distinct spheres is an impossible distinction to maintain.

For Marx, the State has to acknowledge civil society, reinstate it and “allow itself to be dominated by it.” The State is where divisions of civil society are superseded; it furthers a universality that is fundamentally about forwarding the aspirations and logics of capitalism. The State has a necessary commitment to the reproduction of civil society, which in turn, is a commitment to state interests or the reproduction of capitalist social relations. Through his theory of hegemony, Antonio Gramsci further theorizes the States’ investment in reproducing a distinct sphere called civil society as part of a strategy to produce power abiding citizen-subjects. Yet, unlike Marx, Gramsci does not find the State beholden to civil society but rather, in some instances, Gramsci stresses that in “concrete reality, civil society and State are one and the same,”<sup>82</sup> that differing modes of citizen-subject constitution cannot be reduced to either modes of state power or civil society—they are articulated together, implicating each other at all times.

If every State tends to create and maintain a certain type of civilization and of citizen (and hence of collective life and of individual relations), and to eliminate certain customs and attitudes and to disseminate others, then the Law will be its instrument for its purpose (together with the school system, and other institutions and activities.) It must be developed so that it is suitable for such a purpose---so that it is maximally effective and productive of positive results.<sup>83</sup>

Thus, in order to conform subjects to state power and state sanctioned relations of production, the State must both eliminate “certain customs” and simultaneously, through Law and institutions in civil society, maintain “common-sense,” or a certain sensibility within its citizenry. For Gramsci, hegemony is this very process by which a particular set of class interests become universalized, naturalized and experienced as common-sense, even when those very interests work, perhaps, against the interests of the subjects themselves. Hegemony is this fragile moment when ruling class interests are produced and function as the “collective will,” when they become the general habits and guiding principles for the entire society, and when the ruling class sensibilities are experienced by the larger body of subjects as natural, logical. And, for Gramsci, such class hegemony projects are not restricted to either the State or civil society. Rather, the “organicism of the bourgeoisie” facilitates bourgeois class hegemony across state projects and across institutions in civil society which, then, suggests that state projects cannot necessarily be distinguished from the interests of civil society *and* that institutions understood as part of civil society, such as non-profits and NGOs, are also deeply imbricated in (re)producing state power accommodating subjects.

Post-colonial scholars including (but not limited to) Gayatri Spivak and Partha Chatterjee have also made significant interventions against normalized (neo)liberal conceptions of civil society and global civil society. Spivak, for instance, points out that Transnational Feminist Networks and NGOs rely on the assumption that states *will* recognize and attend to international interventions, change its “domestic behavior,” and consequently shift the terrain by which the State and the citizen negotiate. In “Diasporas Old and New: Women in the Transnational World,” Spivak takes feminist social scientists like Keck and Sikkink to task for advancing a “transnationalism that silently presupposes as civil structure,” where NGOs figured as the preeminent voice for civil society presuppose a civil structure that in some spaces, simply is not there. For Spivak, NGOization conceals two problems: the lack of a welfare state in the “south” and the dismantling of the welfare state in the “north.”<sup>84</sup> Similarly, Partha Chatterjee in *Politics of the Governed* moves away from privileging liberal conceptions of civil society (that are based on connecting civil society to the nation-state, popular sovereignty and equal rights for citizens) as the singular site to increase participatory democracies, arguing that “benefits that are meant to be available [...] are effectively cornered by those who have greatest” privilege, access, knowledge and influence in the system already. Instead, Chatterjee offers a conception of “political society” as an alternative to civil society and describes it as a “normatively nebulous zone,” a space where political mobilization can *sometimes* work against the distribution of power in society as a whole.

Gramsci demands that the complex relationships and struggles between civil society, political society, and how civic institutions are differently involved in furthering state power (or “the educative function” of the State), must be theorized within their own

particular, historically specific contexts. In the same spirit, this dissertation insists on developing a critical and historical understanding of NGOization that is attentive to the NGO and non-profit within particular formations of state power—how and in what ways has the non-profit and NGO been historically bound up in the educative function of particular and distinct constellations of state power. Thus, the contemporary regime of NGOization and this particular (normalized) invocation of global civil society championed by Salamon, Lipschutz and Keane, for example, must be considered and contextualized in relation to transformations in state power in the contemporary moment, in which the “neoliberal state” is, as many scholars have described, increasingly a decentralized network of administrative apparatuses that is being progressively privatized while simultaneously outsourcing social responsibility. Generally, neoliberal globalization necessitates the State, particularly in “Third World” countries, “should withdraw from the social sector,” the market must be free, and people in civil society “should organize their own social and economic reproduction.”<sup>85</sup> This “liberation” of civil society is, at the same time, when globalization processes have drastically eroded and/or reorganized state funded social services. Critical of Lipschutz and other such global civil society enthusiasts, Chandhoke argues that within this particular political context, global civil society positions itself as a third sector separate alternative to state-centric international orders *and* to networks of the global market, and that this separation “elides the way in which each of these domains is constructed by power, which spilling over arbitrary boundaries underpins the whole.”<sup>86</sup> To recall, then, global civil society purports to both defy national boundaries and to possess the ability to reorganize and shape the structure of international politics by denying the primacy and power of states, which

further the notion that global civil society is uncontaminated by the interests of neoliberal states, nor imbricated in facilitating the violent expansion of global capitalism. Since the 1970's, NGOs emerged as the most favored "actor" in global civil society (whose very existence indicates the presence of this so-called third sector), growing exponentially in numbers and power in the space cleared by "the rolling back of the state" allowing, in return, the State to increasingly transfer social responsibility to the domain of the NGO. David Harvey describes this shift to neoliberal state power formations in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, finding that NGO's and non-profits have "grown remarkably under neoliberalism, giving rise to the belief that opposition mobilized outside of the State apparatus and within some separate entity called 'civil society' is the powerhouse of oppositional politics and social transformation."<sup>87</sup> Hence, NGOs, positioned as free from state interests, are transformed into moral "guardians of civil society" even as they continue to partner and subcontract with the State, intergovernmental organizations and liberal philanthropic foundations. Where access to the market was once imagined by many neoliberal political theorists as the dominant solution to the uneven, exploitative processes of globalization, champions of global civil society replace former state formations not with the market, but with institutions "based on networks of trust" in global civil society: primarily NGOs. Thus, Chandhoke suggests the construction and maintenance of an NGO filled alternative sphere (global civil society) is a way for the State to 1) appear to check the "unrestricted corporate world" and present itself as transparent and accountable; and 2) replace the State with institutions of global civil society that are assumed to represent the "aspirations of the people," are imagined to be outside of state and global market interests, and are

inherently moral products of (individualized) civic transnational participation.

This reliance on a certain imagination of global civil society (as separate from both the State and the global market) is what underlies the assumption in Transnational Feminist Network theory that NGOs are indeed adequately representing and accountable to “the grassroots,” or to recall Lang’s claim, that NGOs are an effective substitute for actual citizen participation even as they are simultaneously used as an alibi for or proof of, for example, the United Nations’ commitment to gender mainstreaming. Transnational Feminist Networks very existence becomes evidence of a global civil society that is democratic, vibrant, and “developing as a serious counterforce to institutional actors and national lobbies.”<sup>88</sup> This is not to say that there is no contestation on the terrain of global civil society but when NGOs are uncritically positioned as the horizon of activist struggles, it should be remembered, in Wahneema Lubiano’s cautionary words, there is no “outside” of state power, that neoliberal “domination is so successful precisely because it sets the terrain upon which struggle occurs at the same time it preempts opposition” through “inhabiting the vectors where we would resist,” by appropriating what appears to be oppositional strategies, and also by “having already written the script that we have to argue within and against.”<sup>89</sup>

#### **IV. Expanding the Political: Alternative Feminist Imaginaries in *Bailey’s Café***

The last section of this chapter turns to Gloria Naylor’s 1992 novel *Bailey’s Café* to provide a concrete example of how turning to cultural production, and for the purposes of this project, literature in particular, can emerge alternative feminist political imaginaries to the dominant institution building logics particular to the contemporary regime of NGOization and the Non-Profit Industrial Complex. Originally I proposed an entire chapter dedicated to Naylor’s

novel as a platform for a deeper consideration of the kinds of coalitional politics that might emerge in non-institutional spaces such as bars and music clubs, and I hope to eventually return to *Bailey's Café* in order to develop a more historical and in-depth account of the kind of political imaginary this novel offers contemporary feminist activists and scholars. While admittedly, my vision for a lengthier consideration of music clubs and bars exceeds the ambitions and limitations of this dissertation, I feel it is necessary to briefly mention the larger context from which I approach *Bailey's Café* and, arguably, this project in general. My overarching interest in this novel and the particular café space Naylor envisions is very much informed by and connected to my own anti-racist organizing experiences in bars and music clubs, specifically against the growth and influence of the white power music industry in Northwest music and art communities. My recent collaboration, *If You Don't They Will*, is one of many examples of community organizing that is currently happening under the NPIC, but is, at the same time, on the outskirts, and is illegible as political work due, in part, to our differing strategies and imaginations of what constitutes anti-racist political work. In the final section of this chapter I will first briefly detail *If You Don't They Will's* activist strategy and then turn to a reading of *Bailey's Café* that finds some parallels with *If You Don't They Will's* "alternative" vision of anti-racist feminist cultural organizing under the NPIC. However, I find the political imaginaries represented in the novel move far beyond simply instantiating *If You Don't They Will's* approach to cultural organizing. In fact, I conclude that *Bailey's Café* challenges even what might be considered today to be an alternative political model of activism under NGOization and the NPIC. More specifically, *Bailey's Café* challenges understandings of activism as always having a normative dimension, as always a hegemonic project working to shift common-sense, which inherently relies on a certain conception of the aims and tactics of

community organizing in public spaces such as bars and music clubs, or even, Habermas' famous coffee shop. While, admittedly, I find it virtually impossible to even conceive of a political project that lacks a normative dimension, Naylor's vision of activism—that is virtually unintelligible under the regime of NGOization and the NPIC—is exactly the kind of “alternative” political imaginary that I believe feminism needs more of today.

In 2002, when the international white power music industry surpassed bank and armored car robberies to become a multi-million dollar venture and the leading source of income for white nationalist organizing—funding strategies ranging from electoral campaigns and school-board take-overs, to international music tours, merchandising, internet presence, printing presses, and record distribution—organizers on the Left were still scratching their heads over why National Alliance leader William Pierce (a “suit and tie” racist with a Ph.D. in Physics from Oregon State University) bought a small, seemingly insignificant, primarily Nazi skinhead music label called Resistance Records. For in the 1980's, white nationalist leaders such as Pierce, Tom Metzger (John Birch Society, founder of White Aryan Resistance), and David Duke (former Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan, former Louisiana governor candidate, former presidential candidate, now leader of internationally based National Association for the Advancement of White People) distanced themselves from Nazi skinheads and other “extreme” white nationalist music subcultures, believing that the inherent racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia and sexism of the movement would be better coded within scientific and academic discourses, Christian Identity (whose primary tenets center on the belief that Jews are the literal seed of Satan, people of color are the “mud races” and have no souls and that white Christian men are the true lost tribe of Israel)<sup>90</sup> and conservative, more palatable mainstream appearances. However, in the 1990's these same “suit and tie” racist leaders turned more and more to white nationalist cultural

production and music, in particular, as a powerful site for organizing and expanding their ranks across multiple generations, subcultures, and countries. Metzger started supporting and distributing comics, Zines, radio and television programs and worked more strategically with the growing Nazi skinhead population in Portland, Oregon; now disbarred Illinois lawyer Mathew Hale of World Church of the Creator started courting Nazi skinheads such as Ben Smith—the young man who in 1999 shot and wounded nine Jewish people, shot and killed African-American Northwestern University basketball coach Ricky Byrdsong, and shot and killed Won-Joon Yoon, a student at Indiana University during a three day, three state shooting spree;<sup>91</sup> and, at the time, seventy-two year old former aerospace engineer Richard Butler of Christian Identity Aryan Nations hosted “Reich-n-Roll” and “Aryan-Woodstock” music festivals for families and fans from around the world at their compound in Hayden Lake, Idaho. In 1999, though Pierce himself preferred to listen Wagner while reading “scientifically” based racist academic journals such as *American Renaissance*, he purchased a tiny music label called Resistance Records (run by a Canadian man George Burdi) because he envisioned music and music spaces as a strategy to not only generate new sources of revenue but also, and perhaps more significantly, organize young people into the white nationalist movement. He understood how white power music, and the kinds of experiences, relationships and networking that happens at racist, anti-racist or *any* kind of music show, is subject-making and world shaping. Pierce is quoted in a project I worked on, “Turn It Down: A Campaign against White Power Music”: *Soundtracks to the White Revolution*:

I would say that 95% of the youth movement around the world today is because of music. Mass media, television, its flashing images, moving quickly, tightly edited, all the time. In the age of mass media, you can't be putting flyers on cars

and expect to reach the population. You need to get efficient. You need to use the mass media and that's where music comes in. Music is the best form of mass media that we can afford.<sup>92</sup>

Today Resistance Records is an international label complete with flashy merchandise and glossy magazines, and now offers a diverse selection of white nationalist music: from Nazi Oi! bands to National Socialist Black Metal, from white power blue grass, to fascist classical music, from women-led white nationalist pop, experimental and noise music to even, they boast, white power hip-hop. Resistance Records is just one white nationalist music label that generates a significant amount of income for the white nationalist movement as well as, and more to the point, organizes, networks, and carves out spaces for people to *experience* what it means to be white power, shaping a range of white nationalist subjects who (differently) understand themselves as the biologically and culturally superior race and, simultaneously, victims of the Jewish plot of multiculturalism and Z.O.G. (Zionist Occupied Government).

My more recent collaboration with artist and activist Cristien Storm, *If You Don't They Will*, describes the strategy that white nationalist and anti-racist social movements alike utilize (perhaps differently and, of course, for different ends) as cultural organizing. Simply put, *If You Don't They Will* defines cultural organizing as a practice that situates organizing and social change in the environment of the moment, the everyday of a particular time, place, community, and as a world making strategy. Cultural organizing is an approach that does not try to create one particular response or produce one way of, for example, "being white nationalist," "being a feminist," or "being political." Rather, it is about creating *movement* within a certain cultural context, it creates waves that impact the subculture, the participants' identities, music communities, cultural production and so forth, in a way that irreversibly shifts the political

climates of differing communities. More concretely, in a blog *If You Don't They Will* wrote for the MacArthur Foundation's Puget SoundOFF, Cristien Storm recalls how Home Alive (a collective of anti-violence artists and musicians who formed in response to the rape and murder of Mia Zappata of Seattle band The Gits) approached the numerous cultural organizing projects that emerged in response to Zappata's murder that were often rooted in different and conflicting perspectives, desires, and political imaginaries.

There were conflicts of interest, conflicts of opinion, differing views, and even arguments and disputes over how to respond to violence. Our response was that 'there wasn't one right way to respond to violence' and it wasn't Home Alive's job to tell people how to respond, but to support people responding to violence in order to create community dialogues that might help create communities [...] where violence was less likely to happen.<sup>93</sup>

Storm talks about how "all kinds of conversations were happening" about rape and other forms of racial, gender and sexual violence, and that these conversations often happened in places and in ways that "activist don't often think of as 'organizing.'" "Beer drinking working class guys hanging out at The Comet for happy hour" were talking about domestic violence and how they heard through music events that on Super Bowl Sunday, domestic violence increases. "They started talking about how messed up that was and how they might respond if anyone they know says or does anything, and that they need to figure out how to respond." Storm finds this conversation of men "responding to domestic violence in their own language," a direct result of the cultural organizing happening in Seattle music communities after Mia Zappata's murder—although, Storm admits, "that particular group of men would probably never call it that." Nor would they identify as activists, in general.

Contrary, then, to the institution-building logics of the present that over-privilege activist strategies that are empirically recognizable<sup>94</sup> in order to court and sustain foundation funding, If You Don't They Wills' approach to cultural organizing suggests that the political significance of an event such as a benefit show (or an awareness campaign that happens at a music club or festival) actually rests on what kinds of subject-making experiences happen during the event, and that the political potential of cultural organizing as a form of activism, does not lie in the existence of the event itself.<sup>95</sup> Rather than focusing on the event itself as the horizon of activism, through my earlier description of white nationalist cultural organizing, I attempt to describe what I am more interested in here: the kinds of dynamics, political sensibilities and coalitions that are shaped in music and bar spaces. However, If You Don't They Will has learned, often the hard way, that this approach to community organizing is increasingly unintelligible under NGOization and the NPIC. While If You Don't They Wills' community organizing model turns to cultural production to materialize alternative conceptions of anti-racist activism, in the same spirit, this dissertation project turns to literature to challenge the limitations of dominant feminist political imaginaries and expand feminist ways of knowing the political beyond institutionalization as the horizon of social change. I consider the kinds of anti-racist feminist politics that are enabled (and denied) in bar and music spaces through a reading of the café space in Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café*. Though the café in the novel is not a music club in the traditional sense, I will explore how the overarching metaphors that organize the café space (as a listening space) are routed through the musical language, rhythm, and the "loneliness, uprootedness, and suffering"<sup>96</sup> of the blues. Naylor herself describes the musical mood of her novel as her attempt to transliterate Duke Ellington's "Mood: Indigo," also the title of a chapter in "The Jam" section of the novel, because

the song, like the magical Bailey's Café, is the expression of feeling "every sort of lack, every sort of 'might have been' imaginable."<sup>97</sup>

Unlike the majority of literary scholarship on *Bailey's Café*, I pay particular attention to the kinds of politics formed in the café that, under the current regime of the NGOization of social movements, are otherwise unintelligible and certainly would never count as feminist activism. What kinds of political imaginaries are enabled in Naylor's liminal "way station" café that can be accessed from any place on the planet but only by those most in need of a temporary "break" from the severity and particularity of racial, gender, sexual and economic violence in 1948?<sup>98</sup> What kinds of socialities are enabled in Naylor's café where one must be "needing the blues" in order "to get there,"<sup>99</sup> a place where patrons can either choose to end their life on their own terms, or simply take a temporary break from the devastation and despair of their daily lives? Yet, interestingly, much of the secondary criticism produced from within the academy on *Bailey's Cafe* furthers (and desires) a naturalized and often un-interrogated, pre-constituted definition of activism, often relying on the existence of Naylor's café space as, in itself, evidence of a counter-public, a "space of resistance," and a "safe space." Rarely are the logics of the café investigated and most critiques fail to acknowledge the existing tensions and power dynamics between customers, despite the narrator's insistence that the Café is not the *answer* for those "who fall through the cracks of the upswings and downswings,"<sup>100</sup> and is "nothing but a way station, and the choices have always been clear: you eventually go back out and resume your life—hopefully better off than when you found us—or you head to the back of the café and end it."<sup>101</sup> Instead, in the majority of the literary criticism on *Bailey's Café*, there is a lack of attention to the power dynamics and complex hierarchies of the blues through which a particular sociality like Bailey's Cafe might temporarily emerge. The political goes un-interrogated for the majority of the

scholarship tends to presume a general understanding of what already constitutes a radical black feminist political space.

For instance, in “Bailey’s Café as Sports Bar, or Why Baseball Needs a Way Station” (2000), Margaret White describes the café as a “common meeting arena where reoccurring clientele can develop into a supportive community.”<sup>102</sup> In “Healers in Gloria Naylor’s Fiction” (1994), Kathleen M. Puhr positions the café as a “healing place” and a sanctuary that restores “life and hope to women on the edge.”<sup>103</sup> In “Towards a Literacy of Empathy: Inhabiting Gloria Naylor’s *Bailey’s Café*” (2001), Carol Bender and Roseanne Hoefel understand the text as a “model for empathetic listening” for readers in particular, and argue that through collectivity Bailey’s Café opens up “zones of possibility” that are reparative for both the characters in the novel as well as the (now) empathetic listening readers, creating a “momentary but potentially momentous alliance and shared resistance.”<sup>104</sup> Maxine Lavon Montgomery’s work in “Authority, Multivocality, and the New World Order in Gloria Naylor’s *Bailey’s Café*” (1995) describes the café as a space that provides “unity among the widely disparate voices”<sup>105</sup> and “harmony between opposing rituals and traditions drawn from a multi-cultural community.”<sup>106</sup> Montgomery’s later book, *The Fiction of Gloria Naylor: Houses and Spaces of Resistance* (2010), theorizes the café as a “safe space” and a site of “resistance and liberation struggle,” a “safe haven” that is a “uniquely maternal place of beginnings where one is allowed just to be.”<sup>107</sup> Drawing correlations between the quasi-privacy of the café space and black feminist theorizations of the private sphere, for Montgomery the café is a transnational “utopian domestic space that is male-friendly” where “imposed boundaries of race, ethnicity, and nationality no longer exist and is accessible to “anyone regardless of gender for whom the search for home has proven elusive,” where “one must abandon essentialist thought before entering.”<sup>108</sup> From Sadie

the “twenty-five cent whore,” also known as “The One the Coat Hanger Missed,” to Esther who, as a twelve year old is sold by her brother to a notoriously sadistic land owner, the pain and suffering of the differing characters in the novel is so palpable, so intense, it is no wonder that many critics (and readers alike) desire an escape from or, at the very least, some kind of cathartic resolution to the devastating circumstances the novel almost relentlessly details. However, my primary interest here, and in the overall dissertation project, is to investigate, explore, emerge and (re)remember the particularities of differing “spaces of resistance,” feminist coalitions, counterpublics, and other forms of liberation and social change practices—to insist on, under the regime of NGOization, attending to these often reified and rarely interrogated concepts that are assumed to always already signal a singular political imaginary and generalized sense of what constitutes feminist activism and activist practices.<sup>109</sup>

*Bailey’s Café* is Gloria Naylor’s bookend to a series of four novels including *The Women of Brewster Place*, *Linden Hills*, and *Mama Day*. Saturated with biblical allusions and steeped in the language of the blues, Naylor describes one of the ambitions of the novel as creating a space to listen to what women in the bible (Eve, Mary and Jezebel) had to say, “revamp[ing] their stories into post-World War II personas.”<sup>110</sup> To create such a listening space, Naylor relies on the musical language of the blues to organize the logics of the café space (the Jam, one-note players, minor voices, the Vamp), and as Sylvie Chavanelle points out, the differing stories in the novel are meant to be understood as a performance for the reader. The nameless narrator—the maestro—utilizes the language of the blues to warn that if “you don’t listen below the surface,” the characters are “one-note players. Flat and predicable. But nobody comes in here with a simple story. Every one-liner’s got a life underneath it. Every point’s got a counterpoint.”<sup>111</sup> “Anything worth hearing in this greasy spoon happens under the surface.”<sup>112</sup> Chavanelle also

notes that the rhythm of the blues is conveyed in the text both visually and thematically, and like traditional blues music, is rooted in experiences of “loneliness, uprootedness and suffering.”<sup>113</sup> The café space allows each transitory character to have her/his own chapter where they can share their personal suffering and be heard, yet the devastating tales of their lives are not organized hierarchically, but articulated with other “regulars” that frequent the café. Though Bailey’s Café is a magical space “at the end of the line” where the differing but re-occurring characters drink “lousy coffee,” “eat lousy food,” talk about sports and politics and gossip about each other, it is also a space where patrons have a chance to take a breath and share their individual stories, voicing the temporary production of subjugated knowledges that, “if you stick around and listen to the music,” the listening experience will earn you a Ph.D.<sup>114</sup> In this way, the café space, like the music of the blues, can “blend several voices and keep them distinct as solos,”<sup>115</sup> and the absence of closure, redemption, and/or the transcendence of violence and oppression in the novel—“we give no answers—and get no answers”—mirrors the experience of the blues, only a temporary reprieve, “only a temporary stability and release.”

Naylor describes her four novels as differing “meta-physical situations” where the “place is the character” and the place, in *Bailey’s Café* in particular, is a liminal, magical “way station,” a greasy spoon café open twenty-four hours a day, accessible from anywhere on the globe and “wherever it needs to be,”<sup>116</sup> where, in order to find it, you have to reach a certain level of suffering, “needing the blues to get there/look and you can hear it/the blues open a place never closing: Bailey’s Café.”<sup>117</sup> In fact, “needing the blues to get there” is where the similarities between the differing customers end. For instance, the narrator, a young black man whose parents were domestic workers for black middle class families in Brooklyn, enters the space as a soldier returning from fighting the Japanese in World War II. He cannot stop the “shakes” of the

“beautiful, soul-wrenching blue” of the war nor can he dissolve the haunting memories of the “explosion of a hundred entrails,” even as he returns home to the city of San Francisco “going crazy with victory celebrations.”<sup>118</sup>In the midst of the celebrations he is drawn to the water, and looking over the pier into the fog, he considers:

What do we do when the party is over? I knew life was going to be very different (*A different prayer, could there have been a different prayer*), and I felt it just wasn't worth it. Before Hiroshima it had definitely been worth it. I still believe this country had even been worth Hiroshima happening, but at the very moment of Hiroshima happening, it all stopped being worth it. You get a man like that, with thoughts like that, staring over the edge[.]<sup>119</sup>

In the midst of contemplating suicide, his wife Nadine reaches through the fog to tell him that there is a customer waiting, and time freezes as the narrator is transported to Bailey's Café where he is suddenly standing in front of a grill with a spatula in his hand and a burning burger sizzling in a puddle of grease. “[W]ithout thinking I flipped it over. We were in business.”

Or café regular and long-time neighboring entrepreneur Eve, walking for one thousand years eventually finds her home on the magical block of Bailey's Café and opens a boarding house that some patrons argue is intended for women in desperate need, though others venomously describe it as a whorehouse. Adopted by an abusive and cruel preacher named “Godfather” in Pilottown, Louisiana, Eve is thrown out of church (and therefore the town) when she is caught masturbating to the stomping vibrations of neighbor boy Billy in a patch of mint grass. “He said I was going to leave him the same way he'd found me, naked and hungry.”<sup>120</sup>Godfather stripped Eve of her brown sack dress and “purged her” with salt water to “remove, he said, every ounce of food his hard work had put into my stomach,”<sup>121</sup>before

banishing the young girl from Pilottown. Eve walks East saturated in delta dust, “layers and layers of it were forming,” “up toward the saliva in my mouth, the mucus in my nose. Mud forming and caking around the tear ducts in my eyes [...] it found the hidden dampness under my finger nails [...] the moist space between my hips [...] drawing itself up into the slick walls of my intestines.”<sup>122</sup> Born now, she describes, not of Godfather but of the delta dust, in 1913 Eve reaches New Orleans “neither male nor female—mud,” and in ten years proceeds to outgrow the fortunes the city has to offer, “fifty-seven thousand, six hundred and forty-one dollars, not one of them earned on my back.” She finds herself bored and too overqualified to be, even, the governor of Louisiana, and realizes that “thinking on up the line” of what to do with her “potential” means “coming to the end of the line.”<sup>123</sup> “It seemed there was nowhere on earth for a woman like me.” With nowhere to go and no calculable future, Eve finds the same magical block where Bailey’s Café resides and opens her brownstone boardinghouse. Here there is never a season of the year without flowers, and the men who visit the boarders (in accordance with Eve’s rules) must purchase the flowers that the different women of Eve’s place prefer.

Indeed, it is “the blues”—suffering, dead-ends, hopelessness and dreams of suicide—that are prerequisite for accessing Bailey’s Café and once there, rather than solving the individuals’ problems, the café merely offers a temporary reprieve from the violence of the differing patrons’ lives, a transitory space through which people pass but do not remain “between the edge of the world and infinite possibility,” a “halfway house—halfway between finite and infinite [...] The edge of the world is at the front door and the void at the back.”<sup>124</sup> As a way station, it is a stopping point on a journey where one can change over and move in a different direction and within the logics of the café space, there are two options: to go back to the life you temporarily paused, or to go to the back door where it “takes courage to turn the knob and heart to leave the

steps,”<sup>125</sup> to walk into the void and end one’s life. The narrator describes the everyday suicides at Bailey’s Café, the people “who come in through the front door and head straight to the rear of the café—and don’t come back.”

I try to mind my grill and stay put, although sometimes you’ll hear the most beautiful music [...] I might peek through the rear door then, and there’ll be small parties or huge parties going on. [...] I can tell if it’s gonna be a suicide when the whole thing starts to glow so bright it hurts your eyes, and the beautiful music gets so dim it hurts your head to strain to hear it. I’ll turn away and come back inside, but I know what that particular customer has planned: they’re going to stay out back until a certain memory becomes just too much to bear.<sup>126</sup>

Interestingly, the back door to the void, to nothingness, does not always lead to death. It is also a magical space where specific experiences can be conjured: Iceman Jones and Sadie the “twenty-five cent whore” dance the two-step under a sky he summons, for instance. Eve, in particular, possesses the ability to manipulate reality in the void and can magically engineer certain environments and experiences in the nothingness, such as the childhood bedroom of struggling heroin user Jesse Bell, where Eve “helps” her kick through offering her endless access to increasingly pure and potent drugs. While Eve repeatedly tells Jesse Bell “this is hell,” the month long agony Jesse Bell somehow endures does, indeed, free her from her dependence on the drug she originally turned to in order to survive the devastatingly public loss of her son and family when her relationship with a woman is revealed to disapproving black bourgeois in-laws.

Bailey’s Café operates as a “relay for broken dreams” or what Rebecca S. Wood describes in “Two Warring Ideals in One Dark Body: Universalism and Nationalism in Gloria Naylor’s *Bailey’s Café*,” a “transitory Bermuda Triangle,” a circuit between Eve’s place and

Gabe's eternally closed pawnshop "overflowing with the broken relics of uncountable dreams."<sup>127</sup> Patrons get directed to Bailey's Café from the pawnshop if they are able to decode Gabe's sign, "Back at \_\_\_\_\_," a time always one hour ahead of the person's present, followed by an arrow that points down the street to the café. If the future customer misunderstands the logics of the relay and keeps returning to the pawnshop hour after hour and if, importantly, Gabe "thinks they're worth it," he will turn the sign over to read "Out of Business" with the same arrow pointing to the greasy spoon. "Gabe is never open-we never close."<sup>128</sup> Once accessing Bailey's Café, the narrator directs "women who come straggling" in, women that are a "certain kind of woman," in the direction of Eve's place. Eve's place, according to the narrator, "has always been right down the block from the café,"<sup>129</sup> and is a boarding house for select single women who need a place to go, and though Eve is expressly not a "charitable person," "sometimes they pay, sometimes they don't" for boarding at Eve's place. Like the café space, the young women of Eve's brownstone way station experience a break from their differently devastating experiences of racial, gender, sexual and economic violence—from their own individual "dead-ends." Once a month Eve joins the "bored society charity women" and visits the women's penitentiary but unlike the other benevolent visitors, Eve attends to the "problem population" where she passes out her cards to only a select few. Interestingly, Eve makes it clear that the reason some women are accepted into her boarding house is not because she is "moved by their experiences," for "charity has nothing to do with it." Once accepted into Eve's place, the one rule Eve insists upon is that the women in her brownstone may only "entertain men who are willing to bring them flowers." And when the father of boarder Peaches (Mary) comes looking for his daughter, Eve instructs him to go home, leave his daughter in her hands and she

will, through the temporary refuge her boarding house provides, “return you daughter to you whole.”<sup>130</sup>

Contrary to some of the desires evident in the secondary criticism I outlined earlier, Bailey’s Café is not free of essentialist thinking or a “safe haven,” “refuge,” or “safe space,” if those terms signal (like I think they do, at least in this context and moment) an imagination of a black counter-public sphere that is comfortably free of hierarchy and power dynamics. The narrator, reflecting on how he “didn’t start in this business to make a living,” says the café door “will open and close, open and close” even though the greasy spoon’s coffee and food is lousy, “personal charm is not my strong point,” there are no menus or choices for that matter (except on the weekends when you can have *anything* to eat), and patronizing the café “can’t be for the company. Our customers are all so different I’ve yet to see anybody get along in here.”<sup>131</sup> Not only are the re-occurring patrons different, some also have essentialist notions about what constitutes proper blackness, including gender and homophobia, sexism, and anti-Semitism. Sister Carrie quotes scripture to condemn Eve’s place and considers the women boarders disrespectful sinning whores. Sugar Man cannot bare the presence of Eve’s housekeeper and security guard, a highly educated and wealthy man named Beckwourth Booker T. Washington Carver (known in the café as Miss Maple) who wears “light percale housedresses” most of the time. “He’ll start vibrating like one of those jackhammers, his eye blinking fifty thousand miles a minute, and *faggot* has been the kindest thing he’s called Miss Maple.”<sup>132</sup> And when Mariam, a fourteen year old virgin Ethiopian Jew gives birth in the void out back, many regulars, much to the narrator’s dismay, talk about how they have never “heard of a colored rabbi,” “there’s no such thing as a black Jew,” and that they “don’t trust those people.”<sup>133</sup> Indeed, though the narrator disagrees with these sentiments, the maestro begrudgingly admits that he cannot throw

Sugar Man or Sister Carrie out of the café. For, again, Bailey's Café is not owned by anyone. It is not the customer's space, nor does it belong to the narrator. It is no one's "personal discovery" and does not cater to the cultivation of one particular sensibility or experience. Though he first thought the café solved his problems and therefore might be the answer to the patron's struggles as well, Gabe reminds the narrator that the café can do no such thing. "My puppy, you still stand on that wharf in San Francisco, America. And the world, it still waits to commit suicide by swallowing a ball of fire. We do nothing but freeze time; we give no answers—and get no answers—for ourselves or the next man."<sup>134</sup> In other words, the café is not redemptive or healing in the sense that it can fix the patrons dire circumstances or offer resolution or freedom from racial, economic, gender and sexual violence and struggles; those desires are already foreclosed by the very logics of the café space.

Describing his relationship with Jewish pawnshop "owner" Gabe (who is actually in the Caucasus Mountains), the narrator notes the way the magical block of broken dreams allows for different (and, at times, opposing) identities, experiences and histories of violence to (potentially) form temporary intimacies and solidarities through the creation of listening spaces such as that in Bailey's Cafe. While all of the patrons who enter the café space must have the blues in common, unlike the "safe space" ideal desired by many of the critics I outlined above, the kind of sociality that emerges in Bailey's Café through listening to the blues of the re-occurring patrons neither hierarchically compares difference nor does it dissolve difference through an identification with, a mastery of, or a sharing of other people's pain and suffering. Rather, the café provides a listening space where the patrons can perform their own stories as well as listen to the other regulars' blues, the complex melodies "below the surface" where, perhaps, they will hear more than the musical stories of surface "one-note" players. This kind of

sociality is represented in the listening that happens between the maestro and Gabe constructed through “many long afternoons when two very different people can look each other in the eye over glasses of strong tea and learn.”

He’s a Russian Jew. I’m an American Negro. Neither of us is considered a national treasure in our countries, and that’s where the similarity ends. We don’t get into comparing notes on who did what to whom the most. Who’s got the highest pile of bodies. The way I see it, there is no comparison. When most folks come out with that phrase, what they’re really saying is that their pain is worse than your pain. But Gabe knows exactly what I mean: they’re two different ball games. And that’s why we can honestly talk to each other or even get into full blown subjects that other people wouldn’t dream of bringing up in mixed company. I don’t pull in his pogroms when he may dispute me on some point I’ve made about lynchings in the South, and he doesn’t pull in Jim Crow when I don’t agree with everything he says about the quotas on Jews. [...] This man is *not* my brother. [...] This man is simply someone who doesn’t have to run around trying to guess what I really think about him because I *tell* him so.<sup>135</sup>

Though clearly the Café in itself is not a permanent solution to the patrons’ problem—only a temporary though re-occurring retreat from the blues—even these underlying principles of the Café are challenged when Mariam appears on the magical block. Pregnant, fourteen, and a virgin, after Mariam is banished from her Ethiopian village, she walks five hundred miles across steep canyons and gorges to access the magical pawnshop from a back street in Addis Ababa. Mariam’s situation is unlike any that Gabe, Eve, and the narrator have encountered because as an Ethiopian Jew in the 1940’s, she literally has *nowhere* to return to, exceeding the organizing

principles of the relay of three way stations that assume an originary, returnable location of the patrons. Upon meeting Mariam, Gabe breaks the regular circuit (from pawnshop to café to Eve's place), and begs Eve to take her in. However, everyone involved is uneasy because a "child isn't supposed to be born on this street," and there is "no world for this girl to return to."<sup>136</sup> They even wonder if the birth of a child in a way station will disappear the entire block. For,

the choices here have always been clear: you eventually go back out and resume your life—hopefully better off than when you found us—or you head to the back of the café and end it. But how can Life itself begin here? A little snip of a girl bringing a really big question like that, because she got herself born black and a Jew.<sup>137</sup>

Gabe attempts to adopt Mariam out to other members of the Jewish community before her baby comes to term but in the end, Eve orchestrates a magical replication of Mariam's cultural birthing traditions as well as a brilliant light show to dull the excruciating pain of labor, and the young, virgin girl gives birth in the void behind the café, surrounded by café regulars and the women of Eve's place. This is a celebratory, even triumphant moment in the novel but it does not bring resolution to any particular character or to the relay of transitory spaces in general, only more complexities and problems.

The times are a-changing. If the world outside is becoming such that life itself can be brought forth in limbo, then one day, much too soon, I'm gonna start seeing young children walk through that door. Children who have lost their futures (*The children who survived with eyes that are beyond saving*).<sup>138</sup>

Soon after the virgin birth, Mariam dies, trapped in the imaginary cleansing waters of the void, "doomed out there in endless space," but her son George manages to live, and is handed off to

Irene, a customer who is a social worker that runs a shelter for homeless boys. But what kind of future is tethered to a life that begins in nothingness? Unfortunately, Irene is one of the more conservative, judgmental patrons, and believes Eve's place is a whorehouse rather than a way station for women with nowhere to go. This leads the narrator to share, "it bothers me that the little boy will grow up thinking that about his mother. He should know that when he was born the world lit up with lights. But what else can we do? The whole nature of this place runs against a customer ever walking in here who'd be in a position to adopt him."<sup>139</sup>

It is clear that *Bailey's Café* has the potential to generate many different, rich readings for expanding what counts as feminist activism, including contributing to work on identity, intersectionality, and coalitional politics predicated on difference. For my purposes here, however, I want to focus only on the kind of political space imagined in *Bailey's Café* in and against what I described earlier as the now dominant institution-centric feminist political imaginary. Reading Eve, Gabe and the narrator as part of an alternative activist subject formation that the NPIC and the NGOization of social movements has rendered illegible, I want to briefly reflect on the political potential of the spatial logics of the magical "Bermuda Triangle" of broken dreams. Contrary to the majority of the scholarship on *Bailey's Café* that, as I pointed out earlier, imposes a stabilized pre-determined imagination of what constitutes the politics of the café—a space that is free from hierarchy and provides salvation from the devastating racial, gendered, sexual, and economic violences differently experienced by the various characters—I want to instead pressure the categories for knowing the political by asking questions such as, what forms of activism does the architecture and rules of the café space enable? What sociality's are formed and represented in Naylor's café space? What are the rules of this counter-public, or

is this a counter-public? What is the political potential of a magical way station café space, full of every kind of lack and dead-end, with no pre-determined future?

First, unlike the dominant professional feminist activist subjects who form the “velvet triangle” (circuiting between the universities, the State, and NGOs), and who privilege formal education, specialization in non-profit and NGO management, and policy reform as prioritized qualities for feminist social movements, patrons need not a PhD but the blues to access the “Bermuda Triangle”: first the permanently closed pawnshop, then to Bailey’s Café, and finally, only sometimes, to Eve’s place. With the blues in tow, the circuit can be accessed from anywhere on the planet and nowhere in particular but it is, as Naylor explains, a temporary space of full of lack and one has to be able to decipher the clues the organizers use to signpost the location of the magical way station café: “Back at \_\_\_\_\_.” Unlike the institution building logics of dominant transnational feminist activists, Bailey’s Café offers its’ customers a momentary place to catch their breath, for one cannot stay in the café space forever. The café does, interestingly, engender political agency in that it provides an opportunity for customers to end their lives *on their own terms* through the magical conjuring of their choosing in the void out back. Unlike NGO activists and their corresponding organizing sensibilities, *Bailey’s Cafe* is not outcome oriented or bureaucratically organized, nor does it not provide resolution to or even attempt to answer any particular problems; it cannot (nor does it attempt to) change the future conditions of possibility that the characters must eventually return to. The dominant sensibility in the magical space does not think in terms of futurity, end goals, and solutions. “We give no answers,”<sup>140</sup> for the café as a rule only freezes time momentarily. The origin of Bailey’s Café, who opened it, who it is named after, “if there was a Bailey,” and who it is for, is also unknown and irrelevant; Bailey’s Café, then, neither has a particular origin story, nor does it offer a

foreseeable, knowable future. The café does organize the social relations between patrons through providing a listening space where regulars have the opportunity to share their individual blues. This kind of intimate voicing offers customers a temporary, though not uncomplicated, source of relief and comfort through providing an opportunity to both tell their stories of struggle and hardship and listen to the complexity of other people's sorrows, in a way that opens up new listening possibilities that is foundational to this form of sociality. But the social relations enabled through the regulars singing their blues in Bailey's Café does not lead to, as both TFN theorists and many literary scholars want to suggest, an overcoming of or dissolution of racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia and other relays of power that structure the social relations outside of the café space. Though patrons experience a break from their particular contexts, as I pointed out earlier, social, cultural and economic hierarchies are still very much at play in the café space, which means patrons cannot fully escape their circumstances—the power structures particular to their racial, sexual, national, economic, and gender formations follow them into the café space. And while many of the customers are able to access the café space because of the *failure* of reform projects, charitable endeavors and/or attempts to assimilate in the “real” world outside of the “Bermuda Triangle,” the café does not even attempt to provide answers to these kinds of structural problems. Bailey's Café space does, nonetheless, allow the painful experiences shared by the differing characters in the cafe to not be organized hierarchically, and the structure of the way station refuses to collapse the differing constellations of power in way that “enlightens” all of the café patrons, or leads them into a shared understanding (and overcoming) of racism, sexism, poverty and sexual violence. In other words, unlike TFN theory (and some public and counter-public sphere theories), the café is also not a consensus building space, and the organizers of the circuit between the pawnshop, Bailey's Café, and Eve's place do

*not* understand their work as creating a space that can, even magically, resolve and/or overcome racial, sexual and gender violence, or other forms of inequality.

Similar to *If You Don't They Will*, I read the nameless narrator, Gabe and Eve, in contrast to the “velvet triangle” of “political entrepreneurs,” as cultural organizers in that they understand their “activism” (though they would never use this language) as space shaping within a particular music and bar community. Unlike specialized TFN professional activists who understand themselves as properly representing “the grassroots,” Eve, Gabe and the narrator are actually (unpaid) patrons themselves and access the café because of the dead-ends they (differently) encountered in the outside world, because of their own personal blues. Through a system of exclusion, depending on if “they’re worth it” or not, these three activist subjects work within the relay system to “make waves” within Bailey’s Café by directing the most abject, in-need people through the relay system, from the pawn-shop to the café, and for “certain women,” to Eve’s brownstone. Though the narrator laments that his work as an organizer does not include policing and purifying the space (like “86ing” patrons like Sugar Man, for instance, for his trans and genderphobic remarks towards Miss Maple), he does work to shape the space in other ways, such as not allowing holiday decorations to be visible—for *any* one holiday—and by maintaining certain rules that cohere the café space. Not only does the narrator acclimate new patrons to the greasy-spoon café through teaching them the logics of Bailey’s Café (from ordering food and the less than tasty cups of coffee, to the possibilities in the void out back), he also repeatedly disallows any and all customers to come under the false impression that the café space is, in itself, a refuge or permanent solution to their own particular problems. In this way, the narrator’s activism includes pushing against patrons who approach the café space as if it is their own “safe space,” as if it exists to ease the pain of their own particular struggles: “Everybody wants me to

throw the other body out of here. Like this place is their personal discovery and only for them and their kind.”<sup>141</sup>

Eve’s organizing strategy at her boarding house is emphatically not about “charity” or rehabilitation, for that matter, and is for only “certain women,” for women who literally, figuratively and psychically have nowhere to go. Eve also refuses to offer the women an escape from their past/present lives. In fact many of the women continue to live out the violence they differently experienced outside of the magical circuit within their respective rooms. Esther, for example, still lives in a basement room and only accepts her gentlemen visitors in the dark. But Eve offers the women of her brownstone a temporarily different relationship to the violence of racism, sexism and homophobia that always has and always will structure their lives. Her one rule—that visitors must purchase and present the women their favorite flowers—slightly re-organizes the relationships between the women of Eve’s place and the men that visit them in a manner that grants the women a kind of agency that is illegible under now dominant understandings of rational political labor. Thus, the approach of Eve, the narrator and Gabe is similar to that of my opening *If You Don’t They Will* example in that it is an organizing practice that is situated in the everyday interactions of the differing, sometime antagonistic regulars that, though they may (and often do) fall in love with and/or, more likely, despise one another, they still return to the café and Eve’s place on a regular basis for a kind of temporary comfort that is linked through their differently experienced blues. Like *If You Don’t They Will*, the organizers do not create one way of *being* in the magical way station, or one way of *knowing* or experiencing what goes on at Eve’s place. Rather, the organizers shape the café space in a way that allows different and opposing perspectives to be spoken and heard, and also, importantly, their organizing makes room for people to die on their own terms and in their own way. Their

activism structures the relay system in a way that potentially creates small waves in the prevailing sensibilities of the patrons, and simultaneously shapes the momentary relief (through voicing and listening) that patrons experience when their everyday lives are frozen and they step onto the block full of lack and “broken relics of uncountable dreams”<sup>142</sup> to voice and listen to the deeply sorrowful sounds of struggle. The café engenders agency through organizing a certain type of sociality rooted not in commonalities or even in difference, but lack.

However, the political imaginary in *Bailey’s Café* not only challenges the example of the illegible (under the NPIC) cultural organizing of *If You Don’t They Will* that I shared earlier, it also questions some of the fundamental assumptions that theorizations of the “public sphere” assume about what constitutes rational political work. Undoubtedly, in some important ways, *Bailey’s Café* parodies Habermas’ theory of the dominant bourgeois public sphere, a political imaginary predicated on an exclusive café space, accessible to white bourgeois hetero-normative property owning men, where particularity is discarded and regulated to the private sphere, and the co-mingling of different perspectives will eventually lead to consensus that is in conversation with and even negotiates with the State—a particular formation of the State that is assumed to listen to the plight of its citizenry. It is tempting to read Naylor’s café in the context of the critical scholarship on counterpublics, as a parodic black counter-public, full of contestation and difference, and stubbornly committed to forming anything but consensus. Michael Warner’s influential work in *Publics and Counterpublics* defines counterpublics as publics defined “by their tension with a larger public,” an effect produced by the exclusions of the dominant public sphere that pushes against the dominant bourgeois public sphere to expand the normative “horizon of opinion and exchange,”<sup>143</sup> thereby making possible new forms of citizenship. The political promise of counterpublics is that they have the potential to, through a hegemonic

approach, transform norms and shift the general sensibilities of the dominant bourgeois public sphere. For Warner, “[c]ounterpublics are spaces of circulation in which it is hoped that the poesis of scene-making will be transformative, not replicative [of the dominant public sphere] merely.”<sup>144</sup> Other scholarship on counterpublicity also assumes a necessary normative dimension when, for instance, assessing the political potential of black counterpublics. In the anthology, *The Black Public Sphere: A Public Culture Book*, edited by the Black Public Sphere Collective, both the preface and the afterword note the importance of the normative political strategy of black counterpublics. Black counterpublics are figured as supplemental to the dominant bourgeois public sphere, “an answer insofar as it is a counternarrative to the exclusionary national narratives of Europe, the United States, the Caribbean and Africa,”<sup>145</sup> and critical to expanding “new democratic forms.” Black counterpublics shape a “wider sphere of critical practice and visionary politics, in which intellectuals can join with the energies of the street, the school, the church and the city to constitute a challenge to the exclusionary violence of much public space in the United States.”<sup>146</sup> The political relevance of black counterpublicity, then, lies in its abilities to grow space for critique and through a hegemonic approach, transform the norms of the dominant social order.

Like counterpublics, *If You Don't They Will's* organizing strategy also assumes a normative dimension. The central idea behind cultural organizing against neo-Nazi's in bars and music clubs is that the shift in common-sense (or the particular subcultures norms in one club or music scene) will eventually circulate in wider publics. One example is when, after years of tabling anti-racist merchandise on increasingly mainstream tours (such as “Warped Tour”), lead singer of Green Day Billie Joe wore one of our “Kiss Me I'm Anti-Racist” t-shirts, and soon after, the booth was swarmed with white fans who now believe it is cool to be anti-racist. While

wearing a t-shirt may not signal political agency to some, the anti-racist t-shirts specifically targeting white youth were bold enough (including slogans like “fuck white supremacy”) that almost anywhere that particular shirt wearing youth ventured, they are asked to talk about what that t-shirt means to them, and why they are wearing it. Thus, young, often suburban white youth develop a racial literacy—being able to talk to anyone from their teachers, to their conservative grandparents, to the Nazi skinheads at the bus stop who are threatening to beat them up—about the importance of the message on the t-shirt. The central political imaginary for *If You Don’t They Will’s* marginalized mode of organizing under the NPIC, is focused on shifting dominant social norms within particular music communities and eventually, more mainstream audiences as well.

No matter how tempting it may be to conclude that *Bailey’s Café* is, indeed, an example of a black counterpublic, Naylor’s work refuses a normative dimension in the organizing principles of the “Bermuda Triangle.” Unlike counterpublic theories (and my *If You Don’t They Will* example), it can be argued that the organizers and patrons of the magical way station form a public through the practices of voicing and listening to the blues, but this is a kind of public that has no desire or ability to circulate its publicity. There is no hegemonic angle, no mainstreaming tactic or strategy to transform the dominant bourgeois public sphere and reform the hierarchical conditions that exist outside of the street full of every kind of lack. There is no hope of, or strategy to, shift, negotiate with, and/or transform the State—no focus on even expanding the existing, violently unequal structures of power outside (and inside) of the relay of broken dreams. There is no plan to project the sensibilities of a sociality organized through the expression of every kind of lack into the dominant public sphere; it would mean impossibly projecting nothingness into a preconceived political future that already knows the change it

wishes to manifest. The organizing logics of the “Bermuda Triangle” works against all of these political impulses. Though, admittedly, it is difficult for me to even *think* about a political imaginary that does not have a hegemonic approach, *Bailey’s Café* challenges these core assumptions about the political, and what constitutes politically relevant and effective work, as necessarily having a normative dimension. What is activism and political agency if not a practice tied to a normative project? These challenges are exactly what this dissertation demands. Re-imagining the political, however difficult, counter-intuitive or unthinkable, is precisely what contemporary feminist social movements need in order to expand how we imagine what counts as political work and who, correspondingly, is (appropriately) imagined to be a feminist activist.

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<sup>1</sup> Valentine Moghadam, *Globalizing Women: Transnational Feminist Networks* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005) 104.

<sup>2</sup> Joe Bandy and Jackie Smith, *Coalitions Across Borders: Transnational Protest and the Neoliberal Order* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005) 1- 2.

<sup>3</sup> Moghadam, 14.

<sup>4</sup> Keck and Sikkink are cited in every text I have thus far come across.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998) 210.

<sup>6</sup> Moghadam, 82.

<sup>7</sup> Moghadam, 85.

<sup>8</sup> Moghadam, 102.

<sup>9</sup> Moghadam, 104.

<sup>10</sup> Moghadam, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Moghadam, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Moghadam, 17.

<sup>13</sup> Moghadam, 81.

<sup>14</sup> Moghadam, 20.

<sup>15</sup> Moghadam, 192.

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- <sup>16</sup> Moghadam, 89.
- <sup>17</sup> Keck and Sikkink, 12-13.
- <sup>18</sup> Keck Sikkink, 13.
- <sup>19</sup> Myra Marx Ferree and Aili Mari Tripp, Eds. *Global Feminism: Transnational Women's Activism, Organizing and Human Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2006) 13.
- <sup>20</sup> Keck and Sikkink, 25.
- <sup>21</sup> Ferree and Tripp, 13.
- <sup>22</sup> Keck and Sikkink, 207.
- <sup>23</sup> Moghadam, 101.
- <sup>24</sup> Ferree and Tripp, 13, 251.
- <sup>25</sup> Ferree and Tripp, 252.
- <sup>26</sup> Lester M. Salamon, S. Wojciech Sokolowshi, and Associates, *Global Civil Society: Dimensions of the Non-Profit Sector*, vol 2 (Bloomfield: Kumarian Press, Inc., 2004) xxi.
- <sup>27</sup> Ferree and Tripp, 252.
- <sup>28</sup> Sonia Alvarez, "Advocating Feminism: The Latin American Feminist NGO 'Boom,'" *Feminist Politics, Activism, and Vision: Local and Global Challenges*, eds. Luciana Ricciutelli, Angela Miles, and Margaret H. McFadden (London: Zed Books LTD, 2004) 125-126.
- <sup>29</sup> Ferree and Tripp, 252.
- <sup>30</sup> Salamon, 3-4.
- <sup>31</sup> Ronnie D. Lipschutz, "Reconstructing World Politics: The Emergence of Global Civil Society," *Civil Societies and Social Movements* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006) 241.
- <sup>32</sup> John Keane, *Global Civil Society? (Contemporary Political Theory)* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 421.
- <sup>33</sup> Amrita Basu, "Introduction," *Women's Movements in the Global Era*, ed. Amrita Basu (Boulder: Westview Press, 2010) 6-7.
- <sup>34</sup> Basu, 16-17.
- <sup>35</sup> Basu, 16.
- <sup>36</sup> Basu, 17.
- <sup>37</sup> Manisha Desai, "Transnationalism: the face of feminist politics post-Beijing," *International Social Science Journal* 57.184 (June 2005): 320.
- <sup>38</sup> Devaki Jain, "Feminist Networks, People's Movements and Alliances," *Feminist Politics, Activism, and Vision: Local and Global Challenges*, eds. Luciana Ricciutelli, Angela Miles, and Margaret H. McFadden (London: Zed Books LTD, 2004) 68.

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<sup>39</sup> Aaron Pollack, "Cross-Border, Cross-Movement Alliances in the Late 1990s," *Globalization and Social Movements*, eds. Pierre Hamel, Henri Lustiger-Thaler, Jan Nederveen Pieterse and Sasha Roseneil. *Social and Cultural Studies Collection 23* (October 2001).

<sup>40</sup> Desai, 321.

<sup>41</sup> Manisha Desai, *Gender and the Politics of Possibilities: Rethinking Globalization* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2009) 35.

<sup>42</sup> Neera Chandhoke, "The Limits of Global Civil Society," *Global Civil Society 2002* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 52.

<sup>43</sup> Sabine Lang, "Organizing Political Advocacy: Transnational Women's Networks and Gender Mainstreaming in the European Union," (paper submitted for presentation at ECREA conference, Brussels, October 11/12, 2007) 2.

<sup>44</sup> Lang, 5.

<sup>45</sup> Though contested by many feminists in the "global South," including, according to Desai, because it is suggestive of "transnational corporation."

<sup>46</sup> Desai, "Transnationalism: the face of feminist politics post-Beijing," 322.

<sup>47</sup> Desai, "Transnationalism: the face of feminist politics post-Beijing," 324.

<sup>48</sup> Andrea Smith, "Introduction: The Revolution Will Not Be Funded," *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, ed. Incite! Women of Color Against Violence (Cambridge: South End Press, 2007) 10.

<sup>49</sup> Dylan Rodriguez, "The Political Logic of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex," *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, ed. Incite! Women of Color Against Violence (Cambridge: South End Press, 2007) 23.

<sup>50</sup> Rickke Mananzala and Dean Spade, "The Non-Profit Industrial Complex and Trans Resistance," *Sexuality Research and Social Policy: Journal of NSRC* 5.1 (March, 2008): 58.

<sup>51</sup> Nina Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 7.

<sup>52</sup> Eliasoph, 31.

<sup>53</sup> Steven Gregory, "Race, Identity and Political Activism: The Shifting Contours of the African American Public Sphere," *The Black Public Sphere: A Public Culture Book* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995) 165.

<sup>54</sup> Gregory, 153.

<sup>55</sup> Kristin Bumiller, *In An Abusive State: How Neoliberalism Appropriated the Feminist Movement Against Sexual Violence* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 4.

<sup>56</sup> Bumiller, 5

<sup>57</sup> Bumiller, 15.

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- <sup>58</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "In the Shadow of the Shadow State," *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, Ed. Incite! Women of Color Against Violence (Cambridge: South End Press, 2007) 46.
- <sup>59</sup> Smith, 5.
- <sup>60</sup> Smith, 5.
- <sup>61</sup> Smith, 4.
- <sup>62</sup> Nicholas Leman, "Citizen 501 (c) 3," *The Atlantic Monthly* 279. 2 (February 1997): 18.
- <sup>63</sup> Smith, 8.
- <sup>64</sup> Robert F. Arnove, *Philanthropy and Cultural Imperialism: The Foundations at Home and Abroad* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1980) 1. My italics.
- <sup>65</sup> Rodriguez, 23.
- <sup>66</sup> Robert L. Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America: An Analytic History* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990) 70.
- <sup>67</sup> Allen, 76.
- <sup>68</sup> Allen, 71.
- <sup>69</sup> Allen, 75.
- <sup>70</sup> Rodriguez, 25.
- <sup>71</sup> Alvarez, 139.
- <sup>72</sup> Alvarez, 140.
- <sup>73</sup> Alvarez, 141.
- <sup>74</sup> My italics.
- <sup>75</sup> Robin D.G. Kelly, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press Books, 2002) 8.
- <sup>76</sup> "What is Civil Society?" Centre for Civil Society, London School of Economics (2004-03-01). [http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what\\_is\\_civil\\_society.htm](http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what_is_civil_society.htm)
- <sup>77</sup> Neera Chandhoke, *The Conceits of Civil Society* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003) 8.
- <sup>78</sup> Chandhoke, *The Conceits of Civil Society*, 9.
- <sup>79</sup> Chandhoke, *The Conceits of Civil Society*, 11.
- <sup>80</sup> Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," *Karl Marx Early Writings*, ed. Quintin Hoare (New York: Vintage Books, 1975) 220.
- <sup>81</sup> Marx, 220.

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<sup>82</sup> Antonio Gramsci, "State and Civil Society," *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, eds. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, (New York: International Publishers, 1971) 208.

<sup>83</sup> Gramsci, 246.

<sup>84</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Diasporas Old and New: Women in the Transnational World," *Textual Practice*, 10.2 (1996) 245-269.

<sup>85</sup> Chandhoke, *The Conceits of Civil Society*, 441.

<sup>86</sup> Chandhoke, "The Limits of Global Civil Society," 433.

<sup>87</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford UP: 2005) 78.

<sup>88</sup> Lang, 8.

<sup>89</sup> Wahneema Lubiano, "Like Being Mugged by a Metaphor: Multiculturalism and State Narratives," in *Mapping Multiculturalism*, eds. Avery Gordon and Christopher Newfield (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) 68.

<sup>90</sup> Also, World Church of the Creator, to some extent. WCOTC claim to be anti-Christian as well as Anti-Semitic however. They believe in and promote RaHoWa—Racial Holy War.

<sup>91</sup> Ben Smith is now a martyr for the white nationalist movement and there is a white power music label and several bands that honor him by referencing both his work organizing on campuses and his three day shooting spree.

<sup>92</sup> *Turn it Down: Soundtracks to the White Revolution: White Supremacist Assaults on Youth Music Subcultures*, ed. Devin Burghart. (Chicago: A publication of the Center for New Community in cooperation with the Northwest Coalition for Human Dignity, 1999). From my personal archives.

<sup>93</sup> <http://pugetsoundoff.org/causes/social-justice>

<sup>94</sup> Reliance on foundation funding means non-profits and NGOs have to increasingly propose and prove through empirical evidence what the grant money will be used for and how effective the money will be for the community project in question. This means, for example, that the number of events, attendee's and populations served are over-privileged in institutions that rely on philanthropic foundations for program and research—that the numbers themselves are evidence of activism and social change. Under the Non-Profit Industrial Complex, when training other organizations on cultural organizing, often the imaginations of potential strategies end with "let's throw a benefit show." If You Don't They Will emphasizes that cultural organizing is what happens before, during and after the benefit show—what experiences, relationships and political sensibilities challenge and shape how subjects' understand themselves and the world around them. This approach to cultural organizing is often not considered "activism" because it cannot be weighed, counted, or measured, and because ultimately, it cannot be controlled by a particular institution.

<sup>95</sup> This is not to discount the importance of, for example, what is often mistaken as cultural organizing: benefit shows in art and music communities. They are regular features in Northwest music subcultures and are integral to sustaining music and art communities. Because murders, suicides and permanent disappearances are often regular fixtures in our communities, benefit shows provide the much needed support for funeral expenses as well as provide spaces for community members to celebrate and/or grieve. Also, as musicians, bookers, security, bartenders, and many community members are increasingly less likely to have access to social services and/or insurance of any kind, these shows are vital to supporting those with cancer, HIV, in bike, car and motorcycle accidents, in rape and domestic violence situations, and so forth.

<sup>96</sup> Sylvie Chavanelle, "Bailey's Café: The Blues and Beyond," *American Studies International* 36.2 (June 1998): 61-62.

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<sup>97</sup> Karen Schneider, “Gloria Naylor’s Poetics of Emancipation: (E)merging (Im)possibilities in *Bailey’s Café*,” *Gloria Naylor’s Early Novels*, ed. Margot Anne Kelley (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999) 17 footnote 6.

<sup>98</sup> In a longer piece, I am interested in providing a deeper historical context of 1948-1949, often described by historians as a “transition period,” and it’s relation to the logics of the transitory café space. Also, this research leads me to more generally suggest that the knowledge the university produces on the political is *also* part and parcel of NGOization and the NPIC, an effect and constitutive of how mainstream feminism knows what counts as the political or activism.

<sup>99</sup> Gloria Naylor, *Bailey’s Café* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1992) 3.

<sup>100</sup> Naylor, 41.

<sup>101</sup> Naylor, 221.

<sup>102</sup> Margaret Whitt, “Bailey’s Café or Sports Bar, or, Why Baseball Needs a Way Station,” *The Johns Hopkins University Press* 23.4 (Autumn 2000): 1464.

<sup>103</sup> Kathleen Puhr, “Healers in Gloria Naylor’s Fiction,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 40.4 (Winter 1994): 525.

<sup>104</sup> Puhr, 194.

<sup>105</sup> Maxine Lavon Montgomery, “Authority, Multivocality, and the New World Order in Gloria Naylor’s *Bailey’s Café*,” *African American Review* 29.1 (Spring 1995): 28.

<sup>106</sup> Maxine Lavon Montgomery, 32.

<sup>107</sup> Maxine Lavon Montgomery, *The Fiction of Gloria Naylor* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2010) xviii.

<sup>108</sup> Montgomery, *The Fiction of Gloria Naylor*, xx.

<sup>109</sup> My approach and interest in this text is also fueled by a more general interest in how there is a direct relationship between the (uncritical?) knowledge production on “resistance” counterpublics, and “safe space” emerging out of different disciplines on *Bailey’s Café* and, at the same time, at least in my community work, the cultural organizing happening in bars and music clubs (by racist and anti-racist social movements) *also* goes unrecognized by social movements as “activism.” In other words, NGOization and the NPIC effects, produces and limits activist subjects’ imaginations of anti-racist feminist coalition *and* the research and theorization of feminist politics coming out of the university.

<sup>110</sup> Montgomery, *The Fiction of Gloria Naylor*, 85.

<sup>111</sup> Naylor, 34.

<sup>112</sup> Naylor, 35.

<sup>113</sup> Chavanelle, 61-62.

<sup>114</sup> Naylor, 3.

<sup>115</sup> Chavanelle, 63.

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<sup>116</sup> Whitt, 1471.

<sup>117</sup> Naylor, opening of the novel.

<sup>118</sup> Naylor, 27.

<sup>119</sup> Naylor, 27.

<sup>120</sup> Naylor, 88.

<sup>121</sup> Naylor, 88.

<sup>122</sup> Naylor, 90.

<sup>123</sup> Naylor, 90.

<sup>124</sup> Karen Joy Fowler, "Bailey's Café 1992 Interview," *Gloria Naylor: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993) 26.

<sup>125</sup> Naylor, 76.

<sup>126</sup> Naylor, 163.

<sup>127</sup> Naylor, 212.

<sup>128</sup> Naylor, 144-145.

<sup>129</sup> Naylor, 80.

<sup>130</sup> Naylor, 114.

<sup>131</sup> Naylor, 3.

<sup>132</sup> Naylor, 164.

<sup>133</sup> Naylor, 223.

<sup>134</sup> Naylor, 219.

<sup>135</sup> Naylor, 220-221.

<sup>136</sup> Naylor, 159.

<sup>137</sup> Naylor, 220.

<sup>138</sup> Naylor, 27.

<sup>139</sup> Naylor, 229.

<sup>140</sup> Naylor, 228-229.

<sup>141</sup> Naylor, 32.

<sup>142</sup> Naylor, 212.

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<sup>143</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005) 56.

<sup>144</sup> Warner, 122.

<sup>145</sup> "Preface," *The Black Public Sphere: A Public Culture Book*, ed. The Black Public Sphere Collective (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995) 1.

<sup>146</sup> The Black Public Sphere Collective, 3.



## Chapter Two

### Contending Forces: Social Work, Non-Profit Incorporation, and Agitation in Black Women's Progressive Era Club Activism

#### Introduction

Over the last twenty years there has been a revived academic interest in the activism, writings and life of black orator, playwright, thespian, club woman, editor, fiction and non-fiction writer Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins. Countless articles traverse through differing academic circles debating her ancestry, the details of her death and who her intended audience was or was not (white or black) in the numerous forms of writing she published. Historians and literary scholars argue over what Hopkins' intent was behind these various publications, what she thought about and experienced as an active member of the late nineteenth century black women's club movement, and particularly, the reasons she left (or was asked to leave) her position as editor of the first African American literary magazine, the *Colored American*. Her politics are especially debated in these conversations for some suggest her writings and public work demonstrate an allegiance to white supremacist notions of womanhood that privilege light over dark skin as signs of refinement and femininity, and that her politics are more in line with "accommodationism" often associated with Booker T. Washington. Others emphasize her anti-lynching and anti-rape writings, her black feminist internationalism and work towards "uplift for the Blacks in all quarters of the globe,"<sup>1</sup> and associate her politics with W.E.B. Du Bois. In the 1978 edition, Gwendolyn Brooks' afterward critiques Hopkins's most famous novel, *Contending Forces*, as evidence that "Hopkins consistently proves herself a continuing slave, despite little bursts of righteous heat," as "often doth the brainwashed slave revere the modes and idolatries of the master."<sup>2</sup> In *Workings of the Spirit*, Houston A. Baker understands the sometimes ambivalent

and often contradictory narration of *Contending Forces* as confirmation that Hopkins is most interested in garnering the approval of white public opinion. But, more recently, she is often figured as a radical race activist and these scholars point out the ways that her novels consistently engage representations of “transnational racial cooperation,”<sup>3</sup> though interestingly Jill Bergman argues that this trend dangerously “clings to and celebrates accounts of her radical politics in spite of evidence complicating these events.”<sup>4</sup> Others understand Hopkins’ work as revealing the complexities, contradictions and anxieties of the late nineteenth century black women’s uplift movement and rightly argue that the narrator of *Contending Forces* should not necessarily be assumed to fully represent Pauline E. Hopkins’ political sensibility. Thomas Cassidy in, “Contending Contexts: Pauline Hopkins’s *Contending Forces*,” finds that her novel moves back and forth between the differing discourses particular to her historical moment on race, gender, and sexuality in an intentional way to “lead both its black and white audiences to understand the wide-spread nineteenth century lynching and raping of black Americans.”<sup>5</sup> Within a public space already overcrowded with racist, sexist, and essentialist discourses that either justify the lynching and rape of African Americans or finds answers to the “negro problem” in the continued, if not full disenfranchisement of black people, Cassidy astutely points out that *Contending Forces* engages this variety of interrelated problematics to present an argument in favor of necessary, aggressive African American “agitation.”

To varying degrees, Hopkins’ scholars contextualize her political interventions within a historical moment characterized by escalating anti-black mob violence, lynching and rape of African Americans, where confederate powers are legally reinstated, and segregation is formally sanctioned in the 1896 case *Plessy vs. Ferguson*. Various legal measures were implemented to continue the disenfranchisement of black people from formal politics including arbitrary literacy

tests (of which white people did not have to pass because of a “grandfather clause” that granted them voting rights because their ancestors could vote), poll taxes that most poor people could not afford, and “white only” voting primaries.<sup>6</sup> It is a time when prison systems are expanded and more and more black women and men are incarcerated, when black intellectuals (like Hopkins) were increasingly critical of U.S. colonial projects, linking internal and external colonization with “domestic racial oppression and imperialism,”<sup>7</sup> and when most black men in the North experience the failure of legal emancipation including, for one, the continued exclusion from almost every sector of skilled labor. Employed black women are still overly represented in Southern rural agricultural work or employed in domestic services for white families, though in the North black women compete against European immigrants for these positions, and while many states banned white women from working in sex-work houses, black northern women and southern migrants often were directed towards these jobs by employment agencies. A small percentage of black women are considered “professionals,” usually teachers, but for the most part, as Hazel Carby points out, black women continue to be excluded from the “dominant codes of morality”<sup>8</sup> which included, among many things, exclusion from other “feminized” urban industries such as working for telephone companies or larger department stores.

While this chapter engages the contexts perhaps too briefly and incompletely outlined above, I also strive to offer an understanding of Hopkins’ activism—as a writer, editor, and performer, and as an active member of the late nineteenth century black women’s club movement—within an additional context, one that locates Hopkins’ political vision as *also* a critique of transformations in dominant conceptions of charity work at the beginning of the Progressive Era, the 1890’s-1920s. For, interestingly, the late nineteenth century is a moment where non-profit activism skyrockets across the United States. Theda Skocpol argues in

*Diminished Democracy* that the late nineteenth century “was an extraordinary period of civic creativity,”<sup>9</sup> where clubs of every kind emerge and, unlike much of the mainstream club work of the antebellum period, demonstrate a growing nationalist sensibility in the formation of both their organizational structures and in how they think about the political and themselves as volunteers. Women’s clubs, many legally incorporated as non-profits, flourish from 1880 to the mid 1920’s, “leading an estimated two million women from varying class, racial, and ethnic/religious backgrounds to join organizations for self-improvement and social benevolence.”<sup>10</sup> In this period, white women and women of color involved in club work frequently bypass the male dominated printers and publishing companies and expand the self-production and self-circulation of their own club writings, papers, poems, petitions, novels, and even meeting minutes, in unprecedented ways. Most white women’s clubs, however, continue to formally and informally exclude African American women. In fact, this period is also characterized by fractures in the national suffrage movement, where the once cross-racial, multi-gendered coalition splits over the issue of black suffrage; Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony join with the National Women Suffrage Association and Francis Harper associates with the American Woman Suffrage Association. Yet, despite the persistence of racism within the women’s club movement, the late nineteenth century marks a significant, often under-recognized, period of growth for black clubwomen. In 1894, *Women’s Era* becomes the first newspaper published by and for African American clubwomen, and in 1895 the first Congress of Colored Women of the United States convenes. Black women’s clubs are established all over the country including the formation of the Women’s Loyal Union in New York (1892), the Colored Women’s League in Washington D.C. (1892), and the Ida B. Wells Club established in Chicago (1893). In 1896, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) becomes the first

nationally recognized black women's club, formed through a merger between the National Federation of Afro-American Women and the League of Colored Women. After only one year of incorporation as the NACW, the highly influential umbrella organization counted membership from twenty five states and from eighty-two different clubs alone.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, the late nineteenth century is more generally a period where club work and non-profit activism becomes more and more influenced by the logics of the social sciences and the corresponding trend towards professionalized forms of charity, or "scientific charity." Social Work, in particular, emerges as a form of specialization and ultimately institutionalizes itself as the most appropriately equipped field to analyze and solve social problems. According to Michael Reisch and Janice Andrews in *The Road Not Taken: A History of Radical Social Work in the United States*, social scientists and social workers increasingly proposed solutions to the "problems of industrialization and urbanization" that required "the utilization of specialists and professionals like themselves."<sup>12</sup> Frank Dekker Watson's 1922 study, *The Charity Organization Movement in the United States: A Study in Philanthropy*, demonstrates that the shift to a new model of "scientific charity" creates a significant transition in charity organizational structures as well. Organizations in this period, Watson argues, generally collaborate less across institutional formations and become more internally focused on "efficiency in the disbursement of relief."<sup>13</sup> As more emphasis is placed on prioritizing administrative tasks, charity organizations began to favor employing specialists to assess and solve social issues, rather than the volunteer-centric model so central to the charity organizing that dominated the first half of the 1800's.

Undoubtedly, the normalization of Social Works' sensibilities and strategies for social transformation did not evenly or entirely impact all women's clubs of this era, nor do I wish to suggest that all women involved in the club movement shared the same ideas about what

constitutes rational political labor, and who is appropriately an activist and “right” for responding to social issues. In fact, later in this chapter I will reflect on the many differences between white women and men’s club work, and the differing political analysis, strategies and visions between white and black clubwomen in this moment. I do contend, however, that the late nineteenth century is an interesting moment where dominant notions about charity, reform, and uplift transition towards a model of political organizing that is deeply beholden to the knowledge produced by social science professionals as the specialized field of Social Work begins to consolidate. Though white and black women’s clubs differently embraced and/or contested these prevailing notions of activism, they were certainly aware of and deeply impacted by the general trend that increasingly embraced expertise, specialization, and professionalized notions of what constitutes political work, and who is properly equipped to respond to social, political, and economic crises.

This chapter understands Pauline E. Hopkins’ cultural politics as critiques of the failures of emancipation, the persistence and growth of anti-black mob violence, lynching and rape, and the politics embraced by white club activists. Additionally, I hope to also generate a different (but related) context for reading Hopkins’ critical representations of black women’s activism, one that attends to the transformations ushered in by the professionalization and specialization of Social Work in dominant conceptions of what constitutes proper political labor. Within a history that also illuminates changes in how clubwomen, and black clubwomen in particular, differently imagine what counts as effective political work, I am especially struck by Hopkins insistence on an understanding of *fiction* as a necessary weapon against the persistence of racism and white supremacy in the post-Reconstruction era. Throughout her career, whether as a stenographer, orator, editor or writer, Hopkins continually theorized fiction as a central way for gaining a wider

audience and to “enlist the sympathies of all citizens”<sup>14</sup> towards organizing against the maintenance, perpetuation and reconsolidation of white supremacy in the so-called Progressive Era. Secondly, I will also consider the multiple political modalities represented in *Contending Forces*, where dominant Progressive Era social science imaginaries of the political are figured as merely *one* mode of being political in an otherwise heterogeneous and contested field of black politics. While most scholars note Hopkins investment in furthering *agitation* through *Contending Forces*, this chapter will more specifically reflect on what actually constitutes “agitation” within this historical context. I am especially interested in the differing political subjectivities represented in the women and men’s club activism and in how Hopkins frequently characterizes formal politics as “too cold” and “rational” to adequately “agitate” the black communities of Boston. I consider Hopkins’ political vision (a sensibility that emphasizes the necessity of cultural production, affect, and a variety of other political modes as *all* central to agitation) as *also* a critique of the emergence and eventual consolidation of Social Work and the overall influence of “scientific charity” on black women’s club work and black middle class politics more generally at the turn-of-the-century.

Thus, this chapter strives towards two sizable ambitions. First, and more broadly, this chapter is part of the dissertations’ larger aim to engage and expand alternative political imaginaries to the present day dominant professionalization and NGOization of feminist social movements. I realize, however, that a genealogical project of alternative feminist activism does not begin in the late nineteenth century, nor do I wish to suggest in any way that because this chapter dabbles in 1890’s, this dissertation represents a comprehensive history of feminist politics. I approach Hopkins’ cultural politics and the shifts in late nineteenth century dominant conceptions of non-profit club work knowing full well that a longer project will most certainly

have a larger, more comprehensive exploration of the post-Reconstruction era, suffrage, and of course, abolitionism and other forms of antebellum women's activism. As I mentioned in my previous chapter, a longer engagement will also consider women's missionary work in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century as an important part of this historical framework that is essential to understanding nineteenth century U.S. social movements beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. This also means considering the articulation between philanthropy and development, where philanthropy functions as the suture for the predictably devastating violence of capitalism across the globe, and the violence of "progress" requires, even presumes, the necessity of philanthropic projects.<sup>15</sup> That said, I do find Hopkins' political sensibility at the turn-of-the-century to be incredibly elucidating, even shocking at times, when read in and against the now dominant discourses that presuppose NGOization and professionalized forms of activism as always necessarily the most effective and mature form of creating significant social change.

Secondly, and more to the point, this chapter aims to situate Hopkins' activism (what is usually thought of as "activism" today alongside her novel *Contending Forces*) in a way that is attentive to shifts in dominant Social Work influenced conceptions and strategies for social transformation at the beginning of the Progressive Era. To do so, I begin with a brief consideration of the major shifts in dominant U.S. logics of charity from the 1840's-1890's, changes that I understand are significant to understanding the potential impact of the institutionalization of Social Work on black and white women's club work at the end of the nineteenth century. I then offer an admittedly truncated history of the burgeoning women's club movement in the post-Reconstruction era with particular attention to the political strategies and imaginaries of the National Association of Colored Women, as well as the conflicts,

contradictions, and coalitional possibilities between white and black women's club work. Within a context that highlights the rising influence of professional forms of activism on black women's club work, I consider Pauline E. Hopkins' participation and commitment to the Women's Era Club of Boston and the National Association of Colored Women as well as her public work as editor of *Colored American* and *The Voice of the Negro*. Because, as Hazel Carby and others convincingly argue, Hopkins' fiction is deeply influenced by the discourses of black women's club work, I read her more traditionally identified activism (club work, public work) in tandem with her novel *Contending Forces*' representations of the many differing and contradictory modes of *being* political, and ultimately, as a powerful imagination of black agitation particular to the Progressive Era. In this way, I read Hopkins's fiction, non-fiction and club work together not as a "passive representation of history" but as an "active influence within history," and one that is *also* actively engaged in critiquing shifts in dominant conceptions of the political. As Carby suggests, I approach *Contending Forces* as "a fiction which [Hopkins] intended to act back upon its source; urging and inspiring all black Americans to political action."<sup>16</sup>

### **I. Transformations in Nineteenth Century Scientific Charity**

Incorporation as a 501 © 3 non-profit corporation in the early nineteenth century was legally framed as a "privilege," and garnering this privilege meant passing a substantial pre-incorporation process in which individual judges determined whether non-profit charters were "charitable" and truly served the interest of the American public. This meant, of course, that the judiciary was granted the power to execute their own personal interpretations of what constitutes proper charity efforts and who and what composed the "public" and "public good." Applicants for incorporation were frequently required to provide information about the moral reputation of the proposed board members and officers, and speculate in great detail about what effects the

non-profit might have on other non-profits, for-profits, and the economy in general. Pre-incorporation processes could require the petitioner to articulate the potential of their charitable business for achieving its mission, project how the State might benefit financially, and speak to the immediacy of such predicted economic prosperity. Successful non-profit incorporation often had nothing to do with a constructing a legible, properly articulated mission in service of “civil society” and “the public good.” Rather, it depended on whether or not one could convince the judiciary that the non-profit in question would further the expansion of capitalism (under the auspice of furthering “public good”), without interrupting or competing with for-profit projects, and with the State named as the direct financial beneficiary.

In this way, obtaining a charter was the individual state’s way of monitoring and certifying that, indeed, the association in question was “charitable,” that the association operates for the public’s benefit, and that monetary contributions served public ends. Or, in other words, the pre-incorporation process particular to attaining the non-profit charter ensured that organizations of this era furthered the States’ ideological investments in the name of social protection,<sup>17</sup> institutionalizing certain notions of “the public” and the “public good” that was ultimately bound up in bourgeois hegemony projects and the expansion of State power. In many ways, then, the charity organizations of this period reflect the desires and interest of the ruling class. For instance, as Michael Reisch and Janice Andrews write in *The Road Not Taken*, the charity movements’ political sensibility of the early nineteenth century in the United States was strongly influenced by social Darwinism and rooted in a bourgeois ambition to “encourage” a particular work ethic in the urban poor and discourage class conflict, often through the development of a “personal relationship between benefactor and recipient.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, many of the early charity organizations’ programs even utilized “work tests” that sought to determine

why the poor individual in question was unable to find regular work—if the individual was “work-shy”—or not.<sup>19</sup>

Christine Stansell’s work in *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*, also demonstrates how notions of cultural homogeneity and the universalization of bourgeois values marked the priority of the philanthropy and charity organizing of the 1820’s. Whereas poverty was once seen as a “condition bequeathed by divine providence,” philanthropists of this period came to understand the conditions of the poor as a “distasteful situation for which the poor themselves were responsible.”<sup>20</sup> Yet, for charity leaders solving such “distasteful situations” was considered to be a responsibility of the bourgeois class even, for many, an evangelical calling, partially because qualities such as benevolence and altruism were an integral part of a new, growing “cosmopolitan Anglo-American sensibility.” Though rehabilitating the habits, values and practices of the poor became central to solving the crisis of poverty, “the poor” were differentiated hierarchically: some relief recipients marked as “unworthy” and others as potentially salvageable. Stansell argues that this classification was based comparatively on the “image of the bourgeois man” who served “as a model for the downtrodden,” and rehabilitation projects focused on refashioning the poor man’s self-expectations to produce a working subject capable of competing successfully in the market. One powerful way to universalize bourgeois values, and to model and advance themselves and their altruistic sensibilities, was through charity organizations shaped after “English humanitarian societies: secular societies, for helping poor widows, the sick poor, and distressed slaves, church sponsored societies to aid the indigent and charity schools for poor children.”<sup>21</sup>

White bourgeois women of this era also turned to non-profit work in order to publicly distinguish themselves from poor and working class women, and to advance their positions as

exemplars of virtue and righteousness, and as mothers and gatekeepers of the future of the nation whose work was to properly acculturate their sons with bourgeois morals and values.

Interestingly, Stansell argues that it was the creation of this “bourgeois woman” and the entrance of the bourgeois woman “en masse” into philanthropic and benevolent projects that fashioned the figure of the “poor, vice ridden, sexually promiscuous working class woman” into dominant discourses on poverty, race, sexuality and gender. For instance, in 1802 The Society for the Relief of Poor Widows (SRPW), closely allied with the evangelical movement, became the first chartered white women’s non-profit in New York. SRPW worked to imagine and clarify who the State should recognize as “worthy poor” through implementing bourgeois domestic standards, making such distinctions in their mission statement, which specifically excluded aid to women who are deemed immoral, who sold “spirituous liquors,” or who were seen “begging publicly.”<sup>22</sup> Yet while bourgeois women worked to improve their social standing in society by differentiating themselves from working class and poor women, I do not mean to suggest that these efforts to normalize and universalize the “home” as the site of moral domesticity and as a claim to chastity and virtue, for example, were always successful. When the ladies of the Widow’s Society made their “home visits” in an effort to inundate poor women with the values and virtues of bourgeois femininity, working class and poor women often resisted, finding their charitable efforts intrusive, “meddlesome [...] always prying into other people’s business.”<sup>23</sup> In fact, bourgeois women were often distressed by the “alternative” family formations and economic and cultural practices laboring poor women engaged in, as they lacked “thrift,” sobriety, and worst of all, “deference to employers.” They were also, of course, shocked that many of their efforts to “save” the poor went unappreciated. More often, organizations like the SRPW failed to inculcate poor women with bourgeois sensibilities, but the hegemonic function

of such charitable organizations did, nevertheless, succeed in cohering the endeavors of the middle classes, solidifying constructions of bourgeois white womanhood through the creation of the poor, promiscuous, vice-ridden woman. In this way, for bourgeois New York women non-profit work (as a form of social house-keeping) became a way to increase their power within the home and their value within bourgeois society as a whole. Though these wealthy and most often politically networked women could not own property or vote, states began to recognize their eleemosynary efforts as much needed “services for cash-starved and overburdened governments,” and white women-run charities were increasingly valorized because their work subsidized “the state by cutting social service costs through their contributions of money and time.”<sup>24</sup>

Much has been written about the self-serving and violent intentions behind the majority of nineteenth century bourgeois reform projects as they most often aimed to rationalize the colonization and incorporation of communities of color, immigrant communities, and poor populations into the national body, simultaneously naturalizing and universalizing their own interests and investments. I do not depart from or disagree with the existing feminist critique of these projects. Yet, in order to mark the transformation in late nineteenth dominant political sensibilities and in women’s club-work more specifically, I do find it useful to consider some of the dramatic differences between the scientific charity (often linked to evangelical movements) of the first half of the nineteenth century and the kind of professionalized scientific charity imaginary particular to dominant organizing in the Progressive Era. Frank Dekker Watson’s 1922 research in *The Charity Organization Movement* is useful to briefly examine and differentiate between these variations in scientific charity. According to Watson, early scientific charity organizations emphasized the *multiple causes* of poverty and often noted the *interrelation*

between differing factors such as ignorance, idleness, intemperance, want of economy, imprudent and hasty marriages, lotteries, pawnbrokers, houses of ill fame, and gambling.<sup>25</sup> Some leaders, like William Ellery Channing in 1834, even understood this list of “causes” to include structural inequality, questioning, “Is not the social order wrong?” Others pointed out that the problem of poverty must also include an analysis of the infrequency of work available for the “largest class” as well as the “inadequacy of wages”—wages unable to “supply even the bare necessities of life.”<sup>26</sup> Many leaders in the charity movement of this period believed that a destitute individual cannot be “adjusted to society unless social conditions are improved” and looked to efficiently eliminate the root causes of poverty. Further, unlike the 1890’s shifts towards (internal) institution building projects led by professionals who specialize in solving social problems, the scientific charity organizing of the early part of the century offered no claim to monopolize, centralize or streamline charitable efforts. Instead, in Watson’s words, it was believed that a “charity organizations should never say, ‘Subscribe to us, and we’ll protect you from the poor, we’ll do the rest.’”<sup>27</sup> And though the prevailing early nineteenth century notion of charity organizing emphasized tactics purporting to “produce the least waste” with the “greatest efficiency,” central to this vision of political organizing (and contrary to the turn-of-the-century, or now for that matter) is the “intensive, discriminating, thorough, and sympathetic”<sup>28</sup> volunteer.

There were three general goals of the charity organization movement of the first half of the nineteenth century: to rehabilitate families “which for any reason fail to be self-sufficient;” to educate the community on “correct principles of relief;” and to “aid in the elimination of the causes of poverty.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, this approach to charity organizing might be characterized by its belief in scientific “inquiry and investigation into *all* questions,” that will thus provide “far-

reaching” remedies, with the end goal of “curing” the problem of poverty—including, remarkably, the dissolution of the charity organization itself.

In this sense it is the purpose of every charity organization society to work for its own extinction, or at least to work for the lessening of its work to the point where none who receive its aid could have avoided their present condition of need if both the individual and society had done all in his or its power respectively to make impossible the phenomenon of a human being unable to provide for his own support.<sup>30</sup>

Working towards their own extinction, charity organizations were organized around a few basic principles. “Social diagnosis” was the essential first step of this kind of scientific charity work, where the investigator seeks to know the *exact* context of the individual seeking relief, as well as the particulars of the individual in question. This included a strategy that divided the city into “manageable portions” for two or three volunteer investigators who, among other things, aided in “giving employment,” promoting Sunday schools, and abolishing liquor on their so-called “friendly visits;” “work tests” to determine if the individual is “work shy;” and the “accurate recordings” and centralization of these investigations (case records). Record keeping was especially (and newly) emphasized as a way to inform subsequent case workers of the particularities and histories of a district or family, to educate the public, and to more generally (and transparently) accumulate data on poverty.<sup>31</sup> A registration bureau was developed in this period to centralize information though it eventually shifted into a confidential social service exchange institution. All (volunteer) case workers were required to meet weekly

to share the information they gathered on their particular districts in order to generate a larger vision of the exact causes of poverty as well as to imagine potential solutions.

The importance of these middle class volunteers (and their exchanges within and outside of the institution) is exceptional to this period of scientific charity and directly linked to the second tenet of organizing: educating the greater community on correct relief strategies. Indeed, unlike the Progressive Era (and present day) organizing strategies, Watson points out that garnering the interest of volunteers, “the education and training of the charitably disposed individual,” is a primary function of most every charity organization in this era. Though, as I suggested earlier, these “friendly visits” were paternalistic, violent and ultimately self-serving, part of what makes charity organizing unique in this period is its focus on educating the public through first educating its volunteers on “wise and adequate charitable methods” in order to improve the “charitable methods of the general public.”<sup>32</sup>Volunteers were essential to this form of scientific charity because they were understood to bring a “freshness of vision” into the institution, and the knowledge produced from the relationships established with the poor was thought to be “contagious and invaluable to the work of the whole society” and therefore, was believed to more generally create greater interest in alleviating poverty through this actual contact with the poor.<sup>33</sup>

By the 1870’s, charity organizations increasingly turned more towards administrative measures for allocating relief and moved away from the volunteer based “friendly visitors,” deprioritized constructing collaborations across institutions, while less and less emphasis was placed on educating the middle and upper classes around proper charity tactics and strategies. According to Watson’s research, within this period some of

the largest charity associations “ultimately discontinued all volunteer service” under the auspice of promoting greater efficiency in the disbursement of relief through bureaucratic measures and administrative techniques.<sup>34</sup> Thus, beginning in the 1870’s, dominant charity organizations in the United States became increasingly invested in the actual *institutional organization of charity* itself. Watson describes this as a “process of crystallization” where charity organizations ceased being “progressive” and “flexible,” and moved towards embracing a model of charity organizing that employed “professionals seeking employment” to manage the institutional affairs of organization.<sup>35</sup>

Dominant charity organizations of the 1880’s and early 1890’s focused on geographical expansion and internal institution building, positioning themselves as “overlordships of charity” who protected business communities from both “impostor” organizations and the undeserving poor. These organizations were increasingly consolidated and, in Watson’s words, became crystallized or “fixed” as more invested in specialization and mass poverty prevention analysis and practices, rather than particular “case by case” assessment, and the wide-reaching, “leave no stone unturned” poverty alleviation education research and strategies of the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>36</sup> In 1889, charity organizing methods were standardized at a national level and relief registration was centralized, including the development of a system of telegraphic code for charitable inquiries and the creation of uniform teaching curricula—most all information about the practices and results of organized charitable efforts became standardized in this period.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, the value of the “trained service” of specialized professionals to charity organizations became integral to scientific charity of this period as well.

Watson describes Progressive Era charity organizing as nationalizing projects, and though these institutions still believed in abolishing poverty, they increasingly turned towards the social sciences to *prevent* poverty (rather than understand, locate and abolish it) within a context that progressively moved towards an understanding of charity work as a kind of profession. “It was during the late nineties that the numbers of men and women employed by charitable societies, who considered their work as a profession as other men regarded journalism, law, theology or medicine, steadily began to increase.”<sup>38</sup> Indeed, as Watson points out, unlike the early nineteenth century scientific charity, the Progressive Era is a time when the “day had long passed when anyone was considered capable of readjusting the family affairs of others,”<sup>39</sup> because the dominant sensibility held that the “success of the charity organization movement” was now believed to rely solely “upon the possibility of securing enough people for the responsible administrative positions who added to knowledge, wisdom, and who combined with right theory, some experience.”<sup>40</sup> This is not to suggest that they were not voices of opposition or alternative conceptions of Social Work circulating within this period. But, as Reisch and Andrews recall, while Progressive Era reform is often celebrated as the beginning of logical, effective self-help strategies and the growth of Social Work professionals who expertly explain, predict, and resolve social problems, the turn towards professionalization was part of a growing effort to provide minimal services to those in need and minor restructuring of existing institutions, keeping class, race and gender stratifications safely intact.<sup>41</sup> In fact, professionalization in this period was often a tactic to eliminate and/or counter the growing socialist and communist movements within Social Work, as well as progressive social movements more generally. According to Reisch and Andrews,

“[p]rofessionalism seemed to offer the antidote to growing radical influences in the field.”<sup>42</sup> At the 1996 meeting of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections, for example, this increasingly popular sensibility was articulated by Charities Organizations Societies (COS) leader Mary Richmond who argued that professionalization was a “means to create necessary changes in social service work without promoting a dramatic restructuring of society and its institutions.”<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the professionalization of charity work was considered by many leaders as the “only viable” alternative to socialism, leading Reisch and Andrews to argue that, even from its earliest days, professionalism worked to “halt radicalism within social work.”<sup>44</sup>

In sum, the scientific charity of the first half of the nineteenth century differed from the dominant political sensibility characteristic of the turn-of-the-century in several important areas. First, the late 1890’s marks a shift away from an evangelically inspired, volunteer-run organizing strategies, and towards more fully embracing the expertise of professionals to identify and solve social problems; namely, social workers and other social science based professionals. Or, in other words, the dominant charity discourses of these two periods very differently imagined the ideal activist subject—the altruistic bourgeois charitably inclined volunteer versus the formally trained, paid, social science expert and bureaucrat. Second, while Watson insists that the charity movement of the 1890’s still imagined itself as necessarily working towards its own extinction, this argument seems less than convincing for during this period, as Watson also points out, charity organizing turned more towards managerial strategies and administrative tactics in order to attain such goals (or “crystallizing” charity institutions), resulting in less flexibility and creativity, fewer collaborations across institutions, and a reduction of

systemic and structural analysis. Instead of exploring the greater circumstances and multiple causes of poverty, for example, dominant charity organizing of the late 1890's focused more on a preventative kind of reform effort that decontextualized the individual seeking relief from their particular circumstances and from any analysis critical of the existing social order. It is within this later context that I now turn to a brief consideration of women's club work, and how, more specifically, middle class white and black women differently contested and incorporated the logics of the social science professionalization of charity organizing into their varying activist projects.

## **II. Clubwomen's Activism at the Turn-of-the-Century**

Though, as I mentioned earlier, post-Reconstruction United States experienced a dramatic rise in club work and non-profit incorporation in general, it was not until the 1950's that the judiciary pre-incorporation process particular to non-profit incorporation was challenged. In the late 1890's, states did begin to reform earlier, restrictive incorporation laws, and recognizing the contribution non-profits provided towards the economic growth of the State (however unpredictable or risky), put efforts towards managing the non-profit sector. Yet the judiciary process of pre-incorporation for the non-profit expressed greater substantive control during the last decade of the nineteenth century than it ever had before.<sup>45</sup> According to Norman Silber in, *A Corporate Form of Freedom: The Emergence of the Non-Profit Sector*, from 1890-1916, the legal system was flooded by non-profit petitions and reform efforts to "order" post-Reconstruction socioeconomic and cultural "disorder,"<sup>46</sup> often using government to ensure institutionalized racism and corporate freedoms. For example, like for-profit corporations, non-profits increasingly turned to the State for protection against "imitators

and imposters.” The Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks was one of the first non-profits to seek legal protection based on brand names and trademarks, simultaneously reinforcing the “separate but equal” decision of *Plessy vs Ferguson* within men’s club work. Incorporating in 1872, The Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks was an explicitly all white fraternal lodge that, in 1912, sued the predominantly African-American Grand Lodge of Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the World to retain control over the chartered name “Elks.” The white “Elks” lodge accused the “Elks of the World” of intentionally misleading and confusing the public by imitating the name and logo of the explicitly “whites only” organization. Invoking the 1908 consumer protection rationale which prevented “any person or group from adopting the name of a ‘benevolent, humane or charitable organization incorporated [...] as to be calculated to deceive the public with respect to any such corporation,’”<sup>47</sup> the court (not surprisingly) ruled in favor of the white “Elks.”<sup>48</sup>

Despite the pre-incorporation process still prerequisite to non-profit incorporation in the late nineteenth century, the race, class and gender segregation furthered in non-profits, and the institutionalization of white supremacy across the so-called “third sector,” non-profit incorporation and club movements flourished in this period.<sup>49</sup> Yet, white women’s and men’s groups differently embraced and contested the influence of the professionalization of charity work and the rising normalization of the social science perspectives and practices.<sup>50</sup> Interestingly, in “Gender and Urban Political Reform: The City Club and the Women’s Club of Chicago in the Progressive Era,” Maureen Flanagan argues that comparatively, white women’s groups were slower than the elite white men’s clubs to professionalize and embrace experts and the social sciences as the primary tool

for assessing and solving social, political and economic problems. Men's groups, on the other hand, welcomed expertise and administrative strategies that emphasized profitability, fiscal efficiency and facts.<sup>51</sup> Flanagan's research demonstrates that most white club men in Chicago in this era were business men who thought in terms of "assessing a problem through the slow but steady accumulation of facts" and importantly, focused on problem-solving in terms of solutions that "were best for themselves and their businesses."<sup>52</sup> Thus, she argues, their proposals for solving issues around garbage disposal, public education and police power (for example), "make clear that they came easily to see as best for the city what was best for business and businessmen."<sup>53</sup>

At the same time, women's groups worked to develop cultural practices including pageants, literature, banquets, and musical productions that, according to Anne Ruggles Gere and Sarah R. Rubbins in "Gendered Literacy in Black and White: Turn-of-the-Century African-American and European-American Club Women's Printed Texts," "fostered solidarity within the groups" and in some cases, "enhanced their own social standing within the larger community."<sup>54</sup> Generally white women's groups contested the "cult of true womanhood"—which emphasized their central function of "growing" others—by focusing their club work on growing themselves intellectually, as part of a larger effort to refashion white American middle class femininity. Contrarily, Gere and Rubbins' work suggests that black middle class clubwomen were also concerned with self-education and asserting their own perspectives into the dominant public sphere, but the focus was generally on "improving" the "whole world" rather than only growing themselves through internal solidarities.<sup>55</sup> White women's groups were certainly focused on domestic and local forms of improvement but not, according to Gere and Rubbins,

necessarily concerned with issues that cut across race, gender and class lines, “not the concerns of the whole population.” Progressive Era black women’s club activism more often targeted the whole society and advocated for “broad cultural improvement,” challenging not only the “cult of true womanhood,” but also “progressivism, imperialism, self-determinism, and racism on both national and international levels.”<sup>56</sup> Further, Flanagan’s research marks major differences in access to economic resources between white and black women’s clubs and points out that, unlike the white women’s clubs, black women’s groups often kept careful record of the 5 and 10 cent weekly dues, “painstakingly establishing the financial support for their printed texts.” This kind of historical record is rare in white women’s clubs’ archives, suggesting that these women rarely had to scramble to secure this level of monetary support.<sup>57</sup> In fact, in *Talk With You Like a Woman: African American Women, Justice and Reform in New York, 1890-1945*, Cheryl D. Hicks argues that black women’s reform work in this period is characterized by a “chronic lack of funds.”<sup>58</sup> Even when black women embraced social science techniques and sensibilities in their uplift work, they lacked State assistance, and on the rare occasion when they did receive substantial donations, they often were forced to fight “to maintain control over their programs.”<sup>59</sup>

While in the antebellum era there existed a complex network of black women organizing within black churches, the end of the nineteenth century witnessed a surge of autonomous local clubs soon to be nationally and internationally networked through the incorporation of the National Association of Colored Women in 1896. Prominent activists Victoria Earle Mathews, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, and Francis Harper profoundly influenced the growth of black women’s club work in the Progressive Era and

were “catalyst[s] in the establishment of clubs and a movement that would extend far beyond any one single issue.”<sup>60</sup>In early struggles, some of these leaders often (and differently) believed that in order to transform the existing social, economic and political conditions, alliances with white women were integral. They did not, however, focus on transforming the exclusionary policies of white women’s organizations, but instead worked to create their own institutions.<sup>61</sup>Yet the new generation of up and coming black middle class clubwomen articulated a slightly different vision than their deeply influential predecessors. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn argues that “as the women’s suffrage movement progressed into the early twentieth century and the racial oppression of Black people intensified, African American suffragists moved further away from the abstract nineteenth century argument that suffrage was a human right that all people deserved.”<sup>62</sup>The new leadership characteristic of this moment was often comprised of women born into free families in which the men in the family were skilled craftsmen, businessmen, or professionals of some sort. These men had “gained political and public experience from the abolitionist movement of the antebellum years and had educated their daughters.”<sup>63</sup>Terborg-Penn’s work suggests that though there was a diversity of participants in the black clubwomen’s club work, the leaders and a good deal of the participants were increasingly born into middle class families, were more connected to national politics, and less invested in collaborating with the dominant white suffragist organizations who, organizing more around gender lines, continued to exclude black women from their circles. The new black leadership of the 1890’s looked more to black national and international solidarities rather than coalitions with white women, and

“questioned the efficacy of attending white meetings and working in white woman’s organizations that exhibited signs of paternalism and racism.”<sup>64</sup>

This particular formation of black women activists articulated a political vision that, because of the legacy of slavery and the persistence of post-Reconstruction white supremacy, insisted that black women merited suffrage even more than white women, and that black women (experiencing racial, gendered and sexual violence) occupied a unique ability to carry out the kinds of social transformations required to dismantle the gendered and sexualized logics of white supremacy. For example, leaders of the National Association of Colored Women often described themselves as possessing “special qualities enabling them to carry out such a program” and believed that the experiences of black women under slavery granted them a “special fiber,” a “unique strength” and perspective that situated themselves as indispensable leaders in completing the work of emancipation.<sup>65</sup> But as Tullia Hamilton’s work suggests in *The National Association of Colored Women, 1896-1920*, clearly, like their white peers, black women’s club work circulated within the highly influential Victorian discourses of gender and sexuality, but the kind of moral uplift they championed was quite different from the white women’s groups. As such, though they considered themselves uniquely apt to transform the existing social order, for black clubwomen it was never a question of “natural inclination or temperament,” but of the “physical and social conditions” and historical context. Accordingly, black clubwomen’s uplift activism most often worked to “remove the very real social and economic barriers in the way of Black women.”<sup>66</sup>

As I briefly gestured towards earlier, white clubwomen often contested the discourses of the “cult of true womanhood” still circulating in the latter half of the

nineteenth century by growing themselves intellectually and publicly, and as a counter to (and in many ways, a reinforcement of) the “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” required to be a “woman.” Black women were historically differently dominated by these discourses for under slavery, white women were sexed and gendered in a way purporting to “know nothing of sexual indulgence,” and black women were sexed with an “overt sexuality” positioning them as always already outside of “virtuous possibilities” and therefore, outside of “womanhood.” Under these logics, the white slave master was never responsible for raping slave women, and while white women gave birth to citizens, black women under slavery “gave birth to property, and directly to capital itself in the form of slaves.”<sup>67</sup> Black women slaves’ perceived illicit sexuality was also imagined to threaten the solidity of white womanhood and therefore, womanhood more generally, and “it was the female slave who was held responsible for being a potential, and direct threat to the conjugal sanctity of the white mistress.”<sup>68</sup> As Carby points out, though the “cult of true womanhood” did not “remain the dominant ideological code” of the Progressive Era, the exclusion of “black women from dominant codes of morality continued throughout the century.”<sup>69</sup> Attacks on black women’s immorality and illicit sexualities permeated the dominant public sphere at the turn-of-the-century, and deeply influenced the social science reform projects of both white and black women’s club work.

For example, influential white social scientists like Frances Keller, who is considered by many to be a radical of her time, worked to extend her social work with poor white native-born and immigrant women, to black women of this era. Keller was trained in sociology at Cornell University and the University of Chicago and believed that it was enslavement that made all black women “less capable of leading moral,

respectable lives.”<sup>70</sup> She argued for a “progressive” understanding of black criminality and sexuality as environmental rather than biological, yet the innate “moral stature” of poor black women was always questioned, and black women were consistently positioned as morally suspect at best.<sup>71</sup> Though Keller and her contemporaries argued that black unemployment was not about idleness or laziness but a “consequence of industrial capitalism,” these white professional reformers generally believed that poor black women (particularly, in this moment, black migrant women from the South) were more “dangerous to society than endangered by society” because, in part, they believed that “negro women [still] yield to white men as readily as in slavery.”<sup>72</sup> Rejecting biological reasonings for black female criminality and illicit sexualities, Keller (and her peers) advocated for reform work that stressed transforming “labor efficiency” rather than changing the “racially restrictive practices of the labor market and of social institutions,”<sup>73</sup> because poor black women were figured as already, inescapably immoral and therefore their capacity for reform was also assumed to be inevitably limited. Consequently, black clubwomen, also seeking to reform migrant women, had to contest dominant discourses on black female immorality on multiply levels. Carby writes:

[I]n gaining their public presence as writers, [black clubwomen] would directly confront the political and economic dimensions of their subjugation. They had to define a discourse of black womanhood which would not only address their exclusion from the ideology of true womanhood but, as a consequence of this exclusion, would also rescue their bodies from the persistent association with illicit sexuality.<sup>74</sup>

In fact, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) came to fruition because of an open letter printed by the Missouri Press that publicly attacked the morality of all black women. President of the Missouri Press Association, J.W. Jacks, authored the article describing black women as “lascivious,” “having no virtue,” and “altogether without character.”<sup>75</sup> Although black women’s clubs were organizing throughout the country, whether in response to a “specific crisis,” or intent on “evangelizing” and “spreading the good news” to women in other communities, the Missouri Press attack sparked the first National Conference of the Colored Women of America. In 1895, activist, writer, and founder of the first black clubwomen’s magazine, *Women’s Era*, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin declared “Let Us Confer Together,” an open and urgent call for attending the national conference, inviting “all women of America, members of society or not.”<sup>76</sup> Though the name may suggest otherwise, because so many of the organizers behind this conference had personally been excluded from white women’s activist groups, the convention refused to formally define itself by race, and no women were excluded from membership if they shared the organizing principles of the movement. In her call, Ruffin pointed out that the question of black female sexuality not only unfairly attacked black women, but also shaped black club relationships with white women’s clubs. For the exclusion of black women from white clubs was often justified because of their perceived inherent immorality and illicit sexuality. This conference aimed to provide an opportunity to unite and organize black women across class and geographic lines, and from it, the first nationally recognized black women’s club emerged as the National Association of Colored Women (NACW)—a product of a merger

between The National Federation of Afro-American Women and the National League of Colored Women, in 1896.

In 1897, with Mary Terrell as their first president, the NACW conducted their first national convention in Nashville to develop their organizational structure, opening the association to any women's club with a membership of at least ten women. Eventually the NACW gained 50,000 members with local clubs at its base, and state and regional federations topped with a national governing body. The three major issues addressed in the conference were "race, organizing amongst black women, and issues about the role of women in society" more generally,<sup>77</sup> but the NACW's "Lifting as We Climb" mission also included:

To promote the education of colored women and to hold an Educational Institute biennially at the convention.

To raise the standard of the home.

To work for the social, moral, economic, and religious welfare of women and children.

To secure and enforce civil and political rights for ourselves and for our group.

To obtain for our colored women the opportunity of reaching the highest standard

In all fields of human endeavor.

To promote interracial understanding so that justice and goodwill may prevail among all people.<sup>78</sup>

Throughout the Progressive Era, the NACW supported women's right to vote amendments, prohibition legislation, anti-lynch laws, and passed resolutions that refused support to segregationists. It provided a space for black women intellectuals to present,

collaborate, critique and exchange papers, ideas, poetry, novels, and speeches, with information circulating in all directions between differing members of the institutional structure. The NACW established mother's clubs, day nurseries, kindergartens, schools of domestic science, and worked in prisons to reform "fallen women."<sup>79</sup> They worked to help black women compete against white immigrant women for jobs and "shielded migrant women from corrupt unemployment agencies."<sup>80</sup> They sponsored essay contests and placed black literature in public libraries, but interestingly, though the Progressive Era is often recognized as a period of black business expansion, the NACW did not work to build economic institutions.<sup>81</sup> By 1913, the NACW held affiliations in Canada, Liberia and Madagascar as well as in thirty U.S. states, and in 1920 they even raised money to send delegates to the International Council of Women in Norway. Throughout its institutional life, the NACW distributed a national magazine, *National Notes*, and received extensive coverage in the black press. In fact, many NACW leaders were prominent in other progressive groups including the NAACP, the National Urban League, and the Commission on Interracial Cooperation. As Evelyn Higgenbotham argues, by the 1920's the NACW was foundational to black women's club work, the "linchpin that united hundreds of women's clubs throughout the nation in shared goals and strategies of social services and racial uplift."<sup>82</sup> Notably, the activism of the NACW was primarily financed by black donors, and white philanthropists played a minor role in the overall vision and strategy of the NACW.<sup>83</sup>

Yet, as many scholars point out, the combined "evangelical fervor" and social science influenced reform techniques used by the women of the NACW marked a clear hierarchical distinction between themselves as reformers and the non-normative black

women (and sometimes men) who they deemed in need of reform. In many ways, then, working within similar discursive terrains, they paralleled the problematic reform efforts of bourgeois white women's activism that I outlined above. "They sought to direct young women into 'appropriate forms of employment,'" taught manners, dress and domestic skills in an effort to regulate poor black women's behavior.<sup>84</sup> For instance, many clubs of the NACW did not approve of blues and ragtime music because they understood it to "degenerate" not "elevate" the race, and in 1902, the Ohio Federation of the NACW passed a resolution condemning ragtime music because of its "pernicious effect on the character of Black people."<sup>85</sup> Within this context, literary practices came to signal an "acquisition of genteel culture," rather than an integral political practice, and while journalism was imagined to be a central part of club activism, fiction and poetry were increasingly denigrated forms of writing, and delinked from imaginations of what constitutes effective political work. Though, like white clubwomen, NACW members believed that women were "the cornerstone of civilization," it is worth briefly pointing out a few of the many distinctions. Members of the NACW understood their activism as completing the work of emancipation and believed that uplifting black women was "prerequisite for the uplift of the race as whole." Their reform efforts, then, were different in that they were broad-based, intent on reaching the masses and were connected to the concerns of the larger community; a kind of "uplift at its roots."<sup>86</sup> The uniqueness of black women's historical perspective, NACW club leaders argued, meant that the uplift of the entire race was a job that "Black women and Black women alone could do."<sup>87</sup>

Moreover, the social science influenced activism furthered by club members of the NACW was often mocked as a “leisurely” activity, not a substantive political practice, and they were often accused of being only a social club, “a set of butterflies on dress parades.”<sup>88</sup> Of course this easy dismissal is rooted in certain racist and sexist assumptions about black women, but it is also linked to the fact that members of the NACW were not formally trained as social workers. Within a historical moment where the dominant political logic tended to favor professional experts engaging social science methods to explain and solve social problems, the work of the NACW was often disregarded because they did not employ trained professionals armed with scientific logics to expertly measure and solve racial problems. In response to these critiques, club members of the NACW often passed declarations that claimed they were “doing something more than talk.”<sup>89</sup>

To recall, though white and black women’s clubs proliferated across the political terrain of the late nineteenth century, they differently accessed, embraced and contested the shifts in dominant imaginations of what constitutes the political particular to this historical moment. White women’s groups tended to prioritize the individualized growth of club members and, more generally, had greater access to monetary resources and to expertise and Social Work discourses. Black women’s clubs had less access to even the standard forms of professional expertise, and insisting on a necessary structural analysis in their political strategies, most often held a more complicated relationship to the dominant political visions of this moment. I now offer a reading of Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins’ cultural politics as a more general critique of the consolidation and professionalization of charity work (institutionalized as “Social Work”) and particularly, the corresponding influence that dominant social science logics had on middle class black political

struggles in the Progressive Era. Again, this is not to discount the scholarship on Hopkins that argues for an understanding of her anti-lynching, anti-rape black feminist internationalist politics, but to make a case for a related and *additional* way of understanding her political interventions and sensibilities through a sustained reflection on what constitutes aggressive black “agitation” in this era.

Many historians claim that the 1890’s mark a turn away from social and literary societies and thus, necessarily, a progressive turn towards social justice and activism within black women’s club work. Yet, I believe that Hopkins’ fiction as well as her public work as orator, editor, and active clubwomen argues for the (continued) importance of cultural production for black political struggles in this moment where social science discourses are increasingly privileged in the dominant public sphere as well as, on different scales, within white and black women’s club work. Furthermore, I understand Hopkins’ work in *Contending Forces* as equally critical of the consolidation and institutionalization of a singular way of properly *being political*, as she insists on representing the significance of sustaining multiple modes of activism, and multiple imaginations of what constitutes the political. In *Contending Forces*, I argue that Hopkins illuminates the political import of not only the *content* of black activist discourses, but also the numerous *modes* of being political that ultimately she calls “agitation.” Unlike much of the secondary criticism and social movement histories of black activism on this era, I position *Contending Forces* as a critical supplement to the existing scholarship on black women’s club activism as I look to how the novel is critical of the professionalization of charity and the increasingly dominant social science imaginations of activism. *Contending Forces* also expands what counts as black feminist activism, tracing the limitations and possibilities of a multiplicity

of different and conflicting political modalities circulating within black clubwomen's political discourses at the turn-of-the-century.

### **Section III: Pauline Hopkins, *Contending Forces*, and Imaginations of “Agitation”**

Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, previously named Pauline Allen, was born to free parents in 1859 and raised in Portland, Maine, before moving to Boston as a teenager. There she attended a prestigious high school named Girls High School and at fifteen entered and won an essay competition sponsored by William Wells Brown with a piece entitled, “Evils of Intemperance and Their Remedies.” At age sixteen, Hopkins began her career in the theatre debuting with the Progressive Musical Union as “Boston’s favorite colored soprano.” Two years later, Hopkins starred in the stage production of *Pauline; Or the Belle of Saratoga*, a controversial play that showcased white investment in the maintenance and expansion of the institutions of slavery, and even appropriated black-face minstrelsy through the white-face make up worn by the black cast members, boldly “donning the identity of privilege white Americans.”<sup>90</sup> By 1879, Hopkins and her extended family founded the Hopkins Colored Troubadours, a nationally touring musical theater group that staged both Hopkins’ acting abilities as well as the musical dramas she composed including *Slaves’ Escape; Or, the Underground Railroad*. As a playwright, her work is described as insisting on the “interconnectedness” of people of color throughout the globe and is retrospectively situated as part of increasingly public efforts by black women to “make visible African American memories of slavery and freedom that directly challenged flawed mythologies about slavery that fueled racial intolerance in post-Reconstruction America.”<sup>91</sup> Hopkins later joined the black women’s club movement, volunteering as the secretary for the Women’s Era Club of Boston, and with other groups

such as the Boston Literary and Historical Association, and The National Association of Colored Women. In the 1890's, while Hopkins worked and trained in stenography in order to support herself financially, she also began delivering lectures (non-fiction and fiction) at various institutions across the country including black women's clubs, schools and religious organizations. It is worth noting that while Hopkins worked intimately with clubs like the National Association of Colored Women and the Women's Era Club of Boston, unlike the majority of black women leaders in the club movement, Hopkins did not have a college education, was not married and was not middle class—Hopkins struggled financially even at the high point of her writing career with the *Colored American*. Perhaps her non-normative social and economic positioning contributed to her reflections in *Contending Forces* on the tensions and contradictions that defined the “New Negro Woman” in black middle class club activism, “especially the chasm between the domestic ideology modeled by privileged clubwomen and the struggles of the vast majority of African American women, including Hopkins.”<sup>92</sup>

Hopkins' activism is most often linked with her editorial work at the first African American literary magazine, *Colored American*. While the black press grew increasingly to be a “vibrant outlet” for black intellectuals to speak out against the persistent racial, gendered, sexual and economic violence of the post-Reconstruction Era, the *Colored American* was unique in that it specifically targeted a broad base of African Americans through arts and literature, aiming to “introduce a monthly into every Negro Family,”<sup>93</sup> while overtly advocating for full African American citizenship and even land acquisition. The Colored Co-operative Publishing Company, founded by four young black men to function as a membership cooperative between readers and writers,

published the first issue of *Colored American* in 1900, “a race work dedicated to the best interest of the Negro everywhere,” with international affiliations in China, Hawaii, Manila, Africa and the West Indies. Over the course of the five years Hopkins’ worked with the publication, The Colored Co-operative Publishing Company published her first full length novel *Contending Forces* as well as all three of Hopkins’ serial novels in the *Colored American*: *Hagar’s Daughter: A Story of Southern Caste Prejudice*, *Winona: A Tale of Negro Life in the South and the Southwest*, *Of One Blood; or, the Hidden Self*. Hopkins joined the staff at *Colored American* as the “Women’s Department Editor” (writing under multiple names including Sarah A. Allen and Shirley J. Shadrach) and then became editor of the entire journal soon after. As editor, essayist and fiction writer, under Hopkins’ leadership the magazine claimed 100,000 readers by May of 1902.

Hopkins work at the *Colored American* is generally understood as being directly linked to her participation in the club movement and with the Women’s Era Club of Boston more specifically. She often conceptualized her work in collective terms, connecting and expanding the political imaginaries inside black women’s activist circles through her writing in order to circulate these sensibilities within a wider range of readers. Hopkins’ fiction and editorial work was deeply committed to reviving Boston’s “political activity and antislavery societies of the antebellum period,”<sup>94</sup> for in her mind, lynch law, rape, disenfranchisement and institutionalized segregation were only new variations of white supremacist logics deeply beholden to the persistence of the institutions and legacies of slavery.<sup>95</sup> In her non-fiction essay entitled, “Club Life among Colored Women,” Hopkins emphasizes the good work of individual black women, but insists that personal efforts are best if “centralized by co-operation in the form of clubs,

thus giving causes dear and vital humanity the valuable aid of organized intelligence.”<sup>96</sup> Thus, from 1900-1904 under Hopkins’ editor leadership, the *Colored American* focused primarily on the “activities, interests, and business” of black middle class clubwomen and devoted its pages to “literature, science, music, art, religion, facts, fictions and the traditions of the Negro race.”<sup>97</sup>

Clearly, working within the club movement inspired new forms of political protest in Hopkins, for while she retired from the stage, her editorial work at *Colored American* continued her commitment to the struggle against the gendered and sexualized violence of white supremacy and was explicitly associated with the political imaginaries of black clubwomen politics. This commitment is evident in the visual logics of the *Colored American*, for unlike most black editorials circulating in this moment, 36 of the 41 magazine covers under Hopkins’ charge featured black women from the club movement who were often surrounded by “floral borders” and advertisements traditionally used to attract black middle class women readers. In 1901, she published a special series, “Famous Women of the Negro Race,” placing black women’s club activism at the center of black social movement struggles more generally. Alongside women’s club news and information, Hopkins’ generally featured poetry and fiction—including some of her own short stories and serial novels—paired next to anti-lynching articles, texts that attended to the experiences of black women specifically, and pieces that maintained anti-imperial black internationalist perspectives—a position held by the cooperative and publishing company as well at this time. During her career with the *Colored American*, she frequently gave lectures from her fictional and non-fiction writing to a variety of institutions and black intellectuals, including but not limited to, black

women's clubs across the region. Thus, many historians describe Hopkins as the "leading voice" of black women's club work in this era and credit her editorial work specifically for expanding the available public roles for black women as writers and public speakers.

In 1904 the *Colored American* was taken over by new management, and though the magazine claimed Hopkins left her position due to health problems, historians theorize that she was more likely fired because of political differences, for the new owners of the magazine were aligned with Booker T. Washington's political goals and strategies.<sup>98</sup> In fact, in a response to W.E.B. Du Bois, who initially reached out to Hopkins for evidence that would prove Washington was buying and bribing black newspapers, Hopkins explains that she was forced out of her position not because of health problems but because of "overlapping racial, international and gender politics."<sup>99</sup> The firing of Hopkins from the *Colored American* is often situated as evidence of her radical activism and as the highpoint of her activist career. As Jill Bergman's work in "Everything We Hoped She Be" points out, the firing of Pauline E. Hopkins from the *Colored American* for failing to accommodate white readers, funders, and certain conservative black political wishes, is now understood as the "central feature of her activism." Bergman's work usefully complicates Hopkins' relationships to the narrow and problematic ways that historians regularly categorize black political struggles of this moment as necessarily being confined to one of two political camps—Du Bois or Washington—through highlighting some of Hopkins' more "moderate" political pieces, including her installment of "Famous Men of the Negro Race" that highlights the overall importance of Washington's activism. Her research also shows that after Hopkins' dismissal, the *Colored American* went through major transitions in content and readership. While

Hopkins' emphasized clubwomen's politics and cultural production as central to black political struggles, under new management the magazine shifted more towards circulating black business news and information. Articles that prioritized "success through material gains" as "opposed to intellectual advancement" became the priority of the *Colored American* and, though the magazine occasionally reported on women's club activities, it significantly narrowed its scope and began to focus on male entrepreneurial readers as its target audience.<sup>100</sup> Men replaced women on the covers of the journal as the editors steered the *Colored American* away from black feminist internationalist cultural politics though, interestingly, these changes corresponded with a drop in circulation and in the numbers of readers, despite the price of the magazine being reduced. In 1904, Hopkins became a contributor to the Atlanta-based *Voice of the Negro* and later co-founded the *New Era Magazine* with her former colleague Walter Wallace in 1916. Her editorial career ended soon after and she spent the rest of her life working as a stenographer for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In 1930, Hopkins was struggling with health problems when, in her home, she caught fire, and rushing out onto the street engulfed in flames, suffered burns too severe to recover.

### ***Contending Forces***

While her non-fiction and public work can be read in ways that mirror the standard histories of black women's club work, I find that Hopkins fiction, read alongside her "activism," offers a more nuanced look at the many complicated and often contesting political practices of black women's club work in this era. I now turn to *Contending Forces* as a critical rejoinder to the histories I drew on earlier in order to think about how the professionalization and consolidation of Social Work as the dominant political

imaginary impacted black women's club work and corresponding political imaginaries. One way of approaching *Contending Forces*, then, is to read for how Hopkins differently represents the limits and possibilities of the *multiple modalities* of being an "activist" in black political struggles at the turn-of-the-century. Approached in this manner, *Contending Forces* is a representation of how the discourses of professionalization unevenly circulated within differing black political strategies and points to the limitations of professionalization of activism for black clubwomen. The novel offers a window into the political landscape of Hopkins' moment where, interestingly, though social science discourses are privileged, they are (in some contexts) decentered and critiqued, and furthermore, they are situated as just *one* of the multiple representations of activism, for in *Contending Forces*, many modes of being political are still at play within black social movement struggles.

*Contending Forces* is hailed as the romance novel that "would do for the antilynching cause what Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* did for the antislavery cause."<sup>101</sup> Indeed, Hopkins historians often describe her approach to writing romance and sentimental narratives (in novel or serialized forms) as directly part of her political work in the club movement, as part of her political strategy. For, in a moment where the dominant political imaginary increasingly privileged empiricism, expertise, and professionalized social science discourses, Hopkins valued the transformative power of cultural production and believed it had a central role in both reaching and *agitating* black communities to organize against the pervasive racial, economic, gendered and sexualized violences particular to the post-Reconstruction era. She writes, "My stories are definitely planned to show obstacles persistently placed in our paths by a dominate race

to subjugate us spiritually,”<sup>102</sup> and further, as Carby points out, for Hopkins “organizing to fight meant also writing to organize.”<sup>103</sup> Hopkins believed that the abolitionist movement was not over and attempting to reinvigorate the antislavery movement, she intended her fiction to enter “these days of mob violence and lynch-law and directly intervene in and help transform the state of relations”<sup>104</sup> across race, gender, class, and geographic lines. Hopkins understood the rise of mob violence, lynching, rape, and economic exclusion to be deeply bound up in the ongoing political, physical, and psychically terrorizing white supremacist tactics to repress black agitation and deny “the power of the black vote.” Her fiction, then, can be situated as part of her activism, a tactic in the struggle to change the social, political and economic realities of black people in the Progressive Era, and colonized peoples across the globe. Hopkins favored romance and sentimental narrative strategies and believed these genres to be “practical mediums” to reach those readers who rarely if ever read “history or biography.” As Lois Brown writes in “Death-Defying,” Hopkins resurrected her family history and personal political struggles in her writings and intertwined them with “histories of global dominance, subjugation, emancipation, and colonization,”<sup>105</sup> to produce sentimental narratives that engage in and critique dominant white supremacist histories of slavery, lynching and rape apologists, tensions between Northern and Southern racial formations, and black activism in general. More specifically, through the romance novel form of *Contending Forces*, she strategically fused black feminist internationalism and critical historical and political discourses together within romance and sentimental narratives to reveal the anxieties and complexities of black women’s club work and black politics more generally in the Progressive Era.

*Contending Forces* is a complicated story of love, deception, slavery, white supremacy in the North, South and outside of the U.S., miscegenation, and black political struggles in the Progressive Era. It is a novel that (re)centers the persistence of the gendered and sexualized violence of white supremacy, in all of its iterations, as an extension of U.S. slavery and the colonization of peoples across the globe. Thus, for example, while Hopkins may present nefarious characters such as black Boston politician John Langley, who assaults the heroine Sappho's dignity and ladyhood, schemes against his best friend Will Smith, and can easily be bought out by white politicians, Hopkins insists that Langley's "selfishness" and "sneakiness" is problematic, but must be understood as a "product of slavery."<sup>106</sup> Hopkins re-centers the legacies and institutions of slavery as the hideous "cankering sore which is eating into the heart of republican principles and stamping the lie upon the constitution."<sup>107</sup> The novel, then, boldly presents the dynamics, problems and potentials of black political struggles at the turn-of-the-century but always in a way that historicizes these problematics as necessarily articulated with the persistent institutions and cultural logics of slavery and white supremacy. According to Thomas Cassidy, the novel makes three over-arching claims to try to engage white and black readers to organize against the political terror of mob violence, lynching and rape: that "separate but equal" is problematic at best, for the story indexes the complicated, contaminated histories that disallow a purely "black" or "white" bloodline; that the "elevation of race separation as a social ideal" has served to justify and simultaneously invisibilize lynching and other forms of white supremacist violence from the public; and that the accommodationist view of black politics commonly associated

with Booker T. Washington is insufficient and will not lead to the necessary black agitation Hopkins' novel demands.<sup>108</sup>

From Cassidy's vantage, the goal of *Contending Forces* is to lead both its black and white audiences to understand the wide-spread nineteenth century lynching and raping of black Americans as a form of political terror, and to persuade readers that the most effective way of resisting this terrorism is through aggressive African American agitation.<sup>109</sup> But instead of invoking a preconceived understanding of what constitutes "African American agitation," this chapter insists on asking, what is this specific political imaginary, or what is African American agitation in this context? I offer a reading that does not depart from Cassidy's work, but rather engages the transformations in dominant political imaginaries particular to the Progressive Era, in order to identify and unpack more specifically how Hopkins imagines the political counters of black agitation that I believe her novel powerfully commands. I focus on the array of political possibilities she critically envisions as available to black social movements in this moment where Social Work is consolidating into the favored political sensibility and practice for those seeking significant, effective social change. Ultimately, I note the different limitations and possibilities for black "agitation" within these various modalities or, in short, I work towards an understanding of what I believe Hopkins means by *agitation*. I focus my readings on four representations of *being political* that are differently engaged by the main characters of the novel: the parlor party scene in "Ma Smith's Lodging-House" chapter, the women's "Sewing-Circle" chapter, the elite white male Canterbury Club Dinner, and the American Colored League meeting.

In the chapter “Ma Smith’s Lodging House,” Ma Smith (or Mrs. Smith) is introduced as a widowed Bostonian and respectable Northern entrepreneur, mother of main characters Dora and Will Smith, and *one* representation of black middle class women’s uplift strategies and sensibilities. Oldest child Will Smith—often read by scholars as a figure modeled after Du Bois—is a “brilliant philosophical student” who passionately views his studies in Latin and Greek as “tools which he used to unlock the storehouse of knowledge” that has been, in so many ways, violently denied to generations of black people. Will and Dora live with their mother and Dora (who is engaged to Will’s friend John Langley) works to help Ma Smith maintain a “respectable” exclusive boarding house for black people who are “pretty nice” or “high-toned.” It is commonly understood that it is “hard to get a room at N. 500 D Street.”<sup>110</sup> Ma Smith regularly organizes gatherings in the parlor of her boarding house (also called “musical evenings” and “reception nights”) for the tenants to get better acquainted with one another. For Mrs. Smith, these parlor parties that occur in her home (and place of business) are very much in line with how she imagines black middle class uplift strategies, intent on modeling “proper” manners and etiquette, and simultaneously influencing “vulnerable” women who might be led astray from “upright conduct.” Much like NACW and other black women’s club activism, Mrs. Smith organizes these receptions within the familiar discourses of black middle class women’s reform. She reasons, “logically enough,” that these receptions are to encourage “those who were inclined to stray from the right paths” to be “influenced either in favor of upright conduct or else shamed into an acceptance of the right.”<sup>111</sup> Yet, how Smith imagines the dynamics and contours of such uplift practices transpiring through her parlor party is striking (though, importantly, Mrs. Smith is not

surprised by the happenings at the parlor party) for they challenge the standard reading and historicization of black women's club activism. While the parlor parties are imagined within the language of black middle class women's respectability, intent on molding "proper" black bourgeois subjects, at the same time they organize an informal space for multiple political sensibilities to materialize, as well as political entanglements to emerge across class, gender, geographic, and generational lines through the cultural, leisurely and pleasurable practices of the parlor party. For instance, attendants at Ma Smith's parlor parties expect gourmet treats and an abundance of food, even, on special occasions, ice cream, because Ma Smith believes that "good things to eat make a man respect himself and look up in the world." Though Ma Smith identifies as an upright religious woman and is very involved in church politics, these same foods humorously draw the young preacher away from his Godly Sunday duties when he skips the prayer meeting after smelling Ma Smith's "famous white cake." Justifying the affective pleasure the young preacher opts for over Biblical study, he tells himself that skipping the prayer meeting (to eat the cake) is part of his commitment to God's work, for "his presence was necessary to give the festivities the religious air" necessary for a Sunday evening parlor party.

Although the intentions behind the parlor party are easily associated with dominant black clubwomen's activist desires and sensibilities, a closer look suggests Ma Smith's parlor party is an "alternative" uplift political imaginary circulating within the black social movement struggles at the turn-of-the-century. It provides openings for the boarders, including the preacher student, to share their varying histories and struggles in the post-Reconstruction Era across gender, age, class and geographic divides. At the party, Mrs. Ophelia Davis and Mrs. Sarah Ann White, two older former slave women

migrants from a Louisiana plantation, discuss their experiences “livin’ in white folkses” kitchens. They recall the hierarchies amongst women kitchen staff in the South, “servant gals not bein’ as good as enybody else,” and how, regardless of their actions, they were always under suspicion. While black women were denigrated for not wearing proper Sunday church clothes, for example, when Davis and White did wear “sech style,” the “mistis is a-wonderin’ how you kin ‘ford sech style” because in her mind, “you nuthin’ but a cook in the kitchen.”<sup>112</sup> When the war reaches their particular plantation, the white master and mistress abandon their belongings, and Davis takes many of the antebellum dresses formerly donned by the white mistress of the plantation. Davis wears one of these dresses to the parlor party, the “famous black silk dress and gold watch and chain,” and White sports a “bright blue silk skirt and rose-colored silk shirt-waist.”<sup>113</sup> Neither believe in the “gloomy” colors and respectable styles advocated by black uplift women like Mrs. Smith, for they argue that they’d be “dead soon enough and have a long time enough to stay ‘mouldering’ inter clay, without buryin’ herself befo’ it was time.”<sup>114</sup> Interestingly, within a parlor space intent on uplifting vulnerable women, the uncontested appearance of Davis and White’s cultural practices are, perhaps, unexpected. Their experiences under slavery introduce a historically situated logic that refuses the clothing practices instructed by black uplift women like Mrs. Smith (and most all of the women in the novel), and even associates the colors and styles of “respectable” black women of the North with premature death. Furthermore, as former slaves and Southern migrants, Davis and White’s presence at the parlor party historically articulates their aberrant clothing practices with certain gendered experiences under slavery—Davis is even wearing her former mistresses’ dress—which, in this context, allows for the circulation of a critique

of some of the assumptions embedded in the “New Negro Woman,” and what constitutes respectable black femininity in this period in general, across the differing racial formations of the North and the South. Migrating to Boston, Davis and White become local entrepreneurs and begin “The first-class New Orleans Laundry.” Despite the clothing practices advocated by the leadership of black women’s clubs, their laundering becomes “the style” in which “no young bride on Back Bay felt she was complete unless” White and Davis place the “finishing polish on the dainty lingerie of her wedding finery.”<sup>115</sup> While certainly, in this moment, dominant black uplift sensibilities powerfully dictated certain cultural practices as “moral” and others as “immoral,” clearly “alternative” political practices and perspectives contested these visions of womanhood and circulated even within organized spaces like Ma Smith’s parlor party that utilized the same language of uplift and reform. In other words, the parlor party reveals that even within black middle class clubwomen’s politics, there are multiple contradictory political sensibilities circulating as to what constitutes proper uplift practices, and more, these contradictions do not seem to cause Ma Smith any kind of alarm.

Sappho, the novel’s mysteriously beautiful, modest, self-possessed young protagonist from New Orleans, whose beauty combines the “queen rose and lily” in one, is also in attendance along with Dora, Will and John Langley (Dora’s fiancé), and this younger generation leads the literary and musical program which is a central feature of the parlor party. Dora plays piano, Will sings a few songs, John reads from his own collection of poetry and Sappho delivers a dramatic monologue from Ben Hur in “such dramatic style” that the young theologian feels he might “have made a mistake in going into such hilarious company on the Sabbath.”<sup>116</sup> Mrs. White and Mrs. Davis attempt to

ambitiously perform operatic versions of “Suwanee River,” and with “much wheezing and puffing” and “many would-be fascinating jumps and groans” conclude the performance much to the relief of the other boarders. Meanwhile, the “young people in the room had gathered in a little knot” and were deep in discussion about the “many questions of the day and their effect upon the colored people.”<sup>117</sup> Discussions and disagreements as to whether or not black people are “improving in their dress, in their looks, and in their manners” as well as debates about the appropriate ways to interact with white men and women in public, move back and forth across the different generations represented in the room.

Though, again, a reform driven parlor party might intend to normalize certain black bourgeois political sensibilities that, at this moment, might outwardly privilege social science discourses that devalue the role of cultural production, Ma Smith creates a political space where these very discourses are engaged, (re)historicized and contested, all under the auspice of uplifting black women. As I mentioned earlier, during this time period clubs across the country began passing laws against certain musical forms, while literature and other forms of cultural production were increasingly denigrated forms of political work, even disarticulated from how black clubwomen leaders imagined what counts as political. At Ma Smith’s parlor party, however, the piano, operatic singing, theatrical reading, and poetry recitation performances are central to the organizing logics of the space. While the particular forms of cultural production that are acceptable in this gathering (Ben Hur not Ragtime, for example) are still in line with dominant notions of black women’s respectability, the fact that cultural production is integral to black women’s activism is important, and suggests that contrary to the standard readings I

glossed above, many black clubwomen challenged dominant social science devaluation of cultural production, and within certain political modes, articulated a different relationship between “the political” and “the cultural” during this time period. For, interestingly, cultural production, pleasure and other practices often marked in this period as “leisurely” rather than “political” are central to this informal political space where subjugated knowledges (across class, geographic, gender, and generational lines) and differing political sensibilities intermingle in a way that is inseparable from the pleasure of parlor partying. Furthermore, without the monetary resources white women and men’s clubs enjoyed, Hopkins describes how “parlor entertainments,” such as the one described above, were also integral to black women’s fundraising and were greatly “en vogue” at this time. Often “an admission fee of ten cents was collected from every patron,” and all the money “thus obtained was put into a fund to defray the expense of purchasing tables and decorations”<sup>118</sup> and other necessities for a larger fundraiser.

As Sappho and Dora’s relationship grows more intimate,<sup>119</sup> they converse on love and marriage and Dora confesses that although she is engaged to Langley, she often wonders about a childhood friend, Dr. Arthur Lewis, who runs an industrial school in the South, and who is always figured as representing Booker T. Washington. Dora relays to Sappho that Lewis believes that “industrial education and the exclusion of politics will cure all our race troubles” and Sappho disagrees, arguing against the accommodationist political strategy, suggesting that “if our men are deprived of franchise, we become aliens in the very land of our birth.”<sup>120</sup> According to Dora, Lewis also believes that “women should be seen and not heard, where politics is under discussion,” leaving Sappho (and Hopkins) to exclaim that Lewis is an “Insufferable pig!” While his conservatism and

sexism is critiqued amongst these two young women in the intimate quiet of Sappho's bedroom, Hopkins frames Lewis' political sensibility as, again, an extension of the violences of slavery and the continuation of white supremacy, of having to "keep in with the whites of the section where his work lies" if he wants to avoid conflict and have any success at all. Dora notes that Sappho is careful not to detail any of her mysterious history, though she does learn Sappho is a stenographer, but is forced to work from home because the white workers in the office will quit if the supervisor allows a black women to work from the office; though the North boasts to be free of prejudice, when seeking employment, "then every door is closed against" black women (and men).<sup>121</sup> Discussions about the direction of black politics and the role black women should play in these struggles continues in the women's sewing-circle.

"The Sewing-Circle" chapter offers further insight into the anxieties and complexities within black women's club work and at the same time, suggests that multiple modes of *being* political are integral to black women's activism. Mrs. Smith is involved in fundraising for the most prominent black church in Boston, a church very involved in "helping this race to help itself,"<sup>122</sup> and organizes several events geared towards paying off the mortgage of the religious institution. Smith is the chairman of the "board of stewardesses" and is competing to raise the most money for the church through organizing a fair, one, she boasts, "that should eclipse anything of similar nature ever attempted by the colored people."<sup>123</sup> Meanwhile, sewing-circles are held across the city for women to help prepare for the larger fundraising event. At Ma Smith's particular sewing-circle, held yet again in her parlor, Hopkins describes the attendants as the most prestigious middle class black women organizers in Boston. As the women work on their

various sewing projects, Hopkins' introduces Mrs. Willis—who, arguably, is modeled after (and a critique of) prominent Boston club activist Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin—as a critical representation of black women's club leadership, a “brilliant widow of a bright Negro politician,” who at 2pm when the sewing-circle ends, transitions the group of women into the club business of the week. With the sewing temporarily put aside, the circle focuses on what might normally be assumed to be “club work” or “activism.” The women organize themselves to detail the “events of interest to the Negro race which had transpired during the week throughout the country,” and everyone contributes some “fact” to a growing list that is intended to centralize and circulate the information they have gathered throughout the week. Once the facts have been named and documented on the easel at the center of the meeting, Mrs. Willis delivers a talk on a topic perhaps typically expected from black clubwomen of this time: “the place which the virtuous woman occupies in the up-building of the race.”

“Every city or town,” says Hopkins critically, “has its Mrs. Willis.” She is “keen” in her analysis but most people who meet her “after a short acquaintance” in which they experience the “gamut of emotions from strong attraction to repulsion,” end up feeling as if Mrs. Willis “sifted them thoroughly, while they gained nothing in return.”<sup>124</sup> Though Mrs. Willis is well read and “conversant,” she has received minimal formal education. In Hopkins' words, Willis is primarily “self-serving,” “manipulative” and “shrewd in business.” Hopkins reveals that when her politician husband dies, Mrs. Willis sees the “Woman Question” and black women's club work as an opportunity to both make a living and “help her breast the social tide.” Hopkins says of Mrs. Willis, “The advancement of the colored woman should be the new problem in the woman question

that should float her upon its tide into the prosperity she desired.” Mrs. Willis’s plan, “conceived in selfishness,” “bore glorious fruit in the formation of clubs of colored women banded together for charity, for study, and for every reason under God’s glorious heavens that can better the condition of mankind.”<sup>125</sup> And she commands a powerful role in the club circles, for in her hands committees were “as wax,” and if a vote “went contrary to her desire” it was always only in her absence.

In her talk and in the discussion that follows, Willis represents another political mode within black women’s uplift, one that is much like the standard historicization of the leadership of the NACW, and argues that black women offer a unique perspective and vision for black politics, and that “Negro women in her native state is truly a virtuous woman,” and should not be held responsible for wrongs which were “unconsciously committed” or which were “committed under compulsion.”<sup>126</sup> Thus, like the NACW, though Mrs. Willis advocates a certain version of black middle class uplift politics, she necessarily frames the “problem of virtuous black women” as a product of the violence black women slaves experienced under slavery that is continued, though perhaps differently, into the post-Reconstruction Era. The conversation that follows also allows for discussion about how to respond to or reframe some of the sexism and “mulatta” prejudice many of the lighter skin women experience within black men’s political circles. For example, one woman shares a derogatory comment that a Reverend at the church made, condemning “the mulatto race” as a “mongrel mixture which combined the worst elements of two races,” and Willis responds that there is “no such things as an unmixed black on the American continent” and therefore the “fate of the mulatto will be the fate of the entire race.”<sup>127</sup> Mrs. Willis, interestingly, ends the “business” part of the sewing-circle

turned club meeting with an endorsement of a political strategy often associated with Washington when she declares that “happiness and social position are not to be gained by pushing.”<sup>128</sup> Although her conservative politics are overtly motivated by power and access to greater resources, Sappho, who finds Mrs. Willis “forced” and “insincere,” does concede that there is “more in this woman than appeared on the surface” and in this way, Hopkins offers a critical but complicated and sympathetic look at the dynamics within the more conservative sector of the leadership in the black women’s club movement.

The business of the club meeting concludes at 6pm when tea is served and the women return to their sewing and various other projects, knowing their work for the day is scheduled to end at 8pm. Music and recitations are scheduled from 8pm-10pm while ice cream and cake are sold and the money put towards Ma Smith’s Fair. At 9pm the parlor space is scheduled for the younger generation’s committee meeting, organized in support of selling Ma Smith’s four gallons of ice cream. One of the young people on this committee recommends they “get up a dance,” and though Ma Smith is horrified at first, they convince her that she will not be disgraced by the church and that transitioning the sewing-circle turned club business turned sewing-circle turned music and recitation into a *dance* is the only viable way to raise money for the church mortgage. Will offers to call it “his dance” and Ma Smith finally acquiesces, leaving the young committee members to quickly move the furniture and get the “waltz into full force.” Bodily pleasure ensues as ice cream sales skyrocket and “all reserve was broken down the instant the familiar strains of the Virginia reel were heard;”<sup>129</sup> this full day of black activism concludes around midnight.

The political imaginary captured in this one day, where multiple modes of activism are all located under the “Sewing-Circle” chapter, is compelling. Hopkins offers a complex critique of the many self-serving, business minded “Mrs. Willis” of the club movement who capitalize on the “woman question” and use the club movement to further their own social and monetary gain. Yet despite this seething critique of Mrs. Willis, and however imperfect many leaders of the club movement may be, Hopkins maintains that there is something more to Mrs. Willis than her shrewd business mind, and what’s more, preserves an important role for black clubwomen’s activism within the larger struggle for black agitation. However, regardless of Mrs. Willis’s ability to command a space and persuade club members to support a particular tactic or political line, the limitations of this political strategy means that the role of black middle class club work in the struggle for agitation cannot be the *only* role. It does, nonetheless, play *a* role, nested within various other political modalities represented in the novel in its entirety. Moreover, these activist women move seamlessly between the different modalities of being political. In the Sewing-Circle chapter, all (again) located in the home and business of Ma Smith, the transitions between the differing activist practices are fluid—from sewing for the Fair, to centralizing “facts” and updating club business, to Mrs. Willis’s speech and the discussion that followed, back to the sewing-circle, then tea, relaxation and music recitation, and finally a transition to the ice cream fundraiser dance. This fluidity suggests that black women’s activism in this time period was fluent, that they had to be well versed, in a variety of political discourses and practices, where one is not singled out as clearly more important to the political cause than the other, and the political practices they engaged in where not, at least within this context, necessarily hierarchically

organized. In other words, while expertise and empirical forms of knowledge were increasingly privileged within the dominant political imaginaries of this time period, *Contending Forces* suggests that the “business” of the clubwomen (the scheduling, lecturing, fact sharing, note taking portion of the day) did not take priority over the sewing for the Fair, or the young people’s ice cream social fundraiser—all components are intimately articulated with one another and necessary (in their respective ways) to prepare for the larger vision that even exceeds the event itself, Ma Smith’s Fair. Moreover, in a historical moment where the institutionalization of Social Work is drawing clear lines around what is proper “activism” and who is rightly a professionally trained “activist,” it is not clear from Hopkins’ description which part of the day was considered “activism” or who is (or is not) an “activist,” suggesting that these distinctions break down in complicated ways within black club women’s political imaginaries.

In contrast to the multiple modalities of black women’s club activism, especially the pleasurable and bodily practices of *being* political that I detailed above, Hopkins’ most overt representation of white masculine rational modes of activism occurs at the Canterbury Club Dinner—an exclusively all white men’s club (secret society?) composed of the “flower of Boston’s literary savants” where “advanced” men “touch elbows” with theologians, political economists, and other experts to discuss “progress,” “wireless telegraphy,” “philosophy,” “Greek art,” and at this particular meeting, the problem of lynching. Will Smith, John Langley, and Arthur Lewis are invited to the Canterbury Club dinner dedicated to the issue of lynching which, contrary to Ma Smith’s Parlor, takes space in a grandiose hall with “high walls, carved mahogany, brass chandeliers,” and members are served gourmet foods by silent waiters. In this exclusive space, inhabited by

Senators, noted editors, and other experts in a variety of traditions, the conversations on lynching function at an extremely abstract level; this is a mode of political activity that privileges discourses that engage in the “play of cultured thought and keen argument.”<sup>130</sup> This practice of rational, abstract Enlightenment debate about the ethics of lynching and the “Negro problem” allows the Southern Senator in attendance to interject the sentiment that “Negros are all alike with regard to religion, ignorant, thieving, dirty and lazy,” and that “government is still a mystery to black people,”<sup>131</sup> as a rational contribution to the debate. This suggests that the political mode particular to the Canterbury Club (over) values the practice of rational debate, logic, and reason, regardless of the content. In other words, it is the practice of and the ability to engage in rational political debate that is important here, not the stakes and material effects of the argument, for the abstract rational debate form cannot adequately account for the lived realities of racial violence and white supremacy for African Americans in the Progressive Era. Interestingly, Langley, Lewis, and (especially) Smith are fluent in this particular mode of activism, and Smith even “wins” the game of debate when he commands the discussion on lynching and enfranchisement, and directs it away from the Senator’s racist justifications and towards detailing the many (ongoing) institutionalized forms of white supremacy particular to the Progressive Era. When a guest from England is confused about the direction of the conversation, assuming that black people are all equal before the law, Smith returns that “constitutional equity is a political fiction” for the “lines are drawn more sharply than before emancipation” and that “constitutional amendments are dead letters! The ballot box is nil.”<sup>132</sup>

At the very least, this scene demonstrates two points germane to this chapter: the limits of the political practice of abstract rational debate particular to the elite white masculine experts and highly trained specialists and secondly, that agitation for Hopkins necessitates that black social movements struggles be fluent and equipped to navigate multiple political terrains particular to this historical moment. The way of *being political* for Canterbury Club members is to properly debate the varying rationalities in support of or against lynching and full black enfranchisement, but at this level of abstraction, they cannot account for the very real, material effects of racism and white supremacy. Yet, despite these limitations, Hopkins suggests that black agitators (Langley, Lewis, and Smith, in this case) must still engage this particular political discourse in order to shift public sentiment towards full enfranchisement for black people. For if Hopkins articulates a direct relationship between agitation and shifting public sentiment, as the novel suggests on multiple occasions, then shifting public sentiment requires agitation on all levels or within all modes of political activity in the Progressive Era, including within the segregated circles of the powerful white elite.

While Hopkins' reveals the limitations of the black women's club movement through the "Sewing-Circle" chapter, she also turns a critical gaze towards the leadership of the black men's club, The American Colored League. The American Colored League is "made up of leading colored men" from all over New England with chapters located across the country. The Boston club is one of the most powerful clubs within the umbrella organization, and Hopkins writes that most of the other sections around the country look to the Boston group for leadership. Langley, who much to the League's dismay, does not employ black people in his office in order to make the white patrons

more comfortable, is generally described by other League members as “tricky” and “sneaky.” He is, however, a powerful member of the executive committee and thus receives a visit from an influential white politician, Mr. Clapp, who is concerned about the League’s public response to the recent lynching of Jim Jones. Jones was accused of raping a white woman and was “taken from his home by a number” of “leading citizens” and mutilated and lynched, “his flesh stripped from his body, his eyes gouged out, his ears cut off, his nose split open, and his legs broken at the knees.” The white woman he supposedly raped doused his body in oil and applied the fiery torch to his flesh. Soon after, a posse lynches three other black men accused of harboring Jim Jones, the “guilty wretch,” as the Southern white nationalist newspaper *Torchlight* describes.<sup>133</sup>

Interestingly, at the beginning of this private meeting Langley holds a more radical position, insisting that Mr. Clapp cannot “expect us to stand this sort of thing always, and not strike back.”<sup>134</sup> Mr. Clapp argues that “colored people” will never be able to organize for they “can’t stick together” because they are “so confoundly jealous of honores[sic]. Each one of you wants all there is for himself, and you never know when to get off, individually.” Clapp says that because white men know this, they can easily upset black organizing strategies. Langley temporarily holds his position, and seeming to enjoy debate in general, threatens to “knock the party clear over the ropes,” comparing the state of formal politics for black people to “a man being robbed and murdered in his own house.”<sup>135</sup> Mr. Clapp retorts that black people are “too incompetent and ignorant” to receive full enfranchisement and “must earn it” for the “South has rights too, they are white men” and “can’t be left out.” In order to satisfy all “sections,” Clapp says to Langley, black people should “sacrifice” their claim to “full citizenship” for the “good of

the whole” because “it won’t hurt you; you can’t miss luxuries and positions that you never been used to!”<sup>136</sup> Langley reframes the question of full black political enfranchisement as a white business venture and points to the limits of formal political strategies for black liberation. He threatens to “agitate,” pointing out that even the sympathetic white politicians only want the black vote and after “you get them, and all the subsidies, corporations, and trusts are riding easily on the front seat of the coach for another year,” those same politicians will abandon their commitments to black communities: “you won’t know us; and robbing and killing the black man can go right on.”<sup>137</sup> Mr. Clapp ends the heated debate by pointing out that regardless of black activist strategies, the “white man rules in this country every time” because he is “born for business.” Langley ends up conceding to Mr. Clapp’s request to “cool down” the upcoming League meeting intent on conjuring a response to the murder of Jim Jones. Clapp offers to back Langley for the position of City Solicitor in exchange for pacifying members of the League and for keeping the party name “clean.” Clapp even supplies emergency money in case Langley has to buy off angry voters. Much like Mrs. Willis, although Langley is figured as growing increasingly unethical in his relations with Dora, Will, and Sappho, and he is easily bought out by white political interests to serve his own social standing and material interests, Hopkins still insists that Langley’s “sneaky” and disingenuous method of navigating Progressive Era black politics is a “product of slavery,” and promises readers that he will suffer for his wrongs when the novel closes.

The executive committee of the American Colored League meet before the public meeting and, despite Langley, decide that “nothing” can be done “but to agitate.” Once they circulate this decision, the white press declares, “how the Negro abuses the great

privileges which we have bestowed upon him.”<sup>138</sup> Further, as Hopkins details, because black activists are always accused of being “biased” towards black interests, and like Mr. Clapp argued above, are figured as “selfish” in white newspapers for not thinking of the needs of the South (or the good of the “whole”), the American Colored League preemptively invites Mr. Clapp to speak at the highly anticipated meeting so that all sides are represented when the League decides their next move in response to the murder of Jim Jones. Delegates come to Boston from all over the country to attend this meeting pronounced as “a great expression of public opinion.” They arrive from “towns remote,” from farms, from the domestic service industry, and include the people who earn a “scanty living with scrubbing-brush and pail. Doctor, lawyer, politician, mechanic—every class sent its representative” to the League meeting to “protest against the wrongs of down-trodden manhood.” The meeting hall location is decorated with American flags and pictures of anti-slavery “apostles” and a speaker known for his work in the abolitionist movement powerfully frames the reasoning behind the League gathering as a “condition” abolitionists never foresaw: “The systematic destruction of the Negro by every device which the fury of enlightened malevolence can invent.” Backed by the League executive committee, he describes the strategy most successfully employed by the abolitionist movement: “*Agitation and eternal vigilance in the formation of public opinion* were the weapons which broke the power of the slave holder and gave us emancipation,”<sup>139</sup> and argues that these must also be the political strategies employed by black activists. The rest of the League meeting consists of a series of speakers who differently represent the many opposing political discourses circulating in this moment within black men’s club activism, and Hopkins uses this chapter as an opportunity to

point to the limitations and possibilities of each of these political sensibilities, while ultimately making a claim for the necessity of *agitation*.

The first speaker is the aforementioned Mr. Clapp, “a representative of the party and of the sentiment of the best white people in the country,” and a white man who claims to be an ally to both Southern white men and to black causes. Clapp asks the crowd to be “rational,” “calm,” and “logical”<sup>140</sup> and to consider both sides of the situation at hand. Similar to the dominant social science political strategies particular to this period, he describes himself as “fair” and “impartial” and asks the members of the League to be “willing to consult as to the best method of procedure to rectify mistakes,” and yet in the end, Hopkins suggests that this calm rationality logically leads to the conclusion that black people must give up their claim to full enfranchisement. “The greatest enemy to the Negro,” he expertly argues, “and the greatest obstacle to his progress is the politician, and the Negro politician is the worst of all.”<sup>141</sup> His speech is followed by the crowd sounding out a “sigh like a broken moan” that seemed to “come from the heart of the multitude, but not a movement broke the stillness,”<sup>142</sup> and Clapp feels that his speech fails to placate the desire for agitation. The logical, impartial, all knowing expert eye of the white social science endowed politician unsuccessfully convinces the League members, intellectually and physically, as the crowd emotes a collective feeling of broken disappointment that does not sway them towards the strategic vision Clapp puts forth, but instead seems to weigh them down, painfully.

Dr. Lewis, the industrial educator from the South, follows Mr. Clapp’s lecture and begins to address the gathering by focusing on the North’s misconception of the South. Lewis talks of the problematic black people he encounters (and tries to reform) who are

“vicious” and would rather “drink, carouse, and fight” than work—who are dangerous men who can be “seduced by bribery.”<sup>143</sup> He makes a case for the necessity of industrial education to “root out evil” and suggests that perhaps in the future the “Negro race” will be ready for a “clean pure citizenship,” but until these black problems are eradicated, Lewis argues that black people are too immature and that “politics is the bane of the Negro’s existence.” He suggests the League “let matters of government take care of themselves, while we look out for our own individual or collective advancement” for, Lewis continues, if black people are “patient,” “docile” and “harmless,” then “we may witness prosperity.” Industrial education should mark the horizon of black political struggles, Lewis contends, “leaving the white man the superiority of brain and intellect which hundreds of years have developed.”<sup>144</sup> In response, there are “murmurs of applause, mingled with disapprobation,” and the crowd grows restless. Hopkins writes, “Was this what they came to hear—an apology, almost a eulogy upon the course pursued by the South toward the Negro?” This accommodationist discourse that concedes the struggle over full citizenship to the white men of the South and marks black people as unfit and ill-prepared for such responsibility, is also clearly insufficient for Hopkins’ vision of agitation.

John Langley’s speech follows and also displeases the crowd for, not surprisingly, much like Clapp, he advocates that the League be patient, act “calmly” and “deliberately,” and consider “all sides of the question.” He also argues that the problem of mob violence should be entrusted to the national government to handle, and threatens that if black people take “up arms,” “extermination would speedily follow.”<sup>145</sup> Amongst the “suppressed murmurs of discontent,” a delegate from the crowd quotes founding

father Patrick Henry: “Gentlemen may cry ‘Peace! Peace!’ But there is no peace!” And, in an instant, “confusion reigned,” women waved their handkerchiefs and waves of applause ripple across the crowd. Luke Sawyer takes the podium and begins to preach (what seems more like an emotionally moving sermon rather than a rational debate) by criticizing the previous speakers for their “conservatism, lack of brotherly affiliation, lack of energy for the right and the power of the almighty dollar which deadens men’s hearts to the sufferings of their brothers.”<sup>146</sup> Rather than engaging in the rational debate form (as represented by the speakers who precede him), Sawyer passionately narrates a personal story of his own family’s suffering, a history in which his father is punished by a lynch mob for operating a successful black Louisiana business.

As a young boy, Sawyer witnesses a posse of local white people hang his father, whip and rape his mother and sister, and bash in the brains of his two baby twin brothers. Sawyer escapes and is taken in by a black planter named Beaubeau in the next township over. He pauses in his sermon and says to the crowd, “*That, gentlemen was my first* experience of lynching. Do you think it possible to preach peace to a man like me?”<sup>147</sup> As Sawyer continues, inadvertently revealing Sappho’s mysterious past, the audience has a deep bodily response and “cries” and “groans.” “Sobs shook the women, while the men drank in the words of the speaker with darkening brows and hands which involuntarily clinched themselves in sympathy with his words.”<sup>148</sup> He goes on to detail how Beaubeau’s white half-brother kidnaps and rapes his young daughter Maybelle and forces her into prostitution. When Beaubeau confronts his half-brother, he flippantly offers Beaubeau cash to keep quiet and asks, “what does a woman of mixed blood, or any Negress, for that matter, know of virtue?” But when Beaubeau threatens him with the law, later in the

evening a white mob burns Beaubeau's family and home to the ground. Sawyer manages to escape with Maybelle and takes her to a convent in New Orleans where she allegedly dies during childbirth. At this point in the narration, the audience is extremely physically moved by Sawyer's story, and in grief they "convulse" while Sappho, who is actually Maybelle, faints. Hopkins describes a "universal silence" that soon after falls over the crowd, the kind of silence which comes from "feeling too deep for outward expression." It is from this deep feeling quiet place that the crowd seems to *consent* to be moved to agitation. Thus, contrary to standard sentimentalist readings that might understand this moment and the bodily feeling of agitation in a utilitarian sense, as the necessary precondition to politicization—to feel agitated leads to rational political labor—I understand the crowd here as consenting to be agitated. In other words, it is a deliberate political act to allow oneself to be agitated, the inverse of dominant sentimentalist understandings of political agency, because agitation is intentional, a decision. Furthermore, agitation as a form of body-knowledge is not what leads to rational political labor, it is part of the activist practice itself; bodily agitation is *being* political.

Sawyer closes with, "'Peace if possible; justice at any rate.' Where is there peace for men like me?" Only in death, does Sawyer say, will there be peace from these memories. And therefore, under the conditions he describes, Sawyer declares that "contentment, amity—call it by what name you will—is impossible; justice alone remains to us."<sup>149</sup> Someone begins singing and then an "intense silence" falls over the crowd as Will Smith begins a powerful lecture that concludes the evening, and echoes Sawyer's claim for agitation but through a more standard, rational form of argument. He begins his speech arguing that only full enfranchisement can change the inferior status of

black people and solve “the problem of lynching,” and then proceeds to undermine and reframe the conservative arguments that precede him. Smith suggests that, despite how Mr. Clapp, John Langley, and Dr. Lewis want to spin the conversation, the primary question of the day is, “Which race shall dominate within certain parallels of latitude south of Mason and Dixon’s line? The Negro, if given his full political rights, would carry the balance of power every time. This power the South has sworn he shall never exercise.”<sup>150</sup> And thus, Smith points out, all sorts of claims are positioned to prove the “Negro” incapable of the duties and privileges imagined to accompany full enfranchisement; “inferiority of intellect, hopeless depravity, and God knows what not,” are all figured as part of an effort to uphold and reinforce institutions of white supremacy. In this way, Smith argues that literature, politics, theology and history have been “ransacked and perverted” to support the “logical” and “rationalized” efforts against black enfranchisement. He also argues that so called “black vice” and the accusation of rape is an extension of the “master and slave” relationship, a product and outgrowth of the social relations established under slavery. Lynching, for Smith, is not an attempt to “stop crime,” but a “subterfuge for killing men. It is a good excuse, to use a rough expression, to go a-gunning for niggers,” intent on “crushing the manhood of the enfranchised black.”<sup>151</sup> Therefore, Smith argues, it is not rape that inaugurates mob violence, but the possibility of the black vote. The only way to “straighten out this problem,” Smith suggests, is through the “formation of public opinion. Brute force will not accomplish anything. We must agitate. As the anti-slavery apostles went everywhere, preaching the word fifty years before emancipation, *so must we do to-day.*”<sup>152</sup> When Smith finished his speech, there was “not a dry eye in the audience. Every heart followed

the words” and as the crowd dispersed, they were filled with “thoughts that burn but cannot be spoken.”<sup>153</sup>“Thoughts that burn but cannot be spoken” is part of agitation. Or, in other words, to be agitated is to feel in the body a burning, but it is a form of body-knowledge that cannot be spoken within rational debate form. Agitation, then, is a political sensibility that appears to exceed these standard sentimentalist distinctions, disrupts the causal relationship between “feelings” inaugurating rational political action, and at the very same time, it insists on a coterminous relationship between bodily feelings (or body-knowledge) and the thinking mind that together constitute agitation.

**Conclusion: Agitation in *Contending Forces***

Most literary critics of *Contending Forces* stabilize “agitation,” presuming to already know what kind of political labor African American “agitation” signals in their readings of the novel. To conclude, I am interested in connecting the public work traditionally associated with Hopkins’ “activism” to the limits and possibilities of the multiplicity of political practices represented in *Contending Forces*, in order to unpack more specifically how she imagines the particularities of what constitutes *agitation* within this historical context. Contrary to the growing consolidation of social science influenced sensibilities of what constitutes proper, effective activism at the turn-of-the-century, Hopkins’ notion of agitation suggests that for African Americans to achieve full enfranchisement (a vision not limited to legal reform), a hegemonic, normative approach must be engaged by black social movements in order to aggressively shift public sentiment. This means that in order to transform prevailing public opinion, black activists must be literate in the multiple political discourses framing the “Negro problem” during this time period and, as the readings suggest, must be able to navigate the many shifting

political terrains, audiences, and practices that correspond with the differing political contexts. Yet, as I suggested earlier, the hegemonic function of agitation for Hopkins does not presume a singular rational political actor, or one way of being political. The Sewing-Circle chapter in particular demonstrates how for black politics in this era, the boundaries between “political,” cultural, pleasurable and leisure practices within black struggles are blurry and overlap. There is no *one* way of being political, though some practices are problematically privileged over others, depending on the context, but the desire to differentiate between those who are professional “activists” from others who are not particular to this time period is peripheral in this context. In this way, agitation disrupts dominant Social Work political desires of this period, while simultaneously positing an alternative black feminist internationalist political imaginary.

Furthermore, though dominant histories of this period almost celebrate the move away from literary and other cultural practices as necessarily a shift towards a more mature political sensibility, in Hopkins’ editorial work, public speaking, and fiction writing, cultural production is an integral practice for agitation and central to shifting public sentiment and agitation. “Logical,” “calm” and Enlightenment rational debates in the American Colored League meeting appear as “apologies” and excuses for lynching and other forms of racial violence, or as “play” at the Canterbury Club Dinner, a game or artful skill to master. Because these discourses differently neglect the very real, material effects of white supremacy and lynching, and among other things, they also fail to physically and emotionally move the crowd to agitation—it weighs them down and burdens them. Yet, as I suggested above, though Hopkins is differently critical of the limits of certain black women’s uplift strategies, accommodationist political aspirations,

and elite white intellectuals, these political modalities must also be agitated and, ultimately, won over in favor of full black enfranchisement. Thus, agitation is a normative political strategy that must intervene within a multiplicity of political discourses and practices. But at the very same time, as the readings suggest, agitation is a kind of hegemonic strategy that does not result in producing a uniform understanding of the political or a singular (white masculine) rational political actor. In fact, the results of agitation are unknowable and they cannot be predicted—agitation is not just one stage on a well-worn path to a certain political outcome that is already known.

Hopkins also suggests that agitation is a political practice that necessarily bridges generational, gender, and class divides. She points out how power circulates within black social movements and considers the invisibility of black women’s political labor within larger black struggles, for instance, when the pastor concludes that the wildly successful fundraiser/Fair is a moment to “dwell in brotherly love.” Yet White points out, “the *brothers* had nuthin’ to do with it [...]”<sup>154</sup> Hopkins also points to the many contradictions of black women’s club work and uplift strategies, and at one point suggests that “we would hang our heads in shame” if clubwomen knew the “reason why each individual woman loses character and standing in the eyes of the world,”<sup>155</sup> insisting on always historically centering these issues as an inheritance of the institutions, cultural logics, and social relations under slavery. But agitation, as a form of coalition,<sup>156</sup> also connects across geographic divides—it bridges differing racial formations across the North and South, and looks internationally to anti-white supremacist, decolonial solidarities between other oppressed peoples beyond the nation-state form. Agitation, for instance, articulates (and agitates) the relationship between Bermuda slavery logics (that Hopkins’ details in the

beginning), with how white U.S. northern people are “fraid that the black’ll rub off,” and how in the South it is not about “how black you are” but more about “ef yer willin’ to keep in the mud.”<sup>157</sup> Agitation continues an internationalist abolitionism that, in this way, is a political modality that must also be historically connected to past abolitionist struggles, for Hopkins consistently insists that abolition is not over, and that agitation strategies particular to the Progressive Era must utilize the practices that abolitionists developed and implemented fifty years prior to Emancipation. Further, Hopkins’ demonstrates how black people with “shoulders bent and misshapen with heavy burdens” carry “*the sins of others*,” and suggests it is not black communities in need of reform, but “the white men of the South” that are in need of “improvement.” Shifting the problem away from black vice, ignorance, immaturity, and improper sexualities, to name but a few racist logics, Hopkins writes that “Emancipation has done much, but time and moral training among white men of the South are the only cures for concubinage.”<sup>158</sup> Agitation, then, suggests that lynching and formal segregation are part of a larger *white* problem and that reform efforts must be shifted towards “rehabilitating” the moral wrongs of white subjects. White publics must be agitated too, and though she acknowledges that it will take time, part of “agitation” works towards transforming white supremacist norms, dominant white public opinion, and differing white subject formations.

Finally, many critics rightly point out that Hopkins “activism” and novel *Contending Forces* situates lynching as a form of political terrorism. I suggest, however, that framing lynching as political terrorism can, in some ways, limit the political imagination of “agitation” to a form of activism interested in primarily legal transformations. While I, of course, agree that lynching is a form of political terrorism, I

think the novel reveals how lynching and other forms of racial violence are also psychic, bodily, social and cultural. Or, that understandings of political terrorism must also include psychic, bodily and social forms of violence. In other words, if racism and racial violence is not *only* a form of political terrorism (or if we expand what counts as political), then perhaps agitation is not only an external political strategy targeting the law. Agitation stirs publics at bodily, affective, and psychic levels that are integral to this particular coalitional, internationalist abolitionist political sensibility. Agitation, in other words, is also a form of body-knowledge. During the American Colored League meeting, it becomes clear that “logical” “calm” rational discourses are limited in content, but also in how they do and do not affectively impact those they address. The crowd “moans” and feels heavy, disappointed with a “sigh like a broken moan” that seemed to “come from the heart of the multitude.” Sawyer’s address, however, physically and emotionally transforms the crowd: “Sobs shook the women, while the men drank in the words of the speaker with darkening brows and hands which involuntarily clinched themselves in sympathy with his words.”<sup>159</sup> Following Sawyer’s personal narrative, the crowd consents to be agitated, and this deliberative decision is linked intimately with transformations in bodily feelings—moving from “heavy” and “broken moans” to a “burning” feeling (a thought that burns) that, as I pointed out earlier, exceeds rational political discourses *and* standard sentimentalist readings on the relation between affect and agency. Smith’s speech returns to a rational debate mode but one that calls for agitation, leading to “not a dry eye in the audience. Every heart followed the words” and as the crowd dispersed, they were filled with “thoughts that burn but cannot be spoken.”<sup>160</sup> The “thoughts that burn but cannot be spoken” is *also* agitation, to *be physically and emotionally agitated*,

and this form of body-knowledge is a political practice that is central to how Hopkins imagines the contours of black agitation in the Progressive Era.

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<sup>1</sup> Lois Brown, "Death-Defying Testimony: Women's Private Lives and the Politics of Public Documents," *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* 27.1 (2010): 130-139.

<sup>2</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks, Afterword. *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South*, by Pauline Hopkins (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press reprint of Colored Co-operative Publishing Co, 1899) 404.

<sup>3</sup> Colleen C. O'Brien, "'Black in all Quarters of the Globe': Anti-Imperialism, Insurgent Cosmopolitanism, and International Labor in Pauline Hopkins's Literary Journalism," *American Quarterly* 61.2 (June 2009): 249.

<sup>4</sup> Jill Bergman, "'Everything We Hoped She'd Be': Contending Forces in Hopkins Scholarship," *African American Review* 38.2 (Summer 2004): 182.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Cassidy, "Contending Contexts: Pauline Hopkins's Contending Forces," *African American Review* 32.4 (Winter 1998): 661.

<sup>6</sup> David Hammack, Intro. "Co-operation Among Negro Americans," by W.E.B Du Bois. *Making the Non-Profit Sector in the United States*, ed. David Hammack (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998) 264.

<sup>7</sup> Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) 101.

<sup>8</sup> Carby, 39.

<sup>9</sup> Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003) 44.

<sup>10</sup> Anne Ruggles Gere and Sarah R. Robbins, "Gendered Literacy in Black and White: Turn-of-the-Century African-American and European-American Club Women's Printed Texts," *Signs* 21.3 (Spring 1996): 643-644.

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, *Lifting as They Climb: The National Association of Colored Women*, from the microfilms reproduced by the Library of Congress, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms, A Xerox Company, 1973) 13.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Reisch and Janice Andrews, *The Road Not Taken: A History of Radical Social Work in the United States*, (New York: Routledge, 2002) 21.

<sup>13</sup> Frank Dekker Watson, *The Charity Organization Movement in the United States: A Study in American Philanthropy*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1922) 90.

<sup>14</sup> Carby, 127.

<sup>15</sup> M.P. Cowen and R. W. Shenton, "The Invention of Development," *Doctrines of Development*, (London: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> Carby, 120.

<sup>17</sup> Norman I. Silber, *A Corporate Form of Freedom: The Emergence of the Modern Nonprofit Sector*, (Colorado: Westview Press, 2001) 36.

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- <sup>18</sup> Reisch and Andrews, 20.
- <sup>19</sup> Watson, 121.
- <sup>20</sup> Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986) 14.
- <sup>21</sup> Stansell, 30.
- <sup>22</sup> Kathleen D. McCarthy, *American Creed: Philanthropy and the Rise of Civil Society 1700-1865*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003) 46.
- <sup>23</sup> Stansell, 67.
- <sup>24</sup> McCarthy, 38.
- <sup>25</sup> Watson, 67.
- <sup>26</sup> Watson, 73.
- <sup>27</sup> Watson, 98.
- <sup>28</sup> Watson, 95.
- <sup>29</sup> Watson, 94.
- <sup>30</sup> Watson, 101.
- <sup>31</sup> Watson, 121-148.
- <sup>32</sup> Watson, 96-97.
- <sup>33</sup> Watson, 148.
- <sup>34</sup> Watson, 90.
- <sup>35</sup> Watson, 90-91.
- <sup>36</sup> Watson, 276.
- <sup>37</sup> Watson, 238.
- <sup>38</sup> Watson, 333.
- <sup>39</sup> Watson, 333.
- <sup>40</sup> Watson, 334. Watson adds that the “turning of college men and women to social work as a profession” was also due to the increasing interest of colleges and universities in social problems.”
- <sup>41</sup> Reisch and Andrews, 20.
- <sup>42</sup> Reisch and Andrews, 22.
- <sup>43</sup> Reisch and Andrews, 22.

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<sup>44</sup> Reisch and Andrews, 23.

<sup>45</sup> Silber, 32.

<sup>46</sup> Silber, 36.

<sup>47</sup> Silber, 38.

<sup>48</sup> The ruling explicated that because the white “Elks” were so well known, the public would automatically associate the word “Elk” with the “whites only” fraternal lodge. Therefore, the “Elks of the World” had to remove the word “Elk” from their title in order to remain a legally incorporated association.

<sup>49</sup> In fact, in his 1907 article, “Co-operation Among Negro Americans,” W.E.B. Du Bois writes that this period of club growth for African Americans is rooted in a longer tradition of “negro cooperation,” a genealogy that links the organization of black churches in the antebellum period, with the creation of abolitionist societies, post-war educational schools, burial societies, black secret societies, and the “beneficial” societies this chapter attends to.

<sup>50</sup> What has been harder to track in this interdisciplinary study, however, is the relationship between non-profit incorporation and the club form, or, for instance, were clubs turning to non-profit incorporation? Which clubs and under what conditions? I have found that in non-profit histories (that rarely sustain any kind of substantial engagement with the women’s club movement), club activism is conflated with the non-profit form, and often provides evidence of the non-profits long and integral role in social movement histories. Much like I suggest in the previous chapter, locating the non-profit historically in this way is often bound up in the desire to provide evidence that today’s NGOization is a natural and mature outgrowth of social movement struggles in the past. On the other hand, the feminist work on women’s club activism neglects to attend to the particular legal forms that various groups took up, every group is assumed to be a club—they also, in this way, do not differentiate between the “club” and non-profit form. This confusion about legal form will, at least for this chapter, remain an open question, though I am very interested in the directions this might open up and onto, perhaps, a different kind of archival project.

<sup>51</sup> Maureen A Flanagan, “Gender and Urban Political Reform: the City Club and the Women’s City Club of Chicago in the Progressive Era,” *The American Historical Review* 95.4 (Oct. 1990): 1046.

<sup>52</sup> Flanagan, 1046.

<sup>53</sup> Flanagan, 1046.

<sup>54</sup> Gere and Robbins, 643-44.

<sup>55</sup> Gere and Robbins, 660.

<sup>56</sup> Cynthia Neverdon-Morton, “Advancement of the Race through African American Women’s Organizations in the South, 1895-1925,” *African American Women and the Vote, 1837-1965*, eds. Ann D. Gordon and Bettye Collier-Thomas (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997)120.

<sup>57</sup> Flanagan, 670.

<sup>58</sup> Cheryl D. Hicks, *Talk with You Like a Woman: African American Women, Justice and Reform in New York, 1890-1935*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010) 93.

<sup>59</sup> Hicks, 93.

<sup>60</sup> Carby, 116.

<sup>61</sup> Carby, 119.

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<sup>62</sup> Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

<sup>63</sup> Terborg-Penn, 57.

<sup>64</sup> Bettye Collier-Thomas, "Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Abolitionist and Feminist Reformer 1825-1911." *African American Women and the Vote, 1837-1965*, Eds. Ann D. Gordon and Bettye Collier-Thomas (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997) 60. This might explain some of the comments many of the historians of this period make about Francis Harper's role in the NACW. For, though she was a vice-president early in the life of the NACW, many historians point out that her role was relatively minor.

<sup>65</sup> Tullia Brown Hamilton, *The National Association of Colored Women, 1896-1920*. Diss. Emory University, 1978. Ana Arbor: UMI, 1991.

<sup>66</sup> Hamilton, 25.

<sup>67</sup> Carby, 25.

<sup>68</sup> Carby, 27.

<sup>69</sup> Carby, 39.

<sup>70</sup> Hicks, 93.

<sup>71</sup> Hicks, 113-114. Environmental causes meaning "the conditions of enslavement prevented them from becoming civilized."

<sup>72</sup> Hicks, 114-117.

<sup>73</sup> Hicks, 93.

<sup>74</sup> Carby, 32.

<sup>75</sup> Gere and Robbins, 664.

<sup>76</sup> Carby, 116.

<sup>77</sup> Hamilton, 56.

<sup>78</sup> Hamilton, 21-22.

<sup>79</sup> Hamilton, 60, 84.

<sup>80</sup> Hicks, 94.

<sup>81</sup> Hamilton, 84. With the exception of the Philadelphia Federation who organized a building and loan association.

<sup>82</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham, "Clubwomen and Electoral Politics in the 1920's," *African American Women and the Vote, 1837-1965*, eds. Ann D. Gordon and Bettye Collier-Thomas (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997) 140.

<sup>83</sup> Hamilton, 86.

<sup>84</sup> Hicks, 101.

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<sup>85</sup> Hamilton, 84.

<sup>86</sup> Hamilton, 32.

<sup>87</sup> Hamilton, 103.

<sup>88</sup> Hamilton, 86.

<sup>89</sup> Hamilton, 86.

<sup>90</sup> Frances Smith Foster, Jacqueline Bacon, and Susan Tomlinson, "A Black Daughter of the Revolution," Review of *Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins: Black Daughter of the Revolution*, by Lois Brown. *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* 27.2 (June, 2010): 447.

<sup>91</sup> Bacon, 443.

<sup>92</sup> Tomlinson, 448.

<sup>93</sup> Carby, 126.

<sup>94</sup> Carby, 129.

<sup>95</sup> Bergman, 189.

<sup>96</sup> Pauline Hopkins, "Club Life among Colored Women," *Daughter of the Revolution: The Major Non-Fiction Works of Pauline E. Hopkins*, ed. Ira Dworkin (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007) 178.

<sup>97</sup> Bergman, 192.

<sup>98</sup> This event is often cited as evidence of Hopkins' as a radical race activist.

<sup>99</sup> Ira Dworkin, Intro. *Daughter of the Revolution: The Major Non-Fiction Works of Pauline E. Hopkins*, ed. Ira Dworkin (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007) xxxi.

<sup>100</sup> Bergman, 192.

<sup>101</sup> Brown, 134.

<sup>102</sup> Shockley, 25.

<sup>103</sup> Carby, 97.

<sup>104</sup> Carby, 128.

<sup>105</sup> Brown, 136.

<sup>106</sup> Pauline Hopkins, *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South*, (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press reprint of Colored Co-operative Publishing Co, 1899) 221.

<sup>107</sup> Hopkins, 202.

<sup>108</sup> Cassidy, 664.

<sup>109</sup> Cassidy, 661.

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<sup>110</sup> Hopkins, 102.

<sup>111</sup> Hopkins, 102.

<sup>112</sup> Hopkins, 104.

<sup>113</sup> Hopkins, 106.

<sup>114</sup> Hopkins, 106.

<sup>115</sup> Hopkins, 106.

<sup>116</sup> Hopkins, 108.

<sup>117</sup> Hopkins, 110.

<sup>118</sup> Hopkins, 142.

<sup>119</sup> The name Sappho (the Greek poet born on the Island of Lesbos) perhaps refers to the love and intimacy developed between the two women, see Gloria T. Randle in “Mates, Marriage and Motherhood: Feminist Visions in Pauline Hopkins’ *Contending Forces*.” The name “Sappho” also refers to her rejection of the hetero-normative gender roles prescribed to mothers and wives in this period, like, for example, how Sappho initially refuses to mother her secret child conceived, as the novel later details, when her uncle kidnaps and rapes her and forces her into prostitution at the age of 14. In a longer reading, I hope to detail the intimacy between Sappho and Dora as *also* body-knowledge, and a form of agitation.

<sup>120</sup> Hopkins, 125.

<sup>121</sup> Hopkins, 128-129.

<sup>122</sup> Hopkins, 142.

<sup>123</sup> Hopkins, 141.

<sup>124</sup> Hopkins, 144.

<sup>125</sup> Hopkins, 147.

<sup>126</sup> Hopkins, 149.

<sup>127</sup> Hopkins, 151. Later in the novel there is tension between darker skinned women and what they describe as “white folksey colored ladies,” who are described as spoiled and lazy.

<sup>128</sup> Hopkins, 152.

<sup>129</sup> Hopkins, 164.

<sup>130</sup> Hopkins, 291.

<sup>131</sup> Hopkins, 294-295.

<sup>132</sup> Hopkins, 297.

<sup>133</sup> Hopkins, 223-224.

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<sup>134</sup> Hopkins, 229.

<sup>135</sup> Hopkins, 231.

<sup>136</sup> Hopkins, 233.

<sup>137</sup> Hopkins, 235.

<sup>138</sup> Hopkins, 241.

<sup>139</sup> Hopkins, 244-245.

<sup>140</sup> Hopkins, 246.

<sup>141</sup> Hopkins, 247.

<sup>142</sup> Hopkins, 248.

<sup>143</sup> Hopkins, 250.

<sup>144</sup> Hopkins, 251.

<sup>145</sup> Hopkins, 253.

<sup>146</sup> Hopkins, 256.

<sup>147</sup> Hopkins, 258.

<sup>148</sup> Hopkins, 258.

<sup>149</sup> Hopkins, 262.

<sup>150</sup> Hopkins, 264.

<sup>151</sup> Hopkins, 271.

<sup>152</sup> Hopkins, 272.

<sup>153</sup> Hopkins, 273.

<sup>154</sup> Hopkins, 218.

<sup>155</sup> Hopkins, 101.

<sup>156</sup> Assuming the normative understanding of coalition in the present, agitation seems like the opposite of coalition in Transnational Feminist Network sense, which is very interesting. Also, I do not intend to stabilize “coalition” here as always already signaling a particular political imaginary, agitation is a specific form of coalition that is antagonistic with contemporary TFN discourses.

<sup>157</sup> Hopkins, 192.

<sup>158</sup> Hopkins, 332.

<sup>159</sup> Hopkins, 258.

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<sup>160</sup> Hopkins, 273.

## Chapter Three

### Stop Thinking Properly: Feminist Activism and Coalescing with History

In 2010, I attended a public meeting organized by Seattle-based self-defense organization Home Alive to announce the closing of their office. The meeting was intent on bringing together differing community members to create a dialog on the potential next steps for the organization, including the possible relinquishing of their non-profit corporation 501 (c) 3 tax status. Home Alive was founded organically when lead singer Mia Zapata of Seattle band The Gits was raped and murdered in 1993. In response, artists and musicians organized and developed self-defense curricula rooted in cultural organizing that linked self-defense to larger social justice issues. When I first connected with Home Alive in 2001, I was working for a regional human rights non-profit to develop cultural organizing responses against white nationalist and neo-Nazi organizing in music and youth communities. I was especially attracted to Home Alive's curricula because it framed individual self-defense as part of community self-defense, the analysis explicitly linked anti-racism, feminism, class and queer/trans struggles to radical visions of social transformation, and the organizers were highly suspicious of institutionalization and professionalization. I went to this meeting both to show support and out of curiosity. I was excited to hear people's responses to Home Alive announcing that they were considering an alternative to the non-profit model and I was thrilled to be part of a conversation centered on dreaming up alternative imaginations of collectivity. Interestingly, some board members framed the problem as such: the struggle to maintain the institutional structure and meet foundation demands runs counter to the mission of Home Alive. In other words, the mission and values of Home Alive are being compromised in favor of maintaining an organizational structure in the

context of what some activists and scholars are calling the Non-Profit Industrial Complex and/or the NGOization of social movements. Even though I came to the meeting fully aware—from the many painful struggles of my own organizing work—how impossible it is to *not* reproduce the now common-sense logics of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex, the response was startling. A flood of emotions erupted in the room, and though the goal was to brainstorm alternative models to keep Home Alive alive, the two hour long conversation centered on protecting the 501 (c) 3 non-profit tax status.

Keep in mind that these mostly white feminist activists consider themselves edgy, radical, anti-state, and anti-authoritarian. All of these subjects have multiple political affiliations, work in other social movements and connect their anti-racist, feminist and queer struggles with larger anti-imperialist projects. Yet one woman commented that the 501 (c) 3 tax status is “hard to come by these days” and “should be hoarded.” Another talked about how the idea of losing the status made her feel sick, like something “pulling in her chest.” Someone also wrapped her arms around her legs and wept, mourning the thought of losing something they worked so hard for while simultaneously completely forgetting the antagonistic history Home Alive has always had with institutionalization and foundation funding. “As long as we keep the 501 (c) 3, we’ll be fine.” Emerging from these outcries, forming a “coalition” rose to the surface as a sensible strategy for sustaining the institutional structure of the organization. Two local non-profit workers (with the best intentions) argued that a “coalition” would be beneficial for two reasons. First, the logic reasoned, it provides a way for non-profits to work together to potentially secure more funding from private philanthropic foundations and, secondly, a coalition functions as a stabilizing strategy for the institution itself—Home Alive would be more secure if it moved under another organization’s 501 © 3 as a subsidiary non-profit for an umbrella organization.

Interestingly, in this context, this political imagination of coalition not only privileged institutionalization and organizing strategies that network pre-existing non-profits, it also made it virtually impossible in that moment for the group to imagine an alternative to the non-profit in the world they know—impossible to *think* what the meeting was designed for in the first place. It is also worth noting how the reaction to relinquishing the 501 (c) 3 tax status was surprisingly bodily and threatening to people’s sense of interiority and self while, simultaneously, the privileging of the logics of non-profit incorporation (when imagining potential coalitions) disappeared certain organizational memories and histories. In fact, though many of the founder members, original instructors, and board members were present, it was impossible for the group to recall the antagonistic, even hostile relationship Home Alive has always had with institutionalization.

I open with this story from my own activist work to think about what it means that in the current moment securing the non-profit status is now the common-sense organizing strategy for dominant feminist social movements. As I stated in Chapter One, I do not wish to discount the creative range of feminist activism happening in the contemporary moment. Rather, I am interested in furthering the conversations emerging from activist circles, in the social sciences, and in Women’s Studies on the Non-Profit Industrial Complex and NGOization by thinking more specifically about the relationship between historical memories (and forgettings) of feminist coalition and the dramatic proliferation, legitimization, and figuration of NGOs and non-profits as the most logical mode of social change in the post-Civil Rights era. To recall, these discussions most often note the complex and overlapping relationships between non-profits, NGOs and state power, as well as the effects that privileging institutionalization (in the last 40 years) has had on the internal structures of non-profits and NGOs which, many point out,

has resulted in depoliticized single-issue program, a professionalization of activist culture, and a general narrowing of social movements' imaginations of liberation. As I suggested in my first chapter, today Transnational Feminist Networks are the “dominant face of the women’s movement” and, in particular, the dominant feminist imagination of *coalition*. With this in mind, this chapter reads two now “alternative” imaginations of feminist coalition, from the works of Bernice Johnson Reagon and Alice Walker in and against the logics and stabilization of Transnational Feminist Networks as the preeminent form of feminist coalition in the contemporary moment.

To be clear, I do not want to suggest that all non-profits and NGOs are “bad” per se, nor do I wish to dismiss the abundance of creative feminist contestation happening in the current moment. There are countless organizations, people, and groups doing critical work within a 501 © 3 institutional framework—Incite!, Critical Resistance, Gen 5, The Audre Lorde Project—just to name a few in the U.S. And, returning to my Home Alive example, I also want to make it clear that I do not seek to accurately represent or “know” Home Alive’s current generation of activist subjects nor suggest, in any way, that I am somehow outside of these kinds of struggles. In fact, like many other activists, my ten year relationship with Home Alive has been invaluable for my current activist projects, for my academic research interests, and for personal reasons—how I critically understand myself in the world. I am intimately connected to Home Alive both as an organization that I once worked closely with and also to the cultural organizing strategies and imaginations of social transformation that Home Alive introduced into my thinking. Yet I do want to consider the implications for radical social movement struggles when the NGO and non-profit mark the horizon of feminist activist imaginaries. In this way, my opening example simply offers a context for thinking about the effects of the NGOization of social movements on activist

subjects' historical social movement memories. What does it mean for anti-racist feminists if we (perhaps, at times, unknowingly) confine our modes and imaginations of liberation to models of coalition centered on solidifying relationships between institutions, to institution building, longevity and security, and state-sponsored tax-statuses? What histories of struggle are lost (or distorted) when feminist coalition as a network of non-profits or NGOs—most often focused on law and policy reform—is figured and felt as unquestionably the most logical, mature form of activism?

Within this context I turn now to explore “alternative” understandings of coalition and focus on two cultural texts from the post-Civil Rights moment that differently theorize the stakes, practices, and embodiment of “coalition” for radical social movements: Bernice Johnson Reagon’s 1981 speech, “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century,” and Alice Walker’s 1976 novel *Meridian*. These texts are invaluable for remembering theories of feminist coalition as they recall the indispensability of bodily pain and the danger of feminist coalition—a memory, I argue, that the normalization of institutionalization seems to have eclipsed. Both texts also differently suggest critical potential in politics rooted in collective and historical social movement memories of trauma and violence and, at the same time, imagine alternative understandings of political futurity, of the possibilities of coalitional solidarities bound by collective pain.<sup>1</sup> Contrary to Reagon and Walker’s representations of feminist coalition, where coalescing is a historical, destabilizing, temporary and painful practice, I follow the feminist scholarship that is critical of NGOization (as summarized in Chapter One) to suggest that under the regime of the NGOization, feminist coalition has more generally become the description of a relationship between institutions rather than an unsettling, dynamic process, a connection to history, a bodily experience, and/or a way of *being* political. Thus, one effect of NGOization on

feminist political imaginations of “coalition” is the over-privileging of certain feminist activists’ social imaginaries, Transnational Feminist Networks, and the corresponding disappearance of theories of coalition that challenge or disrupt desires for institutionalization from dominant feminist social movements’ historical memory. I believe this is a crisis for feminist activism and feminist theory, for NGOization disallows alternative non-NGO–centric coalitional futures for social movements, simultaneously delimiting a very narrow vision of what counts as political labor for feminist organizing. In fact, the ascendancy of certain activist subject imaginaries has so infused how we understand strategies of social transformation and how we understand ourselves as agents of such change, that it is incredibly difficult to critique, challenge, and conceive of different ways of *knowing* what counts as activism and who is an “activist.”

While this essay focuses on Reagon and Walker, I read these texts as part of a larger coalitional imaginary evident in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s. Reagon and Walker should be contextualized alongside other writings on coalition in this time period such as work by Gloria Anzaldua, Cherrie Moraga, Toni Cade Bambara, Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich, where coalition is theorized *not* as an institutional endeavor, nor a “natural affinity group,” but a coming together out of “political necessity” rooted in the “pain and shock of difference,” and is described as a “physical and psychic struggle.”<sup>2</sup> Or, in the words of Reagon, coalition exists “cause I ain’t gonna let you live unless you let me live. Now there’s danger in that, but there’s also the possibility that we can both live—if you can stand it.”<sup>3</sup> In the same vein as the Combahee River Collective statement, “in our practice or our politics we do not believe that the end always justifies the means,” both Walker and Reagon differently critique the internal activist practices of radical social movements and refuse to understand these movements as somehow outside of power and the dominant social order. They attend to how power operates and effects

modes of envisioning and creating social change and differently theorize models of feminist coalition whose critical potential and basis for an anti-foundational solidarity lies in the histories of collective violence and struggle, and the literal and figurative bodily pains of coalescing.

First, however, I would like to say a few words about how I want to approach these cultural texts, or rather, what I do not want to reproduce in my close readings. It is my intention that a focus on the historical memories of coalition that Bernice Johnson Reagon and Alice Walker's main character Meridian represent is a way to *not* romanticize the essentialized "revolutionary subject," nor do I attempt to locate a *better* model of the activist/protestor. As I suggest above, Walker and Reagon differently envision activist subjects that are deeply conscious of how resistance and opposition are always embedded in power. Rey Chow's work in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and Wahneema Lubiano's essay, "Like Being Mugged by a Metaphor: Multiculturalism and State Narratives," are integral texts for thinking about activist subjects as I attempt to neither romanticize nor foreclose the dangers and possibilities of coalitional politics. Chow questions how the "resistant ethnic subject" can ever move outside or beyond the structures of power that have already mapped out and name her very existence, for those same structures that give rise to the feelings of "individual resistance" or protest, are already built into the same subjectifying process of being named "ethnic" or the necessarily "resistant subject" in the first place.<sup>4</sup> Chow critiques the normalization of Marxist work on the history of class consciousness, in particular Georg Lukacs model in *The History of Class Consciousness*, that is now, according to Chow, the most influential model for imagining revolutionary consciousness and is deeply embedded in Women's Studies, Ethnic Studies and other minority discourses. In short, Lukacs' framework for thinking about "exploited subjecthood" relies on an understanding of an essentialized proletarian "soul" or "humanity" that

is ahistorical and somehow free from and outside of commodification processes. The “soul,” which can never be reified, is critical in Lukacs theory for it is how oppressed classes can resist, move outside of oppressive structures of power, and break free from captivity. Chow argues against this logic, for Lukacs at once locates the revolutionary subject within and outside of processes of commodification and decontextualizes the “soul” from historical circumstances and from the reigning social order. Lukacs’ model also relies on a linear narrative of progress, moving from oppression to awakening, and this invocation of the “narrative of captivity” (which Chow points out is characteristic of modernist conceptions of “violence and counterviolence”) necessarily imagines captivity as a precondition for liberation, and thus locates oppression as a prerequisite for “nonoppression to become credible.”<sup>5</sup>

Chow’s critique is a useful reminder that Post-Enlightenment discourses on revolutionary subjectivity (now often inadvertently replicated in anti-racist, feminist and other identity discourses) frequently rely on an understanding of liberation or revolutionary consciousness where the binaristic underbelly of this kind of subjectivity is oppression and captivity, and captivity is a historically specific, modernist imaginary. Chow suggests that these seemingly natural feelings of resistance, of radical consciousness, must also be interrogated, destabilized and rehistoricized as deeply imbricated in the rationalization and maintenance of the contemporary social order. In other words, Chow’s argument demands that rather than situating the revolutionary subject as something pre-existing and pure, the “culture of protest” and revolutionary consciousness must be located within the context of the capitalist society. “Resistance and protest, when understood historically, are part and parcel of the structure of capitalism, they are the reasons capitalism flourishes.”<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, feminist activist subjects—who imagine their position in the world as resistant or oppositional—are absolutely still subject to (and subjects of) state power. In fact, as Lubiano writes in “Like Being Mugged by a Metaphor: Multiculturalism and State Narratives,” state power is often most productive in places where it does not appear to exist, and these more discreet manifestations of state power often work quite successfully to mystify and conceal the existing power relations. If the “state thinks the subject too,” as Lubiano suggest, then “to some extent what we think of ourselves in relation to the world, what we imagine ourselves to be in relation to the world, is also, under most circumstances, at least partially a state project.”<sup>7</sup> In this way, the complicated, uneven ubiquity of state power is, at least in part, what it means to be dominated.

Domination is complicated and varied. But domination is so successful precisely because it sets up the terrain upon which struggle occurs at the same time that it preempts opposition not only by already inhabiting where we would resist (i.e., by being powerfully in place and ready to appropriate oppositional gestures), but also by having already written the script that we have to argue within and against.<sup>8</sup>

And if the State is involved in the construction of oppositional subjects, it also works to legitimize certain cultural imaginaries of opposition, utilizing these imaginations to normalize state logics and investments and substantiate state authority. Oppositional activist subject positions, then, are both part of how the State expands state power (through managing opposition) and are at the same time the very identities (“the protestor,” “the activist,” “the feminist”) through which activist subjects denote and position critiques of state violence. The formations of revolutionary subject positions that pivot around an imagination of being located outside of and/or against the State—ironically, often the very identities that also incite

participation in social struggles—are part of how the State authorizes itself, simultaneously concealing the “general power of the state to provide, to the public imagination, metaphors for explaining how the world works.”<sup>9</sup>

In this sense, this chapter more broadly attempts to understand the emergence of discrete feminist activist subject formations—that most often understand themselves as outside of or antagonistic to structures of power—as both historical and particular to shifts in capitalist world systems, transformations in state power and global decolonization. It is worth noting that by locating the NPIC, NGOization and the kinds of subjects that these institutions produce within a larger historical context also means that simply not working for an NGO, or not starting a non-profit, is *not* a “way out.” For the very feeling of “resistance” and the imagination that one can be positioned outside of the NPIC, for instance, is actually part of what feeds and perpetuates the now common-sense logics of NGOization and the expansion of state power. In this way, my work’s aim is not to seek or locate a “better” activist subject or model of coalition, nor is it to (re)instate an ahistorical oppositional subject whose imaginaries and practices are somehow outside of and untainted by state power. For, if the State is involved in the construction of oppositional, resisting subjects, it also works to legitimize certain cultural imaginaries of opposition, utilizing these imaginations to normalize state logics and investments and substantiate state authority. Instead, by looking historically at now “alternative” theories of coalition, I expand existing critiques of NGOization as part of an emerging effort to incite, complicate, and think critically about present day feminist activism(s) so that we might carve out space to grow new, historically grounded imaginations of feminist coalition. I now turn to memories of feminist coalition that I find strikingly different, even antagonistic, to the present day institution-centric imaginations of feminist coalition.

## **Stop Thinking Properly: Coalescing & Temporalities of Pain**

“There is a lesson in bringing people together where they can’t get enough oxygen, then having them try to figure out what they’re going to do when they can’t think properly.”<sup>10</sup>

Bernice Johnson Reagon

Singer, composer, writer, curator, scholar, and activist Bernice Johnson Reagon is perhaps best known for her African-American women’s ensemble Sweet Honey in the Rock formed in 1973, in Washington, D.C. Reagon grew up outside of Albany, Georgia, in a rural black community and began a long history of Civil Rights protest at Albany State College where she was a founding member of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee Freedom Singers and the Atlanta based Harambee Singers. Her 1981 speech, “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century,” delivered at the 1981 West Coast Women’s Music Festival, is now a foundational text for feminist scholarship and for radical social movement struggles. Reading Reagon’s speech thirty years later, in contrast to the current dominant theories of Transnational Feminist Networks, is illuminating. Reagon offers a radical critique of identity politics, refusing similar experience and common oppression as the basis for radical solidarities, and portrays a coalitional political sensibility that, within the context I describe in Chapter One, is virtually unimaginable today. For Reagon, coalition is deeply connected to historical memories of pain, and through this connection, pain offers an alternative way of thinking about social movements’ futurity; one that does not insist and/or rely on a pre-constituted point of arrival, and one whose promise is inherently critical of institutionalization. Pain is a complicated term in Reagon’s work because it is always impermanent and destabilizing and it simultaneously indexes multiple experiences: psychic struggles, historical memories of violence and trauma, and bodily feelings of pain. Reading Reagon alongside dominant imaginations of feminist coalition also reveals that, though Reagon is regularly cited in mainstream genealogies of coalition, her emphasis on coalescing—

on the pain and instability of coalition—has been evacuated from dominant feminist coalition discourses almost completely. I believe this erasure from feminist social movements' historical memories, this means of forgetting the painful politics of coalescing that offers no material guarantees, is intensely entangled in the ruling principle that NGO-centric activism is *the* most logical and successful mode of creating social transformation, and furthermore, is having a devastating impact on anti-racist feminist coalitional imaginaries in the present.

Reagon's speech troubles the notion that "there is some common experience that comes just cause you're women" and critiques politics that are based on "women only" parameters or that create a retrenching "home space" as "no way to survive by staying inside the barred room."<sup>11</sup> She marks both the exclusions that normative definitions of "women-only" spaces enforce and she is critical of the effects this kind of politics has on radical social movements' coalitional practices. In fact, her theory of coalition requires, in Moraga's words, "the pain and shock of difference" that "safe spaces" or "home" spaces such as "women-only" music festivals attempt to pave over. Her analysis is also deeply concerned with identifying how power operates and effects modes of activism and activists that understand themselves as outside, resistant and/or opposing state, economic, social and political violence. As Chandra Mohanty writes in *Feminism Without Borders*, Reagon explores the "barred rooms" that oppositional, radical social movements have constructed through basing solidarity in common oppression which "provides an illusion of community based in isolation and the freezing of difference."<sup>12</sup> Mohanty explains that while common experience, oppression and culture may allow the construction of the "barred room" or "home space," this political strategy indefinitely leads to an incapacitating "ossification of difference." Dismissing the authority of a common "women's experience" as a platform for radical politics, Reagon demands difference as prerequisite for coalescing because difference

creates a painful decentering of individual experience, knowledge, political sensibility, and embodiment, all essential for coalition. Significantly, Reagon theorizes coalescing as a painful and dangerous practice that directly relates to having a political future, an “opportunity to have something to do with what makes it into the next century.”<sup>13</sup> Now counter-intuitive to the institution building coalitional logics of the present, the kind of social movement future Reagon calls for is dangerously unthinkable today because it is uncertain, unknowable, and fleeting.

Through her radical critique of identity politics, Reagon envisions “coalescing” as an alternative to the isolating, ossifying “barred rooms” of politics based in common experience or the shared recognition of pain and struggles. She underscores the critical potential of *coalescing*: the feelings of bodily pain, instability, and emotional distress that are evidence of coalescing and are key to “turning the century.” She writes, “I feel as if I’m gonna keel over any minute and die. That is often what it feels like if you’re really doing coalition work. Most of the time you feel threatened to the core and if you don’t, you’re not really doing no coalescing.”<sup>14</sup> It is a kind of process that also promises no gainful guarantees. Interestingly, in the contemporary moment, Reagon’s work on coalition is often misread or misappropriated in the service of securing a politics of recognition; that, for instance, acknowledging and/or understanding past injustices will be a way to move beyond histories of racial and gendered violence, never to repeat. To be clear, however, I read Reagon’s theory of coalescing (and pain in particular) as *not* about the individualized body and the pursuit of a solidarity based on a shared recognition of pain. Instead, the painful impermanence of coalescing creates a kind of sociality that is both rooted in the memories of social movement struggles and linked to an unknowable but possible future for radical social movements.

For example, Reagon makes it clear that coalition is not a place to find comfort or predictability for you “can’t know everything when you start to coalesce,” and the purpose of engaging in this dangerous work, so dangerous “coalition *can* kill people,” should never be to find a political strategy or political identity that leads to (or reaffirms) feelings of safety, stability or that upholds preconceived knowledge about the political gains of coalescing. In other words, contrary to institutionalization, there is no direct pre-determined political map to follow when coalescing. Coalition resists institutionalization for it cannot be a permanent act because, though coalition is essential to “staying alive,” coalition is always temporary and resists being fixed even in the future. “You go to the coalition for a few hours” and then you go back to your comforting space, and “then you go back and coalesce some more.” The pain and discomfort of coalescing means coalition has to be temporary—pain works to interrupt the telos of institutionalization. Further, the purpose of coalescing is not about looking for a return, for Reagon makes it clear that coalescing offers no promises and necessarily denies pre-conceived desires for political gains or knowable futures. “Can’t get nothing! That is the nature of coalition.”<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, Reagon suggests that this practice of coalescing as an anti-foundational form of solidarity that resists institutionalization and is painful, temporary and dangerous, is critical for social movement futures, the “key to turning the century.” For Reagon, coalescing is the only way for radical social movement struggles and imaginaries to *maybe* stay alive, and to *possibly* have a future. “That’s why we have to have coalitions. Cause I ain’t gonna let you live unless you let me live. Now there’s danger in that, but there’s also the possibility that we can both live—if you can stand it.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Reagon writes that part of the political potential of coalescing is making a commitment “to be around for another fifty more years.” She writes that

coalition necessitates having an “age-old perspective.” “Try to figure out what it will be like if you are a raging radical fifty years from now.”<sup>17</sup> The practice of coalition as historical memory transmission is, again, not teleological (where the future is the opposite of past violence, and pain is counter to political progress, where the assumed purpose of political practices are to overcome or transcend past injustices and pain) as the necessarily temporary, dangerous, and painful practice of coalescing works against stabilizing, memorializing and sanctifying social movement historical memories of struggle as originary. Nor is Reagon’s work interested in romanticizing or holding onto pain—yet another form of mastery and control. Rather, the bodily pain of coalescing both constructs a temporary, dangerous and anti-foundational solidarity and simultaneously connects social movements to memory in a way that opens up possibilities for reimagining social movement futures. Pain functions as a (temporarily) destabilizing bodily experience and makes coalescing a self-reflective and self-conscious process, working against the shortsightedness of the present. Thus, coalition offers an imagination of the future that, because of its deep connection to historical memories of pain and trauma, disallows controlling the compulsory future destination of arrival, interrupting preconceived ideas about the political future, or “knowing where we are going.”

The problem with knowable political futures, Lee Edelman’s work points out in, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, is that “politics, however radical the means by which specific constituencies attempt to produce a more desirable social order, remains, at its core, conservative insofar as it works to affirm a structure, to authenticate social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child.”<sup>18</sup> Likewise, when Reagon demands us to consider, “what it will be like if you are a raging radical fifty years from now,” she is not advocating for a direct reproduction of the political aspirations and dreams of the

current moment to be thrown into the future. Because she theorizes coalition as necessary to stay alive but also a painful, unstable, and temporary practice of connecting social movement memories to (possible) political futures, Reagon is critical of activists producing preconceived knowable futures, because, like Edelman suggests, that predetermined future will always in some ways be shortsighted and reproduce the existing social order. Pain—or the physical and bodily practice of connecting to historical memories of violence and collective trauma —where “you feel threatened to the core,” unsafe, and like you are going to “keel over and die any moment,” interrupts mastery, destabilizes what is knowable and forecloses institutionalization, as in today’s case, as the horizon of social movement struggles. Hence, the critical potential of pain lies in its ability to both connect social movement memories across generations at the same time that it absolutely ruptures the comforts of sameness, mastery, and knowability. In Reagon’s words, coalition is “turning the century” with “not just the record of your practice, but the principles that are the basis of your practice.” Those principles are the historically grounded memories of struggle, and the feelings and imaginations of activist subjects that must be coalesced with the future. “[A]nd do everything you can to throw yourself into the next century. The only way you can take yourself seriously is if you can throw yourself into the next period beyond your little meager human-body-mouth-talking all the time.”<sup>19</sup>

Interestingly, while perusing Bernice Johnson Reagon’s website for biographical materials, I noticed a quote from a review on “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century” from the Advocacy Institute stating that the speech is just as “relevant for advocates in this century as they were for those in the last.”<sup>1</sup> I followed the URL to the website page titled “Empower the Coalition: Making Partnerships and Collaborations that Work,” a site that promotes and supports coalition building. I found in this context that though Reagon’s work is recognized as an

important part of the history of coalition and still “relevant” for this century, the contemporary logics of coalition have remarkably misremembered her theory of coalescing, retaining some of the language and hope for having a future, but at the same time disappearing her radical vision of social movement building through collapsing into institutionalization as the logical pre-determined, painless future of social change. Rather than coalescing with Reagon’s work, she is memorialized and frozen as a point of origin. For instance, though the Advocacy Network emphasizes “strength and flexibility” as necessary values for continuing social movement struggles, the pain of coalescing is replaced with the corporate speak of “partnerships” made up of professional activists with “skilled leadership” that is pre-requisite and “needed to guide members through their differences so the coalition can function.” Here, even Reagon’s critique of “home space” politics is absent, for according to the website, coalition’s demand “cohesion and solidarity” between “advocates,” and difference is something to be moved through. In fact, this understanding of coalition finds that though a “coalition is often stronger when it draws together coalition members who are not usually seen as partners,” functioning, legitimate coalitions are composed of advocates with “shared values, goals, and experiences” in order to best secure a knowable future. These “advocates,” of course, presumably represent and work on behalf of the grassroots and are said to be effective at seeking legitimacy on issues through pressuring decision makers, for “strength in numbers” decreases the “calculated risks” for the network of advocates. This is a startling contrast to the necessarily risky business, “coalition can kill you,” of Reagon’s radical vision of coalescing. Yet, simultaneously, the contemporary proponents of these networks of advocates understand themselves as continuing the kind of activism Reagon called for in the early 1980’s—an anti-foundational, painful, self-conscious, and temporary practice of coalescing with social movement histories and multiple generations of

activist subjectivities in order to possibly have an unknowable, but historically grounded open political future. It is fascinating that Reagon's theory of coalition is erased at the exact same time she is marked historically. It is remarkable how dominant, contemporary coalition discourses overtly identify with Reagon's speech—in this instance, they even locate her in their coalition genealogy—yet at the exact same time this historical association with Reagon simultaneously requires a powerful practice of forgetting.

Reagon begins her speech with a description of the music festival that I think interestingly describes coalition: bringing together people who do not have enough oxygen to breath and “having them try to figure out what to do when they can't think properly.” If “thinking properly” might be read as reproducing the social order through common-sense logics, then coalescing—that temporarily decentering practice that makes you feel like “you wanna die,” irrational, and so “you can't think properly”—is exactly what feminist activism under the regime of the NGOization needs more of today: to stop thinking properly.<sup>20</sup> Coalescing disallows knowing (and owning) the outcomes of activist practices and offers a vision of remembering history in a way that persistently ruptures already knowable political futures.<sup>21</sup>

### **Coalescing with History**

Though her activist practices might be read as strategies traditionally associated with liberal politics and, as some characters in the novel identify, as failed tactics of the Civil Rights movement, Alice Walker's main character Meridian in the 1976 novel *Meridian* embodies a memory of coalition that contemporary coalition discourses have also disappeared. She has a deep connection to histories of trauma and struggle, as well as her own experiences of physical and epistemic violence, and her activist imaginary recalls a now unorthodox vision of coalition that is worth investigating. There is much to be said about Walker's vision of activism,

revolutionary leadership, feminism, anti-racism, sexuality, social movement building, violence and the persistence of white supremacy. In fact, her novel indexes the inheritance of the failures of the Civil Rights movement and the corresponding crises in activism brought on by such failures. Some of these crises include the singularization and crystallization of activist subject positions (through the privileging of the revolutionary masculine subject); the pervasiveness of racist, gendered and sexual violence spearheaded by the U.S. Civil Rights State and circulated within the resisting social movements themselves; political apathy; the loss of radical leadership and the cooptation and incorporation of radical organizing strategies. This particular reading of *Meridian*, however, will focus primarily on illuminating Meridian's relationship with history, or what I want to call "coalescing with history," as the chance for radical social movement struggles to possibly have a different kind of future.<sup>22</sup> In some ways similar to Reagon's vision of coalition, I consider Meridian's deep physical and figurative connection to multiple and contradictory histories of black struggles as a model of coalescing with history that might offer a potential future for radical anti-racist struggles. I also explore the kind of activist practices that emerge from Meridian's connection to social movements' historical memories and from Meridian's distinct ability to coalesce. Specifically, I engage three different political episodes of relating to history that Meridian experiences as she grows into understanding the importance of her relation to past histories of racial, sexual and gendered violence and the role of coalescing within radical social movements' futures.

Throughout the novel Meridian is described as stubbornly ambivalent, abstract and lacking a sense of herself as a clear, fixed and autonomous individual. Instead, Meridian is invested in "remaining close to people—to see them, to be with them, to understand them" in order to understand herself, and is exceptionally linked to the histories of struggle of the black

revolutionaries that lived before her. Meridian contains an “essence of silence” and is patient, listening especially to the older generation of Civil Rights activists where she is described as “constantly wanting to know about the songs. Where did such and such a one come from?”<sup>23</sup> All through the novel she is vexed by the question, “Will you kill for the Revolution?”—a question she must answer positively “yes” in order to participate in the activism spearheaded by Anne-Marion and other activists around her. But without context, or “until the occasion arises,” Meridian cannot answer. She cannot answer, in part, because she is “held by something in the past.” For there is something about answering that question “without a stammer” that disconnects her contemporaries from the histories and struggles of past black radicals. This connection, this way of coalescing that Meridian experiences should not be confused with nostalgia or what others are currently calling Left melancholia, but a sensitivity to, an embodiment of, coalescing with social movement historical memories.

Meridian alone was holding on to something the others had let go. If not completely, then partially—by their words today, their deeds tomorrow. But what none of them seemed to understand was that she felt herself to be, not holding on to something from the past, but *held* by something in the past: by the memory of old black men in the South who, caught by surprise in the eye of the camera, never shifted their position but looked directly back; by the sight of young girls singing in country choir, their hair shining with brushings and grease, their voices the voices of angels.<sup>24</sup>

And being “held” (not trapped) by something in the past—or what I want to call coalescing with history—makes answering the question absolutely and without context, “Will you kill for the Revolution?” impossible for Meridian. Instead, her connection to the past forces her to consider

the impact of her contemporaries' activist practices on the future, "If they committed murder—and to her even revolutionary murder was murder—*what would the music be like?*"

Meridian feels a connection to history even as a child and through her father and his particular relation to social movement histories of struggle and institutionalized violence, Meridian encounters the first instance of connecting with history that I wish to explore. As a young girl it is Meridian's father's voice that moves her, a "voice that could come only from the life he lived. A life of withdrawal from the world, a life of constant awareness of death." Meridian connects with her father's interest in the history of the land they inhabit—with the Native Americans who used to live in Georgia where their small farm resides. The farm land runs right up against a cemetery once called the Sacred Serpent and, notably, the connection to the history of the land goes back many generations in Meridian's family; her great-grandmother (on her father's side) fought to save "the snake" from being leveled by wheat farmers. According to her father, the coil in the Serpent's tail was constructed in order to simulate the experience of dying, "the body seemed to drop away, and only the spirit lived, set free in the world." But Meridian experiences something else as a young girl. Unlike her father's interpretations, in this place of "vast isolation" where Meridian remarks she has "contact with no other living thing," she believes being "surrounded by the dead" is actually a way "the living sought to expand the consciousness of being alive, there where the ground about them was filled with the dead."<sup>25</sup> This "tangible connection to the past"—both exhilarating and mystifying to Meridian and her father—is differently experienced by the father and daughter. While her father, "a mourner" and "so resigned to death," seems to be trapped in history and almost drowns in the experience of dying, Meridian finds a deep connection to the dead, to historical memories of trauma and violence, in order to better understand what it means to be alive, what it might mean to live into the future.

In fact, Meridian's father becomes so preoccupied with this history, so consumed with the knowledge that the "land already belonged to them [and that] our food is made healthy from the iron and calcium from their bones," that Meridian would often find him disconnected from the present and future world, surrounded by books, maps and photographs, "his face wet with tears." And though Meridian's mother feels no connection to these histories, to the black soldiers who rode against the Native Americans and thus, acquired their lands through war, her father acknowledges that "we were part of" the genocidal practices waged against indigenous tribes. He gives the deed to sixty acres of land (acquired by Meridian's great-grandfather after the Civil War) to a Cherokee man named Walter Longknife. Mr. Longknife returns the deed but soon after the State co-opts the land and turns it into Sacred Serpent Park which, because it is a "public" park, is no longer accessible to people of color. Indeed, this representation of relating to the past does not translate into any kind of futurity. For years later, when the State integrates Sacred Serpent Park, Meridian returns to try to recapture coalescing with history—the physical connection to the past to better relate to the living—but interestingly, the seizure of the land by the State contorts, even evacuates, the sacred histories from the coil and Meridian finds park-goers are either "shouting and laughing as they slide down the side of the great Serpent's coil," or standing there "attempting to study the meaning of what had already and forever been lost."<sup>26</sup> Though Meridian first experiences the dead and the memories invoked by the Sacred Serpent as a way of connecting to and better understanding the living, her father's model of relating to history, one that is clearly sensitive to past memories of trauma and violence, cannot move radical social movement struggles into the future.<sup>27</sup> His relation to history, as Walker describes, leaves him trapped in it, living a life of withdrawal that is already resigned to death

Meridian's relationship with her father and the history of the Sacred Serpent are integral to her activist practices and to her ability to coalesce with history. In fact, it is through activism, through the deepening awareness of and further exposure to racial violence and the Civil Rights movement, that "one day in the middle of April in 1960 Meridian Hill became aware of the past and present of the larger world." One month after a neighboring campaign base for a black voter registration drive was firebombed, Meridian begins volunteering with the local Civil Rights workers: "typing, teaching illiterates to read and write, demonstrating against segregated facilities and keeping the Movement house open when the other workers returned to school."<sup>28</sup> She is also, in these demonstrations, repeatedly beaten by police officers into a state of "battle fatigue."

They all had it. She was as weary as anyone, so that she spent a good part of her time in tears. At first she had burst into tears whenever something went wrong or someone spoke unkindly or even sometimes if they spoke, period. But now she was always in a state of constant tears, so that she could do whatever she was doing—canvassing, talking at rallies, tying her sneakers, laughing—while tears rolled slowly and ceaselessly down her cheeks. This might go on for days, even weeks. Then, suddenly, it would stop, and some other symptom would appear. The shaking of her hands, or the twitch in her left eye. Or she would sometimes be sure she'd heard a shot and feel the impact of the bullet against her back; then she stood absolutely still, waiting for herself to fall.<sup>29</sup>

These ritual beatings by the State, experienced by most all of her activist contemporaries, permanently injure Meridian's physical body and throughout her life she battles bouts of paralysis and "blue spells," including fainting, loss of sight and hair, and no appetite. In fact,

Meridian remarks that her body “get’s in the way” and values it less, “attended to it less, because she hated its obstruction.”<sup>30</sup> Throughout the novel, Meridian’s physical health is worrisome to her friends Anne-Marion and Truman, yet she nevertheless continues—almost unintentionally—coalescing with history. In fact, in some ways her ability to coalesce seems to be deeply connected to her constant state and heightened awareness of pain. It is as if her own bodily pain is a conduit to multiple and contradictory black histories of pain, struggle and revolution.

A wealthy family in Connecticut “who wished to help some of the poor, courageous blacks they saw marching and getting their heads whipped nightly on TV” decides out of “liberality and concern” to send an intelligent black women to college in Atlanta. Meridian’s high school IQ score is incredibly high, and though she was expelled for being pregnant before graduating, she is offered a scholarship by these white philanthropists to go to a black women’s college. Meridian, at first feeling “blessed,” accepts the scholarship much her to mother’s dismay. Nevertheless, even on the college campus intent on cultivating proper black womanhood, Meridian continues a coalitional practice intensely connected to black historical memories of struggle. The second political episode I explore takes place at Saxon College, a privately endowed finishing school for black women.

At Saxon, Meridian and her friend Anne-Marion are marked as deviant and incapable of being “improved” or transformed into “true ladies.” They continue to be quite active in Civil Rights struggles though most of the students around them are “timid, imitative, bright enough but never daring,” as they were being ushered “nearer to Ladyhood everyday.”<sup>31</sup> The most significant action Meridian and Anne-Marion organize on campus is a funeral for The Wild Child—a pregnant thirteen year old girl who survived without family or friends by living on the streets and going through garbage scavenging for food. Many tried to catch her and offer her a permanent

home, but The Wild Child could never be caught. Meridian learns of The Wild Child when she is canvassing voters and with cake, colored beads and cigarettes, she captures The Wild Child, gives her a bath and brings her to dinner at her Saxon home. But The Wild Child embodies all of the undomesticable qualities that threaten “true Ladyhood,” with her “ashy black arms,” her “large rayon panties, pulled up to her arms,” her “mangy fur jacket,” and her “uncouthness” of manners. “She drank from the tea pitcher, and put cigarette ashes in her cup. She farted, as if to music, raising a thigh.”<sup>32</sup> A supervisor is called in “desperation” by Meridian’s housemates and tells Meridian that her guest must leave because “this is a school for young ladies,” and to consider The Wild Child’s *influence* on other students. The next morning while Meridian calls around to find a home for special children, The Wild Child escapes and is hit by a car and killed.

Though Meridian’s housemates are horrified by the unladylike presence of The Wild Child in their home, they are politicized during her funeral. It is a kind of politicization, however, that is detached from historical context. Hundreds of people join to mourn The Wild Child and Meridian is surprised by the turn out—a mix of Saxon students and neighboring people, “whose odors and groans and hymns drifted up to them pungent with poverty and despair,” bringing up the rear of the procession. As they reach the entrance to the campus, guarded by black police officers, The Wild Child’s casket is turned away from the Saxon chapel by the president of the college. The mood of the students changes “from mournful to indignant,” and while the rejected casket rests on the chapel steps, there is silence amongst the Saxon women. Then the awareness that The Wild Child was refused admittance to their institution’s chapel causes a collective cry to rise out of crowd. In this moment of politicization, the young women stamp their feet in anger and shame, crying and sticking out their tongues. They begin removing all the indicators of wealth and “true Ladyhood” fastened to their bodies. “In the heat of their emotion they began to

take off their jewelry and fling it to the ground [...] They shook loose their straightened hair, and all the while they glared at the locked chapel door with a ferocity that was close to hatred.”<sup>33</sup>In protest, the Saxon students proceed to carry the casket to the middle of campus and rest it under The Sojourner, the largest magnolia tree in the country. They cry and sing, “We shall overcome,” and bury The Wild Child in a local black cemetery. Later in the evening, much to Meridian’s dismay, the young women riot on campus “the first time in its long, placid, impeccable history,” but the only thing they manage to destroy is The Sojourner. Though Meridian desperately tries to convince them to attack the president’s home instead, “in a fury of confusion and frustration,” the young women work all night, chopping and sawing down the “mighty, ancient, sheltering music tree.” This is the second model of (dis)connecting to history that I consider.

The dismantling of The Sojourner in a “fury of confusion and frustration” is significant because, much like Meridian, the tree is a site that maintains multiple memories of black history that are at the same time contradictory and discontinuous, yet held together and embodied in the great magnolia. It gives historical context to the current iteration of racial, sexual, class and gendered violence the young Saxon women experience at the same time that it houses the memories of past revolutionary strategies on their very campus. The Sojourner was planted by a slave on the Saxon plantation—a slave named Louvinie who could not smile because her tongue was clipped out by the plantation owner. She is brutalized in this way for sharing stories (incessantly demanded by the white children) so terrifying that a 7 year old Saxon boy dropped dead of a heart attack. Her tongue is cut out and Louvinie begs for it back, believing that “without one’s tongue in one’s mouth or in a special spot of one’s own choosing, the singer in one’s soul was lost forever to grunt [...] like a pig.” Louvinie retrieves her tongue, smokes it and buries it under the magnolia tree. This leads some to believe that the magnolia possessed magic

and could speak. Others believe it makes music and has the power to obscure vision. Students also believes the magnolia was a special spot the slaves used to make love. Indeed, so many histories and rituals were connected to The Sojourner that “students of every persuasion had a choice of which to accept.”

Meridian fights to defend The Sojourner and is deeply connected to this tree and to the histories embodied by the enormous magnolia, and her ability to coalesce with history parallels the tree’s capacity to contain the multiple and uneven histories of black struggles. When Anne-Marion, standing before The Sojourner in the midst of the procession, offhandedly remarks she’d like to “wreck this place,” Meridian replies, “You’d have to wreck me first.”<sup>34</sup> But without this deep connection to the discrete memories of black struggles, the activist strategies of Meridian’s contemporaries are misdirected, and instead of attacking the institution itself, they inadvertently destroy their connection to the past that is so necessary for radical struggles in the present to survive into the future. This particular political act makes it clear that social movement struggles must be deeply connected to their histories, for without engaging the memories of past revolutionary struggles, the strategies and tactics of the present not only further disconnect themselves from past narratives, knowledges, visions and dreams, but also severely limits the potential of what might possibly be “thrown into the next period.” These histories are integral to social movement memories because they reveal that contemporary formations of white supremacy and race, gender and sexual violence are not merely present day circumstances. In other words, they cannot be simply corrected and surpassed; there is no quick fix.

Interestingly, Meridian’s relationship to history also means she is a bridge-person, a connector figure between different activist subjects—like interracial couple Lynne and Truman—who literally talk through Meridian in order to communicate with each other. This

orientation to history is also, in a sense, contagious. Meridian makes people around her remember and accessing such memories often leads to politicization. For instance, after Meridian is unable to publicly recite a speech about the virtues of the Constitution, her mother chastises her, reminding Meridian that when something goes wrong, to simply trust in God. Miss Winter, a teacher at Meridian's high school, overhears the conversation and cradles Meridian, telling her not to worry about the speech. She says, "It's the same one they made me learn when I was here, and it's no more true now than it was then." Suddenly, Miss Winter's realizes she has never admitted that to anyone before, and is surprised at how good it feels to speak critically and to remember being in Meridian's position as a young girl. Or for Truman, who describes Meridian as a "constant reproach" in his thoughts, Meridian's presence always seems to remind him of his own limitations. He is forced to recall how "frequently he felt superior" to Meridian, to consider his sexual preference for young thin, blonde white women, though he simultaneously fetishizes black female bodies in his art. Truman describes Meridian (and coalescing with history) as a person who is always connecting to the past and at the same time, to the future. It is as if she is never stable or fully grounded in the present but always moving in between. "No matter what she is saying to you, and no matter what you are saying to her, she seemed to be thinking of something else, another conversation perhaps, an earlier one, that continued on a parallel track. Or of a future that was running an identical course."<sup>35</sup> Though "it would have been a joy" for Truman to forget Meridian, he finds himself always looking for her, always in need of remembering of the past, "as if she pulled him by an invisible string."<sup>36</sup>

But at the same time, Meridian leads a relatively lonely, solitary life. Her desire to relate to histories of black struggles, her connection to memories of trauma and resistance, and her stubborn ambivalence is often experienced by other activists as a kind of betrayal. She refuses to

take sides (between Lynne and Truman, for example), and to unquestionably pledge to the political actions of her contemporaries. Unlike Truman and Anne-Marion, who believe the revolution has “sold out” and has become commodified, thus marking Meridian’s activist projects as inconsequential, Meridian understands herself as returning to and pursuing the basic questions raised by Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Yet, Meridian’s slow and mutable position is perceived as betrayal to the differing activist groups she encounters because she will not buy into an unquestioned solidarity with the present conditions nor will she stabilize her political perspective. In fact, coalescing with history in some contexts appears to be a traitorous act because, as in Meridian’s case, she will not commit herself absolutely to the activist visions, strategies, and desires of her moment.

I now turn to a third consideration of activist practices in relation to social movement historical memories, a model that Meridian eventually settles into to better understand her role in radical social movements and her relationship to other forms of activism. It is in a black church that Meridian encounters a mode of political organizing that helps her better understand coalescing with history—connecting the past to the future in a non-teleological, anti-foundational model—and Meridian finds herself deepening her understanding of her role in revolutionary struggles. After the spring of 1968, Meridian begins going, somewhat irregularly, to church and finally, for no special reason whatsoever, she finds herself in front of a Baptist church. Though Meridian is astounded that “people still *came*, actually got out of bed on Sunday morning and came, to church,”<sup>37</sup> inside she encounters a minister in his thirties who speaks in a voice that is “dramatically” like that of Martin Luther King’s, and begins a radical sermon that attacks President Nixon and forbids the young men in the room to participate in the Vietnam War. He admonishes the parents in the congregation for sending their children alone into white

neighborhoods for school and he lectures the teachers in the room for not having faith in black youth.<sup>38</sup> Meridian realizes that he is intentionally mimicking King, and that both the congregation and the pastor are aware of this imitation, this way of keeping King's voice and the millions of other who have been systematically silenced, alive.

It struck Meridian that he was deliberately imitating King, that he and all his congregation *knew* he was consciously keeping that voice alive. It was like a *play*. This startled Meridian; and the preacher's voice—not his own voice at all, but rather the voice of millions who could no longer speak—wound on and on along its heated, now cool, track. God was not mentioned, except as a reference.<sup>39</sup>

This realization leads Meridian to later describe how she begins to hear the “ahmens” differently. Now they are unsentimental and resolutely saying, “We are fed up.”

On another occasion in the church, the father of a dead activist begins a different kind of performance, stating “he would not pray any longer because there was a lot of work for the community to do.” This red-eyed man was notorious in the community for he had “gone temporarily insane” when his son was killed, and in response, wrecks his own house with an axe. That particular day in church was the anniversary of his son's death. Annually, the red-eyed man is asked to speak in schools and churches about his son because the people, “needing reminders, requested it of him.” And his performance is simple. He stands before the congregation next to a photo of his son and recites three words: “My son died.” While watching this ceremony of remembrance for the death of the Civil Rights worker, Meridian describes the parishioners as “needing reminders” of the violence suffered by Civil Rights activists on behalf of other oppressed communities. This performance of remembering, this cultural practice of giving voice to histories of violence, is the third representation of relating to history I wish to explore. It is

“coalescing with history” and it works to both recall and house histories of struggles that are integral to radicalizing the church parishioners.

As he speaks the words, “My son died,” Meridian interprets the audience’s response to the red-eyed man as saying that his son had not died for nothing.

‘Look,’ they were saying, ‘we are slow to awaken to the notion that we are only as other women and men, and even slower to move to anger, but we are gathering ourselves to fight for and protect what your son fought for on behalf of us.’<sup>40</sup>

Then the congregation asks to be reminded, to be encouraged to hold onto the memories of the red-eyed man’s son’s death so that they can be moved into a revolutionary struggle that is fueled by historical memories of trauma and violence. “If you let us weave your story and your son’s life and death into what we already know—into the songs, the sermons [...] we will be so angry we cannot help but move.”<sup>41</sup> Or, if you let us coalesce with your son’s history, we will be able to move in the present, and to perhaps continue anti-racist struggles into the future. Contrary to Meridian’s previous thinking, the church is not reactionary but is a cultural space that models a different kind of political practice through “performance,” through voicing and renarrativizing the histories of black struggles that are foundational to the life-line of the revolution.

The performances in the church have a profound impact on how Meridian understands her work as an activist and how she can support the movement through coalescing her contemporaries with the past so that the “real revolutionaries” can continue to the struggle into the future. She considers herself a “failure” at the kind of revolutionary activism Anne-Marion modeled—though, tongue in cheek, Meridian remarks that Anne-Marion gave up on organizing and is now a famous poet who writes about her children and “the quality of light that fell across a lake she owned.” Meridian’s part in revolutionary struggles, she decides, will be to coalesce with

history, to connect those that “must spill blood” with social movement historical memories, with the voices of the past through song.

[I]t will be my part to walk behind the real revolutionaries—those who know they must spill blood in order to help the poor and the black and therefore go right ahead—and when they stop to wash off the blood and find their throats too choked with the smell of murdered flesh to sing, I will come forward and sing from memory songs they will need once more to hear.<sup>42</sup>

These songs that invoke voices of the past, “transformed by the experiences of each generation,” are the glue that holds the social movement together, bridges the past with the present, so that the revolution can continue to have a voice in the future. If any part of the song is lost the social movement suffers and “the people suffer and are without soul.” Meridian coalesces with history to connect the multiple memories of violence and pain with struggles in the present.

After Meridian’s experience in the church, she continues to register the most abject, poor black communities to vote. She moves to the South, living in one small town after another, barely supporting herself. Rather, she prioritizes “remaining close to the people—to see them, to be with them, to understand them and herself.” And the people, in return, care for her as well. In every town she visits, locals seem to always make sure Meridian has food, shelter and they take care of her during her paralysis spells. As Meridian moves around the rural South, she has fewer and fewer possessions and “less of a social position” from one community to the next.

Some considerations of Meridian’s activist practices, such as voter registration efforts or integrating public spaces, could be interpreted as simply a celebration of liberal reformist political organizing strategies. Even Truman, though endlessly drawn to Meridian, initially considers her labor “useless” and continues to believe that the Civil Rights struggle has “sold

out.” When Meridian—in what she considers a performance—leads a group of very poor young people of color and forces a local sideshow to integrate on a “whites-only” day, Truman remarks, “The whole thing was useless, if you ask me. You can make yourself catatonic behind a lot of meaningless action that will never get anybody anywhere.”<sup>43</sup> Meridian maintains, however, that the performance is valuable because, in this case, the children were able to find out for themselves that the sideshow was a hoax, a fake. They practice using their own eyes and their own voices to name the formerly unexplainable urban legend, untrue. Rather than furthering Anne-Marion and Truman’s utilitarian understanding of activism that privileges certain futures with predictable political gains, Meridian’s practices reorient the political away from the seemingly inevitable question of political gain and of mastering knowable political futures. As a performance, Meridian imitates liberal activism—like voter registration—yet her mimicry has a critical function: it visibilizes the limits of reformist strategies and at the same time suggests an alternative politics that might give black communities a different kind of access to “their voice.” Meridian even acknowledges that the vote “may be useless” and her voter registration practice is not about securing enfranchisement for the sake of expanding access to formal equality; to be recognized and represented by the State. In fact, throughout the novel Walker’s relentless critique marks the expansion of the post-Civil Rights State sponsored violence as well as the persistence of racial, sexual and gendered violence within the internal workings of opposition social movements in the post-Civil Rights era which, in my mind, disallows a liberal reading of Meridian’s activist practices. Instead, Meridian understands her particular mode of activism as a collective way to access one’s voice, not to work towards the hope of forging a coherent national body, but to carry the songs of the past into the future. It is a rejection of reproducing the social order that refuses models of relating to history that attempt to secure a preconceived political

future. “It may be useless. Or maybe it can be the beginning of the use of your voice. You have to get used to using your voice, you know.”<sup>44</sup>This is a form of coalescing that works to connect the voices of the past to the present conditions in order to possibly have an unknowable revolutionary future. In *Meridian*, coalescing with history, the transmission of the songs through performance, the diffusion of memories of violence and revolutionary struggles that “the real revolutionaries” will once more need to hear, is the key to “turning the century.”

Reagon and Walker imagine coalition in such a way that runs contrary to the prevailing activist logics of institutionalization in the present and is worth considering: What might feminist social movements’ histories look like if we were not focused on transcending or mastering pain? What does it mean to remember social movement histories through the destabilizing pain of coalescing, and to always consider under what signs of the present do we desire particular political futures? What kinds of practices or radical imaginaries might emerge when integral to our social movements’ cultures is a persistent rupture of the already knowable future through a profound bodily connection to collective historical memories of struggle? Reagon ends her speech with the reminder that we can do “wonderful things in crisis.” As I suggested earlier, one of today’s crises within dominant feminist activism has to do with an inability to imagine non-institutionalized (improper) futures for social movements, confining what counts as feminist activism to a very limited terrain. I think, then, re-remembering these now “alternative” theories of coalition is vital to contemporary radical struggles and to growing new imaginations of what counts as feminist activism in the present.

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<sup>1</sup>When I speak of historical collective trauma, I am not invoking “trauma” in the same sense as some of the work coming out of Trauma Studies such as Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, where trauma is understood as unlocatable, unassimilatable, never fully known and or fully spoken. Rather, I think the politics Walker and Reagon contemplate imagines a different understanding of the body, and collective rather

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than individualized historical memories of trauma and the pain of coalescing. Instead of representing trauma as something that cannot be spoken, which Hal Foster points out can inadvertently essentialize, romanticize and legitimate certain subjects, Walker and Reagon theorize coalition as a space that holds onto pain and collective memories of trauma without stabilizing it, mastering it, evacuating it, or claiming coalition as a “safe space” free of the contaminations of power, privilege and the coinciding histories of racialized and gendered violence.

<sup>2</sup> Cherrie Moraga, “Foreward,” in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, second edition, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldua (Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century,” in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New Brunswick: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983) 353.

<sup>4</sup> Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 33.

<sup>5</sup> Chow, 39.

<sup>6</sup> Chow, 47.

<sup>7</sup> Wahneema Lubiano, “Like Being Mugged by a Metaphor: Multiculturalism and State Narratives,” in *Mapping Multiculturalism*, ed. Avery Gordon and Christopher Newfield (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) 65-66.

<sup>8</sup> Lubiano, 66.

<sup>9</sup> Lubiano, 74.

<sup>10</sup> Reagon, 343.

<sup>11</sup> Reagon, 345.

<sup>12</sup> Chandra Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, (New York: Duke UP, 2003) 118.

<sup>13</sup> Reagon, 343.

<sup>14</sup> Reagon, 343.

<sup>15</sup> Reagon, 348.

<sup>16</sup> Reagon, 352.

<sup>17</sup> Reagon, 348.

<sup>18</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) 3-4.

<sup>19</sup> Reagon, 352.

<sup>20</sup> This is not to suggest that Reagon offers the “best model” of activism. For coalescing refuses to know what a better future model of activism looks like.

<sup>22</sup> To restate, this reading does not seek to attempt to imagine or locate a better model of activism or resistant subject that would position Meridian as somehow outside of the social order.

<sup>23</sup> Alice Walker, *Meridian*, (Orlando: A Harvest Book Harcourt, Inc., 1976) 27.

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<sup>24</sup> Walker, 14.

<sup>25</sup> Walker, 53.

<sup>26</sup> Walker, 54.

<sup>27</sup> Obviously here too, the State's way of sanctifying historical memories, or even "paying tribute" to Indigenous cultural practices, are also clearly disconnected from histories of struggle, and are not a model of coalescing.

<sup>28</sup> Walker, 82.

<sup>29</sup> Walker, 82.

<sup>30</sup> Walker, 97.

<sup>31</sup> Walker, 27.

<sup>32</sup> Walker, 25.

<sup>33</sup> Walker, 38.

<sup>34</sup> Walker, 31.

<sup>35</sup> Walker, 149.

<sup>36</sup> Walker, 210.

<sup>37</sup> Walker, 212.

<sup>38</sup> Walker, 214.

<sup>39</sup> Walker, 214.

<sup>40</sup> Walker, 219.

<sup>41</sup> Walker, 219.

<sup>42</sup> Walker, 221.

<sup>43</sup> Walker, 12.

<sup>44</sup> Walker, 225.

## Chapter Four

### **‘We’re All a Little Co-opted’: ‘Comfortable Strait Jackets’ and the Compromised Politics of Pleasure**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter I read science fiction writer Octavia Butler’s 2004 short story “Amnesty” as an allegory for the contemporary NGOization of social movements and the corresponding emergence of NGO activist subject formations. I read “Amnesty” (one of Butler’s last pieces published before her death in 2006) alongside some of her earlier work: *Parable of the Sower* (1993), *Parable of the Talents* (1998), and the *Xenogenesis Trilogy: Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989). Across the arc of these three decades, I track Butler’s preoccupations with multiple and changing constellations of power, terror, pleasure, and the body from the late 1980’s into the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, marking both the continuities and the differences that surface in “Amnesty.” In, as I’ve argued, a moment whose dominant political imaginary is ruled by NGO and non-profit forms of activism, I am especially interested in how Butler differently imagines the relays of power shaping the political field in 2004 and how activists, such as main character Noah Cannon, struggle within and against a complicated terrain where both reform and revolution are foreclosed as political possibilities. What does radicalism look like, for example, when political allegiances and loyalties are *presumably* compromised and always contaminated—when the activist is literally employed by the very forms of domination she seeks to destabilize or simply live through? What might perhaps differently count as “activism” when, as in “Amnesty,” the alien structures of power are ambivalent, at best, to securing its’ subjects consent, when the alien “Communities” do not require incorporation or assimilation in order to dominate? With these questions in mind, I read “Amnesty” as an

imagination of activism that works to reveal transformations in the contemporary (reconfigured) field(s) of the political, where activist Noah (as Translator) is positioned as a traitor whose split allegiances might be understood as signs of political possibilities.

More broadly, I turn to the science fiction of Octavia Butler to open up a different space to think critically about the state of feminist activism in the contemporary moment. Butler's work contributes to and complicates the current conversations and critiques of mainstream transnational feminist activism—a conversation that often privileges certain investments in institution building and professionalized forms of activism, and relies heavily on a neoliberal imagination of “global civil society.” To recall, the state of mainstream or “legitimate” feminist activism has in the last two decades or so, situated Transnational Feminist Networks as the primary, most celebrated vehicle by which feminists from across the world can build anti-hierarchical coalitions for effective social and political change. In response to the lack of research and theory dedicated to thinking specifically about gender in the larger historical context of shifts in capitalist world systems and global decolonization, proponents of Transnational Feminist Networks rightly contributed to the major hole in sociological and political science social movement studies, and demanded attention to the kinds of feminist organizing and theories of transnational solidarity emerging in response to the gendered processes of globalization. These thinkers drew scholarly attention to a particular kind of coalition strategy emerging in the 1990's—Transnational Feminist Networks. But, as I pointed out in Chapter One, TFN's tend to privilege Western, professionalized, activist sensibilities, uncritically situate NGOs as necessarily neutral, moral and representative of “grassroots” interests, and likewise understand this form of activism as inherently distinct from, even counter to, state and market interests. They are also, I suggested, problematic because they have become

the dominant mode of imagining coalition within mainstream feminist social movements and are the “face” of feminist activism; a political imaginary that positions institutionalization as the horizon of social change struggles.

It is within this context that I consider Octavia Butler’s invaluable but, perhaps, estranging representations of activism and activist subjects in the near future. While critics and fans of Butler have not formally marked the main characters in her oeuvre “activist subjects” *per se*, and dominant sociological studies of activism and social movement theory are certainly not associated with her science fiction, I find Butler’s work important for engaging political imaginations that augment the discourses that tend to dominate the terrain of contemporary activism: “revolution” and “reform.” In this way, across the arc of her writing, I read main characters Lauren, Lilith and Noah as differently related representations of feminist activist subjects in order to critically complicate and expand dominant feminist imaginations of activism in the contemporary moment. Indeed, Butler’s main characters engage in and expose the limitations of political labor and theories of agency that position activism (and activists) as already outside the structures of power that dominate their concomitant worlds (revolution), or that imagine social change through, often in a nostalgic sense, reforming the structures of violence that shape their lives (reform). Butler’s protagonists are always complicatedly contaminated with split or multiple allegiances and are, in their varying contexts, scorned, distrusted, and marked as “traitors” to the cause, to ruling political sensibilities, and to humanity itself. For her traitorous activists, the longing for revolution or reform is always already foreclosed, and in Butler’s worlds, these two orientations to the political are overly-simplified and unavailable in a real, bodily sense for her main characters.

All of Butler's black female protagonists experience multiple forms of violence, and through these experiences, differently register the political terrain through their bodies, or body-knowledge. Their body-knowledge connects deeply to their abilities to demonstrate to other humans that there is no revolutionary "outside" structures of power while, at the same time, reformist strategies almost always ensure a shorter life for her characters. If such is the case, then within the discourses of revolution and reform, an activist cannot but be a traitor. For, to not be a "traitor," one would have to be outside the very terrain of struggle she wishes to critique. And if an "outside" vantage is impossible for the activist subject, I argue for a consideration of the political potential of an always already compromised feminist activist subject formations. In fact, I will point out that one strategy Butler's main characters utilize in response to such dynamics—or, what I read as "activism"—is to dispel the hopes and attachments to these discourses and thus, complicate contemporary understandings and feminist imaginations of the political, activism and agency. From the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, to the *Parable* series, and to short story "Amnesty," I track the problems and potentials of the discourses of revolution and reform for the activist subject in order to expand the horizon of contemporary feminist imaginations and to attempt to map transformations in power and struggle from the 1980's into the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Before I turn to Butler's texts, however, I offer a brief caveat and reflection on the problems of my own "outside" position as a critic attempting, in this case, to map the current political field. Further, I consider the issues that arise when critiquing a subject formation that I am, in many ways, embedded in as well. Following my reflection, I detail why I turn to the literary form of science fiction in particular to explore the sets of questions animating this chapter, and I describe the political potential of this form of fiction for feminist social

movements in general. The second half of this chapter reads across *Parable*, the *Xenogenesis Trilogy*, and “Amnesty,” where I identify the protagonists as representations of differently related feminist activist subjects. In general, I detail how these subjects understand the relays of power specific to their worlds, pointing out especially what carries over and what is different in Butler’s later work, “Amnesty.” Under the particular conditions of their varying political fields, I read for what Butler’s feminist activist subjects imagine “counts” as social and political transformation, and I attend to the strategies they utilize to achieve such destinations. I also note the relationships between how the protagonists experience bodily pain and pleasure with how they understand operations of power, and find that these ways of knowing are deeply informed by the histories of their bodies, or what Butler herself describes as “body-knowledge.” Thus, I argue for an understanding of body-knowledge that illuminates the experiences of the body as a central register of knowledge and communication, as a different approach to surfacing how power operates, and as key to imagining alternative forms of feminist activism under NGOization.

### **Reading, Writing and Longing for Categories**

It is not much of a challenge to mark the desire for a revolutionary outside vantage or for the sacred space promised by global civil society within transnational feminist theory and even within the critiques of Butler’s work that I will expand upon later. It is perhaps more difficult to notice or admit to how the desires for certain normative political categories emerge in my own reading and writing practices. When brainstorming for this chapter, I found it useful to pause and pay attention to my habits of close reading and claim-making, to notice my body and my anxiety. The sick feeling I often felt (and still feel) as I kept looking for myself, for what I already know. It is very revealing. And I think what I noticed has everything to do with my efforts to

complicate and/or (re) map the political field, and to work to expand feminist activist imaginaries. It has everything to do with understanding power more intimately. For admittedly, even as I wrote critically of, for example, transnational feminist theory's yearning for—even reliance on—the promises of global civil society, I found myself almost compulsively attempting to make the current categories for mapping the political fit onto Butler's story. I tried to smash the categories onto Butler's world, desperately looking for a good fit. I almost couldn't help myself. Maybe the alien Communities represent global civil society and NGO's and the human recruits are the "grassroots" managed by professional NGO activists like main character Noah. Maybe the Communities are corporations and Butler is tracking the over-lapping relationships between state power(s), global corporations and laboring, contracted bodies in the service sector, and therefore the story explores the politics of this form of affective labor particular to the present moment. Or maybe the Communities are clues to understanding late capitalism, a straightforward representation of the post-Civil Rights neoliberal U.S. state that has co-opted the language of "communities" from Civil Rights struggles, and Noah's employer, who she secretly considers a "friend," is a semblance of the "Ethical State." If so, I know how to rearrange and create a formula and then my work as a "critic" is finished.

However, my quest to imprint current ways of knowing the political onto Butler's political field all pointed me in a direction that felt (and still feels) unsettling. *Yes and no. Not quite. Almost. Sort of.* What am I missing? What did I forget? Where am I? I read and re-read the story over and over, pairing it next to my favorite political theorists but nothing seems right. I have 30 pages of single-spaced notes that make attempts to shape my readings into something I already know. No matter what I try, the categories do not perfectly map. They slip even when I force them. The political field is recognizable but out of focus and mutated. It's remarkable.

Butler's story resists being *completely* mapped which, in turn, suggests something useful for thinking about reading her work in the context of what is being called neoliberal governmentality. There is always something not quite recognizable, always something *alien*. It never maps exactly. And this is important to my chapter because if I could perfectly map the political terrain of Butler's differing alien and human constellations of power then there is, consequently, someplace to go outside of that map. I can, at the same time, establish myself as "critic" outside the structures of power that I so neatly positioned, and I locate myself (know myself), perhaps unintentionally, as a reader/mapper that is outside the grasp of neoliberal structures of power, rather than as reader/mapper/subject produced under those same restraints and possibilities. Secondly, one of the underlying points I wish to suggest in this chapter is something about what Butler's work shows us that *fails* to map—or what remains unintelligible and alien to the critic attempting to name her particular social formation. There is something useful about reading "Amnesty" as an engagement with neoliberal governmentality that might demonstrate more about what is not known, what exceeds the current categories for knowing the political, what is *alien*, rather than trying to find a "good fit" or design the perfect map with the concepts and shapes of an already known political field re-arranged, perhaps, but otherwise safely intact.

I wonder about this desire to map, to imprint myself. I notice how I am comforted by the categories for knowing the political even as I try to write about the breaks, creaks and cracks that erupt when I force them onto Butler's world. As a white, anti-racist, feminist critic, activist, writer, reader, and fan, I think it is a worthwhile practice to notice, to pay attention to the body's response and to think deeply about this "body-knowledge" as a possible strategy for thinking about contemporary transformations in state power and in social movement struggles.

Sometimes, as Butler often points out in her work, this is how power feels: comfortable, secure and knowable. Even sexy. It points me in a direction and lands me in a certain destination. That said, instead of looking to the story as a blueprint for the political field—as an answer—that I, as the outside critic, work to piece together, I hope to struggle with how Butler’s work points to the limits of the categories themselves. These ways of knowing are good launching points for (re)mapping the political field, but they cannot be cherished or assumed to be complete. My view is always distorted for I stand within the political field I wish to map. In this sense, Butler’s work forces me to note the inadequacy of my own comfortable ways of knowing the political. This perhaps leads me down an unpredictable, challenging and maybe even impossible path in this chapter, with different demands of myself as a critic, reader, writer, and activist.

### **What Good is Science Fiction for Feminist Activism?**

While non-profits and NGO’s are increasingly entangled in complex, varied and overlapping relationships with state apparatuses, philanthropic foundations, universities and social movements, I find it incredibly difficult to begin to describe the political field, much less carve out the space to generate the new feminist visions and strategies so desperately needed in the present moment. Dean Spade, describing this problem in a recent article, “Demanding the Unthinkable,” writes that in the “context of neoliberalism, especially the legacy of the criminalization and destruction of social movements, the nonprofitization and philanthropic control of any work remotely related to social justice, and the consolidation of media, transformative critical politics have become especially unspeakable, unheard of, and illegible.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the spectrum of political possibilities is “so narrow and so constrained by neoliberal frames that the realm of impossibility is the only generative place to hang out.” Here, Spade suggests that his audience—mostly feminist legal scholars in this context—turn to non-realistic

speculative fiction for “moments of expansiveness” in how, I would add, we conceive of and map the political field, and for how we imagine working within and against the constraints of our present.

In an interview with Charlie Rose, Hugo, Nebula and MacArthur “Genius” Award winner Octavia Butler remarks on such “moments of expansiveness” when asked, “why science fiction?” for writing about race, gender, sexuality, capitalism, and alternate political futures. She responds, “Because there are no closed doors, no walls [...] You can look at, examine, play with anything. Absolutely anything.”<sup>2</sup> Butler further describes the genre as a space where she “make[s] her own worlds. You got to write yourself in. Whether you were part of the greater society or not, you got to write yourself in.” Butler is one of the most highly recognized black women science fiction writers, and beginning her self-described “positive obsession” with writing at the age of 10, often recalls her youthful-self as shy and afraid of most situations, and even wonders why she did not become a geologist because she spent “a lot of my childhood staring at the ground.”<sup>3</sup> At 13, after declaring she “wants to be a writer when she grows up”—to earn her living as a writer—she reflects that “[i]n all my thirteen years, I had never read a printed word that I knew to have been written by a Black person.”<sup>4</sup> Her teachers often understood Butler’s shyness as “not being very bright,” while others called her “backwards” or, in a more tactful way, “so nice and quiet.” Believing she was “ugly and stupid, clumsy, and socially awkward,” Butler describes the possibilities that science fiction opened up for her as a young black poor girl: “I hid out in a big pink notebook—one that would hold a whole ream of paper. I made myself a universe in it. There I could be a magical horse, a Martian, a telepath...there I could be anywhere but here, any time but now, with any people but these.”<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, Butler is often tasked with defending her passion for the genre from two camps. First, in a field where mostly white heteronormative men are traditionally recognized, it is often suggested that the presence of an alien, for example, in the otherwise white dominated narration, is estranging in itself, and therefore it is unnecessary to have, like much of Butler's work, black female protagonists. However, Butler's perspective, and how she describes her own work, emphasizes "people and the different ways of being human" that do not cohere a (white) universal human experience. As Gregory Hampton writes, "The synchronization of humanity is not worthy of pursuit in Butler's narratives, primarily because "sameness" is not in Butler's definition of a "better world."<sup>6</sup> Second, science fiction is often perceived as too far beyond "reality" to be politically and socially useful and is understood as decadent or superfluous, and therefore irrelevant to "real" political struggles. Butler speaks to this perspective in her essay "Positive Obsession" when she describes her answer to a question that constantly haunts her as a black female science fiction writer, "What good is science fiction to Black people?" Or, for the purposes of this essay, what good is science fiction for thinking politically and for anti-racist feminist social movements? *What good is science fiction for activism?*

What good is science fiction's thinking about the present, future, and the past?

What good is its tendency to warn or to consider alternative ways of thinking and doing? What good is its examination of the possible effects of science and technology, or social organization and political direction? At its best, science fiction stimulates imagination and creativity. It gets reader and writer off the beaten track, off the narrow, narrow footpath of what "everyone" is saying, doing, thinking—whoever "everyone" happens to be this year."<sup>7</sup>

Butler's sentiment echoes Darko Suvin's 1979 influential contribution to debates about the political possibilities of science fiction, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On The Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*. Arguing for science fiction to be understood as the *literature of cognitive estrangement*, Suvin theorizes the genre's transformative potential—its ability to defamiliarize social norms and, in Butler's words, get the “reader and writer off the beaten track.” Suvin differentiates its formal framework from both literary realism *and* other magical genres (such as myth, folktale, and fantasy), and calls for a more general recognition of the value of science fiction for critical, political thinking. For Suvin, the reader is estranged in a science fiction narrative when a novum (or newness) is introduced into an otherwise (somewhat) recognizable environment. However, controversially, the novum or magical quality, in Suvin's thinking, is limited in that it must be scientifically plausible and possible, though perhaps not-yet-possible. The reader is estranged by the introduction of the novum and this estrangement creates a distance between the reader and the context that is assumed to be “real” or “natural.”<sup>8</sup> Quoting Bertolt Brecht in *Short Organum for the Theatre*, Suvin describes estrangement: “A representation which estranges is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar.” The reader, then, sees “normal” happenings suspiciously, creating a distance between the reader and the norm or assumption. This distance opens up a space for critical thinking and enables a “detached eye” that, consequently, has the potential to yield a new perspective—a new cognition or way of thinking about an otherwise naturalized social norm.

And further: for somebody to see all normal happenings in a dubious light, ‘he would need to develop that detached eye with which the great Galileo observed

the swinging chandelier. He was amazed by that pendulum motion as if he had not expected it and could not understand its occurring, and this enabled him to come at the rules by which it was governed.’<sup>9</sup>

Unlike literary realism which, for Suvin, is a reflection of the author’s empirical environment, the new cognition produced through the estranging feature generates both a “reflecting *of* but also *on* reality.” “It implies a creative approach tending towards a dynamic transformation rather than towards a static mirroring of the author’s environment.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, the formal framework of science fiction as the literature of cognitive estrangement opens up political possibilities through (potentially) distancing the reader from her assumptions, generating a critical vantage on unquestioned, common-sense political and social norms.

In the Editorial Introduction for the *Historical Materialism* symposium, “Marxism and Fantasy,” prolific British fantasy writer and notorious socialist activist China Mieville<sup>11</sup> expands Suvin’s rigid formulation of cognitive estrangement to include other forms of speculative fiction writing, arguing that the fantastic has always been a part of Marxist traditions. Mieville finds the not-yet-possible *and* the never-possible are “good to think with.”<sup>12</sup> While Suvin’s theory of cognitive estrangement requires a scientifically plausible novum or a possible but not-yet-possible quality, Mieville contends that fantasy writing, where the entirety of the framework of the novel is never-possible, has a critical political function for activism as well. In fact, contrary to Suvin, Mieville locates science fiction as merely *one* form of fantastical, estranging writing not, as Suvin originally claimed, *the* form.

In his essay, Mieville argues against the common charges that fantastical literature is “escapist, incoherent or nostalgic”<sup>13</sup> and therefore irrelevant for Marxist social movement struggles, and claims that the genre is important because it attracts “popular interest,” and because “real life” under capitalism is a fantasy. For if the “lived reality of capitalism is commodity fetishism,” where social relations are organized by the (imagined) relationships between commodities—the “grotesque” dream that commodities rule—then “real life” under capitalism “*is a fantasy*,” and “realism, narrowly defined,” is therefore a “realistic” depiction of an absurdity which is true.”<sup>14</sup> Directed towards Marxists that privilege literary realism as more politically relevant and generative, Mieville suggests that “narrow realism” or “empirical literature “(for Suvin) purports to represent the universal experience, yet it (too) is partial and ideological, and though such writers attempt to represent the “real” proletarian experience, for instance, that “does not mean they reverberate within it with more integrity and insight.”<sup>15</sup> Mieville does not suggest that the fantastic (as a genre) is free from ideology, or that it is somehow inherently subversive, offering a “clear view of political possibilities,”<sup>16</sup> but that because of the relationship between the “real” and the “not-real,” there is critical, political potential in a form that alters the categories of the not-yet-possible *and* the never-possible.

Suvin originally claimed that fantasy writing should never be associated with science fiction. He argues fantasy is an “impure” “genre committed to the interposition of *anti-cognitive* laws” for it does not establish the necessary tension for cognitive estrangement between a plausible novum and a recognizable context, and concludes that fantasy is simply a “subliterature of mystification.”<sup>17</sup> Drawing from Marx’s famous passage in *Capital, Volume 1*, Mieville counters Suvin’s formula for establishing a literature of cognitive estrangement, and elaborates

on the (potentially) transformative powers of fantastical writing whose narrative structure is never-possible.

Consider Marx's distinction of 'the worst of architects' from the 'best of bees': unlike for any bee, '[a]t the end of the labor process a result emerges which had already been conceived of by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally.' For Marx, human productive activity, with its capacity to act on the world and to change it—the very mechanism by which people make history [...]—*is predicated on a consciousness of the not-real*. The fantastic is there at the most prosaic moment of production.<sup>18</sup>

In fantasy writing, the never-possible is ubiquitous and assumed. It is systematically part of the entire narrative structure and, importantly, it is not just “impossible” but imagined (and treated as such) to be real. Mieville points out that writing the never-possible as “real” creates an expansive space where the impossible is re-defined, re-worked, and re-imagined. Fantasy expands the possibilities of the not-real which, in turn, has a direct relationship to altering the real. For if the real and not-real, as Marx suggests in the quote above, are always in relationship with each other, then expanding the impossible and the not-real allows a different vantage on the “potentialities and actualities” of the real. Mieville concludes that the fantastic nurtures critical thinking, creating “moments of expansiveness” of the not-real and ushering the reader (in Butler's words) “off the narrow, narrow footpath” of both political impossibilities and potential political not-yet-real(s). “The notion of fantasy as embedding potential transformation and emancipation in human thinking is of direct political and aesthetic interest to Marxists. [...] No matter how commodified and domesticated the fantastic in its various forms might be, we need fantasy to think the world and change it.”<sup>19</sup> In this spirit, I turn to the science fiction of Octavia Butler in an

effort to expand contemporary dominant feminist activist imaginaries that are, as I point out in Chapter One, severely limited in how they imagine the political.

## **Section II: Traitorous Feminisms in *Xenogenesis* & *Parable***

In this section, I examine the political terrain of Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis Trilogy* and the *Parable* series with particular attention to the discourses of reform and revolution—to how black female protagonists Lilith (*Xenogenesis*) and Lauren (*Parable*) imagine the limits and possibilities of political struggle in their differing worlds, and how they work towards realizing such imaginaries. Because they neither support reformist efforts nor believe in an anterior oppositional political space, Lauren and Lilith are often differently deemed traitors to humanity. I consider the political potential of the traitorous activist subject and I note the importance of the body for the (differing) feminist activist subject formations and for how, through their bodily histories of pain and pleasure, they understand the political field and organize accordingly. In general, while some of the human characters still have faith in reform and (outside) revolutionary political strategies, activists Lauren and Lilith understand these political possibilities as always already foreclosed. In fact, the political terrain in *Dawn* (the first novel of the *Xenogenesis*) is such that the humans themselves have destroyed all government infrastructures so that fantasies of reviving purely human political institutions are inconceivable, even irrelevant. Much to Lilith's dismay, the few remnants left of human history are destroyed by the genetic gene-trading future oriented aliens, the Oankali. Though recognizable human political formations are absent, tensions emerge between Lilith, other captured/rescued humans, and the colonizer/ savior alien Oankali. As a human activist leader *and* Oankali delegate, Lilith works to frame the limits and possibilities of human survival under Oankali colonization, all the while many humans still cling to an imagination of a purely human life “outside” the boundaries of Oankali jurisdiction.

The trilogy begins with Lilith Iyapo waking up in captivity on an Oankali ship with a new scar across her abdomen from alien experimentation and the genetic augmentation of her body. After several such “awakenings” and 250 years of what humans would consider torture, isolation and experimentation, Lilith learns from Oankali member Jdahya that after what Lilith describes as a “humanicide,” where “humanity in its attempts to destroy itself had made the world unlivable,” the Oankali “rescued” all of the humans that survived the war and did not, soon after, die from “injury, disease, hunger, radiation, [and] cold.”<sup>20</sup> The last remaining humans were taken to an Oankali ship orbiting just beyond Earth’s moon while the Oankali, according to Jdahya, work to “restore” Earth with the promise of returning the humans, eventually. The Oankali are a highly intelligent, collective thinking, 3 gendered (male, female, ooloi), tentacled, gene-trading species that require genetic exchange with other species in order to survive and to continually grow and change. In the words of one Oankali, gene trade is essential, “[t]his is how we grow—how we’ve always grown.”<sup>21</sup> Humans, as it turns out, have something special that Oankali value. In fact, they value it so much, Jdahya explains to Lilith, that they interfere with the total annihilation of humanity: “it has been several million years since we dared to interfere in other people’s act of self-destruction.”<sup>22</sup> As Jim Miller describes in “Post-Apocalyptic Hoping: Octavia Butler’s Dystopian/Utopian Vision,” the Oankali plan to “save” humanity by “healing it and subsuming it” through gene trade, resulting in a superior (under Oankali rationales) hybrid Oankali-human species. They find human genetics particularly seductive though they remark that humans are inherently intelligent *and* hierarchical—a deadly combination that the Oankali can (and will) genetically alter through gene trade. Self-described, Oankali power is “genetic engineering.” “We know you had begun to do it yourselves a little, but it’s foreign to you. We do it naturally. We *must* do it. It renews us, enables us to survive as an evolving species instead of

specializing ourselves into extinction or stagnation.”<sup>23</sup> Described as “powerfully acquisitive,” the Oankali are as “committed to trade as your body is to breathing” and they tell Lilith that they *need* humans, they need genetic difference. The Oankali’s particular form of power requires the consumption of differing biologies *and* the social and biological reproduction of new hybridized Oankali-human beings; gene-trading as incorporation is pre-requisite for Oankali futurity.

A partner must be biologically interesting, attractive to us, and you are fascinating. You are horror and beauty in a rare combination. In a very real way, you’ve captured us and we can’t escape. But you’re more than only the composition and workings of your bodies. You are your personalities, your cultures. We’re interested in those too. That’s why we saved as many of you as we could.<sup>24</sup>

In “Reading Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis* after Seattle,” Molly Wallace reads Oankali power as a “model for and a critique of the politics and economics of contemporary neoliberalism.”<sup>25</sup> Though criticism of *Xenogenesis* often situates the trilogy in post-modern identity politics debates, Wallace wisely positions the Oankali in a reading that is attentive to their economic practices (gene-trade) specifically within the context of the WTO protests in Seattle in 1999. Wallace describes the trilogy as setting out to “imagine an alien world not characterized by hierarchy, but ended up creating one differently hierarchical,” and reads the Oankali’s required and desired incorporation of genetic difference as an allegory for understanding transformations under late capitalism. Wallace’s reading suggests, like the Oankali, neoliberalism is seductive in its celebration of hybridity, for late capital too necessitates difference. She relates Oankali seduction to the subtlety of neoliberal logics, “manipulative as hell” but “all so softly.” Though the Oankali appear to many critics of *Xenogenesis* to be anti-

hierarchical and less blatantly violent, and some critics even celebrate their seemingly collective, anti-essentialist embrace of (genetic) diversity, once a human is disobedient, of course, more overt practices of force are employed. And much like late capital, while Oankali require, even seek out difference, new genetic materials, and new markets to exploit, Wallace points out that in the novels that follow *Dawn*, though the Oankali incorporate biological “others,” they tend, in the end, to reproduce themselves. Indeed, as one character points out in *Adulthood Rites*, while humans lock up animals to keep them from straying, the Oankali have a hegemonic approach and “bre[e]d animals that simply did not want to stray and who enjoyed doing what they were intended to do.”<sup>26</sup> Wallace finds gene-trade, in this case, is not a fair exchange or an ethical encounter, but rather a practice of Oankali incorporation, of transforming the “other into self” to produce Oankali “monoculture.”<sup>27</sup> The Oankali describe their gene-trading practice as anti-hierarchical, but powerfully acquisitive: “We acquire new life—seek it, investigate it, manipulate it, sort it, use it.”<sup>28</sup> This form of power is part of Oankali biology, they are genetically programmed to incorporate other genetic structures and cultures in order to grow into the future: they “carry the drive to do this within a miniscule cell within a cell.”<sup>29</sup>

While Wallace’s work on the *Xenogenesis* trilogy is insightful and provocative for thinking about transformations in late capital, I do think it is important to note that reading the Oankali-human configurations of power as a representational map of neoliberalism disregards some of the ways these political categories do not perfectly align with Butler’s trilogy. Notably, Wallace does suggest that her reading practice here is not intended to “supplant other possibilities,” for the trilogy might open up other readings when “rekeyed” to different historical contexts. Yet, along the same lines I suggested earlier, there is something about Butler’s text that resists being mapped perfectly or completely. For instance, in most of all of Butler’s work,

human-alien relations are never one-way; all species come away from most often intimate and/or violent encounters changed, resulting in both parties being contaminated. Even the Oankali, by the third book in the trilogy, who are once so different in appearance that humans have an uncontrollable, xenophobic physical response in their presence, are described by a human “resister” to uncannily resemble the humans they are genetically and socially incorporating. This is but one example of how Butler’s writing tends to complicate victim/victimizer paradigms and blurs clean cut distinctions between the dominater and the dominated, and between pain and pleasure, but in a deeply historical way attuned to complex and varying constellations of power. As Karen Joy Fowler observes, Butler’s literature centers on “relationships of dominance and submission, master and slave, predator and prey. [...] One cannot be eaten or raped without being touched.”<sup>30</sup>

Wallace clearly points out that the relations between Oankali and humans are never symbiotic, collective or even consensual, yet I want to suggest that the domination the humans experience through the Oankali’s hegemonic gene-trading strategy is also never complete. For example, even under coercion humans experience what Fowler describes as a “narcotized pleasure built in on one side of the relationship or both,” a deep complicated form of sexual pleasure(s) with the 3<sup>rd</sup> gender ooloi Oankali. As ooloi Nikanj matures into adulthood, he becomes more interested in pleasuring Lilith, “If you have to do something, it might as well feel good.” “Happily it paid more attention to pleasure than to pain.”<sup>31</sup>The pleasure Nikanj (and other ooloi) provides humans through neural stimulation is experienced by the pleasure-giving ooloi as well. “On a physical level, Nikanj feels what we feel.”<sup>32</sup>The neural stimulation also works to intensify pleasure between two humans when the ooloi is present. Lilith describes the first experience between her human lover Joseph and ooloi lover Nikanj: “She did not pretend

outwardly or to herself that she would resist Nikanj's invitation—or that she wanted to resist it. Nikanj could give her an intimacy with Joseph that was beyond ordinary human experience.”<sup>33</sup> These contaminated relations of power, of domination and submission, coercion and consent, pain and pleasure, complicate—even exceed—what Wallace suggests in reading the Oankali gene-trading practices as a representation of neoliberalism. For Wallace's argument suggests that pleasure in Butler's work is always a sign of co-optation or false consciousness rather than, what I want to suggest here, a critical activist practice. Indeed, rethinking pleasure and problematizing the victim/victimizer configuration (an imagination of power that works top down, that requires total submission) suggests a reading that both opens up alternative imaginations of activism and attends to what is unknowable about contemporary structures of power, or what cannot be known through dominant ways of mapping the political.

To recall, Lilith is first experimented on, then chosen by the Oankali in order to “parent” the first group of humans who will train to return to post-apocalyptic planet Earth. As a traitorous activist subject—working for the Oankali *and* on behalf of the humans—she is expected to teach the humans how to acclimate to Oankali logics including, importantly, a lesson very few humans wish to acknowledge: there is no way out, the Oankali have already captured their genetic structures, produced new generations of humans (without human consent), and that if humans want to have any (miscegenated) future, they must “partner” with Oankali. In other words, the political conditions are such that there is no revolutionary outside of Oankali power, and the possibilities for a purely human existence are already foreclosed. Part of Lilith's work as an activist is to detach humans from imaginations of human freedom that exceed the Oankali domain of power. On the other hand, though she is chosen by the Oankali to organize the humans, Lilith also works to protect the humans, to work towards compromise, and to assure a

certain quality of life for the rescued people. She repeatedly negotiates with the Oankali, “We’re an adaptable species but it’s wrong to inflict suffering just because your victim can endure it.”<sup>34</sup> Upon “electing” Lilith into her leadership position, the Oankali suggest Lilith has a “choice” to become the first human leader and a “choice” as to whether or not to be genetically altered. This choice, however, is limited for on several occasions, when offered a “choice,” the Oankali remark that though Lilith verbally says “NO!” her body, according to the Oankali, says “YES!” in a deeper, more truthful biological sense. Lilith notes the contradictions of her compromised position when she describes how she became the Oankali’s chosen human leader to her lover, Joseph, emphasizing the constraints and possibilities. “They were going to give me this job no matter what I said. I told them they might as well kill me themselves. Even that didn’t stop them. So when Nikanj and his mates offered me as much as they could offer, I didn’t even have to think about it. I welcomed it.”<sup>35</sup> Lilith is altered by the Oankali and given strength, memory, and other abilities such as being able to open walls and access food for the other humans. When Nikanj remarks that the humans “should spend a little time waiting for Lilith, understanding that they’re helpless without her,”<sup>36</sup> Lilith translates to Joseph what she understands Nikanj means by leadership. “It doesn’t mean leader. It means Judas goat.”<sup>37</sup> Clearly, Lilith is very aware of her compromised position and understands how she might be perceived as a traitor, as betraying humanity in the interest of her own survival. The contradictions of her leadership position are further expanded when she acknowledges that, regardless of her place as Oankali elect human leader, Oankali domination via gene-trading cannot be escaped. “But whether you lead them or not, you can’t prevent it.”<sup>38</sup>

Thus, as I claimed earlier, I read Lilith as a traitorous feminist activist subject, a contaminated, already compromised translator between the colonizing Oankali powers and the

“rescued” remains of humanity.<sup>39</sup>Lilith, as Miller describes, is a “willing and unwilling intermediary for alien and human relations.” Kathy Peppers in “Dialogic Origins and Alien Identities in Butler’s *Xenogenesis*” describes this complicated positioning as Butler re-creating black women’s “choice” under slavery—“that is, the non-choice of being permanently “available” to the sexual desires of the slave owners[...].”<sup>40</sup>This is the bind that Butler imagines for both activists Lilith (and Noah in “Amnesty”), where the main characters do have agency, they can make waves within and against the constraints of their moments, but there is no escaping history and there is no outside of their differing constellations of power. Lilith certainly does make “choices,” extremely important and powerful ones even. But according to Peppers, she is still, at the end of the Oankali day, a slave.<sup>41</sup>

Lilith’s leadership position is understood by many humans as a form of betrayal. It is not surprising that many of the “rescued” human characters understand Oankali gene-trading practice as genocide and consequently, without any institutional or even planetary backing, they struggle hopelessly against the miscegenation of their genetic matter in an attempt to remain purely human. Often, this fruitless quest for maintaining human purity and autonomy manifests in attacking Lilith; they constantly question both her allegiances and intentions. For instance, newly “awakened” humans call her a “whore” and question who she “is working for.”<sup>42</sup>They are skeptical of her fluency in Oankali language and they are suspicious of her super-human strength, memory and other Oankali-given abilities. These genetically altered attributes lead to accusations that Lilith is “protected” from the humans<sup>43</sup> and, the logic follows, that because she is not purely human, she cannot be trusted. It is both Lilith’s altered, superior body *and* her perceived and actual intimacy with the Oankali that marks her as a traitor. Yet, Lilith reminds them that she is a “prisoner here just like you. I can’t let you out. I can’t let myself out.”<sup>44</sup>She

also points out that the remaining humans exist only because the Oankali saved them from humanicide and the human destruction of planet Earth. The Oankali, as Butler writes, are the “deadliest enemies to what humans remain, but also essential to survival.”<sup>45</sup> And though the humans are not necessarily free from inequality and power struggles amongst themselves (sexual, gender and racial violence is alive and well), they frequently consider the answer to the contradictions of captivity/freedom to be found in killing their Oankali appointed leader Lilith. Killing the Oankali delegate is not, Lilith repeatedly reminds them, a form of resistance or a “way out.” Nor does it increase their autonomy or chances for survival. If Lilith is killed, the Oankali will put the other humans back to sleep and they will, in the future, repeat the same cycle of bio-social experimentation. In Lilith’s words, “If I lose, everyone loses.”<sup>46</sup> Thus, in this case, the work of the traitorous activist subject is to constantly remind humans that the conditions for survival are bound by the political, albeit changeable, terrain of Oankali power, and that even a “revolutionary” act such as assassination does not change the terms of their subjection. There is no anterior political space to occupy or negotiate from and, at the same time, remaining purely human is already an impossibility.

Unlike *Dawn*, the terrain of the political in the *Parable* series is littered with some recognizable institutional practices and structures. Set in near-future California, main character Lauren’s lover Bankole describes the political field: “federal, state and local governments still exist—in name at least—and sometimes they manage to do something more than collect taxes and send in the military.”<sup>47</sup> Yet not one character participates in the presidential election described in the beginning of the novel, and there is no sign of “civic participation” in institutions associated with global civil society. As Peter Stillman notes in “Dystopian Critiques, Utopian Possibilities, and Human Purpose in Octavia Butler’s Parables,” in the 1993 novel

*Parable of the Sower*, Octavia Butler imagines a near future where the American dream of individualism fails and no one looks to liberal political practices for hope for the future. Butler weaves together an imagined future developed from present day tendencies such as “increasing social divisions, economic inequality, global warming, the political fantasies of the anti-government right (in *Parable of the Sower*) and the religious right (in *Parable of the Talents*).”<sup>48</sup> While new and old forms of violence (such as extreme forms of poverty and slave labor exploitation, racism, sexism, privatization, the disappearance of social services and the corporatization of towns) persist (unevenly) across the board, characters seeking to survive or even change the political climate in this world do not utilize formal political practices. In other words, liberal conceptions of the political including voting, boycotting, non-profit sustainability, policy-making, legal transformations, social work strategies, and other reformist tactics simply are not in the realm of political possibilities for people in this future. “Virtually no character in the books has any faith in or desire to participate in politics—perhaps because that political culture has not helped the poor or the outcast very much in pre-2024 America [...] and because politics can no longer excite or energize people with realistic promises of purpose, meaning or involvement.”<sup>49</sup>

Interestingly, it is because Butler refuses to privilege institutions of civil society and formal political structures as central to the survival and liberation of the *Parable* characters that she often receives the harshest criticism. For instance, in Hoda M. Zaki’s piece, “Utopia, Dystopia, and Ideology in the Science Fiction of Octavia Butler,” Zaki argues that Butler furthers an essentialist feminist perspective in her literature through creating circumstances that demonstrate a “human incapacity to change in response to radically altered conditions.”<sup>50</sup> Butler herself describes her work as not offering concrete solutions but instead adding complexity to, or

imagining new problems. This approach leads Zaki to charge Butler with pursuing a “retrogressive view of politics” with a “muted critique of the current political order”<sup>51</sup> and no immediate possibility for “fundamental social change.” Zaki writes that Butler’s essentialist view on human nature leads to a political perspective in which “human politics” are pre-determined, and is troubled because the “public arena of politics, where dialogue and dissent occur, is nullified in most of her novels.”<sup>52</sup> But Zaki’s sense of the political privileges a certain political subject, a (neo) liberal actor in (global) civil society that explores the “moral and ethical dimensions of political decisions,” where “real debate” permits the “exercise of choice or freedom,” an element, Zaki argues, Butler’s work forecloses. Zaki is also critical of the non-verbal communication of the Oankali in *Xenogenesis*, for the political actor in global civil society requires verbal debate which “serves as the means for resolving differences in point of view and thereby achieving unity.”<sup>53</sup> I would like to remark, briefly, that it is fascinating how in some of the criticism circulating on Butler’s work, what constitutes a political, social change, feminist text hinges on the desire and/or reliance on an unaltered or, at the very least, a somewhat recognizable representation of rational political actors, global civil society and the corresponding civic institutions imagined to inhabit the so called 3<sup>rd</sup> sector. In other words, Zaki’s critique relies on an imagination of civil society where the political—and effective, substantial political change—is equated with either the existence of (reformable) institutions in (global) civil society, certain political actors, and the presence of (neo)liberal political structures, or human characters with a kind of agency that allows them to find individual liberation and hope outside of the existing political structures. As I suggested, in Butler’s work, however, imaginations of (global) civil society and the corresponding institutions and practices are dramatically altered and decentered, if not disappeared altogether, and romantic notions of a

revolutionary anterior positionality are already foreclosed. Yet, I would argue, this does not mean that Butler's work is "retrogressive," essentialist, conservative, apolitical, or politically pre-determined. Rather, as I gestured towards earlier, I understand Butler's work as an engagement with the limitations and possibilities of the discourses of reform and revolution in a way that de-privileges imaginations of reforming the existing political structures *and* of inhabiting a revolutionary outside space free from the structures of power that shape her realities. In fact, I find that similarly to Lilith's leadership strategy, Lauren's activism in *Parable* is to detach others from their investments in reform or in escaping the realities of their world in order to (hopefully) increase their capacity for life. Importantly, in Butler's words, Lauren never "develops a 'things will work themselves out somehow' attitude. She learns to be an activist."<sup>54</sup>

As Stillman points out, though characters in *Parable* do not engage in what might be described as traditional politics, it is important to note that some do, especially during the first half of the novel, maintain a sentimental attachment to a liberal imagination of the past, and to the promise of reforming formal political institutions which, eventually, are imagined to return the formerly middle-class, highly educated multi-racial community of Robledo, California, to the "good old days." Daughter of black community leader and preacher, teenage Lauren Olamina understands this attachment as dangerous. For, in her view, it is an imagination that stops the older generation from responding to the actual political, economic and social conditions of their moment which, according to Lauren, inevitably decreases their likely-hood to survive. "They never miss a chance to relive the good old days or to tell kids how great it's going to be when the country gets back on its feet and the good times come back."<sup>55</sup> This perspective, one of the driving forces behind the creation of her activist project Earthseed, marks Lauren as a traitor to her father's activist strategies and leadership model, and to the common-sense logics of her

community in general. In fact, with the exception of her best friend Joanne and her journal, Lauren keeps her visions and dreams of differently surviving California life in 2025 a secret because of how this betrayal will negatively affect her loved ones and undermine her father's leadership—a model she breaks from and alters, but most certainly respects. When, in confidence, she discloses her political perspective and plan for survival to Joanne, Lauren critiques presidential candidate Donner as merely “a symbol of the past for us to hold on to as we're pushed into the future,”<sup>56</sup> and suggests that “nothing is going to save us. If we don't save ourselves, we're dead.”<sup>57</sup> As Lauren details the political field from her vantage, Joanne is clearly rattled and insists that “things don't have to be as bad” as she describes, and says repeatedly that she does not believe Lauren. Later, Joanne breaks her promise and tells her mother who then tells Lauren's father. Lauren's father is furious with Lauren for frightening people because she has “no idea what [she's] doing,” and that it's “better to teach people than to scare them.”<sup>58</sup> Lauren worries that if she told Joanne everything—about Earthseed and the God-is Change mode of activism—Lauren's father would know her as a traitor and their relationship would be altered forever. Even after Lauren's father is presumed dead, Robledo is burned to the ground, and Harry, Zahra and Lauren begin travelling north together, Harry—his mind “still back in the neighborhood”<sup>59</sup>—initially distrusts Lauren and feels betrayed by her emerging leadership strategy and vision of social change: “He looked at me as though he wasn't sure he wanted to know me anymore.”<sup>60</sup>

As Lauren predicts, this desire for the “good old days” proves to be deadly for most every member of the gated community of Robledo because it keeps them responding defensively to the political conditions of their moment, rather than accepting their current desperate state as permanent (at best), and working towards proactively transforming the existing conditions that

shape their lives. Even her father's activist projects—the highly organized neighborhood watch group, the barbed wire fences, alarms, the gun training and the hopeful, passionate political speeches in church—fail to prevent what seems inevitable in the story: Robledo is burned and pillaged. Most all of its members are robbed, raped and murdered by Paints—formerly wealthy white young people who shave their hair off, paint their bodies with fluorescent colors, and use a drug called Pyro that makes looking at fire feel “better than sex.” For, it is not just liberal individualism that fails to keep people alive in *Parable*, but also certain forms of sociality, certain recognizable modes of community that Lauren's father has worked hard to organize in the gated community of Robledo. Indeed, as Stillman describes, the “American dream of individualism generally fails as does the reliance on the neighborhood or the nuclear family.”<sup>61</sup>

In response to the adults' dangerous longings for the past, Lauren's activism involves developing a philosophy and way of living that emphasizes change—the tending to and shaping of change. This approach to change is the basic tenet of Lauren's activist project, Earthseed. For Lauren, Earthseed is more than just surviving and waiting out what other's believe is a only temporary botch in an otherwise fair and functional American political economy. In a world where racism, sexism, and other forms of violence continue to intensify, and certain racialized and gendered bodies are marked as more likely to be murdered, raped, robbed and enslaved than white gun carrying men, Earthseed offers the hope of creating a new community that might someday actualize a higher quality of life for it's extremely vulnerable followers: mostly people of color, young women, former slaves, “street poor,” sex-workers, and survivors of domestic violence, corporate exploitation, incest, and addiction. Though Earthseed is populated by some of the most vulnerable humans Lauren encounters, Lauren understands this vulnerability as a strength, as integral to the growth and survival of Earthseed recruits for two main reasons. First,

in a world without television news casts or daily newspapers, sharing these differing histories and perspectives is essential for Earthseed to better understand the real lived conditions of their present moment. In other words, for Earthseed to shape change, it requires an engagement with, not an escape from, the political, economic and social conditions of the present represented through the experiences of its members. Secondly, these most vulnerable, most likely to be targeted bodies are also *survivors* of extreme forms of violence and coercion, and thus have multiple and variant skills to teach other Earthseed members. In fact, from the beginning of the first novel, Lauren develops her activist leadership (and Earthseed itself) through what she learns and observes from those around her—through how others have survived their differing challenges and how they perceive and respond to the now pedestrian forms of violence and oppression in their world.

Earthseed emphasizes change, adaption, difference and community accountability. It does not, as Stillman points out, pre-suppose an autonomous liberal subject “who acts in the world to realize his intentions,” but instead, Earthseed followers understand the world through doing, through their experiences in relation to others, and through their diligent engagement with their particular political environment. Contrary to the Christian beliefs Lauren’s father preaches, Earthseed denies the idea of an omnipotent God that punishes and rewards accordingly, and Earthseed believers respond to the conditions of their moment in a manner that both denies individualism and requires connection with others. Earthseed’s primary “truth” that organizes its social structure and daily practices is that change is inevitable, all powerful and, if tended to, can be shaped. In Earthseed, God is change.

All that you touch

You Change.

All that you change  
Changes you.  
The only lasting truth  
Is Change.  
God  
Is Change.<sup>62</sup>

In Lauren's vision of Earthseed society, if God is change, then Earthseed followers do not "worship God," but rather "perceive and attend God." She imagines social transformation in her world, not through reforming political institutions of the past, but through building a new social formation that "adapt[s] and endure[s]" and with "forethought and work" shapes God, shapes change.<sup>63</sup>

Lauren's activism in *Parable* engages in the possibility of the creation of something new—an Earthseed way of living and knowing the world—and can, for some critics, be read as utopian and a hopeful revolutionary "outside" activist project in which Earthseed followers gain individual freedom from the constraints of their moment. For example, Ruth Salvaggio in "Octavia Butler and the Black Science-Fiction Heroine" reads Butler's protagonists as working to "overcome societal barriers to their independence," yearning autonomy and that the overall goal for the feminist activist subject is individual freedom.<sup>64</sup> However, Earthseed's vision is far more complex and provocative than finding individual freedom via moving outside of power structures. For, while Earthseed offers the possibility of making something new, or in Lauren's words, "We'll have what we can shape,"<sup>65</sup> at the same time it requires a heightened awareness of the existing conditions of their particular context in order to shape change and have a chance of extending their life-spans on Earth. In other words, this hope does not suggest that Earthseed

imagines a radical escape from the constellations of power that shape Lauren and other Earthseed followers lives. Rather, Earthseed requires an engagement with the current political terrain and concomitant domains of power, otherwise, it cannot tend to or shape change. In short, the future Earthseed offers is contingent on Earthseed practitioners always being keenly aware of how power operates in their world.

Interestingly, Lauren's body and her feelings of pain and pleasure are essential to the development and practice of Earthseed activism and to, more broadly, how she understands the political field. Lauren has hyper-empathy syndrome—an unexpected by-product of women's addiction to an over-the-counter "smart drug" medication developed by the increasingly powerful pharmaceutical companies as a cure for Alzheimer's. In the near future United States, children of "smart drug" users are sometimes born with hyper-empathy, an uncontrollable, incurable trick of the mind that induces *physical* pain or pleasure when they witness someone else experiencing said sensation in their own bodies. Simply put, Lauren physically experiences the pain and pleasure of others around her. In a world where there is little pleasure,<sup>66</sup> Lauren embodies the physical sensations of those around her dying, being shot, stabbed, and burned over and over again throughout the novel, as if it were happening to her own body. In one scene she experiences death four times over. Lauren's hyper-empathy is understood as a limitation that her family is both ashamed of and afraid of, and they work very hard to keep it a secret, even from neighbors they might otherwise trust with their lives. Hyper-empathy is also thought to make Lauren even more vulnerable to being raped, robbed and even murdered, because while Lauren is, say, experiencing a nearby person being stabbed, she is otherwise incapacitated and cannot necessarily defend herself. Later in the novel, Lauren learns that hyper-empathy syndrome is capitalized on by corporations and neo-slave owners who find those afflicted with the syndrome

to be more physically docile and easier to manage and dominate. Corporations prefer bodies of people with hyper-empathy syndrome, or “sharers,” because they are easier to control, exploit and manipulate. Tori, a multi-racial sharer who escapes slavery with her daughter (who also has hyper-empathy), tells the Earthseed group that her son is taken from her and sold because he is a sharer, because his vulnerability to other people’s pain makes him more valuable to corporations and slave-owners.

Though hyper-empathy makes characters in this world more vulnerable, at the same time it is a strength and essential to Lauren’s activism. It roots Earthseed ways of living and being in the world in empathy, in intense physical relationship with others. Her bodily identification with other people’s pain is part of what informs her perspective on the political field and part of what fuels her activism; her body-knowledge is constructed through intimate identification with others. It is this intimate relationship with other people’s pain that allows Earthseed to move beyond merely a defensive, isolationist strategy for survival for it allows Lauren to open up and connect with other characters (that too have long histories of violence and pain) as they migrate north on the I-5 corridor, Butler’s version of the “underground railroad.” Lauren even has a difficult time differentiating her own body from others: “I had no sense of my own body. I hurt, but couldn’t have said where—or even whether the pain was mine or someone else’s. The pain was intense, yet defuse somehow. I felt...disembodied.”<sup>67</sup> In this way, physically embodying other’s pain allows Lauren to feel and identify with other people’s experiences in the world which, in turn, forces her beyond the lived reality of her own individualized flesh. In fact, I find that the body is the central site of knowledge and communication for Lauren’s activism. “Body-knowledge,” in Butler’s words, and the pain and pleasure of the body, offer different ways of knowing power and of imagining ways to struggle for political and social change.

In an interview with Octavia Butler, “Radio Imagination: Octavia Butler and the Poetics of Narrative Embodiment,” Marilyn Mehaffy and AnaLouise Keating question Butler about the centrality of the body in her texts, noting how the body is often *the* “central communicator” in situations where written and spoken languages are figured as insufficient for the activist subject. Butler acknowledges the many dangers in “knowing” the body, as the Oankali’s approach to Lilith’s “choice” to be their delegate reveals, and still finds that “all we really *know* we have is the flesh.”<sup>68</sup> The dangers of knowing or mastering the body do not necessarily mean anti-racist feminism should renounce or discard the flesh; rather, body-knowledge is a project of “re-imagining and re-assembling it within an ethics of survival.” In fact, as Lilith and Lauren’s body-knowledge differently suggest, the centering of the body as integral for knowing and communicating in the world, for understanding relays of power, and for working collectively towards social transformation, means that body-knowledge has the possibility to “de-hierarchize,” but also “re-hierarchize” the political field for feminist activism.

I now turn to “Amnesty,” one of Butler’s last pieces before her pre-mature death in 2006, to explore the limitations and possibilities of the discourses of reform and revolution for feminist activist subject, Noah Cannon. Interestingly, Lauren’s activism, and the creation of a new sociality within the existing political conditions imagined by Butler in her early 1990’s context, is not a possibility for Noah in “Amnesty.” Indeed, “Amnesty” points to other possibilities for traitorous activist subjects in a world where the political field is reconfigured differently than near-future California, or post-humanicide Earth (as in Lilith’s case). Unlike the *Xenogenesis Trilogy*, the alien power in “Amnesty” is not hegemonic in the sense that the alien Communities do not *require* the social and biological reproduction of “consenting” human citizens in order to maintain or further their specific domain of power. In fact, I find the differing alien and human

structures of power in “Amnesty” highly suggestive for better understanding contemporary constellations of power and struggle, for pointing to what is unknown or unknowable about the current moment. In this spirit, I read the continuities and differences in “Amnesty” as clues to better understanding transformations in state power and social movement struggles under neoliberal governmentality, and I consider what possibilities and limitations the feminist activist subject might encounter in Butler’s twenty-first century thinking.

### **Part III: ‘They’re Here to Stay’: ‘Comfortable Strait Jackets’ & the Traitor/Translator Activist Subject**

Many themes carry over from the *Xenogenesis Trilogy* to the *Parable* series and to, finally here, Octavia Butler’s 2004 short story, “Amnesty.” The main characters, all black female activist subjects, are leaders in future worlds where the possibilities for reform and revolution are already (albeit differently) foreclosed for those seeking significant social, political and economic transformations. Lilith, Lauren and Noah are all differently understood as traitors to humanity and inhabit political positions that are compromised and co-opted. In distinct ways, their activism often centers on demonstrating both the fruitlessness of attachments to reform strategies and the impossibility of a revolutionary outside vantage that is free from the entanglements and complications of the differing domains of power organizing their concomitant worlds. As intermediaries and leaders with split allegiances, their activism also entails translation—acclimating humans to the actual political, economic and social realities of their distinct contexts, and negotiating with the alien powers on behalf of humanity for a certain quality of life. For all three activist subjects, the body remains an important site of knowledge and an integral way of engaging in and understanding the constellations of power particular to their varying contexts. This kind of body-knowledge is also often what marks the activist subject a traitor to humanity. Yet, simultaneously, for all three characters the pleasures and pain of the body is a site for the

activist subject to organize—in Butler’s words, “the flesh knows,”—and this form of knowledge *is* activism in Butler’s work. In fact, it is often through the knowledge and experiences of the body that Butler’s activist subjects both understand the political terrains of their worlds and work to expose the limitations of reform and revolution for other humans. The following section works primarily to mark these commonalities and differences across the arc of Butler’s work. I attend to how, distinctly, Butler imagines the political terrain in “Amnesty,” and the differing constraints and possibilities for the feminist activist subject, Noah, who is literally employed by the powers she seeks to destabilize or, more to the point, simply live through.

In “Amnesty,” “the Communities” are an almost indescribable alien species that quickly, quietly and easily colonize planet Earth. Born of a “completely different evolution,” each Community is made up of thousands of individual selves, “a bunch of moving organisms,” with “electricity flaring and zigzagging,” “like a great, black moss-enshrouded bush with such a canopy of irregular-shaped leaves, shaggy mosses, and twisted vines that no light showed through it.”<sup>69</sup> Each Community is large enough to fill a room but they are not solid, and only weigh six to eight hundred pounds. Communities cannot hear at all, but most can, after some time on Earth, read and write English, and they can see great distances at microscopic levels. As Noah describes below, Communities are alien in the truest (human) sense.

‘They’re not like anything that any of us have ever known,’ she told them. ‘I’ve heard them compared to sea urchins—completely wrong. I’ve also heard they were like swarms of bees or wasps—also wrong but closer. I think of them as what I usually call them—Communities. Each Community contains several hundred individuals—an intelligent multitude. But that’s wrong too, really. The individuals can’t really survive independently, but they can leave one community

and move temporarily or permanently to another. They are products of a completely different evolution. When I look at them, I see what you've all seen: outer branches and then darkness. Flashes of light and movement within.'<sup>70</sup>

Though no human has ever seen a Community die, when there is internal revolution within individual Communities, they can exchange some of their selves with other Communities to shift their climate or status, thus quieting what appears, in human language, to translate as “internal revolution.” Main character and Community-employed Translator Noah remarks that she is unsure about whether the scattering and exchange of selves is “death, reproduction or both.” It seems that reproduction and death, in Community terms, does not translate evenly into human concepts and is, even for a long time Community employee, unknowable. In this way, not only are the Communities incomprehensible in human terms, upon their arrival, all human economies slump into depression, and though the context has yet to reach “humanicide,” as in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, most humans in this world, including those in the United States (like in *Parable*), do not work or even eat on a regular basis. When the Communities began their descent to earth, human governments attempt to resist and make failed attempts to shoot them from the sky. Human governments even coordinate a multi-state nuclear attack on the Communities' enclaves scattered around the globe. The Communities, however, are not only unknowable, but also exceptionally powerful and easily disarm human weaponry, returning half of the nuclear warheads to human governments (keeping the other half) resulting in what Noah describes as human defeat in a “short, quiet war.” Furthermore, while some humans might cling to dreams of the Communities eventually departing, Noah learns (while in captivity) that the Communities cannot leave Earth. “They're here to stay [...] There's no 'away' for them—not for several generations anyway. Their ship was a one-way transport. They've settled here and they'll fight to

keep the various desert locations they've chosen for their bubbles.”<sup>71</sup> In a thousand years, perhaps, some of the Communities will be able to leave in their multi-generational sleeper ships, and some humans will leave with them as well. Otherwise, most Communities are buried deep in the earth hibernating, while a few stay awake managing their own affairs on planet Earth.

Moreover, though the Communities cannot be killed or overthrown by human weapons of war, they also cannot be sued, bought out, legally reformed or partnered with. In fact, the Communities and their corresponding practices are legal. They even pay taxes and follow human environmental restrictions when mining for ore, for example. The Communities have access to a seemingly unending abundance of wealth—they can drill for ores deep in the earth—and they have mastered legal tactics, and are fluent in the logics of contract and individual personhood. Though they have no recognizable human appendages, they can sign their name on legal documents and are careful to hire lawyers to legalize their actions and verify the contracts they construct with human workers. With the exception of working for the Communities (via contract), Noah points out that other opportunities for “partnering” with the Communities, even under coercion as in *Xenogenesis*, is not within the realm of possibility for humanity. Unlike the Oankali, who desire and require a “partnership” with other species in order to maintain and expand their particular hegemonic field of power, the Communities have enough complications amongst their many selves and do not appear to be very concerned with humanity. “What humans do to other humans outside their bubbles is usually not that important to them.”<sup>72</sup> Except, of course, as is the case in Butler’s writing, though the Communities are disinterested in humans and human politics, through intimate contact with humans, the Communities are also altered. While experimenting on and torturing the first and second wave of human abductees, the

Communities accidentally discover the *pleasure* of enfolding captive humans. This pleasure is also unexplainably experienced by the enveloped humans as well.

It happened when captives were being tested in some way. It happened because the entities of the Communities discovered that it pleased and comforted them too, and they didn't understand why any more than she did. The first enfolding happened because they were convenient ways of restraining, examining, and, unhappily, poisoning humans captives. It wasn't long, though, before unoccupied humans were being enfolded just for the pleasure the act give to an unoccupied Community.<sup>73</sup>

Some Communities who experience difficulty transitioning to Earth develop an unprecedented addiction to enfolding humans, an addiction that, interestingly, feels pleasurable to humans as well.<sup>74</sup> Noah, a former Community abductee, tries her best to explain the feeling of being enfolded to other potential human employees.

'Being enveloped by a community is like being held in a sort of...comfortable strait jacket, if you can imagine such a thing. You can't move much. You can't move at all unless the Community permits it. You can't see anything. There's no smell. Somehow, though, after the first time, it isn't frightening. It's peaceful and pleasant. I don't know why it should be, but it is.'<sup>75</sup>

The Communities could not have predicted this exceptional alteration in their biological chemistry for they have no former history of human addiction, or addiction in general, and have no concept of altered consciousness. As Noah relays, the Communities do not experience, and before experimenting on human captives, formerly did not even understand, states of

unconsciousness or sleep, and therefore, inadvertently, humans “introduced them to something brand new.”<sup>76</sup>

The enfolding process is said to ease a kind of biological homesickness some Communities experience as they transition to Earth living. As a result, this addiction opens up one opportunity for humans—one way out of poverty, starvation and economic despair. Chosen humans can contract with Communities to engage in enfolding as a form of affective labor. In other words, the Communities offer the possibility for humans to contract with them, where humans receive formidable sums of money (and pleasure), in exchange for their bodies to be enfolded by said Community-employer. If offered a contract, humans are required to learn some of the language developed by Translator Noah, for the Communities can only,

converse with us in the gesture and touch language [...] That’s why you need to learn it from them, see for yourself how they move and feel the touch-signs on your skin when you’re enfolded. But once you learn it, you’ll see that it works well for both species.<sup>77</sup>

Indeed, language lessons are the one thing that the Communities will most certainly grant their employees if asked. Aside from being enfolded, the job potentially includes running errands, solving puzzles, and answering general questions about human culture, depending on the desires of the specific Community-employer. Within the contract, the Communities agree not to send their employees out of the country, and regardless of placement, the contracted laborer will be released from the Mojave Bubble where the process of contracting via Translator Noah Cannon begins. Though the Communities have agreed to cease bio-medical experimentation on contracted humans, they do reserve the right to sell the contract to another Community, even outside of the initial bubble station. Humans receive food, water, shelter and even have rights to

seek medical care if they are injured but they do not, under any circumstances, have the right to leave the jurisdiction of their Community-employer until the contract ends. This situation, from many of the human recruits perspectives, begs the question, “So what will we be, then? [...] Whores or house pets?”<sup>78</sup> For, simply put, what appears to be a practice of human agency and one of the last options for humans to sustain themselves and their families—Noah herself identifies as wealthy enough income to support her extended family through college—is for humans to work as the drug which eases the Communities’ transition into dominating earth. In other words, humans can feed themselves on a regular basis when they work as consoling bodies for neo-colonial, disinterested, alien powers. *Human bodies make Community domination easier, more comfortable.* For, interestingly, distinct from alien Oankali power in *Xenogenesis*, outside of the pleasures and comforts of enfolding, the Communities otherwise express little interest or need to garner sustainable relationships with humans, gain human consent, or work towards reproducing a miscegenated future of Community-human hybrid social formations.

Within this political context, much like the professional NGO worker I detail in Chapter One, activist subject Noah Cannon understands herself as best suited to represent and protect human interests through working as a translator and personnel officer for the Communities. She is educated, wealthy, highly specialized (with skills only thirty people on the planet have), and even develops the language used to communicate between the two species. Similar to TFN activists, as a translator, she works for the Communities but on behalf of the “grassroots,” and understands herself as the best spokesperson for humanity. And like “velvet triangle” activists, Noah also deeply believes in her position and in her strategy to save humanity. Yet perhaps differently, Noah’s position as a translator is profoundly connected to her past experiences of violence and subjection. As a young girl, Noah is abducted from her parent’s home and

experimented on and tortured by the Communities for over twelve years. “They were like human scientists experimenting with lab animals—not cruel, but very thorough.”<sup>79</sup> She is also the first abductee to be seen released from the Communities jurisdiction and is, upon release, immediately snatched up by human bounty hunters and handed over to the military who, in return, proceed to ruthlessly torture her. As the first released former captive of the Communities, human military agents suspect Noah to be a collaborator, spy, or traitor of some kind, and interrogate her incessantly until she “gave up. I decided that they were never going to stop, that they would eventually kill me anyway, and until they did, I would never know any peace.”<sup>80</sup>

I was handed over to the military which locked me up, questioned me relentlessly, accused me of everything from espionage to murder, from terrorism to treason. I was sampled and tested in every way they could think of. They convinced themselves I was a valuable catch, that I had been collaborating with our “nonhuman enemies.” Therefore, I represented a great opportunity to find a way to get at them—at the Communities. [...] They questioned me day and night, threatened me, drugged me [...] They’d keep me awake for days on end, keep me awake until I couldn’t think, couldn’t tell what was real and what wasn’t.<sup>81</sup>

Importantly, Noah distinguishes her experience with her human torturers from the Communities abduction with a single difference: the “so-called humans” knew they were hurting her. Within human captivity, Noah eventually tries to kill herself, an act she never considered within the Communities’ prison because there was always the possibility of the pleasure of enfolding. The humans only watch as she attempts to hang herself, and though they eventually stop Noah from dying, they immediately begin tormenting her with more questions and torture tactics until she is driven into what she describes as a catatonic state. Though some human captives of the

Communities did commit suicide, Noah says the Communities did not care, they just observed as if the suicides were part of their everyday experiments. The Communities did not understand what kind of pain and trauma their tests were causing their human specimens. Her human captors, on the other hand, knew what kind of pain, humiliation and trauma they were inflicting on her as they continued to detain and torture her.

It mattered more than I know how to tell you that this time my tormentors were my own people. They were human. They spoke my language. They knew all that I knew about pain and humiliation and fear and despair. They knew what they were doing to me, and yet it never occurred to them not to do it.<sup>82</sup>

Noah is marked by her human military interrogators as a traitor, whether willing or unwilling, knowing or unknowingly, because she survived the Communities second wave of social and biological experiments. In fact, ironically, her vital knowledge of the “short, quiet war,” information that she received while held captive by the Communities, makes her even more suspect, and the humans are all the more convinced that she has betrayed them because of her access to the highly classified military information. “The aliens told me before they let me go. My military captors gave me absolute hell for knowing.”

After some time, Noah’s story (and her image) is leaked to the media by, she suspects, a human interrogator who finally “grew a conscience,” and when her family learns she is still alive, they arm themselves with lawyers who eventually get her released. Upon release, she refuses to confirm that the Communities had injured her and pretends not to remember the abuse she experiences from either captor hoping, primarily, to keep her “human ex-captors content.” She tells reporters, “I had been in such bad shape that I didn’t have any idea what was going on most of the time, and that I was just grateful to be free and healing.” She also tells the media she wants

to go back to school and secure a job so that she can pay back her family's massive legal bills. In school, she realizes her role as translator, intermediary, and activist worker. Thus, though she is the first human to leave a Community bubble freely, she is also the first to return to and work for her former alien captors.

In some ways similar to Lilith's position, Noah's job as Translator for the Communities means literally pacifying new human recruits entering into contracts with future Community-employers. For instance, the story opens with Noah working for a Community that has had little contact with humans and demands that Noah, as Translator, "change" the potential workers from "disturbed people to calm, willing workers."<sup>83</sup> Because the Communities can alter themselves through exchanging individual entities, they often assume humans can be reconfigured in a similar fashion. Noah's work, from this perspective, is to fashion more physically docile, easily unfold-able human contractors for the neo-colonial alien powers. But similarly to Lilith, Noah *also* understands her intermediary position to represent human needs and desires, and she negotiates with her Community-employer for human rights ranging from being allowed to wear clothing, to serving food at recruiting meetings, to working with the Communities to legalize their actions and approaches to contracting with humans. Furthermore, Noah imagines her work as Translator and Personnel Officer for the Communities as a form of activism, as the biggest contribution she can make towards the struggle for a peaceful co-existence between the two species on Earth—to save, as her name suggests, a remnant of human life in a context where any kind of human futurity is highly unlikely. Noah's Community-employer, who never hurt her during her abduction and who partnered with Noah to create the Community-human accessible language, is friend-like, even protective of Noah, and wonders why she tolerates the physical and emotional violence that accompanies this form of activism. "You insist on taking these jobs, but

you can't use them to make the changes you to make. You know that. You cannot change your people or mine." Noah replies, "I can, a little [...] Community by Community, human by human." Noah explains that her role as Translator is to make the humans think, to "tell them what human governments won't tell them." She understands her activism as, in part, a practice of "telling the truth." "I want a vote for peace between your people and mine by telling the truth."<sup>84</sup>The truth she is referring to is the "short, quiet war" that happened when the Communities first arrived on planet Earth—a history human governments have kept from the general population, a history that makes visible the real limitations and conditions of possibility for human survival. The other truth her activism reveals is that the Communities will not be leaving Earth and further, they cannot be reformed or destroyed. In other words, "telling the truth" is an activist practice that both points to the limits of the discourses of revolution and reform and simultaneously reveals, to the best of Noah's knowledge, the complex power structures that animate the political terrain. It is an activist practice that has no guarantees; her truth telling is not outcome oriented nor will it necessarily lead to any concrete solution. As her employer points out, however, the possibility of Noah's activism actually saving humanity is bleak.

'But you can't succeed. Right now groups of your people are looking for ways to destroy us.' Noah winced. 'I know. Can you stop them without killing them?' Her employer shifted her. Stroked her. 'Probably not,' it signed. 'Not again.'<sup>85</sup>

Though her job can be viewed as furthering the pacification of humanity to support and comfort the colonizing alien powers, the work as Translator does give Noah access to humans in a way that allows her to tell the story of the "short, quiet war" that the humans lost—a history that is obscured from the majority of the humans, so much so that even when Noah is in school, she

remarks that she could find no record of it. The history and experiences of Noah's body, of being tortured by both species, is also a central part of her activist strategy. "Noah tended to use her history as a way to start questions, accusations, and perhaps thought."<sup>86</sup> Distributing this information, so essential to human futurity, may be futile but Noah insists, "I don't know whether my efforts will do any good, in the long run, but I have to try."<sup>87</sup> Her activism is interestingly *not* tied to an already imagined political future nor does Noah know what it will actually (if anything) achieve or transform. Unlike the activism privileged under NGOization, it is also not outcome oriented.

Noah's Community-employer notes the abuse Noah receives from both sides as a translator between the two species: "you let subcontractors abuse you. You try to help your own people to see new possibilities and understand changes that have already happened but most won't listen and they hate you." Indeed, like Lilith, when Noah first encounters new human recruits, she is accused of being a traitor, a Judas seeking "thirty pieces of silver," and is suspect for collaborating with the enemy, an enemy that once abducted and experimented on her for twelve years.<sup>88</sup> Noah understands these human perspectives for it is the very fact that she can be a translator for the Communities—because she is one of thirty humans that *can* communicate with the Communities—that the humans base "their reason for distrusting her." As a traitor/translator and former abductee privy to intimate alien knowledge, Noah is suspected of betraying humanity, especially by James Adio, a young black man who asks, "So they kidnapped you, and now you work for them?"<sup>89</sup> White woman Thera Collier repeatedly questions, "Why do you defend them?" [...] They invaded our world. They tortured our people. They do whatever they please, and we aren't even sure what they look like."<sup>90</sup>

Noah reframes these questions and positions herself as an activist organizing on behalf of both species. “I’m one of maybe thirty people in this country who can talk to them. Where else would I be but here at a bubble, trying to help the two species understand and accept one another before one of them does something fatal?”<sup>91</sup> The few humans, however, who try to understand Noah’s split-allegiances differently, route their inquiries through questions of forgiveness. They repeatedly ask if Noah “forgives them for what they did” to her (and to humanity in general), in order to make sense of her compromised, activist position as Translator, and to the political situation overall.<sup>92</sup> “You forgive them because they didn’t know what they were doing. Is that it?”<sup>93</sup> Noah, again, reframes the question about forgiveness, stating that forgiveness is irrelevant; it does not change the structures of power and the conditions of possibility for humanity’s future on Earth.

Noah shook her head. ‘I don’t forgive them,’ she said. ‘They haven’t asked for my forgiveness and I wouldn’t know how to give it if they did. And that doesn’t matter. It doesn’t stop me from doing my job. It doesn’t stop them from employing me.’<sup>94</sup>

Thus, Noah’s position as a traitor/translator reveals the limitations—the impossibility—of the discourses of revolution and reform for humanity in this political context. For instance, the desire for forgiveness can be read as a discourse of reform, where the humans imagine an impossible relationship with the disinterested alien powers, one in which the Community formations of power might require or even desire human forgiveness. The Communities, under this rational, could be reformed and the humans could leverage such changes from the conditions of forgiveness, understanding, and ultimately “consent” to assimilation. But the political terrain of “Amnesty” denies these liberal forms of participation to the humans and provides no mediating

or protective structures by which to negotiate with the alien powers. Noah points out that not only have the Communities not asked for forgiveness, but she also marks the impossibility of reform/forgiveness by interjecting the simple though unknown fact that the Communities are on planet Earth for good.

‘And in spite of all that, you work for the aliens. You forgive them because they didn’t know what they were doing. Is that it?’

‘They’re here.’ Noah said flatly.

‘They’re here until we find a way to drive them away!’

‘They’re here to stay,’ Noah said more softly.<sup>95</sup>

This quote points to both the futility of reform/forgiveness strategies as well as the impossibility of an anterior oppositional revolutionary space for human political struggles. Some recruits, such as James Adio, believe humans should be killing aliens, rather than “asking them for a job,” while others believe Noah (and humans in general) should hate the Communities for what they have done, and still others hope that “the weeds” can be driven away. Noah’s work as an activist is to “tell the truth,” to make visible the actual political conditions and the possibilities for human survival, at least to the best of her knowledge: The Communities have no plans to vacate planet Earth, they cannot be killed or overthrown by human military tactics, and with the exception of the affective labor of enfolding, the Communities are disinterested in humanity and do not require anything human for maintaining their particular regime of power. For unlike the Oankali context, the constellations of alien powers in “Amnesty” are not hegemonic in that they do not require human “partnering,” social and biological miscegenated reproduction, or assimilation into the Community’s rationalities in order to maintain and grow their domain of power to secure a future on Earth. This means that humans cannot “win a war” against their

invaders, for they have, though unbeknownst to most, already lost the “short, quiet war.” It also means that revolutionary strategies such as “terrorism” or suicide are equally irrelevant within this context. Such forms of resistance do not transform the political terrains of power and struggle, much less increase the chances of survival for humanity. For though human bodies are being dominated through the contracted, affective labor of enfolding, they are not instrumentalized for any purpose other than easing the homesickness that some Communities experience while transitioning into dominating Earth. Under these circumstances, because human bodies are not essential to maintaining the Community’s power, the symbolic and material refusal (through suicide or assassination) to participate in alien economies of power is simply extraneous, and therefore is not within the conditions of possibility for the traitor/translator activist subject.

Interestingly, recent scholarship on contemporary transformations in state power is very suggestive paired next to Butler’s imagination of the Community’s configurations of power—of these specific representations of future constellations of consent and coercion. For instance, Eva Cherniavsky’s essay, “After Bourgeois Nationalism,” describes the “increasingly disjunctive relation between the nation (as imagined community) and the state (as administrative apparatus)” resulting in a separation of nationalist normative and assimilationist projects and the more bureaucratic functions of the State.<sup>96</sup> Cherniavsky observes that in this moment, it is *not* that nationalism has disappeared completely, but the hegemonic exercise of state power is in crisis. For if the normative project of the nation-state that requires the socialization and incorporation of consenting subjects is “increasingly marginal to the exercise of state power on subject populations,” and the State is “no longer organizing for consent” then, Cherniavsky asks, is the modern state a “purely coercive state?”<sup>97</sup> Similar to the Community’s formation of power, this

kind of dominance without hegemony “once peculiar to the colonial periphery is now becoming *generalized* within the metropole,” and the State’s current practices (of coercion without consenting free subjects) blatantly disregards the myth of purporting to represent its citizens, while state bias and abuse “lie on the surface impossible to penetrate and demystify because *already* exposed.”<sup>98</sup> Thus, as in “Amnesty,” claims to (forgive) reform the State are inconsequential, for as Cherniavsky suggests, new practices of state domination do not appear to be beholden to even the mythic imaginations of serving as representative and protectorate of its citizens. Cherniavsky, however, is careful to point out that it is *also* not that the State has relinquished its pedagogical function completely. Instead, she asks readers to consider “new directions in state pedagogy” and the changing configurations of coercion and consent.

Yet despite the proliferating contexts of state domination without hegemony, it would be too simple to claim that the state has renounced its pedagogical function altogether. Rather, I think, the task is to reconstruct the ethical project of the state in the absence of an assimilative, or universalist, agenda on the part of the ruling class.<sup>99</sup>

What, then, does this mean for feminist activism? For social movements deeply mired in the discourses of revolution and reform? For the feminist activist positioning herself in global civil society who either presupposes a state that will listen to her demands, or denies the structures of state power that constellate her very position imagined to be “outside” of, or somehow surpassing the scope of state and economic interests? Or, in Cherniavsky’s words, “what might it mean to challenge the state’s authority, not in the mode of a national subject but with the terms of the disposable pseudocitizen that, it seems to me, the state is now committed to creating?”<sup>100</sup>

Ananya Roy's work in *Poverty Capital: Microfinance and the Making of Development* is also useful to (re)consider what activism(s) might look like within the contemporary political conditions when the possibilities of reform and revolution are already foreclosed. More generally, Roy's book focuses on microfinance as an exemplary model for understanding new movements in development, one, she argues, that is characterized by a passion for alleviating poverty through self-help, self-reliance and empowerment strategies which, in turn, produce an altruistic, charitable world-citizen subject who tirelessly supports the end of global poverty. Roy's work outlines the many complicated, variant histories and discourses that inform microfinance policy and simultaneously constructs what she describes as a *millennial subject* formation.<sup>101</sup> Briefly, as the founder of the Grameen Bank and Nobel Peace Prize winner Muhammed Yunus theorizes, foundational to the microfinance strategy is the assumption that credit is a human right and that access to credit will improve the lives of the poorest in the world. Critics, however, point out that microfinance is a re-fashioning of capitalist logics that purport to support human empowerment (through supporting "self-reliance") and "civilized globalization" through "ethical economics" while simultaneously furthering "poor-centric" and "anti-welfare" thinking. In short, Roy and others note that these ideals are far more centered on entrepreneurialism and opportunity, rather than redistribution and political, economic, and social equality.

More to the point, what I'm interested in here is Roy's work on the *millennial subject* — the altruistic participant in ending poverty through responsible participatory consumption practices. She describes this moment as "millennial development" where microfinance is "everywhere," and notes how it is both a "celebrity cause and the ordinary citizen's" development model of choice, where being part of the fight against poverty is inserted

*everywhere* into daily consumption practices. Roy understands this as unique for global poverty is remarkably visible and the focus is less on projects that modernize national economies, and more focused on the alleviation of poverty of the "bottom billion." Interestingly, Roy points out how such "poverty alleviating" practices are *world-making* and *subject shaping*: "Our [consumption] choices empower and we are in turn empowered. It is through such forms of intimacy that we make and remake ourselves as world citizens." This model of development, or what Bill Gates calls "creative capitalism," has mobilized participants in the fight against poverty across the political spectrum and this century, Roy argues, is "marked by the emergence of a remarkable global conscience: an awareness of world poverty and the articulation of the will to end poverty."<sup>102</sup> Millennial subjects know themselves as world citizens who prefer "social business" "whose bottom line is doing good," and who understand this "gentler" form of capitalism as a practice of ethical economics. The millennial subject supports economic practices that "aggressively mine the 'fortune at the bottom of the pyramid' but in doing so hopes to eradicate 'poverty through profits,' a sensibility that is organized around the concept of "poverty capital."<sup>103</sup> The logic of poverty capital works to support development strategies that further the notions that reaching the poorest of the poor is a new "particularly lucrative market"<sup>104</sup> for capitalist accumulation (that businesses in the past have overlooked), and that "opening" these potential markets is motivated by a whole-hearted commitment to ending poverty on a global scale. In this way, the millennial subject is a benevolent subject formation whose humanitarian endeavors and conceptions of self expand the violence (and desires) of capitalist exploitation, yet also requires a concept of the "modern western self who is not only aware of poverty's devastation but is also empowered to act upon it in responsible ways."

In her ethnographic research, however, Roy finds that she cannot simply discount all millennial subjects that work for the World Bank (for instance) as simply co-opted, or “sell outs,” and motivated purely by self-interest. In her interviews, she differentiates those that refuse to deviate or disagree with their institutions public personae (often subjects “fresh out of elite graduate schools, brimming with progressive ideas” who easily and unquestioningly settle into their positions of power), from other millennial subjects she terms “double agents”—Washington insiders who “repeatedly voice dissent, calling into question the discourses and practices of development [...] seek[ing] to put forward a more humane and inclusive agenda of development; and they usually work to foreground issues of poverty and inequality.”<sup>105</sup> These double agents are genuinely committed to ending poverty and wage their sometimes even radical critique from within the discourses of development, thus generating “not only global capital but also dissent.”<sup>106</sup> Yet at the same, the double agent is riddled with contradictions for even their critical stance “reaffirms the legitimacy and authority of the Washington consensus on poverty,”<sup>107</sup> and affirms the World Bank as an autonomous “knowledge bank” that is independent of ideology and politics—an expert institution that can hold and guard variant and multiple political positions, an “honest broker, an institution committed to fighting corruption.”<sup>108</sup> Describing this formation of power as an “enfolding” process, Roy (following Spivak) suggests that double agents are “complicit,” but complicity in this context signals a “folding together with this system,”<sup>109</sup> rather than betrayal or loss. While double agents cannot “unmake” complicity, Roy finds political potential in the compromised, complicated positions inhabited by double agents who can, she argues, transform their position of power and privilege into “terrains of contestation and negotiation.” They cannot undo the structures themselves, but they can attempt to “transform the terrain of belonging into a more radical project of casting doubt and even making dissent.”<sup>110</sup> To

be clear, the double agent cannot escape the structures of power that shape her position. In fact it is through the defense and affirmation of those very structures that she wages her critique, that her critique acquires legitimacy. But the political potential for the double agent lies in her ability to forthrightly occupy and make waves in the structure itself. “The double agent cannot seek to smash, tear apart, and burn down the structure, but the double agent can occupy the structure, burrowing in, claiming territory, and marking a terrain of action.”<sup>111</sup>

In “Amnesty,” I find the representations of Octavia Butler’s traitor/translator activist subjects to differently complicate and expand thinking on the political potential of Roy’s double agent. In some ways similar to Roy, Butler’s work suggests a necessary rethinking of power, contestation, and activist subjectivity, and demands a reconsideration of what it means for an activist to be “complicit.” Contrary to what other human characters might believe, Noah’s position as a traitor/translator allows her a certain (valuable) vantage on the reconfigured political terrain. Her position as Translator between the Communities and potential human contractors yields her opportunities to speak “truth,” to share with other humans vital information about the transforming political field that their governments have denied them: the Communities cannot be negotiated with or reformed, any kind of reconciliation project of forgiveness and understanding is completely out of the question, and the alien super-powers cannot be killed nor will they be departing from Earth any time in the near future, if at all. The Communities, like Cherniavsky’s work suggests, do not require or even desire human consent to dominate; they do not have a universalist, assimilative project but instead express mostly disinterest in humanity. On the other hand, the human state(s) does not appear to have an ethical or educative normative dimension either. The State is residual, ineffective and, at best, defensive; the State is unable to provide its citizens protection from the alien neo-colonizers nor does the

State appear to be capable of administrating any social services in response to the planetary-wide economic depression. Yet human states do maintain a quantity of force: they have active, though ineffective, military powers and, from Noah's experience, are very capable of violently regulating and torturing humans that have, say, significant knowledge and/or contact with the Communities. Furthermore, the States pedagogical function furthers a general global mis-education about the actual power structures that animate the political terrain in "Amnesty." Within this context, Noah understands her activism as translation, as helping "would-be employers learn to live with a human being without hurting the human and to help human employees learn to live with the Communities and fulfill their contracts,"<sup>112</sup> and she emphasizes the importance of learning the hybridized Community-human sign language system as key to human agency.

### **The Political Potential of the Pleasure of Enfolding**

Importantly, like Butler's other feminist activist subjects, Noah's traitorous position is rooted in the histories of her body, in the body-knowledge she acquires through being violated and tortured by the human governments *and* the Communities. In Butler's work, power is always embodied and body-knowledge is central to how Butler's activist subjects understand their political contexts, as well as integral to developing distinct activist practices. For Lilith in the *Xenogenesis Trilogy*, body-knowledge is bound up in miscegenation and social and biological reproduction and is, as the Oankali point out, represented as a genetic form of knowledge that she does not think or does not necessarily know for herself. In *Parable*, Lauren's body-knowledge is not genetic or reproductive but based in hyper-empathy, which requires a bodily connection and identification with others in order to understand and organize within her particular political field. It is this bodily identification with others that opens up possibilities to

grow alternative social formations within (not outside) the structures of power particular to Lauren's world. Though pain and pleasure are only experienced through identifying with the experiences of another body, the world Butler creates generates far more pain than pleasure, and it seems that at this point in her career, Butler is far more invested in exploring the political potential of pain.<sup>113</sup>

By 2004, however, pleasure is more significant in Butler's vision of activism and political agency. Noah's body-knowledge is not tethered to social and biological reproduction nor does it hinge on an intimate identification with other peoples' suffering. And, as I suggested earlier, Noah's political context is impossible to completely map and remains for her (and for the reader), just out of focus. This political context opens up activist possibilities through the process of enfolding—the unexplainable pleasure of complicity, of being dominated. The contracted feeling of a “comfortable strait jacket” where humans cannot see, smell or move (unless the Community permits it), and though enfolding can trigger claustrophobia, for the most part it is unexplainably peaceful and pleasant to contracted human laborers. This affective form of labor is the only thing human the Communities are even vaguely interested in—enfolding is the condition of human survival. Noah brokers contracts for enfolding and is, consequently, marked a traitor for being complicit with Community domination, yet Butler situates this very position (as a traitorous activist) as key to understanding enfolding as a *temporarily pleasurable form of agency* under late capitalism. Indeed, in what appears to be the last practice of human agency on planet Earth, survival in “Amnesty” is to contract with the Communities to be enfolded, where the tight, and at times, painful hug of the human body eases the aliens discomfort in transitioning into more fully dominating humanity, simultaneously and unexplainably pleasuring both parties. Though many dominant imaginations of agency invoke masculine, aggressive, or “proactive”

political sensibilities, enfolding is interestingly passive and receptive, yet still the only practice of agency left for select humans chosen for Community contracts.

But I find myself struggling to write about pleasure as agency in this context. This is certainly not the form of pleasure I addressed in my Prologue—the pleasure of meeting outcomes, of moving towards a preconceived, knowable future. Or the pleasure of crossing tasks off of the “list of things to do,” and the pleasure of martyrdom—of feeling like you are vital to the life of the social movement, that you matter. The pleasure Butler imagines in “Amnesty” challenges these contemporary political imaginaries, and in some instances, is even uncomfortable. For instance, when I teach *Parable of the Sower* alongside “Amnesty,” I ask the millennial subjects, filling the University of Washington’s classrooms, which world they prefer to live in and why. “Would you like to be Lauren, in a world of devastation and loss, but with the possibility of growing a new social formation like Earthseed? Or would you live in Noah’s world, where your condition for survival is to ease the neo-colonial powers that dominate your planet?” A few students pick Lauren’s world. Most, however, always say that Noah’s situation “isn’t that bad,” and they astutely liken it to how they imagine their futures working for Microsoft and Google. But when I pressure them to think through the pleasure of complicity, the unexplainable “comfortable strait jacket” generated by these contracted relations, they panic, shift in their seats and get really uncomfortable. Many of them change their minds and opt for Lauren’s political terrain. All of them stumble, like I do, to think through the political potential of pleasure in Noah’s context—that we cannot survive without pleasure. The possibility of pleasure is what keeps Noah alive while she is held captive and tortured by the Communities (it is why she did not kill herself), and the pleasure of enfolding is, simultaneously, the only option for human survival within a political context in which the dominant structures of power care

little about human quality of life, or human futurity for that matter. The Communities are ambivalent (at best) towards humanity, and do not require human assimilation in order to maintain their particular regime of power. If power, as in Butler's work, always produces domination and pleasure, then the good feelings produced through overtly inhabiting (necessarily) compromised positions is significant for feminist political imaginaries in the present. In fact, "Amnesty" suggests that the pleasure of being dominated is key to rethinking feminist political agency under NGOization in the contemporary moment.

While there is a great deal of criticism currently circulating on the limits of reform strategies for social justice movements, there is less scholarship dedicated to giving up the "romance" of a purely revolutionary outside vantage for activism. As I've demonstrated, Butler's writing always already forecloses this particular fantasy, but her work also suggests that there is agency in the pleasure that is gained from inhabiting your own dominated, complicit position. Thus, understanding the body-knowledge of enfolding as a form of activism, as a contaminated politics that is violent *and* pleasurable, and as perhaps the only way to maybe have a human future on planet Earth, demands a reconsideration of how dominant feminist activism thinks about "complicity," "being a traitor," or "betraying the movement" and consequentially so often rallies around demands for political purity. This perspective is significant for social movements whose imaginations might either still linger on and/or desire reforming the State through legal transformations (where the underlying assumption is that the State is/can be egalitarian), or for those that continue to rely on an imagination of an oppositional position that somehow exists outside of the complicated and varied power relations informing the present moment. Butler's work is critical for re-imagining alternatives for feminist activism under NGOization, for exploring the political potential of the *always already* traitorous feminist activist subject and for

(perhaps) responding to the question Cherniavsky posed above, “what might it mean to challenge the state’s authority, not in the mode of a national subject but within the terms of the disposable pseudocitizen [...]?” The answer, at least in Noah’s context, lies in body-knowledge, in the “comfortable strait jacket” of enfolding-as-activism, and in the awareness of the complicated structures of power that shape what it means to be an “activist” in the first place.

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<sup>1</sup> Dean Spade, “Demanding the Unthinkable,” *Feminists @ Law* 1.1 (2011): 2-3.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Charlie Rose. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66pu-Miq4tk>

<sup>3</sup> Octavia Butler, “Positive Obsession,” *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Butler, 127.

<sup>5</sup> Butler, 128.

<sup>6</sup> Gregory Jerome Hampton, *Changing Bodies in the Fiction of Octavia Butler: Slaves, Aliens and Vampires*, (Estover Road: Lexington Books, 2010) x.

<sup>7</sup> Butler, 134-135.

<sup>8</sup> Estrangement, I would argue, really depends on the reader. One cannot assume all readers, in the general sense, are estranged by the same magical newness or the same not-yet-possible quality of the text.

<sup>9</sup> Darko Suvin, “Estrangement and Cognition,” *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On a Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) 6. Still quoting Brecht.

<sup>10</sup> Suvin, 10.

<sup>11</sup> He has been known to brawl with right-wingers at sci-fi conventions and is a member of the Socialist Workers Party.

<sup>12</sup> China Mieville, “Editorial Introduction,” *Symposium: Marxism and Fantasy* 14.2 (2002): 46.

<sup>13</sup> Mieville, 42.

<sup>14</sup> Mieville, 41-42.

<sup>15</sup> Mieville, 42.

<sup>16</sup> Mieville, 46.

<sup>17</sup> Suvin, 8-9. My emphasis. Suvin has since recanted his rigid classifications of what counts as science fiction. However, as Mieville points out, his 1979 argument still holds a lot of weight in these debates.

<sup>18</sup> Mieville, 44.

<sup>19</sup> Mieville, 48.

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- <sup>20</sup> Octavia Butler, *Dawn*, (New York: Aspect, 1987) 13.
- <sup>21</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 34.
- <sup>22</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 24.
- <sup>23</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 39.
- <sup>24</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 154.
- <sup>25</sup> Molly Wallace, "Reading Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* after Seattle," *Contemporary Literature* 50.1 (Spring 2009): 5.
- <sup>26</sup> Octavia Butler, *Adulthood Rites*, (New York: Warner Books, 1988) 203.
- <sup>27</sup> Wallace, 106.
- <sup>28</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 39.
- <sup>29</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 39.
- <sup>30</sup> Karen Joy Fowler, "Remembering Octavia Butler," (March 2006). [http://www.salon.com/2006/03/17/butler\\_3/](http://www.salon.com/2006/03/17/butler_3/).
- <sup>31</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 135.
- <sup>32</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 168.
- <sup>33</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 161.
- <sup>34</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 68.
- <sup>35</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 156-157.
- <sup>36</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 152.
- <sup>37</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 153.
- <sup>38</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 153.
- <sup>39</sup> Norma Alacron's work in "Traddutora, Traditora: A Paradigmatic Figure of Chicana Feminism," is useful for thinking about the traitor/translator feminist figure. "The translators, who use language as their mediating agent, have the ability, consciously or unconsciously, to distort or convert the 'original' event, utterance, text, or experience, thus rendering them false, 'impure.' [...] The 'corruption' that takes place through linguistic mediation may make the speaker a traitor in the view of others—not just simply a traitor but a traitor to tradition that is represented and expressing in the 'original' event, utterance, text, or experience." (68).
- <sup>40</sup> Cathy Peppers, "Dialogic Origins and Alien Identities in Butler's *Xenogenesis*," *Science Fiction Studies* 22.1 (March 1995): 50.
- <sup>41</sup> Peppers, 50.
- <sup>42</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 141.
- <sup>43</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 140.

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- <sup>44</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 137.
- <sup>45</sup> Peppers, 52.
- <sup>46</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 173.
- <sup>47</sup> Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1993) 328.
- <sup>48</sup> Peter Stillman, "Dystopian Critique, Utopian Possibilities, and Human Purposes in Octavia Butler's Parables," *Utopian Studies* 14.1 (2003): 22.
- <sup>49</sup> Stillman, 22.
- <sup>50</sup> Hoda M. Zaki, "Utopia, Dystopia, and Ideology in the Science Fiction of Octavia Butler," *Science Fiction Studies* 17.2 (July 1990): 242.
- <sup>51</sup> Zaki, 247.
- <sup>52</sup> Zaki, 242.
- <sup>53</sup> Zaki, 243.
- <sup>54</sup> Butler, *Parable*, 340.
- <sup>55</sup> Butler, *Parable*, 8.
- <sup>56</sup> Butler, *Parable*, 56.
- <sup>57</sup> Butler, *Parable*, 59.
- <sup>58</sup> Butler, *Parable*, 65.
- <sup>59</sup> Butler, *Parable*, 181.
- <sup>60</sup> Butler, *Parable*, 181.
- <sup>61</sup> Stillman, 21.
- <sup>62</sup> Butler, *Parable*, 3.
- <sup>63</sup> Butler, *Parable*, 17.
- <sup>64</sup> Ruth Salvaggio, "Octavia Butler and the Black Science-Fiction Heroine," *Black American Literature Form* 18.2 (Summer 1984): 78.
- <sup>65</sup> Butler, *Parable*, 325.
- <sup>66</sup> In one scene, hyper-empathy does connect Lauren to Zhara and Harry when they are having sex. It is suggested that her sex-life with Bankole is heightened due to her abilities to feel Bankole's pleasure as well as her own.
- <sup>67</sup> Butler, *Parable*, 297.
- <sup>68</sup> Marilyn Mehaffy and AnaLouise Keating, "'Radio Imagination': Octavia Butler on the Poetics of Narrative Embodiment" *Melus* 26.1 (Spring 2001): 59.

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<sup>69</sup> Octavia Butler, “Amnesty,” *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005) 149.

<sup>70</sup> Butler, *Amnesty*, 162.

<sup>71</sup> Butler, *Amnesty*, 167.

<sup>72</sup> Butler, *Amnesty*, 175.

<sup>73</sup> Butler, *Amnesty*, 172.

<sup>74</sup> Noah also observes in the beginning of the story that Communities with less contact with humans appear more unruly in their appearance, less groomed.

<sup>75</sup> Butler, *Amnesty*, 163.

<sup>76</sup> Butler, *Amnesty*, 163.

<sup>77</sup> Butler, *Amnesty*, 177.

<sup>78</sup> Butler, *Amnesty*, 179.

<sup>79</sup> Butler, *Amnesty*, 161.

<sup>80</sup> Butler, *Amnesty*, 171.

<sup>81</sup> Butler, *Amnesty*, 170.

<sup>82</sup> Butler, *Amnesty*, 172.

<sup>83</sup> Butler, *Amnesty*, 153.

<sup>84</sup> Butler, *Amnesty*, 155.

<sup>85</sup> Butler, *Amnesty*, 155.

<sup>86</sup> Butler, *Amnesty*, 159.

<sup>87</sup> Butler, *Amnesty*, 155.

<sup>88</sup> In an interview in *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, Butler briefly mentions that when writing “Amnesty,” she was thinking about Dr. Wen Ho Lee of Los Alamos’ situation. Dr. Lee is the infamous Taiwanese-American engineer who was accused of leaking nuclear secrets to the People’s Republic of China in 1999. He was fired from his position, indicted, and held without bail, a traitor to the United States of America.

<sup>89</sup> Butler, *Amnesty*, 159.

<sup>90</sup> Butler, *Amnesty*, 161-162.

<sup>91</sup> Butler, *Amnesty*, 167.

<sup>92</sup> Another way of understanding Noah’s relationship with the Communities is also represented by Sorrel Trent’s perspective, a woman who appropriates and practices alien worship/spirituality. For instance, on the addiction, Trent says, “We’re fated to be together. They have so much to teach us.”

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<sup>93</sup> Butler, *Amnesty*, 160.

<sup>94</sup> Butler, *Amnesty*, 168.

<sup>95</sup> Butler, *Amnesty*, 167.

<sup>96</sup> Eva Cherniavsky, "After Bourgeois Nationalism," *Incorporations: Race, Nation and the Body Politics of Capital*, (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2006) 25.

<sup>97</sup> Cherniavsky, 25-26.

<sup>98</sup> Cherniavsky, 30.

<sup>99</sup> Cherniavsky, 30.

<sup>100</sup> Cherniavsky, 48.

<sup>101</sup> My summary on Roy's work is overly simplified, perhaps, because this chapter is not focused on development discourses. Her work, on the other hand, is really attentive to the multiple and differing though overlapping conversations happening (historically) within this field. See *Poverty Capital: Microfinance and the Making of Development* for a longer and more complex history of the debates within development discourses.

<sup>102</sup> Ananya Roy, *Poverty Capital: Microfinance and the Making of Development*, (New York: Routledge, 2010) 6.

<sup>103</sup> Roy, 5.

<sup>104</sup> Roy, 26.

<sup>105</sup> Roy, 85.

<sup>106</sup> Roy, 191.

<sup>107</sup> Roy, 85-86.

<sup>108</sup> Roy, 86.

<sup>109</sup> Roy, 192.

<sup>110</sup> Roy, 194.

<sup>111</sup> Roy, 199.

<sup>112</sup> Butler, *Amnesty*, 24.

<sup>113</sup> The Paints' drug practices bring them pleasure when they see fire, but the danger of this kind of pleasure always guarantees premature death.

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