THE OTHER COLLECTIVES OF THE LEFT: READING BLACK LEFT
FEMINISMS IN SITES OF TRANSATLANTIC CULTURAL PRAXIS

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A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
the Department of Gender and Race Studies
in the Graduate School of
The University of Alabama

TUSCALOOSA, AL

2013
ABSTRACT

Paul Gilroy writes, “It would appear that there are large questions raised about the direction and character of Black culture and art if we take the powerful effects of even temporary experiences of exile, relocation, and displacement into account” (Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 18). Transnationality and citizenship are tangled discourses, acted out in real time, on real people, effecting not only the exiled, relocated, and displaced as individuals, but the communal relations they leave, enter, and/or produce. In this research, grounded in issues of collective cultural praxis, I examine the relationship between lived experience, mechanizations of power, and how collectivity – in the formation of community action groups and artists collectives. I argue that in this way cultural production is instrumental in the transgressing of the real and imaged borders of race, nation, gender, and class. I look at the cultural work of Afro-Caribbean, and American exile, Claudia Jones, American Lorraine Hansberry, and Black artist collectives working in and between the U.S. and U.K. My central argument is that by looking at the work of Black radicals, specifically Black left feminists and their strategic use of collaborative cultural practice, we can deepen our understanding of the strategic use of cultural in bringing about social change. I also argue for a rethinking of the histories and representations of Black radicalism, and the re-imagining of the Black radical subject. This new historicization of the Black radicalism – which is inclusive of leftist feminisms, transnational subjectivity, cultural workers and artists – pushes us toward a radical revision of cultural and identity politics.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my committee for their guidance and support throughout the development of this project. Thank you to Dr. Jennifer Shoaff for her reading and re-reading of these pages. Her critical eye has greatly shaped the final form this project took. Thank you to Dr. Rachel Raimist who continues to inspire my work as both a scholar and an artist. Her example has helped me see all of the myriad ways in which the two are indivisibly entwined. Thank you to Dr. Stacy Morgan who helped me realize the potential of this project. His kindness, patience, and encyclopedic knowledge of the American Left and Black cultural production provided me with an indispensable resource without which this project could not have been completed. Thank you to Baillie Schantz, aka Charlotte, who allowed me to take up space in her life and was always a source of encouragement and refuge. Thank you to Sylvia Hollis who always knew the perfect time to call and tell me to take a break. Finally, thank you to my mom, Ejella Gardner, whose perseverance is a daily lesson to my own. Thank you for teaching me to value my voice, my thoughts, and my work.
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Introduction

The Black Atlantic, Feminism, and Cultural Practice

It is only when the oppressed find the oppressor out and become involved in the organized struggle for their liberation that they begin to believe in themselves. This discovery cannot be purely intellectual but must involve action; nor can it be limited to mere activism, but must include serious reflection; only then will it be praxis.


In his foundational text, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), Paul Gilroy writes, “It would appear that there are large questions raised about the direction and character of Black culture and art if we take the powerful effects of even temporary experiences of exile, relocation, and displacement into account” (18). My work here proposes to explore Black radical traditions, particularly the activism of the transatlantic Black Left, by framing the cultural exchanges between the US, the United Kingdom (U.K.), and the Caribbean as a transatlantic idea. By looking at the work of Black radicals, specifically Black left feminists and their strategic use of collaborative cultural practice, I argue that we can deepen our understanding of “political organizing and cultural criticism,” in order to frame and interrogate cultural praxis beyond pure intellectualism or pure activism (Gilroy 19; Freire 65). This approach blurs the ever-present boundaries, albeit often imaginary, between nations and their

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1 the “Black left” is synonymous with a range of Black protest organizations associated with Communism (McDuffie 2011)
hyphenated citizens, thus complicating the geo-politics of race through creative interventions (Freire 65).

The Black Atlantic has been a productive “borderland” space for Black radical politics and cultural work (Anzaldúa 19; Gilroy ix). Cultural workers – visual, performing, or literary – have maintained long relationships to the political and ideological struggles being fought in and between the U.S., U.K. and Caribbean. We might think here of individuals like Marcus and Amy Jacques Garvey, Claude McKay, Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, Roy DeCarava, Stokley Carmichael, C.L.R. James, and Shirley Chisholm. In this project, I propose first, to examine the intersecting histories of transatlantic protest traditions through the creative actions that narrate and incite them, and second, to explore the lingering influence these traditions have had on cultural production, i.e. print media, theatre, parades, and film. What does it mean to inhabit the hyphen between activist-transnational? How and why have methods of praxis been utilized in different forms of community organizing? How has the differential access to a dominant national identity contributed to the mobility of Black national identities and the continuity of the Black radical tradition?

The period between the Leftist social movements of the 1930s and the onslaught of neoliberalism in the 1980s is an important era in transnational relations, particularly in the Black Atlantic (Fried 30; Marable 20). This is a period marked by heightened Caribbean migration, the Old and New Left, cultural nationalism, and African liberation movements. Situating the 1930s and 1980s as bookends to this project, I propose to trace the emergence of Black Left feminist thought, and by association Black radicalism, within various projects of Black leftist and Black

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2 I use the term cultural worker(s) throughout this essay as a means to securely fasten the work of artist, and the work of art – whether it be visual, performance, or literary fiction or news papers – to the politics of labor.
artist collectives throughout these years, with special attention to the inter-war years to the emergence of the modern Civil Rights Movement in the US. These were turbulent years for the Black left marked by deportations, arrests, and detentions that comprise the geo-politics of the Black Atlantic. These years are also marked with the labors of Black women’s radical interventions into Leftist politics and culture that remain invisible to the larger narrative of Leftist history.

The three ensuing chapters are divided into case studies to support the above. In chapter one, I begin by looking at the radical work of Black Left feminist Claudia Jones (1915-1964), founder of London Carnival. In chapter two I examine Lorraine Hansberry’s (1930-1965) work with leftist circles as they influence her use of theatre as a space of activism and critique. Chapter three examines the work of Black artist collectives, specifically the filmography of the Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC, 1982-1998) and their negotiation of transatlantic histories. I argue that as cultural workers, who live in between or produce work about border spaces and marginalized positions (i.e. displaced populations, colonized people, and post-colony identities), Jones, Hansberry, and BAFC provide insight into the transnational politics of identity formation across the Black Atlantic.

To do this, it is necessary to examine the period between the 1940s and the 1970s because it represents a period of heightened transatlantic migration, exile, and displacement. Race and gender ideology, coupled with Leftist critiques of the structural inequality instigated under capitalism, have long been at the core of anti-imperial and anti-racist movements, and thus undergird the collective cultural productions of Jones, Hansberry, and groups like BAFC. This
perspective expands upon the historiography of the Black Left political struggles to include a transnational feminist perspective that connects the U.S. to the U.K. and Caribbean.

In the U.S., Caribbean, and U.K, the decades between the 1940s and 1970s were volatile years, situated between the interwar period of the 1930s and the neo-liberalism of the 1980s. The effects of World War II, and its predecessor World War I catalyzed migrations, and increased transnational networks, often resulting in remapping racial-ethnic identity, reinforcing xenophobic beliefs, and destabilizing economies in colonial holdings in the process (Foner 226; Watkins-Owens 84). War, decolonization, anti-racist movements, and economic instability caused a shift in the ways the state (re)produced and controlled its citizens.

Identification with “Blackness,” then, took on a particular significance in the U.S. and U.K. during the 1940s that changed significantly by 1980, due primarily to post-colonial migrations. In each of the next chapters I demonstrate that Black Left cultural workers promote a consciousness of the shared cartography of struggle (Mohanty 39). This transatlantic consciousness demanded that Blacks, and people of color broadly, be recognized as fully human and granted the rights and protections accorded to full citizens, espousing a Leftist critique of imperialism and colonization. This project seeks to make visible the visionary and radical work of women like Claudia Jones and Lorraine Hansberry and points to their continued influence on cultural workers in the aftermath of the 1960s.

**Background**

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3 In the U.K. any person of Pakistani, Indian, West Indian, or African origin or descent was marked, socially and legally, as Black (Hiro 1973, Ramdin 1999). In the U.S., Blackness evolved out of slavery and immigration — out of efforts to produce and control the bodies of those who were neither visibly nor legally white. (Omi and Winant 1994).
Relations between labor and production, globalization, and the remapping of national identities are all effects of the nation-state, as well as ideas of *jus soli*, right to the soil, that then make possible racial and ethnic categorization (Ngai 5). The capitalist driven labor relations of interwar Britain saw a continued influx of citizens of its former colonies to British soil. Ron Ramdin writes, “that amidst the circumstances of war that hundreds of West Indians volunteered to come to Britain under a scheme of development and welfare related to the West Indies, organized by the Ministry of Labour and the Colonial Office, with the object of increasing war production, a scheme that was legitimized because it was regarded as contributing towards the relief of unemployment in the colonies” (126). Already subject to xenophobic treatment, this emigration take a special effect on the lives of West Indian women, who would experienced “a cocktail of prejudices,” based on gender, class, race, and imagined national origins (Ramdin 126, Anderson 113). I argue that the practices examined here represent the response of cultural workers to this production and reproduction of difference, affected by the state.

Globally, the economic climate of the post-WWI years, served as a political incubator to leftist artists and organization. In the U.S., the booming war-economy had drawn immigrants and migrants to major cities like New York and Chicago, only to place many of these laborers in subjugated positions once the war ended. Marxist-Leninism and, by extension, Communism, held a certain amount of promise to the depressed classes (McDuffie 10). During these years, Roosevelt’s New Deal programs would, for the first time in U.S. history, create an intricately woven social safety net, at least for some. It would bolster infrastructure and employment through the building of roads, highways, and institutions. Among those newly employed in various Federal Works projects, including the Works Progress Administration (1935-1943), were
artists and writers, some of whom for the first time, were able to make a living wage from practicing their craft (Morgan 15; Langa 24).

Thomas Sugrue writes:

Overlooked in the sensationalistic accounts of Black power were its roots in a long-running Black self-help tradition, its relationship to the deep current of Black anti-imperialism that dated back to the 1930s and 1940s, and its appropriation of elements of postwar racial liberalism, particularly psychological understandings of racial inequality (338).

My use of radicalism is similar to Paulo Freire’s concept of conscientization. Freire writes conscientização, is a process of “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire 35). Radicalism, in other words, is synonymous with creativity – the “creative power” unleashed through collective human labor, to transform society (Freire 2000). This is reflected in the work of Aimé Césaire, Jamaica Kincaid, and Edwidge Danticat, writers whose work speaks to praxis across the transnational spaces of the Black Atlantic. Anti-racist liberation movements, from the Haitian Revolution to anti-Apartheid, have engaged in a critique of the political economy of colonialism and capitalist expansion overtime. Black radicalism has always been transnational, markedly leftist, and, arguably, feminist.

Dominant representations and understandings of Black radicalism often identify it singularly with Black Power Movement of the 1960s and 1970s – with its litany of gun toting,

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4 Under its original name, this basic form of work relief ran from 1935-1939 as the Works Progress Administration. In 1939 it was subsumed into the Federal Art Project and renamed the Works Projects Administration, partly as a reaction against the Communist discourse surrounding the term “progress.” Drastically changed by the onset of WWII it lasted until 1943, amidst increased jobs brought about by war spending.
leather wearing, charismatic icons – that produce an imaginary of the “revolutionary” Black radical (Kelley 107; Joseph “Black Power’s Legacy” n.p.; Iton 106). 5 Centered in a U.S.-dominant failure narrative, these representations force a false historical determination of Black radical activism; one that “characterizes the movement as unabashedly violent, gratuitously misogynistic, politically ineffectual, and mercifully short lived” (Joseph “Black Power’s Legacy” n.p.). Robin D.G. Kelley argues that looking at Black radicalism through the narrow lens of the late 1960s - early 1970s, is both historically and geo-politically restrictive, “a tale too often limited to the domestic sphere of the U.S. nation-state” (62). I would add that beneath this false determination lies the assumption that Black radicalism begins, and ends, with the modern U.S. Black Power Movement, negating the long history of Black nationalist thinking as a transnational praxis. Additionally, this media-constructed archive of myths ignores the complicated intersections of Black, Left, and feminist collectivities.

In his book, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, Cedric Robinson situates Black radicalism at the nexus of late 19th century Marxist social theory and the emergence of Black social and intellectual study. He defines the Black radical as the resistant subject, distinct from the “Western” proletariat resister, located in the laboring African bodies that fought, were captured by, or otherwise antagonized the machinations of European domination (Robinson xiv). In this early work, Robinson has not actualized Black radicalism as praxis. It is a means of understanding a distant *African* past as well the lives and work of Black Leftists, specifically W.E.B. DuBois, C.L.R. James, and Richard Wright. So while Robinson’s

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5 The revolutionary subject is precarious in that the “Black radical” produced through these images, in spite of his marginal status, is quintessentially American and “Black”. A negation of Afro-Caribbean identities, Stokley Carmichael for example.
work considers pre-19th and 20th century manifestations of the Black radical Left, he limits these movements to the labors of men and their activism in the eradication of racial and class difference, giving little attention to women of the Black Left or the role of gendered oppression.

Early Pan-Africanist and Black nationalist movements were notoriously male-centered in spite of gender-based critiques from their intellectual and organizational counterparts, like Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells (Kelley 136-7). This would change, however, with the rise of Garveyism and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) – a movement that emerged in Jamaica in the 1910s, developed in the U.S. in the 1920s, then moved to London in the 1930s – an ideological migration through the Black Atlantic. The Harlem that was an epicenter of Caribbean U.S. migration, the Harlem that made Garveyism possible in the 1920s, is the same Harlem that acted as a generative space for the Black Left in the 1930s and 1940s, particularly among radical Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean women in the Harlem Communist Party.

Contribution

Erik McDuffie writes that for many Black women, “the Communist Party represented a powerful site for realizing Black women’s freedom, dignity, and respect” (2). Women of the Harlem Communist Party, many of whom were immigrants from various islands in the Caribbean, founded their activism on the experiential knowledge they gained from living at the intersections of race, gender, class, and national oppressions (McDuffie 16). Thus, women of the Black American Left were connected to the very core of early and mid twentieth-century of Black feminist thought and were critical agents for expanding the interests of the Communist Party specifically, and the Left generally, toward an understanding of intersecting oppressions
Claudia Jones and Lorraine Hansberry were radical, because they were *actors, activists, actively* engaged in a creative form of political organizing. McDuffie writes, “Black women community organizers, social workers, artists, domestic workers, and writers enlisted in the Old Communist Party because they saw it as a powerful movement with real and imagined links to the global political stage” (2). I argue here that the radically inclusive approach to cultural praxis practiced by Black left feminists marks the foundation of the Black radical tradition. As a tradition that has consistently, if tenuously, embraced Black feminism, radicalism has provided a common language through which to advocate on behalf of anti-colonialist and anti-racist demands for recognition. Moreover, it has provided the means by which to articulate a transnational struggle against gender, race, and class inequality.

Cultural work, like performance, literature, and film provide a bridge for national divisions that work to separate Black radicalism from the Black feminist Left (Joseph “Black Power’s Legacy” n.p.; Kelley 107). Because of its complicity in meaning making and identity formation, cultural work provides a significant lens through which we see and imagine social movements and thus, it is inherently political. I argue that, as we study and reclaim these histories, it is imperative that we do not sever the cultural from the political. *Praxis*, as both reflection and action, can be used to locate a long lineage of transnational agents, some of whose work I explore in this project.

The guiding framework of this project is to contribute to the existing scholarship on cultural production, feminism, and the Black radical Left. Scholarship by writers like Erik McDuffie (*Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of*...)

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6 An example of one such bridge would be the collaborative project between Indo-British filmmaker Pratibha Parmar and African American writer Alice Walker in making the film *Warrior Marks* (1993) about female genital mutilation. This project would later become two projects.
Black Left Feminism, 2011), Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Saagar (Ghosts of Songs: The Art of the Black Audio Film Collective, 2007) Tanya Barson (Afro-Modern: Journeys through the Black Atlantic, 2010) draw out previously under recognized aspects of Black radicalism/Black left feminism. My work places the creative collective projects historically produced by Black left feminists into a larger conversation with sociopolitical moments and contemporary collectivities, from which they are often disassociated.

This relationship between culture, artists, and the Left has two effects: 1) It marks artists, and the production of their craft, as labor; 2) It places the artist-laborer into the narrative of social movement discourse. Art then comes to be not only an aesthetic endeavor, but a political tool. This in and of itself is not new; W. E. B. DuBois famously said in 1926, “All art is propaganda” (DuBois n.p.). What is new, is the engagement of art in critiques of “Americanness,” “Caribbeanness,” and “Britishness,” as well as the ways in which a transatlantic discourse is dispatched through the production of translocal performance, as in Claudia Jones and Notting Hill Carnival; collaborative texts, as in Lorraine Hansberry’s last works on the modern Civil Rights Movement; and anti-colonization, as in BAFC’s engagement with Black diasporic film practices.

Chapter Overviews

The projects discussed here are framed by transatlantic migrations as well as the turn to the Reagan-Thatcher era of the 1980s. From Aimé Cesaire, who worked from the 1930s onward, to the poetic films of Black Audio Film Collective, who were active between 1982-1998, artists of the Black Atlantic, because of their precarious emplacement as citizens, have had a special
role in national identity construction. Chapter 1 of this project is devoted to Claudia Jones and her movement between the Caribbean, the U.S., and Great Britain. Like Carole Boyce Davies, I situate Jones as a pivotal figure for Black feminist thought, preceding the second wave of feminism. As a writer and activist, I argue, Claudia Jones is, in many ways, foundational to our understanding of cultural work as a tool for social agitation. Born in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad in 1915, Claudia Jones traveled to the U.S., to join her parents, at the age of eight. She began her political education soon after through two critical encounters: the first, as early as junior high school when she became a member of the NAACP and began studying drama with the Urban League; the second, when she was forcibly committed to Sea View Sanatorium in 1934, after having contracted tuberculosis (Boyce-Davies 2007). This last event added to Jones’s consciousness of state power, particularly the state’s power to intern citizens at will.

During the 1930s, the heyday of the American Communist Party’s (CPUSA) Popular Front strategy, Claudia Jones joined the Party (CPUSA), and was subsequently subjected to the full-scale attack of a anti-Communist U.S. social policy. This came in the form of the House Un-American Activities Commission, which facilitated her being sentenced to serve multiple lengthy incarcerations. Coupled with the “aggressive surveillance” undertaken by the FBI, these legal proceedings led to her eventual deportation to London. In her deportation across the Atlantic, which she later characterized as her “exile,” Jones took with her not only the painful knowledge

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7 I use the term Black to negotiate these transnational boundaries. I am specifically using cultural workers who themselves identify as “Black,” but who do so with a critical eye toward the multiple meanings that Blackness signifies. “Black” is what Gayatri Spivak terms a “strategic essentialism,” taken on for social organizing, not as an easy term to obliterate the other identities these individuals use, i.e. African, Afro-Caribbean, Negro, etc.

8 Jones is quoted in Boyce-Davies as stating the reasons for her family’s migration from Trinidad to the U.S. as being due to the drop in Cocoa trade (159). There is similarly a change in the sugar economies of the Caribbean, at this time that lead to a depression in Jamaica and Barbados. All of this is couple with the draw of post WWI economy in the U.S. (Foner 2001, Watkins-Owens 2006)
she gained from living at the intersection of race, gender, and political affiliation (i.e. Black-woman-communist), but also the Trinidadian practice of Carnival (Boyce Davies *Left of Karl Marx* 167; McDuffie 207).

Born in, and shaped by Trinidadian culture, this transatlantic communal activity crosses Caribbean-U.S. borders, and then the Atlantic quite literally through Claudia Jones. Brought to London by Jones as a means to organize the Afro-Indo-Carribbean communities then living in London, this transnational transference, London Carnival, now Notting Hill Carnival, took on a special socio-spatial significance. As a necessarily collaborative project, London Carnival is an example of the strategic use of culture in collective praxis. This event, still practiced today, was catalytic in its effects, making literal and metaphorical space for Black recognition and strengthening communal networks. Similar to Jones, but through altogether different media, chapter two examines the work of Lorraine Hansberry, who utilized collective practice, via the theatre ensemble and printed word, in her collaborative work as a writer and dramatist.

Lorraine Hansberry was, in her ideological positioning, a U.S. transnational. I argue that in her sustained commitments to Black Left organizations, including Paul Robeson’s journal *Freedom*, and her critiques of US paternalism in her journalism and theatre work, she, like Jones, espouses a Black left feminist consciousness. A contemporary and one time roommate to the older Claudia Jones, Hansberry most well known for her play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). Also like Jones, Hansberry offers us an example of the possibility for cultural work(ers), to engage in and incite political activism. Hansberry came to radicalism within the tutelage and camaraderie of both Paul Robeson and W.E.B. DuBois; who led the then 29-year-old writer to affirm “her political kinship with anti-colonial insurgency” (Wilkins 192). She argued that the growing
number of “national independence movements globally was inextricably linked to the political
initiatives of Black Americans engaged in similar and sometimes overlapping, struggles of
freedom, full citizenship and self-determination” (Wilkins 192). Throughout her short life,
Hansberry would continue to develop and contribute to transnational consciousness. This
included speaking out against colonization in collaborative photo-essay projects like The
Movement, producing work that spoke to anti-racist feminism through her writings in The Village
Voice, The Ladder, and working through plays like Les Blancs (Higashida, “Anticolonialism”
900, Lieberman 221). At the time of her death she was working on Les Blancs, a drama about
the decolonization of a fictive African nation (Higashida, “Anticolonialism” 900, Abell 462). I
argue that Hansberry used her work as a means to create an alternate space for social criticism
via the stage. In this way she engaged theatre, the relation of performer to audience, to disrupt
the logic of subordination and heteropatriarchy.

Lastly, in chapter three, I address the work of contemporary artist collectives, the British
artists of Black Audio Film Collective in particular, as they provide an anchor point that
completes the transatlantic triangle (Jones-Caribbean, Hansberry-US, BAFC-UK). Artist Kodwo
Eshun has been working towards a restorative-recovery project, bringing greater attention to the
individual and collective work of Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC), active between 1982 and
1998. Eshun locates the re-emergence of Black Audio with the 2002 Documenta 11, curated by
Okwui Enwezor. It was there that John Akormfra’s 1985 film, Handsworth Songs “introduced a
new audience and new generation to the work of Black Audio Film Collective” (Nka 39). BAFC
represents a group of practices that are critically aware of their national-historical moment, an
awareness that Eshun, as a part of a younger generation of Black British artists, also expresses in
his work. He states, “From this perspective, [Black Audio Film Collective] may be seen as one wing of the ongoing metahistorical project to elaborate and extend the “knowledge-politics” of decolonization, beyond the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s into the 1980s and 1990s” (Eshun 39). In theory and in practice, or praxis, their work disrupted the common sense logic of the neoliberalism of the 1980s from which they emerge. The knowledge politics in which they engage, I argue, locates BAFC an extension of the work of Jones and Hansberry. This brief concluding chapter looks at the contemporary artist collective and places them within this critical genealogy. I am arguing, that the existence of these collectives is directly related not only to their artist historical predecessors of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, but to the history of diasporic film practices like that of Ousmane Sembène, that proceeded out of African Independence movements.

**Method**

As a practicing artist myself, it is important for me to think about how Black feminist thought and reflexivity might be incorporated into the research and writing process. It is my hope that by approaching this work through multiple methods, a fuller dialogic relationship will be co-created between myself and the cultural workers that I am in conversation with, both living and non-living. Because of the importance of race, gender, and the experience of both to any conversation of political pasts, I ground this study in Black feminist epistemology (Collins 30). As Patricia Hill Collins explains, “It investigates the standards used to assess knowledge or what we believe to be true. Far from being the apolitical study of truth, epistemology points to the ways in which power relations shape who is believed and why” (Collins 252).
Citing the work of Sandra Harding, Patricia Hill Collins states, “epistemology constitutes an overarching theory of knowledge” (Collins 252). As Philomena Okeke defines it, “Black feminist epistemology refers to the nature, theory, and production of knowledge grounded in the lived experiences of Black women as a point of entry into the forums and constituencies where feminist knowledge are produced and evaluated” (Okeke 168). Black feminist epistemology allows for yet another connection between the U.S., U.K. and Caribbean to be established, as it validates the experiential knowledge gained by living at the intersections of multiple oppressions, race, gender, class, nation. Philomena Okeke writes, “From the 1970s Black feminists in the USA and the United Kingdom such as Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, and Filomina Steady began to voice their discontent with feminist knowledge which has failed to validate their experiences” (Okeke 169).

This study engages Black feminist experience, my own and that of Black women artists, writers, and activists, in an attempt to understand the ways in which in a postmodern, post-structuralist era, we might any longer locate knowledges produced from distinct experiences based in gender and/or race. I, the researcher am a Black US American born woman, while the primary subjects of this project are, predominantly, not US American, in a few cases are men, and may have a different relationship to the idea of “Blackness” than myself. I am located within the long genealogy of Black feminist consciousness that has created strategies to navigate the subjugation of knowledge this consciousness has produced.

Because experiential knowledge is produced from interactions between the Black body and everyday social encounters, it has been dismissed as an invalid means of knowing. On top of the historic exclusion of Black people – Black America, British, Caribbean, or Africa – from
formal politics and social inclusion, Black men and women have made use of cultural work for propagating politics. Producing music, literature, conversation, behavior, and Art, Black men and women have engaged culture, broadly, as a means to enact political participation when conventional politics were stripped or otherwise made inaccessible to them (Iton 148).

I want to engage Black feminist thought here to validate Black women cultural work(ers), as knowledge producers and “reliable knowers” (Code 150). This is important for two reasons. First, the attention given to collective thinkers working in these aesthetic modes is limited in occurrence, breadth, and nuance. Second, my desire is to maintain cultural work as a form of historical recovery through its engagement with political ideology and archives. Black feminist epistemology allows us to look at the shared experiences of gender, race, nationality, and history as a basis of assessing knowledge claims of those researched here.

Through this and other questions I have established a transatlantic fluidity by looking at cultural intervention and the migration of ideology i.e. the Nation of Islam, Carnival, Pan-Africanist consciousness. Paul Gilroy writes that we might think of the Black Atlantic as a set of circulating exchanges. These exchanges include: music, as in the import of Reggae, and Dub from the Caribbean to the U.K. and the U.S.; people, as in the expatriation and forced deportation of activists like Claudia Jones; and the cultural workers who brought me to a consciousness of these U.S./U.K. threads like Sonia Boyce, Linton Kwesi Johnson, and Isaac Julien. All of this will set a substantial foundation for examining practices like London Carnival in the 1950s.

I have constructed a reflexive-dialogic relationship to the individuals, their work, and this project. This was important because I see the cultural worker’s voice is an invaluable interpretive
tool. Arriving at any comprehension of their is impossible without this interaction. I use the term reflexivity as defined by Mary Margaret Fonow and Judith A. Cook in “Feminist Methodology: New Applications in the Academy and Public Policy.” In this essay, reflexivity is stated as the “tendency of feminists to reflect on, examine critically, and explore analytically the nature of the research process” (8). Fonow and Cook also state “reflexivity has also come to mean the way researchers consciously write themselves into the text, the audiences’ reactions to and reflections on the meaning of the research, the social location of the researcher, and the analysis of disciplines as sites of knowledge production” (9). The effects of race and racism, shift across geographical contexts, and I have attempted to account for them in this process. France Twine writes, “After decades of self-reflexivity among ethnographers analyzing the practices of writing and conducting field research, the lack of sustained attention to racialized dilemmas is particularly noteworthy, considering the degree to which other axes of power have been theorized” (20). As a Black American woman I am acutely aware of my positionality; I am however, unaware of what effects this may have on the research I am proposing. I may enjoy a certain amount of privilege as a “racial insider” but am simultaneously a national, and historical outsider, as many of the subjects I cover here are no longer living or take place in transnational context (Twine 6).

A part of this project will look at the dialectic influence in and between U.S., British, and Caribbean cultural workers. Their mentors, visual histories, and exhibition opportunities are all factors that contribute to the aesthetic output of their practices. I will be conducting content analysis of primary and secondary material including the writings of Claudia Jones and Lorraine Hansberry and the film work of BAFC. The project is contextualized in an understanding of how
oppositional and deconstructive filmmaking has expanded the visual vocabulary of the Black Atlantic. Twine raises the question, “...how does one “realistically” represent racially subordinate communities without conforming to idealized racial tropes?” (38) What does it mean to be a cultural producer looking beyond, like Hansberry, or backward like BAFC, at colonization and its effects? I look at the writings of John Akomfrah and Kobena Mercer, UK theorists whose work on race and cultural Marxism in England have been instrumental to the aesthetics and theoretical ground of UK artists since 1980, BAFC and Otolith in particular. I look to understand what the Black transatlantic means to these artists.
Chapter One

Claudia Jones: Exiling the Black Radical Subject

I was a victim of McCarthyite hysteria against independent political ideas in the USA, a hysteria which penalizes anyone who holds ideas contrary to the official pro-war, pro-fascist line of the white ruling class of that country. I was deported from the USA because as a Negro woman Communist of West Indian descent, I was a thorn in the side in my opposition to Jim Crow discrimination against 16 million Negro Americans in the United States. [I was deported for] my work for redress of these grievances, for unity of Negro and white workers, for women’s rights and my general political activity urging the American people to help by their struggles to change the present foreign and domestic policy of the United States.

I was deported and refused an opportunity to complete my American citizenship because I fought for peace, against the huge arms budget which funds should be directed to improving the social needs of the people.

I was deported because I urge the prosecution of lynchers rather than prosecution of Communists and other democratic Americans who oppose the lynchers and big financiers and warmongers, the real advocates of force and violence in the USA.

-Claudia Jones

On a somber December evening in 1955, 350 friends and comrades gathered at the Hotel Theresa in Harlem to say goodbye to Claudia Jones. Somber, because the severance that took place the following day would be both permanent and physical. Letters, clothes, monies, and other gifts poured in from trade unionists, Harlem neighbors, and friends like Paul and Eslanda Robeson and Shirley Graham and WEB DuBois, who, for political reasons, could not be present. Having been a laboring activist in the American Communist Party for nearly 20 years, her departure, a part of a forced “self-deportation” instigated by the US government amounted to a
critical absence for the American left. Even amidst what must have been a tearful and grievous occasion, Jones managed a poignant critique of US domestic/foreign policy stating that “racist immigration laws, directed especially against West Indians from whose proud heritage I spring...These laws are the shame of America” (Sherwood 26).

This analysis of the dislocated writer, community organizer, and Communist Party leader, Claudia Jones, begins at her deportation, what she came to refer to as her exile, from the US. Her dislocation situates Jones as already located in a border position, a tertiary space of Black Atlantic social, national, political and economic displacement that she herself consistently theorized in her analysis of the “superexploitation and oppression of Negro women” (Jones 117). Choosing mediums such as newspapers, theatre productions, pageants and parades, mediums whose very nature necessitate collaboration, Jones established new modes of community organizing, social agitation, and critique that directly informed the later work of not only second wave feminists but also, of particular interest to my larger project, artist-activists.

Enter and Exiting: Border spaces of the Atlantic and Political Organizing in the 1930s

“At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two moral combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores and, at once, see through serpent eagle eyes.”

Gloria Anzaldúa, Borderlands/ La Frontera, 1987 100.

Born in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad on February 21, 1915, notably 50 years prior to the day that Malcolm X was murdered in Harlem’s Audubon Ballroom, Claudia Jones immigrated to the U.S. in 1923 at the age of eight, joining both of her parents (Boyce Davies Left of Karl Marx 159). In December 1955 aboard the USS Queen Elizabeth, taking her from American to British shores, Jones would literally enter the transatlantic for the first time since her departure from

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9 Jones parents had come to the US two years prior to escape the faltering economy in Trinidad.
Trinidad. Paul Gilroy has suggested that the passage of ships through Atlantic waters is a marker of Black Atlantic identification. For Jones, this movement, prompted by legal restrictions that targeted Communists and Afro-Caribbean women with a peculiar brand of persecution, placed her at the intersecting borders of multiple identities. This allowed her, as a displaced Afro-Caribbean British subject, to participate in a “common context of struggles” that continues to constitute the Black Atlantic. Similar to Gloria Anzaldúa’s theory of a mestiza consciousness the borderland of the transatlantic provided Jones a multifocal lens through which she could construct an oppositional collective praxis, a space informed not only by her position as a Black left feminist, but by her radical Black subjectivity and her movement in and between leftist coalitions and national boundaries (Anzaldúa 100). Though it may seem unlikely for a Black woman living in the US during the depression, and the later Cold War, to make such a radical choice for her political life, Jones did not tie her political choices to the avenues of possibility that she was presented. She saw her decisions and political options as very much rooted in radical revolutionary change – in the struggles of Black, working-classed, oppressed human beings.

In an autobiographical letter written at the request of William Z. Foster, then head of the American Communist Party (CPUSA), dated December 6, 1955, three days before her departure on the USS Queen Elizabeth, Jones wrote, “Together with my three sisters, our family suffered not only the impoverished lot of working-class native families, and its multi-national populace, but early learned the special scourge of indignity stemming from Jim Crow national oppression” (Boyce Davies Left of Karl 159). Recalling here her childhood of the 1920s and 1930s, Jones aligned the structural inequalities faced by her family, with those of other families,
particularly those that existed within the boundaries of the US nation-state. Those early
encounters with “national oppression,” coupled with her location within the politically and
culturally active community of Black Harlem brought Jones into contact with other Black leftists
and “fellow travelers.” (Boyce Davies *Left of Karl Marx* 159; Sherwood 20).10 In Harlem, the
CPUSA made itself a highly visible organizing force, marching to help create public awareness
and solidarity, particularly among Garveyites and Black church groups around the trials of the
Scottsboro Boys, in Scottsboro, Alabama. It was also during this time that the CPUSA really
began collaborations that engaged the public en mass (Boyce Davies *Left of Karl Marx* 74;
Naison 57). The comrades she gained through public protests and private salon gatherings
prompted Jones in 1936 to join the American Communist Party and soon after, to take an
assignment in the Young Communist League. Notably, Jones joined the Party during the
Popular Front (1935-1939; 1941-1945), a period in which the Party became more flexible in
hopes of truly becoming a Party of and for the American people. It was during this time that
more native born Americans, people of color, and women joined or affiliated themselves with the
CPUSA. Reflecting back on this moment in 1946, Claudia Jones noted:

> Even the worst enemies of the Communist Party cannot fail to admit that we have been in
the forefront of the struggle for equality of the Negro people. It was the Communist Party which
fourteen years ago made the name of Scottsboro ring around the world. It was the Communist
Party which was the first, since the Reconstruction governments, to raise in the heart of the South
the issue of full Negro freedom.

- Claudia Jones

**The Negro Question and the Woman Question Align**

The Communist Party, as an international political organization, was concerned with the
plight of the working-classed oppressed and came to see the concerns of ethnic minorities and

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10 The Harlem Left included individuals such as Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, Lorraine Hansberry (though she is
younger and comes later), and Louise Thompson, and Ella Baker (Naison, Morgan).
colonized people as related to these oppressions. In the very early part of the 20th Century, the Black proletariat, or working class, concerns that formed the CPUSA thesis of the "Negro Question" were predominantly male-centered, while the "Woman Question" referred predominantly to non-Black women. Harlem Renaissance writer Claude McKay, who was also a Jamaican born immigrant to the US, provoked at least some response toward addressing racism both within the Party and as a goal of the party.

In 1922 McKay, along with Otto Huiswood, a Suriname-born charter member of the American Communist Party, addressed the Fourth World Congress of the Comintern, challenging the internal racism of the CPUSA and warning the party of the necessity of the Black worker in a working-class movement. The result of these speeches was the formation of the Negro Commission. McKay later redrafted and further theorized this position in *The Negroes in America* (1923) (Maxwell 100). This type of advocacy, connecting the social concerns of the populace as a whole to the dispossessed Black working class, is a part of the intellectual labor Claudia Jones performed in her writing. She, however took it a step further by analyzing the effects of both racial and gendered oppression.

Jones’s work on integrated the concerns of what later became “The Woman Question” together with the concerns of “The Negro Question,” helped to form a Black Left feminist theory of intersecting multiple oppressions. These were adopted as the guiding theses of the Communist International (Comintern), elaborating on the ways that sexism and racism helped maintain the economic structuring of society. This also outlined the positions, informed by Marxism, that the

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11 Black radicals of the 1920s who were a part of the still forming Black left such as members of the African Blood Brotherhood, but also members of the New Negro movement, saw the blind spot of socialism in the question of race. Capitalism was not alone the cause of the oppressed status of African Americans, it lay, rather, in the racism that supported the political economy of capitalism, economies that included the transatlantic slave trade, colonization, and imperialism, and fascism. This is the position taken up by Jones and other Black women who will take to writing later, during the Popular Front.
party would take against these challenges. Prior to this, even within these forming discourses, capitalism, and only capitalism, was described as the root cause of these oppressions. Destroy capitalism, the thinking went, and one would destroy domination writ large. The maintenance of white supremacy as a buttress of patriarchy and capitalism was noticeably absent from these analyses (Kelley 42). There was not yet a space for a Black Left feminist position, one that analyzed the multiple layers of history, class, race, gender, and national origin.

The 1930s to the Cold War

For Claudia Jones, the 1930s represented the collision of her life and experiences, particularly as a working class Harlemite, with the political propaganda of a rapidly changing American Communist Party (CPUSA). Having held various jobs that included that of a laundress, a milliner, and a sales person, she entered the CPUSA in 1936, joining the Young Communist League. She stated:

It was out of my Jim Crow experiences as a young Negro woman, experiences likewise born of working-class poverty that led me in my search of why these things had to be that led me to join the Young Communist League and to choose at the age of 18 the philosophy of my life, the science of Marxism-Leninism – that philosophy that not only rejects racist ideas, but is the antithesis of them. (Jones “Autobiographical Letter,” 9).

Jones’s entrance into the party was preceded by collisions of ideologies and nationalisms, as well as class and labor based organizing, all made available to her through her Harlem world.12

The 1930s in the US was period entangled in local and transnational social movements that included not only the purge trials in Russia, but also the Spanish Civil War, the Great

12 Here I am thinking about organizations like the NAACP, or the UNIA, as well as movements like Pan-Africanism, additionally for the 2nd Congress of the Comintern in 1920, Vladmir Lenin produced a directive engaging “The Colonial Question.” Under this nationalisms were given an important place on the agenda. The ideas that for communism to be an effective political affiliation it had to be adaptable to the individual circumstances of each nation.
Depression, labor movements, the dwindling Harlem Renaissance and Garveyite movements, the beginning and ending of the WPA, the Social Realist movement and its influence on film literature, print culture, and the visual arts. The physical distance between the American Communist Party and Russia marked a ideological gulf between the US and the practices occurring under the regime of Joseph Stalin. Theodore Draper, historian and former member of the CPUSA, suggests that during this chapter of American Communist history the Party softened its hard-line following of Old Left indoctrination and unwavering fidelity to the Stalinist state. Under the directive of the Fourth Comintern, this period was recognized as the Popular Front (Draper, *American Communists* 463).

For African American women, the Popular Front ran concurrent with other political outlets, including Pan-Africanism, the last vestiges of the UNIA (United Negro Improvement Association), and National Council of Negro Women. Historians like Erik McDuffie suggests that these Black organizations of the 1930s, in spite of their shared anti-racist positions were not always radical, conscious, or critical of the ways in which they placed Black women in subordinated roles (McDuffie 50). Women’s clubs and churches, because they by and large embraced conservative middle-class “respectability politics” as a means to racial equality, were antithetical to many of the Black women who would eventually join the Communist Party, like Claudia Jones (McDuffie 10, Higginbotham 185). That she was at the beginning of her political career and managed to carry it forward by joining the CPUSA is important given that all avenues, for any woman, were fraught. This was particularly true for women who were interested
not solely in questions of race, but in all of the sticky relations produced and enabled by Jim Crow America and in protections from all forms of violation – racist, sexist, imperialist.\textsuperscript{13}

The Popular Fronters of the American Communist Party, like most periods of the CPUSA, remains a highly contested story to narrate. For some, its significance was its unification of trade unionists and labor groups. There were others for whom the significance of the Popular Front was embedded in the hegemonic moment it represents, a moment of temporary dissolution of sectarianism, when the CPUSA represented more of a bloc than a party (Denning 4). Still others believe that the Popular Front was a “short, aborted interlude,” having little to no significance in the broader history of the Party (Draper, \textit{American Communists} 463). The Popular front, known variably as the United Front or the Cultural Front, had its formal beginning in the summer of 1935, though early rumblings of a shift in party politics may be traced back to the 1933 resolution of the Comintern Executive Committee. While McKay’s earlier work is certainly important to what led up to the Popular Front, this period marked a shift from ultra-sectarian divisions within the party, when women, native born Americans, and people of color, affiliated themselves in greater numbers with the party than at any previous time. Party membership during this period increased nearly 1,000\% between 1930 and 1938, growing from around 7,000 to more than 75,000. This revised American Communist Party was the organization that Claudia Jones joined in 1936. The Popular Front would see a soft ending in 1939 with the signing of the Stalin-Hitler Pact. With it sectarianism re-emerged, shifting party focus from anti-fascism to anti-war policy.

\textsuperscript{13} Scholars like Brent Hayes Edwards have written about the ways in which other political outlets of this time, i.e. Pan-Africanism and Garveyism are implicitly gendered (Edwards, Brent. \textit{The practice of diaspora : literature, translation, and the rise of Black internationalism}. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003.)
In *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women’s Liberation* (2001), Kate Weigand states, "throughout the ‘decades of discontent’ that came between the suffrage victory of 1920 and the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, the lack of a visible women's movement allowed most people to believe that disgruntled women were simply neurotic malcontents" (2). Women like Claudia Jones, then, by their fierce Marxist criticism of social ordering, even within the Communist Party itself, literally recast the feminist body, no longer exclusively white or Euro-American.

The Popular Front is significant for yet another reason. Eric McDuffie writes that during these years of the American Communist Party there emerged a litany of literature on the subject of Black women and labor (McDuffie “Esther V. Cooper” 203). In 1936, Mary Anderson published “The Plight of Negro Domestic Labor,” in the *Journal of Negro Education*. That same year, Louise Thompson published “Towards a Brighter Future” in *Women Today* magazine, where she analyzed the Bronx “slave market” and theorized the “triple exploitation” as an experience specific to and forced upon Black women workers. In 1938, Marvel Cooke and Ella Baker published an essay in *Crisis*, again focusing on Bronx domestic workers titled “The Bronx Slave Market,” and in 1940, Esther Cooper completed her Masters of Arts in Sociology with a thesis titled “The Negro Woman Domestic Worker in Relation to Trade Unionism.”

It was during this time that Jones’s own writing practice emerged, first at an unnamed “Negro nationalist” paper prior to joining the CP then for Party newspapers and pamphlets. During the 1930s Jones also began writing for at least three leftist papers which included the *Daily Worker*, the *Weekly Review*, and *Spotlight*. She later became editor of both the *Weekly*
Review and Spotlight. In 1945 Jones was appointed editor of Negro Affairs at the Daily Worker and in 1953, editor of Negro Affairs Quarterly.

Throughout her career as a journalist, Jones maintained her writing as a practice of her proletarian politics and in 1949 wrote her now famous manifesto “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!” (1949). Having worked odd jobs in her young adult life, Jones developed an experiential knowledge about Black women laborers that added fuel to her standpoint as a Marxist-Leninist theorist. In this highly influential essay, Jones lays out a what might now be termed as a theory of intersectionality. She thoughtfully outlines the roots of a system of national oppressions experienced by bodies that are at once, “negro,” women, and workers. It is what Jones terms in Marxian discourse, “superexploitation.” The effects of the “neglect” marks the “negro woman” as “an outsider within” - an essential member of the American polity, yet, one whose belonging, or recognition, is wholly disavowed (Collins 11).

Throughout Jones’ writing life, she carefully deconstructed the causes and limits of her own multiple belongings – citizenship, nationality, community – as well as her exclusions.

Other Black women members of the Party, took on the politics of labor and place as an important part of their activism as well. From Claudia Jones and Marvel Cooke working in Harlem, to Esther Cooper (m. Esther Cooper Jackson) working in Birmingham, Alabama, the Popular Front period of the Party represented an opening up of Party values – an opening that provided leadership roles and avenues for the address of the abuses faced by Black women as workers and mothers using the Communist Party as a platform. Having seen the Party embrace the existence of both a “negro question” and a “women’s question,” it was not a stretch for these women to see the viability of the Communist Party as a space enact their political praxis. Their
combined efforts engage in what scholars like Eric McDuffie and Mary Helen Washington have termed Black Left feminism (Washington 186; McDuffie Sojourning 4). This framework provides a way of understanding the effects of multiple dominations as tied to political economy that “paid special attention to the intersectional, transnational nature of African-American women’s oppression and viewed them as key agents for transformative change” (McDuffie “Esther V. Cooper,” 204). Claudia Jones, like her comrades Cooke, Cooper Jackson, and Louise Thompson, labored to expose the importance of the intersection of race, gender, and class domination, re-articulating these oppressions through a Marxist-Leninist framework filtered through their own experiential knowledge. In spite of the insistence of party doctrine that previously held to the belief that women's oppression was purely an economic issue, women like Claudia Jones pressed the party in this area. In her writing, she exposed the viscousness of capitalism as not only a concern for women, but the ways in which the subjection of women also subjugated men.

Though former Party members like Theodore Draper have written that this period of party history never did, or could live up to its radical premise, arguably in the fostering of Black left feminisms and collaborations with Black radicals that would usher in the modern Civil Rights movement, albeit problematically, its radical premise was not merely reached but exceeded. For Draper, the Popular Front represented a minor tactical change in the “political” skin of the Party, not a shift at its core (Draper quoted in Barrett, 533). However, later scholars of the American Left suggest this view neglects issues of national sections of the Party – Harlem, Chicago, Atlanta, Birmingham – or, what has been previously suggested, place.
In 1945 after the end of WWII, the world witnessed an epic split between former allies in the form of the US-Soviet Cold War. This tense relationship contributed to the anti-communism that eventually led to Jones’s deportation. Erik McDuffie, building on the work of leftist historian Gerald Horne, suggests that the period of Cold War was an ideological battle ground between the US and the USSR. This struggle resulted in the suppression, and expulsion, of individuals, Claudia Jones being one such example, on the extreme left and the acquiescence to the civil rights demands of liberal Black non-communists and anti-communists. This divide and displace strategy allowed the US to avoid rhetorically invalidating itself as a democratic society, while simultaneously using its immigration laws to enact anti-Communist purges (Ngai 237). In the suppression of specific factions of anti-imperialist organizing, there assumed a hushed atmosphere over Black Left activism. In effect the activist work on path towards citizenship, rights, and privileges became disarticulated from class struggle through the states repressive tactics.14

**Jim Crow / Anti-Communism / Anti-Immigration: Borderspaces**

“Citizenship involves the art of being with others, negotiating different situations and identities, and articulating ourselves as distinct yet similar to others in our everyday lives, and asking questions of justice”

-Engin Fahri Isin *Recasting The Social In Citizenship* 7, 2008

"Woman has to face special oppression in every field in capitalist society – as a worker – a wife, a homebuilder and a citizen."

-Claudia Jones “Fosters political and Theoretical Guide to our work among women.” *Political Affairs*, (March 1951).

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14 Angela Davis and her work the both parties of Black Panthers, the one composed of Communists, and the Black Panther Party for Self defense is a symptom of these breakdowns between Communists, non-Communists and anti-Communists. Climates such as this created the conditions that led to the fight for her job in the University of California system under Ronald Reagan’s Board of Regents, as well as make her a target of political repression efforts.
In letters written aboard the Queen Elizabeth, literally crossing the Atlantic, Jones began referring to herself as a US American exile, not a deportee. Self-representing her removal from the US in this way Jones claims a certain, if precarious, belonging, referring to the U.S. as the “land I belong to and know” [my emphasis] (Boyce Davies *Left of Karl Marx* 158). The issue of belonging requires acknowledging the technologies of the state in the retention of citizen-nationals that run alongside the detention and deportation of non-citizen, non-nationals. Jones occupied an outsider status that was multiplied, simultaneously, by her relationship to the despised threat of the Communist Party and her status as a Trinidadian citizen/citizen of the British Commonwealth. Jones applied for US citizenship in 1938, but was rejected. Indeed, the grounds for the rejection of her application to US citizenship in 1938 and her eventual deportation were her ties to the Communist Party and her Trinidadian birth, not her Trinidadian birth alone.

Approximately six months after her arrival in England, Jones was interviewed by George Borwin of the *Caribbean News*. When asked if she believed that her status as a West Indian in the US were a factor in her deportation she stated:

The very law under which I was deported, the reactionary Walter-McCarran Law widely known for its special racist bias towards West Indians and peoples of Asian descent. This law, which came into being as a result of the whole reactionary drive against progressive ideas in the United States, encourages immigration of fascist scum from Europe but restricts West Indian immigration, once in their thousands annually to the United States, to 100 person per year, from all the Caribbean islands (Jones “I was Deported Because…” 17).

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16 Claudia Jones applied for US citizenship twice, once at age twenty three and again sometime during her marriage to Abraham Scholnick. A lengthy process, no doubt made lengthier by her Afro-Caribbean origins, she was eventually denied because of her ties to the communist party, a criminal act. "It was found that as an Alien Communist she was in violation of Section 20 of the 1917 Act as amended by the Internal Security Act of 1950 and as such was deportable" (Boyce Davies *Left of Karl Marx* 150, quoted from FBI file NY100-1876).
Jones, as in her earlier writing and analysis, was quite precise in her assessment of U.S.
policy. The post-WWII/Cold War era was marked by an investment in patriotism and
nationalism, from both the Communist Party as well as the U.S. American government. The
nativist rhetoric and laws that were produced within this period were born out of desires to claim
ideological distance from the Soviet Union. However, the motivations behind the efforts of the
US government are quite different from the motivations of the CPUSA. The Party aimed to
integrate its ideology into mainstream American ideology. One of the slogans of the period was
“Communism is Twentieth-Century Americanism.” A member of the Party at this time is also
quoted as saying “We were looking for some kind of legitimization of our feeling about being
more American” (Barret 543). This is particularly interesting to think about alongside Claudia
Jones and her belonging. Kate Weigard writes that, “although the American Communist Party
was a rigid and hierarchical organization partially controlled by the Soviet Union, it was also the
institutional center of a large, influential, and uniquely American radical political
movement” [my emphasis] (Weigand 10). How was one's relationship to an American identity, if
there was one to be had, woven together with the promise of legitimacy and justice contained
within the Communist Party? It is also interesting that this rhetorical nationalism was advancing
at a time when Black women in the Party were working to gain an audience for the plight of
Black women workers, “the most exploited group in America” (McDuffie “Esther V. Cooper”
207). I draw these connections to re-emphasize the importance of the ideological battleground
that McDuffie and Horne articulate earlier, that the sentiments of “America for Americans” was
reloaded by these political contests.17 The post-war period provided the US an opportunity to

17 A similar sentiment, though more openly anti-Black, would ring through 1950s and 1960s England via the “Keep
Britain White” propaganda.
expand its sense of exceptionalism and ideas of democratic values beyond U.S. borders. This was accomplished through a mix of nationalist/anti-Communist laws that restricted the rights of, and to, American citizenship.

In 1953 Herbert Lehman, former Governor of the state of New York, came to symbolize the multiple layers of conflict that transnational radicals, such as Claudia Jones, would bear the burden of representing. Senator Lehman, though he was liberal, was like much of the American Congress in the 1950s, an anti-Communist, who stated on the one hand, “free loving people throughout the world look to the United States as the focal point of democracy and moral leadership” and the on the other that Communism is an “evil” that must be extinguished (Ngai 241). Lehman was one of only seven senators who opposed the 1950 McCarran Act (Internal Security Act a.k.a. the Subversive Activities Control Act), under which Claudia Jones was arrested – in October the same year it was introduced – for her March 1950 speech, “International Women’s Day and the Struggle for Peace” (Boyce Davies *Left of Karl Marx* xxv; Ngai 241).

There was a certain contradiction present in American politics, which still exists of course, in that Senator Lehman could believe that the MacCarran-Walter Act of 1952 (The Immigration and Naturalization Act), was in fact a “racist law made worse by an excessive zeal against Communism” but as we have seen previously, he did not wholly oppose these kinds of Communist purges (Lehman quoted in Ngai 237). Under the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act the U.S. government was able to eventually succeed where the McCarran Act had failed in removing

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18 The McCarran-Act of 1952, combined the Senate bill introduced by Senator Pat McCarran (D) of Nevada with the House bill, introduced by Representative Francis Walter (D) of Pennsylvania, the bill preserved immigration statutes already in place in the U.S. really, most significant of those being the keeping in place of quota systems for immigration from the U.S. (see Jones’ commentary above).
Claudia Jones from the U.S. Representative Pat McCarran (D - NV), namesake of the infamous bill, was notoriously anti-Communist. Though the bill would abolish the racial restrictions, which had served to legislate and produce “whiteness” as a legitimator of citizenship, the bill retained national origins quota system, which disguised a similar effect. Mae Ngai, a historian who writes about immigration law in the US states that, “the retention of the national origins quotas reflected the logic that cast the native born as the most loyal Americans, especially whites of British and north European descent and the foreign-born as subversive esp. Jews, who were imagined as Bolsheviks, and Italians who were viewed as anarchists” (237). This idea is substantiated by Senator McCarran’s own words:

I believe that this nation is the last hope of Western civilization and if this oasis of the world shall be overrun, perverted, contaminated or destroyed, then the last flickering light of humanity will be extinguished. I take no issue with those who would praise the contributions which have been made to our society by people of many races, of varied creeds and colors. America is indeed a joining together of many streams which go to form a mighty river which we call the American way. However, we have in the United States today hard-core, indigestible blocs which have not become integrated into the American way of life, but which, on the contrary are its deadly enemies. Today, as never before, untold millions are storming our gates for admission and those gates are cracking under the strain. The solution of the problems of Europe and Asia will not come through a transplanting of those problems en masse to the United States....

The immigrant reduced here as the deportable, unbelonging, unassimilable subject, is likened to contamination, to the perverse, the indigestible, the enemy, a problem. The “problem immigrants,” as I show later, was one that the UK felt it shared.\(^{19}\) This tension produced out of living in the impossibility of her Britishness may have even indirectly plagued her relationship to the British Communist Party (CPGB), as by 1958 her activity with the CPGB had waned.

\(^{19}\) Indeed Jones herself had to go through a series of negotiations between the Trinidadian and British governments before she was allowed to emigrate to England.
The heart condition that assaulted her body for so many years and resultant failing health did not allow her to keep the rigor she maintained in the U.S. For this, and the unattended meetings and missed deadlines that it caused, Jones was not allowed the mobility within the CPGB that she had worked so hard for in the CPUSA. So, barely three years after her arrival in the London, Jones would establish *The West Indian Gazette* (later named *The West Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian News*). This founding coincided with the Notting Hill race riots that also occurred in 1958 as a result of unchecked anti-Black violence. As with McCarran in the U.S., the immigrant-as-threat idea was alive and well, spurring Jones toward immigration activism and projects for West Indian inclusion.

The taint of exclusion and undesirability that rejects one from national belonging in the British context follows what Paul Gilroy terms, “ethnic absolutism.” Ethnic absolutism is a way to describe the knowledge politics of the New Right, which saw nations as homogenous cultures “in which a sense of patriotic belonging can and should grow to become an important source of moral and political ideas” (Gilroy, *There Ain’t No Black* 60). Within this ideological framework, Gilroy contends, “alien (i.e. Black) cultures have been introduced into [the U.K.] with disastrous effect: ‘the indigenous population perceives its own predicament as ... physical pressure and attack’” (Gilroy, *There Ain’t No Black* 60). Arriving at a similar idea little over twenty years earlier, Claudia Jones connected the violent unpunished public response to the presence of its Black and brown colonials in Britain to the crimes of Jim Crow America and Apartheid South Africa. “But the canker of racialism was now nakedly revealed. It exposed…the smugness of official Britain, who hitherto pointed to racial manifestations in ‘Little Rock’ and Johannesburg, South Africa, but continued to deny its existence in Britain” (Jones, “The Caribbean Community
in Britain” 167). The “official Britain,” is the “ethnically absolute” Britain, one in which moral high ground is only achievable through whiteness and synonymous with patriotic nationalism. These contradictions, in which Jones could see the clear linkages between the racist and anti-racist projects of the U.S. and South Africa, pushed her to think of other ways of enacting collective belonging amongst the West Indian communities in London. To do so would require her to make use of alternate forms of citizenship.

Citizenship may take many forms which include, ‘intimate citizenship,’ ‘multicultural citizenship,’ ‘consumer citizenship,’ ‘cosmopolitan citizenship,’ ‘formal’ and ‘substantive citizenship’ (Isin & Nielsen 1). The concept of citizenship carries with it a multitude of contested meanings, associations, characteristics, acts, and actions, all of which range from the political to the philosophical to the legal in their underpinnings. The most basic notion of citizenship is relationality. That is, citizenship may be constituted within relationships between individuals, communities, rights, obligations, bounded territories, and states. How they relate and the power relationships that operate in and between them is an important part of the constitution of the citizen, as well as access to citizenship status (Dwyer; Anderson).

Citing the work of Gordon Lewis, sociologist Peter Dwyer identifies three determinants that appear in the discursive construction of the citizen: 1) “citizen is one way of imagining a link between the state and the individual;” 2) “the concept of citizenship implies membership of some form of community, in turn the notion of community opens up questions of inclusion and exclusion;” and 3) “citizenship is a social status that allows people to make claims in relation to state organized welfare services” (Dwyer 4). Writing on feminism and citizenship, Ruth Lister also characterizes citizenship relational terms. She situates citizenship in the relations between
civil, political, and social rights. Differently from Marshall, however, Lister assigns these relational rights as status – citizen, non-citizen, foreign national – which determine citizenship through the carrying out of practices – the adherence to and performance of certain responsibilities required by the community which grants such status. Thus, the precarious citizenship of the West Indian communities in Britain cannot be examined as a product of nationality alone. Claudia Jones and the work she performed within this new community can be thought of here in relation to what Isin terms social citizenship.

Carol Boyce Davies argues that Jones’s “movement outside of circumscribed national space renders her nationless.” However, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which Jones’s geo-spatial movement is bound to and reinforced by national structures (Boyce Davies Left of Karl Marx 7). While indeed her application for US citizenship was rejected at least twice during her 32 years of living in the US and her deportation and exile are in part effects of this rejection, she is not altogether nationless. The documents of nationality, meaning the Trinidadian birth certificate and passport she possessed in fact gave her multinational belonging. Her claim to Trinidadian citizenship, a colonial holding of the British Commonwealth, facilitated her deportation to England. In this way perhaps we can think of her not as nationless, but rather as a transnational subject, a citizenship holding some legal claims to national belongings, but for whom the precarity of those claims pushes us to think about alternative citizenships that might articulate her liminal status. The transnational subject signals the extension of empire into not only macro-political relations between state authority and individual rights, but also the interpersonal and familial networks that in many ways precede national belonging. The transnational subject also signals the temporality of our national identities as Jones, in various
stages of her life, flowed between Trinidadian, Negro American, and Afro-Caribbean self-representations.

Boyce Davies provocingly focuses on the idea of belonging and political economy as it relates to the discourse around Jones as a simultaneous citizen and non-citizen. The issue of citizenship, coupled with loosening of hard line political ties taken from the interwar period of the Popular Front, were both present in the creation of London Carnival. The strategic use of cultural work in community building made a means of emplacement for formerly displaced bodies of British West Indians.

Carnival: Proletarian Politics In West Indian and Asian London

“Persons displaced by global economic processes, who must constantly reconcile themselves to existing emotionally and physically in different spaces, may enter into what is popularly referred to now as a diaspora, a space that resists centering even as it identifies longing, homelands, and a myth of origin” (Boyce Davies *Left of Karl Marx* 21).

The late August days of 1958 brought about a slow steady build of racial antagonism, generated largely from working-class whites toward the West Indian residents of Notting Hill. The final escalation began August 29th and did not end until September 5th, with hundreds arrested and nine whites, eventually, prosecuted. Since the large emigrations of colonial subjects had begun just after WWII, particularly from the West Indies, the racial tensions in Britain had escalated. The ethnic absolutism that had held a hegemonic dominance over the meanings of “English,” “British,” and/or “Britishness,” as identities, was being upset by foreign, perceivably “ethnic” threats.

The following Summer of 1959, again in Notting Hill, the 32 year old Kelso Cochrane, an Antiguan born British citizen, was stabbed to death by a group of men, all white, for no other
apparent reason than that he was a Black West Indian. The murderers were barely pursued, and his death, as an effect of racist-nationalist violence, would spark the idea for Carnival in London. Because Claudia Jones was conscious of the dangers of unchecked escalations of violence – this being one example, but also the example of Emmett Till which had occurred only four months before her deportation – she understood the necessity to find a space for recognition for the Afro-Caribbean and Asian communities in London. Her use of Carnival then, was not to primarily to institute a space for Black pleasure, but rather was tied up in the the power to value and devalue human life according to racist assumptions about skin tone and national origins, the power to be and exist in England’s public and private spaces. In other words, a politics of recognition.

Originating in 1959 as Caribbean Carnival, then later “London” Carnival, and finally “Notting Hill” Carnival, the nomenclature makes a discursive claim for belonging, rights to inhabit space, and anti-racist visibility. The association of ritual invoked by London Carnival is tied to a politic of inclusion into the local and national constitution of Britishness. Notably, this politic was turned on its head only two decades later in Thatcher’s emergent England, when bodies associated with Carnival again become displaced from the local. Carnival came to be associated with disorderly, hyper-sexual, uncontrollable immigrant non-citizens, those that again did not belong, those that needed to be surveilled, those that should be excluded from rights and protections as British nationals.

**Carnival History**

Carnival began in Trinidad, not as an effort of the indigenous population of the country, but as an import of Spanish colonization. A Christian religious ceremony, marking the beginning the Christmas season and extending to Shrove Tuesday – Mardi Gras, Fat Tuesday, the
day before Ash Wednesday – early Carnival in Trinidad began a celebration of and for the Plantation owning class. The enslaved however, began participating in these yearly rituals, bringing to it masking traditions of the Yoruba, Kongo, and Igbo people of Western Africa (Liverpool 127). After emancipation in 1838, Carnival festivities for the formerly enslaved became “freedom day” celebrations. The yearly events took place in August, with the formerly enslaved, taking to the streets in masquerades, dancing, and making humorous plays about their former colonizers. Garth Green and Phillip Scher write that, “Carnival became a battleground in which a uniquely Trinidadian culture established itself in contrast to the dominant British culture of the elites” (Green and Scher 4). Post-emancipation Carnival was carried out under the watchful eyes of middle and wealthier classes of Afro-Caribbeans, in an attempt at moral policing of the working class. More contemporarily, particularly during the Trinidadian Independence movement, Carnival has become somewhat of a tool of nationalism, coming under the scrutinous surveillance of the Trinidadian government while simultaneously being re-appropriated as a national symbol of "the people," legitimizing the government’s authority to form such subjects.20

It was Claudia Jones who brought this practice to Britain, and though it is not an American idiom it is an example of transatlantic intersection. The idea of using a collaborative process to engage an otherwise disenfranchised public, particularly the working-class, or the proletariat, I argue, comes from her work as a Black left feminist in the American Communist Party. In this way, London Carnival is a part of transatlantic exchange, a phenomena that

20 In practice, this form of nationalism which is tied to emancipation and therefore tied predominantly to the formerly enslaved Afro-Caribbean population, comes at the exclusion of the Indo-Caribbean population. Having been displaced to the Caribbean as indentured servants after Afro-Caribbean emancipation, this population remains largely invisible in these kinds of national identity making.
transformed and was adopted for new sociopolitical use across geo-spacial boundaries. This is stated against Boyce-Davies’ position that “accounting for gender, for race, for Black communities in migration, for carnival and Caribbean culture was not within the range of positions that Marxists took at the time.” (Boyce Davies *Left of Karl Marx* 27) While it cannot be argued that as political institutions, Communism or Marxism of this time adopted totalizing reforms toward radical inclusion, as we have seen Black left feminists like Claudia Jones, Louise Thompson Patterson, and Esther Cooper Jackson were highly influential and steadfast in adopting Marxist Leninism to gender, race, and class issues facing Black communities, opening up some forms of inclusive space in the CPUSA and into Marxist thought. Therefore Jones’s Marxist beliefs cannot be thought of separately from her founding of Carnival. Indeed, as she wrote in 1959, “a people’s art is the genesis of their freedom” (Jones “A People’s Art”, n.p.).

Carnival, which is now practiced from the U.S. to Canada to Brazil and the Caribbean might then also be considered as related to place making, acted out within “particular historically constituted structures of power and representation” (Green and Scher 3). The restructuring of nations and the economics of globalization pre and post-Caribbean independence movements is an important factor in the transnational adaptations of Carnival. These conditions created, restructured, and forced the movement of individuals in and between nations (Green and Scher 3). What does it mean, then, that a Black (Afro-Caribbean), Communist, woman, in her expulsion from the United States, brought the festival to London? A festival that materialized in the Caribbean under first Spanish, then French, and finally British enslavement and colonization?

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21 An example would be the Harlem Suitcase Theatre, created in 1938 by Langston Hughes and Louise Thompson and was sponsored by the International Workers Order (IWO). See Naison and Kelley.

22 Claudia Jones family, having been displaced by the drop in the price of Cocoa in the Caribbean are an example of this. Her deportation/exile to England, and not Trinidad are yet another.
In her 2011 book *Sister Citizen*, which adopts the Hegelian philosophy of *Anerkennung*, the dialectical relationship between citizenship, the state, and recognition, Melissa Harris Perry writes, “Citizenship is more than an individual exchange of freedoms for rights; it is also membership in a body politic, a nation, and a community.” She goes on to say that this system of community, to be equitable, must offer its partakers “opportunities for public recognition” and safeguard against misrecognition, i.e. stereotypes and stigma like those markers elocuted by Senator Pat McCarran – contaminated, undesirable, unfit. These misrecognitions, experienced in various forms of aggression from the “Keep Britain White Campaigns,” of which Jones was a hard critic, to the Notting Hill Riots, and the death of Kelso Cochrane, were palatable and lethal. Jones’ institution of Carnival, which consisted of beauty pageants, steel pan music, and performance acts was a step toward addressing these misrecognitions of the West Indian and Afro-Asian community in London. It is useful to reiterate the quote from above to think about the transplanting of this event: “Carnival became a battleground in which a uniquely Trinidadian culture established itself in contrast to the dominant British culture of the elites” (Green and Scher 4).

While the preceding quote is in reference to Carnival practices in pre-and post-emancipation Trinidad, I argue that it resonates with the practice of Carnival in London as well. “Carnival becomes a highly charged political issue as subordinated social groups struggle among themselves over the content and form of their public representation as part of a larger struggle for legitimacy and status within the social order in which they are subordinate” (Green and Scher 11). That Carnival was instituted in London by Claudia Jones, newly positioned on the Black British Left, allows it to be seen as an effect of a leftist *praxis*, an intersection of local, anti-
Enduring Britain: Expanding Substantive Citizenship, "National" Belonging

Engin Isin writes that the social in social citizenship is broader than the welfare state. The social is composed of being and doing. As Marshall, Dwyer, and Lister have shown, social citizenship is relational, but in terms of being and doing, it may also be thought of as collective and enacted. The struggles that Claudia Jones was immersed in were irreducible social struggles that emerged from a social existence (Isin Recasting the Social 11). Said differently, regardless of the status conferred, the ways in which governments regulate the flow and status of individuals and their ideas ultimately produces certain kinds of interactions and antagonisms, i.e. racism, sexism, communalism. Isin states, “it is important to acknowledge that when people engage with such issues, whatever difference may separate them in values, principles, and priorities, they are enacting citizenship even if they are people who are not passport-carrying members of the state” (Isin Recasting the Social 7). Isin’s use of social citizenship here draws attention to “the process-oriented and contested character of citizenship in terms of both the criteria regarding who are defined as ‘fit’ candidates for citizenship and the particular historical and place-bound set of rights, entitlements, obligations, performative dimensions, and identities to which it refers (Isin Recasting the Social 11). While the state is certainly an enforcing agent of “legal” forms of citizenship, issues of scale, place, and nation are called into question by their
permeable boundaries. Caribbean Carnival in London might be thought then as a form of social citizenship. Through engaging in the interactions of power that sparked the Notting Hill riots, that caused the death of Kelso Cochrane, and that put into place systems of inequality of opportunity and treatment, all who participated in Caribbean Carnival were doing so toward the recognition of their rights to be on British soil as citizens.

As Claudia Jones moved across territorial boundaries, she enacted practices of citizenship through her writing, marching, and even through her self-representations of her citizenship status. This approach, which formed a praxis, enabled her and others to enact their citizenship, their rights to be and belong. As an advocate of democratic inclusion which engages the oppressed at all experiences of society, her posthumous influence on the New Left, including the second wave of feminisms and Black British Cultural Politics, albeit still understudied and largely unrecognized, are recognizable. At minimum, it places another crest in the waves, showing the active voices and labors of feminist praxis that emerged from those who were formed by, and reshaped the Old Left, making possible the New Left, and the Second Wave. It would seem that if this vital connection between women of the Old Left, Popular Front, and the New Left has been frayed – due to the anti-communism and anti-feminism structures that facilitated the deportation, exile, imprisonment, and murder of individuals, particularly women, from Ethel Rosenberg, to Claudia Jones, and even Assata Shakur – that a great social and historical injustice has been done and it must be redressed.
I was born on the Southside of Chicago.
I was born Black and female
I was born in depression after one world war, and came into my adolescence during another.
While I was still in my teens the first atom bombs were dropped on human beings at Nagasaki and Hiroshima, and by the time I was twenty-three years old my government and that of the Soviet Union had entered actively into the worst conflict of nerves in human history – the Cold War.
– Lorraine Hansberry in To Be Young, Gifted, and Black: A Portrait of Lorraine Hansberry in Her Own Words 1971, 24.

In a literary form borrowed from the autobiographical writings of the formerly enslaved, Lorraine Hansberry affirms her membership to the genealogy of Black liberation struggles, transatlantic activism, and American letters. She does this through the deceptively simple phrase “I was born...” (Olney, 50). Frederick Douglass begins his 1845 Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, “I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough...” (10). Harriet Jacobs likewise begins, her autobiography Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861), “I was born a slave...” (11). These geo-politics of domination and oppression are the spatial terrain on which Hansberry signifies, then inserts herself as she writes, “I was born on the Southside of Chicago. I was born Black and female” (Hansberry and Nemiroff 24). This chapter begins where the previous chapter began, in the performative speech of positionality. When in 1955 Claudia Jones said, “I was deported because...” she launched a battalion of critiques against US foreign policy,
domestic racism, imperialism, and colonization (Boyce Davies *Left of Karl Marx* 143). Hansberry’s brief statement is an epistemological claim that locates her in a Black Left feminist cartography, and moves toward my larger argument about the long range of her political and cultural contributions. She is situating herself in the conflict driven life of Cold War America as a Chicago-born, Black, woman, witness, and voice.

The overarching narrative of the US Cold War and Civil Rights Movement is that their intersecting timelines aided an atmosphere of communist-baiting, anti-feminism, and homophobia. Recent work by scholars such as John D’Emilio, Dayo Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, Komozi Woodard, and Barbara Ransby assert that while yes, the McCarthy period treated homosexuality and communism as threats to the US nation-state, stopping one’s inquiry there leaves only a skewed conception of American and European activists networks of this period. Individuals possessing non-normative attitudes towards gender, sexuality, and family structures were consistently, if less recognizably, present. In this regard, Lorraine Hansberry is a poignant example of the presence and visibility of one such actor.

An important figure of study for this reason, Hansberry, like Claudia Jones, remains rather marginalized in histories of the American Left and the Civil Rights Movement. This essay examines her work as an essayist and playwright and the ways in which she contributed to these movements. First, as a “fellow traveler,” and particularly in the face of American anti-Communism that surrounded the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, Hansberry used her writing as a means to critique militarism and US paternalism during the early phases of the Cold War. Moreover, as a lesbian living under the homophobic attitudes and motivations of anti-Communist and anti-racist movement organizations alike, Hansberry struggled with and
challenged the scripting of gay and lesbian activists in these social movements.\textsuperscript{23} Her work as a journalist, non-fiction writer, and dramatist are an important, but often minimized chapter, of not only the radical appendages of a long civil rights movement, but also of the foundations of Black feminist thinking associated with the second wave of feminism and intersectionality.

Like Claudia Jones, Hansberry is located within a Black Atlantic geography of Black Left feminist activism. Hansberry came to political maturity, as did Jones, under the influence and tutelage of the American Communist Party. Beginning her engagement with the Left during the 1940s in the Cold War atmosphere of the proto-Civil Rights Movement, Hansberry died in 1965, amidst the fraught tensions of a matured Civil Rights Movement, McCarthyism, decolonization efforts, and a burgeoning New Left. Her position as an artist and Black Left feminist gave her a specific vantage point from which to witness these political narratives expand and contract. These mixed political ties and cross-continental relationships fed Hansberry’s activism and cultural work.

In the introduction to Young, Gifted, and Black: A Portrait of Lorraine Hansberry in Her Own Words (1970), James Baldwin writes, “For Lorraine made no bones about asserting that art has a purpose, and that its purpose was action: that it contained the ‘energy which could change things’” (xiv). In this statement, Baldwin’s use of energy as a medium for change connects Hansberry to Freire’s concept of praxis, as discussed in the introduction. This praxis demanded, and still demands, a special attention to the nuances of lived experiences of racism, gender, and national oppression. Her imagination allowed her to explore genres that were yet to be fully

\textsuperscript{23} I am thinking here of figures like Bayard Rustin who was coerced out of his position as aid to Martin Luther King Jr. because of the specter of his homosexuality, and other figures like Pauli Murray. Also that lesbians and gay men were often positioned as a national security threat during the Cold War as a means to reinforce American imperialism. See, Miriam Smith, Political Institutions and Lesbian and Gay Rights in the United States, 2008

Lorraine Hansberry lived only to age thirty four, when she died of pancreatic cancer. She was however a prolific writer, leaving behind pages upon pages of work that has still, forty-eight years later, yet to be combed through. Met with early success, Hansberry faced the sorts of harsh criticism reserved specifically for young women of color who dared find mass public reception. While her earliest play, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), has been most widely recognized for its radical vision of economic struggle, Black nationalism, and integration debates, Hansberry continued to write up until her death, laboring within and for transnational coalitions. Her work involved her journalism on domestic and foreign policy issues and devising a Black left feminist theory of capitalist and heteropatriarchal oppressions. It is in her last works, including her plays, but also her non-fiction writing and collaborative work, that we see her utilize her creative work as a means to interrogate and critique what Patricia Hill Collins terms “the matrix of domination” (Collins 227).

In two of her last works, *The Movement: Documentary of a Struggle for Equality* (1964), and *Les Blancs* (1970), Lorraine Hansberry became a part of “the distinct but hidden contours of the Black radical tradition” (Gore, Theoharis, Woodard 1). That is, that she was a woman – a Black, middle class woman – who died young, and as such has been marginalized or wholly disregarded in her contribution to the history of Black radicalism, feminism, Black

24 The Lorraine Hansberry Papers (LHP) were gifted to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in 2000 after having been in the private trust of the Nemiroff family, largely unavailable to researchers.

Internationalism, and cultural praxis. I first place Hansberry and her writing within a framework of Black Left feminism and Black feminist Internationalism (Washington 185; McDuffie 4; Higashida, “Black Internationalist Feminism” 59). As a student, and comrade, of Paul Robeson and W.E.B. DuBois, Hansberry understood the necessity of simultaneously thinking both nationally and transnationally. However, she added her own experiences to what she received from her antecedents, theorizing the multiple ways in which paternalism became a device of racism and colonialism.

Notably, Hansberry’s Black radical cultural praxis and her criticisms of heteropatriarchy and imperialism precede the formation of the US Black Arts Movement. For her critics at the time, like Harold Cruse and Amiri Baraka, formerly Leroi Jones, her middle class pedigree discounted her ability to take critical positions on issues concerning underprivileged African Americans, though Baraka would later change his view of her work. That she does take a position, one which is neither romantic nor naively optimistic, I argue, makes her an interesting figure to study in relation to the Black Atlantic. As one who is dislocated, at least philosophically, and at times ideologically, from her would be peers, like Cruse, Norman Mailer, and toward the end of her life, Leroi Jones, Hansberry makes a space for her work in the shared transatlantic politics of Black liberation struggle. She allowed her ideas to be tested not only in pages of newspapers or on television, but in the living space of the theatre and in her collaborative work with activist organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Prior to this, however, even prior to the completion of her first stage production *Raisin*, Hansberry began integrating feminist thought into her criticisms of the American Left, via the work of Simone de Beauvoir.
**Black Left Feminist and Black Feminist Internationalism**

Simone de Beauvoir’s 1949 text *The Second Sex*, was an important intervention into feminist discourse. De Beauvoir’s work laid down a foundation for what would come to be thought of as the social construction of gender. In 1953, the same year Lorraine Hansberry decided to leave *Freedom*, a leftist newspaper, and embark on her creative work as a playwright, *The Second Sex* was translated into English, making it available for the Anglophone world. Lorraine Hansberry became one of de Beauvoir’s followers. If we trace Hansberry’s shifts from *Freedom* in 1951, through her unpublished essay on *The Second Sex*, and her later writings for *The Village Voice* in the early to mid 1960s, we see a route into Black Left feminist consciousness constituted by her antecedents in the Black American Left, but also existentialist feminism and African independence movements (Higashida, “Anticolonialism” 900). All of which are situated within the context of McCarthyism and anti-feminism of the 1950s -1960s US state.

From 1950 to 1953, Lorraine Hansberry worked at *Freedom* newspaper, first as an apprentice to Louis Burnham, then as a writer and editor (Lieberman 221; Wilkerson 127).26 *Freedom*, an anti-imperialist “radical news organ” co-founded by W.E.B. DuBois and Paul Robeson, was a Black leftist news source, a leading journal amongst the American left during the height of anti-communism in the US (Wilkins 195). Hansberry’s time at *Freedom* provided her with deep and personal contact with not only active Black leftists like Paul Robeson and his wife Eslanda, but also, according to historian Mary Helen Washington, it placed her into a network of Black left feminists, which included people like Alice Childress and Claudia Jones (Washington...

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26 It is not clear to me yet in what capacity Hansberry entered the paper. Some accounts cite her as an apprentice, others as a secretary-receptionist (Wilkins, Washington).
185).27 *Freedom* placed her in contact with these and other women writers hewn in the Harlem Chapter of the American Communist Party, including Thelma Dale, Yvonne Gregory, Vicki Garvin, and Shirley Graham DuBois (Higashida, “Black Internationalist Feminism” 58; Mullen and Smethurst 10; Washington 193).28

These personal, professional, and political ties extended Hansberry’s interest beyond US American borders, leading her to write about the “women’s movements in Egypt, Argentina, China, Korea, Brazil, Kenya, and Jamaica, always focusing on women fighting both for peace and women’s equality” (Higashida, “Black Internationalist Feminism” 57; Washington 193). In 1952, Hansberry traveled to Uruguay as a surrogate for Paul Robeson, where she delivered her own address on peace and the Korean conflict (Cheney 19). This particular focus, that incorporates the importance of place into liberation, is what Cheryl Higashida terms Black internationalist feminism, an ideology that challenges “heteronormative and masculinist articulations of nationalism while maintaining the importance, even centrality, of national liberation movements for achieving Black women’s social, political, and economic rights” (Higashida, “Black Internationalist Feminism” 2). She writes, that “the range of Hansberry’s articles alone speaks to the postwar Black Left’s internationalist understanding of the linkage between Third World movements for national liberation and domestic antiracist civil rights struggles” (57).

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27 According to Anne Cheney, who wrote her 1984 biography, Hansberry covered the 1951 trials of Claudia Jones and Benjamin Davis, another activist in the CP, who were both prosecuted and convicted and imprisoned under the Smith Act (Cheney 18). Hansberry also covered the 1951 demonstration in Washington D.C. of the Sojourners for Truth and Justice, an organization of Black Communist Party Women. At the event Hansberry notes the absence of Jones due to her arrest.

28 During this time, Hansberry charged herself with organizing “artistic programs” that served as Black history lessons, one such program was about anti-lynching advocate Ida B. Wells (Cheney 19).
These engagements with Black international Left politics across the Atlantic were present when, in 1953, Hansberry encountered Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. Cheryl Higashida uses Hansberry’s unpublished 1957 essay “Simone De Beauvoir and the Second Sex: An American Commentary” to restate Hansberry’s internationalist position in relationship to the writer’s ambivalence towards existentialism. She writes, “Hansberry’s engagement with Beauvoirean existentialism illuminates a post-World War II Black feminism that was fostered by the nationalist internationalism of the Black anti-imperialist Left” (Higashida, “Anticolonialism” 900). If we follow Hansberry’s thoughts on Simone de Beauvoir we see the evidence of the influence of the Black Left, particularly in the basic chronology of her thinking.

In the essay, the first subject of address is the American woman. Though at places her assessments are certainly essentialist, Hansberry lays out in almost sociological fashion the various ways in which her American acquaintances accepted or dismissed *The Second Sex* according to their trade and marital status. The “attractive, young unmarried scientist,” and “the married-new-mother-engineer in her mid-twenties” dismiss the work for various reasons. However, Hansberry finds that among “the playwright-actress,” “the woman reviewer in the *Daily Worker,*” “the young, lovely blonde and vaguely literate secretary,” and herself, “the twenty-three year old woman writer,” the book finds welcome reception. She attributes these differences in response to the “innocence and ignorance of women themselves” as products of “the overt hostility of the enemy,” meaning American patriarchy (Hansberry, “Simone de Beauvoir” 129).

The next group to whom she turns, and this is telling, is the women of the American Communist Party. She writes, “As with the Negro question it seems American Marxists,
Communists in particular, have been far in advance in the western world in the recognition of the ‘woman question’” (130). In addition, writes Hansberry, “It is [American Communist women] who have noisily, unscientifically, improperly, harmfully, hysterically, neurotically -- and heroically -- battled to place the question of the status of women in its proper place in the consideration of the most advanced thinking section of American political action and thought” (132). Hansberry is here drawing a direct connection between the labors of the women of the American left and the subject of de Beauvoir’s book.

In this context, Hansberry’s last plays might be read not only within the intertextuality offered by her American contemporaries, such as Alice Childress, but also within the entwined intellectual movements outside the US, including African and Caribbean leftist and French philosophers such as Simone de Beauvoir and also the Martiniquan (French colonized) philosopher, Frantz Fanon. Towards this recognition Higashida writes that in her later work, “Hansberry’s Black Internationalist feminism evolved to explore lesbian desire as a site for undoing the intertwining of militarization, US Cold War nationalism, and heteropatriarchy” (Higashida, “Black Internationalist Feminism” 59). Projects such as The Movement and Les Blancs are then illuminated by recognizing the sophisticated ways in which the writer foregrounds feminism, US Cold War counter logic, antiracism, and anticolonialism in her creative activism, in her praxis.

In 1961 Lorraine Hansberry penned an essay for The Village Voice titled “Genet, Mailer, and the New Paternalism.” The article was partially in response to the American premiere of Genet’s absurdist play The Blacks: A Clown Show. She writes, “They are certain as their antecedents in all ages have been, that if the self-appointed ‘top’ of society is as utterly rotten as
it is, then the better side of madness must be the company and deistic celebration of ‘the bottom’
“(Hansberry, “The New Paternalism” 10). The new paternalism is then, the white male
patriarchal romanticization of subjugation, what Hansberry terms “romantic racism,” that then
gets perpetuated throughout the Atlantic, particularly through shared creative practices like
theatre. She further states:

At this moment, on both sides of the Atlantic, certain of the best men have sent up
a lament which is much concerned with the disorders of a civilization which they
do not really believe in their hearts are to be set aright by invocation of either
fresh “frontiers” or antique “grandeur.” Sensing the source of the disorders to be
deeper than any of that, they have willfully turned to the traditional route of
history’s more serious nay-sayers. They have elected the spirit and fraternity of
what the balance of society is always pleased to hope are “the damned”:
prostitutes, pimps, thieves, and general down-and-outers of whatever persuasion
(“The New Paternalism” 10).

The new paternalism is the conception that Black subjectivity can only exist as a mirrored
shadow of white subjectivity. It is “a conversation between white men about themselves” (“The
New Paternalism” 10, her emphasis).

In Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1940,
Mary Renda writes that paternalism was the ideological underpinning of U.S. American neo-
colonization. That paternalism was “crafted out of race, gender, and class relations in the United
States, and fueled by deeply felt personal histories and local relations of power.” (129). When
Hansberry evokes the “traditional route of history,” militarism, and “fraternity,” she is evoking
paternalism. In her creative work, paternalism became a lens through which she understood the conditions of Jim Crow America, capitalism, and decolonization.

**The Movement: Documentary of a Struggle for Equality**

“Misery may be theatrical to the onlooker but it hurts him who is miserable. That is what the blues are about.”

Lorraine Hansberry maintained a practice of working on multiple projects at once. This is what made it possible for her former husband, Robert Nemiroff, to produce many of her plays posthumously. One of Hansberry’s last projects that she would see brought to the public was not a play, but a photo/text collaborative book with photographers from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC Photo). The project materialized as *The Movement: A Documentary of a Struggle for Equality* (1964). In her book *Imprisoned in the Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle*, Leigh Raiford writes “*The Movement* visualizes the expansiveness of the civil rights movement in a way that would not be recognized so explicitly until some of the most recent waves of movement historiography” (117). As a collaborative project, the deep meaning of the book comes from the relationship of text to image and image to text, not the affect of the images alone. Raiford, working more explicitly on the ingenuity of SNCC organizers and their use of photography as a consciousness raising tool, only grazes Hansberry’s participation in this collective effort. Citing her first as an “African American playwright” then as a “chronicler of urban Black life predominantly,” Raiford’s reduction of Hansberry’s literary and activist role to nine brief words is, unfortunately, more typical than it is exceptional (71; 117). Drawing on the many varied images from the SNCC Photo Unit taken in places North and South, urban and rural, Hansberry’s words allow the
antiracist and feminist concerns that carried from the Poplar Front to the second wave of feminism to be written and visualized contiguously. This includes concerns such as: convict leasing (prison-industrial complex), nationalism and American identification (nationalism/post-nationalism), the splintering of the Civil Rights Movement into Southern vs. Northern problems (fragmentation of the Left), and what liberation meant (means) for not only the oppressed, but also for the oppressor.

It is important to state that The Movement, striking as it was, was not an altogether new form. It had antecedents in collaborative photo-poetry texts like The Sweet Flypaper of Life (1955), produced by photographer Roy Decarava and poet Langston Hughes, and also in the Richard Wright’s photo/text narrative 12 Million Black Voices (1941). Hughes and Wright were not only cultural workers, but also at different points in their lives, active voices of the Black Left. These kinds of collaborations were, and are, important. As used by Decarava and Hughes, Wright and the Farm Administration, and Hansberry and SNCC, they can be thought of as products of the continued use of creative forms from older leftist traditions. Projects like The Movement opened up possibilities for the involvement of cultural work(ers) in activist work by making use of photography as not only a tool of documentation but also as a creative witness, and allowing writers enter into a collective praxis.

For Lorraine Hansberry, there were moments of clarity about her creative efforts and activist work, but there were also murky periods. The writer more than once expressed frustration with what she perceived as a personal weakness for comfort. In a letter she wrote in June 1964, seven months before her death, she asks “Do I remain a revolutionary? Intellectually – without a doubt. But am I prepared to give my body to the struggle or even my comforts? This
is what I puzzle about” (Nemiroff and Hansberry 256, her emphasis). The labors of the mind and the labors of the body are split, in her case, between the labors of a sharp mind and a dying body. In a later letter from the same year, she wrote, “I rather looked forward to going to jail once. Now I can hardly imagine surviving it at all. Comfort. Apparently I sold my soul for it. I think when I get my health back I shall go into the South to find out what kind of revolutionary I am....” (Nemiroff and Hansberry, 257 her emphasis). That is, her work, at a desk in the quaint suburb of Croton-on-the-Hudson, New York, did not meet the feet-on-the-ground labors of the youth in the South. Began in 1963 and published in 1964, it is hard to imagine that time she spent, looking at, reading, living with these images, did not affect in her a sense that her own contribution as an artist seemed small. In the last stages of her illness, shuffling between home and hospital, Hansberry carried the forming movement, literally and metaphorically, with her, in a “new initialed dispatch case jammed with photos from the front lines...” (Nemiroff and Hansberry xx).

There is only a short list of scholarship on The Movement, which includes writing by Sara Blair and Leigh Raiford, as well as the informal writings Maurice Berger and photographer Dawoud Bey. With the exception of Sara Blair’s Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photograph in the Twentieth Century (2007), these texts focus broadly on the project’s use of photography/mass media and while only narrowly giving attention to Hansberry’s contribution. Blair writes, “[Lorraine] Hansberry used The Movement to experiment with narrative devices, associative logic, and ekphrastic resonances in ways that begin to depart from the modalities of well-made drama, bourgeois agency, and heterosexuality alike; in her work on photo-text it is possible to trace the beginnings of a new and experimental narrative stance” (201). The
Movement is however not a departure, but an extension of this kind of work for Hansberry, for her earlier work in newspapers, in theatre, and shouting in the streets of New York, prove that she had already began to experiment with form.

The Movement’s 123 pages contain 123 images. These images were produced not only by SNCC photographers like Danny Lyon and James Farmer, of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), but also by prominent photographers associated with post-WWII images of American life, Roy DeCarava and Robert Frank. The poetic arc of the book moves from the spatial imaginary of “The South,” to the pulse of this movement, the youth. In between, Hansberry weaves a broad and complicated image of this phase of the modern Civil Rights Movement into other narratives such as the US as a police-state, American patriotism, and armed resistance. She floats between various group collectivities, the relation of groups to the individual, i.e. protesters, police, school aged children on sidewalks, and individuals to groups in the form of photographs of single representatives from various organizations like Malcolm X and James Farmer. The images again and again reinforce the idea of “the movement,” meaning the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, as a battleground for imaging the nation. Whether that meant forming new chapters of the Ku Klux Klan, expanding prayer circles, or singing protest songs in the middle of the street organizing as collective units behind the common cause of the nation’s identity was the order of the day. These collectivities had to be en masse, they had to be captured on film, and they had to be recorded in writing. As a student of W.E.B. DuBois, who famously said “All Art is propaganda,” Lorraine Hansberry understood well this function of art (DuBois n.p.).
The active voice and image constructs are arranged in such a sequence as to produce an almost cinematic crescendo throughout *The Movement*. Opening the text is a medium close-up image of a stoic faced youth holding a vigorously hand drawn sign that reads “JUSTICE” (figure 1). Sara Blair states that the photograph is simultaneously “a form of evidence, a mode of sensation, a call to arms, a considered aesthetic artifact” (15). The page is formatted to allow the image to fill its entirety, excepting a simple white border that bleeds into the title page. What follows are the words of James Baldwin, a fellow activist and close friend of Lorraine Hansberry, giving what might be thought of as the opening credit: “It is a terrible, inexorable law that one cannot deny the humanity of another without diminishing one’s own. – James Baldwin.” (Hansberry, *The Movement* 5). Laid out in adjacent pages, text on the left and image on the right, Hansberry proceeds Baldwin with what reads simultaneously as an ethnographic study and the beginning of an epic narrative, “This is the road from Jackson to Yazoo City, leading into the Mississippi Delta country, the heart of the Deep South” (Hansberry, *The Movement* 6). The image is by SNCC photographer, Danny Lyon, and it depicts an undulating two lane Mississippi highway as the afternoon sun casts shadows of the surrounding woods across the roads (figure 2). It is a provocative and aesthetic entrance.

Juxtaposing images of the old Old South, of antebellum mansions being reclaimed by forests of magnolia trees and grass, with images of the new Old South, scenes of lifeless Black bodies hanging from trees among masses of white onlookers, Hansberry writes, “That is why for a long time, one of the South’s chief exports has been people (figures 3-4). Their destination; the ghettos of the North” (Hansberry, *The Movement* 14). Through her words, the disparate images

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29 This is an excerpt from James Baldwin’s *Nobody Knows My Name*, 1961.

30 I have included an appendix of some of the text from The Movement at the end of this document
of mansions in the countryside and lynching photography are intrinsically linked through the filmic narrative. The narrative, in its nowness, implicates a whole nation, north to south, in its telling. The past is always present.

“And then there is all of the complicated silliness that a system took so much trouble to create. The silly...and the unspeakable” (Hansberry, *The Movement* 24).

In the only other inclusion of lynching photography in the book, Hansberry connects a passive image of segregated drinking fountains – one labeled “COLORED” the other labeled “WHITE” – to the charred remains of Will Brown, a lynching victim who was accused of raping a white woman during Red Summer in Omaha, Nebraska (figures 5 and 6). The shot of the drinking fountains comprises the smaller of the two images, taking up only a little over the upper third corner of the left hand page. It carries the caption “And then there is all of the complicated silliness that a system took so much trouble to create. The silly...” (Hansberry, *The Movement* 24). The larger image of Will Brown’s remains is made to seem even larger because it is composed in such a way that it bleeds across the lower two-thirds of the two, facing pages, the caption reads “...and the unspeakable” (Hansberry, *The Movement* 25). She seamlessly ties the psychic aggression held in signage and spatial segregation to the physical violence of lynching and murder.

She returns to this theme of the passive and active racism of signs by using images of placards that direct the public to segregated waiting rooms (figure 7). Hansberry writes, "These laws which enforce segregation do not presume the inferiority of a people; they assume an inherent equalness. It is the logic of the lawmakers that if a society does not erect artificial barriers between the people at every point of contact, the people might fraternize and give their

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31 Lynching photography is its own genre of photography, amassed by the thoughts of murders carried out under vigilante justice across the U.S., see *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (2000)
attention to the genuine, shared problems of the community” (Hansberry, *The Movement* 26).\footnote{It has been pointed out to me that the deconstruction of the apparatus of segregation bears a certain resemblance to Stokley Carmichael’s speech from Greenberg, Mississippi.}

The first image is presumably taken outside of a military recruiting office, and is coupled with a photograph of a sign that reads, “DRIVERS LICENSE RENEWAL AND TEST COLORED.” Signboards that bear text such as “Let the World See you! U.S. ARMY” and “Be a Woman Marine,” are contradicted by a hazily focused sign reading “WHITE WAITING ROOM.” The space of the page becomes tangled in the inequality of separation and in the signs of militarism.

*The Movement’s* pages are filled with both provocation and banality that Hansberry elevates to the cinematic through her writing. These include images of children and the elderly sitting on porches, riding in cars, running, walking, singing, and shouting. Images of jail cell interiors and Harlem street corner preaching. Images of the well-known – Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Ossie Davis – as well as the less well known movement women and youth who marched and suffered but whose names are less frequently spoken – Fannie Lou Hamer, Gloria Richardson, and Annelle Ponder. Invoking a long history of antiracist insurgency, Hansberry includes other voices besides her own such as Black leftist and sociologist W.E.B. DuBois, abolitionist Frederick Douglass, Robert Williams, who has come to be associated with promoting armed resistance, and even “The Riflemen of Bennington” excerpted from a broadside from the first American Revolution.\footnote{Hansberry’s use of the text is purposed to make a not so subtle assertion that the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s is the second American Revolution.}

They stand in the hose fire at Birmingham; they stand in the rain at Hattiesburg. They are young, they are beautiful, they are determined. It is for us to create, now, an America that deserves them (Hansberry, *The Movement* 122).
In her final entry for the book, Hansberry cycles back towards where she began, in “the heart of the deep South” (Hansberry, The Movement 6). Through this geography she connects the politics of one generation to another, in the formation of a national belonging that has to be labored toward. The full page image of a youth, soaked from the Mississippi rain, looks out from the frame, directly implicating the reader/viewer into the conflict (figure 8). As one of her last published works, the sense of her longing for a future, that she will never see, is both fitting and haunting. Her ability to see beyond her present, with urgent and critical vision, spills beyond The Movement into one of her last plays, staged posthumously, Les Blancs.

Les Blancs

I cannot allow the devious purposes of white supremacy to lead me to any conclusion other than what may be the most robust and important one of our time: that the ultimate destiny and aspirations of the African peoples and twenty million American Negroes are inextricably and magnificently bound up together forever (Lorraine Hansberry quoted in Hansberry and Nemiroff, The Collected Last Plays 1994, 31)

Carrying certain parallels to Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Lorraine Hansberry’s posthumously produced play Les Blancs, follows a set of characters living in the mythic African country of Zatembe (Carter 27).34 A driving drumbeat, the Mission, and the Matoseh family hut are central characters in the play, standing as markers of colonization and racial separation. Though it has been suggested that the drama’s main protagonist is Tsehmbe Matoseh and his dilemma of fulfilling his revolutionary promise, I would argue that the balance of the play, to the playwright’s credit, does not actually yield a main protagonist (Abell 462, Effiong 274, Carter 28). Rather, the characters operate almost in a spiral, each contributing to the movement of the narrative towards its uncertain conclusion.

34 Carter is referring to the secondary story of the play, the death of the father and the uneven relationships of the brothers as near mirrors of Shakespeare’s Hamlet.
According to notes from her former husband, Robert Nemiroff, and files from her personal papers, now housed at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Lorraine Hansberry began working on the play that came to be titled *Les Blancs (The Whites)* in 1960 (Nemiroff and Hansberry 31; LHP). In her first jottings, the main protagonist was a woman, not a man, a change that is probably related to the unfolding narrative of independence through the iconography of male leaders, i.e. the jailing of Jomo Kenyatta and the murder of Patrice Lumumba. Hansberry continued making drafts on the project up until her death but, along with a few other projects including a number of plays and a novel, was not able to see it finished. In her wake, Nemiroff, as her confidante, former husband, and executor of her estate, worked to pull the play *Les Blancs* together as a strong cohesive text.\(^\text{35}\)

In the chronology of African independence movements, 1960, the year she began writing the drama, is three years after Kwame Nkrumah became Prime Minister of Ghana, the same year that Patrice Lumumba became Prime Minister of the Republic of Congo, and three years before Jomo Kenyatta was elected Prime Minister of Kenya. In the genealogy of Hansberry’s other creative work, she began *Les Blancs* on the heels of the massive success of her first play, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). This is nearly two years prior to the American premiere of Jean Genet’s *The Blacks: A Clown Show (Les Nègres)*, which would further propel Hansberry’s pursuit of *Les Blancs*.\(^\text{36}\)

Genet’s *The Blacks* was “a play that examines Black attainment of power and concludes that empowered Blacks would be as susceptible to corruption as ruling whites are” (Abell 460).

\(^{35}\) Nemiroff continued to revise *Les Blancs* after it was originally produced on stage in 1970. Some of the cuts are noticeably different in the standing version of the play which is given a final edit in 1983.

\(^{36}\) *Les Nègres* is more closely translated to “The Niggers,” a point of contention about the failure of language not missed on Lorraine Hansberry.
The actor and activist Ossie Davis believed that Genet’s play allowed white theatre goers “to be exposed to [racial hostility] in the safest possible fashion” (Higashida, “Black Internationalist Feminism” 61). According to Cheryl Higashida, the debates around Genet’s play from artists of the Black Left, like Ossie Davis, “centered on two related issues: the play’s suggestion that power universally corrupts, regardless of the race of those in power; and the effectiveness of the play’s exposure of white racism” (Higashida, “Black Internationalist Feminism” 61). Lorraine Hansberry was engaged in these debates about power and racism long before the Genet production reached the U.S. For Hansberry, *The Blacks* became a catalytic force as evidenced by her aforementioned essay “The New Paternalism” and the resultant *Les Blancs*. So where Genet provided safe exposure to racial hostility, particularly for white audiences, Hansberry’s used her own drama to produce and destabilize that safety for all possible audiences.

Both theatre scholar Margaret Wilkerson and Robert Nemiroff note that Hansberry was the first African American playwright to focus on connections between Black American and African liberation struggles, with a particular attention to the question of violence (Hansberry and Nemiroff 18; 31). Hansberry’s drama of decolonization, engages what she felt Jean Genet lacked in *The Blacks*. She explores what Nancy Tuana terms the viscous, porosity of racism and colonization, the mutual effect of oppression both on those on whom it is imposed and those who do the imposing.\(^*37\) *Les Blancs* expresses an advanced, radical understanding of the dialectics of domination. She states “...it is the sameness of kind which oppressors most despise in the oppressed; that they do not lynch or castrate dogs or apes as a way of life because they do not find their own images in those creatures” (“New Paternalism” Hansberry, 14). Echoing James

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Baldwin’s sentiments used in *The Movement*, “that one cannot deny the humanity of another without diminishing one’s own,” Hansberry redoubles the idea of the importance of recognition in (re)gaining one’s humanity.

The play opens without dialogue, only the sound of a “talking” drum, a drummer, and the first appearance of THE WOMAN, who, alone, possesses the spotlight of the stage. Before her, is a spear staked in the ground. She takes hold, and extends it toward the sky. She is a revolutionary. Although THE WOMAN functions as an absent presence, an apparition, throughout much of the drama, she is never inconsequential to the events. It is she who begins the play, and it is she who haunts Tshembe’s life outside of Zatembe. He states, “I have known her to gaze up at me from puddles in the streets of London; from vending machines in the New York subway. Everywhere” (Hansberry and Nemiroff 55-56). Hansberry has in other plays, such as *Raisin*, manipulated the subtlety of revolutionary opposition through the layering of the characters’ attributes. Margaret Wilkerson writes, for example, of the character Lena Younger, the mother in *Raisin*, that “Mama may seem to be merely conservative and clinging to an older generation,” however “it is she who, in fact, is the mother of revolutionaries; it is she who makes possible the change and movement of the generation” (Agho 138). The same may be true about the womanist presence, literally THE WOMAN, that lingers over *Les Blancs*. Though it has been suggested that the presence of THE WOMAN is meant to signal the return of colonized people to a pre-colonial “mother Africa,” I would argue that Hansberry’s understanding of paternalism was more sophisticated than this. That is, Hansberry understood the real and symbolic use of women as reproducers, as child-rearers, as perpetuators of the nation-state. In
Les Blancs the future of the nation is not in THE WOMAN’s womb, but at the cutting edge of her spear.

The other characters of the play are given less dramatic, but no less visionary introductions. In the initial scene of the play, the seemingly docile porter, Peter, is escorting the American journalist, Charlie Morris, into the Mission compound for a meeting. Charlie is there to observe and interview the Rev. Torvald Neilsen, about the great missionary who has been working dutifully with the natives for so long that he is believed to be “practically one of the natives” (Hansberry and Nemiroff 19). This comment is made upon Charlie Morris’s introduction to Dr. Marta Gotterling, the only unmarried woman of the two women residing in the Mission. To this, Marta responds that the Reverend is “not really one of them. More like their father. Like our father, too. We are all his children” (Hansberry and Nemiroff 19). The paternalism of the colony is present, from the outset of the play, not only in the Mission, a microcosm of the colonized world, but in all of the relations that are a product of this incursion.

Other characters of the play include Dr. Willy DeKoven, another medical doctor in the Mission. Madame Neilsen, wife of the absent Reverend Neilsen. Major George Rice, the “Colonial Reserve Officer” who, in Neilsen’s absence, acts as a paternalistic space holder – enforcing curfews, assigning tasks, and meting out punishments. There are the three brothers: Eric, the youngest who is mixed raced, Abioseh, the oldest, and Tshembe, middle brother who, upon coming home to bury his father, is drawn into the bloody unfolding revolution.38 Tshembe has been living in London, studying, participating in independence talks, and working for

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38 The characters relate to Eric as a liminal being. Marginally accepted amongst the Kwi there is always an underlying reference to a part of him that will always be “white” and therefore not to be wholly trusted. These interactions influence the decisions that Eric will make about his role in the coming revolution.
another present/absent figure of the play, Amos Kumalo. The threat of both the retention and the expulsion of the colonial powers is always lingering in the actions and dialogues of the play. Abioseh, has decided to become a Catholic priest, taking a Catholic name, believing this to be the best role for him in the post-colony, when it peacefully arrives. Abioseh, eventually dies at the hands of his brother Tshembe, while Eric, who has been left in the fallout of the Mission, sides with the Zatembe opposition, who are, in Hansberry’s visionary writing, constantly referred to as “terrorists.” The product of the rape of his mother, a Kwi woman, by a military officer, later revealed as Major Rice, Eric’s very presence always signals the contradiction of the colonial project – civilization via savagery, salvation via destruction, division and taking a side. Eric is also engaged in a homosexual relationship with Dr. Willy DeKoven, and while it is not clear whether this relationship is completely consensual, the relationship does destabilize the heteropatriarchal assumptions we might make about this society. I argue that this is a part of Hansberry’s challenge to the scripting of gay and lesbian activist involvement in social movements as it is Eric, the homosexual, mixed raced brother who is the first to join the insurrection, challenging the racial essentialism and “homophobic ideologies of Black nationalism” (Higashida, “Black Internationalist Feminism” 77).

Throughout the play’s dialogues, Hansberry has embedded an ambivalence, or distrust, for peace talks. This is not to diminish her own position as a peace advocate, but rather to suggest that Hansberry understood first, that peace could not be attained by the will of the oppressed alone, and second, that peace would have to be struggled toward. For Lorraine Hansberry, peace could not be gained apart from substantive structural justice, and colonization.

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39 As the narrative unfolds we will learn that, like Jomo Kenyatta and Patrice Lumumba, Kumalo has been arrested on re-entering the country on charges of plotting an insurrection. At the open ending of the play, his fate, alive or disappeared, is left undetermined.
represented a multiple violent injustices (Lieberman 208). In *Les Blancs*, Hansberry uses a long conversation between Tshembe Matoseh, the intellectual and hesitant insurgent, and Charlie Morris, the American journalist, to stage this ambivalence. Taking up nine full pages of dialogue, excerpted below, the conversation sounds out its own impotence.

TSHEMBE. Yes, I was in the South! And yes, I did find the situation there absolutely enraging!

CHARLIE. You really can’t come off it, can you! Why the hell should it be so hard for us to talk, man! Christ, all I want to do is talk!

TSHEMBE. And just why should we be able to “talk” so easily? What is this marvelous nonsense with you Americans? For a handshake, a grin, a cigarette and half a glass of whiskey you want three hundred years to disappear – and in five minutes! Do you really think the rape of a continent dissolves in cigarette smoke? This is Africa, Mr. Morris, I am an African, not one of your simpering American Negroes sitting around discussing admission to country clubs!

CHARLIE. You know even less about American Negroes than you think you know about me!

TSHEMBE. Perhaps my obsessions have made me myopic! In this light for instance, I really cannot tell you from Major Rice!

Thus, Hansberry opens the door to an infinite accusatory space. Morris, accuses Tshembe of thinking too narrowly, reading too African-centrically. Tshembe mirrors back the accusation of ignorance, pointing out Morris’s mistaken motivations for his desire “to talk” and even his choice to travel to Zatembe. Notably, the American South is the only point of comparative politics Charlie Morris is able to bring to the conversation. Tshembe agrees that the situation is “enraging,” but sees the holes in Morris’s invocation of the South. He relates it to the over generalizing liberal view that all Black struggles are the same; this is a critical and self-reflexive problematic that Hansberry creates. Tshembe asserts that the violence of colonization
has a different history and politics of location than the movement in the Southern United States. In asserting that “This is Africa…I am an African,” Tshembe averts the all too easy conflation of American anti-racist struggles and African decolonization struggles. I argue that even in this refutation of Morris’s common sense logic, a common cartography of struggle is still present in the reading of the conversation as a whole. The scene might be seen as a way for Hansberry to work through these questions about the limits of comparing transatlantic struggles over liberation, and domination. Note the blatant accusation that lies in Tshembe’s statement “In this light…I really cannot tell you from Major Rice!” (Hansberry and Nemiroff 51). The American South and the African colonies are tied, in struggles of the power and paternalism represented by Morris and Rice, although not, perhaps, in their goals. In this way, Hansberry’s work dislocates power from simple Black and white reductions. The dialogue continues:

CHARLIE. Tshembe, if we can’t find ways to build bridges – to transcend governments, race, the rest of it – starting from whatever examples we have – then we’ve had it. Which is in fact why I came here.

TSHEMBE. To this Mission? –

CHARLIE. To this Mission.

TSHEMBE. Mr. Morris, I am touched truly. But tell me, did you just happen to come by way of Zatembe? (Charlie nods) Then you must have seen the hills there and the scars in them? The great gashes whence came the silver, gold, diamonds, cobalt, tungsten? Tell me, Mr. Morris, are there scars in the hills of Twin Forks Junction – cut by strangers? Well, that, you see is the difference: we know you are – and we have known it for a very long time? I like your glistening eyes, dear man, and your dream of “bridges,” but the fact of the matter is that those great gashes have everything to do with this Mission – and human transcendence virtually nothing!

CHARLIE. Matoseh, I don’t believe it – that you can sit here, under this very roof where you learned to read and write – and deny the evidence of your own eyes! The dedication of those who came here –
TSHEMBE. I do not deny it. It is simply that the conscience, such as it is, of imperialism...is irrelevant.

CHARLIE. Oh for Christ’s sake man! “Imperialism!” Can’t we, even for five minutes, throw away yesterday’s catchwords?! The sacrifice that these people –

TSHEMBE. (Jumping up) “Sacrifice.” There, you see, it is impossible! You come thousands of miles to inform us about “yesterday’s catchwords”? Well, it is still yesterday in Africa, Mr. Morris, and it will take a million tomorrows to rectify what has been done here –

To this, Charlie Morris gives the overly simple, liberal response, “You hate all white men, don’t you Matoseh?” (Hansberry and Nemiroff 1972, 53). The conversation breaks down. Tshembe has failed Morris’s desires for him. In her essay “The New Paternalism,” Hansberry writes “…the anticipations of white men shall be disappointed if the Blacks really do give more attention to building steel mills and hydroelectric plants throughout Africa than to slitting a few hundred thousand criminal throats” (“The New Paternalism” 14). Tshembe thinks and speaks in a way that shatters Morris’s romantic racist projections of him. The statement “You hate all white men, don’t you…,” is an attempt to goad Tshembe back into his place, as a miroiry shadow of white male fantasy. True to Hansberry’s theory of the new paternalists, Morris wants a conversation ultimately about himself.

The play’s last scenes of fratricide, the burning Mission, and African revolt, might suggest that the author saw no other resolution to the problem of colonization. It is perhaps indicative of a shared ideology with her contemporary, Frantz Fanon, who wrote, “The colonized subject discovers reality and transforms it through his praxis, his deployment of violence and his agenda for liberation” (Fanon 21). However, Hansberry reveals her own uncertainty about the looming struggle for African independence in the final image she draws. We find Tshembe, having killed his brother Abioseh, cradling the dead body of Madame Neilsen, screaming
towards the sky in anguish. Having decided a series of actions that began with his decision to return to Zatembe for his father’s funeral and ending with the death of Abioseh, Tshembe grieves for what has happened as well as for what is to come. It is a risky ending to give to the work, allowing the character to express such ambivalence given the social climate of the 1960s, but it shows a playwright unafraid of a certain amount of vulnerability. Tshembe’s grief, I believe, is an echo of Hansberry’s own, a means of integrating the frustrations she expressed about her “comfort” into her creative work. Her experiential knowledge became praxis.

Though she has been recognized for her groundbreaking work on her first play *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lorraine Hansberry remains a rather marginal character in the larger narrative of the American Left. Further, creative work, has, with few notable exceptions, been considered separately from her work as an activist/essayist. This might be, of course, related to her young death and, until recently, the unavailability of her unpublished papers, unfinished plays, and correspondences. Alternately, it points to the larger issue of visibility of Black Leftist women and the divorce of cultural production from political work.

Such revisions and inclusions would mean a new narrative of the American and transnational Left. It would mean that the failure narratives of the post-Civil rights and post-Black Power movement would hold considerably less purchase because ideas, unlike humans, are not mortal. It would mean that there is room for more feminist work to be done not only in academic spaces, but in the streets, in galleries, and in theaters. It would mean a different reading of the work(ings) of Art, a recontextualization of work from later generations of artists loosely tied to the transatlantic Left, like Black Audio Film Collective and the Otolith Group, which I will discuss in the next chapter. It would mean that our positionality as writers and readers is
always implicated in the stories we tell, something Lorraine Hansberry understood well. In her words:

*The next time you pass a demonstration, hum a little or clap your hands, pick up the words. Perhaps the time after that you will join in and sing -- for my freedom and for yours. You, I mean you, my countryman, reading this.* (Hansberry *The Movement* 141, 1964)
figure 1
Photograph, Declan Haun, Black Star
figure 2
Photograph, Danny Lyon
In the countryside, between the towns, familiar images of the Old South are conjured up...
The laws which enforce segregation do not presume the inferiority of a people; they assume an inherent equalness. It is the logic of the lawmakers that if a society does not erect artificial barriers between the people at every point of contact, the people might fraternize and give their attention to the genuine, shared problems of the community.
figure 8
Photograph, Danny Lyon
Chapter Three

Historicity and the Avant Garde:
Some Notes on the Affinities of Black Audio Film Collective

The 1960s is as much a set of collective uncertainties as it is a locatable past. The list of dates to the left represents an abridged timeline of the decade. It is included here as a means to visually chronologize some of the landmark events that marked this fervent era. The visualization of this sequence of dates allows these events to be situated within an interrelated cartography of struggle that links lines of power and resistance across the Black Atlantic (Mohanty; Gilroy 1993). This is not to suggest that the political exchanges, dislocations, and cultural mutations that comprise the Black Atlantic were limited to the Sixties. As I have shown in the work of Claudia Jones and Lorraine Hansberry, movements from the 1930s Harlem Renaissance, to the mid-century Popular Front and Black Internationalism, to the second wave of feminism were rife with transnational connections. Beginning at the 1960s offers us a moment of coalescence, not a point of origin as such a moment is not locatable, but a point of entry for thinking about the formation of ...
of Black collectivity. Of particular interest here, is the work of Black British artist collectives, specifically, Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC), and the ways in which the 1960s as a moment of political fervor around African and American nationalisms resurged in the work they produced from 1982 to 1998.

Born out of the tension between (de)colonization and national formations, this group poses a messy problematic for writing, and making visual, a concise history of relations between Black artists and transnational radical politics. Indeed, the subject of a number of their films deals with the legacy of political struggles of the 1960s. Testament (1988) deals peripherally with the legacy of Kwame Nkrumah, likewise the 1993 film, Seven Songs for Malcolm X (1993), deals with the afterlife of Malcolm X. However, through a postmodern vein, they eschew easy categorizations that would allow them to be placed neatly within this conception of “Black” and “collectivity.” As such, the goal in this essay is to disrupt the neat categories in which they might be placed, in order to map the sociopolitical terrain from which these collective practices emerge. I examine the work not as an illustrative response to these past-present events, but as cultural critique – as creative intervention into the grand narratives of nation building – while engaging the meta-histories of pasts and presents, of presences and absences, and the instability of the British post-colony.

Filmmaking as a Transatlantic Cultural Praxis

“Constructing an appropriate image, an image of intimacy and truth, involved waging war on the image-machine itself because the default settings of cinema were antithetical – hostile even – to the very possibility of a Black film” (Akomfrah 22).

40 I am using “Black collectivity” here to describe the temporary political groupings of Black identified people, instituted in moments of crisis. I borrow the term from Darlene Clark Hine’s essay “The Black Collectivity and the Culture of Struggle,” where Hine uses the term to refer “to people of African descent who because of their historical experiences with global dispersal, slavery, segregation, discrimination, and disfranchisement forged a sociopolitical culture that encouraged and applauded struggle, resistance, and individual achievement to meet the needs of the people burdened by American racism.”
It is necessary to begin with the importance of filmmaking as a transatlantic critical cultural practice. Independence posed a fruitful problematic for African filmmakers. The provocative question, “What happens to the concept of the nation after a national liberation struggle?” became a provocative question and a point of departure for many involved in the movement to rewrite the African subject (Rosen 28). Speaking largely to feminist concerns of epistemology, like which truth will prevail, film lent itself to the space of the Black Atlantic in a similar and simultaneous path as other branches of the arts had, i.e. newspapers, plays, fiction literature. Black feminist epistemology “investigates the standards used to assess knowledge or what we believe to be true” (Collins 252). In many ways a “borderless cinema,” for this first generation of African filmmakers film was used as an epistemological tool to stimulate political awareness about experiences of colonized and formerly colonized people throughout the transatlantic (Petty 74; Ukadike 106). Filmmakers like Ousmane Sembène, Djibril Diop Mambéty, and Med Hondo who lived through British colonization and witnessed independence, were foundational to later generations of Black filmmakers across the transatlantic, like BAFC and throughout the transatlantic world as they provided an example of the ways in which film might be used to critique racial mythologies of imperialism. In his essay “Digitopia and the Spectres of Diaspora,” John Akomfrah writes that among that first generation “…a Black cinema had to, of necessity emerge as a deconstruction of cinema’s regimes of truth because it was also simultaneously, a critique of prevailing raciological orthodoxy.” He continues, “…any possibility of a Black cinema had to see itself (and many did) as characterized by a ‘double move,’ an agnosticism towards the claims of truth of both documentary and fiction idioms” (22-23). From that group, new means of story telling and image making were invented, landing in the work of
filmmakers from Haile Gerima (*Bush Mama*, 1979; *Sankofa*, 1993), Sankofa Film Collective (*Territories*, 1984) and Julie Dash (*Daughters of the Dust*, 1991), to name just a few. Artists of British film collectives were a generation of academically trained artists. In an interview artist Isaac Julien, a former member of Sankofa Film and Video, states, “It was precisely because we went to university and because of the 1981 riots, that we could then pull together and make an intervention into the media” (Fusco 23). He is pointing to multiple convergences: the meeting of first and second generation British immigrants with the British education system, the collective “we” that emerged from it, and the phenomena of the 1981 Brixton riots that preceded their entrance into film. Working in the 1980s, collectives like Black Audio glanced backward from their present positions toward independence movements and their aftermath where their predecessors like Semebène and Hondo, and dramatist Lorraine Hansberry could only imagine the profound impact that independence movements might bring. These antecedents were beginning to intervene in the ways in which artists might make interventions into “knowledge politics” (Eshun 39).

**On the Conditions of the Emergence of Black Audio Film Collective**

On April 11, 1981, “brixton went up in flames” (Bishop n.p.). The exact cause of the outbreak is still unclear; to some this was a race riot, to others a youth riot, and to still others “an anti-police affray” (Peach 397). What is known is that on the evening of April 11, the arrest of a Black youth sparked a fuse that had been continually shortening at least since the Notting Hill Riots of 1958 mentioned in Chapter 1. Journalist Patrick Bishop states, “I can still recall, with almost psychedelic clarity, the moment that it started – a brick arcing through the air, the crunch of an imploding police van windscreen and the glitter of flying glass in the afternoon
sunshine” (Bishop n.p). In Bishop’s recollection, the poetic beauty of his words stand in sharp contrast to the ugly violent encounter that ensued.

Referred to in the press as “Bloody Saturday,” the Brixton riots were given a discursive affinity to March 7, 1965 in Selma, Alabama. Though these are certainly two separate events, with two separate histories, at the heart of each lay the risk of violence Black bodies encounter(ed) as they enter public space. In 1968 Conservative Party politician Enoch Powell, MBE gave his now infamous speech “Rivers of Blood,” in which he prophesied that the continued influx of immigrants from Britain’s (post)colonial holdings would lead to a racial terror that would, like Virgil’s *Aeneid*, leave the river Thames “foaming with much blood” (*The Daily Telegraph* n.p.). For some observers, the 1981 riots were Powell’s prophecy come to pass: “The riots were a sort of harsh education crash course for bewildered citizens who had believed that it could not happen here or had trusted to the long patience of the English character to accept the bad times somehow. Now they know better” (Mollie Panter-Downs quoted in Minkel n.p.).

Now considered a “minor skirmish” from the political theatre of Margaret Thatcher’s England, the tensions of 1981 would produce riots elsewhere in England including Handsworth, Southall, and Toxteth. Those hot, restless summer months would lead to the arrest of more than four thousand citizens.41

Also in 1981, the Association of Cinematography, Television and Allied Technicians (ACTT) created the ACTT Workshop declaration, which allowed nonprofit media organizations greater access to production and operating funds; this made organizing as a workshop, a

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41 As mentioned in Chapter 1 there were riots in earlier years preceding the Brixton and Handsworth riots. There were also riots in later years. These incidents with police would however, force a change in policing practices over the decades.
collective, more sustainable than working individually.\textsuperscript{42} This same year, the Labour Party won the majority in the Greater London Council (GLC). This win by the Left would bring about a short span of progressive cultural policy, largely in response to the 1981 Brixton riots. This body of policy included the creation of the Ethnic Minorities Committee, within which were housed the Black Arts Division and the development of Channel 4, a public channel developed expressly to address the lack of images of Black Britons in the British media. Channel 4 would fund a number of documentaries by the burgeoning film collectives. It is during this time that collectives such as Sankofa Film and Video (1983), Ceddo Film and Video Workshop (1982), and the Black Audio Film Collective (1982) were established. Coupled with the Workshop Declaration, more funding was opened up to racial minority groups, particularly, though not exclusively, to those interested in film and video. The GLC met its demise in 1986, the culmination of a campaign began in 1983 by Margaret Thatcher to eliminate the council (Fusco; Bianchini).\textsuperscript{43} In spite of this, many of the collectives that were able establish an audience for themselves continued to make work.

Since their inception, the Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC) has made a practice of blurring material and discursive borders through their image making. Working with documents and archival footage, but oppositional to documentary filmmaking, the scope of Black Audio Film Collective’s work includes film works, film and audio installations, and tape slide projects. One of their first films, \textit{Handsworth Songs} (1986), was an experiment into oppositional documentary, dealing explicitly with the Handsworth riots of 1985. BAFC’s sixteen year career

\textsuperscript{42} Different sources cite the exact year that the Workshop declaration was created, I am using the date cited in ‘Young, British, and Black: The Work of Sankofa and Black Audio Film Collective.’

\textsuperscript{43} It is not clear that this is the actual year that Ceddo was established. This is however the year that two of its members, Menilik Shabazz and Imruh Bakari Caesar established Kuumba Productions company. The Collective would produced its first documentary for Channel 4, \textit{The People’s Account}, in 1985.
includes eleven feature length film/video works, various media research projects, documentation of various events and public meetings the group was involved in during the 1980s (i.e. the Trade Union Congress held in 1984, an interview with C.L.R. James), and a number of other collaborative projects between BAFC and their artist contemporaries.44

BAFC emerged at a crucial time in American - British politics and film history. Their work responded not only to Thatcher and Reaganite social repressions, but also to the world of image-history politics in which they found themselves beginning their film practices. Their moment of emergence was amidst the images of Black disorderly bodies of Brixton and Handsworth rioters, the iconography of the slow wane of the Black Power Movement, and newly forming theories of culture, particularly those formed from factions of the New Left.

Speaking about the development of cultural theory that was produced from the pages of the New Left Review during and after his tenure there, Stuart Hall cites three reasons for this development:

First, because it was in the cultural and ideological domain that social change appeared to be making itself most dramatically visible. Second, because the cultural dimension seemed to us not a secondary, but a constitutive dimension of society. (This reflects part of the New Left’s long-standing quarrel with the reductionism and economism of the base–superstructure metaphor.) Third, because the discourse of culture seemed to us fundamentally necessary to any language in which socialism could be re-described. The New Left therefore took the first faltering steps of putting questions of cultural analysis

44 The media research projects were never made public, but are discussed in the book project Ghosts of Songs, curated by Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar.
and cultural politics at the centre of its politics (Stuart Hall, “Life and Times of the First New Left.” 187).

The mass materialization of Black subjects onto British soil after WWII posed a new potential for the socialist project of the Left, and this tension would come to fever pitch in the generation of Black collectives.

Weaned on legacies of dying colonialisms, as well as anti-racist movements from the US to South Africa, I argue that Black collectives in Britain also emerged in relation to Black US collectives of the 1960s and 1970s. The Black Arts Movement of the American 1960s is an important predecessor to the emergence of BAFC. As a movement of both individuals and collectives such as the Black Arts Repertory Theatre in Harlem, and OBAC in Chicago, the Black Arts Movement proceeded from a moment of crisis not unlike the 1980s, when Black artists were merging social criticism with cultural practice. Though artists in the US Black Arts Movement were working in mediums such as theater, poetry, and visual artists, both groups of art workers shared a fundamental interest in deconstruction. BAFC artist John Akomfrah writes that for film artists, “a Black cinema had to, of necessity, emerge as deconstruction of cinema’s regimes of truth because it was also, simultaneously, a critique of prevailing raciological orthodoxy” (Akomfrah 22). Where they diverge is in what they are deconstructing. Writing a treatise on the movement in 1968 for The Drama Review Larry Neal states: “The Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the Western cultural aesthetic...The cultural values inherent in western history must either be radicalized or destroyed, and we will probably find that even radicalization is impossible” [my emphasis]. The “impossibility” inherent to the forming of oppositional praxis of is one that BAFC is wholly immersed in, i.e. the impossibility
of film to capture meta-narratives of history. Neal later cites writer Don L Lee (later Haki Madhubuti) in quoting, “We must destroy Faulkner, dick, jane, and other perpetrators of evil. It’s time for DuBois, Nat Turner, and Kwame Nkrumah.” Lee is critiquing the pedagogy of empire and colonization, and again though from a different lens, this is a strategy of the film forms of BAFC.

In spite of some shortcomings of part of Neal’s essay that have to do with his ahistorical analysis of previous generations of Black intellectuals and a racially essentialist view of anti-racist politics, Neal does raise some notable questions: “The new aesthetic is mostly predicated on an Ethics which asks the question: whose vision of the world is finally more meaningful, ours or the white oppressors? What is truth? Or more precisely, whose truth shall we express, that of the oppressed or of the oppressors? These are basic questions.” These are also feminist, epistemological concerns. In this regard, Neal’s essay reflects Patricia Hill Collins statement that “far from being the apolitical study of truth, epistemology points to the ways in which power relations shape who is believed and why” (Collins 252). In various forms, questions of truth and power were addressed and re-articulated during the 1980s in the work of young Black Britons. No longer issues of “Blacks” vs. “whites,” or hierarchies of meaningfulness, the work of Black Audio would constitute a response to a set of nationalist struggles which would, like Neal, question how/can one radicalize an inherited archive of myths?

There were certainly collectives in Britain in the 1980s like BLK Art Group, who remained faithful to the positivity of the identity politics of groups like OBAC of the 1960s; however, for the BAFC it was important to assert a critical “agnostic” approach toward stable categories of identification. As Kodwo Eshun astutely observes, “The ‘Black’ in Black Audio
Film Collective was not informed by the kinds of identification with post-war Pan-Africanism and the 1960s Black Arts Movement favoured by the BLK Art Group; the Collective distanced itself from the ancestralist imperative invoked by film-makers such as Menelike Shabazz; it remained unconvinced and skeptical of the leftist faith in working-class Black youth as a potential agent of revolution.” (Eshun, 75). Note that identification with is not equivalent to wholly divorced from “post-war Pan-Africanism and the 1960s Black Arts Movement.” It is my argument that the 1960s as a political concept carried a kind of viscous ideology, one that allowed these artists to see to the geo-political terrain of Pan-Africanism simultaneously as past, present, and future. Like Don L. Lee, caught in the borderlands of Dick and Jane and Nat Turner, they belong to a critical genealogy of not only Louis Althusser, Raymond Williams, Jacques Lacan, but also W.E.B. DuBois, Frantz Fanon, and Aimé Césaire. Their films are constructed in the layering, fragmenting, and splicing of image and sound, mimicking the dislocation and mutation of Black transatlantic experiences to “simultaneously call upon and fiercely rebuke notions of location ethnicity and identity as a priori certainties” (John Akomfrah quoted in Kodwo Eshun 78). The work of BAFC signifies on a form of storytelling, slippages in experiential knowledge that exploded the limitations of Black box illustrative film forms. Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar, members of a contemporary Black British collective known as the Otolith Group, formed in 2002, write that “the work of BAFC seemed to us not only to complement but to complicate these notions of document, testimony, witness and archive; indeed in its richness and its gravitas, their art posed fundamental questions to image and sound by way of image and sound; questions that invited us to reconfigure the orthogonal orthodoxies of the Black box” (Eshun and Sagar ,13).
I am a new animal now, a reptile, born at sea cursed to roam the earth without
dreaming without speaking, stealing other voices, living in other bodies and
places…— Abena, Testament (1988)

In my introduction, I focused primarily on the 1960s, but as a precursor to the 1966
military coup in Ghana, 1957 was also an important year. That year marked Ghanian
independence and the ascension of Kwame Nkrumah as head of state and proponent of African
Socialism. Nkrumah is, peripherally, the subject of BAFC’s 1988 film, Testament. Like other
works by Black Audio Film Collective Testament (1988) layers multiple narratives
simultaneously. Staged on the already unreliable recollections of personal memories, the
filmmakers made a film that in no simple form practices the often hidden precariousness of
documentary work. Through the experiences of London journalist, and former Ghanian student
activist, Abena, viewers are launched into questions of dislocated identities, nation making,
history telling, and image production. Abena has returned to Ghana after 20 years in exile to
report on the making of another film, Corba Verde (1987), by German artist Werner Herzog.
Film scholar Sheila Petty writes, “Testament employs ‘return’ as a device to mythologize the
notion of unadulterated origin by evoking slippage between personal and national histories” (80).
Images of the Ghanian present, watery and haunted by the ruins of the past, are woven into
images of Ghana’s past – Kwame Nkrumah’s election, the anti-communist surge, the military
coup. I hold the impetus for the film until the end of this section as it was a guiding, but
peripheral, set of questions and it is perhaps more interesting to think about the effects of the film
before having a sense of its origin.
*Testament* (1988), begins with a purposefully all too brief text recounting the Ghanian politics between 1957 and 1966, from Independence to the overthrow of the Socialist Party by military coup. The scrolling white text reads across the Black screen, “The scenario has haunted African politics since.” (*Testament*). The text acts as a means of foreshadowing in the film, for example foreshadowing the use of color overlays in segments of the film, the text also states that blue, Black, and red are Ghanian colors of mourning. The opening states, “Rivers are Ga gods/goddesses of memory,” the first of many referents to water and rivers through out the film (*Testament*). The text also acts as a means of breaking the powerful illusion that the screen, and thereby the film itself, as anything more than a projected reality. Quoting poet Polish poet, Zbegniew Herbert, one of the opening inter-titles states:

> All we have left is the place the attachment to the place we still rule over the ruins of temples… if we lose the ruins nothing will be left.
> Zbegniew Herbert
> *from* Report from Besieged City and Other Poems

The film then fades into an inflamed morning sky – a red mourning sky – and pans across an arid landscape of the silhouetted forms of buzzards and leafless trees. A man enters from the left wearing a fedora, white shirt, and khaki pants. He has removed his jacket and lays it across a low shrub. The man proceeds to walk into a clay-colored body of water, deeper, and deeper still. He takes a pause as the water reaches his waist to sink the remainder of his body beneath the waters surface. Simultaneously baptizing and drowning himself he turns face-down into the terra cotta river. He emerges only briefly to re-immers himself, this time, face up. The sequence places the viewer and the character alike in the “turbulent rivers of memory” (Mercer 63). According to Kobena Mercer the scene is then “an unmasterable realm that offers the promise of renewal as
well as the danger of drowning” (Mercer 63). The present past encounter is framed as trauma, death, and as rebirth.

Before we are introduced to Abena the journalist, we are presented with the image of two conjoined twin babies; the image is not a stable one but rather ripples, mimicking the flow of the rivers. Over the course of the film, the babies will return only a few times, but enough that, the illusion of the film is broken. Sheila Petty suggests that the presence of the conjoined twins is used by John Akomfrah to construct “a visual metaphor depicting the interdependence of personal and national histories. When that interdependence is sundered, the two traumatized isolations that result cannot be reunited into the original whole” (Petty 80). A jarring image to absorb in the scope of the films other images, I argue that their conjoined bodies signal a different trauma, the immature phase of a violent separation – one that is all sensory, almost pre-lingual, whose scar is the only evidence of its occurrence.

Abena enters on water, she is being driven in boat across the Volta. She does not speak, but a voice-over tells us that she was a student at the Nkrumah Ideological Institute in 1966 when the coup began. The filmmakers made use of documentary footage in the film to re-create, or impose, a sense of Abena’s memory. The images are masked in yellows, blues, and reds – yellow being one of the colors of Ghana’s national flag and the other colors referencing mourning.

In these early sequences, we are not sure what is Abena’s purpose. At first encountering no one, then a woman farmer, Danzo, who does not speak back to her, Abena appears to be a ghost. We later learn why. Abena states, “Three months after the coup, those who had a chance made a pact with history. They were taken over with silence and history would shelter them from the
violence of events” (*Testament*). In a way then, as a journalist, speech-enabled by her trade, Abena is a ghost, a haunting reminder of the 1966 death of Nkrumah’s socialist project. Abena is a reminder of the complicated histories of social movements. While her story is never fully revealed, it is slowly exposed that her exile is the result of her acting in some capacity as an informant against her fellow students, fellow Leftists. This disclosure of her position lingers over the documentary footage of Republic Day in 1960, around the sound footage that speaks of Chinese communists corrupting Nkrumah and his cabinet. This disclosure of lingers over the footage of the public burning of a mountain of Marxist and Communist books. It lingers over the death of Kwame Nkrumah, who died in Bucharest in 1972 and was then returned to Ghana for burial – this is captured in the film as archival footage of his funeral. Cutting between images of Abena lying in recline are images of the Nkrumah similarly posed in his casket. Abena’s voice announces, “Nkrumah died three times. Once in 1966 out of necessity, then again in Romania out of failure, and a third time to bare himself to his enemies” (*Testament*). In the alienation of her exile, and the shame of her actions that she references throughout the film, it is suggested that Abena has suffered each of these deaths as well, yet her life in exile has placed her at a distance from the possibility of grieving.

Contextualizing the absence of Abena’s grief, cultural critic Kobena Mercer writes, “Abena survives the river of memory for almost eighty minutes only to find that she must now initiate her grief and begin mourning *for the very first time*” (Mercer 58). The very last sequence of the film finds Abena, among the ruins of the cemetery at the site of a desecrated grave. From her position above the burial place she can see the skull of an entombed body. The encounter literally takes her breath away as the screen cuts to Black. As an exile, Abena has missed the deaths of
her family and friends, a fact that she does not mention but is implied by her references only to
them as past relationships. At the moment of her encounter with the open grave, Abena who has
been at psychic arrest with the development of post-independence, post-Nkrumah Ghana is
shocked back into the present by the iconic remnant of the past, the skull.

Black Audio Film Collective was one of the first groups of filmmakers to deal with the
subject of post post-colonialism, the period of the 1970s and 1980s which follows the victories
and traumas of the 1960s. The film’s director John Akomfrah was half-inspired by his family’s
own narrative of dislocation from Ghana as a result of his mother’s political ties (Mercer 52).
On being asked about the making of the film Akomfrah stated, “We went to Ghana to try to make
a film about Kwame Nkrumah, but also about a movement and a body of ideas that simply don’t
exist anymore…They’d been swept away not just by the force of historical events but also by
attempts on the part of successive governments after Nkrumah’s to basically bury the man and all
that he stood for. There is something metaphorically significant in that act because so much of
diasporic history rests precisely in that gap between history and myth” (Mercer 44-45).

I end with the work of Black Audio Film Collective because their contributions to
diasporic, or transatlantic, filmmaking is imbedded within the shared politics of the Black
Atlantic. Sheila Petty writes that “diaspora, as both an abstraction and a reality, defies borders of
nation and is a space ‘where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or
disavowed’. Thus histories and cultures intercross freely, creating transnational layers of identity
and, indeed, of origin” (Petty 74). Bridging and intervening in the interrelated histories of Africa,
Britain, the Caribbean, and the U.S. the filmography of Black Audio Film Collective exemplifies
the possibilities of inventive energy that continued to emerge after the 1960s. Their work stands
as a strong example to contemporary artists as a model of collaborative praxis, particularly in the project of utilizing cultural work in the negotiation of politics.
Chapter Four

Concluding Thoughts

The narratives of transatlantic mobility and mobilization that I have woven together here address but a few small, though significant, historical gaps. Having quite literally lived with these women and men over the last few months, it is difficult to succinctly to come to a conclusion of this work. In these chapters I made use of feminist methodologies and Black feminist epistemological questions that addressed who and what is capable of producing knowledge. I teased out some of the ongoing struggles of knowledge politics using various forms of cultural production often thought to be marginal, if considered at all, to radical, Leftist, or feminist study. I examined questions of citizenship and recognition through the life and work of Black Left feminist Claudia Jones, a Trinidad-born, U.S. American immigrant – later exile – and Great Britain emigrant who made use of Carnival, a practice borrowed from traditions of the formerly enslaved, to make visible false determinations of national identity and belonging.

I also examined the essayist and dramatist Lorraine Hansberry, who like Jones engaged a certain transnational politic of Black feminist praxis as a “fellow traveller” to the American Left. After reading an excerpt on Hansberry in Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought (1995), I felt I was introduced to a whole new person and I knew I wanted to do a project that would allow me to work with her. What I found was revelatory in ways that I could not have anticipated. I found an American interlocutor, one, who in her very short life,
participated in coalitions with a transatlantic Black Left. I found a dynamic advocate for peace and human rights, who in spite of the closets and illnesses she faced, managed a prolific career as an artist.

I looked at a generation of still living, working artists who partake in the spaces of critical praxis opened by their predecessors like Claudia Jones and Lorraine Hansberry. The British artists of Black Audio Film Collective produced work under the influence of shared histories of oppositional cultural production and anti-imperialist activism inherited from their Black, Left, feminist, and transnational antecedents. The form they used, as I have shown, engaged in feminist epistemological and methodological questions that critique official histories such as those of nation making post British colonization and those of exilic experiences.

This new historicization of Black Left feminism and Black radicalism pushes us toward a radical revision of cultural and identity politics. The transnational adaptation of this ideology moves us away from simple characterizations of the Black radical left as sensationalist, misogynist, or unfocused. It allows for the necessary disruption of binary narratives of successful and failed social movements and organizing, moving our attention rather toward their legacies, influences, and potentialities.

What I want to emphasize, in conclusion, is that the nature of transatlantic migration is both historical and processual and has included the movement of people as well as ideas. This story has been narrated by cultural workers who stand on the borderlands of society, critiquing from the thresholds of margins and centers. The Black radical Left and the revisionist projects that continue to take place in these spaces are but one chapter in this unfolding narrative, one of many ways to think about these relationships between nations and communities.
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Appendix

Quotes from *The Movement* (1964) not included in Chapter 2

p. 52, "In stunning contradiction to the myth of Negro passivity, there has been virtually no institution of Negro life, from the churches to the blues, which has not had a fundamental preoccupation with freedom. The "new Negro" has merely brought to the Movement new methods and fresh determination."

p. 60, "What the dogs and guns and hoses have proved is that the entire power structure of the South must be altered. The original demand for equal treatment on buses and at lunch counters has had to broaden and sharpen, to strike at the political base of Negro oppression."

p. 99, "We are old stock Americans, that arrogant, that certain of the rightness of our American cause. That it why borrow as freely Patrick Henry as from contemporary slang."

p. 100, "And because we are also strangely enough under the circumstances, patriotic Americans, most of us would prefer not to see this country torn with violence."
p. 104, "The next time you pass a demonstration, hum a little or clap your hands, pick up the words. Perhaps the time after that you will join in and sing -- for my freedom and for yours. You, I mean you, my countryman, reading this."

p. 118, "People do not always need poets and playwrights to state their case."