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## **Demanding Spaces: 1970s U.S. Women's Novels as Sites of Struggle**

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**DEMANDING SPACES:  
1970s U.S. WOMEN'S NOVELS AS SITES OF STRUGGLE**

A Dissertation Presented

By

KATE MARANTZ

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

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September 2017

English

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1970s U.S. WOMEN'S NOVELS AS SITES OF STRUGGLE**

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Approved as to style and content by:

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Asha Nadkarni, Chair

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Emily Lordi, Member

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Mecca Jamilah Sullivan, Member

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Randall Knoper, Department Head  
Department of English

## **DEDICATION**

For Gwen, Nell, and Esme.

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**ABSTRACT**

**DEMANDING SPACES:  
1970s U.S. WOMEN'S NOVELS AS SITES OF STRUGGLE**

SEPTEMBER 2017

KATE MARANTZ, B.A., SKIDMORE COLLEGE

M.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Ph.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Asha Nadkarni

This dissertation offers a new view of 1970s gender and race politics in the United States by analyzing struggles in and over space in four women's novels: Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays* (1970), Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973), Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976), and Marilyn French's *The Women's Room* (1977). My project reads space as a dynamic, politically charged realm of interactions between lived bodies, physical landscapes, and imaginative territories—including the formal characteristics of fiction. Using this critical lens, I highlight how these authors interrogate conditions of sexism and racism by representing their characters making and responding to “demands” for space. These demands occur through embodied, geographically oriented claims—claims to move freely, choose locations, construct one's surroundings—as well as symbolic attempts to make room for new subjectivities, realign marginal positions, and establish common ground. The authors I consider also mirror these spatial struggles onto the innovative structures of their narratives through shifting voices and uneven or fragmented textual patterns, so that the novels themselves become “demanding spaces” of social action in form as well as content. By attending to these multilayered spaces in a group of texts

published across the 1970s but never before placed in conversation, I shed new light on the intersections and frictions among feminist and other social movements of this time period. Just as importantly, I emphasize the possibilities in narrative for enacting and remapping those movements across the stretches of the published page.

My reading of *Play It As It Lays* shows Didion expressing suspicion towards linear trajectories of women's liberation by depicting impeded physical movements and blocked conversations and plots, while pointedly ignoring racial and classed inflections of mobility. I suggest that Morrison's *Sula* explores the power and contingency of black female relationships through the interdependent movements of two young women, situating their journeys within a broader geographical and narrative landscape across which social inequities are marked out but also challenged. In *Meridian*, I contend, Walker self-consciously presents her titular character's body—and the body of the text surrounding her—as mediums for negotiating ideological stances, so that the formulation of “the personal as political” is revealed as crucially important but also particularly burdensome for black women. In *The Women's Room*, I find French cynically doubting women's ability to “make room” for themselves through claiming their physical freedom as well as independent stories, but in presenting a purportedly universalized vision of women's (lack of) liberation, French further marginalizes—even on the level of narration—the experiences of African Americans and women of color across the globe. Ultimately, I find within and among these novels charged debates about the parameters and trajectories of contemporary social movements and women's roles within them. These debates are plotted out across the texts' depicted physical geographies, in their symbolic rhetorics of spatial struggle, and in the terrains of their narrative forms.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

In this dissertation, I offer a new view of 1970s gender and race politics in the United States by analyzing struggles in and over space in four women's novels published in that decade: Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays* (1970), Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973), Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976), and Marilyn French's *The Women's Room* (1977). My project reads space as a dynamic, politically charged realm of interactions between lived bodies, physical landscapes, and imaginative territories—including the formal characteristics of fiction. Using this critical lens, I highlight how these authors interrogate conditions of sexism and racism by representing their characters making and responding to “demands” for space. These demands occur through embodied, geographically oriented claims—claims to move freely, choose locations, construct one's surroundings—as well as symbolic attempts to make room for new subjectivities, realign marginal positions, and establish common ground. The authors I consider also mirror these spatial struggles onto the innovative structures of their narratives through shifting voices and uneven or fragmented textual patterns, so that the novels themselves become “demanding spaces” of social action in form as well as content. By attending to these multilayered spaces in a group of texts published across the 1970s but never before placed in conversation, I shed new light on the intersections and frictions among feminist and other social movements of this time period. Just as importantly, I emphasize the possibilities in narrative for enacting and remapping those movements across the stretches of the published page.

Recent scholars of U.S. history and politics have emphasized the spatial inflections of changing social relations in the decades following World War II. They note new patterns and architectures of displacement and exclusion, while also pointing to the radical possibilities activists found in carrying out embodied demonstrations and reworking contested landscapes, from sit-ins to transgressive border-crossings to battles for equal housing and workplace rights.<sup>1</sup> These sociospatial upheavals took on new urgency in the 1970s, which many note as a pivotal decade in U.S. history characterized by both starker topographies of inequality and a ramping up of marginalized groups' resistant claims to move freely, break down barriers, and establish independent sites of recognition.<sup>2</sup> Complementing this critical attention to spatialized struggle and the significance of the 1970s is a growing body of literature attending to the formative, sometimes tense negotiations within and among political initiatives in this era, including the various feminisms developing in relation to New Left, antiwar, Civil Rights, and Black Nationalist movements. These negotiations occurred on the level of ideology, but also, this scholarship shows, in specific spaces, from college campuses to health centers to prisons.<sup>3</sup> However, what remains under-theorized is how these spatial changes and challenges were also being carried out in the realm of the novel, which was elevated in

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, the work of Janet Abu-Lughod, Eric Avila, Rosalyn Fraad Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen, Robert A. Beauregard, Anne Enke, Dianne Suzette Harris, Gaye Theresa Johnson, Angel David Nieves and Leslie M. Alexander, and Alan Rabinowitz. Mary Pat Brady (10) and Krista Comer (34) also note that Civil Rights struggles must be understood as struggles over space.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to Avila and Enke, see Dan Berger's *The Hidden 1970s: Histories of Radicalism*, Jefferson R. Cowie's *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*, and Sherrie A. Inness' *Disco Divas: Women and Popular Culture in the 1970s*.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, the work of Wini Breines, Stephanie Gilmore, Nancy Hewitt, Kathleen A. Laughlin and Jacqueline L. Castledine, and Benita Roth.

this postmodern period as “the most important vehicle for literary expression,”<sup>4</sup> but also, more significantly, saw an “unprecedented explosion” of contributions by women, including those from racial and ethnic minority groups, beginning around 1970 (Steiner 435, 499). *Demanding Spaces* addresses this critical gap by looking to four women’s novels published across the 1970s and representing vastly disparate authorial backgrounds, social concerns, and formal compositions. With this assembly of a varied cross-section of novels, I show how women writers of this period undertook differing, but often dialogical, modes of political action by working in and stretching the spaces of narrative. In their novels, I find, Didion, Morrison, Walker, and French explore the relationships between physical and social movements, weaving together embodied contestations in material space and the discourses of meeting, journeying, and staying still through which the urgencies of political struggles were conveyed in this era, from Civil Rights assertions like “we shall not be moved” and “keep on pushing” to feminist (Chude) Pam Allen’s claim to “free space” for consciousness-raising.<sup>5</sup> They also layer those physical and conceptual modes of action onto the complex structural forms of their novels, using disruptive chapter patterns, competing voices and viewpoints, and absent or incomplete narration. In these ways, the authors show that diversely conceived,

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<sup>4</sup> Wendy Steiner notes that “postmodernism” can refer to “both the stylistically innovative writing from the 1960s to the 1990s, such as that by Pynchon or Barth, and the literature of the period as a whole” (428). I use the term to refer to the latter grouping and, occasionally, “postmodern” to refer to the historical era. At the same time, I also assume that writers like Didion, Morrison, Walker, and French are themselves formally and “stylistically innovative” and that their work, as with other women and minority writers’ of this era, can “embody the assumptions of postmodernism”—an interest in how language constructs reality; a dismantling of grand historical narratives; a fragmented, multiple sense of the self; an attention to difference and awareness of ambiguity, incompleteness, and contradiction—“every bit as fully as the more obvious, esoteric, and largely unread ‘neomodernists’ do” (Steiner 441).

<sup>5</sup> See Enke 10.

politicized projects of space-making also take place in the textual landscapes constructed in narrative.

I start with 1970's *Play It As It Lays*, arguing that Joan Didion expresses suspicion towards linear trajectories of women's liberation by depicting impeded physical movements and blocked or empty conversations and plots, while pointedly ignoring racial and classed inflections of mobility. I look then to Toni Morrison's 1973 novel *Sula*. That novel, I suggest, explores the power and contingency of black female relationships through the interdependent movements of two young women, situating their journeys within a broader geographical and narrative landscape across which social inequities are marked out but also challenged. In 1976's *Meridian*, I contend, Alice Walker self-consciously presents her titular character's moving, interacting body—and the body of the text surrounding her—as mediums for negotiating ideological stances and disagreements, so that the contemporary formulation of “the personal as political” is revealed as crucially important but also particularly burdensome for black women. Finally, I find that in her 1977 novel *The Women's Room*, Marilyn French cynically questions the possibility of women “making room” for themselves through asserting their physical and social freedoms and the right to tell their stories. But in presenting a purportedly universalized vision of women's (lack of) liberation, French further marginalizes—even on the level of narration—the experiences of African Americans and women of color across the globe.

Thus, while in this dissertation I trace a pattern of 1970s women novelists carrying out social critiques through enacting spatialized negotiations in their texts, I also attend to key differences among the kinds of spaces constructed and what political



messages those spaces convey. These authors advance varying, even incommensurate ideas about the body and its role in political action; about the directions of social progress for marginalized groups; about what it means to be confined and who deserves to move freely. These spatial variances, I suggest, allow us to see in a new light the dynamic, frictional relationships between concurrently developing feminist ideologies, as well as how those ideologies intersected with other social justice movements in this era. More than that, they help us re-see “feminism” itself as a contested, socially and *locationally* contingent paradigm,<sup>6</sup> especially in this era when modes of identity politics so often jostled amongst one another, when “women’s liberation” seemed for some to be limited to the white middle class,<sup>7</sup> when activities on behalf of women’s rights were often not labeled feminist at all.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, I find within and among these novels charged debates about the parameters and trajectories of contemporary social movements and women’s roles within them. These debates are plotted out across the texts’ depicted physical geographies, in their symbolic rhetorics of spatial struggle, and in the terrains of their narrative forms.

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<sup>6</sup> I am inspired by Susan Stanford Friedman’s concept of “locational feminism,” which attends to changing historical and geographical specificities that produce different feminist theories, agendas, and political practices (5).

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Toni Morrison’s own 1971 essay “What the Black Woman Thinks About Women’s Lib.”

<sup>8</sup> Anne Enke argues for a more expansive understanding of the women’s movement that considers “relevant activism and locations that did not always—at the time—earn the label ‘feminist’” (5). See also Stephanie Gilmore, who articulates the reasons why many would eschew that label, given that “they would not be represented in the contemporary media presentations or the historical tropes of feminism” (6).

## The Meanings of Space

It is important to articulate the meanings of space upon which my project is premised as well as the theoretical genealogies that give rise to those meanings. In deploying, as I do throughout this dissertation, the idea of the *sociospatial*, I look to space not as a static, apolitical backdrop but as produced through, reflective of, and capable of reconfiguring uneven social conditions. I therefore draw on a critical history fundamentally shaped by Henri Lefebvre's 1974 text *The Production of Space*. Lefebvre argues that the spaces we inhabit are active and changing, constructed and reworked through historically specific social configurations. From architectural layouts to city grids, sidewalks to highways, spaces are infused with ideological and economic values that guide the people navigating them, "command[ing] bodies, prescribing or proscribing gestures, routes, and distances to be covered" (143), but can also invite, even enact resistance, "'express[ing]' conflicts between socio-political interests and forces" (365). Lefebvre's Marxist analysis places particular emphasis on how bodies both produce and *are* potential-filled spaces (170), capable of challenging capitalist conditions of power and proposing alternatives through resistant physical acts. In this formulation, the body is at once as capable of acting out social struggles in space and is itself a crucially politicized space or "place"<sup>9</sup>—the latter term perhaps better conveying the sense of a specific, though not stable or bounded, site.<sup>10</sup> Such a formulation proves central to my exploration of bodily locations and/as social locations, bodily movements and/as political movements in 1970s women's novels.

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<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, T. Davis 11, R. Gilmore 15, Gwin 33, Jarvis 9, and L. McDowell 34.

<sup>10</sup> See Massey *Space* 120–121.

My work also joins a scholarly tradition highlighting categories of gender and race as geographically inscribed formations, giving rise to particular modes of spatial inequity and struggle; these are issues many have found insufficiently addressed in the class-centered frameworks advanced by Lefebvre as well as other Marxist theorists of space like David Harvey and Edward Soja. Pioneering feminist geographers like Doreen Massey and Linda McDowell have undertaken studies to, in McDowell's words, "investigate, make visible and challenge the relationships between gender divisions and spatial divisions, to uncover their mutual constitution and problematize their apparent naturalness" (12). They show how patriarchal notions of gender difference and women's corresponding experiences of social constraint and marginalization are mapped out through uneven patterns of geographical access, development, and mobility. As conditions of sexism and patriarchal dominance are locationally grounded and spatially enacted, so too are those of racism and white privilege. As Mark Santow argues in the 2008 edited collection *"We Shall Independent Be": African American Place-Making and the Struggle to Claim Space in the United States*, "[p]articularly with regard to race, what power is and how it is experienced and cognitively understood are tied to how it is spatialized—how it finds its way into the built environment, where people live, and how they think of property, community, and social belonging" (73).<sup>11</sup> Santow, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and others have shown that acts of claiming space and making a place therefore prove central to resisting racial inequalities and constructing radical liberatory alternatives<sup>12</sup>; Gaye Theresa Johnson would call these acts modes of "spatial

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<sup>11</sup> See also McKittrick xiv.

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Gilmore's "Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference: Notes on Racism and Geography."

entitlement,” in which “marginalized communities [create] new collectivities based not just upon eviction and exclusion from physical places, but also on new and imaginative uses of technology, creativity, and spaces” (x). Katherine McKittrick locates a similar kind of work in her analysis of “black feminist geographies,” or “black women’s political, feminist, imaginary, and creative concerns that respatialize the geographic legacy of racism-sexism” (53); to take one example she cites, bell hooks’ essay “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance” charts and itself participates in a “remarkable re-visioning of both [black] woman’s role and the idea of ‘home’” as a politicized site of dignity, humanization, and resistance (hooks 45). As in hooks’ own work, McKittrick’s attention to identity, power, and space is deliberately intersectional, revealing that “geographic distributions and interactions are racially, sexually *and* economically hierarchical” (xv, emphasis added) in interdependent, mutually constitutive ways.

My analysis of novels by Didion, Morrison, Walker, and French shows each writer taking up these geographical inflections of gender, race, and class. I argue that these writers’ work of exposing and contesting social inequalities lies in their detailing of characters navigating historically specific, material landscapes; highways, hospital grounds, town squares, and suburban neighborhoods are inscribed with—and inscriptive of—oppressive modes of power and containment, but also charged with possibilities for resistant action. But like Johnson and McKittrick, I am also interested in spaces that are more “imaginative,” in that sense following Thadious Davis’ treatment of “landscapes” as encompassing not just “broad geographical-social contexts” but also “mediated symbolic structures” (2). For what animates the political work of the four texts I consider is more than their representations of characters negotiating physical spaces—spaces

which are themselves, of course, “imaginary” and “mediated” because they are constructed in fiction, but which nevertheless are meant to reflect actual geographical and architectural conditions. In these novels, the meanings of subjugation and liberation, the possibilities for partnership and coalition, also often lie in spaces that don’t actually “exist,” even in the world of the novel. Rather, they are symbolic, abstract, even fantastical. When Didion depicts Maria dreaming, after a painful abortion, of sewage-filled rivers and clogged pipes, progressive trajectories of reproductive freedom get stopped short. When Morrison has Nel and Sula standing next to one another but with a sensed distance stretching between them, she interrogates the grounds and limits of solidarity among black women. When Walker’s Meridian becomes, in the eyes of her activist lover, a safe harbor and place to rest in, it becomes clear how much was expected of women in black liberation movements. When French has Mira describe a door opening in her head, she makes “room” for feminist consciousness-raising. In these and other moments, the authors reveal how centrally symbolic terrains, imagined boundaries, and mental journeys figure in their characters’ navigations of social positions and political ideologies, navigations which are always also being mapped more “materially” as characters’ bodies move across depicted landscapes. Languages of space—encounter and departure, location and movement, margin and center—thus become imbued with at once physical, metaphorical, and sociopolitical inflections, in ways made uniquely possible in literature.

Novels, moreover, prove a particularly generative literary mode for exploring these possibilities. There is a rich critical history focused on what Joseph Kestner in 1978 identified as *The Spatiality of the Novel*, and indeed of all narratives. Literary scholars

like Robert T. Tally emphasize that “all spaces are necessarily embedded with narratives,” containing stories and histories that determine and revise their meaning<sup>13</sup>; conversely, he points out, “all narratives must mobilize and organize spaces” (2). In the words of Michel de Certeau, stories “traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories....Every story is a travel story—a spatial practice” (115). Importantly, as Kestner, de Certeau, and Tally all make clear, these “spatial practices” occur not just in the content of narratives but also in their forms, from the structuring of sentences—with “the art of ‘turning’ phrases” mirroring the “art of composing a path” (de Certeau 100)—to the ordering of chapters and layout of words across the pages of a novel.<sup>14</sup> In other words, novels in their content use physical descriptions to assemble an imagined map of spaces, tracing “an arrangement of places, dwellings, and rooms” that characters move through and animate; moreover, by describing and telling stories about geographical locations and landscapes, novels actually participate in constructing those spaces in the material world (Miller 10, 16).<sup>15</sup> But more than that, the forms of novels are also spatialized constructions, as I show in my work on *Play It As It Lays*, *Sula*, *Meridian*, and *The Women’s Room*. These constructions are in a sense quite literal: short lines of dialogue or abrupt breaks between chapters build blocks of white space; there are actual shapes, margins, and movements made through the patterning of words and voices on the page. I find that these literal spaces *of* the authors’ narratives echo and further the political work being carried out in their treatment of spaces *in* their narratives. The

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<sup>13</sup> See Jarvis 7.

<sup>14</sup> See also Gwin 58 and Kestner 21.

<sup>15</sup> See also Brady 7–8.

women's movement gets "stopped up" in Didion's novel in Maria's dreams of clogged pipes after her abortion but also in the blockages of short, terse chapters; Morrison communicates the problems and possibilities of Nel and Sula finding common ground through their differing narrative positions as well as their bodily ones; abrupt chapter and focalization shifts in *Meridian* convey the difficulties of depicting an entire history through one African American woman's story; the long, repetitive structure of *The Women's Room* echoes its protagonist's sense that her new "room" as a liberated woman is empty and unproductive. Looking to these structural narrative elements, I build on Cora Kaplan's claim that "the imaginative writing that was being produced" in the 1970s "was very much a part of the ongoing debate about what different positions were developing" in political movements like feminism, "what strategies of action and practice" (19). I show how those debates about political "positions" and "strategies" resonated in the spaces opened up through these writers' formal choices—who narrates when; how lines of text proceed, circle back, and stop—as well as in their subject matter.

### **Space, Politics, Literature, and the 1970s**

My reading of these four women's texts thus takes up the charge advanced by David Harvey in his 2006 essay "Space as a Keyword." In it, he insists that understanding and challenging uneven social conditions requires focusing on "the ways we physically shape our environment and the ways in which we both represent and get to live in it" (*Spaces* 139)—a multi-pronged task that I undertake by looking to the physical, representational, and "lived-in" spaces of 1970s novels as key sites of political engagement. And my focus on the 1970s in particular is significant. It was in fact in 1973

that Harvey published his first major study of space, geography, and politics, *Social Justice and the City*, and his was just one of many foundational theoretical texts in the field coming out of that decade. Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1974), Yi-fu Tuan's *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (1974), Edward Relph's *Place and Placelessness* (1976), Richard Peet's *Radical Geography* (1977): these and other works evidence geographers, philosophers, and social theorists of the 1970s placing a new emphasis on how space is "implicated in social relations, both socially produced and consumed" (Hubbard 42), and especially how particular spatial and geographical configurations reinforce structures of inequality. Importantly, as editors David Sibley, David Atkinson, Peter Jackson and Neil Washbourne assert in their 2005 collection *Cultural Geography: A Critical Dictionary of Key Concepts*, this newly politicized attention to spaces that arose in the 1970s was "inspir[ed]" by and undertaken "in sympathy with wider political processes of the period (such as the American Civil Rights movement, the global student protests of 1968, the women's movement and other forms of radical politics)" (x). In other words, the critical spatial turn of the 1970s must be understood as emerging out of the concerns being advanced by feminist and Civil Rights movements of the time and, I would add, those movements' own theoretical texts, from Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* to collections like Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Powerful*, Toni Cade (Bambara)'s *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, and Angela Davis' *If They Come in the Morning*. These and so many other writings of the time period described segregatory boundaries and bodily restrictions, critiqued uneven housing conditions and unjust incarceration, and asserted the right to occupy, march, and safely travel. Such writers thus



revealed the urgency of questions of space to experiences of gendered, racial, and classed identities, and therefore to their involvement in contemporary social movements that took up those identity politics. These spatial concerns, of course, had always been suffused with political implications, but they had become differently inflected in the decades following WWII. It is therefore important to look to this history as a way of framing the contested political milieu of the 1970s, and the space-based social critiques the novelists I consider were also undertaking throughout that decade.

Following WWII and continuing through to the 1970s, the increasing privatization of the housing industry, the development of cheap, assembly-line production practices, and a growing, sometimes government-supported discourse linking homeownership, democracy, and patriotism led to massive demographic shifts from city centers to suburban communities in the U.S.<sup>16</sup> White citizens were attracted and incentivized to the space afforded outside the urban setting, as well as its racial homogeneity; suburbia was by and large populated by those who met the criteria of “minimum income, veteran status, and [white] race” (Baxandall and Ewen 143),<sup>17</sup> and most people of color were either excluded from the suburban migration completely or limited to communities delegated for non-whites. There were new and problematic gender politics at work in suburbia, as well. In places like Levittown, Long Island—the brainchild of businessman William Levitt, whose economic model and racially

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<sup>16</sup> See Baxandall and Ewen 107. Rosen points out that the American suburban population doubled in the 1950s, with one-quarter of all Americans living in the suburbs by the end of the decade (9).

<sup>17</sup> As much as Baxandall and Ewen are interested in the construction of a problematically homogenous suburban landscape in this era, they also suggest—against disdainful portrayals of suburban conformity advanced in the media and within literature throughout the twentieth century—that suburbia has been and continues to be a more diversely experienced and even contentious setting than it is often given credit for.

exclusionary vision for suburban housing influenced scores of towns springing up all over the country—(white) women’s bodies and activities became overdetermined in new ways. Both reproduction and the conspicuous purchase of increasingly complex domestic products (marketed as time saving, but accompanied by expectations for more time spent on housework and “homemaking”) were, in this image of suburbia and its reality, directly tied to women’s community and national worth.<sup>18</sup> In fact, as Dianne Suzette Harris suggests, the configurations of appliances, interior design elements, architectural features, and landscaping layouts of these suburban homes were coded with gendered, raced, and classed assumptions so that, through what she calls “spatial rhetoric(s)” (10), “postwar domestic environments became poignant ciphers for whiteness, affluence, belonging, and a sense of permanent stability” (1).

White flight, the dispersal of industrial and manufacturing jobs, and the disinvestment in urban centers meant that as the suburbs exploded, many U.S. cities became more segregated, impoverished, and dangerous. Millions of African Americans arriving in Northern and Sunbelt cities from the rural South during and after WWII—a new pattern of relocation following on the initial wave of the Great Migration of the 1920s and 1930s—were greeted with labor and housing discrimination and became, along with other people of color, “disproportionately poor...locked into older neighborhoods and channeled into public housing projects” (Beauregard 21). Further, the two Federal-Aid Highway Acts of 1944 and 1956 allocated funds to an ambitious new interstate highway system that contributed to “the continued suburbanization and deconcentration of America,” as construction that would ease commuter travel into and

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<sup>18</sup> Pregnancy came to be referred to as Levittown’s “major industry” (Baxandall and Ewen 150–151).

out of cities was consistently and unapologetically prioritized “with little regard for easing transportation *within* cities” (Gutfreund 55–56). What roadway construction in urban centers there was, moreover, often cut through established neighborhoods, “erecting new barriers that isolated and contained poor people of color,” whose “bodies and spaces” were “historically coded as ‘blight’ in planning discourse” and “provided an easy target for a federal highway program that usually coordinated its work with private redevelopment schemes and public policies like redlining, urban renewal, and slum clearance” (Avila *Folklore* 8, 2–3).

Beginning in 1965, the year of the Watts Rebellion in Los Angeles, violence erupted regularly in cities around the country, eventually prompting Lyndon B. Johnson to appoint a National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (known as the Kerner Commission) in 1967 in response to riots in Detroit that left 43 dead, more than 7,200 arrested, and about \$40 million in property damage (Herman 215). One of many government initiatives of this period addressing the alarming state of America’s cities, the Commission released a 1968 report that became an instant bestseller, in which they argued, “No American—white or black—can escape the consequences of the continuing social and economic decay of our major cities” (20). At the same time, they detailed racial inequalities in housing, employment, education, and social services; the report’s famous “basic conclusion” was, “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal” (1). This state of “separate and unequal” affairs was, of course, not new or just then being “moved toward,” and not limited to a black-white binary. But the report nevertheless made clear that racial inequality was being spatially re-sedimented into the American landscape through the urban/suburban divide, a

“separation that enabled suburbanites to avoid urban problems and people unlike themselves” and that “reflected and exacerbated a moral disregard for the needs of those in the cities and a political reluctance to support a collective response” (Beauregard 188).

Suburbanization and the corresponding crises in urban centers thus stretched back through various legal, industrial, and ideological shifts in the postwar years, and actually further back through the beginnings of the twentieth century, by which time the turn to suburbia had already begun. But by the 1970s the racial and economic disparities and gendered inequalities that were mapped across urban and suburban spaces had not only been deeply concretized both literally and figuratively; they were also being newly strengthened by changing governmental policies anticipating the turn toward a neoliberal ideology. As Alan Rabinowitz points out, while the trajectory toward suburbanization and urban decline was firmly established in the decades following WWII, in the 1960s Presidents Kennedy and Johnson at least recognized these problematic trends and expressed, or were perhaps forced to express, moderate interest in addressing them. This was evidenced not only in Johnson’s Kerner Commission but also, more broadly, in the creation of meaningful housing and urban development initiatives. Both presidents, in fact, oversaw the passing of significant legislation to that effect.<sup>19</sup> But after the 1968 election of Richard Nixon, the federal government, led by the president, began “to withdraw from such activities indefinitely if not permanently” (Rabinowitz 147). By 1973, Nixon had imposed a moratorium on all federal housing programs, and Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) head George Romney, an advocate of low-income public housing in cities and suburbs to alleviate urban poverty and segregation,

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<sup>19</sup> See Rabinowitz 146–153.

had left his position after Nixon continually refused to back any such forward-thinking economic integration policies for housing.<sup>20</sup> It was also under Nixon that “a range of new antidrug measures and law-and-order campaigns yielded the steady rise of a highly racialized mass incarceration that especially affected urban black communities” (Berger 3). Additionally, the Nixon administration proved relatively uninterested in addressing gender inequality and in fact seemed increasingly resistant to women’s rights reform; just one example is the 1971 vetoing of the Comprehensive Child Development Act, which would have provided opportunities for childcare for all women and which Nixon argued would lead to “the Sovietization of American children” (qtd. in Rosen 90–91). The Nixon administration’s tendency to limit government involvement and distaste for social reforms reflected and helped contribute to the rise of neoliberalism as a global economic orthodoxy. Harvey traces this development, depicting the ascendancy of neoliberal doctrine beginning in the 1970s as characterized by the “financialization of everything” (*Spaces* 24), the prioritization of individualism over citizens’ collective wellbeing, the quelling of political freedoms, and “uneven geographical developments” (*Spaces* 41).

But it would be too simple to think of the 1970s as, to use Eric Avila’s characterization of societal attitudes in that era, “a decade of regret, doubt, and denial” (*Folklore* 29). Rather, as several recent studies of the era show, the 1970s were a time of ideological contradiction—as intellectual Michael Harrington put it at the time, the nation was simultaneously moving “vigorously left, right, and center” (qtd. in Cowie 3)—as well as sustained political action.<sup>21</sup> Against earlier historical narratives that mark the decade as a period of cynicism and backlash following the heady, progressive era of the

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<sup>20</sup> See Baxandall and Ewen 179.

<sup>21</sup> See the work of Dan Berger, Jefferson R. Cowie, and Sherrie A. Inness.

1960s, it is important to recognize that “many of the social movements of the 1960s—including the youth movement and the movements for gay rights, civil rights, and women’s rights—were alive and thriving in the 1970s” (Inness 4). Moreover, just as with the diverse modes of social protest of the 1960s—uprisings against racism in city centers, gender-based mobilizations against urban freeway construction,<sup>22</sup> sit-ins and picket lines and walkouts—these movements’ activities continued to challenge and subvert the new spatial patterns of segregation and marginalization that had emerged over the past several decades. In fact, many political organizations and individual activists evidenced a ramping up of their radical claims to space in the 1970s, more boldly calling attention to how the nation’s physical landscapes inscribed racial, gendered, and socioeconomic inequities but also the possibilities for social change that lay in inhabiting those landscapes transgressively. We can think, for instance, of prisoners’ violent takeover of Attica Prison in 1971 following the killing of George Jackson at San Quentin; or of the members of the American Indian Movement’s occupation of Wounded Knee in South Dakota in 1973<sup>23</sup>; or of African Americans’ and Chicanas’ artistic repurposings of Los Angeles’ freeway infrastructures throughout the decade, turning them into canvasses for politicized visual and performance art as well as collaborative musical “soundscapes.”<sup>24</sup>

It was a rich period for women’s activism, too, as evidenced in and beyond the noteworthy changes in law, politics, and education occurring even in the relatively conservative Nixon years, from Shirley Chisholm’s 1972 nomination to the presidency to the 1972 passing of Title IX to the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision. As Anne Enke describes

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<sup>22</sup> See Eric Avila’s *Folklore of the Freeway*.

<sup>23</sup> See Inness 4.

<sup>24</sup> See Avila’s *Folklore of the Freeway* and Johnson’s *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity*.

the early 1970s, “Everywhere, it seemed, women were resisting gender roles and their relegation to ‘second place’ (1–2), and fittingly, these acts of resistance often had everything to do with establishing actual new *places* and reconfiguring existing ones. As with—and often inseparably linked to—antiracist and socialist activisms in these years, urban centers became hotbeds for agitating and advocating on behalf of women, for forging collectives and mobilizing around common causes, some explicitly called “feminist” and many others not. These mobilizations occurring in cities across the country often took the form of widely publicized strikes, marches, and building occupations. To take one example, in 1971, the radical feminist organization Bread and Roses took over a Harvard University building demanding space for what became and still is the Cambridge Women’s Center; importantly, that Center was the site of later meetings of the National Black Feminist Organization, founded by Barbara Smith and others before they broke off and established the Combahee River Collective (Breines 101–103, 124). In cities, too, women of this era entered into new areas of employment, transforming male-dominated workplaces; they also established a growing number of clinics and self-defense centers, places where the health of women’s bodies, especially those in poverty or under duress, could be adequately attended to.

Furthermore, women’s radical spatial acts extended beyond urban landscapes, whether those were big metropolitan areas like Boston, New York, and Chicago or smaller Midwestern ones like Dayton, Ohio, which were also developing active feminist communities (Farrell 53). In the first few years of the 1970s, mass-market publications like *Essence*, the first for black women (Wall “1970” 969), and *Ms.*, co-founded by well-known feminists Gloria Steinem and Dorothy Pittman, began to enter women’s homes

across the country. With these publications, even those in suburban outskirts or rurally isolated locations became “link[ed]...to other women with similar experiences and perspectives,” generating by reading and writing letters *to* the magazine additional sites of commiseration and community—and, just as importantly, heated disagreement—on the printed page (Farrell 53). And beginning in 1970, Women’s Studies programs were founded on campuses ranging, even in that first year, from West Coast cities (San Diego State University) to small New England towns (Cornell University); by 1971, “fourteen regional conferences had been held, in locations ranging from the University of Pennsylvania to Portland State, in Oregon,” and at the end of the decade, there were 300 programs in colleges and universities spanning the United States (Boxer 9–10). With these programs, new constellations of sites for feminist action were emerging. Lines of communication and debate opened up among geographically variant locations, marked by the “flow of pamphlets, manifestos, and newsletters from feminist communities to campuses, and the circulation of course outlines and reading lists from instructor to instructor” (Boxer 10), as well as the distribution of scholarly journals like *Signs* established to focus on women’s issues (Steiner 501). Concurrent with Women’s Studies programs came a proliferation of courses and centers dedicated to the histories and literatures of other minority populations, including African Americans, Chicano/as, Native Americans, and Asian Americans. Buoyed by the dissemination of corresponding academic publications (*Amerasia Journal*, as one example, began publication in 1971 and focused on Asian American culture [Hsu 960–961]), these new programs, too, were revolutionizing institutional spaces and building new sites for identity-based intellectual and community organization.



It was in part because of the explosion of women's, minority, and ethnic studies initiatives in the academy that the 1970s also marked a resurgent "entry of politics into literary discussion" (Rivkin and Ryan 643). Supported by these programs and their diverse faculties, studies of literature—and discussions of what literary studies should do—began to take newly politicized directions in this period, with questions of subjectivity, difference, hierarchy, and power coming to the fore. Such scholarly focuses grew directly out of contemporary feminisms and Civil Rights and Black Power, Chicano/a, and gay and lesbian rights movements; they were also, to varying extents, tied to broader critical trends that included a renewed attention to cultural anthropology and Marxist and Freudian thought, as well as the nascent influence of French poststructuralists. Women's scholarly contributions reflecting some of these radical new directions in literary studies include, to name a only a few, Kate Millett's 1970 *Sexual Politics*, Adrienne Rich's 1972 "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," Alice Walker's 1974 "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: The Creativity of Black Women in the South,"<sup>25</sup> Barbara Smith's 1977 "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," and Marcella Trujillo's 1979 "The Dilemma of the Modern Chicana Artist and Critic." But the turn toward issues of identity, ideology, and representation in literary studies was also inextricably linked to the fact that, in the 1970s, more and more writers from marginalized groups, including an unprecedented number of women, were making their *own* literary contributions. Facilitated in part by a growing array of publishing houses, literary magazines, and writers' collectives founded to support the work of

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<sup>25</sup> Walker's essay originally appeared in *Ms. Magazine* and was later included in her 1983 collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*.

underrepresented populations,<sup>26</sup> diverse groups of female authors in the 1970s were marking out new territories on the printed page, not just in revolutionary manifestoes, mass-marketed magazines, or academic criticism, but across the innovative landscapes they crafted in fictional narratives. Requiring fresh modes of interpretation and generating new crosscurrents of political coalition, circulation, and contention, these rich territories, these demanding spaces, are precisely what I find in *Play It As It Lays*, *Sula*, *Meridian*, and *The Women's Room*.

### *Demanding Spaces*

In *Demanding Spaces*, I carry out several significant interventions. First, I reveal surprising commonalities among an unlikely grouping of 1970s women writers. Despite their differing social and ideological positions, each of these writers is invested in exploring women's (and men's) experiences as gendered subjects and, to varying degrees, how those experiences are also inflected by race, class, and sexuality; each participates in contemporary political dialogues about oppression and liberation through depicting unequal social conditions and revealing the possibilities for resisting those conditions through individual acts and identity-based alliances. More importantly, the writers I consider all carry out this work by representing contested spaces and movements in both the content and the forms of their texts, developing shared motifs of interlocking physical, social, and textual barriers; mobility and/as progress; and ideological negotiations as embodied and narrative processes. Recognizing these commonalities, I do more than underscore the necessity of recognizing spatial struggles as central to the

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<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Hsu 960–961 and Steiner 501.

unfolding of social movements. I also contribute to an ongoing critical project of “rethink[ing] the organizational and geographic boundaries of feminism” (Kline 64).

Placing these four novels in conversation shows how women’s proliferating political engagements in these years went beyond explicitly named activisms, exceeded the concerns of gender and the terms of “feminism” alone, and occurred not just “on the streets” but also in the charged terrains of literature. And those diverse engagements, it becomes clear, intersected with and influenced one another in meaningful ways that included the publication of more and more women’s novels, each generatively revising the existing canon with its own new vision—and enactment—of sociospatial struggle. By looking to some of these novels, then, I build upon a growing body of criticism concerned with complicating and expanding histories of second-wave feminism,<sup>27</sup> which have traditionally focused on sharp distinctions among different strands of feminism—liberal, socialist, radical—as well as among white women and women of color.<sup>28</sup> These histories also often advance a racialized teleology whereby feminism is constructed as a

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<sup>27</sup> The second wave is traditionally periodized as beginning in the 1960s—often with the 1963 publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*—and dissolving around the 1980 mark with the rise of “women of color” feminism. As I and others suggest, this is a flawed and oversimplified historical narrative; as Benita Roth puts it, “Second-wave feminism’s appeal in the 1960s and 1970s was not limited to ‘bourgeois’ white women, was *never* in fact practiced *only* by those women” (215). I use “second-wave feminism” here primarily to refer to the time period. Nancy A. Hewitt points out that “[t]he rubric gained popular currency...with Martha Weinman Lear’s article “The Second Feminist Wave,” published in the *New York Times Magazine* in March 1968” (1).

<sup>28</sup> See Bevacqua 163 and Hewitt 6. While Benita Roth’s 2004 *Separate Roads to Feminism* is in some respects concerned with complicating these histories as well, she primarily emphasizes how different factions of second-wave feminism were “largely organizationally distinct from one another, and from the beginning, largely organized along racial/ethnic lines” (3). Her analysis is compelling, but it too can be critiqued for tracing racially “separate” histories of feminism.

“white first, then women of color” phenomenon.<sup>29</sup> (From the 1960s through the mid-1970s, this narrative goes, while white middle-class women began to generate gendered critiques, women of color prioritized race politics; it was only later, in *response* to white feminists’ racist marginalization of their experiences, that women of color began to formulate their own intersectional feminisms, considering sexism alongside racism as well as classism and homophobia.)<sup>30</sup> Such narratives’ white-centered periodization of second-wave feminism “negates the agency of feminists of color” (Roth 6). It also obscures the diverse, simultaneously emerging, and interactional paths pursued by politically engaged women, self-proclaimed feminists or not, in the 1970s<sup>31</sup>—paths that can be found marked out literally, figuratively, and textually in the spaces of the novels I consider.

At the same time, assembling such a grouping of novels and thereby “[c]onstructing a multiracial feminist movement timeline”—and corresponding movement *map*—also, as Becky Thompson puts it, “reveals competing visions of what constitutes liberation and illuminates schisms in feminist consciousness that are still with us today” (40). Indeed, there were pressing—and still unresolved—arguments unfolding in these years among women and other marginalized groups about what it meant to be free and who should be able to claim that freedom. These arguments revealed how gender-based social critiques and acts of resistance were always necessarily overlapping with and bumping up against other forms of identity politics, or even just differing modes of gender-based political work. Two episodes recounted in Benita Roth’s *Separate Roads*

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<sup>29</sup> See Breines 8, Hewitt 6, Roth 6, and Thompson 41.

<sup>30</sup> Ruth Rosen’s *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America*, originally published in 2000 and revised in 2006, exemplifies this narrative.

<sup>31</sup> See Bevacqua 163, 169; Evans vii; and Roth 2, 8.

*to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave* strike me as particularly illustrative of these overlaps and frictions. The first is a well-known incident at the historic Women's Strike for Equality event on August 26, 1970, organized by the National Organization for Women (NOW),<sup>32</sup> where members of the Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA) held signs reading "Hands Off Angela Davis"<sup>33</sup>; according to TWWA founding member Frances Beal, "one of the leaders of NOW ran up to us and said angrily, 'Angela Davis has nothing to do with women's liberation,'" and Beal responded, "It has nothing to do with the kind of liberation you're talking about...but it has everything to do with the kind of liberation we're talking about" (196).<sup>34</sup> Roth also cites an event that occurred a year later: the first national conference organized by Chicana feminists, the Conferencia de Mujeres por la Raza, which was held at a Houston YWCA in May 1971. The conference was attended by up to six hundred women, "possibly half" of whom walked out to protest the YWCA's "racism, unresponsiveness to the local Chicano community, and heavy-handed treatment of conference participants" (144–145). "Those who walked out," Roth continues, "went across the street and met in a park, drawing up their own set of resolutions for the conference members to consider; they eventually came back in and read those to the reconstituted group," and ultimately the conference was widely considered a success (145).

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<sup>32</sup> The rally drew more than 20,000 women to march in New York City and across the country to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the passing of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment.

<sup>33</sup> Angela Davis was in hiding from the FBI, which had recently placed her on its list of 10 Most Wanted Fugitives for her purported role in the armed takeover of a courtroom in Marin County, California, by a young man attempting to free several black defendants.

<sup>34</sup> See also Ward 119.

I reference these examples in part because they show how ideological differences among women played out spatially: through purposeful movements and counter-movements in specific locations, among protesting, jostling bodies. And this makes perfect sense when we recognize that the very conditions that these and indeed all activisms of this era were mobilizing to address—the segregation and violent treatment of gendered and racialized bodies, tense urban and community relations, the varying definitions of liberation itself—had everything to do with contested ideas and experiences of space. This is precisely why I argue for the necessity of attending to the spatialized modes of meaning-making and boundary-testing presented in the novels I consider in order to parse their political engagements. I also cite these incidents because they aptly map out the especially tense issue of race in women’s movements; they showcase both the strained negotiations undertaken by feminists attempting to address sexism and racism simultaneously, and the very real problem of how white, middle-class women’s narrow conceptions of women’s liberation could edge out and further marginalize people of color, even or especially other women. These are the kinds of spatialized political conflicts I track in the novels, too; I show, for instance, how Walker’s protagonist endures bodily suffering trying to mediate the complex identity politics of black womanhood, and how French’s act of “making room” for women actually reinforces the confinement of people of color. But it is also important to point out that Roth’s examples, just like each of the texts I consider, are in the end *stories*, textual (re)constructions of embodied standoffs and contested geographies. We can’t know exactly how these events actually unfolded. But nevertheless, these recounted events, these narratives of spatial struggle (or following de Certeau, “travel stories”), come to play a crucial role in

representing broader political movements, even actually carrying out or redefining those movements' work. (Whatever happened at that march, for instance, Frances Beal's story of it mattered, understandably affecting the work of the TWWA and its relationship with NOW.) I am concerned with unearthing those kinds of narrative enactments of political struggle in my analyses of 1970s women's novels. In depicting which characters get to move and settle, who encounters whom and what physical interactions ensue, what shared spaces they can imagine together and where those visions diverge and lead to separate journeys, these authors construct stories that support or subvert contemporary ideologies regarding strategies of protest, gendered and racial alliances, and individual and collective achievements of freedom. These stories thus reveal a more complex picture of the 1970s as a historically and politically "contentious moment, simultaneously moving in multiple directions" (Berger 3), showing that women writers spanning ideological spectrums and literary traditions were actively tracking and re-aiming those multiply directed "movements" in their novels.

My attention to these novels' treatment of spatial struggles—and thereby my pursuit of a more expansive mapping of women's intersecting political movements of the 1970s—thus includes a particular attention to the possibilities afforded in narrative for charting and inscribing those struggles onto textual forms. In the 1970s, novels clearly functioned as active sites of political engagement, participating in marking out "the different positions" and reflecting "the ebb and flow of the debate[s]" in contemporary politics (Kaplan 18); within women's movements especially, "fiction served both an epistemological function, having the power to depict 'things as they are,' and as a means to the explication and creation of feminist subjectivity" (A. Wilson 55). (Indeed, we can

consider how the sometimes overtly politicized nature of many texts of this era contributed to the “canon wars” of the 1980s; as Wendy Steiner argues, “[p]erhaps the single most revolutionary development in literature from 1970” on has been the “questioning of...assumptions” about what literature can and should do and who is capable of appreciating it, “with the result that the literary canon and audience have been broadened, the categories within ‘high art’ multiplied, and the meaning of artistic history reassessed” [432].) By looking to a diverse collection of fictional narratives of this period, we can see that what made those narratives so politically salient was in part their ability to creatively literalize, across the geographies depicted in their texts, the different ideological “positions” and “ebbs and flows”; it was their capacity for detailing the landscapes of “things as they are” while also presenting visions of radically alternative realms. In other words, what made these texts resonate was their potential for laying bare the spatial configurations of power that so many in this time period were themselves struggling to name, and for testing out the efficacy of various political pathways that could be taken to go about undoing those configurations. These observations about the rich meanings of spaces *in* the novels are central to the interventions of this dissertation. But equally important is my attention to the political work that occurs in the complex formal elements of these narratives. Shifting narrative voices and ambiguous focalizations, non-linear or repetitive plots, uneven chapter lengths and stark blank spaces on the page: in these structural elements of their novels, the writers I consider do more than construct textual landscapes with “shapes,” contours, and holes as intricate as the ones they depict their characters physically and imaginatively traversing. They also open up or close down spaces of understanding, dialogue, and collaboration between



characters and, for that matter, between the novels and their readers. Doing so, these writers reveal their acts of social engagement—their explorations of contemporary identity politics, relationships between individuals and social movements, possibilities for exercising freedoms and effecting change—to be deeply embedded in the complicated forms of their texts.

Chapter one focuses on Didion's *Play It As It Lays*. Centering on a depressed actress, the novel offers a despairing look at Hollywood culture, and space-centered scholarly critiques have largely focused on its portrayal of Los Angeles. Contrastingly, my approach to the novel traces a pattern of impeded, blocked motion pervading the text on the levels of physical description, discursive patterns, and narrative structure. I argue that Didion uses her protagonist's slowed and thwarted physical movements, the stoppages and repetitions of conversations, and the novel's circular form to question straightforward narratives of women's progress, particularly those of reproductive rights. But I also suggest this questioning is only made possible through the novel's refusal to engage with raced and classed inflections of mobility, through its moving past or stopping short of addressing the limited perspective of its privileged white female subject. In effect, then, Didion's novel all-too-accurately reflects the mainstream feminist movements it aims to undermine.

In Chapter two, I turn to Morrison's *Sula*, in which questions of gendered liberation are inseparable from race and class dynamics. The novel traces the history of an African American community in Ohio destroyed, by the time of the novel's present, by suburban sprawl. While *Sula* has often been read as mournful and elegiac, I read the novel's navigated spaces—architectural, environmental, narrative—as complex sites of

subjugation *and* possibility, where social inequities cohere but are also reimagined. Central to this project are Morrison's depictions of Sula and Nel, whose physical interactions and shifting command of the story mark their negotiations of black womanhood and sisterhood. But just as important is her treatment of other community members moving and staking claims across historical landscapes of exclusion. In these representations, Morrison reveals how uneven social relations are sedimented spatially, while exploring the potential of alternative realms for refiguring those relations, including the structural "geographies" of her own text. These geographies have more recently come to include an author's Foreword that I argue provides a new entry-point or "lobby" for readers, showing the novel's particular grounding in the changing cultural landscapes and corresponding new modes of community-building of late-1960s New York City.

My third chapter focuses on Walker's *Meridian*, a novel equally concerned with black female identity but also more explicitly based in contemporary political struggle: it follows Meridian Hill, a black woman coming of age in the Civil Rights-era South. I argue that in depicting the physical stresses characterizing Meridian's activism, as well as the stresses placed on the text as it shifts in focalization and scope, Walker reflects on the idea and the lived reality of "the personal as political." I assert, moreover, that she does so more ambivalently than previous critics have suggested. In her characters' strained physical encounters and the novel's formal inconsistencies, Walker conveys how hard it is, on people and on stories, that political work is always (inter)personally felt, and that intimate experiences carry larger ideological implications. And by self-consciously tracing one woman's life and/as an entire movement, Walker shows how black women's bodies, and their texts, carry this weight disproportionately. However, I find that she is

also interested in the possibilities for getting out from under this weight, leaving her character and closing her text on a more privately navigated—but no less socially aware—set of terrains.

Chapter four examines *The Women's Room*, French's novel of feminist awakening centering on a group of white, middle-class women at Harvard in the late 1960s. While French's exposure of gendered inequalities has long held critics' attention, I bring this political project into clearer focus—and advance a sharper critique of its shortcomings—by attending to the novel's titular spatial conceit of “women's room.” I argue that French figures feminist resistance as a process of women making new “room” for themselves, both literally and textually, through writing out their stories; at the same time, her characters express uncertainty about the alternative spaces being carved out, painting them as empty or unproductive. Ultimately, as with my reading of Didion, I suggest that the novel's act of making new room for women, only to advance questions about the value of doing so, depends upon keeping “others,” specifically racial minorities and women from the Global South, in their places. The novel's expressed ambivalence about the parameters of “women's room,” then, becomes an unavoidable result of the exclusions and limitations upon which that formulation is based.

I end, in the Epilogue, by reflecting on the disparate visions of “textual-social struggle” (Thorsson 17) presented by these four authors, addressing why some seem so much more politically viable and narratively compelling than others. And I take an exploratory view forward and outward, asking what it would mean to bring the politicized questions of “demanding space” to bear on women's writings published in the years following *The Women's Room* and departing from the novel form. Specifically, I

look to Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's 1981 edited collection *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Tracing the representation of "the bridge" as an embodied and textual site of conflict, encounter, and movement, I find a new kind of political "narrative" being constructed that allows for the multiplicities and contradictions of women's experiences—and their writings.

Ultimately, each of the texts I consider in *Demanding Spaces* reveals from fresh angles how gendered, raced, and classed identities—and inequalities—are always corporeally lived and felt, enacted in and across physical locations themselves imbued with complex social histories. And each novel provides a disparate lens for investigating these material conditions by revealing social positions and movements as both discursive and ideological constructions and on-the-ground, place-based realities. More than that, each in its own way shows the capacity for making *new* places, enacting radical, imaginative sociospatial struggles in content but also in form; indeed, it is most notably in these novels' innovative structures, voices, and chronologies, I suggest, that new and pivotal sites of social action and negotiation emerge. Uncovering these spaces of narrative as rich territories of political action, I show that reading literature closely and attending to its unique artistic forms is always a deeply political project.

## CHAPTER II

### JOAN DIDION'S *PLAY IT AS IT LAYS*

#### AND THE LIMITATIONS OF (THE) WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

In Joan Didion's 1972 essay "The Women's Movement," published originally in the *New York Times Book Review* and later included in her collection *The White Album*, she advances a scathing critique of contemporary feminist politics. The women's movement, she contends, arose through the "invention" of women as a disenfranchised group after "[o]ne oppressed class after another had seemed finally to miss the point" (110). Most recent is the case of "the minorities," who had initially "seemed to promise more"; however, in the end even they "resisted that essential inductive leap from the immediate reform to the social ideal," seeing "the integration of the luncheonette and the seat in the front of the bus as real goals" as opposed to "counters in a larger game" (110). Didion is skeptical of the "instant transfiguration" of women into the latest potentially revolutionary class, but she also argues that it is "precisely to the extent that there was this Marxist idea that the curious historical anomaly known as the women's movement would have seemed to have any interest at all" (110). The problem—why Didion is ultimately *not* interested—is that the women's movement is not grounded in "radical materialism" (111). Instead, she argues, it is "stall[ed]" in "solemn *a priori* idealism," in oversimplified, binaristic rhetoric and misconceived formulations of oppression (114, 111). Didion finds evidence of this "stalling" in feminists' trivial emphasis on the "odious[ness]" of childrearing and drudgery of housework (113); even worse is their attributing all the complexities and difficulties of women's experiences to imposed

patriarchal forces. Satirically assuming this perspective, Didion writes with obvious disdain: “No woman need have bad dreams after an abortion: she has only been told she should. The power of sex is just an oppressive myth, not longer to be feared. . . . All one’s actual apprehension of what it is like to be a woman, the irreconcilable difference of it,” can now be “declared invalid, unnecessary, *one never felt it at all*” (116–117).

While essays like “The Women’s Movement” are emblematic of Didion’s (in)famous role as a social critic, they aren’t often considered in relation to her fiction, which is often framed (most notably by Didion herself) as disengaged from or transcendent of political concerns.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in his 2005 introduction to *Play It As It Lays*, a text published just two years before Didion’s essay, David Thomson jokes that the novel “remind[s] us that feminism came along a little late in the great me-me rush called the sixties” (xi). Contrary to such views, I find *Play It As It Lays* advancing in fictional form the same ideological critique articulated more explicitly in “The Women’s Movement” a few years later—and using the same kinds of images and figurative tropes to do so. *Play It As It Lays* explores the flatly traumatized interiority of Maria Wyeth, an institutionalized Hollywood actress mourning the loss of her daughter, who is mentally disabled and also in an institution, and more recently a painful, soon-regretted abortion. Depicting motherhood as decidedly central to female identity and women with reproductive “freedoms” as not so free after all, Didion’s novel, like her essay, is driven by a profound skepticism about the aims and achievements of the women’s movement. As in her essay, too, with its brief, patronizing treatment of “the minorities,” this

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Didion’s interviews with Sara Davidson and Susan Stamberg, and her essays “On the Morning After the Sixties,” “In the Islands,” and “On Morality.” See also, for example, Geherin 105.

skepticism is paired with the privileged white writer's strikingly dim recognition of—and, ultimately, willful turn away from—questions of race and class. And finally, similar to the essay's images of “stalling” in “the movement” and “resisting that essential inductive leap” past the seat in the front of the bus, in *Play It As It Lays* both Didion's critical engagements *and* her privileged blind spots surface through her evocation of a sense of impeded or blocked motion, of static non-progress. In the novel, in fact, this sense pervades not only the “stalled” physical movements of her characters, but also the repetitions and stoppages of their conversations and the blank spots in the text obstructing its narrative progression. It is in these moments of stasis and stalling that Didion challenges forward-moving narratives of women's liberation, insisting that progress might not be happening and questioning where the movement is going—thereby revealing a distinctly gendered dimension to the disillusioned suspicion of narrative itself she was beginning to advance in these years.<sup>2</sup> But just as with her essay, these moments also reveal profound limitations to the novel's critique, showing how Didion's focus on the “movements” of wealthy, white, heterosexual female subjects allows her to pointedly push aside equally urgent issues of poverty, racism, and homophobia from her analysis of gendered struggle.

In *Play It As It Lays*, Didion complicates straightforward stories of gendered advancement through her countering of states of progressive motion with sensations of

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<sup>2</sup> In her essays from and about this time period, most notably “The White Album,” Didion is often concerned with critiquing narrative as an imposed, potentially “sentimental” (44) and oversimplified method for understanding “the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience” (11), specifically in light of the chaos and upheaval of the late 1960s. Also relevant are her essays “Slouching Towards Bethlehem,” “On Going Home,” and “Pacific Distances,” in which Didion links her coming to “find narrative sentimental” to her move to Los Angeles from New York in 1964 (112).

veering out of control, circling back, or staying still. These movements and counter-movements occur across multiple spaces in and of the text: bodily, discursive, and formal. First, Maria's difficulties asserting her agency and independence as a woman, and her navigations of uneven gendered power dynamics, are conveyed through depictions of her body in careening motion and constrained stillness. Second, these social struggles play out through Maria's dialogues with other characters, which alternately rush forward, stall, or dead-end via deft rhetorical moves and intentional conversational stoppages. Last, the novel unfolds through a fragmented, short chapters that often stop abruptly, leaving only static white space, and in the end we return to where we started, with Maria confined in the institution. With these layered levels of uncontrolled, impeded, or countered progression—embodied, spoken, and novelized—Didion undermines cultural narratives of growing female agency and empowerment; she insists not only that women like Maria might not be as “free” as they seem or want to be, but also that the freedoms they strive for might actually end up being dangerous, confining, even paralyzing. And when Didion does allow for moments of legitimate gendered awareness and even nascent feminist revolt as Maria sits motionless, not talking at all—thus seeming to test out new modes of empowerment in stillness and silence—she stops short of letting even alternative resistant narratives fully cohere.

Didion's critique in *Play It As It Lays* is also limited to a simplistically binaristic gendered framework that completely ignores issues of race, class, and sexuality. This is especially noteworthy, and problematic, given that while writing the novel, Didion was certainly witness not just to the rise of what's now called second-wave feminism (which, contrary to David Thomson's suggestion, had certainly “come along” by the late 1960s),



but also to the many other resistance movements of the era, many of which were catalyzed through events occurring in the very city she inhabited and was writing *about*: the rebellion in Watts, for instance, or the Chicano Moratorium. That, despite these developments, the novel's attention to the politics of movement and stasis is unapologetically confined to the category of gender therefore reveals Didion deliberately refusing to address other, intersecting structures of inequality. In fact, these inequalities are often actually *reinforced* through the same logics of careening motion and blocked stasis by which Didion raises questions of Maria's agency and autonomy as a woman. The novel consistently allows Maria—and so, because she is the protagonist and focalizer, prompts us as *readers*—to alternatively “move” quickly past or sit back and disengage from representations of subjectivities and experiences of mobility outside those of the rich white female subject. In these ways, Didion's skeptical send-up of the politics of the women's movement in *Play It As It Lays* is actually deeply invested in the same work of racial, socioeconomic, and sexual marginalization characteristic of the mainstream feminisms she seems intent upon undermining.

### **“I mean it leads nowhere”: Blocked Paths to Liberation**

In the novel's opening section, Didion has Maria “set down the facts” of her life (4). After the basics—“Age, thirty-one. Married. Divorced. One daughter, age four” (4)—Maria proceeds to “Details: I was born in Reno, Nev., and moved nine years later to Silver Wells, Nev., pop. then 28, now 0” (5). Because of her father's gambling and get-rich-quick schemes, “[w]e had a lot of things that came and went”: “a cattle ranch with no cattle and a ski resort picked up on somebody's second mortgage and,” in the case of

Silver Wells, “a motel that would have been advantageously situated at a freeway exit had the freeway been built” (5). While Maria was raised “to believe that what came in on the next roll would always be better than what went out on the last” (5), she now maintains no illusions about the possibilities the future holds. “I mean it leads nowhere,” she states, remembering her mother

looking through her magazines for contests we could enter (Waikiki, Paris France, Roman Holiday, my mother’s yearnings suffused our lives like nerve gas, *cross the ocean on a silver plane*, she would croon to herself and mean it, *see the jungle when it’s wet with rain*), the three of us driving down to Vegas in the pickup and then driving home again in the clear night, a hundred miles down and a hundred back and nobody on the highway either way, just the snakes stretched on the warm asphalt and my mother with a wilted gardenia in her dark hair and my father keeping a fifth of Jim Beam on the floorboard and talking about his plans, he always had a lot of plans, I never in my life had any plans, none of it makes sense, none of it adds up. (7)

Among the things that don’t “make sense” or “add up” for Maria is the death of her mother, who later “ran the car off the highway outside Tonopah” (8). The trauma of her mother’s death and, more recently, of being unable to care for her daughter have left Maria unable to invest herself in anything, for she is convinced that ultimately, “everything goes” (8).

Given how grounded the novel is, here and throughout, in the Western landscape—and given Didion’s status by the time of the novel’s publication as perhaps *the* writer of and about California—it is understandable that spatialized readings of *Play It As It Lays*’ social commentaries have largely centered on its representations of the West, particularly Los Angeles and its surrounding regions.<sup>3</sup> However, we can locate

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<sup>3</sup> The novel is consistently featured in studies examining artistic representations of the city. See, for instance, the 1984 collection of essays *Los Angeles in Fiction*, edited by David Fine (as well as his own 2000 *Imagining Los Angeles*); Mike Davis’ sweeping 1990 study of the metropolis, *City of Quartz*; Eric Avila’s 2004 *Popular Culture in the*

Didion's engagement with questions of space and social relations not just in singular elements of the landscape or particular physical sites, but also in the sensations of aimless or impeded movement that permeate passages like this one. Forever in pursuit of something "better," Maria's family moves to Silver Wells, lured by the money-making potential of a highway construction project that would move people to and through the area; when the project changes course, though, their opportunities for economic success are dead-ended, the town itself eventually reduced literally to zero. Maria observes her parents in quixotic pursuit of imaginary or deferred elsewhere, with the syntax of that passage even mirroring this feeling of purposeless motion, its compounding images of travel stopping short at "none of it makes sense, none of it adds up." The circumstances of Maria's mother's death underscore this sense of ineffective, even *destructive* movement: not only does her car run off a highway, but Maria's knowledge of the accident is then delayed because her father's letter with the news "was mailed to an old address and forwarded"; she finally reads it "in a taxi one morning" on her way to a modeling gig in New York (9).

Towns left behind and unconstructed freeways and trips not taken; fatal car crashes and mothers grieved in the backs of cabs; sentences and paragraphs and life stories building toward dead ends of disconnection, meaninglessness, even mental breakdown: everything *does* "go," in the double senses of movement and loss. Suffusing Maria's narration in the opening chapter with restless motions perpetually blocked or

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*Age of White Flight*; and the 2012 publication of the *Cambridge Companion to the Literature of Los Angeles*, edited by Kevin R. McNamara. In terms of gender, Krista Comer has shown how Didion's representations of California's natural topographies, specifically beach spaces, facilitate an examination of changing sexual identities. And Deborah Paes de Barros and Deborah Clarke reveal the gendered implications of Maria's driving in *Play It As It Lays*, which Mike Davis has called Didion's "L.A. car book" (67).

rendered pointless, Didion stalls the equation of movement with productive advancement in order to begin reflecting critically upon notions of freedom and progress in a distinctly U.S., distinctly 1960s context. She conveys her characters' investment in "going places," in the potential for physical and social mobility afforded by new developments in technology and infrastructure, as well as changing cultural norms and familial relations. But she also undercuts those feelings of advancing possibility with competing ones of misdirection, stoppage, and confinement (not least through her protagonist's narration of all this while lying down in an institution). Doing so, Didion partakes of the kinds of deeply distrustful attitudes toward narratives of progress that came to characterize the era of her writing. These attitudes developed in part out of the inescapably visible horrors marking societal "advancement," from the gunning down of a progressive president in his passing motorcade to the growing quagmire of Vietnam. But in uneasy coexistence with this, they also arose amidst radical political and cultural movements urging new paths forward for historically disadvantaged groups, including women. Indeed, it is most particularly narratives of *gendered* progress that Didion is interested in interrogating and disrupting in *Play It As It Lays*. After all, in representing Maria moving to New York to pursue a career, Didion literally maps the new claims to economic, familial, and sexual independence being staked out by women in the decades following World War II. And yet the liberatory implications of that move are soon countered with her being "hit" with the news of her mother's death in a taxi—which she is *sitting* in, on the way to a *sitting* (9). That moment gestures toward potentially dramatic intergenerational rifts resulting from the social changes of the era, but also actually stills the progressive trajectory of Maria's career independence: "I began to scream and did not work for a month after" (9).

It is in her representation of Maria's abortion, however, that Didion most overtly takes on the question of women's sociospatial progress<sup>4</sup>—and there, too, her representations center on the space of the car. Pregnant and unsure whether the father is her estranged husband Carter Lang or ex-boyfriend Les Goodwin, Maria, at Carter's insistence, reluctantly schedules an abortion. On the day of the procedure, Maria is directed to meet a man in a parking lot. "You drive," the next chapter begins, with the go-between joining Maria to direct her to the house where the procedure will take place and, along the way, idly asking about her car's gas mileage and confiding that he is considering buying a new one (78–79). By the time they arrive, the man has "significantly altered her perception of reality," with Maria feeling now not like "a woman on her way to have an abortion," but instead "a woman parking a Corvette outside a tract house while a man in white pants talked about buying a Camaro" (79). The abortion proceeds as planned, and once it is over and she has returned to her car with the man who escorted her, Maria "back[s] out of the driveway...smil[ing] radiantly at her companion" (83). Didion's tying of Maria's abortion to her time in the car is central to Deborah Clarke's discussion of the novel. As part of her interrogation of what she calls "automotive maternity" (77)—the ways in which cars are bound up in ideas of motherhood in American culture—Clarke turns to novels like *Play It As It Lays*, which present what she calls the "darker side of mothers and cars" (89).<sup>5</sup> She argues that the

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<sup>4</sup> This is unsurprising, given the urgent role that struggles for sexual liberation and reproductive rights played in feminist conversations of this era. With the landmark 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision some years away, having an abortion in the 1960s in most cases still meant breaking the law, but also, too frequently, compromising one's health. See Solinger 38.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that Clarke also reads a more liberatory formulation of "automotive maternity" in *Play It As It Lays*, suggesting that at times Maria's car is her

scenes surrounding the abortion evidence a problematic (and ultimately unsuccessful) “displacement” of Maria’s role as a mother onto her place in the car and as a driver; Didion’s protagonist attempts in vain to gain control over or deflect the reality of her pregnancy and its termination by orienting herself in relation to automobiles, or as Clarke puts it, “cover[ing] over abortions with car talk” (94–95).

However, Clarke’s analysis of Didion’s novel misses out on some other gendered implications detectable in Maria’s interactions in automobiles as she goes through the process of her abortion, implications not limited to maternal identity and not even reducible to questions of theme.<sup>6</sup> For it is not just that, as Clarke suggests, Didion represents Maria’s car as the site where her protagonist alternatively resists, recasts, and confronts her pregnancy and subsequent abortion. It is also that both that car and the narrative surrounding it are moving at alternating speeds and in changing directions, navigated by a woman who doesn’t always know where she is going and doesn’t always seem to be getting anywhere at all. Maria meets the go-between in a parking lot she is directed to but has no knowledge of, reassured on the phone that she “can’t miss it” when she whispers, “What Thriftmart” (76). She drives there through air so still and clear that it seems to “rob everything of its perspective” and “alter all perception of depth,” feeling

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“anchor,” affording her “a desperate means of staying sane and so gaining more say over the fate of her daughter” Kate (93). In her car and as a mother, Clarke argues, Maria attempts to find a meaningful identity “outside of the dominant Hollywood culture” (93).<sup>6</sup> After all, as Clarke herself points out, “the intersection of women and cars” is such a fraught and productive point of historical and cultural inquiry because it illuminates so *many* intersecting “shifts and rifts in the notion of woman’s place, agency, and identity” (3). These “shifts and rifts” are not confined to changing conceptions of motherhood; they encompass the new kinds of sexual freedoms made possible through driving and riding in cars, the blurring of gendered spheres of public and private, and the opportunity to have a “stake in automobility” and therefore in a distinctly American identity (Clarke 2). In novels like Didion’s, the car “functions as a contested site in which the very notion of femininity is challenged and ultimately reformulated” (Clarke 4).

“as if she were reconnoitering an atmosphere without gravity” (76); there is the sense here that she is either not moving through or toward anything of substance, or is about to lose contact with the ground and float away. Once she reaches the parking lot, Maria is again reminded that, though in command of her moving vehicle, carrying her own cash for the procedure, she has no idea where she is or where she’s headed. “You familiar with this area, Maria?,” asks her companion, and she pauses, the question seeming “obscurely freighted,” before finally answering simply, “No” (78).

Moreover, though Maria drives on, gratefully distracted by their discussion of car purchases as they reach the house and the end of that short chapter, the following one depicting the abortion temporarily stills her, as well as, it seems, her ability to articulate herself. The scene in the “bedroom in Encino” (81) stretches over almost five pages, and for most of it, Maria is lying on a table enduring an abortion that we know is painful not because of anything heard from the patient herself—in fact, there is no direct speech from Maria at all as she is prone—but instead, eerily, from the words of the doctor: “quite often the pain is worse when we think about it, don’t like anesthetics, anesthetics are where we run into trouble, just a little local there on the cervix, there, relax, Maria, I said *relax*”; “don’t scream, Maria, there are people next door”; “I said don’t make any noise, Maria” (82–83). With these admonitions lingering, Maria’s return once “the contractions had stopped” to the “hot October afternoon” and the relative mobility of her car, and that quiet, “radiant” smile at her companion as she exits the driveway with her mission accomplished, don’t feel all that liberating—especially since she’s now “backing out,” actually moving in reverse (83).

Didion thus plots out the process by which Maria goes through with the abortion through a complex, often contradictory automotive logic. That that logic signifies so powerfully clearly comes from the cultural entanglement of cars and mothering that, as Clarke shows, has existed in the United States since the invention of the automobile and continued throughout the twentieth century. But it also arises out of the tensions between mobility and immobility, speed and stasis—on the level of physical movement, but also the flow of the narrative itself—that that automotive imagery is able to sustain.<sup>7</sup> Those tensions are meant, I think, to specifically speak, and speak *back*, to a particular moment in the history of women’s reproductive rights. Didion suffuses the plot of her protagonist accidentally becoming pregnant, and then terminating that pregnancy, with competing states of progression, circularity, and reversal, of speeding up, slowing down, and pausing. Moreover, these states permeate the structures of the text itself, from the patterning of conversations (especially those actually occurring within cars) to the length of chapters. Didion therefore disrupts any neat trajectory toward empowerment that might be imposed upon Maria’s experiences as a sexually independent woman, able to choose who to have sex with and whether or not to have a child. She seems to suggest that the very idea of “choice”—which would become so central to feminist discourses in the post-*Roe* era<sup>8</sup>—might be more complicated than it seems, given women’s constrained options when seeking illegal abortions, not to mention their potential dependence upon men

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<sup>7</sup> Also relevant here is a later set of scenes in the novel, when Maria, increasingly depressed and dissociated, has a random sexual encounter with an actor at a party. As they have sex, he tells her, “Don’t move... *I said don’t move*,” and Maria complies silently (154). But when the actor falls asleep, Maria steals his Ferrari and, “hesitating when she came out to the main canyon road,” heads toward the freeway and drives to Tonopah (where her mother died), where she is eventually “stopped for speeding” and arrested (154).

<sup>8</sup> See Solinger, especially 9.



exerting coercive force to direct their decisions. More than that, though, Didion shows Maria oscillating—literally and figuratively—between the competing feelings of control and powerlessness, certitude, ambivalence, and regret, that women can experience in this situation (even if it is their independent choice, even if it is what they want), no matter how much some might argue that they needn't feel conflicted or that those feelings are imposed by patriarchal forces.

Indeed, even after leaving it behind in that bedroom in Encino, Maria will continue to circle back to the abortion; it will continue to divert and impede her physical progress and the progress of the narrative itself. Sometimes, this happens again in the space of the car, as when Maria, after a humiliating conversation with an agent, pulls over, “put[s] her head on the steering wheel and crie[s],” the chapter ending with her realization that “this was the day, the day the baby would have been born” (141). There is also the one-page Chapter 42, when Maria decides to go to New York for a few days, because “[i]t was something people did when they did not know what else to do”; however, after thinking all day “of fetuses in the East River, translucent as jellyfish, floating past the big sewage outfalls with orange peels,” the section concludes, “She did not go to New York” (116). Perhaps most disturbing are the dreams she is plagued with, in which the plumbing in her house in Beverly Hills is “stopped up...gray water bubbling up in every sink”; the end of the dream and the chapter reveal what Maria has known “all along” is preventing the pipes from flowing: “hacked pieces of human flesh” (96–97). When a sink actually clogs in her home, Maria flees, renting an apartment on the fittingly named Fountain Avenue, but after “the shower seem[s] slow to drain” one morning, she packs up and, “in the driving rain,” returns to the house in Beverly Hills (104). “There

would be plumbing anywhere she went” is the last sentence of that chapter (104). In these blockages of Maria’s passage along roadways, of her attempts at travel, of the pipes in her home (and, figuratively, of her internal organs), of chapters’ progressions, Didion undermines both Maria’s and our own ability to follow any easy, straightforward path or narrative of “moving on” from the abortion. She thus presents a cynical, even overtly conservative challenge to discourses of women’s liberation premised upon an empowering process of women gaining and exercising their reproductive rights.

**“I am just very very very tired of listening to you all”:**

**Resistant Stillness and Its Limits**

Chapter 36 begins with a telephone conversation between Maria and Carter as she lies on the bed in the rented apartment sometime in the months after her abortion. The section opens with Carter on the phone from New York, saying, “There’s some principle I’m not grasping, Maria” (103). He goes on, “You’ve got a \$1,500-a-month house sitting empty in Beverly Hills, and you’re living in a furnished apartment on Fountain Avenue” (103). From her spot on the bed, “watching a television news film of a house about to slide into the Tujunga Wash,” Maria clarifies, “I’m not living here, I’m just staying here” (103). When Carter presses, “I still don’t get the joke,” Maria, keeping her eyes on the screen, replies “at the exact instant the house splintered and fell,” “Then don’t get it,” the last of the dialogue we are given (103). After their conversation, Maria watches an interview “with the woman whose house it had been”: ““You boys did a really outstanding camera job,’ the woman said. Maria finished the cigarette and repeated the compliment out loud” (103).

Though the chapter ends with Maria's shaken departure from Fountain Avenue after the plumbing debacle, there is something temporarily, almost surreally empowering about this scene—and it comes, I want to suggest, from the same kind of physical and discursive stoppages that elsewhere have come across as stifling or debilitating. Didion represents Maria's prone, motionless body stubbornly occupying a space of her choosing and, against Carter's frustrated inability to "get the joke," calmly dictating the literal terms of that occupation: "staying," not "living." Even more striking is her response of "Then don't get it" just as the house on the television collapses into ruin. There, the rebellious freedom Maria finds in terminating the conversation is mirrored against a kind of architectural (and specifically *domestic*) termination, one that suggests the possibility of anarchic liberation—or at least, in the case of the woman onscreen, "cheerful detachment" (104)—in the destruction of traditional home and family structures. Following on this, Maria's echoing of the onscreen woman's comment might signify as something more than a weird verbal stutter, more than just troubling evidence that Maria, lying there talking to the television, is somehow stuck, as it were, on repeat. We might also read it as a grim, sardonic moment of alliance with the unknown woman being filmed by the "boys" as her home life crumbles. That moment is strangely poignant precisely because in it, Maria seems a bit unhinged.

This episode is one of several in which, as the abortion plotline unfolds and its traumatic aftermath is brought into ever-sharpening focus, Didion represents Maria increasingly resisting or refusing to engage with the men in her life and, at the same time, increasingly interested in engaging with women around her, including, or especially, strangers. And these moments are made to resonate through a logic of stalling, stopping,

or stuttering that permeates the characters' bodily movements and surroundings, as well as the patterning of their dialogue: Maria lying on the bed in the new apartment; her ceasing a conversation as a house is destroyed onscreen; her engagement from a prone position in a kind of circular exchange with the woman on the television. In this section, then, I argue that while there are certainly times in Didion's novel when she uses a sense of stasis to undermine linear narratives of women's progress, she also at other moments uses that same static sensation—physical, discursive, textual—to tentatively to *rewrite* those narratives, telling different stories about the ways women can be empowered and connect with one another.

Earlier on in the book, for instance, just before she tells Carter she is pregnant, Maria is lying on the beach with him listening to the contemptuous banter of their friends Helene and BZ. Their conversation is punctuated by interjections from BZ's masseur friend, whose vocal "rise and inflection" (43) and "elaborate" affect (45) seem to mark him as homosexual (contributing to the novel's general implication that BZ is as well). When Carter finally storms off, Maria lies "perfectly still until she knew that he was beyond the dunes," then sits up. (46). Her eyes move from BZ and the masseur, "their bodies gleaming, unlined, as if they had an arrangement with mortality," to Helene, who is "not quite so immune to time," with a "certain texture to [her] thighs, a certain lack of resilience where fabric cut into [her] flesh" (46). "It occurred to Maria," the passage continues, "that whatever arrangements were made, they worked less well for women" (46).

This is not exactly an earth-shattering realization, even when unsubtly punctuated, directly following this, with Maria's sudden memory of a woman she read about being

“shot in the face by her fourteen-year-old son” (46). Premised upon stunningly reductive gendered oppositions—things are one way for men, and another, worse way for women—Maria’s vague revelation prevents her from recognizing how things might “work” differently, for instance, for gay men (even those married to women), as evidenced in her free trafficking here in offensive language about “faggots.”<sup>9</sup> And yet these binaristic assumptions are in some ways utterly in keeping with many mainstream white feminist discourses of this era. Emphasizing women’s freedom from men’s “arrangements”—from constricting fabric to patriarchal social structures—these discourses often not only essentialized on the basis of gender, but also deprioritized or even further marginalized groups facing intersecting injustices related to sexuality and race. And so even as we’ve seen Didion taking narratives of women’s liberation to task at other moments in the novel, she appears in this scene to represent an instance of ideological awakening and nascent feminist consciousness that stays firmly within the limited parameters of those narratives. The difference, however, is that all this occurs not as Maria is “standing up” for herself, or marching, or speaking out, but actually lying down and then sitting, silently taking in her surroundings and reflecting. As with that strange moment with the woman on the television, in this instance Didion seems to advance a kind of observational—not to say passive—identity politics that potentially reorients, without actually disinvesting in, the trajectories undergirding contemporary formulations of gendered progress. Here, what marks Maria beginning to recognize

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<sup>9</sup> When the masseur asks if Carter is going to come back with the lemons, Helene replies “pleasantly,” “Faggots make Carter nervous” (47). The term appears in other moments, too, as when Maria characterizes her time spent modeling in New York as a lot of time spent with “Southerners and faggots and rich boys” (8), or when, in the months after the abortion and her subsequent finalized divorce from Carter, she is taken to parties by “an occasional faggot” (125).

patriarchal inequality and, alongside this, forge tentative (or simply imaginary) female alliances is actually when she just sits back and is still, stopping and witnessing and saying very little.

Or rather, in the case of her interactions with men, precisely nothing. Indeed, “Maria said nothing” becomes in *Play It As It Lays* a kind of novelistic “refrain,” “repeated with increasing persistence...until it takes on the characteristics of a ritual chant” (Geherin 107). And it is noteworthy that the repetition of this phrase and its variants begins to ramp up in direct relation to Maria’s grappling with the abortion and its aftermath, as she becomes at once more interested in the shared particularities of women’s experiences and more resentful of male attempts to control those experiences. Amidst these realizations, Maria, over and over, deliberately halts the progression of conversations with the men in her life with pointed silences.<sup>10</sup> There is, for instance, the moment when Maria is speaking on the phone to Carter after arranging the abortion, when Carter says, “Just hold on a minute, Maria, I want to know what the doctor says” (62). But Maria is “staring into a hand mirror, picking out her mother’s features. Sometime in the night,” the passage continues, “she had moved into a realm of miseries peculiar to women, and she had nothing to say to Carter” (62). In the next chapter, Maria

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<sup>10</sup> Thus, while I appreciate David Geherin’s observations about its repetition, I disagree with his situation of the phrase within what he sees as the “overriding thematic concern” of Didion’s novel, “man’s relationship with himself and with existence in general”; he argues that the text is “neither primarily a sociological commentary on the values of contemporary American society nor a psychological case study of its heroine,” but “rather, a picture of personal dread and anxiety, of alienation and absurdity lurking within and without” (105). Even Chip Rhodes’ more recent reading of the novel’s “sparing use of words”—Maria’s actually saying nothing, but also the Hemingway-esque sparseness of the prose in general—doesn’t, to my mind, attend sufficiently to gendered implications; though he reads her verbal “passivity” as “a form of resistance as much as it is a sign of her psychic scars,” he argues that her taciturnity is meant to generally “show how empty and ‘unmotivated’ the words employed by others are” (134).

learns from her phone service that her Les Goodwin has called multiple times. Looking “again into the hand mirror and again [seeing] her mother,” Maria directs the service, “Tell him I haven’t picked up my messages,” and the section ends, “She had nothing to say to any of them” (64). Soon after, two short sections, each about half a page in length, end with Maria hanging up on Les and pulling the ringing phone’s cord out of the wall, respectively. And a few pages later, when Maria meets Les for dinner on the same day as her abortion, their conversation cuts off, along with the quarter-page chapter, with her telling him, “I am just very very very tired of listening to you all” (85).

These passages show Maria beginning to situate her experiences within a kind of universal female condition, a “realm of miseries peculiar to women” that even allows her to feel connected to her mother in new, overtly genetic ways, evidenced in her picking out their shared features in the mirror. At the same time, Maria comes to place herself in direct opposition to individual men in her life but also to a collective male “them,” so monolithic that she finds it increasingly “hard to keep [Les] distinct from everyone else, everyone with whom she had ever slept or almost slept or refused to sleep or wanted to sleep. It had seemed this past month as if they were all one, that her life had been a single sexual encounter, a dreamed fuck” (68–69). All this happens through an accumulation of moments depicting Maria sitting and “having nothing to say”—a syntactical formulation that keeps Maria an active agent and renders “nothing” an unignorable presence—or otherwise impeding the progress of her exchanges with men. (Even when she does actually articulate her resistant stance, telling Les she is “very very very tired of listening to you all,” there is a sense of productive stuttering. The repetition of the single word “very” stalls the completion of the sentence, but it allows Maria to claim additional

discursive space and underscore the weight of her claim.) But perhaps more importantly, this sense of vocal stoppage is also being echoed on the level of form, with Didion punctuating these passages about Maria not having or refusing to say words with actual blank space on the page. In this way, she invites, or rather forces, readers to participate in a textual version of the static, and explicitly anti-male, rebellion we see Maria carrying out in the novel's conversations. Maria says nothing, then Didion writes nothing, so we read nothing; together, character, author, and reader stop, exploring in those spaces of pause alternate (and sometimes completely silent) articulations of female solidarity and alternate, but perhaps not very nuanced, modes of resistance.<sup>11</sup>

Concurrent with Maria's increasingly stilted interactions with men is evidence that her physical stasis, simply sitting in place and listening and observing, allows her to pay new attention to women and their struggles, even if that attention is not necessarily sustained or reciprocated. Chapter 35 begins with a woman "sitting next to Maria at the snack counter in Ralph's Market" declaring, "I don't know if you noticed, I'm mentally ill" (101). Maria is waiting to use the payphone, and as she sits at the counter, the woman next to her confides that she has considered killing herself. "You'll feel better. Try to feel better," Maria replies, as she watches "the girl now using the nearest telephone" calling a taxi (102). After noticing that the girl has "rollers in her hair and a small child in her basket" and wondering "whether her car had been repossessed or her husband had left her or just what had happened," Maria continues to her companion, "I mean you have to try, you can't feel this way forever" (102). "I'll say I can't," the woman responds, beginning

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<sup>11</sup> Again, then, while I agree with Geherin's assertion that "the blankness on the pages of the book" are "as significant as the refrain of 'Maria said nothing,'" I don't share his view that these textual silences convey simply "a bleak and haunting picture of nothingness," or a sense of pure "vacuity" (114).



to cry and going on, “You don’t even want to talk to me” (102). When Maria “touche[s] her arm” and insists, “But I do...I do,” the woman screams, at the chapter’s conclusion, “*Get your whore’s hands off me*” (102). Here, again, what facilitates Maria’s contemplation of the hardships of the women she encounters, as well as her willingness to interact and even empathize with them, is simply pausing, watching, and listening. Seated at the snack counter, Maria is prompted to wonder about various material impediments to the unknown “girl’s” automotive autonomy—the pressures of marriage and motherhood, economic constraints—and, at the same time, to literally reach out and try to help another woman in need. Didion thus presents a kind of brief, anonymous iteration of consciousness-raising, that mode of sitting down, sharing space, and bearing witness to women’s experiences that was so iconic to the women’s liberation movement.

And yet, of course, in Didion’s distorted mirroring of that activist practice, this consciousness-raising “session” ends not with any productive catharsis or achieved solidarity, but instead with one woman calling the other a whore. Ultimately, then, scenes like these only add another layer to Didion’s cynical disruption of political narratives. As I’ve been suggesting, the novel’s undermining of linear, forward-moving notions of women’s liberation might be framed more redemptively as a gesture toward the potential of stasis—bodily, discursive, formal—as an alternative methodology of feminist consciousness, resistance, or coalition. But in the end, the novel refuses to fully “play it as it lays,” in that it won’t play out even that physically or verbally inactive mode of politicization.<sup>12</sup> In scenes like the ones discussed above, Didion either stops short of or

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<sup>12</sup> The novel’s title refers on a more explicit level to gambling, and the idea that one must play the hand one is dealt. But it also interestingly calls up imagery of a body lying/laying (as well as, of course, the sexual connotations of “lay”). It makes sense, then,

outright refuses the possibility of Maria's physical stillness or verbal stalling affording her—or us as readers, really—any sustained sense of awareness or connection. Perhaps more importantly, even if these moments *did* end in something more generative than vaguely stereotypical realizations or screamed name-calling, or even if we as readers *did* find productive pause in those white spaces between chapters, the novel's conclusion would still present a far more depressing outlook on what it means not to move. For in the novel's final pages, we will finally learn of the circumstances of BZ's death, with Maria, after calling him a "queen" for being suicidal, lying down with him on the bed and holding him as he swallows a fatal dose of pills (212–213). And while Maria ultimately differentiates herself from BZ by deciding to "keep on playing," no matter how much she has come to "know what 'nothing' means," she still remains, at the close of the novel, "[lying] here in the sunlight" back at the institution, "talk[ing] to no one," being "*almost moved to read*" the I Ching coins she throws in the pool, but "refrain[ing]" (213, emphasis added). Thus, whatever potentially fruitful political possibilities seem to be opened up along the way as characters sit and lie down, as conversations stop, as pages remain blank, Didion is finally unwilling in *Play It As It Lays* to assemble any kind of coherent, fully fleshed-out narrative of gendered resistance or empowerment—definitely not one in which progress is made through active motion, but also not even one in which stasis is figured, subversively, as resistant or empowering.

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that the cover art for the most recent edition of the novel shows a woman lying supine, her face covered by a curtain.

**“Try to keep her eyes on the mainstream”: The Privileges of (Im)mobility**

In *Play It As It Lays*, Didion seems intent upon undercutting political narratives of “women’s movement,” whether that is through impeding the forward drive of gendered progress or resisting even the alternative possibility of finding a feminist power in stillness. At the same time, however, the fleeting, pseudo-political realizations Didion does allow her protagonist—arrangements working “less well for women” or the “peculiar miseries” of female reproduction—are premised upon precisely the kinds of simplistic gendered binaries and alliances, precisely the unacknowledged race and class privileges, so common to the mainstream feminisms Didion is ostensibly distancing herself from. Recognizing this ultimately gives us a very different lens through which to approach the questions of mobility and agency of movement that have animated this essay thus far. Using this lens, we might reframe Maria’s defiant stillness as she talks to the woman on the television this way: she watches some stranger lose her home while reclining on a comfy bed in her *second* residence. We might re-see Maria’s attention to the girl at the payphone calling a taxi as something more like the idle musings of a movie star whose own automotive mobility is guaranteed. We might pan outwards from the tragic texture of Helene’s thighs in that beach scene and take in the larger picture: a group of rich white people lying around on the sand.<sup>13</sup> We might even revisit the recursive, blocked trajectories of the abortion plotline and acknowledge what Maria doesn’t seem able to: that no matter how powerless she feels, there are also very material racial and

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<sup>13</sup> Importantly—and in a rare instance of attention to the racial implications of Didion’s work—Krista Comer attends to this issue in her readings of scenes like this one. She writes, “With palpable meticulousness, *Play It As It Lays* attends to the role of beach spaces in the construction and negotiation of gendered and sexual identities. At the same time, again with palpable meticulousness, it does *not* attend to the role of landscape representation in producing dominant, Anglo racial subjectivity” (87).

economic advantages being asserted in her innocently unfamiliar navigations of huge swaths of Los Angeles by car, her very ability to go and see a man who does “clean work.” For instance, the doctor probably won’t intentionally sterilize her, which was a coercive and fully state-sanctioned practice among poor women of color seeking birth control devices for the majority of the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup>

What’s worse is that these sociospatial advantages go unrecognized not only by Maria, but also, it seems, by the novel itself. Save for two chapters at the beginning of the novel, Didion never cedes the point of view from her protagonist (and even then, it is just to Carter, a rich white man, and Helene, another rich white woman); after those initial sections, we as readers see everything through Maria’s eyes, in either first- or close third-person. By making this solely Maria’s story, untempered by alternate viewpoints, I argue, Didion is able to leave unconsidered, and thus discourage any *readerly* acknowledgement of, the ways in which her protagonist’s ability to move and stay still might be inflected not just by her identity as a woman, but also her privileged position in relation to racial and classed dynamics. Moreover, Didion doesn’t seem aware of how her own similar privileges might be exactly what allow her to construct a story in which exploring the political implications of mobility and paralysis can potentially mean nothing more than following the circuitous journeys of an able-bodied white female subject. In this section, I work against these apparent blind spots, which align Didion with some of the very

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<sup>14</sup> See Athey 178–180. As Benita Roth suggests, reproductive rights were a particularly racialized and classed point of contention among feminists in this era. “Black feminists,” she points out, “criticized the (white) women’s liberation program of abortion on demand, divorced from other issues of reproductive rights that were directly tied to class and racial status: involuntary sterilization, life circumstances that compel poor women to abort, and the possibility that women on welfare could be forced by the state to have abortions” (102).

feminist discourses she wants to reject. I focus on how Maria's movements, however circular, leave marginalized groups and their stories in the rearview mirror;<sup>15</sup> how her pauses, however anxious, can end up conveying not only an obliviousness to the liberty of leisure, but also an inability to recognize sociopolitical implications outside of the framework of gender. And I suggest that, as in my earlier readings, there are registers to these movements and stoppages that exceed physicality. Alongside the unacknowledged privileges expressed through Maria's bodily motion across the Southern California landscapes, her turns away from unsightly evidence of uneven social conditions, there is also her freedom to alternatively drive or impede the movements of conversations and, as the focalizing protagonist, the narrative itself.

The first numbered chapter in *Play It As It Lays* begins, "In the first hot month of the fall after the summer she left Carter (the summer Carter left her, the summer Carter stopped living in the house in Beverly Hills), Maria drove the freeway" (15). "She dressed every morning," the passage goes on, "with a greater sense of purpose than she had felt in some time," and "she dressed very fast...for it was essential (to pause was to throw herself into unspeakable peril) that she be on the freeway by ten o'clock...If she was not she lost the day's rhythm, its precariously imposed momentum" (15). Once she is

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<sup>15</sup> This is, I think, particularly problematic in light of the stark sedimentation of spatialized modes of inequality and repression in Los Angeles in this era. Janet Abu-Lughod writes, "Between 1940 and 1965, the African American population of Los Angeles County increased from some 75,000 to 650,000. This larger population became increasingly concentrated in the only two areas open to it in a highly segregated city: an already degraded Watts, and the older and somewhat better South Central Avenue district to its west" (200). Eric Avila puts it more forcefully, arguing that postwar suburbanization relegated this growing black population to "a virtual state of captivity," "boxed in" not only "by the exclusionary policies of federal agencies," but also "by the violence deployed by white homeowners and racist police officers" (*Popular* 55). See also Soja and Scott 10.

safely on the freeway and has “maneuvered her way into the fast lane,” Maria drives “the San Diego to the Harbor, the Harbor up to the Hollywood, the Hollywood to the Golden State, the Santa Monica, the Santa Ana, the Pasadena, the Ventura” (15–16). She drives “as a riverman runs a river, every day more attuned to its currents, its deceptions,” learning to navigate complex lane shifts and interchanges “without once braking or once losing the beat on the radio” (16), even developing an ability to “shell and eat a hard-boiled egg at seventy miles an hour” (17). Finding temporary escape from mounting anxieties about her divorce and waning career, Maria puts “seven thousand miles on the Corvette” in that one month (18).

It makes sense that these passages are probably the most famous and widely analyzed of the entire text. Maria’s participation in this scene in what Didion elsewhere called “the freeway experience” firmly establishes the novel’s central concern with the inextricability of Los Angeles culture—and, perhaps, Los Angeles narrative—from the act of driving.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, it is here that Didion sets in literal motion her protagonist’s novel-long struggle to find a “greater sense of purpose” amidst growing feelings of meaninglessness, to assert her agency against an increasingly confining set of circumstances. In this context, some have assessed these passages as fully empowering,<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> In her essay “Bureaucrats,” Didion calls “the freeway experience” “the only secular communion Los Angeles has” (83). She also discusses in “Pacific Distances” how “a good part of any day in Los Angeles is spent driving, alone, through streets devoid of meaning to the driver” (110). Importantly, she then suggests, in language strikingly relevant to the novel, that “[s]uch tranced hours are, for many people who live in Los Angeles, the dead center of being there, but there is nothing in them to encourage the normal impulse toward ‘recognition,’ or *narrative* connection” (111, emphasis added).

For another exploration of the centrality of the freeway system to Los Angeles topography and culture from this era, see critic Reyner Banham’s 1971 text *Los Angeles: Architecture of Four Ecologies*.

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, Deborah Paes de Barros’ discussion of the novel.

but these readings clearly have their shortcomings. Even before Maria gets in the car, for instance, the opening sentence's ambiguous slide from "Maria left Carter" to "Carter left her...Carter stopped living in the house" begs the question, who is actually making purposeful moves here? And the desperate, "precariously imposed momentum" propelling Maria's sojourns further undermines any solid sense of freedom, even one conveyed in "an alternative lexicon" of "direction without destination" (Paes de Barros 137, 127). In any case, whatever "alternative existence" Maria temporarily establishes is discontinued a few chapters later when Maria finds herself having driven almost as far as Carter's film location and, after considering the prospect of rehashing their vicious arguments, heads back to the city without contacting him. "After that," we learn in the chapter's final sentence, she does not "go back to the freeway except as a way of getting somewhere" (33). Ultimately, then, like the other car scenes I've discussed, if the freeway drives are such a useful touchstone for Maria's struggles (whether existential or specifically female), it is not so much because they are freeing, but rather because they spatialize a tension between autonomy and submission, agency and powerlessness.<sup>18</sup>

This tension can actually be understood as historically definitional of the L.A. freeway system itself, both in general—in the sense that it purportedly epitomizes "democratic mobility" but also involves "surrendering" to close monitoring and regulation (Avila *Popular* 221)<sup>19</sup>—and in quite explicitly gendered terms. For as Eric Avila points out, the postwar "interstate highway program...was largely a male enterprise" that "helped reinforce the masculinization of public space" and the "cult of domesticity"—like relegation of women to suburbia (*Folklore* 86). At the same time, he

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<sup>18</sup> See Geherin 107 and Rhodes 138–139.

<sup>19</sup> See also Banham 216–217 and Wachs 106.

suggests that scenes like this one in *Play It As It Lays* offer “a glimpse into the capacity of women to claim an independent space within a structure” founded upon such gendered hierarchies, to “[defy] official meanings assigned to the new freeways” and potentially use them “in ways different from the intentions of its designers” (*Popular* 205). He argues that Maria “recovers on the freeway a sense of purpose” that, “as Betty Friedan lamented in *The Feminine Mystique*, [had] gradually slipped away from suburban women in postwar America,” a slippage driven in part by the very construction of freeways that further distanced and demarcated the gendered spheres (*Popular* 205).

But even setting aside the fact that Maria’s problems as a Hollywood actress seem somewhat different than Friedan’s “problem with no name,” to my mind, Avila’s otherwise compelling reading is insufficiently critical of the unspoken racial and classed privileges subtly undergirding Maria’s roaming freeway drives (the same privileges, of course, that propped up the malaise of Friedan’s suburban housewives). This is surprising, given Avila’s own assessments of the relationships between the L.A. freeways, racial segregation, and white flight. In both 2004’s *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* and his more recent 2014 work *The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City*, Avila historically frames Didion’s so-called “freeway experience,” which was rapidly becoming more widespread in the postwar decades,<sup>20</sup> as one that “furthered the distance, literally and figuratively, between” races and classes (*Popular* 10). Funneling drivers “along a concrete continuum,” freeways “imposed a singular perception of the city and

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<sup>20</sup> “Between the years of 1950 and 1955,” for instance, “total operating mileage of the Los Angeles freeway system increased four and a half times, as large segments of the San Bernardino, Hollywood, and Santa Monica Freeways opened” (Avila *Popular* 198).



limited the possibilities for different perspectives,” allowing for “an edited view of the metropolis” in which “scenes of racial poverty, deindustrialization, urban renewal, and other unsightly features of the city’s postwar metamorphosis” were cut like so much movie film (*Popular* 186, 213–214). This phenomenon was acknowledged even at the time: as Avila points out, Carey McWilliams discussed in a now-famous *Nation* article in 1965, the same year as the Watts rebellion,<sup>21</sup> how L.A. seemed “organized to further the tendency towards social indifference. The freeways have been carefully designed to skim over and skirt around such eyesores as Watts and East Los Angeles; even the downtown section, a portion of which has become a shopping area for minorities, has been partially bypassed” (qtd. in Avila *Popular* 213). Moreover, against McWilliams’ somewhat naïve assessment that this seemed to have happened “[b]y accident more than design,” Avila makes clear that the routing of freeways in L.A., as in cities across the nation, was directly coordinated with “slum clearance” and other urban renewal projects that displaced and further isolated communities of color (*Popular* 207).<sup>22</sup>

With all this in mind, the insistent momentum of Maria’s drives take on new, less redeeming implications. Maria might indeed be transgressively using the freeways “in ways different from the intentions of its designers” in that she finds in her navigation of these masculinized spaces a sense of “purpose,” independence, or power (and, moreover,

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<sup>21</sup> It’s worth noting, as Janet Abu-Lughod does, the influence of the freeway system on the declining conditions in Watts that led to the riots: “By 1961, the existing mass transit system of Los Angeles had ‘died’ (or rather, had been consciously ‘killed’), supplanted by limited-access freeways that bypassed Watts. By then, Watts’s population had become overwhelmingly African American, increasingly poor, and more marginalized from employment opportunities. By the time the riot broke out in 1965, the population of Watts was suffering from high rates of unemployment, dependency, and poverty” (201).

<sup>22</sup> See also Avila’s introduction to *Folklore*, as well as Dana Cuff’s “A Survivor’s Guide to Los Angeles.”

does so by driving them for the sake of driving as opposed to reaching a fixed destination). But in other ways, she is enjoying exactly the kind of sociopolitically disengaged or “indifferent” experience that the freeways seem to have been designed for. For as opposed to what happens when she idles in a parking lot or sits down at a snack counter, Maria on the freeway rarely just stops, observes, and reflects upon her surroundings, and she doesn’t really have to talk to anyone, let alone engage in a way that prompts her curiosity, empathy, or affective identification. When she does have the rare interpersonal interactions at “Union 76 stations, Standard stations, Flying A’s,” they play out only in relation to her sense of herself: she’ll try to “let the attendant notice her” putting an empty Coke bottle back in the rack as a self-conscious “show of thoughtful responsibility,” or she’ll “ask advice on oil filters, how much air the tires should carry, the most efficient route to Foothill Boulevard in West Covina,” but only “to hear her own voice” (18).

Furthermore, for the most part Maria doesn’t have to go anywhere that the freeway doesn’t take her to or see anything that its sanitized views of the city don’t allow; at the very worst, she might occasionally have to stop and turn around. In a much less oft-cited passage from the chapter, we learn that sometimes “the freeway ran out, in a scrap metal yard in San Pedro or on the main street of Palmdale or out somewhere no place at all where the flawless burning concrete just stopped, turned into common road, abandoned construction sheds rusting beside it” (17).<sup>23</sup> But when that happens, Maria learns to “keep in careful control, portage skillfully back, feel for the first time the heavy

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<sup>23</sup> This makes sense, given that Didion’s novel “surfaced just after the completion of a rudimentary network of freeways that provided the basis for the future construction of more freeways” (Avila *Popular* 205).

weight of the becalmed car beneath her and try to keep her eyes on the mainstream,” focusing on “the great pilings, the Cyclone fencing, the deadly oleander, the luminous signs, the organism which absorbed all her reflexes, all her attention” (17). Maria, in other words, does from time to time have to confront the reality that the freeway is not actually perfectly, linearly self-contained, and that it won’t take her everywhere she wants to go; in fact, there might be decidedly un-picturesque realities—postindustrial lots, abandoned construction sites, locations so seemingly worthless that they register as “no place at all”—ready to dead-end her just around the turn.<sup>24</sup> But even those moments don’t put her any closer to the “unspeakable peril” she constantly, somewhat inexplicably feels she’s teetering on the brink of. Maria is still fully in “control,” because she has the freedom to turn around and leave those places behind, “keeping her eyes on the *mainstream*”: a freeway system deliberately designed to bypass and further marginalize non-dominant populations. And as she does this, we as readers, too, are tacitly prompted to keep *our* attention on the mainstream. We are directed to parse the potential feminist implications of a disaffected white woman’s aimless drives while, at the same time, leaving unconsidered other subjectivities and different experiences of physical and political movement.

Another scene later in the book raises similar issues. Sometime a few months after the abortion, Maria arranges to meet Les Goodwin at a motel in Oxnard, a coastal town north of L.A. As she waits for Les, Maria kills time walking on the beach and driving around “aimlessly,” eventually ending up parking and sitting on a bench in a downtown

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<sup>24</sup> Dana Cuff’s characterization of Los Angeles as “[s]itting...along fault lines topped by four-level freeway interchanges; portrayed as a promised land yet riven by tense racial bifurcations; imagined as sprawling without interruption but punctuated by violent urban upheavals” (250) seems relevant here.

plaza, “watching some boys in ragged Levi jackets and dark goggles who sat on the grass near her car,” their motorcycles parked nearby (129). When the boys appear to begin breaking into “the glove compartments of parked cars,” Maria goes to a payphone and calls Les, planning to “tell him she was sitting in the park watching some hoods rifling cars and she could not wait,” but he cannot be reached (130). After hanging up, Maria finds that the boys are “all watching her now, because they were standing around her car, they knew it was her car, they had watched her lock it”; they proceed to try various keys while “watching what she would do” (130). “As if in slowed motion,” Maria walks over to her car as the boys “[melt] back” and [form] a semicircle” (130–131). Finally, she unlocks her car and gets in, and the chapter concludes with this:

As she slid into the driver’s seat she stared directly at each of them, one by one, and in that instant of total complicity one of them leaned across the hood and raised a hand in recognition of what had passed between them, his palm out, inscribing an arc in the still air. Later those few minutes in the plaza in Oxnard would come back to Maria and she would replay them, change the scenario. It ended that way badly, or well, depending on what you wanted. (131)

It is important to note that, as with the scenes I discussed in the previous section, this strange instant of “recognition” occurs “in the still air” of the plaza where Maria has pulled her car over. If we wanted to read this as another example of Maria beginning to reflect upon (or at least sense that there *are*) broader implications in everyday interactions, we would again see it happening through a state of “slowed motion” or stopping. But as with that moment on the beach with Helene, BZ, and the masseur, whatever identity politics playing out in this scene seem confined to a binary critique of male domination and female subjection, while other kinds of privileges and inequalities are actually reinforced, or at least allowed to go unnoticed—unless we actively read against the grain to look for them.

This is not to say that there is not real potential danger here for Maria as a woman, a distinct possibility of things “ending badly”: after watching a group of men attempt to break into her car—knowing that she is watching them, and feeling free to do it anyway—Maria approaches them and they partially encircle her. And it’s also not to romanticize the men Maria faces down; I am not suggesting that these poor boys, so desperate for money that they must turn to robbery, are the ones actually deserving of our sympathy. They might indeed be “hoods,” short for “hoodlum,” which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as a “youthful street rowdy; ‘a loafing youth of mischievous proclivities’; a dangerous rough” (*OED Online*). But Didion’s use of “hood” might nevertheless give us pause, given its urban or “street” connotations—whether denoting a person or, as was also in common use by then, “an inner-city area inhabited predominantly by non-whites” (*OED Online*)—and given that it was in this time period that “urban” was first becoming euphemistically linked to poverty and people of color. Of course, Didion might not be expected to know the historical etymology of the word “hood.” But the fact that she has her protagonist planning to use the term on the phone with Les, as a way of urging him to come meet her, suggests that Didion is at least somewhat aware of the perceived threat to privileged white femininity that is subtly invoked by deploying the term.

Reflecting on the implications of Maria’s use of “hoods” can also help us reframe that “instant of total complicity” between her and the boys, that raised hand of “recognition” as she prepares to drive away. Given the generally gender-limited framework of her depiction of uneven social dynamics, I think Didion herself would probably want us to understand the moment just as Maria herself does, as a mutual

acknowledgement of their specific parts in an “evolving...choreography” (131): the men have asserted their physical dominance because they can; the woman flees, but only because they let her, with a taunting wave goodbye. But we could also read it differently, as a shared instant of recognition that while the “hoods” might be at liberty to scare her a little, in the end, they are going to leave Maria, with her Corvette and her Beverly Hills clothes and her anonymous someone on the other end of the payphone line, well enough alone. In the end, she gets to “stare directly at each of them” but then to turn her eyes away, gets to drive off unharmed (and without having ever, perhaps, been in any real danger). More than that, she gets to end the chapter by “replaying” those minutes, “changing the scenario” so that it ends “badly, or well, depending on what you wanted.” With this conclusion of the section, Didion not only allows Maria to leave lingering, specter-like, the seemingly inherent (but potentially imagined) threat posed by the “hoods”; she also reestablishes her protagonist’s control over the “movements” of the novel, whether bodily or textual. The scenario plays out how Maria wants—or rather “you,” we as readers getting interpellated and rhetorically aligned with her (and thus against the others). And the chapter stops not when the scene ends, but when she “wants,” when she stops narrating it.

We might feel obliged to give Didion some credit for even including scenes like this at all; Maria doesn’t *have* to encounter abandoned industrial lots or the countercultural menace of “some boys in ragged Levis.” But the fact that they are so few and far between, and so utterly un-reflected-upon in any nuanced way, seems to suggest that the novel itself is ultimately premised upon the same kind of blindness to issues of class and race that its protagonist is allowed. This blindness could be explained, though

certainly not justified, as simply the unconscious naiveté of privilege, Maria's and Didion's. But I am tempted to read it, with Krista Comer, as a more "meticulous silence" (87). After all, as Comer points out, "the California years Didion is writing about witness the Watts riots, the Chicano Moratorium, the emergence of the United Farm Workers, and the formation of the American Indian Movement, as well as a broader national civil rights movement and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr." (87). There is precisely one moment in *Play It As It Lays* in which Maria evidences awareness of any of these social developments in even the most general of ways. It occurs in a short chapter relatively early in the novel, immediately following the scene in which Maria tells Carter that she is pregnant. "Late that night," Maria is "sitting alone in the dark by the pool," thinking about a couple whose home she and Carter used to visit for dinner (52). "Sidney Loomis," she recalls, "was a television writer and Ruth Loomis was very active in the civil-rights movement and group therapy. Maria had never been able to think of anything to say to Ruth Loomis," though "in retrospect," she assesses, "that was not why Carter had stopped seeing" the couple; rather, it must have been because Sidney's show was canceled (52).

For Maria, sitting sad and alone after Carter has left, the takeaway from this random memory is that her husband is "a dropper of friends and names and obligations" (52). But I suggest that we as readers can use this moment to conclude something else entirely. With the image of Maria there by the pool, thinking about the Loomises, it becomes apparent that alongside the unacknowledged advantages of Maria's mobility, her ability to "keep her eyes on the mainstream" and drive away from scenes of economic or racial disparity, there is also a concurrent, equally unspoken privilege of stasis. This is

evident, of course, in her poolside seat at the house in Beverly Hills; as with her supine position on the bed in the second apartment, the image conveys a claim to bodily leisure and brings her relative wealth into stark focus. But more than that, as with the end of that chapter with the hoods, there is the privilege of discursive stasis, of stopping conversations and chapters when you want, of not talking or narrating at all. When Didion has Maria reflect that she “had never been able to think of anything to say to Ruth Loomis”—directly after noting that the woman was active in civil rights and directly before concluding that this wasn’t actually a problem—she inadvertently betrays something central about her novel and its politics. She makes clear that she is utterly incapable of contributing to the “movement” of dialogue *about* movements highlighting racialized (or classed) inequalities. More than that, she reveals that this kind of discursive blockage is actually quite necessary and central to the novel’s construction of a solely, simplistically gendered critique.

After the memory of the Loomises, this short chapter turns back to Maria’s self-pitying reflections on Carter’s departure; after her conclusion that “[s]he had done something that reached him, but now it was too late,” the chapter ends with Maria remembering Carter saying, before he leaves the house, “What am I supposed to do....What in fuck am I supposed to do?” (53). These final lines of text are followed by almost an entire page of blank space. In a more redemptive reading, we could frame this as another instance of the resistant verbal, textual, and readerly stasis that I have already discussed: here again, Maria says nothing, Didion writes nothing, we read nothing. But this example, I think, is distinctly different than those other moments with Carter and Les, when pauses in dialogue and stops between sections might have invoked an anti-



patriarchal rebellion through silence. This static, empty textual space, on the other hand, communicates on the level of form what Maria does in the content of her narration: a literally, glaringly white refusal to engage with Civil Rights or any other kind of politics not oriented around simplistically gendered formulations of oppression.<sup>25</sup> Like Maria's freeway driving and her interaction with the "hoods," therefore, this blank space on the page marks out the narrow parameters of Didion's novel, and of the feminist narratives it even ambivalently engages with. *Play It As It Lays* may be noteworthy for its use of spatialized tensions of motion and stillness to complicate facile trajectories of women's progress. But in the end, its individualized investment in the struggles of a singular white, privileged female subject—and its stopping short of acknowledging other subjectivities and modes of power—means the novel's potential for meaningful social commentary is profoundly limited. Not so, however, for Toni Morrison in her 1973 novel *Sula*, which similarly pursues questions of gender politics through the overlapping spaces of bodily movements, geographical landscapes, and narrative forms, but also insists upon the inextricability of these questions from intersecting dynamics of race and class.

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<sup>25</sup> Repurposing the (repurposed) title of Didion's 1979 collection of essays *The White Album*, David Fine calls *Play It As It Lays* a "'white book' with more white space than print" (*Imagining* 247). There are racial implications to this whiteness.

### CHAPTER III

#### TONI MORRISON'S *SULA* AND THE DEMAND FOR SPACE

In 2004, Vintage began publishing a new edition of Toni Morrison's 1973 novel *Sula* with an author's Foreword. In it, Morrison writes that the questions guiding the novel—"What is friendship between women when unmediated by men? What choices are available to black women outside their own society's approval?" (xiii)—came out of her own situation living in Queens as a working mother, "so strapped for money that the condition moved from debilitating stress to hilarity" (xiv). Fortunately, she goes on, "this was the condition of every other single/separated female parent I knew," and together they "traded...[t]ime, food, money, clothes, laughter, memory—and daring. Daring especially, because in the late sixties, with so many dead, detained, or silenced, there could be no turning back simply because there was no 'back' back there" (xiv). In that atmosphere, "we found it possible to think up things, try things, explore," and Morrison "began to think about just what that kind of license would have been like for us black women forty years earlier" (xiv–xv). The Foreword's final lines elaborate on this point: "In *Sula* I wanted to explore the consequences of what that escape [from male rule] might be...on female friendship. In 1969, in Queens, snatching liberty seemed compelling. Some of us thrived; some of us died. All of us had a taste" (xvii). Readers then turn to the opening lines of *Sula* itself: an unnamed prologue describing the Bottom, a now-destroyed neighborhood of Medallion, Ohio, that was once a close-knit African American community. The novel is a history of that community, centered on the women of the Wright and Peace families and in particular Nel and Sula, whose friendship threads

through the narrative from their coming of age in the 1920s through Sula's 1940 death and Nel's middle age in the 1960s.

If *Sula*'s prologue on the Bottom was written as a kind of "lobby" to "situate" the novel's readers, as Morrison suggests in her Foreword (xv), then that Foreword itself now functions as another, outermost "lobby" guiding us into the text. Situating *Sula* in the context of her supportive network of black women, Morrison primes readers for her novel's treatment of the radical identity-forming and -changing power of black sisterhood, or what Kevin Everod Quashie calls "girlfriend selfhood": a "political and spiritual solidarity" open to anyone who is "outside, marginal, and...who is committed to justice and love and the survival of Black women" ("The Other Self" 203). (This includes, we will see, men like Shadrack, a character whose "desperate and desperately creative strategies of survival" Morrison also touches upon in her Foreword [xvi].)<sup>1</sup> Further, the Foreword shows readers that engaging with these conditions of solidarity and "strategies of survival" also means exploring, in ways utterly different from Didion's, how spaces are themselves politically charged, reflecting uneven social conditions but also providing room for embodied, resistant negotiations.<sup>2</sup> For by specifying that *Sula*

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<sup>1</sup> Such readings help reframe Morrison's relationship to feminism. As Gurleen Grewal points out, *Sula* "partakes of the black cultural resistance to liberal white feminism" (3), for which Morrison had already expressed suspicion in her 1971 essay, "What the Black Woman Thinks about Women's Lib." Against that vision of feminism, Morrison in *Sula* centralizes the experiences of black women while also representing those experiences as inextricable from issues of masculinity, sexuality, socioeconomics, and community. The novel thus deliberately demands, and itself enacts, a black feminist theoretical analysis that attends simultaneously to "inscriptions of race (particularly but not exclusively blackness), gender (particularly but not exclusively womanhood), and class" (V. Smith 39).

<sup>2</sup> Katherine McKittrick (22) and Brian Jarvis (113), among others, note Morrison's concern with space and geography. Previous studies of the novel that attend to space include Patricia McKee's 1996 article, "Spacing and Placing in Toni Morrison's *Sula*."

was conceived in late-1960s Queens among women who felt “there was no ‘back’ back there,” “[c]ut adrift” (xv) but therefore uniquely able to “explore,” Morrison calls up a powerful tension between neglected directionlessness and trailblazing possibility that aptly characterizes the landscape of New York City at the time.<sup>3</sup> As in Didion’s L.A. and other U.S. cities, there had been “an unprecedented churning of population in the New York region” in the decades following WWII (Abu-Lughod 159), with the arrival of African Americans seeking jobs coinciding with white flight and redirected government funds to undeveloped portions of outer boroughs and the suburbs; by the late 1960s, New York City was profoundly segregated, its poorer neighborhoods dotted with vacant lots and abandoned or burned-out buildings.<sup>4</sup> However, this was also a period of marked social resistance in New York City, as across the nation and the globe, with people of color playing central roles in efforts to occupy, reclaim, and overhaul the city’s spaces.<sup>5</sup> As in Los Angeles, these efforts took the form of formal political action but also everyday processes of what Gaye Theresa Johnson calls “spatial entitlement”: marginalized communities’ formation of collectivities based on “new and imaginative uses of technology, creativity, and spaces” (x). Such was the case, it seems, for Morrison’s friends “snatching liberty” in Queens, who felt free to “[w]rite a play, form a

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<sup>3</sup> Morrison thus also speaks back to a critical history framing her novel as provincial or distanced from present-day concerns. Sometimes, these interpretations were leveled as criticisms; see, for instance, Sarah Blackburn’s December 30, 1973 review of *Sula* in *The New York Times Book Review*, to which Alice Walker responded with a scathing letter to the editor (“In the Beginning” 18). See also Dubey 57. Houston A. Baker, Jr.’s analysis is laudatory, but his points are premised upon problematically gendered dichotomies; see 103–104, 132, 136–137, 157–159.

<sup>4</sup> See Mogilevich. These landscapes were formed in part by urban renewal and infrastructural initiatives hollowing out established communities and disproportionately displacing people of color (Gandy 115, 161), a pattern in cities nationwide.

<sup>5</sup> See the work of Martha Biondi, Julie A. Gallagher, Clarence Taylor, and Michael Woodsworth.

theater company, design clothes, write fiction unencumbered by other people's expectations"; as she puts it, "Nobody was minding us, so we minded ourselves" (xv).

These sociospatial dynamics, touched upon but left relatively undeveloped in Morrison's new Foreword, are what guide my chapter on *Sula*. I investigate how Morrison represents the spaces in and of her narrative as historical sites of subjugation and possibility,<sup>6</sup> sites where, as in her depiction of late-1960s Queens, inequities of gender, race, and class cohere but are also challenged through creative individual and collective actions, including the processes of storytelling. *Sula*'s "spaces" register on multiple levels: materially, in depicted physical geographies, infrastructures, and architectures; conceptually, in symbolic and imagined terrains; and formally, in the structural landscape of the text itself. Morrison maps out uneven social relations in these overlapping spaces, depicting conditions of constrained mobility and marginalized location as embedded in physical landscapes, imagined boundaries, and the limits of narrative control and coherence. But she also illuminates new possibilities for resistance and coalition in those spaces, whether it's a community taking back a piece of land excluded to them or two women forging bonds across social—or textual—distances. Looking to the contested topographical and social landscape of the Bottom, then to Nel and Sula's encounters with and departures from one another across that landscape, I ultimately uncover in *Sula* what Katherine McKittrick calls a "black feminist geography,"<sup>7</sup> a "real [response] to real spatial inequalities" that also offers

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<sup>6</sup> See McKittrick xviii and Santow 73.

<sup>7</sup> In her 2006 work *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, McKittrick defines black feminist geographies as "black women's political, feminist, imaginary, and creative concerns that respatialize the geographic legacy of racism-sexism" (53).

“reconceptualizations of space and place” (xxiii).<sup>8</sup> These “reconceptualizations” take place in *Sula* as Morrison has her characters work to transform existing material locations, making them, as with her own friends in New York, new sites for “exploring” and “trying things.” But they also occur in the contours of the narrative itself. With *Sula*’s recursive but forward-looking structure, Morrison insists that threatened geographies like the Bottom—and like many parts of late-1960s New York—remain present, active, and worthy of attention, and that new terrains of struggle are always on the horizon. And as Nel and Sula’s shared and divergent navigations of their physical surroundings are mirrored in their separate but interdependent narrative positions, Morrison presents black female sisterhood as a dynamically spatial process that is always embodied and place-based, but also being worked out in the forms of literature.

### **“In that place”: Building, Reworking, and Destroying the Bottom**

We learn in the untitled prologue that the Bottom dates back to the late nineteenth century but is now, in the unspecified present of the late 1960s, almost fully destroyed due to the effects of integration and suburban sprawl. The section begins, “In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood” (3). Connected to Medallion by a road “shaded by beeches, oaks, maples and chestnuts,” this place “is called the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called the Bottom”—a name that comes from a “nigger joke” (3–4). A white farmer once “promised freedom

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<sup>8</sup> In a 1989 interview, Bill Moyers asked Morrison, “What do you think is the primary role of the novel? Is it to illuminate social reality, or is it to stretch our imagination?” She replied, “The latter. It really is about stretching. But in that way you have to bear witness to what *is*” (273).

and a piece of bottom land to his slave if he would perform some very difficult chores”; however, when the slave finished the chores, the farmer decided that, while “[f]reedom was easy—the farmer had no objection to that,” his land was another story (5). So he enticed the former slave to settle on the barren hillside, telling him that it, not the valley, was the real “bottom land...the bottom of heaven” (5). This “joke” is the Bottom’s origin story.

As Phillip Novak points out, there is an almost “fairy-tale-like cadence” to these opening lines: “there was once” evokes the classic “once upon a time,” and the detailing of the joke, with its villainous trickster figure and neat wordplay, seems to “situate the novel’s tale,” and the space of the Bottom that provides its setting, “in the timeless realm of parable or myth” (186). But, of course, the “myth” that Morrison depicts here is very real, deliberately located, and perpetually timely: it is nothing less than “the writing of an American betrayal” (Baker 137), a microcosmic example “of White society’s failed promises” to African Americans (Montgomery 128). More than that, it at once allegorizes and concretizes the spatialized power dynamics—from place-naming and property ownership to human movement and settlement, land development, and access to the natural environment—upon which processes of racial subjugation and struggle have been premised from the Middle Passage through Reconstruction and up to Morrison’s present day (and our own). This “joke” laid out in the prologue reverberates throughout *Sula*, a novel that traces the “material and conceptual placements and displacements, segregations and integrations, margins and centers, and migrations and settlements” (McKittrick xiv) of an African American community across multiple generations. At the same time, Morrison also holds that “joke” up to scrutiny, even as she retells it, in a

process of “repetition with a difference,”<sup>9</sup> making room for other kinds of stories of space-claiming and place-making.

By the time we learn, in the middle of the prologue, of the “joke” of the Bottom’s origins, it has in some sense already been (re)told in the more recent past of the novel’s first paragraphs, which depict the Bottom’s ongoing destruction with the encroachment of suburbia. Beginning with the unmistakable racial symbolism of the first sentence—“they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots”—the opening passages of the novel paint the suburbanization of the Bottom as synonymous with the erasure of black geographical and cultural spaces. “The beeches” that shaded the road connecting the Bottom to the valley, Morrison writes, “are gone now, and so are the pear trees where children sat and yelled down through the blossoms to passersby. Generous funds have been allotted to level the stripped and faded buildings that clutter the road from Medallion up to the golf course” (3). The passage continues:

They are going to raze the Time and a Half Pool Hall, where feet in long tan shoes once pointed down from chair rungs. A steel ball will knock to dust Irene’s Palace of Cosmetology, where women used to lean their heads back on sink trays and doze while Irene lathered Nu Nile into their hair. Men in khaki work clothes will pry loose the slats of Reba’s Grill, where the owner cooked in her hat because she couldn’t remember the ingredients without it. (3)

Analyzing this passage, Novak writes, “all that is evoked here, from the moment of its emergence, is missing or vanishing—is always, in some sense, already gone” (187), and indeed, Morrison’s elegiac description conveys how mid-twentieth-century patterns of

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<sup>9</sup> In *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition*, Cheryl A. Wall takes up the titular blues trope to show how black women writers redraw the “lines” of geneologies and literary traditions. “‘Worrying the line,’ she says, ‘is inevitably a trope for repetition with a difference’; both refer to the process whereby ‘rewriting or reading the dominant story, and delegitimizing or displacing that story’ allows ‘black women inscribe their own’ (16).



migration could fragment black communities, as well as the racialized violence of post-WWII suburban sprawl.<sup>10</sup>

But to read the unfolding story of the Bottom as characterized solely by absence, or what Patricia McKee would call the “experience of missing” (2), means ignoring the ways in which the prologue also establishes a presence. We can see this even in the organization of that opening sentence: surrounding the destruction of the middle clause’s “tearing” and uprooting with the simple phrases, “[i]n that place” and “there was once a neighborhood,” Morrison textually foregrounds the existence of the Bottom as a physical and social location. And though the first paragraph goes on to describe its destruction, that very description is also (re)building the spaces being destroyed. The Time and a Half Pool Hall, Irene’s Palace of Cosmetology, Reba’s Grill: these are or will soon be gone, but they are all now there, too, indelibly recorded in acute detail. And these absent-but-present spaces are still very much alive and occupied,<sup>11</sup> as we sense in the glimpses of bodies and snatches of voices: the “feet in long tan shoes,” the dozing women at the salon, Reba in her hat, the “dark woman in a flowered dress” that, “if a valley man happened to have business up in those hills...might see...doing a bit of cakewalk, a bit of black bottom, a bit of ‘messaging around’ to the lively notes of a mouth organ,” her “bare feet...[raising] the saffron dust that floated down on the coveralls and bunion-split shoes of the man breathing music in and out of his harmonica” (4).

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<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Lemann writes, “Between 1910 and 1970, six and a half million black Americans moved from the South to the North; five million of them moved after 1940....In 1970, when the migration ended, black America was only half Southern, and less than a quarter rural; ‘urban’ had become a euphemism for ‘black’” (6).

<sup>11</sup> Wall *Worrying* 167.

In these details, Morrison accomplishes something more than the commemoration of a now forgotten past, a now absent place. She also exploits the possibilities afforded by the novel's textual landscape, and the reader's imaginative one, to make this disappearing community *matter*—to mean something, to be made up of actual materials—and be *present*—to be of-the-moment, to exist in real form. And though the subsequent appearance of the “joke” would seem to abruptly undercut this project of textual space- and place-making, the end of the prologue cuts back, first by turning the joke on its head and then by simply rendering it irrelevant. After we come to know what exactly “account[s] for the fact that the white people lived on the rich valley floor...and the blacks populated the hills above it,” the narration continues, “Still, it was lovely up in the Bottom,” so much so that “the hunters who went there sometimes wondered in private if maybe the white farmer was right after all. Maybe it was the bottom of heaven (5–6). In any case, the people living in the Bottom “had no time to think about it. They were mightily preoccupied with earthly things—and each other, wondering even as early as 1920 what Shadrack was all about, what that little girl Sula was all about, and what they themselves were all about, tucked up there in the Bottom” (6). With that “still,” Morrison insists that to know the Bottom requires more than considering its racist history. It means imagining the kind of “loveliness” that would make someone think that maybe the Bottom *was* heavenly, an idea that would not so much make the white farmer right in his lie as reveal that the beauty of that land, and of the community that made its home there, proved him utterly wrong. And it means recognizing that in the end, the people of the Bottom didn't concern themselves with word games. They were too busy with projects of curiosity and self-discovery.

The prologue's concluding sentence anticipates the story of Shadrack that appears next. The only chapter of *Sula* not centered on the experiences of any of the Wright or Peace women (they have not yet been introduced into the novel at all), "1919" introduces Shadrack as a "young man of hardly twenty" (7) who witnesses atrocious violence during the First World War. In the first scene, he is "running with his comrades across a field in France"; after days of marching, it is "his first encounter with the enemy" and Shadrack is not even sure "whether his company [is] running toward them or away" (7). Feeling "the bite of a nail in his boot," Shadrack finds himself "deep in the great sweep of men flying across this field"; he sees "the face of a soldier near him fly off" and the body "stubbornly, taking no direction from the brain...[running] on, with energy and grace, ignoring altogether the drip and slide of brain tissue down its back" (8). The gruesome scene ends there, and after a section break, we learn that, "[b]lasted and permanently astonished by the events of 1917" (7), Shadrack has spent over a year in an Ohio hospital—a period often spent straitjacketed and in hallucinatory states of panic, and of which he "fully recollect[s]" only eight days (11)—only now to be ejected because of a "demand for space" (10). Shadrack wanders into an unnamed "small Midwestern town" where he sits down on the curb to cry, terrified of "the unchecked monstrosity" of his own hands, and is promptly arrested for "vagrancy and intoxication" and locked in a jail cell (12–13).

In these scenes, Morrison draws the original slavery-era "joke" into the twentieth century and sends it echoing across the Atlantic. She plays out on the individual level the ways in which spatialized processes of racial discrimination took on new dimensions in the context of World War I, a period that revealed the nation's relative disinterest in

attending to the health and safety of black men's (and women's) bodies even as they moved across the country and traveled overseas in droves in service of America's "making the world safe for democracy."<sup>12</sup> As Shadrack runs aimlessly, Morrison conveys not just a soldier's general unpreparedness for the chaos and intensity of battle (heightened with the introduction of modern warfare tactics newly capable of inflicting large-scale death and destruction), but also the specific kinds of terror that would result from encountering these military geographies with inadequate training, clothing, and equipment. And her story of the shellshocked veteran being forced, because of "a demand for space," to leave the hospital and roam ignored (or persecuted), speaks to the experiences of the many African American soldiers who returned home to America after fighting for their country to find there was no space for them—as wounded soldiers, as workers, as participants in national narratives of democracy and justice. But, importantly, the story or "joke" does not end there. Rather, in "1919" Morrison plays with the novel's textual and physical spaces to offer potentially new historical interpretations, new modes and languages of resistance.

There is, for instance, the scene in Shadrack's jail cell, where under the "command to fuck himself" that he sees written on the wall (13), in the midst of his

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<sup>12</sup> For an exhaustive study of this period, see Nina Mjagkij's 2011 work, *Loyalty in the Time of Trial: The African American Experience During World War I*. She details the racist practices of the all-white draft boards; the Army's deprioritization of training and equipping black soldiers for battle; and the widespread persecution of black soldiers by white military superiors, local police, and civilians. These conditions led to an increasingly incendiary state of race relations in America, as evidenced in the riot that erupted in East St. Louis on July 2, 1917 (64) and in the "Houston Mutiny" of the next month (66). Racial antagonisms were further inflamed when the war ended and many of the hundreds of thousands of black Southerners who had migrated north to pursue wartime employment opportunities lost their jobs as white veterans returned; there was also an increase in lynchings and another wave of race riots in cities across the country (xxiii).

displacement and subjugation at the hands of the state, Shadrack discovers his own face. Seeing his reflection in the toilet water, he finds that the blackness of his face is “so definite, so unequivocal” that it “astonishe[s] him” and leaves him wanting “nothing more”—and in full possession of his own hands, which he finds are finally “[c]ourteously still” (13). After discovering this new physical and psychic space of black presence and value—a “definite” space accessed, paradoxically, in the wavering, indeterminate circle of water of a toilet bowl, inside a jail cell—Shadrack returns to Medallion and the place that he has protected over the years in his “cave mouths of memory”: a shack once owned by his grandfather, with “a window that looked out on a river” (10). And once home, in a “struggle to order and focus experience” and “[make] a place for fear as a way of controlling it,” Shadrack inaugurates National Suicide Day on January 3, 1920 (14). Created to compartmentalize his fear of death, to help himself and “everybody...get it out of the way” so that “the rest of the year would be safe and free,” Shadrack spends the first and every National Suicide Day walking “through the Bottom down Carpenter’s Road with a cowbell and a hangman’s rope calling people together. Telling them that this was their only chance to kill themselves or each other” (14). This spectacle initially causes “panic” in the community, precisely because, though “they knew Shadrack was crazy,” they also have to acknowledge that “that did not mean that he didn’t have any sense or, even more important, that he had no power” (15). In fact, while the holiday makes clear that Shadrack is still profoundly affected by the traumas of war, it is also a powerful statement, one that makes its own kind of perfect sense. It is a highly fitting response to, a reappropriation *of*, the earlier “demand for space.”

With National Suicide Day, Shadrack is able to “make a place” not only for his fear but for himself, becoming an active participant in a process of place-making as opposed to a passively displaced victim. Walking down Carpenter’s Road, ringing his bell and yelling with a “voice so full of authority and thunder” (15), he forcibly announces himself in the sonic, topographical, and social landscape of the Bottom. He asserts his, and his community’s, “spatial entitlement,” to return to Gaye Theresa Johnson’s phrasing, insisting on his right to take up this civic space and “calling people together” to do the same. And while the holiday does not become a collective affair until later on in Morrison’s novel, soon enough the community does get used to National Suicide Day, “absorb[ing] it into their thoughts, into their language, into their lives” (15), even using it as a reference point as they make plans and tell stories. With his staking out of a time and place to be seen and heard, and with the community’s recognition of it, Shadrack the disenfranchised war veteran becomes an agent and (re)writer of history.<sup>13</sup> Marching down the road and thereby instituting a “national” holiday, a performance that reads as both highly satirical and deeply sincere, he at once inserts himself into and disrupts dominant national narratives of valor and sacrifice that have left him marginalized. And he does this through a spatial practice that confronts and renders livable, even darkly comical, the effects of that very marginalization.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Cheryl Wall argues that “National Suicide Day becomes a more significant marker of time in the Bottom than the historic events toward which the dates that differentiate the sections of *Sula* gesture” (*Worrying* 169).

<sup>14</sup> In this context, and given that we know that “the events of 1917” profoundly affected Shadrack, we might think about “the Silent Parade,” which Nina Mjagkij calls “the first black protest march in the history of the United States” (64). After President Wilson refused to speak out against the racial violence of the East St. Louis riot, the July 28 march assembled 10,000 African American protestors near the NAACP headquarters in New York City. The “[i]mpeccably dressed” protestors, Mjagkij writes, “marched

With Shadrack's story, Morrison's attention to the spatial dimensions of racial subjugation coexists in tension with a process of laying out paths (literally) for subverting, or at least contesting, this familiar trajectory, allowing room for alternative processes and interpretations. This tension also animates the saga of the New River Road, which "threads its way throughout the text" (Wall *Worrying* 166) and reaches its dramatic conclusion in 1941, on the twenty-first annual National Suicide Day. We first encounter the road in the "1927" chapter. "In a state of euphoria, with a hunger for more and more" in the postwar years of "fake prosperity," the town's council plans "a new road, tarmac, that would wind through Medallion on down to the river, where a great new bridge was to be built to connect Medallion to...the town on the other side" (81). Jude Greene, Nel's soon-to-be husband, is one of many men from the Bottom who unsuccessfully seek work on the construction project, seeing "the gang boss pick out thin-armed white boys from the Virginia hills and the bull-necked Greeks and Italians" and hearing "over and over, 'Nothing else today. Come back tomorrow'" (82). A new flicker of hope arises in 1940 with the announcement that the construction of the tunnel, which has replaced the bridge portion of the project, now "would use Negro workers" (151), but by this point the people of the Bottom have little patience left. In addition to Sula's death the previous October, which shook the community's social order to its core, there has been an outbreak of scarlet fever, and an early ice storm has led to deepening poverty. So on the third of January, 1941, when Shadrack appears walking down Carpenter's Road, a

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silently to the sound of muffled drums...The decision to dress well and march in silence was deliberate. While the NAACP tried to arouse the American conscience in hopes of gaining support for federal antilynching legislation, civil rights leaders knew that the public might turn against the protestors and accuse them of being unpatriotic. To deflect those charges, the NAACP called the protest march a parade and made sure that it exuded an air of respectability and order" (65).

group of people in the Bottom decide to finally join him in a march that ends tragically at the tunnel site. Reaching “the place where their hope had lain since 1927” and now sits “leaf-dead,” the marchers rush to destroy it but end up going “too deep, too far”:

A lot of them died there. The earth, now warm, shifted; the first forepole slipped; loose rock fell from the face of the tunnel and caused a shield to give way. They found themselves in a chamber of water, deprived of the sun that had brought them there. With the first crack and whoosh of water, the clamber to get out was so fierce that others who were trying to help were pulled to their deaths. Pressed up against steel ribs and timber blocks young boys strangled when the oxygen left them to join the water. (162)

Shadrack presides over this haunting scene, standing “upon the bank...ringing his bell” (162).

As with Shadrack’s war-torn struggles, the story of New River Road registers dire historical realities: chronic unemployment due to racist hiring practices; boom-time construction initiatives abandoned in bureaucratic quagmires; black communities in the “cold vise” of illness and starvation; the violent underside of development projects. With this story, then, Morrison adds new dimensions to her exploration of the mutually constitutive relationship between uneven physical landscapes and uneven social relations, making clear that her characters’ surroundings are also always political and ideological, as well as literal, battlegrounds. But if the New River Road is a battleground, the outcome of that battle is perhaps too complicated to be characterized as a loss. After all, immediately before the destruction of the tunnel that leads to the death of so many people of the Bottom comes an extended passage of giddy vitality bringing together nearly everyone in the community. Having for so many years watched Shadrack’s procession solemnly from behind closed doors and shuttered windows, the people of the Bottom now finally join together in laughter that “infect[s] Carpenter’s Road” and draws them



together into what eventually becomes a “parade” (159). Refusing to hide themselves away and endure their pain with the appropriate dignity and maturity, refusing to let their entire world be defined by absence—of food, of opportunity, of happiness, of hope—the parade-goers defiantly announce that they are very much present and alive, capable in this moment of “open[ing] further this slit in the veil” that shrouds their lives in “anxiety” and “gravity” (160). This crowd “strut[s], skip[s], marche[s], and shuffle[s] down the road,” undeterred by racial divides marked onto the landscape; though some stop short at the start of the sidewalk marking “the white part of town,” those “fainthearted” are “put to shame by the more aggressive and abandoned,” and the parade continues down Main Street and the New River Road (160–161).

Moreover, even though the group’s giddiness is abruptly extinguished when they reach the site of the tunnel, their collective power to simultaneously call attention to, transgress, and explode physical and social boundaries is not. Leaping over the barricade, the people “[kill], as best they could, the tunnel they were forbidden to build”: “they picked up the lengths of timber and thin steel ribs and smashed the bricks they would never fire in yawning kilns, split the sacks of limestone they had not mixed or even been allowed to haul; tore the wire mesh, tipped over wheelbarrows and rolled forepoles down the bank” (161). This destruction of the tunnel leads to violent deaths, but it also registers a powerful spatialized protest. “Killing” the tunnel, the people of the Bottom expose the hypocrisy of infrastructural initiatives undertaken in the name of economic growth that leave unaddressed and actually perpetuate conditions of poverty and unemployment. They assert their power to reconstruct or *deconstruct* the physical world around them, to “wipe from the face of the earth,” at least for a time, at least symbolically, the

topographical contours of exclusion and discrimination, to “kill it all” even if that means killing themselves in the process. And this act of “killing” does change the landscape of the novel, both its physical geography and its narrative trajectory. By the chapter’s conclusion, the tunnel, that ostensible symbol of progress and development, has become both a site of mass protest and a mass grave, a haunting underground “black geography” that is at once “critical of spatial inequalities, evidence of geopolitical struggles, and demonstrative of real and possible geographic alternatives” (McKittrick 17)—however deadly those alternatives may be.<sup>15</sup> This underground terrain, the future of which is left permanently unresolved, works now as a kind of eerie access route across the following section break, bridging an unprecedented twenty-four-year gap to “1965,” when we learn that the Bottom too has finally “collapsed” (165).

*Sula*’s final chapter begins, “Things were so much better in 1965. Or so it seemed” (163). With this opening, Morrison moves from the more omniscient voice of the previous chapter to the free indirect discourse of Nel, through whose reflective, deeply ambivalent voice we learn of the radical changes in Medallion that have occurred in the missing years since 1941. Nel notes encouraging evidence of integration in the town: “You could go downtown and see colored people working in the dime store behind the counters, even handling money with cash-register keys around their necks. And a colored man taught mathematics at the junior high school” (163). At the same time, her neighborhood has begun to disintegrate, with “[e]verybody who had made money during

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<sup>15</sup> Katherine McKittrick cites various “ideas, places and concepts” that exemplify black geographies, including “‘the middle passage,’ ‘the underground,’ Ralph Ellison’s ‘invisible man,’ Houston [sic] A. Baker Jr. and Marlene Nourbese Philip’s black (w)hole(s), the slave ship, Dionne Brand’s ‘a map to the door of no return,’ bell hooks’s ‘margin’ and ‘homeplace,’ Carole Boyce Davies’s ‘politics of location,’ and Paul Gilroy’s ‘the black Atlantic’” (17–18).

the war mov[ing] as close as they could to the valley, and the white people...buying down river, cross river, stretching Medallion like two strings on the banks”; up in the Bottom, too, “rich white folk [are] building homes,” newly appreciative of the value of “a hilltop house with a river view and a ring of elms” (167). Conversely, “[t]he black people,” Nel reflects, seem “awfully anxious to get to the valley, or leave town, and abandon the hills to whoever was interested”; though she sees “[t]hese young ones [keep] talking about the community,” they are leaving the Bottom “to the poor, the old, the stubborn—and the rich white folks” (166). What is so profoundly “sad” about these changes, for Nel, is that “the Bottom had been a real place”: “Maybe it hadn’t been a community, but it had been a place. Now there weren’t any places left, just separate houses with separate televisions and separate telephones and less and less dropping by” (167). Though it may have lacked, at least in Nel’s view, the singular cohesion of a “community,” the Bottom was nevertheless something shared, geographically, culturally, racially. Now, the landscape has become nothing more than a series of separate architectural and social units that might reflect new socioeconomic opportunities for African Americans, but also, according to Nel, dissolve a materially shared set of spaces and experiences into an empty abstraction of “the community.” Moreover, it has clearly in no way disrupted systems of white privilege.

Nel’s sorrow and bitterness resonates powerfully as we read these passages, even though, or perhaps precisely because, the “end” of the story of the Bottom has already been revealed in the prologue, to an extent that even Nel cannot know at this slightly earlier moment in 1965. As Philip Novak argues, in processing the inevitable reality of the Bottom’s collapse and reaching a novelistic conclusion that seems only to “[replay]

its beginning,” we as readers are faced with the troubling sense that, while in the course of the narrative, “a history will have been recorded...nothing, in essence, will have occurred”; “[t]he narrative,” he contends, “sinks within the margins, between the two markings, of its absence; it situates itself within the loss it creates” (188). Moreover, the Bottom’s destruction is now placed in a broader historical context, as Nel’s discerning narration reveals “the specific economic and social processes” that have resulted in the Bottom’s disappearance (Novak 188). But the final chapter is more than one of two bookends of absence. In the textual space that lies between the novel’s opening section and “1965,” something, after all, *has* occurred; in fact, so many things have occurred and are still occurring that the final section distinguishes itself from the prologue as a very different physical and textual space. Part of what makes us share in Nel’s sorrow and bitterness is that this once unfamiliar topography is now so thoroughly particularized, personalized, and alive. We know now, in ways that weren’t possible in the prologue, exactly how “the Bottom had been a real place”; its landscape has been populated not just by the anonymous “feet in long tan shoes” and “woman in a flowered dress,” but by fully developed characters who have interacted with the spaces of the Bottom and each other in those spaces for more than forty-five years. The memories of these characters’ sociospatial negotiations—the oscillations between displacement and place-making, destruction and creation—inform our processing of the events of the last chapter, as we mourn with Nel the disintegration of the Bottom but also recognize, in ways that perhaps Nel cannot in this moment, the perpetual potential that the novel has established for marking out new physical and ideological terrains of struggle.

These memories, furthermore, attune us more acutely to the ways that Nel herself asserts her bodily and narrative agency in this concluding section. Walking on “the shoulder road while the cars [slip] by” as she narrates (166), Nel refuses to participate in an automobile culture that affords new kinds of mobility but also generates new forms of social separation. Instead, she stakes her claim as “[o]ne of the last true pedestrians”: “she still walked wherever she wanted to go, allowing herself to accept rides only when the weather required it” (166). And having reappropriated the prologue’s detached narration of the Bottom’s destruction, Nel makes it a story, first and foremost, about herself: only after she indulges in sensuous memories of her childhood—“Jesus, there were some beautiful boys in 1921!” (163)—levels harsh judgment on “modern-day whores” (164), and reflects on the “tiny life” she has led “since Jude walked out,” do we learn that, “[i]n the meantime, the Bottom had collapsed” (165). Moreover, the passage on the Bottom’s destruction marks only one phase of her journey: once Nel reaches her destination and endures a visit with Sula’s grandmother Eva, “[a] bright space open[s] in her head and memory seep[s] into it” (169). Making a visit to the cemetery where Sula is buried, Nel’s focalization shifts from the present to the days surrounding her friend’s death in 1940; as she leaves and the narrative returns to the present at its conclusion, Nel passes Shadrack, “each thinking separate thoughts about the past” (174).

In this final scene, Morrison opens up a textual “bright space” that exceeds simply an elegiac sense of mourning for earlier times, “gone things” (174), and “collapsed” places. Instead, it forces readers to “think thoughts about the past” while also looking to the present and future. We circle back at once to a longer fictional narrative leading up to “1965,” the chapter, and a longer cultural geographic narrative leading up to 1965, the

year in history—and simultaneously circle forward through the post-1965 moment of the prologue and the years leading up to the novel’s publication in 1973. This circular reading strategy prompts us to draw connections between past and current spatial politics, both inside and outside of the world of the novel. It allows us to feel how the propulsive, palimpsestic weight of a history of real and imagined spatialized protests inflects contemporary realities, and to recognize how that history can—or must—be harnessed for new struggles. For instance, with that last view of Shadrack as Nel’s narration straddles 1940 and 1965, our memories of his traumatic experiences are reanimated simultaneously against the backdrops of both World War II and the Vietnam War, which each, like WWI, catalyzed new waves of political protest by freshly illuminating and sometimes deepening racial, gendered, and classed inequalities in the U.S. The events of his National Suicide Day—the annual solitary walks and what happens when, following years of chronic unemployment and poverty,<sup>16</sup> it finally becomes a collective procession—now too, from this historically layered vantage point, echo through the civil rights and anti-war marches enacted throughout the 1960s across the nation’s roadways, highways, and bridges.<sup>17</sup> We can even re-see Shadrack’s discovery of the blackness of his face in the jail cell, “so definite, so unequivocal” that he wants “nothing more,” as an anachronistic contribution to the 1960s “black is beautiful” movement, or an anticipatory

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<sup>16</sup> Black unemployment was also newly pressing in the 1960s, as the industrial and manufacturing jobs that led so many African Americans to migrate to Northern city centers in the previous decades had by this point “essentially disappeared” (Lemann 284). By 1970, “African American men and women [were] facing an unemployment rate nearly double that of their white counterparts” (Gillespie 4).

<sup>17</sup> Especially relevant is the infamous Edmund Pettus Bridge—named for a former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan and later state senator—in Selma, Alabama. In a striking set of cross-temporal echoes, the bridge was constructed between 1939 and 1940, and in March 1965, hundreds of protesters attempted to cross the bridge several times, enduring brutal police violence, as they made their way to Montgomery demanding voting rights.

space of “black power.” And as Shadrack recedes and Nel realizes that “all that time” that she “thought [she] was missing Jude” (174), she was in fact feeling the loss of Sula, Morrison carves out an additional, female-centered dimension of historical and narrative space. Speaking back to the Moynihan Report of 1965—which condemned a matriarchal structure in black families that supposedly hindered black men’s economic, social, and familial authority<sup>18</sup>—and displacing the primarily male-centered rhetorics of Black Power movements of the 1960s and early 1970s,<sup>19</sup> Morrison deliberately centralizes the experiences of black women and also, in ways emphasized anew in her 2004 Foreword, insists upon the urgent importance of their presence in one another’s lives.

### **“girlgirlgirl”: Nel and Sula’s Separate and Shared Spaces of Struggle**

That final scene with Nel mourning Sula, one of the novel’s most well-known, deserves further attention, and I will return to it at the end of the chapter. But first I want to fill in the details of the relationship between those two women, who together sit at the

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<sup>18</sup> Published by the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Policy Planning and Research soon after the Watts Rebellion of August 1965, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* became known as the Moynihan Report for its author, Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan. The report traced the cause of black poverty in America to the absence of nuclear families in the black community and more specifically the prevalence of single-mother households. In “Sula and the Sociologist: Toni Morrison on American Biopower after Civil Rights,” Gregg Santori argues that the entire novel can be understood as a kind of rebuttal to the Moynihan Report.

<sup>19</sup> With new emphasis in Black Power discourses being placed on the celebration and preservation of blackness, the figure of the African American woman occupied a crucial role, representing a connection to the homeland and the future of the struggle. But these discourses were decidedly masculinist, often “using sexualized metaphors to talk about the effort to resist racist domination” (hooks 58) and relegating women to a submissive position centered only on domesticity and reproduction (and representing birth control as a pernicious form of genocide). While the Moynihan Report was mostly criticized by black political leaders, its pathologization of black female power was troublingly resonant within “black liberation movements that marginalize[d] women’s concerns” (Thorsson 18).

center of *Sula*'s exploration of the "multiple and complex social, historical, and cultural positionality which...constitutes black female subjectivity" (Henderson 35)—or rather, *positionalities*, *subjectivities*. For despite the novel's title, which like Walker's *Meridian* seems to emphasize the singular, even emblematic quality of the titular character, this text is at its core about Sula *and* Nel, how they forge a deep bond based on shared social conditions but also how that bond is strained by the two women's divergent, sometimes incommensurate desires and differing navigations of social expectations. And as in her Foreword's discussion of the women in Queens, "cut adrift" and "exploring," some "thriving" and some not, Morrison investigates the terms of Nel and Sula's relationship—and its implications for black feminist politics—through spatial conditions of encounter and isolation, co-occupation and divergence. These conditions are depicted physically, through the locations and actions of the women's bodies in relation to their surroundings and to one another,<sup>20</sup> but also in imagined or metaphorical realms of sharing or detachment. In addition, through shifts in focalization and breaks in the story, the formal spaces of the narrative further mediate the women's connection. Morrison in *Sula* thus enacts between Nel and Sula what I call a spatial politics of sisterhood. Directly engaging with the identity and "movement" politics of her contemporary moment, she reveals how forging coalitions to challenge intersecting inequalities of race, gender, and class is an interpersonally embodied process, carried out through delicately responsive movements and collaborative acts of space-making. But she also shows the complications that can

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<sup>20</sup> These physical negotiations speak to Jennifer Nash's analysis of the "affective politics" of "'second-wave' black feminism," in which she attends to "how bodies are organized around intensities, longings, desires, temporalities, repulsions, curiosities, fatigues, optimism, and how these affects produce political movements (or sometimes inertias)" (3).



arise in those attempts to find common ground, which might exist in tension with empowered assertions of individuality. Ultimately, Morrison illuminates the liberatory potential as well as the psychic and social costs of resisting confining conventions and exploring new territories of black womanhood, alone and together.

The end of “1920” depicts the beginnings of Nel and Sula’s relationship. After accompanying her mother Helene to New Orleans following the death of Helene’s grandmother, Nel returns to Medallion feeling “different” (28); that night, she looks in the mirror and says aloud, “I’m me. I’m not their daughter. I’m not Nel. I’m me. Me,” feeling “a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear” (28). Though this is “the last as well as the first time she was ever to leave Medallion,” Nel’s moment of self-discovery and her subsequent desire to be “wonderful” leads her to imagine other journeys, deciding that “[l]eaving Medallion would be her goal” (29). “But that,” the passage continues, “was before she met Sula, the girl she had seen for five years...but never played with, never knew, because her mother said that Sula’s mother was sooty. The trip, perhaps, or her new found me-ness, gave her the strength to cultivate a friend in spite of her mother” (29). Despite Helene’s disdain for Hannah Peace’s “sootiness”—an insult that alludes at once to skin color, an unkempt home, and sexual promiscuity—Sula soon wins Helene over; seeming “to have none of the mother’s slackness,” Sula loves spending time at the Wright house, sitting “on the red-velvet sofa for ten to twenty minutes at a time—still as dawn” (29). Nel, though, prefers Sula’s “wooly house,” with its lax rules and constant activity (29).

In this passage and the chapters that follow, Morrison presents the girls’ friendship as a series of subtly spatialized contributions and concessions. Nel initially

links her “new found me-ness” and her subsequent desire to be “wonderful” with the ability to travel: “Leaving Medallion would be her goal.” But with the following line, “But that was before she met Sula,” Morrison suggests that, whatever limits might be placed on Nel’s mobility, her new friend can provide an alternative route to both selfhood and self-love. This might not involve leaving her home, but rather re-seeing and re-inhabiting it: originally regarding “the oppressive neatness of her home with dread,” Nel feels “comfortable in it with Sula” (29). And it might not involve getting out of Medallion, but rather finding spaces within it to explore—like Sula’s house, with its disorderliness and continuous stream of visitors. What Nel can give Sula, conversely, is a respite from that “house of many rooms” (30) and perpetual motion, a quiet, ordered place to sit “still as dawn.” Moreover, the two girls can together leave those physical spaces behind entirely for “the delirium of their noon dreams,” which is in fact where Nel and Sula “had first met” (51). Nel sitting “on the steps of her back porch surrounded by the high silence of her mother’s incredibly orderly house,” Sula “wedged into a household of throbbing disorder,” the two girls dream up such intimately connected worlds of romance and adventure (each featuring a “someone” who is sympathetic and constant) that their first physical meeting is already suffused with “the ease and comfort of old friends” (51–52). By the time, then, we reach the well-known line that comes next—“Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be” (52)—it has already become clear that “something else” is also *somewhere* else. Less a single geographical location than a shifting, adaptable set of

literal and conceptual spaces, in this elsewhere Nel and Sula, and through them Morrison, explore modes of escape, support, pleasure, and resistance for and as black women.

Chronicled in “1922,” Nel and Sula’s eventful twelfth year solidifies but also puts pressure on their friendship. First comes their encounter with “four white boys in their early teens, sons of some newly arrived Irish people” who “had come to this valley with their parents believing as they did that it was a promised land,” but found instead “a strange accent, a pervasive fear of their religion and firm resistance to their attempts to find work” (53). Because the immigrants’ “place in this world was secured only when they echoed the old residents’ attitude toward blacks,” these boys “occasionally entertained themselves in the afternoon by harassing black schoolchildren”; after they bully Nel, the girls’ route home becomes “elaborate” to evade them, until one day when Sula suggests, “Let’s us go on home the shortest way” (53–54). As expected, they meet the boys standing “like a gate blocking the path” (54). Sula then pulls out a paring knife, squats down, presses her finger onto the edge of her school slate, and cuts it, leaving the boys “open-mouthed” and asking them, “If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I’ll do to you?” (54–55). The scene concludes, “The shifting dirt was the only way Nel knew that they were moving away; she was looking at Sula’s face, which seemed miles and miles away” (55).

Here, Morrison at once ramps up and complicates Nel and Sula’s efforts to find a common ground where, “abandon[ing] the ways of other people and concentrat[ing] on their own perceptions of things” (55), they can escape pain, resist persecution, and forge their own paths to selfhood and intimacy. In response to the Irish boys’ harassment, Nel crafts an “elaborate” alternative for them to avoid the boys that works temporarily, until

Sula proposes instead, “Let’s us go on home the shortest way,” a suggestion that reemphasizes the girls’ solidarity (“Let’s us”) and reprioritizes the value of their time (“the shortest way”). Nel “blink[s] and acquiesce[s]” (54), not yet privy to Sula’s plan to destroy (through, paradoxically, an act of self-mutilation) the danger that obstructs their path and allow them reclaim their walk home. This series of events deepens their sense of loyalty and dedication to one another. But it also suggests that Sula and Nel’s crafting of alternate, exploratory “routes” across the physical and social terrains around them may not always overlap. Moreover, even when Nel follows Sula’s lead and remains in close bodily proximity, her friend still ends up seeming “miles and miles” away—a distance opened up by Sula’s drastic venturing outside the bounds of socially sanctioned behavior that will only grow and become more literal as the novel continues.

The following section depicts the girls later that year on what begins as a shared adventure to an exhilarating elsewhere, as they run out of town and through the forest, “creat[ing] their own breeze” (57). Nel and Sula reach a clearing and begin to play in the earth. Detailing the girls stripping bark from twigs, digging two holes that meet and become one, filling it with debris and covering it up—all without speaking a word—Morrison depicts an intimate, complexly gendered and sexualized ritual that unfolds silently with each girl watching, learning from, and building upon the other’s movements to create a secret topography in the dirt. But what happens next when they encounter Chicken Little, a young boy from the Bottom, marks divisions in and limitations to Sula and Nel’s exploratory world, even more than the finger-cutting incident. Sula swings Chicken in circles until he slips from her hands and flies into the river, leaving a “closed place in the water” (60–61). Fearing that Shadrack may have seen what happened, Sula

runs to his house where he only smiles, nods, and says, “Always” (62); she then returns to her friend “and the dark closed place in the water” and tearfully “allow[s] Nel to lead her away” (62–63). At the funeral, the girls don’t “touch hands or look at each other”; there is “a space, a separateness, between them” (64) marking their differing roles in and reactions to the tragedy.<sup>21</sup> Though this space finally “dissolve[s]” at Chicken’s gravesite (66), the boy’s death illuminates the surprisingly high stakes and potentially harmful consequences to the girls’ seeing through their “mean determination to explore everything that interested them” (55), to carving out alternative spaces of female agency and strength—and further demarcates Nel and Sula’s individual orientations in relation to those spaces. It is here that the two girls’ paths across the novel’s geographical and textual landscapes begin to diverge significantly, with the chapter’s closing image of “two young girlfriends trotting up the road on a summer day” (66) soon displaced by that of Sula leaving the reception following Nel’s marriage to Jude, “gliding, with just a hint of a strut, down the path toward the road” (85). With this departure, Part One of the novel ends; the first chapter of Part Two, “1937,” begins, “Accompanied by a plague of robins, Sula came back to Medallion,” having been gone, we learn, for ten years (89). She steps off the bus dressed like a “movie star” and carrying an exotic “red leather traveling case”: “no one had seen anything like it ever before, including the mayor’s wife and music teacher, both of whom had been to Rome” (90).

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<sup>21</sup> In part, this is the physical space of Shadrack’s house, which only Sula sees, and the ambiguous textual space opened up with his “Always,” which only Sula hears. At the time, Sula interprets Shadrack’s “always” as the answer to “a question she had not asked”—whether or not he saw or would report what happened—and feels “its promise [lick] at her feet” (63). When Sula dies, however, we learn through Shadrack’s reflections that he “had said ‘always’ to convince her, assure her, of permanency,” thinking that Sula too was afraid of death (157).

With Sula's arrival amidst the storm of robins, looking like a celebrity with a bag the likes of which no one, including visitors of Rome, had ever seen, Morrison conveys her titular character's powerful, worldly capacity for "flight."<sup>22</sup> Sula's spatial self-possession, her ability to powerfully negotiate, take control of, or change her surroundings at will—as evidenced in her finger-cutting, Chicken's body flying through the air, her departure after Nel's wedding—has clearly been further fine-tuned in her travels, which we learn have included a stint in college and time in "Nashville, Detroit, New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia, Macon and San Diego" (120). But it is also immediately apparent that Sula is now an alien, disruptive presence in the Bottom, its very earthly landscape; those robins, after all, leave droppings, and "you couldn't go anywhere without stepping in their pearly shit" (89). On the other hand, married to Jude, with three children, Nel is now firmly a part of the Bottom and its social order, as becomes clear in a subsequent scene when Sula visits the house Nel shares with her family. In the two women's conversation, Morrison shows how the simultaneously social and spatial separations beginning to occur between Nel and Sula in "1927" have been cemented in the blank space that divides the novel's first and second parts. That textual gap reflects a widening distance between the two women, geographically and socially, so that even when Sula returns, it seems their orientations to each other and to the world around them are potentially incompatible. And yet, that blank spot in the text and the narrative also formally articulates the mutually constitutive, collaboratively creative nature of Nel and Sula's identities and sociospatial positions: when the two women are

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<sup>22</sup> "Sula" is also a genus of sea birds.

separated, there is no story at all. That interdependence, too, is on display as they share the space of Nel's home.

As in their childhood, Sula's strong, active physical presence allows Nel to inhabit and appreciate her surroundings, and even the "magic" in "her own body" (94), anew: when her friend stops by, "the dishes piled in the sink [look] as though they belonged there" and "the dust on the lamps sparkle[s]" (96). For her part, Nel can contribute a savvy ability to traverse the social landscape of the Bottom that Sula lacks: when she learns that Sula has sent Eva to a home run by a white church, a decision Nel knows will make "tongues...wag," she suggests that they "work out a plan for taking care of" Eva, agreeing to accompany Sula to the bank (101–102). Tellingly, Morrison frames Sula's request for Nel's help with Eva, and Nel's capacity to provide that help, as grounded in a shared, explicitly place-based understanding and system of support. Sula tells her friend, "Whenever I was scared before, you knew just what to do," and the passage continues, "The closed place in the water spread before them"; Nel then feels the situation become "clear to her" as she remembers Chicken Little's death and how, "when fear struck her, [Sula] did unbelievable things," leaving it to others to "straighten out" (101). But this scene also includes moments when Nel and Sula's knowledge of, movements through, even language *about* spaces seem less complementary. When Sula complains about Medallion and Nel comments, "You been gone too long, Sula," her friend replies, "Not too long, but maybe too far" (96)—a distance that measures the extent of Sula's travels away from Medallion, but also the social gap between Sula, who has "moved a pile of ironed diapers" to sit down (96), and Nel, who is doing the ironing. And later, in response to Nel's request to hear about the "big city," Sula only says simply,

“Big is all it is. A big Medallion” (99); Nel presses her—“No. I mean the life. The nightclubs, and parties”—but again, Sula disappoints: “I was in college, Nellie. No nightclubs on campus” (99). “Campus? That what they call it?” Nel replies (99).

When, not long after this conversation, Nel discovers Jude and Sula having a sexual encounter in the married couple’s bedroom, these subtle distances between the two women harden into a seemingly unbridgeable chasm of deep betrayal. Describing the moment, Nel narrates how, as Jude gets up, dresses, and walks past her saying, “I’ll be back for my things,” Sula sits “on the bed not even bothering to put on her clothes” (106). For Nel, part of what makes Sula’s behavior so reprehensible is her invasion of a shared, exclusive territory that should have been inviolable, the bedroom, which when Nel and Jude moved in had seemed “real big” but when she discovers him with Sula feels “small” and “shambly” (106). Even more devastating is the fact that when Nel discovers them, Sula stays in the room sitting naked but unengaged “like a visitor from out of town” (106), detachedly cohabiting this intimate space with Nel even after Jude exits—a moment that, at the section break, presumably leaves the two women alone together but paradoxically cements the terms of their separation. For Sula, though, it is Nel’s reaction that is the betrayal, because it suggests not only that “she and Nel were not one and the same thing”—“[m]arriage, apparently, had changed all that” (119)—but also that her friend, “one of the reasons she had drifted back to Medallion,” is actually “one of *them*. One of the spiders whose only thought was the next rung of the web, who dangled in dark dry places suspended by their own spittle, more terrified of the free fall than the snake’s breath below”:

If they were touched by the snake’s breath, however fatal, they were merely victims and knew how to behave in that role (just as Nel knew how to behave as



the wronged wife). But the free fall, oh no, that required—demanded—invention: a thing to do with the wings, a way of holding the legs and most of all a full surrender to the downward flight if they wished to taste their tongues and stay alive. But alive was what they, and now Nel, did not want to be. Now Nel belonged to the town and all of its ways. (120)

Sula reads Nel's problem with the affair as damning evidence of her friend's unwillingness or inability to break outside of social conventions and exercise her agency, which Sula renders as a bodily process that involves deliberate movement as well as surrender, which as Kevin Everod Quashie has argued can itself "also be expressive and active" (*Sovereignty* 28). Instead, she sees Nel allow herself to be driven by the "flick of [the townspeople's] tongues...back into her little dry corner" (120), an imaginative space of Sula's own creation to which she desires no access.

The two women confront each other from these differing locations three years later in "1940," when Nel comes to visit Sula "lying at death's door" (142) and their conversation turns to Sula and Jude's affair. Nel asks, "How come you did it, Sula?" (144); after a silence that "Nel [feels] no obligation to fill," Sula replies, "Well, there was this space in front of me, behind me, in my head. Some space. And Jude filled it up. That's all. He just filled up the space" (144). That Sula's affair with Jude successfully "filled up" whatever empty space she was grappling with is the ultimate insult to Nel, who felt following the affair that "her thighs were truly empty and dead too, and it was Sula who had taken the life from them and Jude who smashed her heart and the both of them who left her with no thighs and no heart just her brain raveling away" (110–111). She tells Sula, "We were friends....And you didn't love me enough to leave him alone. To let him love me. You had to take him away" (146). Sula retorts, "What you mean take him away? I didn't kill him, I just fucked him. If we were such good friends, how come

you couldn't get over it?" (146). After a final exchange in which Sula's voice becomes "as soft and distant as the look in her eyes" (145), Nel leaves the house, and shortly after, Sula dies.

This scene in Sula's bedroom is the last time the two friends will share a common physical space, and as in Nel's bedroom when she catches Sula with Jude, it also seems to solidify how "distant" they are from one another. It is a distance again communicated not just through Sula's emotional detachment and Nel's lack of forgiveness but also in their incommensurate spatial experiences and interpretations, with Sula's use of Jude to "fill up" space utterly at odds with Nel's emptiness. At the same time, whatever distance lingers between Nel and Sula is also itself simultaneously "filled up" in the shifting focalizations and layered geographies of the novel's concluding chapters. For instance, when Sula tells Nel on her deathbed that someday, despite others' hatred for her, "there'll be a little love left over for me. And I know just what it will feel like," we as readers know what Nel does not: that Sula is thinking "of the wind pressing her dress between her legs as she ran up the bank of the river to four leaf-locked trees and the digging of holes in the earth" (146). Moreover, after Sula revisits that shared space of the past, she dies imagining a future one within which she and her friend are reunited: at the moment of her death, Sula smiles and thinks, "Well, I'll be damned...it didn't even hurt. Wait'll I tell Nel" (149). And in the novel's final pages, Nel goes into "the colored part of the cemetery" (170) where Sula is buried, her memories returning to her friend's death in 1940. Nel recalls making the arrangements for Sula's burial, going to the funeral parlor and being "so shocked by the closed coffin she stayed only a few minutes"; she remembers the burial the next day, when the "black people from up in the Bottom" sang

“Shall We Gather at the River,” the song’s “question clott[ing] the October air” (173). Passing Shadrack on her way out of the cemetery, Nel stops short, whispering, “Sula?”; “We was girls together,” Nel says, “O lord, Sula...girl, girl, girlgirlgirl” (174). *Sula* concludes, “It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow” (174).

Scholars are right to suggest that the novel’s honoring of black women’s complex subjectivities and dynamic relationships with one another, and themselves, culminates in these closing lines. Kevin Everod Quashie, for instance, argues that in this moment Morrison represents “the fullness of one Black woman’s love for another Black woman,” and shows that acknowledging that love also, for women like Nel, means working toward an “embrace of her own volatile self” (“The Other Self” 197). And Claude Pruitt asserts that “*Sula*’s circles of sorrow mark the site of black women’s history at the center of black community” (116). To conclude this chapter, I suggest that these meanings are conveyed in *Sula*’s conclusion through Morrison’s final assembly of such a rich, deeply layered textual landscape for Sula and Nel to share; that landscape is as fraught, contingent, and potential-filled as her Foreword’s 1969 New York City and it therefore, for readers of the 2004 edition, calls that space up anew. Morrison’s concluding passages draw the two friends back together in spaces of tense, ongoing confrontation: the funeral parlor Nel visits because she’s assumed the responsibility of making Sula’s final arrangements; the cemetery where she stands aboveground as Sula lies below; her sorrowful cry of “girlgirlgirl,” which emphasizes the closeness they had by removing even textual gaps, but also how that pure closeness of being “girls together,” and making worlds together, was unsustainable. Moreover, with Nel’s confrontation of Sula’s closed

casket—so disturbing because her friend refused to be still or confined in life—Morrison’s discussion of those heady days of “snatching liberty” in Queens in 1969, some women some dying and some thriving, comes echoing back; those women, too, were girls together, striving to generate new and alternative spaces for themselves and sometimes, as with Morrison’s writing of *Sula*, very much succeeding. And the question of “shall we gather” that hangs over the burial the next day, that indeed lingers through the end of the novel, evokes the ongoing, sometimes mortally dangerous work of coalition-building Morrison and so many other women (and men) in African American communities pursued in their efforts to achieve self-determination. As we’ll see in the next chapter, that question of “gathering at the river,” of bodies coming together in mutual support and collective struggle, comes up for Walker, too, in her own novel of black womanhood and spatial politics, *Meridian*.

## CHAPTER IV

### ALICE WALKER'S *MERIDIAN*

#### AND THE BURDEN OF THE PERSONAL AS POLITICAL

Alice Walker's 1976 novel *Meridian*, which follows the titular protagonist's coming of age and into political consciousness in the era of Civil Rights and Black Power, opens with a set of epigraphs. In the first, from *Black Elk Speaks*, Black Elk describes the massacre at Wounded Knee, "the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch"; the excerpt continues, "I can see something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people's dream died there. It was a beautiful dream...the nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead."<sup>1</sup> Following this passage is a capacious list of definitions for "meridian." These range from the celestial, "the highest apparent point reached by a heavenly body in its course"; to the cartographical, "a great circle of the earth"; to the figurative, "the highest point of power, prosperity, splendor"; to the physiological, "the middle period of one's life, regarded as the highest point of health, vigor"; to the locational, "a place or situation with its own distinctive character"; to, finally, the regional, "southern. [Rare.]" That last definition also silently points readers towards another Meridian: the Mississippi hometown of activist James Chaney, famously murdered nearby, along with two others, by members of the Ku Klux Klan in 1964.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The ellipses are original to Walker's epigraph.

<sup>2</sup> Greil Marcus noted this connection to Meridian, Mississippi, in his 1976 review of the novel in *The New Yorker* (12).

Imagery of the “bloody mud” and “sacred tree” and “earth’s surface”; language of hoops, orbits, and globes; a haunting allusion to a blood-stained locale: as Thadious Davis points out, these epigraphs establish a distinct “lens of space” for Walker’s text (354). But what are we to make of the shifting, almost *kaleidoscopic* nature of this lens? There is, for instance, Black Elk’s “crooked gulch” scene, which somehow signifies as at once a physical landscape of human massacre (in South Dakota), a metaphorical site for the death of “a people’s dream,” and an obviously evocative stand-in for a post–Civil Rights, post–“I have a dream” historical moment. We also have the dizzying array of different definitions for “meridian,” including the strange contradiction of its connoting the height of health, power, and prosperity, but also the location of three activists’ murders. Perhaps most importantly, there is the difficulty of symbolically folding these and all the other disparate meanings into our reading of *Meridian*, the narrative of political and psychological struggle that follows, and within that, onto the actual protagonist at that narrative’s center. Grappling with these multiple, sometimes incongruous significations means confronting the social and textual processes by which geographical sites, lived (or dying) bodies, and individual histories come to carry meanings that far exceed any single location or person—and, moreover, can differ and change, sometimes drastically, depending upon perspective and context. This symbolic overdetermination is, of course, important, helping to reveal the necessary inextricability of personal experiences, specific locales, and narratives of power and resistance; the epigraphs convey this in the representative significance of James Chaney’s murder and the dead bodies at Wounded Knee, and in the relationship of Meridian Hill, the character, to ideas of Southern identity, notions of health, and histories of struggle. But these

passages also make clear that this overdetermination can also ask a lot of bodies, of places, and even of texts themselves, as singular characters and stories bear the weight of vying, sometimes incommensurate significations. In these ways, I suggest, examining *Meridian* through a multi-registered “lens of space” reveals Walker undertaking a careful examination and productive critique of the relationship between the personal and the political.<sup>3</sup>

Conveying the inseparability of individual experiences and larger configurations of power, the personal as political has long been used as a touchstone in scholarship on *Meridian*.<sup>4</sup> Most relevant, perhaps, are Madhu Dubey’s foundational arguments about the novel’s uneasy toggling between “the political and the individual register” in terms of both content and structure (143), and Thadious Davis’ more recent claims that Walker depicts “the struggle for rights and power” as an overlapping set of geographies “that [contain] the domestic, the private or personal, and the physical body of a woman” (355). But while Dubey’s analysis is tethered to the particular issue of Black Nationalist aesthetics, and Davis is ultimately concerned with the novel’s radical “reconstruction of [U.S.] southern racial space” (340–341),<sup>5</sup> I read *Meridian* as a sustained rumination on the difficulties and limitations of rendering the personal and the political as inseparable at all. And I suggest that it is in Walker’s characters’ bodily and textual struggles across and

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<sup>3</sup> The origins of the phrase “the personal is political” are ultimately somewhat murky; at the very least it became more widely popularized with white feminist Carol Hanisch’s 1969 essay of the same name. But “the personal is political,” as an idea, far precedes and exceeds this or any single movement, and it is inarguably relevant to Walker and to her project as a black feminist writer.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Christian 76 and M. Walker 170.

<sup>5</sup> There is already a scholarly tradition that focuses on the racialized and gendered implications of nature, environment, and ecology in *Meridian*; see Rachel Stein, and more recently, Sampada Chavan and Jennifer C. James.

over the spaces of the novel that we can locate this reflective work. On a corporeal level, Walker portrays people's varying ideological stances, and the subsequent problems of reconciling those stances, as deeply and viscerally felt. She conveys this through the mirroring or contrasting positions of her characters' bodies and the processes by which they literally come together and pull apart, at the same time as they grapple with differing perceptions and experiences of their physical surroundings. In addition, through shifts in narrative voice and focalization, Walker marks out in textual space the difficulties of her characters working (and even storytelling) together across disparate subjectivities, categories of identity, and political priorities. Walker is thus able to literally map out, through bodily movements as well as moving through perspectives in the body of the text, the demanding work of *activist* "movements," of finding common ground and building coalitions. And she conveys at once how important and how hard it is—on people, but also on stories—that political work is always (inter)personally lived and felt, and, conversely, that intimate experiences must carry the weight of larger ideological implications.

But that weight is also unevenly distributed: more than anyone, it is Meridian that Walker depicts physically struggling to reconcile her individual subjectivity and historical positionality, her personal experiences and the political movements she wants, or is expected, to represent. Indeed, the novel itself grapples with this problem, because its protagonist is always at once a unique character who exists on her own terms and what Walker herself has described as a "composite" figure with a particular "function": "to help us relate in a *personal* way to a period of history very important to the development of our country, the Civil Rights era" (S. Wilson 325, emphasis added). In other words,



with Meridian and her story, the “personal” of an individual woman and a single text read in isolation is always already linked to the “political” of racial struggle, national identity, the very trajectory of history. At the same time, though, Walker insists upon the vulnerability of Meridian’s body—which is, as Thadious Davis reminds us, its own kind of “spatial parameter or boundary” (11)<sup>6</sup>—and, moreover, she crafts a *narrative* body that is uneven and unresolved. In these ways, I argue, Walker conveys a self-conscious awareness of the potential dangers of neatly uniting the personal and the political in Meridian, the emblematic woman, and *Meridian*, the representative text. For as Walker herself is painfully aware, it matters greatly whose bodies, whose stories are made to take on the representational weight of history, and too often, the burden falls on black women. In the end, though, Walker does more than simply reflect upon these problems; by insisting that lives like Meridian’s, and narratives like *Meridian*’s, are never totally reducible to political stances or resistant activism, she is also able to gesture toward a more expansive notion of racialized and gendered subjectivity, and of black women’s literature.

**“I always think of you as so strong, but look at you!”:**

**Political and Physical Positions**

Beginning in the present of the mid-1970s and oscillating through the previous several decades, *Meridian* follows the titular protagonist: from her childhood and

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<sup>6</sup> Davis draws upon Adrienne Rich’s 1986 description of the body as “the geography closest in,” a formulation that “encourages examinations of the body as inscribed with social values and as inscriptions of social mores” (11). In addition to Davis’ work, critical readings of the body as space—historical, social, textual—in Walker’s novel include the foundational work of Alan Nadel, as well as Shermaine M. Jones’ more recent essay on body politics and affect.

adolescence, when she becomes pregnant and drops out of school; to her college years in Atlanta and on to New York City; and finally, through a series of small Southern towns where Meridian lives into her thirties. The story of Meridian's life is also the story of her evolving political activism. Stumbling as a teenager upon a house of students advocating voting rights, she becomes involved in civil rights work, dedicating her time to protests and community outreach projects that are increasingly interspersed with periods of debilitating sickness. As we see in the first chapter, she has sustained this activist dedication into the 1970s, even as her fellow revolutionaries eventually lose interest. Titled "The Last Return," the chapter opens with Truman Held, Meridian's longtime friend, ex-lover, and sometime activist ally, arriving in Chicokema, Georgia, from New York City to find her staging a solitary protest against the segregation of a circus display. As he watches from the crowd gathered in the town square, Meridian marches a group of poor, mostly black children past a line of police into the exhibit; later, she collapses in a catatonic state and is carried home, where Truman is waiting for her. In these scenes, Walker starts to probe the complicated entanglement of the personal and the political through her characters' tense interactions in physical and narrative space, through their out-of-sync bodily negotiations and, at times, their shifting control over the text itself.<sup>7</sup> And she begins to make clear that these negotiations take a disproportionate toll on the body of Meridian. This registers both literally, as Meridian physically buckles under the weight of heavy expectations, and representationally, as the uneven, multi-voiced "body"

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<sup>7</sup> As Thadious Davis argues, "[a]pproaching space as a site of struggle over value and meaning necessarily involves engagement with the structures underpinning and driving narration itself" (14).

of her narrative enacts the problems of attempting to reconcile contested political standpoints, even entire movements, into a singular woman's text.

With Meridian's protest in the town square, closely watched from the sidelines by Truman, and then in their one-on-one meeting at her home, Walker continually draws sharp contrasts between how Meridian and Truman individually perceive and occupy their surroundings. These contrasts highlight their differing understandings and physical experiences of political struggle. For instance, when Truman sees the children "[fall] into line" behind Meridian and begin to march, "their heads held high and their feet scraping the pavement," he draws on his memories of (and subsequent cynicism about) the methodologies of Civil Rights-era protest to narrate what he is seeing, muttering somewhat derisively, "Now they will burst into song" (6). But under Meridian's direction, the scene does not play out as he predicts. Truman's comment is immediately followed by the simple expository statement from the third-person narrator, "but they did not" (6); instead, Meridian approaches the tank in complete silence. Even then, though, Truman continues to read the scene as an ineffectual, almost pathetic display, conducted by a woman powerless against ever-strengthening structures of white domination, as evidenced in his perception of the actual sizes and colors of the figures he is watching: in Truman's focalization, the tank seems "to grow larger and whiter than ever" while Meridian appears "smaller and blacker than ever" (7). But again, Meridian's actions don't match up with what Truman sees or expects. As he looks on, she steps "lightly, deliberately" up to the tank, raps on it "smartly"—thus bringing it down to size—and then kicks open the circus car door while the men "in the tank [crawl] sheepishly out again to stare" (7).

Moreover, even when Meridian and Truman are in the exact same bodily position, how and why they got there, what it feels like and what it seems to signify, could not be more different. After the protest, Truman goes back to Meridian's home and, knowing "from his student days, working in the Movement in the South...how pleasant it could be to nap on a shaded front porch," takes off his "hot city shoes" and lies down (9). Here, Walker communicates Truman's cosmopolitan, Northern privilege through an assertion of bodily leisure, one that allows him to at once knowledgably claim and temporally distance himself from "the Movement." His relaxed spot on the porch starkly contrasts with the image of four men bringing a "barely breathing" Meridian home, "hoisted across their shoulders exactly as they would carry a coffin," to place her on her sleeping bag (10). Meridian, too, is supine and still, but unlike Truman's, her unmoving body ironically marks her as still deeply in "the Movement," still "volunteer[ing] to suffer" (11) to effect social change. As Maria Lauret has pointed out, Meridian's bodily position even can be seen as a "literalisation" of Stokely Carmichael's famous (and perhaps apocryphal) quip that "the position of women in SNCC is prone" (129)—or, I would add, perhaps even a protesting parody of that sexist formulation on Walker's part.

These disparities clearly point to the ways in which Meridian and Truman's differing social positions—she an impoverished, Southern black woman; he a comfortable, urban and light-skinned man coming from the North—shape their differing experiences of bodily "positions," of physical autonomy and mobility. They illustrate, in other words, that spaces, starting with the "personal" space of one's own body, are political; they are inextricable from uneven gendered, classed, and raced ideologies that, while oppressively salient, can also be reoriented and resisted (as evidenced in

Meridian's face-off with the tank, and even perhaps her "prone" position).<sup>8</sup> Even more important, though, is Walker's explicit linking of the incongruity of Meridian and Truman's corporeal perceptions and experiences to their irreconcilable *political* positions, their disagreements about worthy causes and effective modes of protest. In Truman's view—the same view that saw her body as "smaller and blacker than ever"—Meridian is "mak[ing] [her]self a catatonic behind a lot of meaningless action that will never get anybody anywhere" (12); from this perceptual standpoint, he laments later in their conversation, "I always think of you as so strong, but look at you!" (20). But to this, Meridian only replies "cockily," "I *am* strong, actually...I'm just not Superwoman" (20), a retort that insists that there is meaning, even empowerment and perhaps satire behind her protests, while also subtly calling attention to Truman's problematic expectation that Meridian singularly carry the weight of radical activist work.<sup>9</sup> What all this suggests is that political stances, and the larger historical movements and narratives they support or reject, are always being embodied on a personal, sometimes quite literal level. At the same time, we see that the uniqueness and profound unevenness of those individual bodily experiences is sometimes precisely what makes ideological agreement or coalition so difficult.

Furthermore, this uneven bodily work is always being mirrored in *Meridian's* opening scenes in struggles for narrative control, control over both the story itself and

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<sup>8</sup> Leigh Ann Duck argues that *Meridian* presents a "fissured and 'four-dimensional' view of space, one in which locales have been palpably constructed by 'social interrelations and interactions' that have...been experienced differently depending on residents' race, gender and class" (459). (Duck is quoting here from Doreen Massey's 1992 essay "Politics and space/time.")

<sup>9</sup> Meridian's comment thus directly anticipates Michele Wallace's arguments in her 1978 text, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. I explore this issue more fully later in the chapter.

readers' access to and understanding of the events unfolding within it. We can see this, for instance, in the very fact that *Meridian*, the titular novel, actually begins with Truman's arrival into town, that it is only through his focalization that readers get to see the protagonist for the first time as he stands "on tiptoe, squint[ing] across the square" at her (6). And Meridian pushes back against Truman's dominance over the literal *terms* of the narrative not only by revising his definition of what it means for her to be "strong," but also when she reframes Truman's argument that "it is best to leave" when political movements change course or appear over, calling that "running away" (13). But these struggles aren't limited to Meridian and Truman; in fact, the most striking example of this textual push-and-pull—and the one that is most explicitly tied to questions of politics—is the letters from her college roommate Anne-Marion Coles that Meridian has prominently displayed on the walls of her home. As Truman sees when he arrives, Anne-Marion's letters are "a litany of accusations," beginning with phrases like, "Of course you are misguided..." and "Those, like yourself, who do not admit the truth..." and "You have never, being weak and insensitive to History, had any sense of priorities..." (9). When Truman comments to Meridian later, "Anyone who could write such hateful things is a real bitch," she explains that she keeps the letters "because they contain the bitch's handwriting" (20). In fact, not only has Meridian painstakingly hung up this vitriolic correspondence, she has also, as Truman notices in his observations, "gamely scribbled" her own words onto the pages in response: "Yes, yes. No. Some of the time. No, no. Yes. *All of the above*" (9).

The letters further illuminate how Meridian and Truman literally read their surroundings differently; where Truman looks at the letters, "walking slowly clockwise

around the room” with “the feeling he [is] in a cell” (9), as the suffocating product of a hateful “bitch,” Meridian takes comfort in their presence adorning her otherwise bare home, appreciating not so much what is written but the familiar specificity of her friend’s writing. But it is also important that these pieces of paper contain far-reaching arguments about “the truth” and “History” countered with casually brief responses; they juxtapose the divergent ideologies of two activist women in the intimate interplay of their individualized scrawls, evoking the sense of their hands moving across the same surfaces from different locations. In these ways, the letters allow Walker to render in (meta)textual space, on imagined physical documents constructed in the writing of her own novel, the ways in which political confrontations are necessarily, sometimes stingingly personal, as well as how hard it can be to mediate those tensions, even on the space of the page.

**“There’s nothing between us”:**

**Contested Landscapes and Difficulties Sharing Space**

It quickly becomes clear that Anne-Marion’s presence in Meridian’s life has been as formative for her as Truman’s. This is underscored in one of the flashbacks in “The Last Return” when, “nearly ten summers” ago in New York, Meridian sits on the floor with Anne-Marion and other activist women, “her hands clasping the insides of her sneakers, her head down” as they ask her to vow her willingness to kill for the Revolution (13–14). When Meridian says she cannot, the women turn away from her; only Anne-Marion, “her true eyes...replaced by black marbles,” cares enough at least to ask, “What will you do? Where will you go?”—to which Meridian responds that she will return to the South and “go back to the people, live among them, like Civil Rights workers used to

do” (19). More context for their relationship emerges in the second chapter, which is untitled but begins, in another instance of politically charged textual space-sharing, with a strikingly varied list of the dead: “MEDGAR EVERS/JOHN. F KENNEDY/MALCOLM X/MARTIN LUTHER KING/ROBERT KENNEDY/CHE GUEVARA/PATRICE LAMUMBA/GEORGE JACKSON/CYNTHIA WESLEY/ADDIE MAE COLLINS/DENISE MCNAIR/CAROLE ROBERTSON/VIOLA LIUZZO” (21). The chapter depicts Anne-Marion first becoming “quite conscious of Meridian Hill” while watching “the first televised Kennedy funeral,” when both women are attending Saxon, a women’s college in Atlanta (21). Anne-Marion sees “Meridian’s face, grayish-blue from the television light, glisten[ing] with tears that dripped off her chin onto her blue cotton shirt. Slumped forward with grief, she did not bother to raise her hands from her lap, where they lay palms up, empty. She shivered as if she were cold” (22). Remembering that earlier that year Meridian had planted a “wild sweet shrub” on campus after Medgar Evers’ assassination, and that “[e]ach day the jealous gardener had pulled a bit more of its delicate roots to the surface, so that it too soon died” (22), Anne-Marion holds out her sweater. The chapter concludes, “Scarcely looking at her, Meridian took it and wrapped herself up tight” (22).

As with Truman, Walker introduces Meridian’s relationship with Anne-Marion as one in which intimate encounters are bound up in broader sociohistorical trajectories, and in which the complicated terms of ideological coalition are conveyed through alternately communal, jostling, and irreconcilable negotiations of physical space. In the scene in New York, for instance, personal and political tensions—which are one and the same here—are made evident through Meridian’s bodily position, protective against the



others turning away and against her friend's accusing eyes, now "black marbles." And they echo in Anne-Marion's question, "Where will you go?," her implication that Meridian cannot disavow allegiance to the revolution without losing her friends both emotionally and physically, without *going* somewhere else and leaving the city. The description of the women's first meeting in the next chapter, too, conveys the simultaneous beginnings of close friendship and shared activist awareness through a corporeal act of sharing, with Meridian wrapping herself in the sweater Anne-Marion has offered as both of them grieve for the loss of a political leader. The impetus for this act, moreover, is Anne-Marion's memory of Meridian planting a shrub in front of the dorm where both women live, her appreciation of and sorrow for Meridian's quietly radical attempt to incorporate something "wild" and "sweet," in honor of Evers, into the environment of the school's "formal" garden (22).

Meridian and Anne-Marion bond through their shared recognition of the hypocrisies of Saxon's conservative, pious, Anglo-American values, where students "learned to make French food, English tea and German music" (28), where a locked gate separates the pristine campus from the slums of Atlanta. The two women reject these social and physical strictures, becoming "deviate[s] in the honors house" (27) and dedicating their time to civil rights work. As we learn in a chapter entitled "The Driven Snow" (a reference to the school song celebrating students' chastity and purity), they "marched often together and would go to jail with their toothbrushes and books and cigarettes under their arms. In jail they were allowed to smoke, which helped to calm their shrieking nerves," although on campus, "smoking led to expulsion, as did any other form of 'decadent' behavior" (94). But while both women are committed to rebelling

against strict social mores and fighting against injustice—which, importantly, often means actually leaving the confines of their campus—Walker also highlights their differing personal relationship with surrounding physical spaces, and how these differences affect their ability to agree politically. Sometimes, it is simply that their resistant acts are carried out at separate sites, each pursuing their own form of individual rebellion and seeking their own kind of broader socio-environmental awareness: Meridian “slip[s] off the heavily guarded campus at five in the morning to photograph a strange tree as the light hit it just the right way,” while Anne-Marion “risk[s] being raped in a rough neighborhood as [she] attempted to discover the economic causes of inner-city crime” (28). At other times, though, the women disagree about the proper ways to live on, treat, even *write* about the land around them, as Walker makes evident in an exchange between the two friends about Meridian’s senior thesis. While Meridian’s argument is premised upon “the notion that no one should be allowed to own more land than could be worked in a day, by hand,” Anne-Marion, on the other hand, thinks this is “quaint” (122). She asserts instead, “When black people can own the seashore...I want miles and miles of it. And I never want to see a face I didn’t invite walking across my sand” (122)—a claim that foreshadows Meridian’s revelation, later in the book and in life, that Anne-Marion has by the 1970s become a well-known poet whose subjects include “the quality of the light that fell across a lake she owned” (221).

It is in one of the novel’s most oft-cited chapters, “Sojourner,” however, that Walker most directly maps onto geographical space the tense terms of Meridian and Anne-Marion’s relationship as friends and activists. The chapter depicts them walking together “as they had many times before. Only now they moved slowly, carefully, their

dark dresses down to the tops of their polished shoes, and their hands, underneath the narrow coffin, nearly touched” (28). They are carrying the body of Wile Chile, a thirteen-year-old, pregnant homeless girl that Meridian has attempted in vain to care for; within a day of “captur[ing]” her and bringing her to Saxon, Meridian is told that Wile Chile cannot stay and the girl soon escapes, only to be hit by a car and killed (25). Carrying the casket with four other women, Meridian and Anne-Marion are part of a line of mourners passing through the gates onto Saxon’s campus, a crowd that includes other students as well as some of Wile Chile’s “neighbors” from the surrounding slums “[h]umbly... bringing up the rear” (30). Though their goal is to hold a funeral for the girl in the school’s chapel, the school’s president has issued orders against this and “retired to his Victorian mansion on the hill,” leaving guards to protect the locked building (37). After the “ashamed and angry” crowd of students lets out a collective cry of protest, the pallbearers eventually bring the casket to be placed under The Sojourner (37–38), “the largest magnolia tree in the country” (31) that sits at the center of the campus.

Walker devotes the middle of the chapter to the history of The Sojourner, whose origins are traced through the story of Louvinie. A slave on the plantation that later became the college campus, Louvinie is adored by the Saxon children for her vivid, often terrifying stories. But when one of them dies of a heart attack during one of her tales—a portion of which is “later discovered on a yellowed fragment of paper and... kept under glass in the Saxon library,” written “in the childish handwriting of one of the older Saxon girls”—Louvinie’s master clips out her tongue at the root; she buries it under a “scrawny magnolia tree” that soon “outgrow[s] all the others around it” and becomes renowned by other slaves for its purported magical powers (33–34). More recently, the tree has taken

on new meaning for Saxon students as the site of the “Commemoration of Fast Mary of the Tower,” the only ceremony that unites “the rich and the poor, the very black-skinned (few though they were) with the very fair, the stupid and the bright,” the “only time in all the many social activities...that every girl was considered equal” (35). In fact, “[a]ny girl who has ever prayed for her period to come is welcome,” for this yearly “Commemoration” honors Mary, a student in the 1920s who secretly gave birth to and then destroyed a baby on campus, but was found out and punished by “being locked in her room and denied the presence of a window”; she subsequently committed suicide (35). With *The Sojourner* said to have been “Fast Mary’s only comfort and friend” at Saxon (35), it is fitting that those mourning Wile Chile, another dead young mother, another tragic casualty of suffocating sociospatial structures of inequality, lay her casket under the “generous” tree (38). But after eventually burying Wile Chile “in an overgrown corner of a local black cemetery,” many of the students, including Anne-Marion, riot on campus, and although Meridian “beg[s] them to dismantle the president’s house instead,” the women destroy *The Sojourner*, working all night to saw down “that mighty, ancient, sheltering music tree” (38–39).

With the story of *The Sojourner* and its demise, Walker anchors the contingent interplay of interpersonal connections and ideological bonds into a singular feature of the natural landscape. Sprouting out of the ground from Louvinie’s buried tongue, *The Sojourner* becomes the site where Saxon’s otherwise stratified population can find a common ground for politicized resistance based on shared womanhood. Moreover, this strategic connection through identity politics is felt on a bodily, almost metaphysically intimate level: they “[hold] each other’s hands tightly” during Fast Mary’s

Commemoration (35); they carry Wile Chile's casket there "as if by mutual agreement—though no words [are] spoken" (38). At the same time, the coalitional unity that the women find at The Sojourner is as fragile and destructible as both the tree itself and the individuals that meet there—as Walker hints at when, as the students are carrying the casket across Saxon's beautiful campus, Anne-Marion tells Meridian, "I'd like to wreck this place," who responds, "You'd have to wreck me first" (31). Indeed, though the two women stand together at the tree with the other students, singing "We Shall Overcome" through "tears that slipped like melting pellets of sleet down their grieved and angered cheeks," they later part ways as Anne-Marion joins the group that, "in a fury of confusion and frustration," chop down The Sojourner to Meridian's dismay (38–39).<sup>10</sup> Here, Walker attends to the sometimes quite literal divisions that arise when political priorities change and diverge. She also constructs a geographical emblem for the evolving conditions and perpetual conditionality of collective struggles, using close, visceral descriptions of the tree and the women's touching, weeping, raging bodies surrounding it to show those struggles as deeply personal and painfully embodied.

Perhaps nowhere does Walker more directly get at these personal-political tensions—and their bodily and textual implications, particularly for Meridian—than in the sections of the novel dedicated to her protagonist's relationship with Truman and Lynne Rabinowitz. As we learn toward the end of Part One, called "Meridian," after

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<sup>10</sup> Rachel Stein has argued that this plot point "foreshadows the moment when the nonviolent Civil Rights movement will be replaced by more militant black power organizations and when Meridian will part company with the northern cadre over the question of revolutionary violence, which she believes to be as self-mutilating as the leveling of the tree" (107). But Stein's periodizing separation of Civil Rights nonviolence from Black Power "militancy" feels overly simplistic, and in any case, Meridian is ambivalent up to the novel's end about acceptable and effective activist strategies, including Anne-Marion's revolutionary determination to "kill."

meeting in her hometown, Meridian and Truman begin a brief romance while attending neighboring colleges in Atlanta. But their courtship ends abruptly when Truman is drawn to a group of white exchange students “because their color made them interesting” (108); by the time Part Two, called “Truman Held,” begins, Truman has paired off with Lynne, one of the exchange students. The first two chapters of Part Two depict the couple’s time together in the rural South, including an extended period in Mississippi beginning in 1966.<sup>11</sup> But it quickly becomes apparent that as the 1960s are wearing on and the political climate is changing, so too are Truman’s feelings for Lynne, now his wife. Once drawn to her cosmopolitanism, to her “long[ing] to put her body on the line for his freedom” (149), and most importantly to her whiteness, Truman begins to find that what originally made Lynne attractive now, with the shift to more separatist ideologies, makes her “guilty” (140); she is “no longer welcome at any of the meetings” and “excluded from the marches” (146), in part because her presence as “the only white woman in town regularly seen only with black people” has proven dangerous for them (142). At the same time, Truman cannot shake his lingering feelings for Meridian, whom he holds up as an icon of “brown strength,” a “woman to rest in” (149). That Truman’s changing romantic feelings for Lynne and Meridian are so obviously bound up in the changing ideologies of the movement neatly points up the problematic inextricability of the political and personal; even more noteworthy, and troubling, is how Meridian and Lynne’s raced bodies, and his actual distancing from or figuratively “resting” in those bodies, are what allow—or force—Truman to mark out his political position. Over the course of the rest of Part Two,

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<sup>11</sup> In another unspoken Meridian reference, Walker marks the date as “a little over two years after the bodies—battered beyond recognition, except for the colors: two white, one black—of Cheney [*sic*], Goodman and Schwerner were found hidden in a backwoods Neshoba County, Mississippi, dam” (137).

Walker continues to depict Meridian, Truman, and Lynne engaging in intimately felt, closely mapped interactions that alternatively underscore and jeopardize their political allegiances. She conveys this through the three players' oppositional and accommodating physical movements, as well as their oscillations between claiming and ceding control over *Meridian* the text itself—and so too, increasingly, over Meridian, the embodied character.

In the chapter called “Visits,” for instance, the story leaps forward to “the summer before Meridian arrived in Chicokema,” when Lynne arrives unannounced at her house to find that Truman is already there (153). Though Meridian tells Lynne that “[t]here’s nothing between” her and Truman, Lynne is unconvinced, replying derisively, “Nothing between you, my ass”; the narrator, through Lynne’s focalization, clarifies, “She had almost said ‘but my ass’” (155). Later that day, after she climbs in the window of Meridian’s locked house, Lynne attempts to tell her about being raped by Truman’s friend Tommy Odds, and in several of the chapters that follow, three of which are actually titled “Lynne,” her story takes over. In the first chapter bearing her name, Lynne recalls driving from New York City back to the South with Truman, presumably after college; the second depicts the rape and the couple’s subsequent estrangement, ending with Lynne becoming pregnant and returning to New York to raise their daughter Camara. It is there, sometime in the early 1970s, that the three are again reunited—and that Meridian’s point of view is woven back in—when Camara is brutally murdered and Truman, who now lives in the city as well, asks her to come help. Part Two ends with the last of the “Lynne” sections, which returns to the more recent time period covered in

“Visits,” depicting Lynne and Meridian back in Meridian’s house, Lynne rousing herself from her memories and Meridian waking up in a chair close by.

Throughout these chapters, all three characters negotiate shifting alliances based on sexual desire, emotional connection, and intersecting identity politics through their proximity to and division from one another, literally, figuratively, and textually. These negotiations register in what is or isn’t “between” Truman and Meridian (including Lynne’s “ass”); in Lynne forcing her way into Meridian’s home and into the center of the narrative; in the three’s travels between and across the South and New York City to see one another together and separately; in sections and chapters named for the various characters but subdivided into competing focalizations. Perhaps the most delicately and intimately rendered negotiations, though—and thus the ones in which Walker most explicitly addresses the difficult entanglements of the personal and political—are those between the two women, as they grapple with Lynne’s rape and the death of her daughter. When Lynne tries to tell her about the rape and Meridian “ris[es] abruptly and throw[s] up her hands” (164), for instance, Walker has her protagonist communicate with bodily force an inability to empathize with her friend that is clearly shaped by the sense that “to privilege the white woman’s story of interracial rape is to participate in an historical violence against accused black men” (Barnett 71). In other words, Walker conveys Meridian’s recognition of the political implications of Lynne’s story through a singular physical movement, one that gets at both the visceral, deeply felt nature of what Lauren Cardon calls Meridian’s longer “historical memory” (174), and the ways in which the two women’s differing social standpoints might make it impossible for them to even be in the same room. At the same time, though, the chapter ends with Meridian sitting



back down, looking at Lynne “through her fingers, which were spread, like claws, over her face” (165), and allowing Lynne to “sit there...and try to remember what had happened to her and Truman’s life” (165), which includes providing her account of the rape.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps because Meridian cares about Lynne as a person, perhaps because she also knows all too well the politics of gendered violence and what it feels like not to be listened to—for whatever reason, Meridian forces herself to remain in the room, despite being clearly pained, and she tacitly gives Lynne the room to take over the text.

This uneasy sharing of the space of the home and of the text continues in the “Two Women” chapter, when Meridian and Lynne sit together in Lynne’s apartment, “companionable and still in their bathrobes” (189), mourning Camara’s death. The narrator explains that it is “the absence of the child herself” that has “finally brought them together”: though “not unlike the loss of Martin Luther King or Malcolm X or George Jackson...they grieved more because the child...had been personally known, had been small—six years old—and had died after horrible things were done to her” (191). By framing the women’s grief over the murder of Lynne’s daughter as “not unlike” what it felt like when such notorious figures of racial struggle were killed, Walker explicitly draws a line from political to the personal, suggesting that the death of an unknown—or rather, “personally known”—child is just as much an ideologically charged event, just as historically significant, as that of any political leader. But “not unlike” is not the same as “equal to”; their feelings about Camara are, in fact, worse, not just because she was family, but also because of the “horrible things” she endured before her murder. These “things” are left hauntingly unnamed, but they raise the specter of sexualized violence

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<sup>12</sup> Importantly, Tommy Odds provides his, too; he actually gets a brief chapter of his own. See Suzanne W. Jones 148.

and therefore further delineate the women's grief for the young girl from what they felt for the male leaders. For as in the scene in Meridian's home, there is a sense, in the "Two Women" chapter, that it is definitely a politics of shared gender—and within that, shared motherhood, shared sorrow for a child's absence—that has "brought them together" and made possible this moment of "intimacy, compassion, and potential reconciliation" between Meridian and Lynne (Shermaine Jones 189). This moment of individual connection based on identity politics is conveyed through the "companionable" closeness of their bathrobe-clad bodies, but also by the fact that they have equal narrative control; the chapter intersperses short phrases focalized through Meridian and Lynne with longer passages of distanced, third-person narration about "they" and "them." At the same time, the chapter ends up disrupting this fragile equilibrium, concluding on terms of bodily and textual departure: the chapter closes with Meridian leaving the apartment, and after Part Two, Lynne is only mentioned once more in the remainder of the novel, in a half-page chapter whose title is relegated to parentheses.<sup>13</sup> Walker thus ultimately thwarts any facile linking of her two main female characters through a simple politics of gender.<sup>14</sup> Instead, she points to, and maps across the spaces of the novel, the contingencies of the women's shared concerns as individuals and members of broader political movements. More specifically, she hints at the unsustainability of Meridian's willingness or actual ability to meet Lynne halfway, to set aside their very material differences and make herself and her narrative available for this other woman in need.

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<sup>13</sup> "(Atonement: Later, in the Same Life)" depicts Truman and Lynne reconciling, presumably after Camara's death and Meridian's departure from Lynne's apartment (237).

<sup>14</sup> This argument seems to have proven tempting; see Suzanne W. Jones 146 and, more recently, Cardon 177.

The textual body of *Meridian* thus emerges here as a fraught, contested space, a singular story that becomes the necessary grounds of political work but also strains under the weight of competing priorities: who gets to tell what story and when, what interpretations are included, when narrative control must be given up and when it can be reclaimed. At the same time, these struggles over the body of *Meridian* the text are always also struggles over the body of *Meridian* the character. For while Lynne, Truman, and *Meridian*'s relationship might be most easily figured as a triangle, with each point or combination of points varyingly taking center stage, their interactions often function more like a tug-of-war, with the embattled *Meridian* at the center. There is, for instance, the period after Camara's death when she frantically "shuttl[es]" between Truman and Lynne's apartments in New York, "dashing in and out of subways, cooking meals, listening to monologues thickened with grief, being pulled into bed—by Lynne, who held on to her like a child afraid of the dark—and by Truman, who almost drowned his body with her own"; "[b]etween them," in short, "they [drain] her dry" (188–189). And when those two arrive a year later, both unannounced and uninvited, at *Meridian*'s home, each are in need of her care, and each ignore the woman's own deteriorating health, her "frail and sickly-looking" appearance (153). Mirroring the narrative contests over *Meridian*, these physical contests over *Meridian* highlight the pressures placed upon her to be simultaneously sacrificial and ever-constant, to be a figure of strength and selflessness as much as an actual person, and make clear that these competing pressures tax her body, just as they tax the text.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, Wendy Wall's analysis of Walker's 1982 novel *The Color Purple* includes a similar attention to its "strange conflation of text and body" (261).

**“I’m afraid I won’t be able to live up to what is required of me”:**

**The Problem of Meridian’s Overdetermination**

I have already suggested that Walker uses her novel’s first chapter, “The Last Return,” to establish how characters’ bodily and textual negotiations mediate the personal as political—in the sense that they *enact* that entangled relationship, but also that they are the means by which characters attempt, with varying success, to cope with or reconcile those entanglements. Just as importantly, though, that opening chapter reveals that it is above all Meridian who takes on this mediatory work. We actually come to see this most clearly through the presence of *another* woman, Marilene. When Truman enters the square in Chicokema, he sees a circus wagon that has emblazoned its side in “tall, ornate gold letters...outlined in silver”: “Marilene O’Shay, One of the Twelve Human Wonders of the World: Dead for Twenty-Five Years, Preserved in Life-Like Condition” (4). Below this is “a smaller legend” written in red on “four large stars: ‘Obedient Daughter,’ read one, ‘Devoted Wife,’ said another. The third was ‘Adoring Mother’ and the fourth was ‘Gone Wrong.’ Over the fourth a vertical line of progressively flickering light bulbs moved continually downward like a perpetually cascading tear” (4). A pink leaflet details “The True Story of Marilene O’Shay,” who, “[a]ccording to the writer, Marilene’s husband, Henry...had been an ideal woman, a ‘goddess,’ who had been given ‘everything she *thought* she wanted,’” but had been “corrupted” and “gone outside the home to seek her ‘pleasuring’” (4–5). A street-sweeper provides the deadly end to the story for Truman, who is “watching Meridian” as he listens: “Just because he caught her giving some away, he shot the man, strangled the wife. Throed’em both into Salt Lake”; later, “she washed up on shore” and Henry, having “done forgive her by then...[t]hought since

she was so generous herself she wouldn't mind the notion of him sharing her with the American public" (7-8). "The oddest thing about her dried-up body," the flier details, is that the salt caused Marilene's skin to "darken," though Henry tried in vain to "paint her her original color" (5). Truman is understandably confused that this is the display for which Meridian has put her own body in front of a line of police, demanding that the town's children are given access to Marilene. But when he asks about it later, she explains her reasoning: "She was a fake. They discovered that. There was no salt, they said, left in the crevices of her eyesockets or in her hair....They said she was made of plastic and were glad they hadn't waited till Thursday when they would have had to pay money to see her" (12).

With the exhibition of Marilene O'Shay, Walker lays bare the process by which a single woman can, through methods of bodily objectification or subjectification and narrative crafting, be imbued with sweeping symbolic resonances that far exceed, and perhaps render irrelevant, her individual life. Displayed in the circus wagon, dried and preserved, Marilene's body is more than matter; it is a "human wonder" to be consumed by "the American public," the awe-inspiring evidence of man's ultimate, deadly devotion, an object lesson in the consequences of domestic "goddesses" straying "outside the home." Her story is more than that of a singular woman who grew up, married, had a child, and left her husband; it is the literally spectacular tale of a fallen "ideal," the quintessential narrative of the "Obedient Daughter," "Devoted Wife," and "Adoring Mother" "Gone Wrong"—ornate capital letters, blinking lights, bright pink handouts and all. And with Meridian standing at the door of the wagon and her subsequent "catatonic trance that mimics [Marilene's] paralysis" (Dubey 127), with Truman watching her while

listening to the sweeper's story, even with the strangely darkened skin, it is impossible not to draw connections from the mummy woman to the protagonist herself. For here and throughout the novel, Meridian, too, is made to stand in, or sometimes just physically stand, for much broader struggles over power and agency, a process that can take a serious toll on the body, as both Marilene's (fake) corpse and Meridian's collapse indicate. (Ironically, Meridian is putting her own body on display, and in harm's way, precisely to prove to the children that Marilene's displayed body doesn't actually represent or mean *anything*, and certainly should not teach them the lesson that disobedient women end up dead.) Moreover, just as Marilene's narrative of the "ideal woman gone wrong" is revealed to be neither as exemplary nor coherent as it first appeared, the story of *Meridian*, too, will prove far more partial and unsettled than we might initially expect, given the emphasis on finality, completeness, and closure of the chapter's title, "The Last Return."

Reading on, we do find Walker pursuing a sweeping historical agenda, crafting the bodies of both Meridian the person and *Meridian* the novel into symbolic spaces across which bigger political arcs are mapped out. But in the physical breakdown of Meridian's body and the narrative "breakdown" of the novel's irregular voice and nonlinear, incomplete structure, the novel also exposes the shortcomings of imbuing individual characters and plotlines with extra-narrative resonance, of asking them to be more than they are, to tell entire stories of political movements and intersectional identities. Like Marilene, then, an obvious symbol that also highlights the limitations of reading symbolically, the narrative of Meridian is explicitly representative, but also resists being understood on those terms. Presented from the title and definitions page

onward “as ‘prime,’ the meridian from which all else is measured” (M. Walker 175), Meridian is an embodied emblem of mid-twentieth-century activist struggle whose personal story encompasses political upheaval on a national scale. At the same time, through the distressed instability of that body and that story, Walker illuminates the problems of treating women like Meridian and stories like hers as emblematic at all.

Marking the novel’s first return to present-day Chicokema after the various oscillating pasts of Part Two, a chapter called “Questions” begins with several lines of dialogue at first unattributed to any speaker, opening with the statement, “I’m afraid I won’t be able to live up to what is required of me—by history, by economics....” (204).<sup>16</sup> As the exchange continues, it becomes clear that this is Meridian speaking to Truman about the possibility of killing as part of revolutionary praxis, about which she is deeply ambivalent. But in part because it is presented so abruptly, and so initially out of context, Walker seems to invite her readers to recognize that Meridian’s statement has implications extending far beyond the immediate subject at hand. Meridian’s fears about “what is required” of her might well be tied not just to the pressures she feels to commit murder for the cause, but to her very identity as a black woman, both in general and particularly in the political and cultural era covered by the novel, from the height of the Civil Rights movement through, by this point, the mid-1970s. As Trudier Harris suggests, “Historically, African American women have been viewed as balm bearers, the ones who held a people together against assaults from outside as well as from within the community” (9); they are expected to model features of strength that include “suprahumanity, introspection, and keeping one’s own counsel,” as well as “Christian

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<sup>16</sup> Ellipses in original.

virtue,” “self-denial,” and “silence” (11). Moreover, as has been famously argued by Michele Wallace, among others, the role of black women in liberation movements was an especially troubled one; they were alternately and sometimes simultaneously fetishized and ignored, revered and denigrated, depended upon and treated as obstacles.<sup>17</sup> Above all, women like Meridian were expected, or “required,” to both embody and give themselves over (or up) to the struggle—whether that meant serving as martyrs, or as corporeal manifestations of the beauty of blackness and the African motherland, or as silent supporters, or as vessels to carry the next generation of revolutionaries, or all of the above. Truman’s response to Meridian’s comment in this scene bears this out: when she implies that she might not be capable of killing, he replies, “But there’s so much you can give, other than being able to kill” (204), thus simply emphasizing what *else* she has to offer.

Of course, readers already know by this point in the novel that this is typical for Truman, through whom Walker throughout the novel articulates the overdetermined, often contradictory expectations placed upon Meridian and her body as a, or rather *the*, black woman revolutionary: quiet yet strong, powerful yet self-sacrificing, familial yet sexual, standing for the past but existing in the present.<sup>18</sup> But it is not only Truman who contributes to these weighty burdens. There is also Lynne, who tells Meridian that she envies her because “you’re so strong, your people love you, and you can cope” (161); there are the people of Chicokema, who “*appreciate* it when someone volunteers to

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<sup>17</sup> See Wallace’s *Myth of the Superwoman*, as well as, for instance, bell hooks’ essay “Reflections on Race and Sex” in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*.

<sup>18</sup> There is, for instance, Truman’s affection for Meridian’s “brown strength that he imagined would not mind being a resource for someone else” (149); his explaining that “Meridian is my past, my *sister*...” (159); his paintings of her and other black women as “magnificent giants, breeding forth the warriors of the new universe” (183).



suffer” (11). In fact, Meridian is constantly walking this seemingly impossible line, from when she stands in commanding silence at the circus exhibit and then collapses and is carried home; to when Truman and Lynne lean on her as they grieve for their daughter, while she herself is “drained dry”; to when she reluctantly gives them shelter and food at her nearly bare home (which is explicitly aligned with her sexualized body)<sup>19</sup> after they arrive uninvited, even as she “live[s] ‘around’ her illness” because it seems “pointless for her to complain” (154). And while the line she walks might be a figurative one, the journey is quite material: it is in navigating, and sometimes overtly rejecting, these competing ideological obligations that Meridian experiences real bodily harm.

But expectations placed upon Meridian to personally “live up to” the exigencies of “history,” “economics,” and whatever else lies in the non-verbal space of the ellipses following that opening line in “Questions,” come also from the text itself. In fact, the novel unmistakably invites an interpretation of Meridian as more than herself, as a “medium” (Butler-Evans 117) or “catalyst” (Lauret 129) through which broader sociopolitical battles are fought and stories of race, gender, and culture are both recited and contested. And this is an explicitly corporeal process: it is actually Meridian’s *body* that becomes an overdetermined location of historical struggle and possibility.<sup>20</sup> Even as

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<sup>19</sup> After Meridian watches Truman and Lynne engage in a vicious argument outside her house—where, later, Lynne will try to tell her about the rape—she tells them, “Forgive me, both of you...but I’m locking the house,” to which Lynne replies, “giggling,” “A locked house, a locked pussy” (161).

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Thadious Davis’ reading of Meridian “as body and as space...in which new social arrangements can be formed and on which new political theory can be written” (353–354), or Alan Nadel’s parsing of “the relationship between Meridian’s body and the body politic” (56), or Madhu Dubey’s reading of her body as “the symbolic site of a radical redefinition of black womanhood” (127), or Maria Lauret’s argument that Meridian “literally becomes a site of struggle, a battleground on which all conflicts have to play themselves out” (137). Opal Moore has also written admiringly of how Walker

it constructs Meridian's body as a generative symbolic space for enacting social critique and radical resistance, though, the novel also seems to know not only that this construction is problematic from a gendered and racial standpoint, but also that asking her (or any) body to carry out this herculean task can cause real physical harm; in fact, it simply might not *work*, on a corporeal level.<sup>21</sup> And just as her body may not be able to hold up, it's possible that her narrative might not, either. For the body of *Meridian* buckles and fractures, too, in the kind of abrupt toggling between focalizations and narrative voices I've already discussed and also its disjointed, montage-like scenes, unresolved plot threads, and metafictional commentary. With these formal spaces of uncertainty, unevenness, even stuttering, the novel questions its own ability to "live up to" its yoking together of the personal and the political through the titular character's life story.<sup>22</sup>

A seemingly minor plot-point that exemplifies this layered corporeal and narrative pressure occurs later on in the "Questions" chapter, sometime during Meridian's stay in Chicokema. Following the conversation about the role of killing in revolution, which ends with the narrator distinguishing Meridian from others who "didn't endanger life and

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"offers the black female body as both physical self (*herstory*) and metaphor; it is the literal *figure* (or body) and a figure of speech...both flesh and literary device, or metaphor" (235).

<sup>21</sup> To some extent, Davis grants this when she suggests that "the cost of the movement, of activity across race lines, the personal loss, including an alienation from family and community, and ultimately the potential for rejuvenation all play out in the body of Meridian Hill," and the physical toll that this takes "destabilizes any notion of a clear-cut solution to the problem of conflicting ideology so highly visible in the text" (361). However, while she recognizes these problems, in the end Davis is still deeply invested in reading Meridian's body as a site for "reexamining race and social relations, as well as [for] political engagement and cultural production" (353).

<sup>22</sup> According to Madhu Dubey, *Meridian's* "conflicting modes of characterization seem to overload Meridian's character with an abundance of meanings that it sometimes cannot carry" (144).

limb” worrying about such questions, a new section begins with a sudden, uncontextualized image: “It was a small white house, freshly painted by the black community, with green shutters and a green door” (207). The yard of the house slopes down to a “large ditch that ran the length of the street” where neighborhood children swim, against their parents’ orders, having no alternative because the town pool closed rather than integrate; however, “the same city officials who had closed the public swimming pool had erected a huge reservoir very near the lower-lying black neighborhood,” and when it overflows every year, any children swimming in the ditch drown (208). It is the body of one of these children, “the bloated figure of a five-year-old boy,” that Meridian then is depicted carrying with a “serene, set expression on her face” into a town meeting to place before the mayor, only later, “at some distance from the center of town,” to “suddenly [buckle] and [fall] to the ground” (209). “When she was up again,” the narrator proceeds, her neighbors “came to her and offered her everything, including the promise that they would name the next girl child they had after her,” but Meridian instead makes them vow to learn to “use the vote” (209). We finally return, abruptly, to the house, this time to an interior description that makes clear who has been living there: “There were two rooms. In one, a hot plate, a table and a battered chair (brought by the neighbors when they brought the food and the cow), and in the other, where Meridian slept, only her sleeping bag on the floor, some toilet articles on a windowsill...and a jar of dried wildflowers in a green wine bottle placed in a corner. And, of course, the letters” (209–210).

The debilitating bodily effects of Meridian’s role as representative—of the community, of an ongoing political struggle—are all too clear here: she physically takes

on the burden of fighting institutional and infrastructural racism by stoically carrying one of the dead in her arms and then collapses. But just as important is the uneasy balance the narration of this episode strikes between the historical and the individual, the political and the personal—and how this balance is negotiated through descriptions of spaces. It begins with an exterior of a house (at this point it is unclear whose); moves outward to an extended sociopolitical and topographical history of the neighborhood, with the yearly deaths of the children; then zooms in on Meridian as she carries the dead boy into the town hall, the people of the neighborhood trailing behind her; and in the end refocuses on the house, this time providing intimate glimpses at the materials that make up Meridian's domestic life, including those donated by her neighbors. In this rapid toggling between architectures, landscapes, bodies, and objects, a sort of narrative unevenness emerges. Is this about Meridian, or is it about the people? What matters, the specifics of the house or its position in the neighborhood? Is it one woman's journey, or a broader movement? The answer to all of these questions, of course, is *both*, in this case and always, both. But with its abrupt shifts in scale and focus, as well as its formal lack of integration into the dominant plotline, a passage like this also makes visible—or rather, renders spatial—a kind of narrative tension, one that is grounded in the problems of representation: whether and how this woman and this story can carry the weight of political history and social struggle writ large.

Walker addresses these issues even more overtly in a set of disjointed passages about halfway through the novel, during Meridian's time at Saxon College. With his relationship with Lynne on hold, Truman "stroll[s] up" to Meridian on campus and tells her, "I think I'm in love with you, African woman"; he goes on, "your body is so

beautiful. So warm, so brown...,”<sup>23</sup> and, looking at her “with eyes of new discovery,” whispers “worshipfully,” “You’re *beautiful*...*Have my black babies*” (120). These lines neatly capture the objectifications and hypocrisies that undergird the overdetermination of black female bodies in Black Nationalist movements: in Truman’s eyes, Meridian becomes simply “African woman” (though born in Georgia), “an abstraction of mythical black motherhood” to be celebrated (Dubey 129). (In reality, of course, Meridian has been left for a white woman to end a pregnancy alone with a dangerous abortion, not to mention that she already has a child, which she kept from Truman because he was “raised to expect and *demand* a virgin” [150]). The next chapter, “The Recurring Dream,” raises the stakes of Meridian’s fraught symbolic role even further. It begins with the repetition of this one-sentence paragraph three times: “She dreamed she was a character in a novel and that her existence presented an insoluble problem, one that would be solved only by her death in the end” (120). This moment of metatextual stuttering is immediately followed by a passage that chronicles Meridian’s declining health. She feels “as if a small landslide had begun behind her brows, as if things there had started to slip,” but “[pays] it no mind” (121); instead, “[s]he just beg[ins] to take chances with her life”: “She would go alone to small towns where blacks were not welcome on the sidewalks after dark and she would stand waiting, watching the sun go down. She walked for miles up and down Atlanta streets until she was exhausted, without once paying attention to the existence of cars” (121–122). Eventually, as her eyesight begins to fade in and out and she finds that “her legs no longer [work],” Meridian begins to “experience ecstasy”: “she felt as if a

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<sup>23</sup> Ellipses in original.

warm, strong light bore her up and that she was a beloved part of the universe; that she was innocent even as the rocks are innocent, and unpolluted as the first waters” (124).

In placing the scene with Truman directly prior to the onset of Meridian’s strangely diverse set of physical and mental ailments, Walker prompts readers to recognize a direct, almost causal connection between the two episodes. The contradictory ideological expectations being placed upon her individual body, it seems, might not only result in its physical breakdown, but also, more disturbingly, cause Meridian to accept or even embrace this process—either as a twisted form of rebellion (deliberately devaluing her overvalued body), or as a welcoming of the “worship” and deification that comes from martyrdom. Moreover, with the “recurring dream” inserted in the middle, Walker adds an explicitly self-conscious, metafictional element.<sup>24</sup> She reminds us that Meridian is also carrying the weight of *Meridian*, acting as the representative for this ambitiously encompassing novel of race, gender, and class politics. Because no one character or person could possibly live up to those symbolic or textual expectations—and because narrative conventions seem to demand it for tragic heroes, sacrificial saints, or revolutionary iconoclasts—the only novelistic resolution may be death.

In the end, however, Meridian doesn’t die; instead, back in the present of her home in Chicokema in the last chapter, “Release,” she is preparing to leave. Through Truman’s focalization, Walker depicts her protagonist as “strong enough to go,” having discarded her cap to reveal “newly grown hair”; certain that she will “return to the world cleansed of sickness,” Truman sees in her something “new, sure and ready, even eager, for the world” (241). Although he is still concerned that she will be “always alone,”

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<sup>24</sup> See Duck 446 and Pifer 85.

Meridian reassures him, “But that is my value. . . . Besides, all the people who are as alone as I am will one day gather at the river. We will watch the evening sun go down. And in the darkness maybe we will know the truth” (242). Then she hugs him, “long, lingeringly,” and walks away “as if hurrying to catch up with someone” (242). After Meridian’s departure, left alone in what he senses is “his house, now. . . . His cell,” Truman climbs “shakily into Meridian’s sleeping bag” and, in the novel’s closing lines, wonders “if Meridian knew that the sentence of bearing the conflict in her own soul which she had imposed upon herself—and lived through—must now be borne in terror by all the rest of them” (242).

It is tempting to interpret these last moments as unequivocally liberatory for Meridian, evidence that her “physical and psychological sickness” has given way to “redemption and recovery” (Cardon 161).<sup>25</sup> Perhaps it is even that Meridian’s bouts of illness have been paradoxically healing, moments of pause allowing her to accumulate the energy necessary to do what she recognized early on as “the only new thing” left for activists like her: “just walk away” (162).<sup>26</sup> After all, the power of her departure is that she seems finally able to turn her back on the competing ideological expectations placed on her body that sometimes proved so paralyzing (and the man who most directly embodies those expectations), as well as the historical precedents and narrative conventions that seem to portend, even require, her demise.<sup>27</sup> But such readings, I think, impose an overly neat resolution onto what Pamela Barnett calls the “sustained tension” that characterizes the text (89), a tension that doesn’t loosen in the novel’s final lines.

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<sup>25</sup> See also Lauret 124, D. McDowell 168, and K. Stein 130.

<sup>26</sup> See Cooke 145, Lauret 127, R. Stein 98, and Toland-Dix 119.

<sup>27</sup> See Barnett 83, 89; Patterson 87.

That tension is there, for instance, in the image of Meridian “hurrying *as if* to catch up with someone,” which could indicate trailblazing agency and future coalitional work, but also might suggest a perpetually secondary, subtly submissive position, even possibly evoking the masculinist “ten paces behind” language that writers like Toni Cade (Bambara) were so adamantly criticizing in this era.<sup>28</sup> More importantly, the conclusion actually leaves unresolved the issue of Meridian’s singular “character” needing or being expected to serve a broader “purpose,” whether ideological or textual; we still haven’t escaped her bodily and narrative overdetermination, the problem of what Meridian calls in her final words to Truman her “value.” Meridian may walk away and exit the story, but she is still “alone” and set apart, still a political and literary symbol, and it is somewhat small comfort that “one day” others like her might “gather.” Moreover, while at least some of this symbolic weight might also ultimately be transferred onto Truman as he “moves into her physical space” seemingly to “assume the role Meridian has held” (Patterson 88),<sup>29</sup> there is still a kind of “terror” in that vision. For there is still the implication that in activist work, and in the stories we tell about that work, there is always some individual *body* “bearing” the “sentence”—an apt term that denotes punishment, even imprisonment, but also the building blocks of narrative.

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<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, Bambara’s essays “On the Issue of Roles” and “The Pill: Genocide or Liberation?” in *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, as well as Jean Carey Bond and Patricia Peery’s “Is the Black Male Castrated?” in that volume. These writers take up the language of “ten paces behind” to allude specifically to a common understanding of black women’s role in the Nation of Islam, whose discourses and ideologies often overlapped with the politics of Black Power.

<sup>29</sup> In an interview with Sharon Wilson, Walker asserted, in reference to this scene, “As you grow beyond something, you move on to the next thing. But some one else is coming to where you were, and they go through then what you went through, and then they go on” (325). See also Cardon 178–179, Patterson 86, and K. Stein 140.



I end this chapter, then, not by trying to resolve these issues, for doing so would mean ignoring the intentional ambiguities, even ambivalences, of the novel's close. Rather, I want to contribute an alternative reading, one inspired by Kevin Everod Quashie's recent formulation that "all living is political—every human action means something—but all living is not in protest; to assume such is to disregard the richness of life" (*Sovereignty* 8–9). His 2012 study *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* argues for a closer attention to "quiet," a paradoxically dynamic "notion of interiority" that he presents as a new, more capacious "template for thinking about black collectivity," including, most notably, the liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s (76). Quashie's sense of "quiet," I think, is deeply relevant to Walker's novel, not least because he cites as "a supreme example of quiet subjectivity" her famous list of definitions for "Womanism," a list that, in its fluidity and conditionality, is not unlike the one opening *Meridian*.<sup>30</sup> Like Quashie, Walker in *Meridian* makes clear that all personal experiences "mean something" politically, because they are necessarily bound up in larger questions and longer histories of power. But she also illustrates that understanding those experiences in strictly political terms is profoundly limiting. Doing so not only overlooks what Quashie calls the "the full range of one's inner life" (*Sovereignty* 6), but also asks a lot, maybe too much, of individual people, especially black women like *Meridian*—and like Walker herself, whose "full range" of accomplishments as a black woman writer cannot be fully comprehended through the singular framework of political protest.

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<sup>30</sup> Walker's definition of "Womanism" appears in the opening pages of her 1983 essay collection, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. See Quashie *Sovereignty* 96.

With this in mind, when Meridian walks away at the end of the narrative, perhaps Walker is asking us to do more than parse out the political implications of this departure, more than determine whether her protagonist is executing an act of resistance, or “hurrying to catch up with” others and continue her activism, or following behind the “real revolutionaries.” In the white space on the page at the novel’s end, maybe Walker is also prompting her readers to simply recognize the “quiet” of Meridian’s disappearing yet sustained interiority, her “desires, ambitions, hungers, vulnerabilities, fears” living on beyond the narrative, “watcherless” (Quashie *Sovereignty* 6, 22); this character walking away from her house and out of the story means nothing more and nothing less than that she is, in our minds, alive. And so too, then, might the end of the text signify nothing more and nothing less than that Walker has finished her novel and is ready to pass on a sense of “quiet” to her readers, who will hold the novel open in our hands, silently, still, our minds, as Quashie puts it, “afame with things ordinary and extraordinary” (*Sovereignty* 77). Making room for this sense of quiet—the quiet of imagination, of open-endedness, of the unknown and the possible, of the personal as political and also so much more—may be Walker’s most powerful spatial act. In the next chapter on *The Women’s Room*, we’ll see Marilyn French, too, working to carve out room for women’s physical exploration and narrative agency; the landscapes that emerge in that case, however, are far less dynamic and generative than Walker’s, and they serve a much more limited and limiting sociospatial vision.

**CHAPTER V**  
**MARILYN FRENCH'S *THE WOMEN'S ROOM***  
**AND THE PRIVILEGES OF MAKING SPACE**

Marilyn French's 1977 novel *The Women's Room* opens, fittingly, in the restroom of an academic building at Harvard. It is 1968, and, newly enrolled in a graduate program in English and "feeling stupid and helpless," thirty-eight-year-old Mira Ward is hiding in a toilet stall until class starts (1). She bides her time reading the graffiti scrawled on the walls, which includes "a crude drawing of female genitalia" accompanied by the message "Cunt is Beautiful"; another statement, printed in "great jagged letters in what look[s] like red nail polish" but also resembles blood, reads "SOME DEATHS TAKE FOREVER" (2). Reading this causes Mira to "[draw] her breath in sharply" and leave the stall, finally making her way to class as she repeats the message and reflects on women's "unimportant[ce]" and her own feelings of "invisibility" (2-3). Following this scene, a first-person female narrator intrudes and establishes the novel's present six years later. Employed as a professor at a community college in Maine, the narrator has recently decided to try to write down her memories of the past; this process begins with her thinking back to that time at Harvard in 1968, a transformative year she describes as "an open door" through which "you could never return" (4). At the center of the narrative is Mira, whose meek ineffectuality and traditionally feminine attire in those early days in Cambridge—"tottering around on her high heels...in a three-piece wool knit suit"—lead the speaker to compare her to women in "the Moslem countries" made to wear "jubbah and yashmak," invisibly "drifting through streets...turning into dark narrow alleys and

entering doors that slam shut loudly” (7). “Only the forms are different here,” the narrator tells us, and indeed, in *The Women’s Room*, the story of how Mira ended up in that toilet stall, cowering, will also be the story of the various “forms” of confinement and oppression that make women what the narrator calls “the most scorned class in America” (8). At the same time, this will also become the story of how Mira leaves the boundaries of that stall and begins to ponder feminist issues like the ones raised by the politicized graffiti on its walls, to think about things like female anatomy and interminable deaths via nail polish. For ultimately, Mira too passes through the “open door” of 1968; in fact, by the end of the novel, it is revealed that the more experienced narrator of the present, looking back through the “doorway” at that earlier time feeling “a little superior,” is Mira (5).<sup>1</sup> She is looking back on her younger, more repressed self, reflecting that now, as opposed to then, she has “enough room”—although she also feels “terribly alone,” and that the room she has is “empty” (6).

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which *The Women’s Room* questions the possibilities for women’s liberation by mapping out women’s efforts to make room for themselves and the roadblocks, isolations, and losses that result; to advance this ambivalent picture, however, the novel at once collapses and reinforces very real disparities in how different populations of women and other marginalized groups experience spatial autonomy. Like Didion in *Play It As It Lays*, French uses the language and imagery of physical negotiations to plot and complicate trajectories of women’s struggles for freedom. But while Didion employs a logic of moving and stopping, French

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<sup>1</sup> The fact that Mira is, from the novel’s start, the central focalizing character probably leads many readers to anticipate this revelation well in advance of the novel’s conclusion. In any case, for the purposes of clarity, in this chapter I discuss the present-day Mira as “the narrator.”

takes up and literalizes the metaphor of claiming “room.” She represents her characters’ development as independent, agential, and politically aware subjects as dependent upon their breaking through stifling boundaries, opening doors and occupying new kinds of space—bodily, intellectually, and even textually, on the pages of the novel. At the same time, these efforts do not result in a sense of liberation, or of narrative possibility; rather, characters end up lonely or dissatisfied, if they live at all, and the text, taking up nearly five hundred pages, is suffused with a self-conscious sense of purposeless repetitiveness. Thus, as with Didion’s work, the novel refuses to construct a celebratory narrative of feminist progress, suggesting that liberation can come at a cost and, moreover, that writing about it might not even be very compelling.

However, attending to the ways in which French’s novel makes layered use of the concept of “room” to reflect upon the means and ends of women’s liberation also reveals the privileges, generalizations, and exclusions upon which its political vision is premised. As is so starkly evident in that opening scene when the narrator compares Mira to women in “the Moslem countries” traversing “narrow alleys” and disappearing behind slamming doors, *The Women’s Room* often relies upon simplistic formulations of oppression in which the physical and social confinements of women like Mira are presented in relation to those of other marginalized groups, most often women in the Global South and racial minorities in the United States. These comparisons highlight purported similarities between the experiences of these different populations but also serve to justify its focus on the specific constraints of gender, which is sometimes overtly placed at the top of hierarchies of subjugation. (In addition to her “Only the forms are different here” statement, the narrator follows up her assertion that “women are the most scorned class in

America” with this: “You may hate niggers and PRs and geeks, but you’re a little frightened of them. Women don’t get even the respect of fear” [8].) Employing these analogies, I suggest, allows the text to elide the privileges of race and class enjoyed by characters like Mira,<sup>2</sup> privileges that manifest spatially through where they live and are able to go even before any new, empowering “room” is made. Just as troublingly, these analogies between unequal social relations within and across cultures often actually more sharply map out the very sociospatial divisions they seem to bridge; in other words, the novel’s pointing to purported commonalities among marginalized groups in effect underscores racial and cultural inequalities and reaffirms white, Western dominance. Ultimately, I argue that the exclusionary visions of oppression and freedom that these analogies serve are inextricably linked to the novel’s cynicism about women’s liberation politics, its pessimistic characterization of what “women’s room” really looks like. For when feminist action is formulated as a process of making new room for white, middle-class women while also keeping various marginalized “others” in their place, the spaces that get carved out always will, and *should*, be experienced as empty and unproductive.

### **“She was constitutionally unfree”: Gendered Confinement and Cultural Distancing**

After the initial set of chapters opening on Mira at Harvard and the narrator in Maine, *The Women’s Room* jumps back in time to meticulously chronicle the various

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<sup>2</sup> Scholars like Carolyn Dever recognize “Mira’s reasonably protected status as an open-minded, intelligent, middle-class, well-educated white woman. She is not a woman living in poverty...nor does she experience overt misogyny and certainly nothing like racial discrimination or hatred” (195). Still, Dever contends that “her suffering is acute and her damage genuine” (195). While this is certainly true, I think it is important to point out the strategies that allow the novel to emphasize its characters’ “suffering” and “damage” without acknowledging their “reasonably protected status,” and how these strategies actually serve to shore up that status.

stages of Mira's life. It moves from childhood and adolescence to her early sexual experiences in college and subsequent marriage to Norm, describing their life in the New Jersey suburbs and Mira's close friendships with other discontented housewives. The narrative finally carries us up to Mira's time at Harvard, where she enrolls after getting divorced. There, she and a group of other female students forge intellectually stimulating and emotionally fulfilling bonds, gathering regularly in their apartments to engage in the kinds of productive debate and cathartic venting becoming commonly known as "consciousness-raising." From early on in the novel, these scenes of the Harvard women's discussions regularly interrupt the story, as do intrusions from the narrator of the present, commenting upon past events she's describing, the discussions *about* those events taking place later, and the difficult process of storytelling itself. This difficulty is heightened as she relates, at the climax of the novel, a series of tragedies and losses: the daughter of Mira's closest friend Val is raped and then treated by the justice system as culpable, and Val is killed by the FBI as she attempts to save another woman from jail. The novel closes back in Maine on the narrator, by this point clearly Mira, who "walks the beach every day, and drinks brandy every night, and wonders if she's going mad" (462).

Given its multileveled analeptic structure as well as its overt thematic concerns with memory and history, it is unsurprising that several recent studies of *The Women's Room* focus on its engagement with questions of time. Susanna Radstone, for instance, places the novel in the context of women's confessional narratives of the 1970s and 1980s, which trace the "development of a suffering and victimized central female protagonist" (62), the remembering, confessing narrator "for whom liberation marks one

boundary between her former and more recent selves” (104). In contrast, Jane Elliot in 2008’s *Popular Feminist Fiction as American Allegory: Representing National Time* proposes to read novels like *The Women’s Room* as allegorical negotiations of the broader disillusionment about the future plaguing United States culture in the post-1960s, postmodern era. Elliot too begins her analysis of the novel with Mira reading the graffiti in the toilet stall, reading the “SOME DEATHS TAKE FOREVER” moment as evidence of Mira confronting a sense of “temporal stasis,” “killing time” in a life that, for women, is “as changeless as death” (51–52). Elliot’s smart pun describing Mira’s position in this scene as “stalled” (52) helps her underscore her argument about a static sense of time, but it also reveals an equally fruitful avenue of feminist inquiry that analyzes the spatial “allegories” and implications of the novel rather than (or as a complement to) the temporal ones. This kind of analysis can of course begin with that physical space of the stall and of the women’s room itself, a potent location, as Carolyn Dever points out, for examining “gendered ideologies that follow from entrenched social conventions of sexual difference” (188).<sup>3</sup> But it is also important to investigate other sites and registers of “room” in the novel. Doing so reveals that concept as the fundamental trope by which French maps the parameters of freedom for women not only figuratively, but also onto actual physical bodies and locations as well as the contours of the novel’s form. French is thus able to call attention to the inseparability of social liberation and the freedom to move through and occupy spaces, and “of aesthetic practices and feminist social action” (Dever 187). At the same time, that that room often feels empty or interminably stretched out is central to the novel’s expression of uncertainty, even malaise, about the

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<sup>3</sup> Radstone also discusses the novel’s “concerns with women’s sexuality—metaphorized, even by the paperback cover’s design—as ‘women’s room’ matters” (105).



consequences of breaking out of gendered constraints. But perhaps most importantly, attending to French's engagement with the idea of women's room—both the problems of their not having enough as an oppressed class, and the problems that arise when they claim it for themselves—also reveals the processes of distancing, containment, and exclusion of other non-dominant groups upon which her project is built.

The narrator's turn from her opening descriptions of Mira at Harvard to the more distant past of the protagonist's childhood draws a direct line between Mira's confined position in the bathroom stall and the repressive constraints she has faced as a female since birth. A chapter ending with the question, "How did she manage to get herself, at the age of thirty-eight, to hide in that toilet?," is followed by a new one that begins, "Mira was an independent baby, fond of removing her clothes and taking a stroll of a summer's day to the local candy store" (9). After she is brought home by the police several times, Mira's mother begins to tie her up using "a long rope, so Mira could still move around," attaching it to the handle of their front door (9). Though Mira initially continues to take off her clothes, her mother eventually uses "stern reproach and withdrawal of affection" to cure her of her "disconcerting habit"—so much so that her daughter has "trouble removing all her clothes on her wedding night"—and eventually, Mira "learn[s] to operate within a small space, digging into things since she was not permitted to range outward" (9). By this point, her mother can stop tying her up, because Mira "show[s] herself to be a docile and even timid child" (9). This passage lays out a pattern that will be continually emphasized and expanded upon as the novel charts Mira coming of age, whereby her desire to express bodily and social autonomy, to have room to move freely and independently, bumps up against restrictive norms dictating appropriate behavior for

women that are literalized as states of physical immobility or imprisonment, even as actual closed doors.<sup>4</sup>

A pivotal experience in Mira's college years exemplifies this dynamic. Mira has been dating Lanny, a fellow student for whom she has intense sexual feelings, but is too worried about becoming pregnant to act upon them. Lanny seems to have all but lost interest when they go out one night to a bar near campus and meet some of his male friends, soon disappearing into the crowd, but Mira is relieved because he always makes her feel as if she "should be sitting in a chair against the dining room wall, faintly smiling," and she continues to drink with the men (30). Eventually, they all begin to dance, and as the only woman there, Mira takes turns with various partners, "loving" the experience of "moving and swinging" (30). "She was music and movement," the narrator describes; "[s]he was whirling in a great ballroom, she was sheer motion" (30). But Mira's fun is cut short when one of the men, Biff, urgently leads her upstairs to his and Lanny's apartment and guides her to the bedroom, where he closes the door and leaves and she falls asleep. Mira awakens to "noise, shouting, slamming, arguing"; she tries to exit the room, but finds that she is locked in until, after several more "door slams," Lanny opens the bedroom door only long enough to shout, "I hope you're satisfied, you slut!", and storms out of the apartment with "other slams" (31). Biff finally returns and reluctantly explains: he locked her in the room to protect her from the rest of the men, who, with the "dancing...and Lanny's leaving her alone," "got the wrong impression"

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<sup>4</sup> It is noteworthy here that Mira's mother, a woman, is the first figure that embodies and enforces these restrictive conditions. This is in keeping, however, with French's portrayal of women's constrained social roles as part of a long, learned history that is being radically *un*learned in the 1960s, and with her interest in how women themselves are implicated in upholding confining gendered norms.

(31). Feeling “appalled” as she grapples with what might have happened—“All of them?” she asks; “In turns?”—Mira goes home to sleep in her own bedroom and, the next day, doesn’t get up at all: the chapter concludes, “she just lay there” (31–32).

This event is presented as critical to Mira’s growing awareness of gendered inequity: the following chapter begins, “She was overwhelmed. This was what it was all about, all the strange things she had been taught. Everything fell into place, everything made sense” (32). From this experience, Mira comes to see that when women like her go out alone and in public, especially at night, they are not only profoundly vulnerable to men’s advances, but can actually be read as deserving of them. Even worse, she concludes that this “injustice” is unavoidable and unchangeable. “It would always be like this,” she thinks; “That was the way things were” and “that is the way things would stay” (33). The grim finality of this revelation, of course, has been conveyed all along in these scenes by the repeated closing and slamming of doors (five times in three paragraphs), by the juxtaposition of Mira’s exhilarating but short-lived “sheer motion” as she dances with her chapter-ending position “just laying there.” In these ways French frames women’s social freedoms as exercised through autonomous physical action and movement, and those freedoms’ inevitable curtailment as manifested in confined stasis. When women occupy new, independent “room”—the “great ballroom” of a dance floor, the bedrooms in boys’ apartments—they will, it seems, always be met with slamming doors. Faced with this disillusioning reality, Mira “retreat[s]” and is engaged to Norm by the end of the year and the next short chapter; “[h]er dream of choosing and living a life of her own had vanished,” with Mira having been effectively “taught her place” (33–34).

But what is exemplary about these passages is not just that Mira's revelations are figured through a spatial logic of making room and being closed in, of advancement and retreat. It is also that French has Mira situate these revelations in direct relation to various other marginalized peoples, to various distant places across the globe. When she recognizes that "[s]he was a woman and that alone was enough to deprive her of freedom," perhaps most startling to Mira about this realization is that it means her experiences are no different than those of any other subjugated female population: "no matter how much the history books pretended that women's suffrage had ended inequality, or that women's feet had been bound only in an ancient and outmoded and foreign place like China," women like Mira are still and always "constitutionally unfree" (32). And when she comes to see that "[a]ny life in which she was alone would contain the risk of encountering that pack of savages" in the bar, the biggest irony, she acknowledges "[b]itterly," is that "those usually called savages... would probably never behave that way: only civilized men behave that way" (34). Both of these moments seem meant to mark Mira developing a nuanced, even global sense of unequal social relations, as well as a more critical understanding of gender politics in the U.S. After all, she sees that value-laden dichotomies between seemingly enlightened, "civilized" nations like the U.S.A. and "outmoded" ones like China are actually false; that real, dangerous misogyny, and the real "savages" that perpetuate it, exist right here at home as much as they do anywhere else, or perhaps even more so. But these relativistic revelations can only signify through a comparative process that simultaneously glosses over and shores up uneven cultural differences. For by having Mira relate her experience of being "unfree" as a woman to the practice of footbinding, French elides some very significant

distinctions between the state of being temporarily closed into a room and what was, for many Chinese women between the twelfth and twentieth centuries, a lifelong process involving both intense pain and “assiduous maintenance and care”; she also ignores how that process varied widely across regions and time periods, and the fact that by the 1950s, while many Chinese women still had bound feet, the practice of footbinding was itself “outmoded” (Ko 1–2, 14).<sup>5</sup> At the same time, because the comparison’s horrifying impact ultimately comes from the implication that it’s not just those “foreign” locations where women are oppressed—it happens *here*, too, in the land of the free—Mira unquestioningly maintains a firm distance between the U.S. and “places like China,” a distance that measures social progress as much as geography.<sup>6</sup> Mira’s comment about “savages” contains similar implications. When she admits that “those usually called savages” maybe aren’t actually rapists like everyone thinks, that American men like those in the bar might really be the out-of-control predators, her statement achieves a pseudo-liberal condescension while also maintaining a firm binary measured by proximity: while those so-called savages “*probably*” are the “civilized” ones after all, she’s still never going to have to come anywhere near them to find out.

The novel follows this pattern of comparisons throughout its chronicling of Mira’s time with Norm, their move to the suburbs and raising of two children, and their

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<sup>5</sup> Ko argues that the 1880s to the 1930s were a “a transitional stage” for footbinding, when “[n]ew visions of female and social bodies had taken shape” that caused the practice to be “not so much outlawed as outmoded; footbinding came to a virtual death when its cultural prestige extinguished” (13–14). She cites the last reported case of footbinding in 1957 (4).

<sup>6</sup> Exactly these problems also characterize Mary Daly’s chapter-long analysis of Chinese footbinding in her 1978 treatise *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, which also references a similar treatment of footbinding in Andrea Dworkin’s 1974 *Woman Hating: A Radical Look at Sexuality*.

eventual divorce. French depicts Mira, along with the group of other suburban housewives she befriends, finding that the sexist conditions of marriage and motherhood leave women like them, as she puts it at one point, “never free to move” (90), and overly neat, culturally insensitive comparisons are deployed to emphasize how paralyzing this plight really is: “the children were much more effective as clogs than confinement on a prison farm would be” (90). After having two children, for instance, Mira notes that “lots of Chinese women, given in marriage to men they abhorred and lives they despised, killed themselves by throwing themselves down the family well,” but continues grimly, “there are so much easier ways to destroy a woman. You don’t have to rape or kill her; you don’t even have to beat her. You can just marry her” (41). It’s not just the Chinese that are held up as exemplary subjugators of women: “women in suburbs,” she contends in another reflective moment, are also “much like the women in ancient Greece...locked into the home, and see[ing] no one but children all day” (69). It is with these kinds of comparisons that the novel, as Carolyn Dever argues, “suggests a related universality of female oppression,” although Dever concedes that “the presence of option in this context, such as cleaning help, appliances, and even access to birth control, locates this form of protest firmly in the middle of the middle class” (198). But this is precisely the point. It is not so much that French’s “protest” is meaningful *and yet* limited by its narrow focus on middle-class women, as Dever seems to suggest. Rather, it is that these seemingly “universal” critiques of female oppression—a universality conveyed through shared conditions of physical confinement—can only function by centralizing the experiences of white suburban women, and thus by maintaining their race and class privileges.

Perhaps the most startling of these comparative moments comes when Mira is describing commiserating with the other neighborhood women about their husbands, “howl[ing] and cackl[ing] at them, at their incredible demands and impossible delusions”: “it was as if they were de black folk down to de shanty recounting the absurd pretensions of de white massas up to de big house” (71). Here, French does something slightly different than those other comparisons that connected Chinese, Greek, and American women through a common female condition of not having room—while at the same time upholding strict boundaries between the “here” of advanced civilization and the “there” of foreign backwardness. Instead, in this moment French deploys what Lisa Maria Hogeland has dubbed the “sex/race analogy,” “a founding rhetoric of second-wave feminism” that “permeated every kind of Movement writing and analysis, from outlines for consciousness raising, to theoretical works, to literary criticism, to poetry and fiction” (32). The sex/race analogy works here, obviously, through layering the image of Mira and the other white suburban housewives gossiping about their husbands onto a corresponding one of black slaves lamenting the absurdities of their masters in the pre-Emancipation United States. As Hogeland argues, these kinds of analogies are premised upon a “fantasy of coalition, whether joined by the structural similarity of the systems of domination or by the parallel strategies of resistance” (46). In this case, it’s both: what’s implied is that, like slaves poking fun at their white rulers, the women in Mira’s community stay sane by mocking their husbands, subtly transgressing the social order—patriarchal control, which is comparable to white supremacy—even though they are unable to permanently disrupt it. As Hogeland states in rather measured tones, such a comparison is “flawed as an analysis of sex, race, and the relations between them, not

least because of its erasure of women of color” (32); there is no allowance for what’s different between patriarchal culture and the chattel slavery system—which ultimately functions here only as a metaphor, diminishing its real, horrifying history—nor for the experiences of those who could possibly feel the effects of both.

A passage like this also shows how white feminists’ deployment of sex/race analogies can do more than ignore key distinctions between gendered and racial structures of inequity; it can actually serve to reinforce racial boundaries. For even as Mira’s comparison constructs a “fantasy of coalition,” it also executes an act of differentiation. The women’s “howling and cackling” at their husbands might make it seem “*as if* they were de black folk,” but French’s switch mid-sentence into an exaggerated parody of African-American vernacular speech marks out firm racial and socioeconomic distinctions on the space of the page. And French might be asking us to picture the suburban housewives as metaphorically relegated to “de shanty” as opposed to “de big house,” where their husbands “were experiencing life on a different level” (71). But it’s also clear by this point that in terms of racial barriers in housing, these women have much more in common with “de white massas”: they live in Meyersville, a New Jersey suburb where, like so many others built in the decades following World War II, “distinctions” could exist based on “religion, age, and education,” but, as Mira points out, “race was not even a question” (66). In Meyersville, she and her cohort sit in their kitchens or “in the grass or on homemade patios, sipping iced tea or coffee,” watching their children and living “a lazy life” (69). In the framework of the novel, this kind of life, “because it went nowhere,” is depicted as “oppressive” (69–70). But such depictions also partake of what Dianne Suzette Harris calls the “spatial rhetoric(s)” (10) by which



“postwar domestic environments became poignant ciphers for whiteness, affluence, belonging, and a sense of permanent stability” (1)—a set of meanings utterly incommensurate with black slaves’ living quarters on a plantation.

Given all this, it is strange and yet somehow perfectly fitting that as she tracks the events leading up to Mira’s departure from those “oppressive” suburbs, French uses as a touchstone the story of James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman, three Civil Rights workers abducted and murdered by a group of white men outside Meridian, Mississippi, during the Freedom Summer of 1964. (This event, of course, is also alluded to in Walker’s novel, and imbues its title with urgent political significance.) Nearly ten years after moving with Norm to the suburbs, Mira is listening one day to “a broadcast about the three young civil rights workers who had disappeared in Mississippi” when an old friend calls her, “screaming” about another friend of theirs, Samantha: “Mira did not understand but it sounded as if she were saying that Sam was going to be put into jail” (180). Finding Sam at her home with a repossession notice on the door, the result of her husband’s chronic unemployment, Mira listens as her friend laments her misfortunes and those of so many other women they know: “[e]verything seems to be falling apart. I don’t understand it. When I was a kid, things didn’t seem to be like this. It’s as though there’s more freedom, but all it means is more freedom for men” (184). That night, Norm refuses Mira’s request to give Sam money to help, leaving Mira to sit helplessly and listen to the news report on the likelihood that Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney are dead. Her mind a “numb jumble,” Mira “wonder[s] about them, those three young men who believed they could change things,” that “the cause was worth the risk” (186); the next morning, she brings Samantha a check for \$350, “the closest [she] ever came to a declaration of

independence” from Norm (196). For some time, their lives go on as usual—even as Mira hears one day on the radio that “the bodies of the young civil rights workers were found” (196)—but by the close of Part III a few pages later, Norm is telling Mira, “I want a divorce” (203), the catalyst for her enrollment at Harvard and immersion in radical feminist politics.

The Sam-money plotline, the concurrent deepening of Mira’s sense of gendered injustice, her departure from the traditional mores of suburbia to the revolutionary milieu of Cambridge—French punctuates these pivotal plot-points with the unfolding story of Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney, and her protagonist’s reactions to the events as they unfold. Doing so, she neatly extends upon the sex/race analogy: we are clearly meant to see, as Mira does, echoes between the Civil Rights’ workers protests for the “cause” of racial justice and women’s struggles against male control. Reading against the grain, we can also see how these moments speak to the significant yet often fraught links between Civil Rights and feminist politics. More precisely, they shed light on how what became known as the women’s liberation movement—which was often criticized for its inattention to or investment in racial, classed, and sexual inequalities<sup>7</sup>—itself emerged in significant part out of white U.S. women’s exposure to and involvement in antiracist activisms of the 1950s and 1960s,<sup>8</sup> a political genealogy that often went unacknowledged.

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<sup>7</sup> See my discussion in Chapter 1 on Didion’s novel and the exclusions of mainstream feminism.

<sup>8</sup> See Roth 73. Roth even points out that, tellingly, “[t]he phrase ‘women’s liberation’ was drawn directly from the struggle for racial equality—although used initially in an [*sic*] slightly ironic way to illustrate women’s situation in comparison to Black and Third World peoples” (52). As an illustrative example, we might also think about Mary King and Casey Hayden, two young white women working in the South for SNCC during the Freedom Summer who, apparently impelled in part by their animated discussions while reading *The Second Sex*, wrote a position paper detailing women’s subordinate role in the

The text gestures toward these connections when Mira reflects, as she sits there listening to the news of the men's likely deaths, that "[i]n her youth she had spouted integration lines"; though she "had long since given up even thinking about it. What was the use?," she now considers that "it must be nice to die for a cause. Since you had to die anyway. Better for a cause. Because otherwise" (186). That thought is left unfinished, but the implications French means to suggest are clear: Mira is beginning to see that the potential risks of fighting for the rights of the oppressed—whether blacks or women, whether through voter drives in Mississippi or defying your husband in Beau Reve—might not be as bad as the slow deaths of inaction and acquiescence, the kinds of deaths, going back to that bathroom stall, that "TAKE FOREVER." The problem, of course, is that in the text, as in the movement it purports to narrativize, such revelations construct a sense of oppression that is oversimplified and selective. Left unacknowledged is the ease with which Mira can give up "even thinking about" social inequalities that don't directly affect her, then revisit them only as a mirror for her own experience. Not reflected upon are the differences between being shot, killed, and left in a ditch, and the kind of "dying" that Mira faces as a disaffected white woman in the suburbs. And rendered impossible is any sense of injustice in which gender hierarchies might be qualified amidst other categories of privilege (against the backdrop of the murders in Mississippi, Sam's comment to Mira about there being "more freedom for men" is almost surreal).

Clearly, then, the novel's references to the Schwerner-Goodman-Chaney events work in concert with, in service of, its centralization of white, middle-class women's

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organization. (King has even claimed that Stokely Carmichael's now infamous quip that "[t]he only position for women in SNCC is prone" was spoken in jest as a response to the circulation of the women's paper [Rosen 108–109].)

subjectivities and experiences and corresponding marginalization of other groups'. And as I have been arguing, it is important to read this as a distinctly spatialized process, whereby the landscapes across which women like Mira struggle contain racial and classed boundaries that edge out non-dominant sociospatial positions, even when they seem to be acknowledged. For by the time Mira first hears of the missing men, she and Norm have moved from their starter home in Meyersville to a much larger residence in nearby Beau Reve, with “four bathrooms” and a “wide foyer” and an “impressive chandelier” and a “winding staircase”; Mira now has her own car and,

(after some wrestling with her conscience and some tense discussions with Norm, who did not want to say straight out that he did not want to pay for help in the house, so said instead that they could only get a colored woman and she would no doubt rob them blind—as if they had anything to steal) a washer-dryer, a dishwasher, a man to wax the kitchen floor every two weeks, and a laundry to do the sheets and Norm’s shirts. (139)

It is against this intricately detailed backdrop of classed privilege—and casual, parenthetically rendered racism—that Mira, while “working in her garden with a little transistor radio perched near her,” hears about Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney’s disappearance (180). It is in that well-equipped kitchen with the waxed floor that Mira is denied her request for money to help Sam; it is while sitting in the family room later that night that Mira sees the television reports about the men’s possible murders, and then “switch[e] off the set, and pour[s] a brandy” (186). And it is there “in Beau Reve, polishing furniture,” that Mira learns that their deaths have been confirmed and thinks “bitterly,” “So much for that”; the passage continues, “Her mouth, she noticed, was coming to have a thin and bitter aspect. She went on polishing furniture” (196–197). In these moments, Mira’s growing sense of injustice, her deepening sensation that she “could not move” (185), becomes firmly grounded in the domestic geographies of white,

Northern, upper-middle-class suburbia. Subsequently, even when that paralyzing sense of disempowerment is tracked alongside the events in Mississippi, it only serves to underscore Mira's—and too, because of her singular focalization, the readers'—distance from them. In other words, exactly when the text seems to draw parallels between the prejudice and even outright danger Mira faces as a woman and those the men face in the Civil Rights-era South (parallels that are themselves problematic), it also makes sure that the two sets of experiences never actually intersect, and that one of them is much nearer and more immediate than the other. Indeed, this is the way it *has* to be, because the analogies French constructs can only function when her characters' privileges as middle-class white women are invisible; those privileges would be starkly exposed and the analogies would crumble if women like Mira, and novels like French's, were unable to keep people of color and issues of racism at arm's length and instead had to fully, closely confront them.

**“Only the tide rolls in”:**

**Landscapes of Feminist Disillusionment and Racial Segregation**

As suggested even by the definitive break in text between the end of Part III and beginning of Part IV, French figures Mira's divorce and subsequent return to school as a radical opening up of space for her protagonist. At first, the transition is shocking—Mira feels like she's been “thrown out of the igloo in the middle of a snowstorm. There is lots of space to wander in, but it's all cold” (205)—but at the suggestion of her friend Martha, Mira eventually enrolls in graduate school at Harvard and moves from Beau Reve to Cambridge. There, following an initial week of loneliness and hiding in bathroom stalls,

she reaches a crucial turning point one night: after reflecting bitterly on Norm's unfair treatment of her, Mira realizes, "It was useless to demand justice. She sat down with a fresh brandy, her mind feeling as if a door had opened and fresh air was blowing through" (227–228). Recognizing that she needn't "have a life only through another person," Mira feels "more alive than she had been since the days long ago when she had taken off all her clothes and gone for a stroll in the candy store," and decides to never "again hide in a toilet" (228–229). Mira soon forges a tight-knit bond with a group of female graduate students based on shared intellectual curiosity, political consciousness, and dedication to gendered struggle. This plotline neatly follows the pattern of what Rita Felski calls the "feminist novel of self-discovery" (122), which she argues features a "new narrative structure for women, tracing a process of *separation* as the essential precondition for any path to self-knowledge" (124). Felski suggests that "the novel of self-discovery proceeds from the recognition of women's estrangement within a male-defined environment" (124), which "is expressed externally in the narrative through the act of leaving a husband or lover, the protagonist often choosing to live alone or with other women. Sometimes," Felski goes on, "the shift in physical space is as symbolically important as any changes in personal relationships" (131). In fact, in *The Women's Room* the "shift" Felski identifies is depicted not just as a physical transition from one space to another but also as a figurative transition from less to *more* space: Mira the New Jersey housewife, defined and confined by her marriage to Norm, having no "room" of her own, gives way to Mira the self-actualized feminist at Harvard, finally able to open the "doors" in her mind, to both find and provide for other women "a space to be" (282).

The problem with this reading, however, is that even as French sets up that liberatory trajectory of finding new space, from the very first pages of her novel she has also already undercut it. After all, in the opening scene of Mira in the toilet stall, the narrator goes quickly from criticizing Mira's buttoned-up, proper demeanor, "slamm[ing] genteel doors in her head," to admitting ruefully how similar they really are: "in a way, it doesn't matter whether you open doors or close them, you still end up in a box.... There's Mira with all her closed doors, and here's me with all my open ones, and we're both miserable" (4). Even if we don't know yet that this is Mira herself speaking, these opening comments from a purportedly wiser narrator, a narrator on the other side of 1968's revolutionary "open door," immediately raise questions about whether the new "room" opened up when women reject confining patriarchal norms—figured here in distinctly architectural terms—is actually so freeing after all. In fact, more than any straightforward path to feminist consciousness we might trace from Beau Reve to Cambridge (and on eventually to Maine), it is French's doubtful questioning of the value and meaning of new female space—whether or not finding more of it in their minds, on the ground, and through their stories actually gets women anywhere at all—that drives her engagement with feminism. Moreover, just as French's initial representations of women not having enough space involves both drawing facile comparisons to and flattening out the experiences of other marginalized populations, so too, unsurprisingly, does her questioning of what women eventually having more space really accomplishes. These moments continue to reveal French's refusal to attend to the historical specificities and contingencies of different formations of power, and her comfort in the fact that,

however unsatisfying, the women in her novel—and she herself, by writing them into being on the page—have access to spaces that others simply do not.

Perhaps the central image of *The Women's Room* is that of the narrator, later revealed to be Mira, “walking along the beach” in Maine, an image that first appears directly after her comment that she and Mira, doors opened or closed, are “both miserable” (4). In the novel’s opening chapters, the narrator is introduced walking aimlessly along the beach a few miles from the community college where she teaches, plagued by thoughts of her Cambridge friends and “dying” of “emptiness” (6), knowing that the summer, “two and a half whole months with nothing to do,” lies before her “like the Sahara Desert, stretching on and on under the crazy sun, and empty, empty” (7). This bleak expanse of idle time, the “vacant stretching summer,” is what inspires the narrator to “write it all down, go back as far as I have to, and try to make some sense out of it” (8); maybe, she thinks, letting out the “voices” in her head of the women she’s known will help her understand “how I ended up here feeling engulfed and isolated at the same time” (9). What lies ahead in *The Women's Room*, though, is in fact a lot more “emptiness,” a lot more “stretching.” For even when she’s not actually traversing the vast, lonely beach, the narrator continues to describe her life in similar terms. “My life,” she says at one point, “sprawls and sags, like an old pair of baggy slacks that still, somehow, fits you” (137); and later, “I look back on my own life and all I see is bombed-out terrain, full of craters and overturned rocks and mudholes. I feel like a survivor who has lost everything but her life, who wanders around inside a skinny shriveled body, collecting dandelion greens and muttering to herself” (195).



This sense of purposeless wandering and sprawling disorder pervades the narrator's reflections on her life, but also her commentary on the difficulties of assembling those experiences into a coherent narrative. Indeed, the narrator frequently reveals her awareness, even frustration, that her exhaustively detailed chronicle does not fit inside appropriate novelistic frameworks of form and pacing. In the middle of the lengthy portion of the novel centering on Mira's life in the suburbs, for example, she intrudes to comment, "One thing that makes art different from life is that in art things have a shape; they have beginnings, middles, and endings. Whereas in life, things just drift along" (131). And a bit later, shortly before she characterizes her life as "bombed-out terrain," the narrator admits after a brief digression, "I guess I should get back to the story, but I turn in that direction with such weariness" (193). With regard to recounting the struggles Mira and other suburban women endured, the narrator argues, "There's no point in telling, it is all just more of the same," then addressing the reader to ask, "Do you believe any of this? It is not the stuff of fiction. It has no shape, it hasn't the balances so important in art" (193–194).

Comments like these support Jane Elliot's discussions of the novel's "static time," or rather its depiction of time as passing with excruciatingly slowness and utter sameness, revealing no meaningful pattern, development, or change. This simultaneously stalled and stretched-out temporality underscores a "sense of inescapable repetition of women's oppression," which "in many ways forms the fundamental reading experience of the novel" (Elliot 62).<sup>9</sup> Moreover, alongside the novel's insistence on gendered injustices as

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<sup>9</sup> As Maria Lauret puts it, "*The Women's Room* is held together, relentlessly we might say, by a vision of unified male power instantiated over, and over, and over again in the collective personal histories of women's victimisation" (111).

ubiquitous and never-ending is its correspondingly “bleak picture” of feminism (Dever 200). Women like Mira are politically awakened to gendered oppression and begin to claim and exercise their freedoms, but then find themselves “alone, depressed, and in some ways, no better off” (Loudermilk 44)<sup>10</sup>—a pessimistically circular, non-progressive timeline French establishes with the narrator’s rueful reflections in the novel’s opening pages. It’s important to note, however, that this emptily repetitive temporal sense is also mapped out in *spaces* imagined in and created by the text. Mira’s summer with nothing to do is a desert stretched out before her; looking back on times past reveals a denuded terrain filled with holes; the entire narrative, in her estimation, becomes a landscape of drifting flatness. We as readers get a similar sensation. Our eyes move across the novel’s densely printed pages, covered in tiny words depicting not so much “a teleological sequence of events linked by some principle of causation” and leading to “some form of resolution or convergence”—in other words, a typical plot—but rather, an ongoing “repetition of events,” just different versions of the same story (Richardson 167, 174). That monotony is broken up only by chapter numbers that climb and climb over hundreds of pages but inevitably return back to “1” at the start of each of the novel’s five long parts.

By creating these spaces of empty flatness or redundancy, French enacts a version of what Rachel du Plessis calls “writing beyond the ending”: she transgresses narrative conventions—constructing a speaker who’s grim and reluctant about telling her story, impeding the purposeful (or numerical) progression of the plot—in order to “express critical dissent from dominant narrative[s]” that can uphold gender norms and institutions

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<sup>10</sup> See also Elliot 64 and Radstone 105.

(5). In this case, though, the “dominant narrative” French challenges is actually one of feminist progress, whereby women’s liberation is framed as an exciting, ongoing process of creating and accessing generative new spaces. After all, French’s novel was written in and about an era that saw women—and widely publicized them—taking over streets and occupying buildings for marches and strikes; relocating and traveling independently in growing numbers; establishing clinics, training centers, businesses, presses; authoring a new wave of political, legislative, and literary materials. Yet the enduring picture French constructs in *The Women’s Room* is instead of Mira, the feminist who finds her “space to be”—through moving to Cambridge for graduate school, through supporting herself as a professor, through writing down her story and those of so many others—but in the end sees only a lonely, stretching expanse. Moreover, French gives us a novel that, rather than reveling in its own capacity to make space on the page for women’s experiences previously unacknowledged, at once burdens the reader with its exhaustive, repetitive detail and excessive length and consistently features commentary about how unsatisfying it is to write it. In these ways, as Anna Wilson argues, while the text is invested in advocating for a certain (firmly white, middle-class) kind of feminist awakening and action—in “show[ing] women that they should wise up to exploitation, stop looking after everybody, and go to school”—it also “issues a warning”: “avoid the extra step out into the wilderness, because there is no ‘there’ out there” (66). That “out there” materializes in the novel as a recurring set of vacant, hole-filled geographies and flat textual expanses.

French’s deconstruction of sunnier narratives of feminist space-making is a potentially useful historical and political intervention. By representing the disappointing emptiness of feminist liberation—and of *stories* of feminist liberation—French’s novel

might, like Didion's *Play It As It Lays*, validate the experiences of women in this era beginning to confront the differences between idealistic notions of freedom and its lived reality. At the very least, like Walker's and Morrison's novels, albeit with quite different subjects and conditions, it shows that resisting social conventions and staking out alternative territories is often hard and lonely work. But as with French's representation of the problems of not enough room (and as with Didion's treatment of the problems of gendered progress), it's worth considering the kinds of privileges that prop up this disillusioned treatment of spatial liberation. As we've already seen, these privileges are perhaps most starkly displayed, paradoxically, in the novel's tendency to analogize what it means to have space across cultures and contexts. These analogies allow French's central characters, and prompt her readers, at once to disregard historical specificities and to leave intact the social and racial barriers they purport to challenge, reinforcing the centrality of white, middle-class women's experiences.

One example of this comparative dynamic can be found in a passage midway through the novel, when the narrator confesses to feeling "like an outlaw, a criminal"—"Maybe that's what the people perceive who look at me so strangely as I walk the beach"—because she thinks "that men are rotten and women are great" (193). Such feelings, she asserts, "are the result of my experience":

Like a Jew just released from Dachau, I watch the handsome young Nazi soldier fall writhing to the ground with a bullet in his stomach and I look briefly and walk on. I don't even need to shrug. I simply don't care. What he was, as a person, I mean, what his shames and yearnings were, simply don't matter. It is too late for me to care. Once upon a time I could have cared.

But fairyland is back beyond the door. (193)

Here, the narrator does more than compare men's unequal treatment of women in middle-class, white New England to Nazis' genocidal treatment of Jews in Europe during the

Holocaust. She actually inserts herself *into* that historical picture, one of most extreme scenarios of identity-based oppression and certainly the one that would carry the most dramatic weight in the decades following WWII. She does so, moreover, in order to suggest a common set of conditions in which being freed from confinement and having the room to “walk on” from those traumatic circumstances—whether they occurred in a concentration camp or a suburban marriage—generates a sense not of exhilarating liberation but numb, empty disconnection: Jewish ex-prisoners file, unmoved, past dying Nazis, and the narrator paces her beach in Maine, hating men. Part of what makes this passage significant, then, is the unapologetic neatness of the narrator’s comparison of herself to the “Jew,” which allows her to portray her own situation as possessing equal gravity and historical significance. At the same time, this kind of comparison subtly—and under the guise of a global historical awareness—distinguishes between women like the narrator and who, and where, they are not: she is “*like a Jew*,” but certainly not Jewish; she “walks on” from a past life in suburban New Jersey that she can position as analogous to Dachau but obviously, the reader already knows, is not at all the same (for one thing, she never encountered any Jews there). This is the key tension at the heart of French’s disillusioned representation of women finding space: she compares her characters’ experiences to various marginalized others’ only to justify her singular focus on gender politics and to remind readers that, in all ways but their femaleness, they are not “other” at all.

This pattern of distancing-by-comparison takes on new dimensions toward the end of the novel, first through the rape of Chris, the daughter of Mira’s best friend Val.

The narrator relates “the story of that time,” which she later hears from Val (407)<sup>11</sup>: Chris is walking to her apartment alone after a peace demonstration in Chicago, where she attends college, when she is attacked by a young man and raped repeatedly. Chris chooses to report what happens and is gruffly examined at the hospital, and when she elects to press charges and goes with Val a few days later to the police station, the women are left in a locker room alone for hours, visited periodically by attorneys who berate Chris with questions and imply that she might have been asking for it. Nevertheless, the police have Chris identify her attacker from a lineup, and he eventually pleads guilty in court. But both women are left feeling dissatisfied with the outcome—the defendant is leniently sentenced to six months for battery—and traumatized by the ordeal; once home, Chris is unable to be alone and must accompany her mother everywhere. In an attempt to protect her daughter, Val finally insists that Chris go to live on a communal farm in the Berkshires, a decision Chris interprets as a deep betrayal and which causes a permanent rift in their relationship.

This plotline articulates a cynical logic of “women’s room” somewhat different than that of Mira’s “beyond the door” beach walks. In this case, it’s not so much that claiming more space for themselves leaves women disillusioned and alone, rather than empowered. Instead, there is a sense here that when women exercise certain sociospatial freedoms, the very freedoms, in fact, being demanded with greater and greater force in

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<sup>11</sup> Immediately preceding the narrator’s recounting of the events is another Holocaust comparison: the narrator states that she is “struck” by how much Val’s eyes, in the aftermath of the rape, resemble those of “a Polish Jew who had spent her young adulthood in a concentration camp” (406–407). Pamela Barnett argues that this comparison allows French to position Chris’ rape as “part of a larger ‘gynocidal’ project” (114). It might, but the limits to that solely gender-based framework of historical violence are quite obvious, since men suffered in concentration camps, too.

this era—when they go off to college and attend rallies, when they move to a city and navigate its streets alone, when they visit hospitals and courthouses and insist upon the right to be medically treated for rape and see their attackers prosecuted—they are met with danger, humiliation, and, eventually, the punishment of being put back in their place. We can sense this punishment in Chris’ sense of reduced objectification at the hospital, feeling “demolished” as people “look at her body...all interested in the same place, that was all she was, vulva, vagina, cunt, cunt, cunt, that was all, there was nothing else, that’s all there was in the world, that’s all she had ever been in the world, cunt, cunt, cunt, that was all” (409). It is also on display in the scenes with the attorneys who “[attack] and [jab] and [try] to get [Chris] to retract her story,” leaving her “immobilized” (415); in their refusal of Val’s request for a protective screen for her daughter in the lineup room and their “barr[ing] the doorway” so that she can’t accompany Chris (417); in the descriptions of Val being led out of court “as if she were a cripple” and Chris getting home and “curl[ing] into a ball and [creeping] into the corner of the couch” (421). Here, French assembles a plotline in which patriarchal (and, inextricably, state) power consistently asserts repressive force against women daring to exercise the freedoms fought for under the banner of women’s liberation, daring to demand fair and respectful treatment in bodily interactions and under the law; it is a force that leaves both Chris and Val literally broken down, unable to move, or physically displaced. We might very well locate a powerful if quite sad message in all this, understanding in new ways how viscerally women can feel the backlash when they push against or transgress traditional gendered boundaries. But it is equally important to recognize that underpinning French’s communication of this message is a profoundly problematic treatment of race.

Midway through the narrator's chronicling of events, it is revealed that the young man who raped Val's daughter, Mick, is black. We learn this during a scene when Chris and Val are riding the bus to the courthouse, "pass[ing] through sections of Chicago Chris did not know" (414). Looking out, the women see "apartments built of yellow brick," each with "a concrete courtyard, and around that, a high cyclone fence"; the passage continues, "They must have been built for black people because inside the yards there were black people, tens and tens of them, just standing there looking out" (414). From the bus, Val comments "bitterly," "Daley knows how to keep the niggers down": "Build them a bunch of prisons and pretend they're free to leave them, and stick them all in there and give them welfare" (414). On its surface, Val's grim observation seems solely about state-sanctioned racial (and, inextricably, socioeconomic) separation and subjugation, specifically how housing redevelopment policies under Chicago Mayor Richard Daley served to deepen racial and classed stratifications in what was already, by the mid-twentieth century, one of the most notoriously segregated cities in the nation.<sup>12</sup> But readers have also been primed to situate such a view in relation to the gendered forms of "imprisonment" so insistently chronicled throughout the novel. The barricaded projects could be yet another version of suffocating suburbia, where women are "locked into the home" (69); or the mental hospital with a "chain-link fence that rose twelve feet high around it" where Mira's friend Lily ends up (as Lily tells Mira, "they put the blacks in jail and us in here" [219, 221]); or, for that matter, the Maine academic life of the

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<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Eric Avila and Mark H. Rose's "Race, Culture, Politics, and Urban Renewal: An Introduction." They show how in cities like Chicago, post-war urban renewal and suburbanization initiatives promoted a "cultural ideal of containment" that "emerged as the new paradigm of race and space, reflecting a new set of racial and economic disparities built into the very design of the new American city" (341).



narrator, who reflects after visiting Lily in the asylum, “she’s inside those gates, I’m inside these” (222). Val’s comments thus subtly invoke another iteration of the “sex/race analogy,” this version hinging on the purportedly shared plight of women and people of color who seem to be “free”—to walk the streets, to leave the projects—but actually remain under conditions of reactionary physical repression. As in its other versions, the analogy flattens out what is different between gendered and racial power dynamics, while simultaneously erasing women of color from the picture. We can find echoes of these elisions and erasures as the events surrounding Chris’ attack proceed; for instance, after realizing that the attorneys don’t really believe her daughter, that they think she must have secretly wanted to be raped, Val reflects that “[s]ubmission” is the only framework they seem to “get”: “Kings, emperors, slavemasters got it too. And wiliness. Isn’t that what women and slaves are known for?” (419).<sup>13</sup>

The irony here, of course, is that French’s own plotline is advancing an even more simplistic framework of power. For in her single-minded focus on the injustices women face in a patriarchal rape culture, she depicts a “preposterous” (Barnett 113) series of events from a racial standpoint: the court is unwilling to believe a white woman’s story of being raped by a black man, and eager to dismiss the case against him. Running parallel in these scenes to comparisons *between* misogyny and racism, then, is the prioritization of misogyny *over* racism—which constructs an either-or paradigm in which, as editors

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<sup>13</sup> There is also the moment when Val watches the police shout at the young men in the lineup, thinking she “would have rushed toward the cop and struck him if he had talked to her that way” yet also allowing, “But then she was privileged, white, and female. They would only have knocked her out, or pinned her arms and taken her to the insane asylum. They would have different methods for these boys” (417–418). In this instance, Val appears to recognize her racial and socioeconomic advantages and the material differences between blacks’ and whites’ experiences. But by analogizing those experiences, she avoids any meaningful analysis or self-reflection.

Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith would put it in 1982, *All the Women are White, All the Blacks Are Men*.<sup>14</sup> In this case, the pressing nature of (white) women's experiences of being marginalized takes precedent over the marginalization of (male) African Americans; more than that, it actually cements that marginalization, both literally and in the movements of the text itself. Going back to Val and Chris on the bus, for instance, even as the unnamed "tens and tens" outside the window get subtly and simplistically aligned with women, they are also being positioned as distinctly different, and dangerous. After her comments about Daley's prisons and welfare, Val continues, "Anyone who's ever read a fairy tale knows that when you have a dragon and you lock him in a dungeon, he gets out and ravishes the country. I guess Daley never read a fairy tale" (414). In response, Chris "shudder[s]" and asks, "Do you think they hate us, Mommy?"; after Val replies, "I can't imagine why not. I would if I were they. Wouldn't you?," her daughter reveals the race of her rapist (414). Val's gesture toward empathy is far outweighed here by the dialogue's oppositional "us-them" construction, as well as her equation of an oppressed black, implicitly male population with a dragon that will, in classic sexualized terminology, "ravish" when given the opportunity—just, it is then implied, as Mick did. This allows her to tacitly justify the need for that population's continued containment, even while recognizing, with charitable condescension and "fairy tale" reductionism, that it's containment that created the problem.

Mirroring the content of this conversation is what's occurring around it: Val and Chris on a moving bus, being transported, along with the storyline surrounding them, to the courthouse, the crowd behind the fence fading into the distance, just "standing there."

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<sup>14</sup> The full title of their edited collection is *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*.

The narrator will then share Val's growing outrage at the women's unfair treatment by the court officials and the injustice of the case's outcome, while Mick will speak a single-word plea, "Guilty," and disappear from the narrative to quite possibly, with "other charges pending against him...spend his life in jail" (420). That imprisonment is quite different and much more material than Chris' feeling "like a prisoner being delivered to jail" at the utopian commune in the Berkshires (423), no matter how much she doesn't want to be there and no matter how much the text, by focusing so much on Chris' emotional traumas and so little on Mick at all, wants to elicit our sympathies for her plight over his. Chris' rape plotline, then, might allow French to show the forms of patriarchal pushback women encounter when they assert their rights to free and equal space. But showing this also means reasserting the segregation and confinement of black men, whose experiences must be compartmentalized and rendered obsolete, whose movements—physical and political—stalled, in order to preserve "the novel's allegiance to a political analysis which subordinates all power relations within society to those of gender" (Lauret 111). As Val concludes after the court sentencing, "It didn't matter if they were black, or white, or yellow, or anything else for that matter. It was males against females, and the war was to the death" (421).

Val's articulation of this oppositional ideology foreshadows the violent events to come as *The Women's Room* nears its conclusion. After Chris' departure, Val becomes increasingly radicalized and joins a "militant feminist organization" (428), distancing herself from Mira and her Harvard cohort; a few months later the news comes that Val has been killed in a shootout with the FBI. Mira learns that Val's organization had been following the trial of Anita Morrow, a young black woman who was attacked by a man

attempting to rape her on her way to the subway. Anita stabs and kills him, but her act of self-defense is trumped by the man's position in "a respectable white family" with a wife and children; accused by the prosecutor of prostitution, she is charged with murder, found guilty, and sentenced to twenty years to life (455–456). Val and her comrades hatch a plan to rescue Anita, waiting with concealed handguns on the day of her transfer to state prison. But tipped off by an informant, the police are waiting, too, and they have machine guns: two pedestrians, one policeman, and all of the women in the group are killed, and two of the women's bodies, riddled with "so many bullets," explode (457). After Val's funeral, the remainder of *The Women's Room* moves quickly, with the rest of the Harvard group going their separate ways and Mira, after finishing her dissertation, ending up in Maine. Returning to the present there in the novel's last pages, she describes being plagued with "bad dreams": threatening men with "vacancy in their eyes" appear in her "empty, utterly empty" apartment, or she must choose between being "trapped" behind a closed door and leaving it open for future male intruders (464–465). The summer nearing its end, she continues to walk the beach which "grows emptier every day," under a "large and vacant and mindless" sky (464). "I have opened all the doors in my head," Mira states at the novel's close; "I have opened all the pores in my body. But only the tide rolls in" (465).

These final lines of the novel thus leave us with more of the same. Mira's conclusion to her narrative, which also traces a history of the women's liberation movement itself, conveys "a lack of any real sense of progress or promise" (Radstone 107) through the by-now familiar language of emptiness and vacancy, of doors that, closed or open, lead to equally bleak destinations. More importantly, while the

appearance of Anita Morrow could mark an encouraging if belated recognition of black women and their role in feminist work, her plotline reveals even more starkly the novel's tendency, or need, to at once analogize, generalize, and shunt aside the struggles of racial "others" in service of recentralizing those of white women. On one hand, Anita's story is clearly meant to echo and build upon Chris' and therefore become for the reader, just as for Val, just yet another outrageous example of a violently oppressive male order: like Chris, Anita is young, independent, and pursuing an education; like Chris, Anita's sexual assault causes men to accuse her of promiscuity; like Chris, she is left full of "bewilderment and terror" by her experience with a patriarchal legal system (456). On the other hand, the comparisons only go so far, for Anita and Chris' assaults, both in circumstance and outcome, are very different. Anita is attacked not on her way back from a peace demonstration, but on her way to night class: she is in school to become an English teacher while supporting herself "as a domestic during the day" (455). Anita's response to the assault is not to fearfully submit, as with Chris, but to use the knife she carries with her at all times, having "grown up on the streets" (455). Anita is accused not just of sexual promiscuity but of actual prostitution, and that's because the prosecution claims she could not be literate or "educable" enough to study English; she must have been attending school "simply to find more trade" (456). And her encounter with the law concludes with a departure not to a communal farmhouse but to prison, a fate settled when expert witnesses are brought in to judge Anita's "grammar, syntax, and spelling" and she is found "sadly wanting," making it impossible to believe her story (456). These plot differences seem meant to mark real racial and socioeconomic disparities, but they also reinforce corresponding stereotypes. Urban spaces continue to be coded as black,

poor, and dangerous; people of color stay uneducated, inarticulate prisoners; and, maybe most significantly, African American women remain the long-suffering symbols of strength and self-reliance that Walker was so concerned with deconstructing in *Meridian*.<sup>15</sup> In any case, it's not really about Anita at all; the woman who matters most in this story is Val, whose voice persistently "comes charging in" on Mira's narration throughout the novel (64), whose body takes up new space (and newly "empty," in terms of the sustainability, the livability, of feminist action) in all directions as it explodes. By that point, Anita is long gone, "thrust in the van" and taken away (457), never mentioned again. Quite disturbingly, it seems this is exactly what has to happen in order for the novel to continue to prioritize sexism over racism, and to treat white women's liberation as more immediate than and, in the end, necessarily separate *from* the work of Civil Rights. After all, it's when those political projects intersect that women like Val are killed.

So what, finally, are we to make of all this? To address that question and conclude the chapter, I want to turn briefly to Benita Roth's 2004 work *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave*, in which Roth attempts to contextualize the "gender universalist ideology" that many

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<sup>15</sup> Pamela Barnett analyzes this aspect of *The Women's Room* in detail. She argues that with Anita's story, "French suggests that poor black women, acculturated to oppression rather than to the privileges of white, middle-class... femininity, have different resources for resisting male domination" (103). "For French," Barnett asserts, "the black woman's strength, however arrived at, is exactly what must be reincorporated into white female subjectivity": "Anita, with all her self-respecting rage and willingness to fight for herself, is a model for an empowered, less vulnerable, female subject" (110–111). While Barnett is ostensibly merely observing and not actually supporting French's treatment of Anita, it's worth pointing out how offensive this treatment is; not only is French relying on and reinforcing stereotypes of black female strength, honed through being poor and oppressed, but she is also deploying those stereotypes only in order to advocate for the need for stronger, less passive *white* women.

white feminists had developed by the early 1970s (188). While noting that this ideology did indeed “[privilege] gender oppression above others” and “blur racial and ethnic difference among women,” Roth also suggests that these universalizing gendered frameworks were “not intentionally exclusionary,” but rather “arose as a response to New Left charges of feminism as being diversionary, bourgeois, and individualistic”: “To counter claims that feminist interests were somehow narrower than those of the working class (or of Third World peoples), white women’s liberationists claimed that gender oppression was as fundamental and widespread as racism and class domination” (188). In other words, Roth argues, white feminists’ universalizing rhetorics emerged as a defense against accusations that their political project was limited to the concerns of privileged female subjects in the United States. Furthermore, according to Roth, the tendency among white feminists to draw analogies between gendered and racial oppression actually indicated “just how seriously [they] took the struggle for racial justice” and how invested they were in being taken equally seriously (188–189). Roth takes pains not to apologize for this white feminist ideology and the rhetorics that served it, acknowledging that “unconsciousness as an explanation for universalism is problematic, as is arguing that white feminists could not have recognized their own neglect of other issues due to their relatively privileged social positions” (196). Nevertheless, she emphasizes the importance of understanding why these universalizing and comparative formulations of oppression developed in women’s liberation movement circles in the 1970s, suggesting that those formulations reveal “the exigencies of making a strategic argument about feminism’s importance” (196).

On one level, French's novel perfectly bears out Roth's arguments. With its insistent pattern of comparing sexism to, and privileging it over, other modes of racial and cultural marginalization, the text develops a singular argument about gendered oppression as a fundamental, widespread problem, an argument that seems suffused with an anticipatory defensiveness against those dismissive of feminism as politically limited or less urgent than other radical struggles. But attending as I do to the spatial inflections of *The Women's Room* also allows us to see the feminist ideologies Roth discusses from a different angle, and to come to different conclusions about them. For one thing, by looking at the ways in which French represents her characters' experiences of sociospatial confinement in relation to, for instance, those of African Americans, from shanty-bound slaves to slain Civil Rights workers to Chicagoans in the projects, I find ample evidence that French's comparative strategies actually are "intentionally exclusionary." In fact, I contend that the novel is deeply invested in maintaining a firm distance, both physically and socially, between the white, middle-class women it focuses on and the populations of color it periodically acknowledges. This distance, I argue, is crucial to French's universalizing treatment of gendered oppression, which would not hold up if she were to investigate sexism as part of an intersectional matrix of modes of marginalization in which racism, classism, and homophobia might play equally (or even more) meaningful roles. At the same time, it is exactly because of these deliberately maintained distances that the feminist vision advanced by *The Women's Room* ultimately feels so lacking—even, it seems, to the novel itself. For as much as it is concerned with revealing the stifling repressiveness of women's lives with not enough "room" under patriarchy, French's novel, as I've shown, also depicts the liberating achievement of



“women’s room” as an empty, flat landscape across which women like Mira might be free to pace endlessly, but will find no real fulfillment and make little progress. Such a desolate landscape of liberation, I think, is the inevitable destination of a purportedly all-encompassing politics of gender that in effect recentralizes the experiences of white, middle-class women. That landscape therefore reveals the inherent failures of the “strategic argument” deployed by 1970s white women’s liberationists, how such a formulation doesn’t, and indeed can’t, actually serve a productive movement politics. As I suggest in the Epilogue, as opposed to the bleak, purposeless expanses mapped out in French’s novel, reaching more active, generative feminist terrains means making room for women’s diverse, particularized, and multiple identities, and undertaking the hard, ongoing work of building coalitions that can bridge—without flattening—them.

## EPILOGUE

### MAKING A PLACE AND *THIS BRIDGE CALLED MY BACK*

Ruth Wilson Gilmore has argued, “A geographical imperative lies at the heart of every struggle for social justice. If justice is embodied, it is then therefore always spatial, which is to say, part of a process of making a place” (16). In *Demanding Spaces*, I have investigated four 1970s U.S. women’s novels with this argument in mind. I have suggested that these texts all undertake modes of social action by depicting characters’ embodied negotiations of historical and imagined geographies, and by layering those negotiations onto the structural “bodies” of the narratives. Using Gilmore’s assertions as a guide, I want to close this dissertation by asking, exactly what kind of social project does each novel’s “geographical imperative” seem to serve? What kinds of places have been made in and by each text, and how do those places function in support of its struggle for justice? Perhaps most importantly, which acts of making a place and demanding space, which formulations of justice, are most meaningful or useful? Which ones work, in the sense of both the narrative’s accomplishment of its evidenced imperatives and the larger question of political efficacy?

In my view, Joan Didion’s *Play It As It Lays*, unlike the other three novels, is not very concerned with advancing any social justice project at all. But the novel does appear invested, at least, in revealing what is *not* right or just about women’s experiences. In the text, this includes women like Maria’s daily confrontations with misogyny and gendered violence, but also their grappling with disjunctures between progressive ideologies of sexual liberation and more complex, ambivalent realities not captured by those sunnier

trajectories. The text also works to explore what can happen when women start to recognize these problems. It makes *places* for these recognitions to occur, from never-ending stretches of highway, hazy beaches, and vacant parking lots to blank expanses on the page. But ultimately, these places convey a stultifying sense of stasis and emptiness, and that's not just because the novel's "geographical imperative" actually functions through impeded movement, through stopping up coherent feminist narratives of gendered awakening or empowerment. It's also because those places Didion constructs are starkly disconnected from, indeed impenetrable to anything beyond the vision and narration of the novel's privileged white protagonist. That can only get readers so far—"I mean, it leads nowhere"—given that what Maria comes to see and tell us as a woman, about being a woman, is so clearly premised upon what she, and the novel, refuse to see and describe about a late-1960s Los Angeles violently segregated by race and class.

I see Marilyn French's *The Women's Room* as a kind of mirror image of *Play It As It Lays*. Unlike Didion's text, *The Women's Room* is overtly invested in the struggle for social justice as advanced by contemporary feminist movements, and it undertakes that struggle by enacting a process of making a place for U.S. women that is explicitly contextualized in relation to concurrent struggles against racism in the United States, as well as gendered inequities around the world. But though both the political affiliations and the processes of place-making we encounter in French's text are radically different from those in Didion's, *The Women's Room* finally constructs a similarly bleak landscape of women's liberation, precisely because it operates within a similarly limited framework of inequality. On the one hand, the text emphasizes the necessity of women's ongoing struggle for "room": to move their bodies, to intellectually explore, to voice their

experiences to one another and in the pages of literature, all in ways that have been historically denied. On the other, the terrains that get staked out by achieving that room—whether the physical spaces of New England beaches, the imaginative headspaces of the liberated narrator, or the textual expanses of French’s novel itself—are emphasized as flat, monotonous, even uninhabitable. As with my understanding of *Play It As It Lays*, I would argue that French’s version of making a place, her vision of “women’s room,” cannot be anything but empty and unsustainable if it is carried out by, in this case, treating “women” as a universalized category of identity connoting shared experiences of confinement and marginalization, experiences that are at once neatly comparable *to* and more important *than* oppressive structures of racism. French’s “geographical imperative,” which unlike Didion’s is purportedly aimed in a feminist direction, will nevertheless always be undermined by its own insufficient, narrow parameters.

Like *The Women’s Room*, Toni Morrison’s *Sula* is invested in revealing the sociospatial constraints that women encounter in their daily lives and in exploring what happens, both what’s liberating and what can be lost or sacrificed, when they push beyond those constraints and move in uncharted directions. But the struggle for social justice that *Sula* enacts is so much more expansive than that of French’s novel, because Morrison’s act of making a place is so much more nuanced. Instead of the trope of “women’s room,” which constructs a one-dimensional, universally applicable sense of uneven gendered space, Morrison gives us the Bottom. In the Bottom, the landscapes that people build and move across, and the ones they imagine, shape and are shaped by those people’s identities as gendered subjects, but never separately from their varying experiences of being African American in a racist society, and of possessing certain

socioeconomic and class statuses within a close-knit but stratified black community. In the Bottom, because of these intersecting forms of identity and modes of privilege, men *and* women negotiate geographies of exclusion and map out alternative terrains. And if women in the Bottom do confront particular conditions of constraint and marginalization, those conditions and women's reactions to them are not universal, as Morrison shows with Nel and Sula inhabiting their surroundings with variant gestures and purposes, moving in opposite directions, telling competing stories—and yet also sharing rooms, meeting in dreams, coming together in the narrative patterns of the text. With the Bottom, then, “in that place” and in the story of that place, Morrison constructs a landscape layered and malleable enough to explore the evolving grounds of solidarity among black women, as well as the shifting geographies of black community. That the Bottom has already “collapsed” by the novel's present is important, too. The present absence of the Bottom is what allows Morrison to comment on contemporary problems of white flight and the destruction of black spaces. But it's also what helps her maintain such an urgent “demand for space” or “geographical imperative” in her text. From Nel and Sula's ambivalently sensed “closed place in the water,” to the simultaneous triumph and tragedy of the tunnel's collapse, to that community of creative black women in Queens, some thriving and some dying—projects of place-making, Morrison insists, are hard, unevenly felt, sometimes sad work, but they are always ongoing. Neither French's nor Didion's seem to be.

Compared with the relationship between French's text and Morrison's, it's somewhat easier to draw lines of connection between *The Women's Room* and Alice Walker's *Meridian*. Both of the latter novels overtly trace histories of contemporary

political movements and, unlike the other two texts I consider, have even been brought together in literary criticism under the shared label of “feminist fiction.”<sup>1</sup> But despite these novels’ shared attention to women’s social roles and political activities in the 1960s and 1970s, I find Walker’s project in *Meridian* to be much more in line with Morrison’s in *Sula*.<sup>2</sup> For as opposed to French’s singular, bounded formulation of “women’s room,” *Meridian*, like *Sula*, establishes locations for enacting struggles for social justice that are multiply inflected and unresolved, indicating liberatory possibility but also a process of real, ongoing labor. In this case, though, these locations are corporeal: the physical body of her protagonist Meridian Hill—and the other bodies she interacts with and moves among—and the “body,” the narrative makeup, of Walker’s text. On one level, Walker’s act of place-making, her “geographical imperative,” involves emphasizing the body and story of Meridian as rich, complex sites of political action, in order to assert the centrality of African American women within Civil Rights histories and the significance of their positions (physical and ideological) in carrying out and mediating the work of social movements. On another level, however, in depicting the fragility and fragmentation of Meridian/*Meridian*’s body, Walker underscores the problem of the personal as political, the problem of making this individual body and this singular text into representative sites. This is a problem of social justice, too. Should one black woman’s body, already so historically overburdened, be *the* “place” of social struggle? Should the story of her

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Lauret looks at both novels in her 1994 study *Liberating Literature: Feminist Fiction in America*. More recently, Pamela Barnett also included analyses of these novels in her work *Dangerous Desire: Sexual Freedom and Sexual Violence Since the Sixties* (2004).

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Christian discusses *Sula* and *Meridian* as related examples in the evolution of African American women’s fiction in her landmark 1985 work *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*.

movements be the story of *the* movement? By having Meridian walk away at the end of the novel into a “quiet,” personal space outside the story, Walker might not fully answer these questions in the negative. But she does invite us to consider what it would mean to make a place—on the ground, in history, on the page—for women like Meridian without locking them into singularly representative roles.

Another “demanding space,” the edited collection *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, takes up this very task, and so I want to turn to that text as a way of concluding and thinking beyond my dissertation. “[C]onceived of in 1979” (Anzaldúa “Refugees” i) and originally published in 1981, *This Bridge Called My Back* is an assembly of essays, poems, interviews, and short creative pieces curated by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, who provide a Preface and Introduction as well as opening comments at the start of each section. Composed of writings by diverse, politically active women of color, the sections are organized thematically, ranging from formative childhood experiences (“Children Passing in the Streets: The Roots of Our Radicalism”) to cultural and ideological rifts among feminists (“And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures With You: Racism in the Women’s Movement”; “Between the Lines: On Culture, Class, and Homophobia”) to revolutionary manifestos (“El Mundo Zurdo: The Vision”). Taken together, these writings do not make up a novel, but they do construct a narrative: *This Bridge Called My Back* tells a multi-voiced, sometimes contentious story about the experiences of women of color, women interested in exploring the ways that they are tied to and separated from one another, who want to know if it’s possible to acknowledge their differences while also bridging them. Indeed, the spatial trope that runs throughout these writings is the image of the bridge, a complex

signifier carrying simultaneous associations of departure and arrival, division and connection, being walked over and being helped across.<sup>3</sup> As the collection's title suggests, Moraga, Anzaldúa, and the other writers are concerned with revealing how, as women of color, they are expected to make and themselves *be* "bridges" among differing categories of identity and vying political groups. But these writers also acknowledge that bridges contain liberatory potential, in the sense that they facilitate the journeys, meetings, and alliances that must be undertaken in order to forge a more capacious and effective feminist community. *This Bridge* thus constructs a site of feminist action that not only aptly calls up the multiple senses of space and movement that I have traced throughout this dissertation, but also provides a new textual mapping of the tensions and intersections characterizing women's political engagements that we've seen play out across the four novels I've considered.

Cherríe Moraga's Preface to the collection establishes the bridge as a site of bodily strain and political contention. She begins by describing the jarring experience of taking a bus from "the white suburbs of Watertown, Massachusetts" to Harvard Square and then "transfer[ring] and go[ing] underground" by train to arrive in "Black Roxbury," at the home of Barbara Smith; along the way, a white man "throws a Black kid up against the door, handcuffs him and carries him away. The train moves on" (xiii-xiv). While staying with Smith in Boston, Moraga narrates, she attends "[a]nother meeting. Again walking into a room filled with white women, a splattering of women of color. The issue on the table, Racism" (xv). Asking, "*How can we—this time—not use our bodies to be thrown over a river of tormented history to bridge the gap?*," Moraga quotes Smith, who

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<sup>3</sup> As Susan Stanford Friedman writes, "Bridges signify the possibility of passing over. They also mark the fact of separation and the distance that has to be crossed" (3).



told her, “A bridge gets walked over,” and then asserts, “I cannot continue to use my body to be walked over to make a connection” (xv). Allowing the starkly racialized journey from Watertown to Roxbury to inflect her descriptions of the meeting, Moraga reveals the stresses, the feelings of being “used up,” that come from having to assume a mediatory position in order to “connect” with white feminists and facilitate their “awkward” discussions of race (xv). (“We have had it,” Moraga writes later in the collection, “with the word ‘*outreach*’ referring to our joining racist white women’s organizations. The question keeps coming up—where exactly then, is *in*? It smells white to us. We have had it” [“Introduction” 61]). In “The Bridge Poem” that follows Moraga’s Preface, Donna Kate Rushin takes these critiques further. The poem’s speaker laments expectations placed upon her to be a “bridge” that come from multiple directions, as various people and groups require her to explicate and make connections across difference. The poem begins with, “I’ve had enough / I’m sick of seeing and touching / Both sides of things / Sick of being the damn bridge for everybody / Nobody / Can talk to anybody / Without me / Right?” (xxi). The speaker goes on to recount the “explain[ing]” she has to do for her mother, father, sister; the list goes on: “My little sister to my brother my brother to the white feminists / The white feminists to the Black church folks the Black church folks / To the ex-hippies the ex-hippies to the Black separatists the / Black separatists to the artists the artists to my friends’ parents...” (xxi). A later essay from Anzaldúa, “La Prieta,” echoes this sense of being stretched among different groups of people with competing political priorities. “I am a wind-swayed bridge,” she writes, “a crossroads inhabited by whirlwinds. Gloria, the facilitator, Gloria the mediator, straddling the walls between abysses”:

‘Your allegiance is to La Raza, the Chicano movement,’ say the members of my race. ‘Your allegiance is to the Third World,’ say my Black and Asian friends. ‘Your allegiance is to your gender, to women,’ say the feminists. Then there’s my allegiance to the Gay movement, to the socialist revolution, to the New Age, to magic and the occult. And there’s my affinity to literature, to the world of the artist. What am I? *A third world lesbian feminist with Marxist and mystic leanings*. They would chop me up into little fragments and tag each piece with a label. (205)

And yet, as Anzaldúa states further on in that essay, “There is enormous contradiction in being a bridge” (206). For even as she, Moraga, and other writers in the collection reveal how politically problematic and physically harmful it can be to assume the task of “bridging,” they also claim the bridge as an inhabited space of both personal empowerment and coalitions among women. In “La Prieta,” for instance, Anzaldúa eventually returns to her liminal, intersectional position and begins to celebrate it: “The mixture of bloods and affinities, rather than confusing or unbalancing me, has forced me to achieve a kind of equilibrium. Both cultures deny me a place in *their* universe. Between them and among others, I build my own universe, *El Mundo Zurdo*” (209). Revisiting the language of the “wind-swayed bridge” passage, Anzaldúa now claims, “I span abysses,” and “I walk the tightrope with ease and grace.... I walk the rope—an acrobat in equipoise, expert at the Balancing Act” (209). Moraga’s Preface, too, comes back to the bridge, ultimately establishing it as a place where women can share and “contradict each other,” acknowledging differing material realities while together finding the power to “change our lives, save our lives” (xviii–xix). In a final section of the Preface titled, “I Have Dreamed of a Bridge,” Moraga asserts, “This book is written for all the women in it and all whose lives our lives will touch,” a “family” who (like Nel and Sula) “first only knew each other in our dreams, who have come together on these pages to make faith a reality and to bring all of our selves to bear down hard on that reality”

(xix). She goes on, “It is about physical and psychic struggle. It is about intimacy, a desire for life between all of us, not settling for less than freedom even in the most private aspects of our lives. A total vision. For the women in this book, I will lay my body down for that vision. *This Bridge Called My Back*” (xix).

It is fitting that Moraga’s Preface should conclude with an image echoing ones that appear at the endings of *Sula* and *Meridian*; when she writes, “In the dream, I am always met at the river” (xix), Moraga, like Morrison and Walker, refers to an imaginary site where the possibility of meeting or “gathering” together in identity-based coalition is a perpetual possibility but not assumed as inevitable or easy. But looking at these final lines, it’s also important to note that just as much as the bridge works as an embodied metaphor within the writings of Moraga, Anzaldúa, and others in their collection, the meanings of the bridge as a point of meeting and crossing also encompass the space of the book itself, *This Bridge Called My Back*. As Moraga acknowledges, it is “on these pages” of her collection that women “have come together”; it is “through the making of this book,” she and Anzaldúa write in their Introduction, that they have come to feel “greater solidarity with other feminists of color across the country” (xxiii). The work of bridging that *This Bridge* accomplishes is a central topic in Toni Cade Bambara’s Foreword to the collection, too. She begins, “How I cherish this collection of cables, esoeses, conjurations and fusile missiles. Its motive force. Its gathering-us-in-ness. Its midwifery of mutually wise understandings” (vi). These lyrical lines point up how each individual piece in *This Bridge* itself spans distances, but also how those pieces form a collection with a singular, magnetic power, a capacity for “gathering” its writers and readers and facilitating acts of recognition and reciprocity. Bambara celebrates the

“awesome, mighty, glorious” possibilities opened up by the collection for “the fashioning of potent networks” of resistant, empowered women of color, writing, “This Bridge lays down the planks to cross over on to a new place where stooped labor cramped quartered down pressed and caged up combatants can straighten the spine and expand the lungs and make the vision manifest” (vi–vii). If we, with Bambara, recognize *This Bridge* as itself a bridge—with each essay, interview, and poem the differently voiced and shaped “planks” that get fitted together into a tension-based but load-bearing structure—then the work I’ve begun in this dissertation is only the beginning. The “demanding spaces” I’ve explored in 1970s novels are particularly inflected by the geographical upheavals of and leading up to that decade and specifically constructed in the forms of fictional narrative. But reading Moraga and Anzaldúa’s collection, it becomes evident that those spaces exist as part of a larger, ongoing political process of women “making places” and enacting movements through writing. This is a process that, *This Bridge* makes clear, need not be limited to a single genre and can be undertaken collectively as well as individually. Moreover, by encountering women’s writings this way, as terrains of political action crisscrossed with departures, connections, and collisions—in Bambara’s words, as “cables, esoesses, conjurations and fusile missiles”—we as readers are drawn into this process, as well. Physically turning the pages and imaginatively immersing ourselves in the texts, we too test the parameters of liberation or render populations to the margins; we too propel or divert the trajectories of social movements; we too reinforce boundaries and bridge divides; we too execute acts of making a place. And it’s possible that those acts in reading, too, can aid in the struggle for social justice.

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