MIGRANT MODALITIES: RADICAL DEMOCRACY AND INTERSECTIONAL PRAXIS IN AMERICAN LITERATURES, 1923-1976

Francisco Eduardo Robles

A DISSERTATION
PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY
OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE
OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

RECOMMENDED FOR ACCEPTANCE
BY THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Advisers:
Dr. Daphne A. Brooks
Dr. Valerie Smith
Dr. Alexandra Vazquez

May 2016
Migrant Modalities: Radical Democracy and Intersectional Praxis in American Literatures, 1923-1976
by Francisco E. Robles
is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ........................................ III

Acknowledgments ................................ IV

Previously Appearing Work ................. XIV

Introduction ...................................... 1

**Chapter 1**
Flow, Memory, Dusk: Jean Toomer’s *Cane*,
Borderlands of Encounter, and the Crucible of Contradiction in the Creation of Migrant Literary Subjectivity

**Chapter 2**
“Many lives, many poems, many acts of love”: Muriel Rukeyser, Zora Neale Hurston, and the Radical Praxis of Their Democratic Poetics

**Chapter 3**
“Pastures of Plenty”: Movement Politics and the Politics of Movement in Woody Guthrie and Sanora Babb

**Chapter 4**
Traveling Borderlands and Communities of Difference in Tomás Rivera and Lydia Mendoza

**Conclusion**
Odetta, Alice Walker, and Acts of Radical Presence

**Bibliography** ................................. 290
ABSTRACT

Beginning with Jean Toomer's *Cane*, my dissertation tracks the representation of migrants by exploring specific and often subtle methods of experimentation that revise the conditions of dialogue between author, subject, and reader. Placing it in conversation with Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*, I seek to establish *Cane* as a border text to construct a theoretical framework for my dissertation, as well as thinking through a literary history of American internal migration in the 20th Century. The dissertation then discusses Muriel Rukeyser and Zora Neale Hurston, creating a dialogue that reassesses their writing as concrete and specific rather than populist or folksy. In this chapter, I specifically attend to black migrant workers in the 1930s and the means through which both Hurston and Rukeyser sought dignity and justice for the men and women they (re)presented on the page. The third chapter discusses Sanora Babb together with Woody Guthrie, setting the stage for my engagement with music. Considering the plight of the Okies in a dissertation largely devoted to African American literature allows me to explore more fully the era of revolutionary possibility envisaged by the Popular Front politics of the 1930s and ’40s. Including Babb in this conversation diversifies the conversation by adding a strong voice—to long relegated to footnotes—dedicated to exploring gender politics. I then consider Tomás Rivera together with Lydia Mendoza. Tracing the movement of migrants from Texas and Mexico to the Midwest and beyond, I map out a geographical and literary path of major importance to the Mexican American community, in particular envisioning new models of collective representation and politics. I conclude by discussing Odetta and Alice Walker, exploring their rigorous revisions of aesthetics and history as revolutionary critiques of the past and present, particularly by examining how each artist crafts textual space.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to work slowly through the people whose presence in my life has impacted me and my research, whether subtly or profoundly.¹ First off, I would like to thank the many colloquia I have been a part of at Princeton University, namely the Postcolonial Colloquium (thank you to Sonya Posmentier, Grant Wythoff, and Emily Hyde for getting me involved in the first place, and to Anjuli Gunaratne and Caitlin Charos for being my co-conveners), and the much beloved Genres Colloquium, which in its short existence brought me (and many others, I hope) much joy—thank you, Colin Azariah-Kribbs, for that wonderful experience! Thank you to the “Graduate Football Club,” with whom I played soccer on so many Thursdays and Sundays when I lived in Princeton. Victor Oyeyemi, Gonzalo, “Solo Zurdo” (whose name I cannot recall), Soccer Tom (who is also the energetic presence behind the best cheese club at the best bar—the Ivy Inn), John, Moldovan Mikhail (and his enormous dog) and everyone else, thank you for all that exercise and for all the fun. Thank you to my dear friends Nadia Abouzaid, Jacob Adams, Sally Bergmann, Eric Brei, Ryan Brei, Becca Brunner, Victoria Crago, Jamar Jackson, Danny Luce, Aubrey Edwards, Stephanie Ghoston, Joey Hutchings, Elizabeth Larkin, Asona Lui, Ray Mailhot, Ana Maria Martinez, Victoria Rodriguez, Jon Simmons, Gabriela Sotomayor, Jin Tran, Marley Williams, and Arthur Yeh.

Thank you to the many graduate students with whom I shared conversations in classrooms, in apartments, in hallways, in McCosh or East Pyne, over meals, on trains, in cars, and of course in Firestone. Thank you to Carl Adair, Carolina Alvarado, Gavin Arnall, Sand Avidar-Walzer, Kim Bain, Joshua Bennett, Rachel Bergmann, Keisha Blain, Edna Bonhomme, 

¹ I was listening to ABBA’s “Thank You For the Music” while writing this. If you’re accessing this digitally, you can follow this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0dcbw4IEY5w>.
Vaughn Booker, Danny Braun, Harriet Calver, Sarah Case, Caitlin Charos, Alexandra Chreiteh, Emily Dalton, Jason Dickson, Taylor Eggan, Will Evans, Rene Flores, Zoe Gibbons, Tikia Hamilton, Daniel Hazard, Eugene Hillsman, Julia Hori, Jennifer Huang, Dan Johnson, Jennifer Jones, Matt Krumholtz, David Lennington, Sara Marcus, Kijan Maxam, Jesse McCarthy, Jen Minnen, Melanie Mohn (hello with a finger wave), Andrea Oñate, Jessie O’Rourke-Suchoff, Ivan Ortiz, Javier Padilla, Xavier Pickett, Megan Quinn, Orlando Reade, Cate Reilly, Matthew Rickard, Rodolfo Ríos-Zertuche, Hope Rogers, Rebecca Rosen, James Rumsey-Merlan, Roy Scranton, Matt Steding, Jill Stockwell, Kate Thorpe, Sharon Traiberman, Elise Wang, Meagan Wilson, Ron Wilson, and Mimi Winick.

Thank you to Dean Karen Jackson Weaver, whose mentorship and support while you were at Princeton meant so much to me. Thank you to Julia Macias, my academic and scholarship advisor at Washington University, whose presence in my life has been so meaningful and impactful. You saw me grow from an entirely irresponsible young person to a somewhat responsible adult and academic. Thanks to the Annika Rodriguez Scholarship and you, my scholarship and my teaching are what they are. Thank you to the Graduate Students of Color Dissertation Writing group, and the organizers, especially: Linsey Edwards and Eric Miles Glover, and also to Dana Hughes-Moorhead and Diana Hill Mitchell. Thank you to everyone who works at the Department for African American Studies: April Peters, Dionne Worthy, and Allison Bland. Thank you to Judith Ferszt and Candice Kessel in American Studies.

Thank you to everyone who works at the English Department. Thank you to Karen Mink, Tara Broderick, Marcia Ross, and Nancy Shillingford. Thank you, Kevin Mensch, for your good morning salutations (and for always having a charger or a dongle), and for your beautiful music. Thank you John Orluk Lacombe, for welcoming me into your home, for feeding me and for
giving me my first ever taste of the delicious Heady Topper. Thank you, especially, to Pat Guglielmi, who has always been kind, who has always had an answer (even if it had to be copied and pasted out of the handbook—how did I never look there first?), who always expected me to be responsible and to extend the kindness of timeliness to others—your standards and your caring have helped me successfully navigate the thickets of graduate school, from conferences to deadlines and more. Thank you.

Thank you to the undergraduates at Princeton, especially those I have had the pleasure of teaching. To everyone in my many precepts—from Modern Evil to American Literature to American Popular Cinema to Growing Up Global to Graphic Novels and Comics—thank you for the conversation, thank you for your brilliance. Thank you to the students in the Graduate Pedagogy Seminar in the spring of 2016. Thank you, especially, to the incredible students in Esther Schor’s American Jewish Writers seminar. Being the Assistant Instructor in that course was the perfect conclusion to my time here at Princeton, and I thank you for reading so carefully and brilliantly every single week.

Thank you to everyone (that I can remember) I have taught with at PTI: Ross Lerner, Andrew Nurkin, Ben McCary, Beth Stroud, Elise Wang, Kelly Swartz, Frances Jacobus Parker, Matt Spellberg, Qinyuan Lei, Raphael Krut-Landau, Sean Toland, Yang-Yang Zhou, and Marcus Johnson. Dan Wodack, Sukaina Hirji, and Ella Haselswerdt, it was a great pleasure getting to know you (and to listen to ABBA every so often). Thank you to Sandy Sussman for all the work you did in sustaining PTI. Thank you to Jill Knapp for being the fiercest, stubbornest, most tireless, most inspiring advocate for every single incarcerated man and woman and child in the state of New Jersey, for feeling so deeply for others and being so committed to prison reform and prison education. Thank you to everyone at the Wesleyan Center for Prison Education: to all the
undergraduates who woke up early to help students with their essays and problem sets, to Zach Fischman and Shannon Nelson, especially, for working incredibly hard to make things run smoothly on the inside and the outside. Thank you to Dara Young, for always demanding the best of everyone. Thank you to Sean McCann and to Kristin Inglis.

Thank you to every single student whose minds are the freest imaginable, yet whose bodies remain shackled by the cruelest system in America. I can’t forget you, and I won’t stop teaching until everyone is free. To the men in Garden State, Albert C. Wagner, and Cheshire, and to the women in York, thank you for sharing your classrooms with me. Rest in peace Khalil Lockett, whose stunning brilliance and fearless soul are no longer with us.

Thank you to Thadious Davis, Joe Jeon, Kyla Wazana Tomkins, Nicole Fleetwood, Caleb Smith, Langdon Hammer, Julius Fleming, Jarvis McInnis, Tao Leigh Goffe, Edgar Garcia, Douglas Jones, Silvio Torres-Saillant, Susan Edmunds, and Harvey Teres. Thank you to Sonya Posmentier and Adrienne Brown, not only for your friendship and your kindness, but for inviting me to participate in my first ever conference—it was an honor to be able to share the stage with you all, to learn from you, and to have such motivating role models as a young graduate student. Thank you to Greg Londe, Alejandra Josiowicz, and Ivan Ortiz. Thank you, Briallen Hopper, for opening up your house and your life, for being a sweet and caring friend, a brilliant preacher and a gripping, heady writer. Finally, thank you to Farah Jasmine Griffin, whose advice and encouragement literally gave my dissertation its shape.

I want to give a special thank you to the following colleagues and friends. I wish there was a way, somehow, to fit everything that I treasure about you on these pages. To Anjuli Gunaratne, without whose friendship I would be completely lost. The warmth of your soul and the sharpness of your intellect have shaped me in so many ways, and I don’t know what I would
ever have done without our meandering, wonderful conversations. To Ross Lerner, for being the sweetest person, thank you. You’re always picking up the phone or answering an email whenever I’m at my lowest or at my happiest. To Mollie Eisenberg, for being so brilliant and so honest, for the wonderful Seders and wonderful dinners and wonderful conversations. To Kelly Swartz, for the dreams, for the questions, for talking about whatever comes up when we’re together. To Matt Spellberg—my darling, your friendship has meant more than you can imagine. The hours we’ve spent dancing and drinking and dishing and dialoguing, and always in the best company I could ever want. To Jill Jarvis, for being a friend since that Queer Graduate Caucus meet and greet, and for the many conversations and nights spent talking about life and love and our ideas. To Briallen Hopper, whom I’ve already thanked but can never thank enough, for making New Haven a place I love, for the food, for the invitations to parties, for listening and for teaching, for giving me opportunities to learn more from you. To Kyessa Moore, for being so committed to building a community at Princeton, and for insisting on solidarity. To Chelsea Adewunmi, with whom I can laugh, cry, communicate, and listen to, enraptured, whether hearing you weave a web of scholarly brilliance or belting it out on YouTube when I need to hear songs I love. To Yanie Fecu and our Papa Eleggua connection, and for your charm and your brilliance. To Ella Brians, who never fears to speak the truth, whose fierceness of intellect has opened up new ways of thinking. To Emily Vasiliauskas, for showing the way with your work and for being a constant friend and a generous soul. To Priyanka Jacob, who taught me, for the first time, to think about the need to acknowledge the limits of the empathetic mind, thus creating greater and more generous modes of empathy. I’ll never forget two things: the time you taught me that I can’t always inhabit or understand every experience—and that it’s okay; and the brief, unforgettable, forever influential snippet of Housekeeping you brought to class one day. Brittney
Edmonds, for being such a moving interlocutor, for pushing me, for pulling me, for helping me think before and after and while I speak, for some of the most hard-charging and invigorating conversations and debates I’ve had! And who can forget our trip to MELUS? Eric Miles Glover, for being a constant friend and for being my companion and compatriot in navigating the academic world, I thank you. We’ve been there for each other in some really trying times, and we made it through, together. To Kameron Austin Collins, for being so kind and funny and understanding, always—for the trip we took together to Arizona, for being the sharpest person I know, for writing things I can never stop reading and referencing (and for being a fellow charter member of G.A.G.A. for Chick-fil-A). To Rae Gaubinger, who has stood me in good stead through thick and thin, through drunk and skunk, from Princeton to Philadelphia. From researching tattoos in George Eliot’s notebooks at the Beinecke to talking about anything that ever came up (no matter how ridiculous or difficult) to introducing me to darling Pearl, you’ve been a dear friend.

Thank you to the faculty members in English, whose classes I have taken and whose company I have enjoyed. Thank you to: Bill Gleason, who has been an ally in every way; Nigel Smith, who let me write on whatever I wanted; Deborah Nord, who let Eric and I bring readings that were important to us to class; Sarah Rivett, who has been an intellectual and organizational inspiration; Simon Gikandi, for being honest with me, for expecting me to think harder; Christopher Brown; Eduardo Cadava; Zahid Chaudhary; Anne Cheng; Sarah Chihaya; Andrew Cole; Joshua Kotin; Russ Leo; Lee Mitchell; Britt Rusert; and Gayle Salomon. Although not in the English Department, thank you to Imani Perry, Nick Nesbitt, Rosina Lozano, Joshua Guild, and Tera Hunter. Thank you, Eddie Glaude, for being so welcoming, for hearing me out, for advocating fiercely for the students at Princeton, and for demanding intellectual and moral
honesty. Thank you to Wendy Belcher for being a good friend, a great teacher, and for devotedly and responsibly urging us all to consider the stakes of our scholarship.

I want to especially thank Diana Fuss for encouraging me so much in my teaching, for the Cotsen Junior Fellowship, for the Love seminar that was so profoundly influential on my research and my teaching. Thank you, also, for teaching me that transparency and vulnerability are essential attributes of confidence, especially when maintaining an attitude of learning. Thank you to Esther Schor, whose invitation to be the preceptor for American Jewish Writers was an enormous boon, in every single way, in my final semester at Princeton. Thank you to Kinohi Nishikawa. Since you’ve been at Princeton, you’ve sustained and further built up a community that has always been sorely needed. Your openness and your honesty have made being your colleague a rich pleasure. And thank you for agreeing to be my departmental reader.

Thank you to my advisors. Valerie Smith, thank you for generously agreeing to be a part of my committee, for being an exemplary leader in so many fields, for supporting PTI, for becoming President Val. Getting to take class with you, and hearing your comments on my writing have been gifts that I will always be thankful for. Thank you Alexandra Vazquez, for shaping every scholarly field you’re a part of, for writing the most courageous scholarly book I’ve ever read, and for insisting on being an ethical scholar in new and brave ways. Thank you for insisting that I stop being my worst enemy, and for your honesty and your rigor in everything.

I would like to dedicate an entire paragraph to Daphne Brooks, whose scholarship, teaching, and mentorship have shaped me so profoundly that I could never adequately thank you. From convincing me to come to Princeton to one of the best seminars I ever had the pleasure of taking at Princeton; from reassuring me before my Generals to trusting me as a research
assistant; from letting me vent about graduate school frustrations to fielding and responding with incredible empathy to weepy emails about loved ones who’ve passed away; in so many ways, you are someone after whom I’ve modelled myself as a scholar. Thank you for looking out for me. Thank you for challenging me. Thank you for always pushing me to deepen and broaden my claims. And thank you, forever, for always reminding me that the personal is an essential component of the scholarly, for kindling within me the fire to tell the stories and make the arguments that matter.

Thank you to my family. Gracias a mis tías y tíos, a mis primos; gracias a mis sobrinos y sobrinas, Ysaballa, Brussito, Bryan, and Angelica. Thank you to my mom’s six sisters and one brother, as well as their loved ones, their children, their children’s children. Thank you to my Gomez and Gonzalez families from Monterrey to Brooklyn. Thank you to my dad’s family, both in California and Puerto Rico. Thank you to Maria Luisa Gomez, my beloved grandmother, my mother’s mother, whose stories have found their way into my dissertation, and whose stories I hope to keep hearing. Thank you to Virginia Robles, my dad’s mother, for being so strong that we’re all in awe.

Thank you to my grandparents who have passed away. Thank you to Ignacio “Nacho” Gomez, my grandfather whose stories I wrote down and recorded, whose stories I will never forget. I always listened, and if we meet again, I hope I get to sit down next to you and hear you tell me about ghosts in fields, about your brothers and sisters, about everywhere you’ve lived, about everywhere you’ve been and the people you’ve known. Thank you to Primitivo Robles, Sr., whose life was dedicated to serving others, whether orphans or groups of fellow soldiers or family or country, who made me and Pedrito green eggs and ham. Thank you to Mildred Kathleen Guinn Pettis, my “grandmother in love.” You saw a skinny brown girl in your class and
intellectually nourished her; you gave my mom a home away from home and let her believe that she could go to college. You loved all of us so deeply and so fiercely. You showed me the back roads to Vulture Peak, you were the person who took me to the greatest, most beautiful places on earth, the Painted Desert and the Petrified Forest. You always stood up for people and stood up to those who tried to keep others down. Remember when tía Josie saw the colibrí on the day of your funeral, and everyone knew it was you?

Thank you to my siblings. I made pages happen! Thank you, Krystyna, for your joy and your passion in making the best life for yourself, for insisting that happiness and fulfillment are necessary. Thank you, Cecilia, for being the teacher I want to be, and for being the most well-read person I’ve ever met. And thank you for letting me stay with you so many times. Thank you, Pedro, my best friend when we were younger, my steady sibling throughout life, the young ‘un who follows his dreams.

Thank you to my parents, Yolanda Gomez and Primitivo “JR” Robles.² Thank you, dad, for telling me so many stories about your life, even though they seem to pop up suddenly. Thank you for teaching me humility. Thanks for the Graves Disease, and thank you for the hypothyroidism, too! Thank you for telling us about how your dad refused to carry a gun when he was in Korea and Vietnam, and how this persistent, conscious relationship to Truth is important for navigating a world full of war and hurt—that’s how we can make love bloom; thank you for being so dedicated to nonviolence. Thank you for telling me not to fight the people I wanted to fight, even when I wanted to, which probably saved my life. Thank you, mom. Thank you for teaching me to work hard, for giving me strength and hope. Thank you for being so good

² Here, I am listening to Jason Moran’s “Cradle Song.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uyW0tsgkh_1>. 
at softball that other teams were terrified of you. Thank you, even though you don’t like to think about it, for always being the loudest voice in the rink or on the field or in the stadium. Thank you for singing in church. Thank you for taking me to piano lessons. Thank you for going to college against the odds, for insisting that belief in yourself is tantamount. Thank you for your scarred hands, hands that picked cotton and beets and onions, hands that held me, hands that hold me, hands that taught me to make beans, to make rice, to make tortillas (all of which I have used to stave off hunger), hands that write out Bible verses, hands that draw flowers on the page, hands that draw flowers and fruits out of the earth in the many gardens you tend.

Thank you, Brandon Menke, for loving me. Thank you for reading my work. Thank you for being the funniest person I’ve met, the smartest person I’ve ever been around, and for getting me to really change the way I think about so many things. Thank you for making me a better person. Thank you for taking care of Zorro, our little Zorro Pumpernickel, when I’m in Philadelphia and Princeton. Thank you for being courageous and thoughtful, and for caring about everyone, especially me. Mon petit lapin, gracias por dejando me ser tu sweet mpenzi.

Finally, I want to thank God. I don’t always believe in you, but you’ve believed in me, somehow. How else can I explain where I am, who I’ve known, and the blessings I’ve accrued in this life?
PREVIOUSLY APPEARING WORK

Parts of this dissertation have been presented in part or in whole at various conferences.


My work on Tomás Rivera was given as a lecture at Syracuse University (February 2016), entitled “Writing the Communal Imagination in Tomás Rivera’s ...y no se lo tragó la tierra/...And the Earth Did Not Devour Him.”

My work on Alice Walker was given as a lecture at Connecticut College (May 2016), entitled “‘She Was Drawn With Them’: Communal and Dialogical Architecture of Self in Alice Walker’s Meridian.”
Introduction

“But that battered word, truth, having made its appearance here, confronts one immediately with a series of riddles and has, moreover, since so many gospels are preached, the unfortunate tendency to make one belligerent. Let us say, then, that truth, as used here, is meant to imply a devotion to the human being, his freedom and fulfillment; freedom which cannot be legislated, fulfillment which cannot be charted.”
—James Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” Notes of a Native Son

“The deeper I have excavated, the more surely I have satisfied myself that the best was underneath, in the obscure depths. And I have realized that it is quite wrong to take these brilliant and powerful talkers, who expressed the thought of the masses, for the sole actors in the drama. They were given the impulse by others much more than they gave it themselves. The principal actor is the people.”
—Jules Michelet, quoted and translated by Edmund Wilson in To the Finland Station

“That’s the one thing I don’t want to do, is come off preachy. So, it’s a fine line. But I think that the biggest thing to do is to remember is that you’re not on a—even though people might try to put you on that thing—that you’re not on the pedestal, you’re not in the pulpit—you know what I mean—that you’re one of the people. And so, as a voice of the people, I’m never talking to you all, I’m talking about us. So, you’re including yourself in the whole thing that you’re discussing.”
—D’Angelo on Tavis Smiley (September 1, 2015)

“Each of us is here now because in one way or another we share a commitment to language and to the power of language, and to the reclaiming of that language which has been made to work against us. In the transformation of silence into language and action, it is vitally necessary for each one of us to establish or examine her function in that transformation and to recognize her role as vital within that transformation.”
—Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” Sister Outsider

I. Constituting a Praxis

In many ways, this project emerges from my desire to extend our understanding of the radical consciousness of the Popular Front, or at least its motivating impulses, beyond its typical periodization from the late 1920s to the mid 1940s. Focusing on the figure of the migrant (and the problems migrancy reveals for political and artistic representation), I seek out a longer,
broaden, and more complicated story about the legacies of leftist Modernism, experimentation, and artistic creation.

The struggle to access democracy, particularly through the idea of “having a voice,” is the primary motivation behind the works present in this dissertation. Regardless of their contextual specifics, each author and musician strives to refashion—to radicalize—democracy in order to create material, textual spaces for the voices and self-determined narratives of migrants. Understanding this radically democratic impulse and the intersectional praxes utilized to articulate this impulse is incredibly important for understanding the significance and power of the literary and musical works I discuss in these pages.

Within these pages, I hope to elaborate three separate contributions to the fields of American Literature and American Studies. First, I want to identify a literary-historical narrative of radical democracy’s intersection with aesthetics, one that can only be read by attending to how certain artists struggle to represent migrants, which has not yet been discussed in the field at large. In order to see this narrative, it is necessary to create new artistic constellations, new creative dialogues that draw previously unseen connections between authors, musicians, and theorists. The figure of the migrant is particularly important because he or she is often left outside of representation, both politically and artistically. This is largely because migrants, by virtue of their social and cultural exclusion, are necessarily considered outside of or other to the local or national populace. The very fact of their movement across place, of their perceived itinerancy, precludes migrants from sharing in the “home” as so-called natives construct it. These disenfranchising procedures, along with the destruction of collective bargaining and the right to stable shelter, gave the lie to democracy as it was then—and is still—generally understood. What is generally named democracy in the U.S. context is actually a system of alienated representation
alternately named “representative democracy” or “constitutional republicanism.” By alienated representation, I mean the process by which one foregoes the right to speak in the political arena by voting for a representative who then becomes an avatar taking up the winning side’s voice. Therefore, any time anyone is denied the right to participate in the process of selecting a representative, we encounter a decidedly non-democratic system in which an entire group of people is disincluded and disempowered.

The texts I explore in *Migrant Modalities* actively counter the undemocratic tendencies behind anti-migrant politics. These texts contain a related series of experimental strategies that open up unforeseen possibilities for representation as both a political and an aesthetic act. By centering on migrants and their stories, these texts focus their transformative power on a world that often excludes and expels migrant laborers and their families. Thus, borrowing from Fred Moten, I find a literary history of experimentation in which, “Democracy is the rupture of any exclusion, however common that exclusion might appear to be” (79). Texts like *Mules and Men*, *Whose Names Are Unknown*, and Woody Guthrie’s agitprop ballads are not often considered experimental; however, I find their novelty in the particular methods they use to rupture exclusion, to find new ways of empowering and representing migrants.

Second, I describe the experimental grammar that these artists use to rupture exclusion and create spaces for other voices, particularly those of migrants. These attempts chiefly take place through an artist’s attempts to render their text as a space where multiple voices labor to transform the world of that text. This happens in several ways: utilizing another person’s named voice (often constructed through research, interviews, archives, or historical revision—this is where I situate Hurston’s *Mules and Men*, Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead*, Babb’s *Whose Names Are Unknown*, Odetta’s reimagined agitprop folk standards, and Walker’s *Meridian*),
splitting the narrative voice in ways that highlight the tensions that underlie authorial intent (such as locating or instantiating multiple narrative centers that actively and metacritically comment on the status of authority—this is where I place Toomer’s *Cane* and Rivera’s *...y no se lo tragó la tierra*), and rethinking the ways that an artist improvisatorially operates within and through the audience (this is what I see Mendoza and Guthrie doing in their performances).

Third, I propose that the artistic constellations I envision offer a necessarily reconsidered model of literary criticism that takes up intersectional praxis as its orienting logic. For example, the philosophical and political connections between Hurston and Rukeyser, two fiercely critical artists searching for justice, are extremely strong—but they have not yet been examined. The same holds true for the idea of Toomer’s *Cane* as a border text. Embracing intersectional praxis means opening oneself up the many meanings and possibilities contained within each text—it means resisting unidirectional or preordained readings of texts. This refusal of the singular is my strategy when assessing and correcting the dominant literary criticism of Rivera’s *...y no se lo tragó la tierra*, as well as when I perform an undercommons reading of Lydia Mendoza’s songs.

Thus *Migrant Modalities* explores how various works of art—ranging from fiction to poetry to folk music—seek to speak the truth about their subjects in order to create a directly democratic, radical society by transforming the existential, social, and economic structures of the United States. Even though it must be stated that these imagined radical societies are putatively confined to the work of art itself, on the level of process (that is, in the labor that produces the work) and experience (that is, the sensual reception of the work as well as the various relationships constituted by that reception), there nonetheless maintains in these works a distinct outward propulsion that attempts to transform undemocratic realities by representing new possibilities and subjectivities that must be taken into account. What is needed is a praxis that
seeks to integrate these characteristics into a cogent, alternative, defiant narrative that examines texts in experimental constellations by attending to historical context, formal features, and content in order to test out new comparative maps and methods. This praxis also directly embeds the process of political struggle within its own narrative by tracing out the radical features of the contextual and formal experiments engaged in by the artists presented in the dissertation. This is done in order to sound out political possibility as it still exists and thrives—the yearnings within texts from the past are still oriented toward possibility, rather than regret: this enlivening, this stoking of the embers of hope and transformation, primarily, is what distinguishes a praxis. 

*Migrant Modalities, in part,* is a theorization of praxis as a literary-critical craft.

This speculation on a “praxis oriented” theory of literary criticism, however, does not quite suggest what, in particular, motivates and drives the dissertation’s scholarly methods. What does it more exactly mean to engage in a praxis? How should praxis be positively defined? What assumptions and definitions underlie the use of praxis in this dissertation, especially in relation to other concepts such as democracy, not to mention disciplinary concerns like criticism, culture, and race, as well as critical keywords such as space, sound, and flow?

In the space of this dissertation, I use praxis with Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in mind.1 For Freire, praxis is an ethical stance and a methodology wrapped together as one—praxis is a method that *must* be ethical and an ethics that *must* be methodical (and not distinctively disciplined by methodology). As mutually constitutive features of praxis, ethics and method generate a persistent (rather than necessarily consistent) attention to the details of

---

1 In my third chapter, I use critical studies whose definitions of praxis differ from mine. That said, I maintain my use of praxis throughout the dissertation, and when I refer to praxis, I mean the definition I establish in this introduction. See, for example: Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements* (1998), wherein they use “cognitive praxis” to examine collective identity formation, social movements, and the use of political music in constructing activist consciousness.
democracy and the forms used by writers to convey the transformative urgency of the lives written into and onto the page. That is to say, ethics and methods of re/presentation come together in a union of abstract principles (ethics as an underlying structure for perceiving the world and acting within or upon it as an artist) and concrete actions (artistic re/presentation as a record of what occurs in the world), and considering them together accesses the powerful dialectic they constitute. I find that tracking the ways that ethics and re/presentation come together disorders the urge to work with a consistent methodology, since doing so may hinder one’s critical vision. Alexandra Vazquez, in *Listening in Detail*, argues that new critical work must understand methodology in a non-monumental and determinative mode. Vazquez’s model is “listening in detail,” to which I closely ally myself as I theorize my use of praxis. Vazquez writes, “This ethos bears a set of necessary protocols: one must be able to adjust to a different sense of time, be eager to go to unexpected places, remain open to being altered, ready to frame a project in the diminutive, and prepared to assume there is always some other way” (7). Adhering to protocols rather than methodological truisms (reminiscent of Hortense Spillers’s critique of methodology and discipline as such), Vazquez sees listening in detail as an *ethos*. This inherently political and ethical inflection echoes in praxis, as well.

Praxis considers method beyond discipline, particularly in how our work as critics intersects with lived experiences—our own, an author’s, a subject’s. Praxis seeks to outline and suggest, rather than informing (and in so doing, risk deforming). Praxis should speak to and

---


3 In this sense, praxis also cautions against turning oneself, an author, or a text’s subject(s) into cultural informants. See Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”
with, rather than for. In this sense, praxis attends to the implications and consequences of methods and protocols. As Freire argues,

[W]e discover something which is the essence of dialogue itself: *the word.* But the word is more than just an instrument which makes dialogue possible; accordingly, we must seek its constitutive elements. Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world. (87)

In a footnote to this passage, Freire puts together a formula in which Action and Reflection together make “the word,” and “word=work=praxis;” further, he states that “Sacrifice of action=verbalism” and “Sacrifice of reflection=activism” (87, fn. 1). At either end something is sacrificed; in each case, words can lose their transformative potential. In order to consciously utilize this praxis, then, it is incredibly important to attend to the intersectionality of identity and cultural practice when accounting for and describing texts. By the term “intersectional praxis,” I indicate that one’s existence in the world is informed and determined by the belief that all actions must be transformative in nature and intent, that the world and the self can only be understood in multiplicity, and that our transformations of the world worth attend to the multiplicity in each individual that inhabits this world-in-the-making.

---

4 Intersectionality, as a critical and descriptive term, has been theorized quite thoroughly at the moment. Rather than repeat the philosophical underpinnings of intersectionality, I will point to my favorite, most illustrative text on the subject: Valerie Smith’s *Not Just Race, Not Just Gender.* Says Smith, “To describe the interactions of race and gender as they shape lives and social practices, Kimberlé Crenshaw has coined the term ‘intersectionality’” (xiii-xiv). For Smith, “the practice of reading intersectionally [allows one] to question the implications of ideological and aesthetic liminality,” a forceful critique of the ways that subjects and identities considered “other” or “otherwise” are always already circumscribed by discourse and description (xv). For the idea of intersectionality as a space for emergent critique, see Angela Davis’s *The Meaning of Freedom and Other Difficult Dialogues* (2012), as well as AnaLouise Keating’s *Transformation Now!* (2013) and Trinh-T. Minh-ha’s *Woman Native Other* (1989).
Taking up Freire’s idea of praxis as dedicated to truth along with Baldwin, whose words constitute one of this chapter’s epigraphs, we encounter a theory of truth that is dedicated to making the world a better place through thought and action. For Freire, truth is about transforming the world and remaking the relation of self and the world such that exploitation can be undone and hierarchies smashed. For Baldwin, truth “is meant to imply a devotion to the human being, his freedom and fulfillment.” In both cases, truth is about (re)making the world in such a way that all humans have the right to absolute dignity, to be free from exploitation and coercion, and to live in a social world as subjects with complete recognition from fellow subjects. Therefore, truth as Freire and Baldwin use it is integral to the transformation of society into a space wherein all people receive recognition as subjects, where all people are given the right to speak for themselves.

The social force that comprises this ideal world is love. Freire argues “Dialogue cannot exist…in the absence of profound love for the world and for people. The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love. Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself” (89). This “naming of the world” infuses the present moment, the lived moment, with a revolutionary love that is dedicated to the betterment of the world. A naming of the world which is not loving is decreative and destructive, oppressive and fascistic, rather than an “act of creation and re-creation.” In other words, Freire suggests that ethics—signified by the infusion of love—informs the concrete acts that, as instances of “creation and re-creation” name the world.

Thus the world must not be refashioned in one’s own image, but must instead be encountered and enacted dialogically, with the dignity of self and others in mind at all times. As a result, the world in which all people are given the right to speak for themselves has as its goal
the dignity of all its subjects. Rather, this world is premised upon and operates through an insistent, ever-present, capacious, revolutionary love for others. Says Freire, “Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause—the cause of liberation. And this commitment, because it is loving, is dialogical” (89).

Although *Migrant Modalities* is partially a theory of praxis as a critical method, it is more broadly a literary analytical mode that seeks to weave an understandable narrative of artistic, political struggle that can adequately convey the subtle yet radical experimentation that occurs on the level of representation. That is, how do the artists in this dissertation seek to transform the following relationships: author and subject, author and object, author and the language of the subject/object? By focusing on the figure of the migrant,5 *Migrant Modalities* offers a counterhistory that revolves around the difficult project of presenting the voices of people who have little access to structures and mediums that allow them to be heard and recognized.

In this way, “representation” is one of the most important words in my dissertation. In “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Gayatri Spivak rightly critiques the overly easy equation of the political and critical-theoretical senses of representation, especially in the work of Gilles

5 “The migrant” is a fraught mythotype whose symbolic importance to American historiography seems undisputed, but whose semantic substance in the American context has been contested continually since at least the establishment of religiously dogmatic colonial governments and the ensuing hegemony enforced by heteropatriarchal, racist property laws. “The migrant,” as a myth, functions doubly, and this double function seems to operate according to a historical divide that can be traced to roughly the late 19th century. Beginning with explorers and pilgrims and continuing on to settlers and homesteaders, the migrant was seen as a preeminent figure in the making of America. This mythography continues today, although one is unlikely to encounter references to explorers, pilgrims, settlers, and homesteaders as migrants. Beginning with nativist panic over the rise of Asian and European immigrants (as well as a seemingly eternal unease with migration from the non-Anglophone Americas), however, “the migrant” seems to have stood quite firmly as a symbol of the foreign and displaced, as something that unsettles the settled in U.S. History.
Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and the Subaltern Studies Group’s “history from below” methodology. For Spivak, the assumption that representing the other in critical and historical discourse is the same as granting them political power rings quite hollow. She instead counsels scholars to attend to the atypical, often unseen discursive methods practiced by the oppressed. In *Migrant Modalities*, I inquire into the careful tactics used by authors to produce, utilize, and maintain alternative textual spaces and narrative voices within their own work, specifically for the purpose of giving the right to speak to those who have not had access to mass or published media. The problem, however, lies in the fact that these texts still have single authors. The struggle, then, is to open my eyes to the means through which authors avoid doubling the erasure of migrants, to avoid becoming like the political representatives and opportunistic artists who profit off of the voices of the marginalized. Pierre Bourdieu describes the cynical empowerment of those who profit through disempowerment, starkly outlining the consequences of losing one’s voice:

> [I]n the alchemy of representation (in the different senses of the term) through which the representative creates the group which creates him[,] the spokesperson [is] endowed with the full power to speak and act on behalf of the group…. Group made man, he personifies a fictitious person, which he lifts out of the state of a simple aggregate of separate individuals, enabling them to act and speak, through him, ‘like a single person’. Conversely, he receives the right to speak and act in the name of the group, to ‘take himself for’ the group he incarnates, to identify with the function to which ‘he gives his body and soul’, thus giving a biological body to a constituted body. (106)

Bourdieu offers a particularly sharp critique of the Western World’s fetishistic adherence to democracy as (neo-)liberal democracy, as representative democracy. Raymond Williams argues that as the theory of democracy was standardized and promulgated in the modern world, representative democracy took hold as the preferred model, particularly due to the stability it might afford. He states, “Bentham formulated a general sense of democracy as rule by the
majority of the people, and then distinguished between ‘direct democracy’ and ‘representative democracy’, recommending the latter because it provided continuity and could be extended to large societies” (Williams 56-7). Williams hints at the general critiques of radical or direct democracy that I outlined earlier; namely, the idea that direct democracy is too slow, too localized, and too unwieldy. The continuity and stability privileged by Bentham, along with other theoretical proponents of modern liberal democracy such as James Madison and Alexander Hamilton in The Federalist Papers, served to disparage the right to self-determination of anyone outside of the voting class (which, it must be remembered, was exclusively white and exclusively male for the vast majority of post-American and French Revolutionary Western History). The consequences of this through-line are tracked by Ta-Nehisi Coates in his most recent book, Between the World and Me. Coates identifies the logic of the eternally unresolved, never synthesized dialectical tension of a representative democracy undergirded by supremacy:

There is no them without you, and without the right to break you they must necessarily fall from the mountain, lose their divinity, and tumble out of the Dream. And then they would have to determine how to build their suburbs on something other than human bones, how to angle their jails toward something other than a human stockyard, how to erect a democracy independent of cannibalism. (Coates 105)

Various American artists have been seeking to undo this stability, which is underscored by the desire to preserve power, and not merely for the sake of wreaking disestablishmentarian havoc or for the easing of one’s troubled bourgeois mind. Rather, the revolutionary flow of this artistic strain is the beat against the doors and safeguards of stasis, of approved and legitimated structures of time and place. One is reminded of Nina Simone’s outrage, in “Mississippi Goddam,” against the “go slow/too slow” hypocrisy that counseled patience with white supremacy while using white supremacy to terrorize black workers across America. This broken sense of time, meant to eternally uphold white power as an exception to the supposed rule of
equality and fraternity, becomes for Simone a rallying cry that retakes and reanimates the supremacist’s “too slow!”

Ultimately, what the authors discussed in *Migrant Modalities* specifically seek to avoid is any personification of a fictitious person or entity as a representative, as well as any reduction of a person’s and a people’s multiplicity. Zora Neale Hurston and Muriel Rukeyser criticize the idealization of the “folk” as an untouched or simplistic category, even as they explore folk ideas and popular knowledge. Similarly, Alice Walker disrupts the surprisingly persistent idea that urban, in particular non-Southern, people are the only adherents to radical politics and anti-establishment critique. In this way, even as I acknowledge the nearly impossible projects undertaken by the authors and musicians in this dissertation, I find an undeniable beauty and justice in their struggle to reshape the very possibilities under and through which art revolutionizes the political, and vice versa.

II. Towards a Theory of Migrant Modalities

The other critically important term in my subtitle is “radical democracy.” In *Migrant Modalities*, I use “radical” to mean a self-determined political orientation that situates itself outside or in distinction to the typical understanding of a given concept. This orientation is also radical by virtue of its being understood by others as distinct, atypical, and idealistic. Radicality/radicalism is perhaps most identifiable by its belief that ideal situations are worth striving for, regardless of their plausibility or practicality. By “democracy,” I name a very specific instantiation of politics. I use democracy to describe the political formation in which each individual is given direct access to political speech and political power. In this system, representation is one-to-one, by which I mean each individual represents his or her own views,
choices, and desires, without the need of an intermediary or elected representative. Democracy, as I understand it, becomes a structure legitimized by the consensus of the community and its support for the process of deliberating, as a whole, through any issue, problem, or occurrence that involves that community.

Radical democracy, then, is the somewhat redundant name I have given to the belief that the sole mode of politics that grants full dignity, autonomy, empowerment, and social coherence is self-representative, consensus-driven, dialogical democracy. Although radical democracy as a political formation is often considered impossible or impractical due to its status as an ideal (not to mention the general undesirability of consensus-driven decision making), it nonetheless actualizes quite material activist, philosophical, and artistic approaches that attempt to represent its existence. Fred Moten asks, “Where will democracy, which is to say the democracy that is to come, have been found? The answer remains on the outskirts and in anticipation of the American polis” (78). Here, Moten uses both grammatical and spatiotemporal slippage to gesture towards the unknown that contains “the democracy that is to come.” In this sense, democracy is a bit like psychoanalytic notion of the Real: it cannot be named or spoken, since it is the pre-linguistic foundation of all experience—its presence at the heart of all discourse is suppressed (or, more properly speaking, repressed) by the Imaginary and the Symbolic, yet it ever threatens to irrupt into language, shattering the frameworks established to make sense of the world of experiences, feelings, and encounters. Although I do not utilize psychoanalysis, I find the analogy useful in describing the paranoid gatekeeping against migrants and their threat to the ossification of democracy, as it has been instantiated; yet, regardless of its ossification, this version of supremacist democracy shows cracks at its foundation.
Radical democracy, which is not often understood, which is often disparaged, which is ever a threat, seeps through these cracks and threatens to undo the stolid foundations of supremacy. Intersectional praxis opens our eyes to the various manifestations of radical democracy, to the many identities, peoples, and strategies used to uphold human dignity, assert autonomy, demand justice, and struggle for the right to self-representation. These strategies are often passed over, considered overly prosaic or simplistic, or perhaps too obvious, for serious literary criticism. Yet, as Gayatri Spivak and Fred Moten persistently remind us, undercommons discourse manifests in novel ways, largely in order to resist linguistic or political capture. It is the job of intersectional praxis, as a literary criticism orientation, to describe without capturing, to witness without tampering, and to discuss without appropriating these novel methods and modes of artistry and representation.

In this dissertation, interpreting the flow of migrants through space and text is the fundamental critical attention. Because interpretation depends on context, placement, as a spatial and literary heuristic, is crucial to establishing a praxis constructed of literary and cultural studies within the dissertation. And because placement is rather anarchic, especially for migrant communities, any interpretation based on placement must attend to the many modalities through which living registers along the multiple discourses that describe experience and existence. Migrants trouble ideological assumptions such as home and introduce new meanings, contexts, and placements for objects and spaces that operate within the discourses of domestic or national habitus. Thus to pay attention to the various modalities of migrant life, especially as they intersect across cultural, literary, and musical discourses, is to commit to a praxis that allows for the critical flexibility to map out the strategies, tactics, and experiences of migrants as they move in and out of the many social structures surrounding them. Rather than being determined by these
structures, though, migrants, as presented by the authors explored in this dissertation, assert an irreducibility that is often expressed as multiplicity, independence, and sometimes even as opacity.

In the space of this dissertation, I take “modality” to mean several things. *Modality,* philosophically, is a term that relates to identity and categories of belonging. Because migrants, by virtue of their collective motion through the world, initiate and make central the idea of the encounter in everyday life, I conceive of identity as a process rather than as an immutable set of characteristics. As a result, rather than relating strictly to philosophical identity, in this dissertation *modality* signifies three things. First, as indicated above, my use of modality gestures toward categories and fluctuations of existence, which I narrowly channel through the problematic of political subjectivity in relation to communal and democratic possibility. Although I do not utilize either formal or ordinary language philosophy, I must acknowledge my debt to those disciplines’ use of the term modality to describe the subject’s position within the web of human expression and existence. Second, modality is used to indicate formal *modes* of writing, which are necessarily staged within and move through literary, cultural, and historical maps. These modes often take shape as tones and affective registers, such as dialect, poetic form, and plot shape. Third, because I focus on three folk musicians and their relationship to migrant communities, I consider musical *modes* and their sonic, as well as affective, registers. I do not engage music theory as a discipline, largely because of my lack disciplinary training. At the same time, it is important to note specific chord changes, harmonic development, and guitar strumming technique in each of the three musicians I study.

In order socially and existentially to consider the above, *Migrant Modalities* considers migration and modality in terms of space and race, and how these categories interact and
intersect. What spaces do migrants move to and from, and how does their otherness register across space? In other words, how do migrants “translate,” and how does representation account for this spacial and racial translation?

What results is an idea of how the works of art considered in this dissertation become *migrant works of art*. The outcome of the unmoored, radical existence of the work of art on the move is that a case can be made for a new mode of relational and representational existence: direct, participatory democracy as a formal, artistic category. Ultimately, what this dissertation seeks to accomplish is a reconsideration of literary representation and American democracy through exploring the works of several authors and musicians from 1923 to the present day. By reframing and recontextualizing Jean Toomer, Muriel Rukeyser, Zora Neale Hurston, Woody Guthrie, Sanora Babb, Lydia Mendoza, Tomás Rivera, Alice Walker, and Odetta, I hope to assemble a constellation of artists whose works and words work towards creating a better world by considering the subjectivities of migrants and their labors. (To a certain degree, the Herculean resonance of “work” should be kept in mind, especially given Hercules’ own status as a wanderer who performs labors.)

Important to migrant communities, as well as the existential equilibrium of the individual moving away from home (and thereby remaking the very idea of home), is a sense of space and place, which is often constituted through song and story. Because of this, *Migrant Modalities* explores the following questions: what is the “sound” of migration, and how does the “flow” of migrants encounter space and race? In mapping the various modalities of migrant and migrating aesthetics through the problematics of space, race, sound, and flow, we encounter new interfaces and intersections of artistic-political potential. What I mean by “new interfaces and intersections of artistic-political potential” is this: the migrant provides a specific, difficult case to both
literature and to politics—so, where does the migrant fit in (to history, culture, literature, the nation, and so on)? And how does “not fitting in” translate on the page or the recording?

How can anyone represent the migrant—especially in a concrete text or in a rigidified political system? What the artists in this dissertation do is seek answers that end up turning literature upside down and politics inside out. Thus the radical yet subtle experimentation behind Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead* and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men*, as well as more obviously experimental works like Jean Toomer’s *Cane* or Tomás Rivera’s *...y no se lo tragó la tierra*. These experimentations create new models for reading and literary representation—the texts in this dissertation offer up a complex set of new hermeneutical necessities with which we must encounter the world and others in the world. Hermeneutics thus becomes not only a synonym for interpretation, but a necessary and urgent ethical project for living in the world. The flow of people across categories and boundaries presents literature and politics with limit cases that *must* be taken into account.

Because flow, by its very nature, is disruptive and un-capturable, the organizing principle of my dissertation might be called “radical democratic juxtaposition” or “radical conjunction,” wherein I tell critical stories through the dynamics of difference and relationality that come into play when reading sets of texts—the “and-ness” of living in an intersectional world. My project sounds out the collaborative, ensemblic potential of textual studies, reframing questions of belonging in light of newly mapped relationships. Continuing in the critical tradition of Fred Moten and Gloria Anzaldúa, *Migrant Modalities* improvises upon the possibilities of freedom, *putting on (the) record* the unique practices of the texts I read. *Migrant Modalities* rehearses expected comparisons and orchestrates new juxtapositions, assembling a map of political praxis that considers utopia’s potential to become real, rather than immediately rejecting it as a fantasy.
What arises from this ensemblic, constellating practice is an aesthetic tendency that might be called “praxis of multitude,” a method that particularizes even as it theorizes a coalitional, communal politics. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri insist that “we must delve into the ontological substrate of the concrete alternatives continually pushed forward by the *res gestae*, the subjective forces acting in the historical context. What appears here is not a new rationality but a new scenario of different rational acts—a horizon of activities, resistances, wills, and desires that refuse the hegemonic order, propose lines of flight, and forge alternative constitutive itineraries” (*Empire* 48). Akin to Fred Moten’s concept of fugitivity, this constellation of actions named by Hardt and Negri necessitates a methodology attendant to flows—historical, aesthetic, and subjective. Thus, as a critical-descriptive term, *flow* reveals the interacting articulations of space, race, and sound in the formal construction of a given text. Flow, in its very nature, disrupts and ruins the concrete accumulations of text and representation. Flows refuse to be set in place, therefore demanding new practices that take into account the encounter.

*Migrant Modalities* seeks to furnish a space through which multiple discourses, voices, and stories can play together and create new modes of critiquing *and* postulating democracy—written with a small d, as well as with a large D—in the United States. Largely inspired by Anzaldúa’s beautiful, generative models of anthologizing (*This Bridge Called My Back; Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras;* and *This Bridge We Call Home*), my work seeks to preserve and propound the particularity of texts, personal experiences, and identity, while still exploring the space of alliance and coalition. Anzaldúa’s anthologizing praxis bespeaks her commitment to radical democracy, a commitment shown by her emphasis on dialogism and practical dialectic. That is, to take *This Bridge Called My Back* as an example, we see dozens of unique voices come together through the manifold processes of speaking out in and through dialogue. The dialogue at
work in the anthology evidences an interactive space for writerly rumination and readerly response. Further, *This Bridge Called My Back* enacts dialectic as its organizational and philosophical principle by insisting on concreteness of experience and particularity of voice, while emphasizing the need for abstracted, communal politics to generate the power to create change. Crucially, Anzaldúa insists on “power to” rather than “power over”: revolution comes through self-actualized empowerment, not from the wresting of power from that which lies outside of oneself.6 The dialogic and dialectical organization of *This Bridge Called My Back* keeps this distinction in mind. More generally, the texts in my dissertation hew to this differentiation; from Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923) to Odetta’s recordings of the 1950s and 1960s to Alice Walker’s *Meridian* (1976), the texts I explore—both musical and literary—are most concerned with the people(s) and communities they engage.

I am further concerned with what a dialogic, differential, direct democracy looks like, compared to a “democracy” built upon representing electorally legitimized essentialism and sameness.7 At stake are the limits of democracy’s utopian potential: how is utopia to be made

---

6 I derive this distinction directly from John Holloway’s articles, “Twelve Theses on Changing the World without taking Power,” [http://libcom.org/library/twelve-theses-on-changing-the-world-without-taking-power](http://libcom.org/library/twelve-theses-on-changing-the-world-without-taking-power) and “The concept of power and the Zapatistas” [http://libcom.org/library/concept-power-zapatistas-john-holloway](http://libcom.org/library/concept-power-zapatistas-john-holloway). This theory of power is distinct from traditional notions of power distilled from Marx (this idea of power seems almost directly taken from Marx and Engels’ *Communist Manifesto*). One might also turn to Lenin or Gramsci for examples of “taking state power” or shifting the scene of hegemony; both thinkers emphasize the inter/nationalization of revolutionary power. What I see Anzaldúa doing, along with the Zapatistas as discussed in Holloway, is moving away from concerns with state power and towards subjective empowerment through “consciousness raising,” dialogue, and the necessity of a “refusal”/“negation”/“ya basta” (which is indirectly related to Adorno’s negative dialectics) that rejects existing frames of power altogether in order to seek out new ways of belonging in the world.

7 What is meant here is that elections determine a winning side, and that side gains the legitimacy of the voting populace such that politicians often feel comfortable announcing that “the people have spoken,” implying, in each election cycle, that a monolithic mandate arises from voting. Of course, this does not account for dissenting voices and their discursive power within the political
tōpic (and therefore an actually existing place) and topical (and therefore worthy of serious consideration)? By carefully attending to the modalities of specific works by Jean Toomer; Zora Neale Hurston and Muriel Rukeyser; Lydia Mendoza and Tomás Rivera; Woody Guthrie and Sanora Babb; and Odetta and Alice Walker, I argue that experimental, prophetic constellations of democracy arise formally and contextually, providing experiential maps to be sounded out in every sense—sung, tested out verbally and visually, explored spatially—by readers and listeners.

What sort of song arises from the groupings established in *Migrant Modalities*? What sound bursts forth when Gloria Anzaldúa is heard in conversation with Jean Toomer? What do Zora Neale Hurston and Muriel Rukeyser have to say about the presence of “the folk” in their literature—and what is the speaking position generated by these two artists and their insistence on presenting the manifold, concrete experiences of “common” men and women as they boldly assert their dignity?

By voicing and giving voice to manifold subjectivities, the authors and songwriters in *Migrant Modalities* tell personal stories in order to enact a communal, yet personally empowering mode of democracy. Although these texts are written and sung by individual artists, I argue that their formal strategies refuse to tokenize or collectivize the people they depict. Through performances that enact democracy, or through literary tactics that uncouple subjects from oppressive, externally determined regimes of representation and symbolic meaning, the texts in *Migrant Modalities* use art for the sake of the people—not people for the sake of artistry. *Who sings the nation state?* might be the question here. The answer, I argue, can only be found

---

if we listen to each other’s voices as we move through the everyday, material conditions of our lives.

III. Beside the Border

In her foundational theorization of affect and performativity, specifically as encountered in *Touching Feeling* (2003), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick introduces a theory of “beside” that is avowedly materialist and spatial and thus resists teleological, transcendental narratives. She tells us, “as its title suggests, the most salient preposition in *Touching Feeling* is probably beside. Invoking a Deleuzian interest in planar relations, the irreducibly spatial positionality of beside also seems to offer some useful resistance to the ease with which beneath and beyond turn from spatial descriptors into implicit narratives of, respectively, origin and telos” (Sedgwick, 8). This concept of beside would thus, if extended to the works in this dissertation, entreat readers to theorize socio-cultural discourses and categories next to each other as spaces to be negotiated and moved between and through, rather than transcended or disavowed. Using *beside* thus horizontally orients one’s frame of reference, abetting comparative work that refuses to evaluate and hierarchize.⁹ Sedgwick’s important work in *Touching Feeling* offers more than a theoretical means of justifying a horizontal approach to criticism: it urges us to consider epistemological simultaneity, achieved by considering multiple perspectives at once; and it also privileges ensemblic comparative work, since pulling apart and putting together groupings of text or art for consideration in both expected and unexpected ways allows us novel experiences of aesthetic pleasure, political progress, and theoretical expansion. By theorizing with and through the idea of

---

⁹ Maria Eugenia Cotera, whose work I address in later chapters, provides a refreshing and rousing call for the utilization of this non-hierarchical, horizontal method of comparative studies in her book *Native Speakers* (University of Texas Press, 2008).
beside, categories of description, existence, and identity become spaces rather than walls: and because they are spaces, they can be traversed and explored, rather than simply bumped up against or overleapt. In other words: since the borders between categories is not a space that is “either/or,” nor a space that is “neither/nor,” it is rather a space of constant conjunction, of “both/and.” The language of the border, then, describes multiple traversable geographies, from the psychic to the physical. D. Emily Hicks gives us a generative approach to thinking about border writing and what this means for the complex spatialization of history and memory. A border text’s porosity and polyphony chart out ways of traversing time and space affectively, in the taking up and utilization of memory. Says Hicks, “border writers give the reader the opportunity to practice multidimensional perception and nonsynchronous memory. By multidimensional perception I mean quite literally the ability to see not just from one side of a border, but from the other side as well” (xxiii).

I would also like to query the contours of a spatial history: what might this look like? What does it mean for a space to have a memory, a history? How do histories and memories migrate, along with the subjects whose memories and histories they are? Might history be seen as a category of identity worthy of exploration and experience, rather than simply something that must be rigidly excavated and examined? Thinking of history as spatial allows a novel methodological approach to hermeneutics that allow for a wholly different, wholly radical approach to experiencing oneself in the world—both as a geographical and as a historical subject. History, then, might be experienced as a series of borders that must be encountered and crossed, experienced and considered—history is a text or a map that is interpreted. This injunction to spatialize does not run counter to historicism; on the contrary, I find it productive in the sense that it forces us to consider multiple histories and their relations as spaces that interact.
and criss-cross. Historical flux and movement are thus put into play with place and memory, and
particularity and relationality become the ways to negotiate these complex planes. Here, maybe
more than elsewhere, we find a valorization of the radical subjectivity that someone like Jean
Toomer calls for—that said, it is also an insistence that radical subjectivity operate in an
ensemble, that multiple memories and histories help shape the fabric of the borderland, that
aspirations toward unity acknowledge (and operate through) difference. By radical subjectivity, I
do not mean individualism as such, but a radicalized, performative being in the world. Daphne
Brooks, arguing for the powerful specificity of black performative opacity and black song, shows
that such a radical(ized) subjectivity “instill[s] movement in ‘free’ yet socially, politically, and
culturally circumscribed bodies” (*Bodies in Dissent*, 8). This movement operates in
circumscribed space and opens up new modes of being that cannot be accounted for by
discursive forms, such as inscription or description. Movement through space, as well as history-
as-space characterizes this otherness, this radical, opaque, purposive, improvised subjectivity.
This subjectivity “plays” on history’s spaces to make better sense of one’s self in the world
(carrying one’s home-space with oneself when moving from one place to another—through
memories, stories, feelings, rituals, habits, speech, and song, for example).

This spatialization of history allows what Fred Moten calls “a free, which is to say
anarchic and atelic, generativity; a reconceptualization or out-from-outside reinstrumentalization
of idiom that allows an improvisation through rather than a deconstructive oscillation within the
aporia of philosophy” (Moten, 46). Together with Brooks’s description of black performative
opacity’s instilling of movement, Moten encourages us to improvise through “the aporia of
philosophy,” using the aporia as an encounter and event, not a binary system that leads us,
ultimately, to the fundamental ambiguity of language itself. Improvisation maintains the *idiom*, the content of what we try to express (the different notes), yet allows “a free…anarchic and atelic generativity” in order to think *differently* about what we face. Like Sedgwick’s *beside*, Moten’s explanation of improvisation is opposed to a telos (it is atelic), and it does not see deconstruction—or transcendence, for that matter—as the ultimate end. While deconstruction might occur, it is not intended from the very beginning; rather, if it is to occur, it must be because one’s improvisational, radical, anarchic generativity has led one there.

This notion of mapping is charted out by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, as well as Chela Sandoval. Maps are contestable, drawn and redrawn, and subjectively traversed. Deleuze and Guattari note that “the map has to do with performance” (13), and this is precisely what I want to get at in *Cane*: by working through trauma, affect, and dispersion, the text situates itself on the border between North and South, between identities, and between desires, crossing back and forth and resisting entrapment What performance allows one to do is to move between these structures, to “border hop” and perform what Gloria Anzaldúa calls *travesía*, over and over again.

According to Anzaldúa, this *travesía* between contradictions is a powerful critical space: “the split between the two mortal combatants [will] somehow be healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes. Or perhaps we will decide to

---

10 Hazel Carby’s “Becoming Modern Racialized Subjects” understands the scene of history as a topography characterized by the encounters that create the self as a racialized, gendered subject as a result of modernity. Important work by Jared Sexton, Frank Wilderson, and Lewis Gordon, responding to Frantz Fanon’s psychoanalysis of racialization in *Black Skin, White Masks*, also understands racialization as generative of modernity.

11 For Sandoval, “differential cognitive mapping would engage consciousness, ideology, citizenship, and coalition as masquerade. It requires a consciousness that perceives itself at the center of myriad possibilities all cross-working—any of which is fodder for one’s loyalties” (31). In *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
disengage from the dominant culture, write it off altogether as a lost cause, and cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory. Or we might go another route. The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react” (*Borderlands/La Frontera*, 101). This, as has been noted by D. Emily Hicks, is intimately related to Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the rhizome: “A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new ones…. That is why one can never posit a dualism or a dichotomy, even in the rudimentary form of the good and the bad” (Deleuze and Guattari, 9). We see that Anzaldúa’s theory of contradiction does not operate as a dualism or a dichotomy—instead, it is a differential and experimental union of oppositions that maintains the integrity of difference, a critical space and stance that privileges the performativity and experience of the border crosser rather than “the [healing] word.”

---

12 See Hicks, *Border Writing* (1991), especially xxvi-xxxi.

13 While this distinction might seem tenuous at first glance, I think it is quite important to grasp the ways that Anzaldúa’s contradiction does not operate by the same dialectical logic as does the dichotomy; nor does it fall under the strictures of dualism, which posits a transcendental, master signifier to resolve the dualistic split. For the best exploration of this difference, it would be best to turn to Anzaldúa’s essay, “La herencia de Coatlicue/The Coatlicue State,” in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), 63-73. The mirror discussed on 64 might be a reasonable starting point. In the mirror, there is “seeing and being seen. Subject and object, I and she.” Anzaldúa’s insistence on conjunction indicates the inseparability of the contradictions she sets up, which come together in the space of the body and the consciousness, but which remain unresolved insofar as they maintain their difference, even under one roof. What Anzaldúa posits is a spirit of “abiding,” of recognition of difference: the contradiction abides, whereas the dichotomy gets resolved and the dualism gets messianically transcended. Where the dialectic gets its power from the movement from thesis-antithesis-synthesis, and dualism posits ascension and transcendence, contradiction works with the constant tension(s) between its parts. Perhaps the best way to describe the distinction I am trying to make is by making use of planar or spatial language: the dialectic is a movement between to objects on the same plane to a higher or different plane; dualism is a rapturous ascension to a separate plane; contradiction dwells on the same plane, forcing us to perform here and now. Contradiction is a present-tense or present-oriented category, different from the other two.
In Anzaldúa’s *travesía*, we find echoes of *fugitivity* as it is theorized by Moten and Saidiya Hartman, as well as the ideas of *improvisation* and *beside* explored above. These theoretical interventions provide a language for struggling with our encounter with texts like *Cane*, as well as the radical representational “problem” (which is in fact a solution) presented by migrants in and as text. *Cane*, in perhaps its most deeply transgressive vein, makes nearly everything migratory—unstable and (over)flowing.

IV. What Lies Ahead

I have structured *Migrant Modalities* as a five chapter dissertation whose literary chronologically begins in 1923 with the publication of Jean Toomer’s *Cane* and ends in 1976 with Alice Walker’s *Meridian*. Because Alice Walker was a student of Muriel Rukeyser’s at Sarah Lawrence, and also because Walker was instrumental in reinvigorating the canonical and political importance of Zora Neale Hurston’s life and work, I have decided to conclude the dissertation with Walker. This move not only emphasizes the connections and circuits that flow through the dissertation, but also gestures toward the real, existential stakes of hermeneutic practice. That is to say, the way that Walker takes up the heritage of writers before her not only speaks to the importance of genealogy and tradition, but also reveals emphatically the necessary lifework that critical interpretation performs in the world at large as both an aesthetic process and as a political process.

---

I begin *Migrant Modalities* by arguing that *Cane* must be understood as a border text, using Gloria Anzaldúa as my framework for understanding the idea of the border. My argument for taking *Cane* as a border text unlinks “border” from nationalist discourse and moves it into other potential border spaces. In this conceptualization, the border is wherever two spaces are beside each other, especially if these spaces are oppositionally situated or theorized—that is, that these spaces are contradictory yet constitutive (much like national borders, which must exist in order for nations to exist). This might seem too broad a definition for “border,” and thus by extension “border text.” Therefore, through a discussion of the borderlands and contradictions in *Cane*, I hope to show that although it seems rather impossible to assert positive criteria for what constitutes a border text (other than a “besideness” of spaces and the existence of one or more borders), *Cane*’s aesthetic and existential performance of the border(crossings) in the lived experience of black migrants is what distinguishes it as a border text. In so doing, I hope to extend the ideas brought about by Diaspora, Postcolonial, and Border Studies to a different archive, pulling together seemingly disconnected texts and offering new constellations of textuality and existence for further critical consideration. Beginning this dissertation with a chapter on *Cane* foregrounds my concerns with race, space, sound, and flow, as *Cane* explicitly considers each of those categories in terms of the individual lives of the people it portrays. *Cane* inaugurates this dissertation on literature and migration because it rethinks the very notion of border—what it means to cross borders, to live on the borderlands (both geographically and existentially), to experience oneself through the various borders of one’s identity—and establishes the seemingly evanescent, fluid life forces of migrants as the generative, integral energies that allow us to encounter better articulations of new versions and visions of democracy.
My second chapter is a contrapuntal reading of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men* and Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead*. What I find most beautiful in the work of Muriel Rukeyser and Zora Neale Hurston is a commitment to loving, dialogical writing. Whether the oppression is political (as in the case of laborers who have no recourse to political power or belonging), economic (as in the exploitation of laborers for the benefit of others), or discursive (as in the stereotype of the black folk, in which certain classes of people are relegated to the status of historical oddity or absurd remnant/remainder), Rukeyser and Hurston work against strictures that bind people to destructive structures and representational dead-ends.

Through considering the work of Rukeyser and Hurston, I strongly believe it possible to begin constituting a set of answers to the above questions about praxis, and what is the role of the writer in theorizing and enacting democracy. By including and experimenting with the voices of their subjects in their work, Hurston and Rukeyser insist on the plural, multivocal, and dynamic lives of their characters. The two authors explore the particularities of the people they have encountered, studied, come to know, and with whom they have allied. For both authors, there is no protean or prototypical American citizen. Instead, what Rukeyser and Hurston reveal is a deeply multivocal humanity that lives, dies, struggles, weeps, laughs, and thrives in the everyday. Through the representation and centering of marginal citizenships, Hurston and Rukeyser engage in a lexical and political praxis that offers new hermeneutic methodologies with which to ethically encounter others and stage new versions and visions of democratic community.

My third chapter is a critical consideration of the work of Sanora Babb together with Woody Guthrie. Initially, this chapter deployed John Steinbeck rather than Babb, since Guthrie famously recorded an album of songs, *The Dust Bowl Ballads*, partially as a result of his inspired
reading of Steinbeck. After watching Ken Burns’s 2013 *Dust Bowl* documentary, however, I was struck by the story of Sanora Babb, an FSA sociologist, itinerant journalist, and talented creative writer. During her assays into migrant Okie communities in the 1930s as part of her FSA work, Babb collected notebooks full of information on the lives and experiences of the Okies throughout their travels, travails, and encampments. Her boss, Tom Collins, read these notebooks and decided to forward them to Steinbeck, whom he knew was conducting research on the Okies in California. In a cruel measure of how laborers are often exploited by their overseers, Babb had no idea that Collins was sharing her work with Steinbeck. Steinbeck, of course, found the treasure trove of work invaluable and incorporated it into his blockbuster novel; he felt so strongly about the importance of the notes that he dedicated the novel to Collins. Thus, although Babb had a contract with publishers, Steinbeck’s work predated her own; as a result, her publishers told her that there was no more room for another Dust Bowl novel, and her magnum opus, *Whose Names Are Unknown*, lay unpublished for over 60 years.

What Babb enacts in her novel is a commitment to developing a descriptive praxis that has the potential for consciousness raising and political transformation. This is a praxis that one finds in the music of Woody Guthrie, in that Guthrie invokes grand historical narratives while still singing about and representing common people. This is most evident in the wide array of verses for many of Guthrie’s songs. Guthrie often chose which verses to perform almost on the spot, depending on the historical, political, or regional context. Many of his WWII era songs deal with anti-fascism—and give rise to one of the most enduring images of Guthrie and his guitar, upon which he placed a sticker proclaiming, “this machine kills fascists.” In tying his musical artistry directly to the working class—his instrument is a machine, upon which he labors and produces goods to help the war effort—Guthrie announces the need for a revolutionary approach
to destroy the evils present in fascism: statist capitalism, militarism, ethnic hatred, and nationalistic internationalism through world domination.

As a result of the above, *Migrant Modalities* is interested in Guthrie’s relationship to distribution, fame, and copyright. Famously, Guthrie didn’t care about who played his music and when, or even if, they gave him credit. What he wanted most of all was to energize his listeners (and, given the history of right-wing backlash against Guthrie as a “pinko,” you can see how his music is still quite invigorating). In providing his audiences with “free gifts” through his performances, Guthrie often short-circuited usual notions of ownership: he invited his listeners to sing along, to learn the songs and perform on their own.\(^\text{15}\) Songs were passed around, communally heard, and disseminated in both public and private. Guthrie’s songs, whether originals or standards, achieved a variety of shapes and sounds as they moved from mouth to mouth, from setting to setting, and from person to person, as the songs were learned and listened to across America.

Most of all, I would like to chart the ways that Guthrie embodies and subjectivizes the “great historical bum” through his musical performances: what does it mean to be a worker that travels throughout history? Is he simply ventriloquizing the history of laboring classes? Or, is he suggesting that all of us must be aware of history while participating in this time of enormous human progress? Perhaps both: what Guthrie makes us hear in his music is the justice behind labor struggles and the promise of economic and historical change. His music creates a space of indignation and righteous optimism as he invites every listener to join him in singing the songs that he hopes will give voice to a new concept of popular democracy.

\(^{15}\) Interested persons would write to Guthrie’s Brooklyn address, and he would send a copy of the Ten Songs to the indicated return address. Often, he would include doodles, mall sayings, personal notes, and other marginalia.
My fourth chapter is immediately concerned with the Mexican Diaspora in the United States, as represented by Tomás Rivera and Lydia Mendoza. Specifically, I consider the north-south axis of movement of Mexicans and Mexican Americans from Mexico to Texas to Chicago and everywhere in between (as well as back again). I will focus on the Texas-Mexico border, but also move north into Chicago and Michigan. The movement, from Texas to the Upper Midwest, was the path of Lydia Mendoza in her youth as a migrant worker and performer. Echoing my discussion of *Cane*, I will investigate the ways Rivera and Mendoza construct diasporic consciousness and diasporic memory, especially as they interact with geographies of power, ethnicity, and capital. How do the works attend to spaces of migration and the feelings and experiences of the people whose travels create these spaces? In my reading of Rivera’s seminal Chican@ novel, we find a point of view that insists on rethinking representations of the lives of migrants as Rivera knew them (he himself was a farmworker as a child and teenager, much like Gloria Anzaldúa and Lydia Mendoza). Rivera’s polyvocal novel is comprised of vignettes and short stories, spanning various lives, locations, ages, and genders. In representing a wide picture of immigrant life, Rivera opens up a complex critique of capital along several lines: gender relations, worker exploitation, religious fear and faith, and racial tension, to name a few.

Combining my analysis of these two authors with Lydia Mendoza opens up a perspective on the importance of music in the experience of Mexican American and Chican@ life, especially the *corrido* form, rather than other forms of Mexican American popular musical expression such as *ranchero*, *tejano*, and *mariachi* music. The corrido is a type of balladic song popularized along the U.S.-Mexico border, and Mendoza is often considered one of its champions. With her twelve-string guitar, she would travel to different cities, towns, and hamlets to play for her borderlands compatriots. “Borderlands compatriots” is a phrase I find intriguing because of its
insistence upon shared origin from a space that famously resists the straightforward nation formation; even as migrants move to and from the borderlands, this complicated identity moves along with them wherever they go.

This leads me to the most important aspect of this chapter: the construction of a borderlands semantics that forms this unique location’s narrative. How can we tell a story about the border? How do Mendoza and Rivera describe and chart the flows of people, affects, memories, and desires? For Rivera, the answer lies in the formal dimensions of his text, which travels across time, space, and imaginative barriers. What I hope to do in this chapter, while keeping Cane in mind, is that the borderlands stretch across the United States along with the migrants that call these borders home. Rivera and Mendoza draw attention to the presence of the borderlands in various, varied spaces—performing an improvisatory intervention on the themes of citizenship across a geography of tenuous, marginalized space that is transformed into a powerful, central speaking position.

These “traveling borderlands” reveal new spaces for the limits—and, by extension, the potentials—of democracy. Who is allowed to participate in certain communities? Where do the voices of migrants move to when they are not allowed to participate in larger, hegemonic communal narratives? In this chapter, theories of space come forcefully into play with the political discourse of radical democracy I have been developing, testing out new variations in the themes of citizenship. This coming together theoretically of space and politics further enables the critical method of reading that I derive from Gloria Anzaldúa and call “travesía hermeneutics,” a praxis I describe in this introduction and enact in my reading of Cane. This reading method abides in the borderlands of reading and political praxis, staking a critical position that seeks to open textual possibilities, rather than discursively sealing and naming analytical certainties.
My final chapter, which is also my conclusion, begins with a discussion of the folk musician Odetta. I am specifically interested in the process of rewriting, renewing, and remembering reflected in and through Odetta’s wide-ranging oeuvre. Most interesting to me is the “soundscape” of her music, and of the affective encounters found in the political and aesthetic implications of her revisions and re-imaginings of folk standards.

Alice Walker’s work parallels Odetta’s music in the way both artists disrupt the present, as well as traditional narrative forms, to tell the stories of the most marginalized persons. Both utilize traditional forms to open up fissures in the expected or received narrative, transforming the present and the past in order to remake the possibilities held by the future. Odetta and Walker go back in order to bring forth. By this I mean that they imagine and rephrase the narratives of history, whether musical or literary. By repeating, reordering, or rewriting what is traditionally or commonly “known” historically, Walker and Odetta express the multiplicity of historical (and, by default, contemporary) American experiences. In their reformulation of classic(al) forms and American scenes, both artists voice the varieties of diasporic experience.

I will be reading one novel by Alice Walker: Meridian, a novel committed to exploring modes and methods of relationality, and radically revising the meanings and forms of community. Meridian recovers, narrativizes, and embodies (historical) particularities of black experience in the United States: each novel, for example, depicts a different scene and condition of migration, whether massive or individual. In asking what community means and interrogates the ways that people come together, and specifically questions received history and expected knowledge, Meridian explores the activism of the 1960s and ‘70s, seeking to make sense of interracial activism, alliance, and relationships during the high-point of radical activism in post-WWII America. Walker questions the hopes and expectations, as well as the disappointments
and futilities, of activism at the time. Why did no revolution come about? What did the passage of Civil Rights legislation accomplish immediately after it was passed? *Meridian* brings radical activism back to the South—where SNCC and other Civil Rights groups had their origins. In locating activism away from metropolitan centers like the Bay Area, Chicago, and New York City, Walker seeks to recognize and reaffirm the importance of the South in black American experience.

Thanks to Farah Griffin’s suggestions, I will be bringing the dissertation full circle by connecting Walker to one of her former teachers, Muriel Rukeyser, as well as to the author and thinker whose work she helped revitalize, Zora Neale Hurston. While at Sarah Lawrence, Walker studied poetry with Rukeyser. Indeed, Rukeyser’s theory of the “unborn poets”—those who will come and remake the world—is perhaps most fully expressed in her poem, “To an unborn poet,” which was inspired by Walker.

I do not mean to suggest that Odetta and Walker are the telos or endpoint of a historical narrative, and I do not mean to establish them as the logical endpoints or exemplars of my arguments. Situating them at the end of *Migrant Modalities* is a subjective, aesthetic judgment. It also reveals an intention of mine: to revel in the difficult, circuitous, anachronistic possibilities contained within history and its interpretation. Odetta and Walker are by no means “the end of history,” but they are the at the end of this particular history of literature, largely because I believe their works take everything explored in this dissertation as foundational wisdom, thus embarking on radical aesthetic journeys that push the limits of appreciation and understanding—and it is this “living on the limit,” the *borderlands*, that I would like to investigate to finish the dissertation.
Chapter 1. Flow, Memory, Dusk: Jean Toomer’s *Cane*, the Borderlands of Encounter, and the Crucible of Contradiction in the Creation of Migrant Literary Subjectivity

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.
—Robert Frost, “Stopping by Woods on a Snow Evening”

I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers
—Langston Hughes, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”

I. Extensive Overture: Beside, Beneath, Beyond, and the Case for a Spatial Methodology

Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923) takes up the crossroads of American racial and nationalist discourse. It is a text that is its own crossroads, a text that inhabits various racial, geographic, and experiential borders while containing and complicating its own internal borders and categories. For example, what does it mean to live in the North and retain one’s roots in the South? What is the aesthetic purpose behind *Cane*’s unconventional formal structure? What does it mean to consider the South one’s homeland, especially if one is oppressed there through violent,
economic, and juridical means? *Cane* earnestly takes up the lived experience of black southerners and their relationship to the South: the beauty of the land, along with the beauty of the people that live there, is juxtaposed to themes of violence and exclusion. This terrible beauty, this ardent love for a violent land, largely (in)forms the aesthetic of *Cane*. This contradiction begets several questions, which motivate my reading in this chapter: how does *Cane* approach the questions of historical nostalgia, kidnap, and displacement brought about by white supremacy, as well as subsequent histories and narratives of movement? How can the experience of blackness contain such overwhelming, yet constitutive contradictions? How does *Cane* undercut its own adherence to an intellectually patriarchal version of Literary Modernism? What emerges from gendered and raced silences in the text, and relatedly, how does *Cane* discursively enable models of cultural, literary, and political inquiry that do not only constitute a revision, but a re-sounding (a *resounding* re-sounding) of history? Finally, what does the history of black migration in the 20th century illuminate and possibly reconfigure regarding all of these questions?

My argument for taking *Cane* as a border text unlinks “border” from nationalist discourse and moves it into other potential border spaces. In this conceptualization, the border is wherever two spaces are beside each other, especially if these spaces are oppositionally situated or theorized—that is, that these spaces are contradictory yet constitutive (much like national borders, which must exist in order for nations to exist). This might seem too broad a definition for “border,” and thus by extension “border text.” Therefore, through a discussion of the borderlands and contradictions in *Cane*, I show that although it seems rather impossible to assert positive criteria for what constitutes a border text (other than a “besideness” of spaces and the existence of one or more borders), *Cane*’s aesthetic and existential performance of the
border(crossings) in the lived experience of black migrants distinguishes it as a border text. *Cane* rethinks the very notion of border—what it means to cross borders, to live between worlds, to experience oneself through the various borders of one’s identity—and establishes the seemingly evanescent, fluid life forces of migrants as the integral energies that allow us new versions and visions of democracy.

*Cane* limns several borders. Historically, *Cane* is a text of migration and its particular moment is post-WWI, post-Reconstruction American race and class relations. Its historical tensions are rehearsed and performed throughout the text. Spatially, as a migration narrative that explores the open wounds between black and white communities in both the North and the South, the text opens up non-traditional ways of considering space and linkages between communities. Mnemonically, *Cane* situates memory in both body and mind, exploring the way that memory is communally articulated and negotiated. Generically, *Cane* is relatively uncategorizable, as it contains lineated poems, prose poems, short stories, and a quasi closet drama. Thematically, *Cane* has several continuously occurring elements, such as rivers, roots, dusk, and the color purple. Attending to these formal elements allows us to see how *Cane* plies the borderlands of race, community, and existence through repeated semiotic patterns and structural concerns: form and content come together in a unity that, paradoxically, allows *Cane* to best examine the disunity and contradiction that underlies racial and democratic experience.

However, much of the scholarship on *Cane* focuses on Jean Toomer’s fraught biography.¹ This research emphasizes his desire for transcendence beyond the “biracial

---

¹ See, for example: Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity* (1986) and “Jean Toomer’s *Cane*: Modernism and Race in Interwar America” (2001); William M. Ramsey, “Jean Toomer’s Eternal South” (2003); Gino Michael Pellegrini, “Jean Toomer and *Cane*: ‘Mixed Blood’ Impossibilities” (2008); Ignacio Ortiz-Monasterio, “Jean Toomer’s ‘Kabnis’ and the Language of Dreams,” (2006); George Hutchinson, “Jean Toomer and American Racial Discourse,”
identification system” which made no room for him, and beyond a material culture that seemed to reify both objects and subjects, making the latter into legible, discursive objects while also maintaining the former (and as a result, subjects, too) as consumable commodities. As a result, this scholarship has tended to take up Toomer as a tragic hero looking forward to a post-racial America, an iconoclast seeking to transform putatively ethnocentric politics. In this configuration, Toomer stands in for radical individualism (a fetishized category that is taken up as a hallowed symbol for various political purposes): a signifier for embracing a subjectivity that pushes against the objectification that is often claimed to be a consequence of either identity (politics) or modernity, or both. This reading logic follows either a dialectical model or a developmental model. That is, in the dialectical approach, either the black-white binary of American racial politics (as understood and laid out in these arguments) is sublated (at the very least, these readings argue that Toomer attempts to transcend racial categories), while in the developmental approach, the social construction of race gives way to a more idealized approach to subjectivity taken by Toomer-the-man that rejects fragmenting and fragmented identity (politics) in favor of belonging to a common identity or a common non-identity. In both cases, I find that a specific, ideological model of history is privileged: either transcendence beyond historical events, experiences, and categories, or social constructions evolving into “better,” supposedly more inclusive identifications such that all categories of experience are relinquished

---

(1993); and Charles Harmon, “Cane, Race, and ‘Neither/Norism,’” (2000). This might be a more recent trend in Cane scholarship; nonetheless, I find it representative and indicative of a “transcendental” urge in readings of Cane.

2 I would like to acknowledge Fred Moten’s reading of Marx’s commodity that/who speaks in In the Break (2003), especially pages 5-22. I believe that his cogent, rigorous analysis of the commodity could provide, in and of itself, a response to the “transcendental” scholarship of Cane by showing that a materialist response to American racism and racial politics is a more potent and adequate gesture towards a realizable notion of utopia; materialism acknowledges “the real” while critiquing the symbolic order(s) within which objects operate, without positing transcendence as its telos.
in favor of a unifying theory of identity. In the case of Toomer criticism, these arguments often hinge on a utopian nationalism espoused by Toomer in his later life and work. What troubles me about these claims is the “erasure” or “forgetting” that seems to underlie these models (and is often referred to in tense political discussions as “moving on” or “getting over”). As Josh Kun might put it (in *Audiotopia* [2005]), we too often “hear” a song of America that resists difference; the aforementioned *Cane* scholarship is imagined as a “democratic utopia based on harmony—on a convergence of songs—that [is] already [heard], a harmony that sweeten[s] the sound of difference in the name of establishing the native music of the American new world” (Kun, 25). In other words, difference becomes simply a chord progression that resolves into a boisterous major fifth and is ultimately forgotten after the final notes have died away, leaving only satisfied applause behind, and subsequently, the only memory is the satisfaction of having had satisfied applause.

I want to complicate these readings by making a brief recourse to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Touching Feeling* (2003), before furthering the case for *Cane*’s status as a border text. In her foundational theorization of affect and performativity, Sedgwick introduces a theory of “beside” that is avowedly materialist and spatial and thus resists teleological, transcendental narratives. She tells us, “As its title suggests, the most salient preposition in *Touching Feeling* is probably beside. Invoking a Deleuzian interest in planar relations, the irreducibly spatial

---

3 To be fair, none of the critics referred to in footnote 1 have insisted on “moving on.” That said, I find generalized criticisms of “identity politics” or “ethnic studies,” which some of these scholars espouse, to contain the germs of “move on” in their critical soil, which may eventually bloom into the weeds of “forgetting” and “erasure.” These claims tend to assert that the only permissible difference in society is that between individuals as objects in material space and their subjective/phenomenal make-up. Racial identity, in this schema, is often seen as an impediment to “getting along.” Without accusing these critics of unavoidably espousing this philosophy, I would simply like to point out this stance’s shared foundations with certain contemporary political formations that explicitly condemn racial and sexual politics as sticks in society’s spokes.
positionality of beside also seems to offer some useful resistance to the ease with which beneath and beyond turn from spatial descriptors into implicit narratives of, respectively, origin and telos” (Sedgwick, 8). This concept of beside, if extended to Cane, enables readers to theorize binaries and categories of identification next to each other as spaces to be negotiated and moved between and through, rather than transcended or disavowed. Using the concept of beside thus horizontally orients one’s frame of reference, abetting comparative work that refuses to evaluate and hierarchize. Sedgwick’s important work in Touching Feeling offers more than a theoretical means of justifying a horizontal approach to criticism: it urges us to consider epistemological simultaneity, achieved by considering multiple perspectives at once; it also privileges ensemblic comparative work, since pulling apart and putting together groupings of text or art for consideration in both expected and unexpected ways allows us novel experiences of aesthetic pleasure, political progress, and theoretical expansion. By theorizing with and through the idea of beside, categories of description, existence, and identity become spaces rather than walls: and because they are spaces, they can be traversed and explored, rather than simply bumped up against or overleapt. Since the borders between categories are not spaces of “either/or,” or spaces of “neither/nor,” they are rather spaces of constant conjunction, of “both/and.” The language of the border, then, describes multiple traversable geographies, from the psychic to the physical. D. Emily Hicks gives us a generative approach for thinking about border writing and what it means for the complex spatialization of history and memory. A border text’s porosity and polyphony chart out ways of traversing time and space affectively, in the taking up and utilization of memory. Says Hicks, “border writers give the reader the opportunity to practice multidimensional perception and nonsynchronous memory. By multidimensional perception I mean quite literally the ability to see not just from one side of a border, but from the other side as
well” (xxiii). This “multidimensional perception” is the border space that *Cane* takes up throughout, however uncomfortably. *Cane* not only moves between spaces—it constantly sets them beside each other, inhabiting both, and enunciating from both, at the same time.

Thus, rethinking the notion of borders causes us to see migration as a socioeconomic act and an existential act, allowing us to explore the realm of consequences in each. What I am gesturing towards is a notion of the borderland that *Cane* inhabits: generically, thematically, and philosophically, it does indeed resolutely target the bankrupt politics of a national ideology that (still) insists on violently marking the difference between black and white, as the *Cane* scholars cited above have eloquently shown. However, rather than thinking of *Cane* as partaking in an “implicit narrative of origin and telos,” I would like to insist that it uncomfortably and powerfully inhabits the borders of the binaries whose deconstruction is sought, rather than seeking to escape them. In doing this, *Cane* makes us witness the intensity and the beauty of the lives it portrays. Perhaps the text does make a political argument about the need to transcend racial categories; yet by inhabiting the borderlands of the contradictions it lays bare, *Cane* indicates a different utopia, a utopia that is not created by transcendence, but by fierce, defiant existence. That is to say, utopia cannot be thought or willed into existence—it must be *lived*. *Cane* sees the beauty of the many, of the plural, rather than of the unitary—hence its many names, places, and lives. Rather than seeking to streamline existence into unity, *Cane*, to borrow Brent Edwards’s provocative theorizations of articulation and *décalage* in *The Practice of Diaspora*, “lives with and through, not despite, difference” (Edwards, 12).

In *Cane*, black is beside white, and North is beside South; binaries are beside each other. I would like to think of these binaries as spatialized (and thus capable of real, material effects), as well as being historically informed, and from there, to consider the roles played by memory,
movement, and affect in moving through these spaces. I would also like to query the contours of a spatial history: what might this look like? What does it mean for a space to have a memory, a history? How do histories and memories migrate, along with the subjects whose memories and histories they are? Might history be seen as a category of identity worthy of exploration and experience, rather than simply something that must be rigidly excavated and examined?

Thinking of history as spatial allows a novel methodological approach to hermeneutics that allow for a wholly different, wholly radical approach to experiencing oneself in the world—both as a geographical and as a historical subject. History, then, might be experienced as a series of borders that must be encountered and crossed, experienced and considered—history is a text or a map that is interpreted. This injunction to spatialize does not run counter to historicism; on the contrary, I find it productive in the sense that it forces us to consider multiple histories and their relations as spaces that interact and criss-cross. Historical flux and movement are thus put into play with place and memory, and particularity and relationality become the ways to negotiate these complex planes. Here, maybe more than elsewhere, we find a valorization of the radical subjectivity that Jean Toomer calls for—that said, it is also an insistence that radical subjectivity operate in an ensemble, that multiple memories and histories help shape the fabric of the borderland, that aspirations toward unity acknowledge (and operate through) difference. By radical subjectivity, I do not mean individualism as such, but a radicalized, performative being in the world. Daphne Brooks, arguing for the powerful specificity of black performative opacity and black song, shows that such a radical(ized) subjectivity “instill[s] movement in ‘free’ yet socially, politically, and culturally circumscribed bodies” (Bodies in Dissent, 8). This movement operates in circumscribed space and opens up new modes of being that cannot be accounted for by discursive forms, such as inscription or description. Movement through space, as well as
history-as-space characterizes this otherness, this radical, opaque, purposive, improvised subjectivity. This subjectivity “plays” on history’s spaces to make better sense of one’s self in the world (carrying one’s home-space with oneself when moving from one place to another—through memories, stories, feelings, rituals, habits, speech, and song, for example).

This spatialization of history allows what Fred Moten calls “a free, which is to say anarchic and atelic, generativity; a reconceptualization or out-from-outside reinstrumentalization of idiom that allows an improvisation through rather than a deconstructive oscillation within the aporia of philosophy” (Moten, 46). Together with Brooks’s description of black performative opacity’s instilling of movement, Moten encourages us to improvise through “the aporia of philosophy,” using the aporia as an encounter and event, not a binary system that leads us, ultimately, to the fundamental ambiguity of language itself. Improvisation maintains the idiom, the content of what we try to express (the different notes), yet allows “a free…anarchic and atelic generativity” in order to think differently about what we face. Like Sedgwick’s beside, Moten’s explanation of improvisation is opposed to a telos (it is atelic), and it does not see deconstruction—or transcendence, for that matter—as the ultimate end. While deconstruction might occur, it is not intended from the very beginning; rather, if it is to occur, it must be because one’s improvisational, radical, anarchic generativity has led one there.

Improvisation and beside gives us the language to think of migration a spatialized action and a historical process, and thus a major literary, critical, and political concern. Migration is thus not only a thematic element in Cane, but also a textual process and at its limits, begets a

---

4 Hazel Carby’s “Becoming Modern Racialized Subjects” understands the scene of history as a topography characterized by the encounters that create the self as a racialized, gendered subject as a result of modernity. Important work by Jared Sexton, Frank Wilderson, and Lewis Gordon, responding to Frantz Fanon’s psychoanalysis of racialization in Black Skin, White Masks, also understands racialization as generative of modernity.
readerly engagement with the novel. We, as readers, are made migrant. Migration, loss, trauma, and memory all flow throughout the text, often bringing the text into contact with itself through narrative collapse, fracture, or impossibility when characters, communities, and environments are faced with violence, when they can no longer “go on.” These instances function, for the reader, as ways of drawing an affective cartography through the text, one that is often constructed by the characters themselves. This is because even while moments of collapse do occur, the text still flows by drawing together instances of repeated or echoing images, symbols, and ideas, such as dusk and blood. Geographically and mnemonically, characters work to create affective and cognitive bridges across spaces, which creates a more readily available set of flows for the reader to apprehend; that is, formally, the reader is urged to note the ways the text folds and refolds itself into new maps. The text charts itself, offering up various pathways for making connections between passages and themes. This construction of a psychical and affective map is integral to Cane’s status as a border text. This notion of mapping is charted out by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, as well as Chela Sandoval. Maps are contestable, drawn and redrawn, and subjectively traversed. Deleuze and Guattari note that “the map has to do with performance” (13), and this is precisely what I want to get at in Cane: by working through trauma, affect, and dispersion, the text situates itself on the border between North and South, between identities, and between desires, crossing back and forth and resisting entrapment. What performance allows one to do is

---

5 Throughout this chapter, I will be making recourse to Jonathan Flatley’s work, Affective Cartographies.
7 For Sandoval, “differential cognitive mapping would engage consciousness, ideology, citizenship, and coalition as masquerade. It requires a consciousness that perceives itself at the center of myriad possibilities all cross-working—any of which is fodder for one’s loyalties” (31). In Methodology of the Oppressed (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
to move between these structures, to “border hop” and perform what Gloria Anzaldúa calls *travesía*, over and over again.

According to Anzaldúa, this *travesía* between contradictions is a powerful critical space: “the split between the two mortal combatants [will] somehow be healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes. Or perhaps we will decide to disengage from the dominant culture, write it off altogether as a lost cause, and cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory. Or we might go another route. The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react” (*Borderlands/La Frontera*, 101). This, as has been noted by D. Emily Hicks, is intimately related to Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the rhizome: “A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new ones…. That is why one can never posit a dualism or a dichotomy, even in the rudimentary form of the good and the bad” (Deleuze and Guattari, 9).  

We see that Anzaldúa’s theory of contradiction does not operate as a dualism or a dichotomy—instead, it is a differential and experimental union of oppositions that maintains the integrity of difference, a critical space and stance that privileges the performativity and experience of the border crosser rather than “the [healing] word.”

---

8 See Hicks, *Border Writing* (1991), especially xxvi-xxxi.
9 While this distinction might seem tenuous at first glance, I think it is quite important to grasp the ways that Anzaldúa’s contradiction does not operate by the same dialectical logic as does the dichotomy; nor does it fall under the strictures of dualism, which posits a transcendental, master signifier to resolve the dualistic split. For the best exploration of this difference, it would be best to turn to Anzaldúa’s essay, “La herencia de Coatlicue/The Coatlicue State,” in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), 63-73. The mirror discussed on 64 might be a reasonable starting point. In the mirror, there is “seeing and being seen. Subject and object, I and she.” Anzaldúa’s insistence on conjunction indicates the inseparability of the contradictions she sets up, which come together in the space of the body and the consciousness, but which remain unresolved insofar as they maintain their difference, even under one roof. What Anzaldúa posits is a spirit of “abiding,” of recognition of difference: the contradiction abides, whereas the dichotomy gets resolved and the dualism gets messianically transcended. Where the dialectic gets its power from the movement
In Anzaldúa’s *travesía*, we find echoes of *fugitivity* as it is theorized by Moten and Saidiya Hartman, as well as the ideas of *improvisation* and *beside* explored above. These theoretical interventions provide a language for struggling with our encounter with texts like *Cane*, as well as the radical representational “problem” (which is in fact a solution) presented by migrants in and as text. *Cane*, in perhaps its most deeply transgressive vein, makes nearly everything migratory—unstable and (over)flowing. Thus, Gino Michael Pellegrini claims that mixed race (especially male) characters in *Cane* find themselves and their situations impossible. For Pellegrini, this impossibility is indicative of American society’s failure, and precipitates a despairing tone to the text, in its formal and thematic ambiguities:

[M]ixed race male narrative voices in *Cane* must navigate the same rigid segments of black-white color line that limit and damage the mixed race women whom they describe. For this reason, these narrative voices, on the whole, are sympathetic, but also hesitant, ambivalent, and conflicted about their own social standing. They also shift in and out grammatically from first to third person, and they are continually on the move from place to place (13).

Pellegrini also suggests that “the male narrative voices in *Cane* are inclined to flee once they realize that they are caught in the middle of situations that surpass their understanding and ability to intervene and effect change” (14). For Pellegrini, this impossibility renders *Cane* hopeless.

from thesis-antithesis-synthesis, and dualism posits ascension and transcendence, contradiction works with the constant tension(s) between its parts. Perhaps the best way to describe the distinction I am trying to make is by making use of planar or spatial language: the dialectic is a movement between to objects on the same plane to a higher or different plane; dualism is a rapturous ascension to a separate plane; contradiction dwells on the same plane, forcing us to perform here and now. Contradiction is a present-tense or present-oriented category, different from the other two. 

With the critical stance that Anzaldúa sets the foundation for, though, we see that “impossibility” is the state-of-affairs of the oppressed, what Chela Sandoval calls our attention to when she reminds us that “the condition recently claimed as the ‘postmodern splitting of the subject’ is one of the conditions that conquered and colonized Westerners were invited to survive under modernist and previous eras, if survival were a choice” (Methodology of the Oppressed, 33). Further, “a life lived metonymically from experience to experience is also a course of action demanded of those who hold out against conditions of hunger, deprivation, humiliation, colonization, and social subjection” (28). Fugitivity—a permanently oppositional and differential consciousness—becomes a way of life and a critical position: it is the improvisation and “anarchization of certain principles” that Fred Moten calls us to, necessary for social (if not existential and physical) survival (Moten, 93). 11 Again turning to Sandoval, “oppositional consciousness … travels differentially but with literacy across and through cultural spaces: it is a mobile, flexible, diasporic force that migrates between contending ideological systems” (30). All of the above is to say: perhaps impossibility is what should be desired. Impossibility necessitates improvisation, since no pre- or re-written social script can make the sense that we need to continue existing, especially if the social scripts are predicated upon social death, oppression, or erasure.

Through its polyphony and its wide expanse of characters, Cane occupies the affective borderlands of a diaspora often described and dismissed in the terms just mentioned: social death, oppression, and erasure. Because memory is so often tied to trauma and ambiguity, it is a call to keep in mind the spirit of perseverance, to keep the past popping into the present, stressing the importance of community and creating affective maps to chart one’s voyage of survival.

11 This passage from Moten’s In the Break will be considered at a greater length later in this chapter.
Anzaldúa suggests that these maps serve to connect migrants to their origins, even though these origins may be violent and traumatic; in this way, the South is always part of the North, and one’s origin is always part of one’s current place in the world, at least as it is psychically and spatially configured by migrants.\textsuperscript{12}

Anzaldúa sees this migrant, oppositional consciousness as a new iteration and embodiment of human being:

[The new mestiza] has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else. She can be jarred out of ambivalence by an intense, and often painful, emotional event which inverts or resolves the ambivalence. I’m not sure exactly how. The work takes place underground—subconsciously. It is work that the soul performs. That focal point or fulcrum, that juncture where the mestiza stands, is where phenomena tend to collide. (101)

Anzaldúa offers us a way of embracing \textit{Cane}’s ambiguities, its monstrosities, its incommensurability, its traumas: the text, uncomfortable in its own skin (like Toomer was in his, one could say in a nod to the biographical), provides a way of working with, rather than beyond, its contradictions. In this working-with, we constantly encounter Anzaldúa’s “I’m not sure exactly how”; we find ourselves at the limits/borders, in the midst of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls “the boundary of what a writer can’t figure out how to say readily, never mind prescribe to others: in the Jacoblike wrestling—or t’ai chi, as it may be—that confounds agency with passivity, the self with the book and the world, the ends of the work with its means, and, maybe most alarmingly, intelligence with stupidity” (2). What is at stake in the phenomenon of \textit{working with} is that the author, critic, or speaking agent does not profess to any overarching

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Cane} acknowledges both parts of the contradiction. It embraces one half and keeps its thumb on the pulse of the other, constantly reminding us that violence and death cannot be forgotten, that they are a part of the \textit{herencia} of America’s creation and rise to power: modernity without violence would cease to be modernity.
knowledge or mastery; rather, what emerges is a theory of constant, consistent dialogue—a
dialogical way of existing in the world. This mode of existence requires us to think horizontally,
transgressively, and thus democratically—and ultimately, with a persistent, fierce desire to act
ethically. Reading and interpretation, then, are more than contemplation—they are border-
crossing acts committed while we inhabit the borders of our own existences, and by thinking of
reading and interpretation as such, we can reorient ourselves in a textual, objectified world. After
all, if objects have life and must be ethically encountered, should not ethical interpretation be our
first and constant gesture toward others? A notion of border-inhabiting and border-crossing is
integral not only to reading Cane: it allows us to situate ethics, experience, and interpretation as
contiguous, continuous fields of inquiry. Therefore the burden is on us, who experience the text,
to travel its affective map and explore the text’s many relations and relationships.

In Cane we find everyday life always already disrupted: the characters are in a Coatlicue
state, which Anzaldúa describes in Borderlands/La Frontera. For example, Ralph Kabnis is
trapped in a grotesque Southern nightmare-scape, forced to acknowledge his multiple heritages
while resisting identification either way. For Anzaldúa, this state can be stultifying and
heartbreaking (as it is for Kabnis throughout much of the vignette), or it can be a “step forward
… a travesía, a crossing. I am again an alien in a new territory. And again, and again” (70). This
is because “Coatlicue depicts the contradictory…. she is a symbol of the fusion of opposites: the

---

13 As discussed in this dissertation’s introduction, the model of direct democracy and
speaking/working with I describe and advocate for throughout Migrant Modalities is predicated
upon the desire for justice, and because it is dedicated to justice, fights for the fundamental
dignity and sacredness of every human. As stated in the introduction and in subsequent chapters,
much of this thinking is derived not only from the Civil Rights Movement, but also from the
ACT-UP activists, César Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and the United Farm Workers labor
movement, Eugene V. Debs, Paulo Freire, and Simone Weil.

14 Fred Moten establishes the stakes of this ethical, re/de/constructed objectification in In the
eagle and the serpent, heaven and the underworld, life and death, mobility and immobility, beauty and horror” (69). *Coatlícuē* is not sublation, though: she is not synthesis per se (she is combination or coming-together rather than synthesis: she takes both opposed parts and joins them in one body while maintaining their difference). D. Emily Hicks supports this view: “The border crosser is both ‘self’ and ‘other.’ The border crosser ‘subject’ emerges from double strings of signifiers of two sets of referential codes, from both sides of the border” (xxvi). As does Kun: “Strangeness is identity’s uncomfortable, but required, double” (12). The self (and self-as-other) is the space where contradiction is apprehended and negotiated, but the dyad does not function dialectically, as the self-as-other construction might imply.\(^{15}\)

Thus, as Kun puts it,

[W]e should be thinking of music in terms of the differences it contains, the differences it makes audible, not the unities or harmonies it can be used to fabricate. We should be thinking of pieces of music—be they songs, samples, lyrics, chords, harmonies, rhythms— as ‘audiotopias,’ small, momentary, lived utopias built, imagined, and sustained through sounds, noise, and music. This, of course, requires another adjustment, to think of music in terms of space and in terms of its spaces—the spaces that the music itself contains, the spaces that music fills up, the spaces that music helps us to imagine as listeners occupying our own real and imaginary spaces. (Kun, 21)

Kun’s audiotopia is exactly the aspirational border space that *Cane* inhabits. As noted by Geneviève Fabre and Michel Feith, “one might argue that the aesthetics of collage and the kaleidoscopic effect of a composition by fragments also apply to narrative instances, engendering a general polyphony, in which each piece creates its own voice” (6). Joel Peckham finds that “most of the narratives seem fragmentary and disjunctive, reinforcing the montage effect of the work as a whole. This fragmentation, far from representing a structural flaw in the work, is the source of *Cane’s* strange power” (286). *Cane* as song is sounded through its

\(^{15}\) As it would in Hegel or Kojève.
multiplicity, its many perspectives, its seemingly unlocatable narrative voice, and the melody of each of its parts. Again, Cane doesn’t sublate or resolve these differences. Instead, it takes them as generative and differential, asking the reader to approach its text as an ensemble and to participate in its imaginative universe. Because the text is an ensemble, rather than a collection or a novel, it enables a vision of an emergent, polyphonic migrant community. It is emergent because it traces possibilities of diasporic community; it is polyphonic because the range of voices is exceptional. Although Cane is certainly in conversation with Modernist and Regionalist works at the time (one immediately thinks of Willa Cather, William Carlos Williams, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore, Edgar Lee Masters, and Sherwood Anderson in terms of a demotic style of Modernist writing that contains Regionalism within it), it thinks beside them or aside from them, largely due to its ensamblic nature. Cane improvises and devises new modes of expressivity that try to account for the black migrant community as it flows through the United States.

II. Flow

The way I have decided to synthesize the diverse, dizzying borderlands in Cane is to isolate my argument to the following formal and contextual elements as they emerge in the text: flow, memory, and dusk. What are the flows in the text, and what do they do? Recent work by Marissa K. López, Josh Kun, and Dalia Kandiyoti, along with the work of Mary Pat Brady and José David Saldivar pushes for a hemispheric, transnational consideration of U.S. Literature. Flow and influx are necessary terms when considering not only literature and music in the U.S., but its overall sociopolitical portrait. Although I do not explicitly consider the hemispheric implications in my reading of Cane, I take to heart the lessons taught by the scholars mentioned.
above, especially in utilizing a systemic, discursively broad approach to reading text. Because my attention in this chapter is keyed to migration and movement as instanced by the black diaspora in the United States, a postcolonial and hemispheric perspective informs my methodology, especially as I consider the implications of flow in its narrative and formal aspects in *Cane*. Although it seems a catchall, flow describes the way that histories commingle and move, the way that communities separate and re-form.

Some of the flows we might follow are: memory flows; bod(ily) flows such as migration and blood; flowing music, and music as it flows; and flows of consciousness. There are certainly quite a lot more, but these are just some of the problematics that Toomer engages, and through which I would like to approach the polyphonic subject/subjective matter in *Cane*. There are many examples of trauma and violence in the text, which often bleakly fragment characters, highlight their alienation, or result in death and the unrepresentable. Alternately, these instances can be taken as ruptures of the all-too-real into the everyday—or, of the all-too-real as the everyday; for the reader, they might also be experienced as the melancholic intrusion of the past into the present, an “‘intrusion of a forgotten past that disrupts the fictitious progress of chronological time’ [and thus] is not an escape from the present, but (paradoxically) a more attentive return to it” (Flatley, 68). In this way, *Cane* avoids any simple pastoral characterization—violence is a repetitive intrusion and reinscription of racist ideology and oppression. Thus, the “rural” and “traditional” South is shown to be part of the contradiction that is modernity: lynching, segregation, economic oppression, and discrimination are part and parcel of modernity, not medieval precursors in the narrative of human progress.\textsuperscript{16} The textual move

\textsuperscript{16} Here, it would be instructive to turn to Raymond Williams’s fantastic *The Country and the City*, in which he argues that all pastoral is (and has always been, regardless of which time period it was written) necessarily ideological. This ideological underpinning is characterized by a
from South to North (and back) does more to show the interrelation of both than contrast them dialectically (or as Manichean oppositions).

The contradiction lies in the fact that modernity must be understood as both North and South, as both irredeemable violence and the promise of progress. I want to locate an onus that must be taken up by the reader: to problematize the construction of “modern versus primitive.”

Tace Hedrick tells us that “for artists and intellectuals south of the United States, the imagery of roots, seeds, grafts, and hybrids which accompanied the nationalist language of mestizaje would provide, at least in part, an artistic vocabulary with which to try to fuse the antinomies of modern and primitive” (47). We will see, through a discussion of two scenes that tie North and South together through the figure of a woman, that Toomer does indeed seem committed to this “artistic vocabulary.” Yet, because this mestizaje is predicated and dependent upon the figure of a maternal black body, this artistic vocabulary verges into the reinscription of sexist subjection.

As Laura Doyle cautions us in Bordering on the Body, this language of reproduction “depends on mother figures, in effect, to open up and sustain those other spaces and the intercorporeal voices which inspire its lyricism. In this way Cane perpetuates the Romantic gendering of materiality desired return to previous, “innocent” times, to a time of greater union (indeed, this union is often depicted through a supposed identification of a pastoral poem’s subjects with the nature in which they are situated). “Return” is a detrimental and ideologically purposed political position that seeks to erase difference in order to propose an idealized unity or singularity of identity. Brent Edwards, in his introduction to The Practice of Diaspora, utilizes Stuart Hall’s theorization of diaspora as difference rather than return to expand upon his argument regarding the important differences and translations of blackness in the circumatlantic world, and how these differences allow for the articulation (that is, the discourse of, as well as the differentiation of) diasporic consciousness.

17 Hedrick is specifically referring to Mexican artists and writers here, especially Frida Kahlo. Her article “Blood-Lines That Waver South: Hybridity, the ‘South,’ and American Bodies,” however, provides exceptional insight into Toomer’s relationship to the aesthetics of Mexico and the American Southwest. See: “Blood-Lines That Waver South: Hybridity, the ‘South,’ and American Bodies,” Southern Quarterly 42, no. 1 (Fall 2003): 39-52. Also, see Emily Lutenski’s “A Small Man in Big Spaces: The New Negro, the Mestizo, and Jean Toomer’s Southwestern Writing,” MELUS 33, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 11-32.
and remains caught in the reductive inscriptions of motherhood and embodiment which are deemed acceptable by racial patriarchy” (82).

Doyle suggests that *Cane*, although it problematizes the “Romantic gendering of materiality,” remains indebted to its racist patriarchal ideology. The dichotomization of materiality and contemplation is especially detrimental because it hierarchizes the two, and suggests that contemplation might emerge into higher planes through the gendered fecundity of the material. Thus, while *Cane* offers a vibrant model of migrant personality and consciousness through male characters, it often does so at the expense of a theory of mythological, mythopoetic womanhood. Valerie Smith argues that critics engaged in reconsiderations of literary experience “begin to reconsider the material ground of their enterprise, they demonstrate their return to earth, as it were, by invoking the specific experiences of black women and the writings of black women. This association of black women with reembodiment resembles rather closely the association … of women of color with the body and therefore with animal passions and slave labor” (Smith, 316). Doyle and Smith elucidate an important point that sheds light on Toomer’s use of black women to signify new artistic possibilities. These artistic attempts fall apart, except meta-textually: Toomer himself creates *Cane*, especially its first two parts, through representing and taking inspiration from black women’s bodies and lives. Incisively focusing on

---

18 A corollary of these arguments can be pursued by recent, illustrative work on phenomenology undertaken by Gayle Salamon and Lisa Guenther, among others. Salomon’s work works out the intersectional encounters brought about by being-in-the-world, and shows that “there are important implications for thinking all kinds of gendered and raced subjectivities and that these psychic and bodily topographies can help us understand gender theory to refer not only to what is read on or done with the surface of bodies, but as a means by which we might ask whether and how bodily interiority is achieved and what kinds of liberations or sufferings are occasioned by that achievement or its failure” (Salamon, 110). Guenther’s work illuminates many important philosophical and ethical implications of incarceration and its regime of bodily incapacitation. Her work problematizes uncritical fetishization of embodiment, much like Salamon, Doyle, and Smith, but with a different focus of attention, the ways that phenomenology is exploited in order to harm, punish, and dehumanize.
the failures of the text rather than on Toomer himself allows us to consider the ramifications of narrative failure. By reconsidering the space of these “failures” and silences, new knowledges of gendered enlightenment can be brought to bear on *Cane*. Perhaps, à la Moten, Anzaldúa, and Nathaniel Mackey, there is something quite relevant in queering the idea of the gender binary, such that what is traditionally considered feminine because it is embodied becomes instead an de-gendered phenomenological means of accessing important knowledge of the self and (and in) the world. The will to mastery and linguistic control thus impedes and restricts access to knowledge, whereas an acceptance of language’s silent spaces and aporia might preserve the essential dignity and subjectivity of figured characters, such that the processes of figuration and representation come into question.

In *Cane*, we are presented with the flow of bodies and of culture. In ‘*Who Set You Flowin*,’ Farah Griffin makes clear the point I have tried teasing out, which is epitomized in “Seventh Street,” the first section we encounter in the Northern portion of *Cane*: “there is no single migrant from the Southern section who emerges on this new landscape; instead, we the readers are the migrants of this text. It is our consciousness which immediately confronts the Northern metropolis” (65). The language of the prose poem disorients us, fragmenting our reading experience. I want to focus on a specific trope within the text at this point: the blood, the “thrusting unconscious rhythms, black reddish blood into the white and whitewashed wood of Washington” (Toomer, 39). Through blood, we are reminded of Georgia’s red soil; with the wet wood that Toomer describes, we re-encounter the doused wood of Tom’s hellish lynching.

---

19 Here I want to give a shout out to Kameron Collins, who asked me what I thought about the blood and gave me a good listen, allowing me to hone my ideas. Also, if I am not mistaken, he brought the importance of the blood to my attention, and then we together had that “aha!” moment when we connected this section to the previous vignette, “Blood-Burning Moon.” This occurred on either 6 or 7 March 2010.
The migrants flow like blood, and the blood of the migrants flows as a result of Jim Crow housing and labor markets, as well as race riots that targeted the burgeoning black communities in the North. Toomer asks three times: “Who set you flowing?” No answer is provided. Still, I want to suggest that just like the migrants who flow North, their cultural memories move North as well: the blood that cannot be stanched flows from a wound held open by a “wedge” that Toomer references at least twice. The wedge can be seen as a divider; I prefer to think of it as something that holds open the deep cut, forcing us to peer inside and assess the gash, à la Anzaldúa.20

Along with Anzaldúa, Nathaniel Mackey gives us further critical tools to peer into the wound. He speaks to the sonic quality of breaks/cuts/gashes/gaps, engaging with Federico García Lorca’s theorization of the duende—the gitano, syncretic ideal of soulful music as expressed by performers in Spain. In Mackey’s view, “Lorca doesn't so much define duende as grope after it, wrestle with it, evoke it through strain, insist on struggle. He writes, for example, that ‘one must awaken the duende in the remotest mansions of the blood,’ that ‘the duende loves the rim of the wound’ and that it ‘draws near places where forms fuse together into a yearning superior to their visible expression’” (183-4). Lorca, as explained by Mackey, defines duende in terms that look ahead to Anzaldúa’s exploration of the “Coatlicue state,” specifically in his call to evocation “through strain,” the awakening of the duende in terms of experiential consciousness raising, the fusion of forms, and the dwelling in “the rim of the wound”—una herida abierta. For Mackey-cum-Lorca and Anzaldúa, abiding in the space of the open wound is necessary for the formation of “a third country—a border culture” (see fn. 24), where new possibilities are experienced and

20 “The U.S.-Mexican border es una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture” (Borderlands/La Frontera, 25).
spoken.

The flowing blood in *Cane*’s “Seventh Street” gives us an aesthetic of the open wound, and has multiple valences: a rush of new “blood” might be linked to genetics, or to family. Clearly linked to violence, “blood” takes us from “Seventh Street” back to “Blood-Burning Moon” and Cane’s southern section, where we go back again to the poem “Portrait in Georgia.” In this poem Toomer gives us a catalogue, traditionally known as a blazon, of a woman. However, the cataloguing is anything but traditional in its subject matter. Not only does the poem undermine the blazon, it also subverts even Shakespeare’s subversive catalogue in his “dark lady” sonnet. “Portrait in Georgia” condemns Georgia’s racial violence by making it constitutive of the woman’s body—what is traditionally a poem dedicated to breaking apart a woman’s body in order to properly worship each beheld portion, is here made into an excruciating description of lynching’s horrors. Repeating the act of violence by separating the body and cataloguing the violence committed to each described part of the body, the poem splits the first two lines and the last two lines to add a hesitating, terrifying effect to the conflation of beauty and butchery. Every single simile in this poem is related to lynching: ashes and burnt burned bodies are used to describe the whiteness of the female body: “Hair—braided chestnut, / coiled like a lyncer’s rope / … / And her slim body, white as ash / of black flesh after flame” (27).

As a corollary, the poem also asserts that Georgia’s (although the title’s determinative preposition is *in,* one cannot help but think that Georgia could also be the name of a woman, especially if the preposition were *of* ) whiteness is paradoxically (but inevitably) blanched by the blackness it oppresses and exploits. One is reminded of Ralph Ellison’s “optic white” in *Invisible Man:* only with the onyx-colored droplets of mixer can optic white be the “whitest white” on the
market. “Portrait in Georgia” is more than just a foreshadowing of Tom Burwell’s lynching in “Blood-Burning Moon.” It also shows how poems in Cane become lyrical bridges between its parts, as well as engagements with American space(s) and historical literary forms. By focusing the reader on the specter of racialized violence, Cane explicitly makes its case for considering the terror and the beauty of the South in the same breath: in our present moment, given the events that have preceded us, there can be no other way of witnessing the history that unfolds itself. Like Benjamin’s Angel of History, we fly backwards, witnessing the horrors of history. And, as Cane makes clear, horrors can—and in fact do—take place in the beauty of a pastoral(ized) land. This startling and violent contradiction marks one of the borders Cane most determinedly sets out to explore.

In “Bona and Paul” and “Box Seat,” the maternal figures imaginatively engendered by Paul and Dan rupture time and space, bringing their present lives together with their past lives, as well as mythical lives before theirs. It is particularly important to examine how Cane works to bridge distances through memory and affect, using repeated symbols such as that of the mother figure, as well by the structurally situating poems to stitch together the text, in order to chart and

---

21 See Karen Jackson Ford, Split-gut Song: Jean Toomer and the Poetics of Modernity (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2005). I have largely ignored Cane’s poems, a silence that Ford takes critics to task for: “To come to terms with the poems is to unsettle many established notions about the book…. Moreover, guided through the text by the poems, our sense of the structural logic and thus the significance of the ending will change. For the poetry of Cane tells quite a different story from the one many readers have sought in its pages, a story not of awakening, reconciliation, or promise but one of nostalgia, fragmentation, defeat” (2-3). As much as I have ignored the poems, though, I cannot help but point out that my reading of Cane does not fall under Ford’s descriptive “either/or.” This reading hinges on Cane’s performance (that I have been attempting to perform [and have perhaps ended up deforming]), one that relies on a hermeneutics that attempts to step outside of Ford’s either-or.
create new ways of “flowing” through the text, of conceiving its affective and cognitive map.\textsuperscript{22} Keeping in mind the problematic linking of self and myth through the ritualized, symbolic embodiment of the mother, we can perhaps rearticulate the text’s mapping praxis.

Regarding memory and its relation to the self as a historical subject, Jonathan Flatley reminds us that “for Benjamin, an idealized version of Erfahrung [experience; specifically, “long historical memory”]—in which involuntary and voluntary memory mingle, where individual and collective experience are conjoined—remained a kind of center of gravity, not so that he could lament its passing, but so that he could remember to keep looking for the echoes of ‘experience in its strict form’ in whatever secret places they were hiding” (Flatley, 70). This is because affective experience knows no “real time” as it is defined; rather, affective experience comes upon us as very present, even if its origin is in the past. Thus in the vignette “Bona and Paul,” we find Paul standing at his window:

\begin{quote}
Paul follows the sun, over the stock-yards where a fresh stench is just arising, across what lands that are still waving above their stubble, into the sun. Paul follows the sun to a pine-matted hillock in Georgia. He sees the slanting roofs of gray unpainted cabins tinted lavender. A Negress chants a lullaby beneath the mate-eyes of a southern planter. Her breasts are ample for the suckling of a song. She weans it, and sends it, curiously weaving, among lush melodies of cane and corn. Paul follows the sun into himself in Chicago. (Toomer, 71)
\end{quote}

Paul mnemonically rides the sun, imagining Georgia, and, importantly, envisioning a singing woman working the red soil. The sun and the remembrance of a song create an affective connection between Paul in Chicago and his home in Georgia. As Farah Jasmine Griffin points out, “voices create an aural space where listeners can momentarily experience themselves as outside of themselves, as ‘home’ or as ‘free.’ This space can be simultaneously political,\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{22} As we will see in Chapter 4, Tomás Rivera’s ...\textit{y no se lo tragó la tierra} uses estampas, impressionistic miniatures utilized by many Mexican American authors, to achieve an effect that is strikingly similar to Toomer’s tactics in \textit{Cane}.\textsuperscript{22}
spiritual, and sensual” (110-111). For Paul, this moment of riding the sun becomes all three. The Chicago stockyards send up “a fresh stench” through which he must psychologically travel to reach the bucolic, idealized South. This South, though, is immediately compromised: the Negress is “chant[ing] a lullaby beneath the mate-eyes of a southern planter.” The imagery of mating is mixed with that of nursing and weaning; the exchange between all three suggests beauty, but beauty that results from coercive sexual violence. Curiously, the offspring here is a song, which is sent back to Paul on the rays of the sun, which he follows back “into himself.” This synesthetic scene creates a space built by smell, (visual) memory and hallucination, and sound. Yi-Fu Tuan’s *Space and Place* might describe this scene as one where Paul desires the freedom space, because as a migrant, he does not feel in place.

Because the stockyard stench reminds Paul of the South, it seems that an intimate, if subconscious connection exists between the smell of death and the scenes from “back home.” Textually, this connection is furnished by the many scenes of violence in the book’s first part. The smell of burning arises in several poems and stories, including Becky’s burned home in “Becky,” the charred blazon in “Portrait in Georgia,” and the vicious fight to the death and lynching in “Blood-Burning Moon.” The connection between industrial farming and the oppression of black bodies can also be found in other works of art, such as Charles Burnett’s *Killer of Sheep* or Jesmyn Ward’s short story, “The Cattle Haul.” While neither *Cane* nor *Killer of Sheep* offers a specific critique of animal abuse, both texts explicitly draw the parallel between the massive slaughter of bodies to feed a hungering nation and the violence against black men and women to feed racist oppression. The hunger of the planter’s “mate-eyes” brings this parallel

---

23 Although not about the treatment of animals in industrial settings, Ward’s Pulitzer Prize winning debut, *Salvage the Bones*, draws a strong thematic bond between ecological disaster and ruin, animal abuse, and socioeconomic neglect.
home, and the oppression comes full circle as the song migrates northward to find the freedom it needs to thrive after weaning.

As a scene of violence to the woman, the space is political: the sending of the song along migratory pathways is a call for safekeeping and for rootedness, for creating a space of diasporic being and becoming through the nourishing, differential, and anarchic liberty of improvisational iteration by the Northern son, Paul. This moment of disembodiment is one in which Paul’s psychic and affective space becomes political, spiritual, and sensual, as described by Griffin. The timelessness—or the inability to precisely name the time—of this scene is a perfect example of Benjamin’s *Erfahrung*, cited above, “in which involuntary and voluntary memory mingle, where individual and collective experience are conjoined.” Thus the starkly sexual and (always) potentially exploitative eyes of the southern planter invade the bucolic, pine-matted hillock. Yet, out of this timelessness emerges the song—and moving northward, this song becomes potential and promise.

Spiritually, Paul’s sun-journey is a way of bridging North and South, of charting an affective map from the stench of the stock-yards to the cane and corn fields of the South and back again. The psychic journey back is a way of creating an at-home space in the alienating and industrial North; this at-home space, though, is disturbed by the lurking threat of violence, represented here by the planter’s mate-eyes. Just as the planter’s lust complicates the ideal southern scene, the stench of animal carcasses pervades the North’s promise of progress. In both places, sense is intertwined with, and imbricated in, physical space. Yi-Fu Tuan’s theorization of the experiential and phenomenological characteristics of space, in his book *Space and Place*, are quite useful here. For Tuan, sensory and conscious experience combine to create an architecture of the world through which the human body can move. This is an important description of space,
giving critical approaches to *Cane* a stronger vocabulary for exploring the complex ways that sense, experience, and space combine to express migrant movement and diasporic historical consciousness. Thus the Negress’ song is material and sonic, creating a space through which to experience the self as a subject and the self as part of a history and myth: it plays and sounds itself “among lush melodies of cane and corn,” and lends to Paul a double sense of self. As we can see, the “rustic” woman’s voice gets very neatly tied to the earth by Toomer, and indeed, her song and voice are shown as mythic in quality and spirit; the latter literally gives birth to the former, which subsequently forays north circuitously to reach Paul. In this sense, the passage is reminiscent of Moses’ birth and sending-off in the Bible. Toomer seems to be saying that the song, weaned by the Negress, must be sent off in order to survive. Thus, Paul’s psychic journey south is one of survival just as the song’s heading north is. Sensually, we are driven by the sound and sight of this rural portrait: is it painted by Paul, or by an unnamed narrator? This sensory space is also what helps affectively connect the scene to Paul’s window-view, and what enables an exploration of diasporic consciousness’s historical implications upon the present-day migrant.

The architectural, historical quality of song and sound in *Cane* are key to (re)thinking the migrant experience, as this quality creates the space for a reconsideration of representational possibility. With “Bona and Paul,” a paradoxical logic of simultaneity, created through sound and space, allows for a consideration of nonlinear, unexpected knowledge that tries to account for the migrant experience. In the vignette “Blood-Burning Moon,” a similar formal logic applies, as the text tries to make sense of contradiction not only through the soundscape of song, but also through the context of mixed-race, polyamorous desire. When it begins, we find Louisa walking home and singing on her way to meet Tom. She is desired by both Tom and Bob—a black man and a white man, respectively—and she in turn desires both. Louisa, in an immediate
echo of “Portrait in Georgia,” is catalogued by the narrative: “Louisa sang as she came over the crest of the hill from the white folks’ kitchen. Her skin was the color of oak leaves on young trees in fall. Her breasts, firm and up-pointed like ripe acorns. And her singing had the low murmur of winds in fig trees” (Toomer, 28). Louisa’s body is immediately tied to the earth by the image of the young oak tree—but it is an oak tree shedding its leaves for the coming winter. Her breasts are “like ripe acorns,” the seeds from oak trees. Her singing is linked to a different, more biblical, mythical tree: the fig, with wind murmuring through it. This image of earthy embodiment, as part of a textual pattern, casts Louisa as a conduit of male creative activity. Yet, unlike the text’s other embodied, singing women, Louisa is not described by an embedded narrator. The narrator in “Blood-Burning Moon” is omniscient and omnipresent, and does not depend on hearsay; the narrator is also not focalized through male consciousness. However the narrative does freely travel by means of free-indirect discourse, which is characteristic of several other stories, as well.

Farah Griffin, describing Louisa’s voice, says Louisa’s singing voice is “otherworldly not because it is from another planet, because it is part of an unseen world that parallels our own rational one. It is both spiritual and material, both mystical and natural…. Toomer represents the voice carried by the breeze and held by the trees, creating a mystical landscape and leading directly to the ears of God” (Griffin, 115). Griffin points out the “bothness” of Louisa’s voice: it is material and thus linked to nature, but by the same token, is made mythical and spiritual. This bothness, this contradiction, is sonically tied to blackness. As related in Frederick Douglass’s autobiography, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, the songs of the slaves bespeak a nearly inconceivable contradiction: the beauty of the songs and their palpable melodies are often used to ease work—and that is only for the songs that are within hearing range of whites.
Douglass describes the hopefulness and near ecstatic joy of the slaves’ songs as they travel and move, as they move in a less oppressed space to create and shape their own sonic spaces. In one of the most quoted passages from the *Narrative*, Douglass writes,

> The slaves selected to go to the Great House Farm, for the monthly allowance for themselves and their fellow-slaves, were peculiarly enthusiastic. While on their way, they would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out—if not in the word, in the sound;—and as frequently in the one as in the other. They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone. Into all of their songs they would manage to weave something of the Great House Farm. Especially would they do this, when leaving home. (11)

Intimately tied to movement, song here is “both spiritual and material, both mystical and natural,” to hark back to Griffin. Song is engaged in because of access to space, but it is also used to create *new* space, to poetically engage with possibility even while retaining knowledge of horror. This contradiction—“the highest joy and deepest sadness”—is the task of historical remembrance and utopian hope; it is the singing of expectation and lamentation.

The “mystical landscape” created by Louisa’s song in “Blood-Burning Moon” is precisely that of expectation and lamentation. Louisa desires and she sings. This mystical landscape, though, is the setting for Tom and Bob’s duel to the death, and Tom’s subsequent lynching. “Blood-Burning Moon” perhaps describes the limits of desire and the impossibility of holding contradictory feelings; or, maybe it is a paean to a future time, when desire is not violently limited and the consequences of cross-racial desire are not death. Most importantly, Louisa’s song does not transport the self, even though it is described by “the low murmur of winds in fig trees.” Where will this wind go? Where does it carry?

In “Box Seat,” Dan Moore sits next to a “portly Negress” in order to see a musical while
following his *object* of desire, Muriel. Escorted to his seat, Dan takes his place,

close beside a portly Negress whose huge rolls of flesh meet about the bones of seat-arms. A soil-soaked fragrance comes from her. Through the cement floor her strong roots sink down. They spread under the asphalt streets. Dreaming, the streets roll over on their bellies, and suck their glossy health from them. Her strong roots sink down and spread under the river and disappear in blood-lines that waver south. Her roots shoot down. Dan’s hands follow them. Dan’s heart beats violently. He places his palms upon the earth to cool them. Earth throbs. Dan’s heart beats violently. He sees all the people in the house rush to the walls to listen to the rumble. A new-world Christ is coming up. (Toomer, 62)

Again, the body of the woman is mythopoetic, helping chart the affective map that another character (and the reader as well) might follow. The roots function doubly here: as a folk-connection, as well as being represented as literal roots. These blood-lines wavering south, Tace Hedrick reminds us, are tied to Toomer’s political and utopian project, characterized by Waldo Frank’s American excitement and a blend of radical mysticism: the “primitive” and “modern” always trouble and inhabit each other. Thus while attending a musical, Dan encounters the “soil-soaked fragrance” of a mythicized woman.

Much like Louisa’s song, expectation and lamentation are mutually constitutive of the sorrow song that emerges from the “blood-lines that waver south.” Blood, as it always is in *Cane*, indicates historical and genetic inheritance as well as violence. The roots spread, and in their flowing toward the south, provide “glossy health” for the asphalt streets. Importantly, the streets “suck their glossy health from them” while they are “dreaming.” Ascribing this consciousness to the asphalt streets, we might begin to consider alternative symbolic meanings, as with “Seventh Street.” The asphalt roads, black and structurally important, must flow north and south as well, if they take their health from the southbound roots that travel beneath them. Whereas “Seventh Street” describes the roads as “whitewashed,” though, here the roads are black. Again unlike “Seventh Street,” blood does not course *over* the roads, but under them


through an intricate root system. Troubling the distinction between the primitive and the modern is the seemingly symbiotic relationship between the mythical root system and the technology of asphalt road construction.  

The characters in Toomer’s text inhabit spaces that are alternately grounded in tradition and extralegal terror, the constant shifting between the present and the past, history as it is conceived and history as it is bodily experienced. *Cane*, it might be said, “listens to the seam between dusk and dark,” to quote Anzaldúa (63). *Cane* is extraordinary because as a text, it inhabits the borderland between itself and the reader: just as memories, histories, bodies, rivers, and songs flow through and between characters and places, they also serve to stitch together the polyphonic, multifaceted text. As readers, we migrate with the words on the page as well as with the characters in the short stories. As violence and memory rend the text, we have the opportunity to go deep into the wound. Reading *Cane* is an extended listening project, one in which we are called to perform “a critical listening that does not necessarily reject consensus or harmony, but questions its default functionality as an apparatus of obligatory group belonging and nationalist solidarity” (Kun, 16). We must perform critical listening to experience and explore *Cane*; on the other hand—and at the same time—we might see *Cane* itself performing this critical listening, especially since it has its ear at the seam between the binaries it critiques and questions. Maybe *Cane* listens to our faltering, offering traces that we need to connect the various parts of its polyphonic, fluid, and inconstant map. How can we move through this map, and what is at stake in creating a textual, conceptual map? I believe that the idea of migrancy in the black diaspora is mainly what gives rise to the repeated symbols that run throughout *Cane*. I

---

24 I believe a strong case can also be made for a connection to the Underground Railroad.
25 This quote is part of Anzaldúa’s introductory poem to “La Herencia de Coaticue/The Coatlicue State.” See *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press, 1987), 63-73.
will expand the canon of symbols found in the text and discuss their role in representing black migrant experience, beginning with the sun, examined above in relation to “Bona and Paul” and “Kabnis,” and the moon.

The moon and the sun are repeated symbols and entities in Cane. The moon is blood red when Tom is lynched (“Blood-Burning Moon”); it is a white baby sleeping on top of pines in “Kabnis.” The sun is what guides Paul’s affective, cognitive journey to Georgia, as well as what Kabnis sees in the morning, as a newly risen “gold-glowing child” at the end of the book. Lewis, his double throughout the vignette, points out, after Kabnis says “aint much difference between blue an black,” that this difference between blue and black is “enough to draw a denial from you [Kabnis]. Cant hold them, can you? Master; slave. Soil; and the overarching heavens. Dusk; dawn. They fight and bastardize you. The sun tint of your cheeks, flame of the great season’s multi-colored leaves, tarnished, burned. Split, shredded: easily burned. No use…” (107). The sun is a new morning and a new possibility. It “tarnishes [and] burns,” but also provides warmth and light. It splits, burns, and shreds “the great season’s multi-colored leaves.” The sun is also used to describe Kabnis’ cheeks, aligning him with the rising sun at the end of the text (albeit tenuously). Although initially Lewis accuses Kabnis of not being able to “hold” his contradictions, the sad irony is that Lewis flees the text, unable to cope with the basement, with history, with sexuality, while Kabnis stays behind, weathering the night in his accidental vigil. Emerging from the basement in which Father John embodies and echoes the traumas of historical violence against black bodies, Kabnis greets the new day with his swollen eyes and hung-over sickliness.

Near the end of “Kabnis,” we find Kabnis stripped of his robe, stumbling up the stairs with a bucket of dead coal. The dawn greets him as “he swings the pail [of coal] carelessly and
with eyes downcast and swollen, trudges upstairs to the workshop” (Toomer, 116). Kabnis cannot be said to be “recovered” or “recuperated” at the end of the text. What he has discovered, however, is that Southern violence has irrevocably damaged the South’s roots. What is more, this grudging trudge up the flight of stairs comes immediately after his almost-cathartic “healing” by Carrie K. After Kabnis calls Father John an “old black fakir” for announcing that the sin of the white folks was to “ma[ke] th bible lie,” Carrie “turns him to her and takes his hot cheeks in her firm cool hands. Her palms draw the fever out. With its passing, Kabnis crumples. He sinks to his knees before her, ashamed, exhausted” (115, 116). Kabnis does not feel catharsis, only shame and exhaustion. As he “rises and [goes] doggedly towards the steps,” he cannot be said to have gleaned much from Father John’s words and from Carrie K.’s healing touch. When she helps him take off his soiled robe, “he hangs it, with an exaggerated ceremony, on its nail in the corner. He looks down at the tousled beds. His lips curl bitterly ” (116). Kabnis’ muteness at the end of the text means he must mime his disgust and his shame: his robe becomes an alb that he hangs up with “exaggerated ceremony,” and he is unable to do anything but curl his lips bitterly at the evidence of the bacchanal he has just taken part in.

As noted earlier, the Coatlicue state is Kabnis' state. Kabnis is unable to reconcile his fear of lynching with his desire for “authenticity” and grounding, which he believed he would find in Georgia. He is constantly frightened by his surroundings, held in skeptical or cynical contempt by many of those with whom he interacts, and ultimately gets fired from his job at the school. Ignacio Ortiz-Monasterio insists that from the beginning of the piece, Kabnis finds himself involved in a series of situations and events over which he has no control. Either his will is ineffective or it has been completely suppressed and, thus, has no play in the development of events. Kabnis is incapable of changing the direction of his life and, most importantly, he does not even pose to himself the possibility of doing it. In ‘Kabnis,’ as in dreams, free will has no power. (30)
I agree with Ortiz-Monasterio insofar as Kabnis' despair seems infinitely deep and unconquerable—however, because I believe that “Kabnis” is about the Coatlicue state and the crises—both ontological and epistemological—precipitated by this state, I find Kabnis at the crossroads of alienation, which, as noted earlier, has two directions in which one might traverse: travesía or capitulation and despair. In postmodern and poststructuralist parlance, Kabnis is a fragmented self. However, if we think of Kabnis embodying rather than exemplifying this fragmentation, we arrive at the crossroads that Cane inhabits: of contradiction as a—perhaps the—way of life. Embodiment is the operative theoretical term in this argument, and it is opposed to exemplification. When Kabnis embodies or inhabits fragmentation, we are allowed to witness his existential struggle. His experience takes on a rigorous, fascinating philosophical quality, whereas if exemplification were operative, his experience would be purely symbolic. Embodiment does not prevent the obviously allegorical qualities of “Kabnis” from coming through, but it does prevent symbolism from accruing the entirety of the critical freight and heft in interpretation. While it is tempting to read “Kabnis” as symbolic—indeed, this is clearly one of Toomer’s intentions, and perhaps the reason that “Kabnis” is written as a closet drama (along the lines of Milton’s allegorical Samson Agonistes, for example)—it cannot be read as purely or solely symbolic: in fact, it is impurely symbolic, due to the nature of Kabnis' embodied experience throughout the narrative; indeed, perhaps the only symbolism that is not overdetermined is the story’s overall emphasis on impurity, its impure, excessive economy of description and trope. Thus, when “Kabnis” ends with its title character’s despair, while at the same time describing the sun as a rising, golden child, we perceive the open-ended contradiction the text leaves to us. In a text rife with dusk and moon, we finally see a dawn—but at first blush (and without context), what is the difference between dusk and dawn? The opening out of the
text at this point reveals a somewhat tepid hope, a barely incipient optimism. Kabnis does not quite go through the typical bildungsroman narrative; it is difficult to pinpoint what exactly Kabnis has learned. Utilizing a purely expository eye to explain Kabnis' trajectory, we are left like Kabnis in his final portrayal, “with eyes downcast and swollen, trudg[ing] upstairs to the work-shop” (Toomer, 116). Yet with the dawn, “The sun arises. Gold-glowing child, it steps into the sky and sends a birth-song slanting down gray dust streets and sleepy windows of the southern town” (116). The sun’s song reminds us immediately of the migratory song in “Bona and Paul.” Unlike that song, though, this “birth-song” emerges from the sun and illuminates the “gray dust streets and sleepy windows of the southern town.” The songs stays in the South.

Many critics have read the character of Kabnis as the accretion and culmination of the previous male narrators in Cane, and because of this, a narrative of growth can be assumed: Kabnis is like Paul returned to the South, for example, home to teach, to collect materials for his writing, to arrive at a new aesthetics. In the first section of Cane, the only response to violence was to migrate northward; after the disappointment in “Bona and Paul,” the only response was to migrate south, to return. If we agree with this correspondence between characters, what “Kabnis” shows is that a new aesthetic can be achieved after the compulsive movement north and south—and diegetically this is so, since the birth-song remains among the streets and windows of the southern town, rather than needing the sustenance of a mother from the south and a man up north (à la “Bona and Paul”). Perhaps Kabnis is the prodigal son/sun returned home, the newly “Gold-glowing child.” This reading of course privileges the literary urge by centering the creative act itself within the realm of the masculine. The sunlight, indeed, “streaks through the iron-barred cellar window. Within its soft circle, the figures of Carrie and Father John” (116). Within the patriarchal aesthetic regime, the figure of the woman and the figure of history remain entrapped,
illuminated and observed by the light of the “Gold-glowing child.” Most perniciously, this entrapment does the work of objectification. Carrie and Father John are not emulatable, but observable; as mythic figures, they are reified.

This reading reveals the limits of according primacy to the artist figure. In the patriarchal aesthetic regime, the artist still speaks for the objects of inquiry—the objects say what he makes them say. Yet, as Moten asks in In the Break, what does it mean for objects to speak back? Can we read “the figures of Carrie and Father John” as speaking back and speaking out, or are they meant to stay in the sunlight, their faces marked by the shadows of “the iron-barred cellar window”? Carrie, in fact, does speak, but only right before the scene of her “illumination.” As Kabnis leaves the cellar, “Carrie’s gaze follows him till he is gone. Then she goes to the old man and slips to her knees before him. Her lips murmur, ‘Jesus, come’” (116). Carrie’s final words, delivered while kneeling before the figure of history, are a murmured prayer, prefaced by the text as a passive utterance: “her lips murmur.” Carrie’s speech is reduced to a function of her fractured (and em-blazoned?) body. Unlike the flowing sunlight around her, Carrie is reduced to passivity and stasis; Carrie and Father John are textually trapped behind iron bars, even if they are rendered by the sunlight. It seems we are again trapped in the critical space that Spivak speaks out against: the space given to the subaltern is still controlled and spoken for by the artist and critic.

George Hutchinson, for example, finds that “Kabnis' failure to find the words to name his soul … reveals the significant silences of our own deeply racialized social text, the gaps and absences which critics, in turn, have failed to make speak” (244). For Hutchinson, Kabnis has fallen into the interstice that appears in the cracked and “deeply racialized social text” that sediments itself in the early 20th Century and thus continues to dominate discourse today. In
Hutchinson’s interpretation, what piques me is the logocentrism, the need for “the word” to be spoken so that all “shall be healed.”*26 Hutchinson’s logocentrism sees interstices as “gaps and absences,” rather than presences because they have not been made to speak. Adhering to this binary, wherein silence = absence and words = presence, forces us to disqualify the lived experiences of (textual) subjects and privilege critical mastery over one’s subject of inquiry. As we shall see in the next chapter, it is this desire for mastery that Gayatri Spivak forcefully and righteously speaks out against by asking us to bear witness to a new method of critical engagement, one in which the critic’s voice does not stand in for the voice of the marginalized or subaltern and reproduce the silencing, structural violence that causes marginalization in the first place. What Anzaldúa, Moten, and Sedgwick all offer is a critical vocabulary that presents these gaps and absences as texts in and of themselves, as desires that are so radical or so oppressed that no language can capture them yet—these are fugitive desires, and they often find their expression in the contradictory, frustrating, and often incomprehensible alingistic embodiment of those like Kabnis.

The recuperative criticism that Hutchinson advocates is wary of essentialism (as it should be) yet is also a stance that seems to distrust racial identity in all of its formations (which is questionable), primarily because race leads literary critics to aporias that are too often avoided and ignored. Hutchinson would have these “gaps and absences” made to speak; the task of the critic, though, is not to master and coerce. By way of response, one calls to mind Saidiya Hartman’s “Fugitive Dreams,” in which she tells us that “the fugitive’s legacy…. didn’t require me to wait on bended knee for a great emancipator” (234). To “make [Kabnis and thus Cane] speak” is to risk discursively reifying Kabnis and many other characters in Cane. To “speak for”

---

26 From the Roman Catholic mass: "LORD, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word, and I shall be healed."
risks playing the role of “great emancipator” and effacing and erasing the impossible, contradictory, uncategorizeable performances in *Cane*. A reading praxis that posits the reader as the sole actor or moral subject is (and should be) questionable, at best. Rather, the hermeneutic position theorized by *Cane*, as outlined in the first section of this chapter, pushes us to acknowledge that the impossible, contradictory, and uncategorizable must be presented *as is*—must be represented *in situ*, in the full bloom of its dangerous, productive impossibility. This is why, as readers, we are led to recognize the powerful writerly position gestured to in *Cane* (and which I will develop more intensely in later chapters): that of speaking *with*, rather than for.

What is at stake in speaking *with*? What is the *hope* involved in the political project of speaking *with*? Fred Moten might as well be asking Toomer—who was deeply committed to forging a new, utopian “American” ethnicity—the following questions, which he asks of readers of the Black Avant Garde in *In The Break*:

> Have you ever suffered from political despair, from despair about the organization of things? What does it mean to suffer from political despair when your identity is bound up with utopian political aspirations and desires? How is identity reconfigured in the absence or betrayal of those aspirations? What’s the relation between political despair and mourning? In the face of the problem this constellation of questions forms, what is required is an anarchization of certain principles so that an improvisation of Enlightenment might become possible” (93).

If *Cane* is a song of loss, even as it is a song of hope, a song of mourning and morning for the South, then we might begin to approach Kabnis’ horror and shame through the principles of contradiction, of speaking *with* rather than for, of thinking horizontally and *beside*, of a methodology based on anarchization. Kabnis’ search for rootedness has led him so far away from his black and white heritage(s). The resultant despair might truly be “the sickness unto death” (to quote Kierkegaard), especially if we take Hutchinson’s word for it. But Moten’s questions give us a new lens through which to read Kabnis: if modernity-as-Enlightenment
provides us with the seemingly incommensurable paradox that underlies genocide, lynching, and slavery (that is: these inhuman[e] acts were necessary for humanism to take shape economically, philosophically, and politically), then Moten is right to claim that “what is required is an anarchization of certain principles,” principles that have given rise to modernity’s horrors in its drive towards progress. The resultant “improvisation of Enlightenment” steps outside of “rationalism” and pushes for other ways of knowing and meaning that are not necessarily the word—especially since improvisation is unavoidably linked to performance. Thus the recuperative word that Hutchinson would like readers and critics to speak is still bound up in the reifying strictures of discourse. In performance we confront (and are confronted by) a difference that both plies and undoes discourse. Again, turning to Moten gives us insight on this notion of difference and performance, especially as it might be contrasted to “the word”: “difference is in that it is performed, disappeared, or not apparent given the understanding of performance within which or without which we’ve been operating” (162). Thus, the unspoken but lived-in contradiction at the end of Cane, which cannot be simply resolved, sublated, or transcended: black and white, North and South, pastoralism and violence, despair and birth/hope. All are structures that stand oppositionally according to discourse, yet are wholly incorporated into modernity.

Anzaldúa’s theorization of the “underground,” elaborated upon in the first section of this chapter, brings us back to “Kabnis.” We can think of the basement as the affective, psychic space that Kabnis works through, “the juncture where the mestiza stands,” “where phenomena tend to collide.” Rather than seeing Kabnis as despairing and hopeless, we see the basement as an allegory for the deep, painful work required of Kabnis, of Toomer, and of readers. We need to think about who we have left behind in our quests for enlightenment, and we need to consider
methods of inclusion that do not beleaguer or reinscribe violence, trauma, and oppression. *Cane* as a body and as a text provides ways of working through the constantly shifting grounds of modernity and racism. *Cane* takes up border-consciousness and diaspora in its status as a performative and performing text that forces itself (and us) to take up the contradictions it exposes, to embrace the process of constantly becoming both self and other: *Cane* performs subjectivity and memory differentially and communally, spatially and historically, creating a map that we must ethically traverse if we are to create an efficacious and political hermeneutics.

III. Memory and Dusk

Because in *Cane* memory is operative in a historical sense and in a spatial sense, I would like to explore its complex negotiations (the way memory negotiates, as well as the way it is negotiated). Memory *flows* and *moves*, connecting individuals through far-flung communities and narratives. It operates as both rooting and uprooting. Economics and violence, which often converge, traumatically deracinate individuals and communities, rending extant social structures. Memory and trauma then become part of the diasporic fabric that thinks and links community across space and time. Paul’s sun-journey and Dan’s vision of the deep-rooted woman in the theater are just two examples of the way diasporic memories and traumas get negotiated. Through the linking of formal and thematic elements, we are given several pathways for articulating diaspora.

Dusk is an exceptional, expansive border metaphor in *Cane*. Toomer uses this word a multitude of times.\(^27\) This insistence on the crepuscular is the text positioning itself as a

---

\(^27\) Here is a list of most of them: working backwards, 107, 91, 78, 73, 71, 69, 56, 31-35, 22, 20-21, 17, 13, 5. A quick online search of the original 1923 version, available online, revealed 20 instances of the word dusk. Available through the Princeton University Library server,
borderland, giving us (m)a(ny) map(s) by which we might experience the text. The insistent repetition of dusk opens us up to a theme and its variations, with dusk as the connective tissue for the various riffs and modes. Dusk is used to describe skin, to discuss the liminal space between day and night (and the even thinner space between sunset and sundown). Dusk has a “realer” feel than twilight, which has a definite connotation of an end, of a blinking or fading out. Sunset describes a longer process than dusk, which seems so ephemeral in its connotations, even while it takes up a heavy, brusque dental (d) at its beginning, and a quick, undeniably material guttural (k) at the end of its monosyllabic complexity. In this way, dusk asserts its materiality, even its irreducible spatiality, in comparison to both sunset and twilight, which are imbricated in significations of time’s passage. Dusk is moment, it is space: it is the borderland.

In *Cane*, dusk/y operates as an adjective and as a noun. This overflow of signification lends *Cane* some of its mythical character, since person, time, and space are often described in strikingly similar terms. This semantic excess requires a dynamic reading practice, one that emulates the flowing, moving people within the text. Thus, as the book splits and moves north and then back south again, we are invited to experience the means through which the text flows across space and time in order to create a song of and for the black diaspora. For this reason, we must take into account the integral migrant experience and the reasons for migration, which shed light on the oppositionality of North and South (in *Cane* and beyond) in the first place. The same


28 I was inspired to think of the crepuscular by Casey Walker’s presentation at the Americanist Research Symposium at Princeton University, “Virtuosity.” Casey’s paper was “Cormac McCarthy at the Border: *All the Pretty Horses* and Crepuscular Style.” Paper given on 12 March 2010.

29 N.B.: the only paper on “dusk” I could find was Jun Li, “[L]ike dusk on the eastern horizon’: Reading *Cane* through Chinese Culture,” in *East-West Connections* 5, no. 1 (2005): 53-60. I find this gap in the critical discussion intriguing, even if I do not devote too many words to address it.
South that is the source of much African American folklore, as Toomer saw it (along with the New Negro movement and the Young American movement), is the same South that Tom Burwell and Bob Stone call home in *Cane*’s “Blood-Burning Moon,” where the horrors of lynching are harrowingly (re)presented.

The flowing blood in the nation’s capital also stands for the racism and violence that has led to the unmitigated flood of blood in and from the South (in: lynching; from: migration), not just as a result of migration. The unstaunched blood thus runs through(out) D.C.’s white streets and white monuments, continuing the thread begun in “Portrait in Georgia”: the relationship between whiteness and violence is again made clear. This time, however, “white and whitewash disappear in blood” (Toomer, 39), rather than subsuming the ashes of the lynched. “Who,” the narrator asks, “set you flowing? Flowing down the smooth asphalt of Seventh Street, in shanties, brick office buildings, theaters, drug stores, restaurants, and cabarets? Eddying on the corners?” (39). Striking up a note of disbelief, the narrator asks question upon question in this prose poem. The thrice repeated question (“who set you flowing?”) acknowledges two origins: who began the violent flowing of the blood? Why are the migrants leaving the South? The narrator’s questions demand answers, which can only be answered through the invocation of memory and trauma. The map brought into being is a “(reversible, rhizomatic) affective map [that] not only gives us a view of a terrain shared with others in the present, but also traces the paths, resting places, dead ends, and detours we might share with those who come before us” (Flatley, 105-106). “Who set you flowing?” is thus a question that traces the flows of bodies, of memories and traumas, and constructs affective maps that operate communally and offer paths of subjective negotiation.

In “Avey” we have a more innocuous “invasion” from the South: soil. The narrator tells us, “Against the soft dusk sky of Washington. And when the wind is from the South, soil of my
homeland falls like a fertile shower upon the lean streets of the city” (Toomer, 46). The wind brings rural soil to the urban streets, where it falls and (presumably) germinates—the necessary process of biological growth and sustenance depends on such intergermination, on the migration of soil and seed through wind. The narrator’s preoccupation with fertility—of the homeland soil but also Avey’s—speaks to the textual obsession with art making. As Laura Doyle points out, the fact that artistic creation is so intimately bound with controlling the black female body shows that Cane’s premise is deeply imbricated with ideologies of racial patriarchy; yet, that Cane’s male narrator(s) so often fail to capture and compel the female body suggests the complex knowledge that making speak cannot possibly constitute a creative act.

The narrator’s failure of consummation with Avey is figured as more than sexual frustration. It is also a lack of understanding, failed communication:

I talked, beautifully I thought, about an art that would be born, an art that would open the way for women the likes of her. I asked her to hope, and build up an inner life against the coming of that day…. I sang, with a strange quiver in my voice, a promise song…. I began to visualize certain possibilities. An immediate and urgent passion swept over me. Then I looked at Avey. Her heavy eyes were closed. Her breathing was as faint and regular as a child’s in slumber. My passion died. (46).

The narrator’s fantasy of art “for women the likes of her” finds nothing but sleeping ears. The narrator’s song is “a promise song,” an enunciation of the narrator’s quest to free Avey. However, the narrative immediately complicates and perhaps even undoes the (de)liberation held in the moment by tying freedom to passion, and passion to “certain possibilities,” and the destruction of the passion once the narrator realizes that Avey sleeps while he sings. Laura Doyle argues that this dissolution of political drive occurs largely because of the problematic differentiation between female embodiment and male speech. As a result of this distinction, which grounds itself in tenuous ontological footing, “Women are affiliated with embodiment and
men with the speech that will embrace embodiment; in order to maintain this division, the text implicitly repeats the metaphysical movement which privileges speech over embodiment and undercuts its own radical challenge to traditional metaphysics” (Doyle, 88). Although this may seem the general case at first blush, I firmly believe that Cane undoes even this “implicit repetition” of speech’s privilege over embodiment. Male words are undone and undercut, and these hopeful “promise songs,” meant to be sung on behalf of women, falter and the men are reduced to silence, to feeling their own mouths fail to enunciate. Rather than indicating male disempowerment, however, this undoing suggests a reconsideration of privilege and power, such that we read the necessity of that silence and the failure of speech’s attempted mastery. Lindon Barrett, arguing against Theodor Adorno’s anti-jazz ethos (in which Adorno suggests that jazz reduces the mass to ignorant silence), says that “the African American singing voice and musical production provide … a fundamental means for African American populations to extricate themselves from harshly imposed and dehumanizing silences” (Barrett, 92). The silence endured by the narrator in “Avey” is not a dehumanizing silence, but is instead an invitation to contemplate the ways that mastery and power seek to instill silence by speaking for others, like the narrator wants to speak for Avey. In this way, Cane raises the stakes of embodiment by indicating what gets lost when words are used to capture and “visualize certain possibilities”—especially when those possibilities are “immediate and urgent passion[s].” While the narrator stews in frustration, we are made to rethink the stakes of silence—what does Avey’s silence show us? What does it mean to listen (to the silences)? What does it mean to speak otherwise? And further, when we listen to Avey, do we allow the space for her own singing? Nathaniel Mackey, in his essay “Cante Moro,” briefly writes that “Bound reference, univocal meaning, is no solution to the riddle of language” (187). This, precisely, is how Cane—in its frustrations,
impediments, gaps, and absences—is incredibly suggestive of the possibilities created by these supposed “emptinesses” and shows that, like the dark matter in space, there is something there—we just have to know how to look and listen.

Indeed, as Mackey explores in *Bedouin Hornbook*, there is something about collective aurality that enables ethical, future orality. Mackey, who dramatizes an epistolary conversation between “N.” and “Angel of Dust” through the letters N. writes to the angel, speaks of and to the richly plural expressive vocabulary emanating from the African diaspora. Says N., in one letter to the Angel, ‘What you've called ‘a collective stutter’ is indeed iterative, but if I've been at all successful in what I set out to do in this piece the tongue is not so much obstructed … as it is inflated in pursuit of options which, however cautionary they might appear on first encounter, erase the ostensible line between emphasis and obsession” (30). *Cane*’s silences, in my argument, should be interpreted as indicating the “inflated” tongue, rather than the “obstructed” tongue. Although the text’s many narrators bump up against obstruction and frustration, we as readers encounter the (re)iterated scenes of failure as scenes of fractious, vibrant plurality. These “gaps” are alive. The narrators might not get to sing the songs they planned—but in the stead of these frustrations, we get the chance to consider new songs.

What are the songs that need to be sung? Must these songs be wordless? In these songs, how might one give voice the self in a way that does not adhere to hierarchies based on mastery and degradation? This is where *Cane* repeats its most radical solution over and over again, and it requires returning to “Bona and Paul” in order to bear witness to the ways that *Cane* wrecks the fantasy of masculine mastery over artistic creation. As quoted above, Paul’s psychic journey ends with “She weans it, and sends it, curiously weaving, among lush melodies of cane and corn. Paul follows the sun into himself in Chicago” (Toomer, 71). The cane and corn provide their
own lush melodies as the song moves steadily north—yet the journey comes full circle with Paul following “the sun into himself in Chicago.” The passage concludes with Paul exercising a visuality newly informed by his mythical journey, as filled with the sun, “He is at Bona’s window. With his own glow he looks through a dark pane” (71). The sun seems to have provided an internal “enlightenment” for Paul.

This enlightenment is cut short when Paul’s roommate Art walks into the room boisterously announcing that he has found a date for Paul. Paul, in frustration, gets ready for the date and silently fumes: “Paul: He’s going to Life this time. No doubt of that. Quit your kidding. Some day, dear Art, I’m going to kick the living slate out of you, and you won’t know what I’ve done it for. And your slats will bring forth Life…beautiful woman…” (72). This incredibly suggestive passage veers almost directly into the allegorical. “Art,” the roommate, will be kicked apart. Out of the “slats” of this destruction—slats being the supporting, foundational structures that make up “Art”—will come “Life…beautiful woman…” As pointed out by Doyle, the male narrators and focal consciousness in Cane often equate their ideal artistic creation with destruction (of existing structures) and control (of the female body, which is a stand-in for the “art to come”). Similar to the narrator in “Avey,” Paul immediately turns from promise and creation to a “beautiful woman” set off by ellipses. Passion for the woman figure, as with “Avey,” is intimately tied to the idea of beauty—passion, in Cane, is always possessive. In “Bona and Paul,” Paul talks to a black doorman at the dance, and he tells the doorman “I came back to tell you, to shake your hand, and tell you that you are wrong. That something beautiful is going to happen…. That I danced with her, and did not know her. That I felt passion, contempt and passion for her whom I did not know. That I thought of her. That my thoughts were matches thrown into a dark window. And all the while the Gardens were purple like a bed of roses would
be at dusk” (78). Paul feels “contempt and passion” for Bona, his dance partner, a white southern woman, and knows that “something beautiful is going to happen.” He sees his thoughts, sun-enlightened as they are, as matches thrown at a dark window: the inscrutable, dark window of Bona’s body and soul. He feels he has the knowledge to know, and thus to recite and create. Yet, at the end of “Bona and Paul,” Paul’s sun-enlightened consciousness and desire to create Life and beauty come to naught, since “When he reached the spot where they had been standing, Bona was gone” (78).

Must the story end painfully and fitfully, with nothing to be gained? Fred Moten, in his essay “Knowledge of Freedom,” suggests that enlightenment should not be completely cast aside and shunned, but that its premises should be radicalized, anarchized, and remixed. Moten says that “the black radical tradition is in apposition to enlightenment. Appositional enlightenment is remixed, expanded, distilled, and radically faithful to the forces its encounters carry, break, and constitute. It’s (the effect of) critique or rationalization unopposed to the deep revelation instantiated by a rupturing event of dis/appropriation, or the rapturous advent of an implicit but unprecedented freedom” (Moten, 274). The personal knowledge of “revelation” and “unprecedented freedom” exist, especially on the level of consciousness—we should not discount them. Still, we must always rethink and reconsider the ways we make use of the new knowledge—this is what appositional enlightenment allows us. Paul, in his image of matches flung at Bona’s dark window, believes that he can purvey illumination through the extension of his self through artistic creation, through his appropriation of both Bona and the weaned song. But what is needed instead is an improvisation of his knowledge, because “the dark matter that is and that animates this tradition sounds, and so sounds another light” (275). The knowledge of freedom is not enlightenment or consciousness per se, but is instead, I would argue, akin to an
idea of truth envisioned by James Baldwin (which will be discussed in the next chapter): “But that battered word, truth, having made its appearance here… is meant to imply a devotion to the human being, his freedom and fulfillment; freedom which cannot be legislated, fulfillment which cannot be charted” (“Everybody’s Protest Novel”). This freedom must be performed, improvised, and acted out with an expansive, rather than narcissistic (as it is with Paul), idea of human being.

In “Theater,” we find Dorris and John, a dancer and a spectator, who occupy distant sides of an unbridgeable gap. As “Dorris dances…. The whole stage claps. Dorris, flushed, looks quick at John. His whole face is in shadow. She seeks for her dance in it. She finds it a dead thing in the shadow which is his dream” (53). John, the whole time he has been watching her, has been dreaming a bucolic dream: “his feet feel as though they step on autumn leaves whose rustle has been pressed out of them by the passing of a million satin slippers. The air is sweet with roasting chestnuts, sweet with bonfires of old leaves” (53). Dorris seeks to create a reality that John, it turns out, cannot give her; his dream, so divorced from the world they inhabit, kills Dorris’s dance in “the shadow which is his dream.” We might recall the asphalt streets from “Box Seat,” that in their dreaming suck up the energy from the “blood-soaked roots” that emerge from the “portly Negress.” Indeed, Cane may even suggest that this trancelike possession of energy from the roots that emerge from the overdetermined, embodied women in its text is stultifying and unjust: as in “Theater,” gendered, acquisitive creation functions by taking the art and voice of a subject and objectifying it, thus destroying the living qualities of the subject.\(^\text{30}\)

---

\(^{30}\) This is quite literally what happened with Sanora Babb’s novel, *Whose Names are Unknown* (which will be discussed at length in Chapter 3). Her novel was under contract, and as an FSA researcher and migrant advocate, she compiled a hefty amount of research material that she planned on including in her novel. Her boss, Tom Collins, forwarded some of this material to John Steinbeck after he received it from Babb, and Steinbeck used it to strengthen his
this dream, “John reaches for a manuscript of his, and reads. Dorris, who has no eyes, has eyes to understand him. He comes to a dancing scene. The scene is Dorris. She dances. Dorris dances. Glorious Dorris” (53). As in “Avey,” art cannot survive; in this case, Dorris’ performance has been put into dreamlike words, but the real, material performance has actually been found “dead in the shadow” of John’s dream: John has destroyed the real Dorris in favor of the imagined Dorris.

In “Avey” and “Theater,” the male narrators use art as a reifying force. It is the space of fantasy, which the male characters use to harness the women they desire, while paradoxically desiring to give these same women the space to exercise the freedom they will be given by this “new art.” Artistic, discursive attempts to capture Avey and Dorris, to provide spaces for their liberty, end up becoming closed off, walled-in spaces. Throughout Cane, this seems to be the case for many or most of the characters. This is certainly the case for Dan Moore, for Paul, and Kabnis, as well as for other characters that have not been touched upon, such as Rhobert, Esther, Fern, and Karintha. The more insistent the discursive attempts to make a space for them, the more likely they are to become like Dorris in John’s dream: “They are in a room. John knows nothing of it. Only, that the flesh and blood of Dorris are its walls” (53). The room sings, but is a room nonetheless—in this way, we recall the en-celled basement at the end of “Kabnis.” The image of the room gives us an idea of the discursive violence committed against bodies in Cane: rather than establishing freedom and giving a name to the unnameable (echo of Hutchinson’s call), “the word” enacts its deadening violence against performance. It preserves by removing blockbuster novel, The Grapes of Wrath. After Grapes was published, Babb’s publisher told her that the market could not support another migrant labor novel, and her great work remained unpublished until 2004. For a brief biography of Babb, along with some relevant clips from Ken Burns’ Dust Bowl documentary, see <http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/dustbowl/bios/sanora-babb/>.
vividness and dynamism; it operates through descriptive capture. In *Cane*, words and discursive spaces show that affect and memory can become sealed rooms—or, perhaps, tombs—rather than maps. This, then, is *Cane*’s warning to those who create art: ensure movement and freedom, rather than capture and preservation. The ultimate goal of migrant art, then, is not only the ethical representation of migrant subjects, but also the form that this representation takes, and whether it enables movement.

IV. Final Notes

I want to simply restate the themes in order to keep the differential harmony in the air, rather than striking a boisterous, full-orchestra final chord. *Cane*’s performance is multivalent: not only does it sound itself—it forces us to read and reply in a textual, intersubjective call and response. In this way, difference maps various routes through which to perform memory and affect. I also want to keep in mind the space of this performance, the borderlands. As a non-normative border text, *Cane* refuses to restrict itself to rooms or discursive spaces. Instead, it seeks to cross back and forth between spaces and histories, its *travesía* a constant “keeping on” or “going on.” As such, it upholds and lives within contradiction; this, in turn, keeps the performance alive by refusing settled, linear narratives that finish with “the word.” The wounds and traumas of history are kept open: not to force ourselves to limp along, but to find the maps that bring the past and the future together within the present moment. Performances and movements keep us alive. Utopia, then, becomes an aspirational, present-oriented aim rather than a non-space in a timeless, distant future: it becomes enacted through performance rather than distanced and set apart by the word. The moving, oppositional consciousness fostered in *Cane* forms the constant, revolutionary *becoming* of its performance.
Chapter 2. “Many lives, many poems, many acts of love”: Muriel Rukeyser, Zora Neale Hurston, and the Radical Praxis of Their Democratic Poetics

I. Constituting a Praxis

What does it mean to engage in a “radical praxis of democratic poetics”? How should “praxis” be defined? How should “radical” modify “praxis”? What is meant by “poetics”? What assumptions and definitions underlie the use of “democratic” in this dissertation generally, and in this chapter specifically?

As argued in the Introduction, I use praxis to mean a reconsideration of method that attends to the ways that authors and artists engage with the lived experiences of their subjects, such that they attempt to create experimental spaces for speech and dialogue. While Cane articulates a problematic and difficult-to-square idealization of black folk culture (even though, as I show, Toomer realizes and examines the impossibility of this idealism), Zora Neale Hurston and Muriel Rukeyser take an approach to their art that seeks to establish space for the men and women with whom they engage. Each approach, while elaborated with quite a bit of difference and for different political and ethical reasons, speaks to the manifold possibilities within praxis.

Taken together, Hurston’s Mules and Men and Rukeyser’s The Book of the Dead provide an intriguing perspective on radical democratic possibility. This possibility takes shape specifically through their relationships to and with the black men and women they encounter in their research. For Hurston, this research is an ethnographically oriented elaboration of her own formative environment and of Louisiana’s “Hoodoo” practices; for Rukeyser, the research enables “consciousness raising” journalism and leftist poetry meant to prophetically denounce the dual exploitation of migrant labor and the environment. Each writer carefully articulates a vision of radical democracy that sees full participation and vocalization as its goal—thus,
representation is not alienated or abrogated, as in a system wherein a “representative” speaks for a specific polity; instead, representation is singular—it is one-to-one—such that each person is given the space to speak out, raise up, and make themselves and their desires known. This radical democracy is particularly important given the context in which Rukeyser and Hurston write: pre-Civil Rights Movement, 1930s segregated communities in which black men and women were consistently denied access to political representation. Hurston inscribes the voices and stories of her subjects within her work, showing the importance of individual voices in the construction of a community. Even if Mules and Men is not overtly political, the praxis through which it is created enacts a desire for radicalizing American democratic institutions and aesthetics. Rukeyser’s poetics seek create a space for justice’s political achievement, and she does this through a subtle experimentation that undoes the poet’s authority and aestheticizes political demands for dignity by deferring to her subjects’ actual voices, rather than speaking on their behalf through assumption and cooption.

What I find most beautiful in the work of Muriel Rukeyser and Zora Neale Hurston is a commitment to loving, dialogical writing, similar to that articulated by Paulo Freire. Whether the oppression is political (as in the case of laborers who have no recourse to political power or belonging), economic (as in the exploitation of laborers for the benefit of others), or discursive (as in the stereotype of the black folk, in which certain classes of people are relegated to the status of historical oddity or absurd remnant/remainder), Rukeyser and Hurston work against strictures that bind people to destructive structures and representational dead-ends.

Through considering the work of Rukeyser and Hurston, I strongly believe it is possible to begin constituting a set of answers to the above questions about praxis and about the role of

---

1 I engage the idea of love and dialogue in my Introduction, pages 4-5.
the writer in theorizing and enacting democracy. By including and experimenting with the voices of their subjects in their work, Hurston and Rukeyser insist on the plural, multivocal, and dynamic lives of their characters. The two authors explore the particularities of the people they have encountered, studied, come to know, and with whom they have become allied. For both authors, there is no protean or prototypical American folk or citizen. Instead, what Rukeyser and Hurston reveal is a deeply multivocal humanity that lives, dies, struggles, weeps, laughs, and thrives in the everyday. Through the (re)presentation and centering of putatively marginal citzenships, Hurston and Rukeyser engage in a lexical and political praxis that offers new means of ethically encountering others and staging new versions and visions of democratic community.

In this chapter, I argue that the primary term we must use to understand the revolutionary and democratic impulses of Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead* and Hurston’s *Mules and Men* is *dignity*. What does it mean to have dignity, in a political economic sense? It is not only having a “dignified bearing,” though that is a mode through which dignity is expressed, especially in figurative mediums like writing. I suppose I mean dignity in ways suggested by Walter Reuther,

---

2 Although it is perhaps recalcitrant, against the critical grain, and perverse to describe Hurtson’s commitments as “revolutionary” and “democratic,” I insist upon doing so, and will continue to do so in the space of this dissertation. There is simply no other way to describe Hurston’s beautifully strange performance and methodology in *Mules and Men*. Her commitments are above all to the people she represents, although I concede that many would argue that her primary commitment is to herself. In insisting otherwise, I must perhaps plead my case through critical anachronism and willfulness. However, I cannot help but think that most castigations and renouncements of Hurston emerge from her misunderstood reaction to *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* – 347 US 483. Given what has been trenchantly argued in the past two decades, especially in Cornell West’s *Race Matters* and *Democracy Matters*, Jonathon Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities* and *The Shame of the Nation*, Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow*, and Angela Davis’s *Abolition Democracy*, among countless other works, America has returned to juridical and de facto segregation through specious and dogmatic appeals to what is referred to as the “free market,” without any apparent irony. Although Hurtson’s argument against *Brown v. Board* was (and still is) read as an attack on integration and racial progress, in retrospect, we should see that her attack was a warning against any legal or juridical pronouncements of equality without any structural changes in racist attitudes.
Ida B. Wells, César Chavez, Eugene V. Debs, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Emma Goldman (among so many others). Dignity is political and economic recognition that a human is a human—that a human is a subject, a being with agency that must be approached as an equal. In “The Capitalist System,” Mikhail Bakunin notes that workers and bosses are “equal, according to the juridical fiction,” but unequal in any economic sense—by themselves, laborers do not have the flexibility or power to enable equal negotiation with their bosses. Using this starting point, the struggle for dignity is the struggle to smash the juridical fiction of equality and remake the foundations of human relationality, so that humans can recognize and acknowledge their fellow beings on a truly equal footing. We might think of the struggle for dignity as the struggle for recognition in the Hegelian sense: through dialectically arriving at the understanding that someone is a subject and not an object, we can break out of the socially and philosophically structuring bonds of the lord and the bondsman.

To arrive at dignity as it can be found in their works, we should explore the routes of representation engaged in by Rukeyser and Hurston. Representation must be considered in the literary sense, as well as the political sense. In Rukeyser and Hurston, these two senses cannot—and must not—be separated. Representation, in both Rukeyser and Hurston, is something interrogated, pressured, and expanded upon, all in order to bear witness to its various directions and limits. The essential questions, left unasked, but nevertheless quite present, are: “Who speaks for the worker? Who speaks for the downtrodden? Who speaks for the marginalized?” In both authors’ works, this question is re-envisioned and reconsidered, so that the functional and determinative preposition is not “for,” but rather “with.” In making the question: “Who speaks with the worker?” or “Who speaks with the downtrodden?” or “who speaks with the marginalized?” Rukeyser and Hurston set out to establish a platform and space for “borderized”
and peripheral speech: they do not speak for the marginalized, thereby reinscribing the erasures and displacements that cause marginalization in the first place; instead, they search for new ways of representing the speech of migrant workers, struggling to undo the distance between author and subject. They build bridges and create spaces for speech and empowerment, and in this way, offer a new vision of democracy that insists upon the dignity of the citizen subject as a precondition for its existence. The people speak for themselves, and the author speaks along with the people, rather than asserting any privileged and sacred authority. Only when people speak for themselves, in dialogue with the author, and rather than assenting to being spoken for by a representative, can political autonomy replace the harmful cycle of political metonymy, concrete particulars displace essentialist assumptions, and political patriarchy be dismantled. This revolutionary aesthetic tendency is the heart and soul of what Rukeyser and Hurston seek to create.

What needs to happen, though, and this is what Rukeyser and Hurston realize and therefore implement, is an opening up of a space for speech, a space for dialogue, a space for experience. This revolutionary, experimental space occurs in the no-space—the utopia—of the text.

Perhaps, turning back to the introduction’s epigraph, we can best define Hurston’s and Rukeyser’s projects according to James Baldwin’s clarion call for truth, which “is meant to imply a devotion to the human being, his freedom and fulfillment; freedom which cannot be legislated, fulfillment which cannot be charted.” There is no chart for this truth; to borrow a term from Deleuze and Guattari, truth is, at best, a deterritorialized concept. Rukeyser and Hurston

---

3 See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus* (University of Minnesota Press, 1987), especially the introduction for a theoretical outlining of key terms such as “mapping,”
speak truth, in the sense that their works are “devotion[s] to the human being” and humanity’s “freedom and fulfillment.” As can be seen, this definition of truth is quite similar to dignity, as I have used it. Or, better yet, dignity is the route to truth: by asserting the dignity of their subjects, Hurston and Rukeyser devote themselves to establishing a space for the speaking of truth.

So, given the complex circumstances that Rukeyser and Hurston encountered and wrote about, how do they present their subjects with dignity? I would suggest that the difference lies in the specifics of the formal medium itself: the laborers and their families are presented, rather than represented. Both authors struggle to redefine the work their writing does: moving towards presentation rather than representation (and therefore letting the people speak for themselves), distinctly tending towards an engaged and specifically oriented political praxis through their ars poetica. This former claim seems absurd on its face, though: how can writing be anything but representational? Writing is always already representational. Does the distinction between presentation and representation truly hold? If so, what characterizes the distinction between the two?

Gayatri Spivak sees the conflation of aesthetic and political representation as one of critical theory’s most pressing and problematic concerns, and by arguing that Hurston and Rukeyser radicalize existing notions of political representation through their methodology of presentation, I believe that the two authors offer an alternative route from the one critiqued by Spivak. Thus, through suggesting that Rukeyser and Hurston present rather than represent their subjects, I would like to try short-circuiting the problem identified by Spivak in her foundational essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak.”

“rhizome,” and “deterritorialization.” As a concept and a term, mapping will figure significantly throughout this dissertation.
Spivak questions efficacy of discussing the representation of the other—whether the other is defined as the subaltern, the proletariat, or the colonized—without determining a consistent or specific meaning for representation. Although her focus is on a dialogue between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze published in *Power/Knowledge*, she signals that her intervention is meant to be instructive, since the problem is widespread in politically oriented criticism and philosophy.\(^4\) Says Spivak,

Two senses of representation are being run together: representation as “speaking for”, as in politics, and representation as “re-presentation”, as in art or philosophy. Since theory is also only “action,” the theoretician does not represent (speak for) the oppressed group. Indeed, the subject is not seen as a representative consciousness (one re-presenting reality adequately). These two senses of representation—within state formation and the law, on one hand, and in subject-predication, on the other—are related but irreducibly discontinuous. To cover over the discontinuity with an analogy that is presented as a proof reflects again a paradoxical subject-privileging. (274)

What Spivak is commenting on here is the unproblematic “representing” of others’ voices: in other words, the un-reflected upon position of the author or the critic.\(^5\) The consequence of this unremarked upon position of the critic is a solidification or reinscription of the oppression of the other. That is, by speaking “benevolently” about the oppressed—by representing their concerns—the critic holds him or herself as a champion, as one who knows, as a privileged voice. But, as Spivak points out, we must remember that the critic or author is not only representing the other politically, but also engaging in aesthetic “re-presentation,” as well. Thus,

\(^4\) Spivak contextualizes her intervention throughout “Can the Subaltern Speak,” given that her line of inquiry is derived from, as well as a critique of, the Subaltern Studies Group and their innovative, insurgent attempts to represent “history from the depths.”

\(^5\) For a convergent criticism applied to literature as such, one might turn to Wayne Booth’s classic, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, or to William Stott’s *Documentary Expression*. Booth’s trenchant critique of early and mid-Twentieth Century literary criticism, especially levied against purely New Critical textual approaches and purely biographical approaches, focuses on the inherent “rhetoric” of all writing: every piece of writing reveals the positionality of the author and his/her particular worldview. Although
although the other is being spoken for, what is actually represented is a literary figure or
figuration. Thus, to use Spivak’s preferred terminology, as well as to gesture towards Rey Chow,
the interminable loop of the native informant is inscribed and iterated *ad nauseum*:

Thus one of the most important enterprises nowadays is that of investigating the
“subjectivity” of the other-as-oppressed-victim. “Subjectivity” becomes a way to
change the defiled image, the stripped image, the image-reduced-to-nakedness, by
showing the truth behind/beneath/around it. The problem with the reinvention of
subjectivity as such is that it tries to combat the politics of the image, a politics
that is conducted on surfaces, by a politics of depths, hidden truths, and inner
voices. The most important aspect of the image—its power precisely as image and
nothing else—is thus bypassed and left untouched. ([Writing Diaspora, 29])

Chow and Spivak expose the difficulty of speaking for others. Although they focus on the critic,
I would like to suggest that their problematization of representation reveals the absolutely critical
nature of *Mules and Men* and *The Book of the Dead*, and the intervention each text performs
within their respective generic constraints. Each text *deforms* form: *Mules and Men’s*
experimental ethnography and what we might call *The Book of the Dead’s* aslant documentary
each conducts a sideways and self-reflective performance of their respective forms, and in doing
so, seeks to find a means of appropriately speaking *with*, rather than *for*, their subjects.

Approaching Rukeyser and Hurston, with Chow’s and Spivak’s insights in mind, we can
see each carefully yet vehemently stating a case for direct, participatory democracy by
performing it. How do they do this? Primarily, they reconsider the location of the writer and
speaker: they place themselves *beside* the subject in order to conduct a dialogue through their
work. In so doing, they also invite readers to place themselves beside the textual subjects—the
very process of reading is reformed along the lines suggested by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in
*Touching Feeling*. Says Sedgwick, “the irreducibly spatial positionality of *beside* also seems to
offer some useful resistance to the ease with which *beneath* and *beyond* turn from spatial
descriptors into implicit narratives of, respectively, origin and telos” (8). By spatializing the
relationship between reader and subject, Hurston and Rukeyser posit a new hermeneutic community, one that is emphatically not about unearthing the “truth” about textual subjects, thus remaking them as objects of documentary or as political objects to pity. Furthermore, using Sedwick’s descriptors, the men and women in Rukeyser and Hurston’s texts are neither written about in order to find a folk origin, nor in order to hold them forth as folk sacrifices to a narrative of political progress that will eventually leave them behind. As a result, the two authors perform a joyful, defiant incorporation of people’s souls into their work, and in so doing, they revolutionize the very idea of hermeneutics and make it ineradicably, undeniably political.

The Book of the Dead and Mules and Men vibrate with the beauty of the lives contained therein, and while they cannot escape representation, they can revolutionize the terms through which representation takes place.

II. Documentary and Truth

“There are two kinds of documents, or two tendencies within the documentary genre. The first, the more common, gives information to the intellect. The second informs the emotions” (Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America, 12). William Stott’s theorization of documentary and what it does is quite straightforward. Documentary must operate within one of these two tendencies he lays out. Often, of course, a documentary blends the intellectual and the emotional in order to change the viewer, listener, or reader. Thus, in order “To right wrongs, to promote social action, documentary tries to influence its audience's intellect and feelings” (26). Although seemingly obvious, Stott’s reduction is perhaps the most direct means of grasping the enormously complex body of work that is documentary.
Stott’s simple, precise way of theorizing documentary carries throughout the rest of *Documentary Expression and Thirties America.* In exploring what it was about the 1930s that gave rise to such a proliferation and sophistication of documentary styles and motives, Stott voices the pragmatic, action-oriented, hard-working spirit of the country’s Great Depression decade. Says Stott, “no other time so prized the Whitmanian ‘I’—able to see, incorporate, and give voice to all human experience. Several critics singled out for particular praise Whitman's line ‘I am the man, I suffer’d, I was there.’ And Whitman's stance of being there was a criterion of authenticity in expression at the time” (36).

Hurston and Rukeyser were two authors who went there (in so many senses of that phrase)—and what they brought back galvanized their reading publics. In *The Book of the Dead* (1938), Rukeyser’s poems of black laborers who were intentionally kept ignorant of and constantly in contact with the silica that crystallized and poisoned their lungs, she tried to approach the question of how to justify the beautiful possibilities inherent in human progress as well as nature with the oppressive capitalism that brutalized the workers who were made to transform nature in the service of progress, thus destroying the beauty of both. Hurston’s *Mules and Men* (1935) takes account of the lives of black migrant laborers in her native Florida, contextualizing their folklore in the experimental text by formalizing the tales she is told through a textual architecture that parallels the epistemological framework of folklore in the communities she visits.

Rukeyser and Hurston utilize both of the documentary tendencies theorized by Stott in *The Book of the Dead and Mules and Men.* Both authors suggest a documentary impulse and

---

6 The documentary tendency is certainly quite present in most of Hurston’s work, especially given how important her anthropological fieldwork was in informing and shaping her work. However, it is a bit inaccurate to call the tendency “documentary” *per se,* especially because
ethos to their work. They speak and document the lives of others in order to create a broader consciousness about their subjects. Each went on a fact-finding research journey. In these ways, their writing could almost certainly be described as documentary. They lay out facts and data, but they also relate these facts through examples that enliven them. By giving life to facts, and by situating them in specific—and perhaps above all, literary—contexts, the two authors create a distinctly ethical motive in the reader that could be said to supersede the aesthetic motives of their work. Put another way, their works’ ethical imperatives are engendered and achieved through the sheer enjoyment of reading their writing. Discussing Vladimir Lenin and Martin Heidegger on action and the creation of communal “moods” that engender a desire for social transformation, Jonathan Flatley argues that documentary and factual reportage allow one an “intentional, tactically and theoretically sophisticated exertion of agency over collective experiences of mood.” (“How a Revolutionary Counter-Mood is Made,” 505). Flatley states that Lenin “asserts that the most powerful agitational effects are achieved by straightforward reporting on the mistreatment of other persons, which, in his account, does not produce pity or sympathy but an immediate shift into a militant, collectively self-aware mood” (505). Although it must be noted that Rukeyser and Hurston had target audiences separate from the subjects they wrote about (even if—or perhaps especially because—Rukeyser wrote for the Partisan Review and The New Masses), and it is problematic at best to suggest that Hurston purposely sought to doing so might legitimize an unfortunate readerly habit that reads Hurston through a completely reductive mimesis. In a bit, I will discuss the ways in which Hurston quite self-consciously creates a slippage between documentary tendency and fiction. Sonnet Retman’s Real Folks addresses this slippage in an incredibly productive way, to which I am quite indebted. Further reading: John Laudun, “Reading Hurston Writing” in African American Review 38.1 (2004): 45-60; Rosemary V. Hathaway, “The Unbearable Weight of Authenticity: Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God and a Theory of ‘Touristic Reading’” in Journal of American Folklore 117(2004):168-190.
create a catalogue of injustice to stoke collective outrage, it should nevertheless be suggested that Hurston and Rukeyser create political moods and revolutionary outlooks in their writing. Although their experimentation could be confined to the purely aesthetic, I would like to insist throughout this chapter that the aesthetic formalization of this experimentation is necessarily political and ethical, not simply by virtue of their subject matter, but also because their novel methods of presentation are an articulation of a radically democratic political ethos.

While it may be true that Hurston and Rukeyser document what they witness, however, their writing is not quite documentary as defined by Stott: Rukeyser does document injustice, but her work is not primarily about the act of documenting and preserving evidence; Hurston’s work was initiated and carried out as a documentary project, but as can be seen, *Mules and Men* is as much about the stories between the stories she collected. In each case, what emerges is a textual experiment that merges fact and fiction in a way that signifies on the very idea of documentary—and thus, through a peculiar circuitry, each signifies on the central ideas that undergird representative democracy in the United States. Because they reorient the direction of reading from one dedicated to beneath or beyond to one that necessitates a commitment to being beside the text and its subjects, they disrupt the typical work of documentary and documentation. By resisting the idea that they are the representatives of their textual subjects, Hurston and Rukeyser make us reconsider our own relationships to the men and women in the texts. We are not only

---

7 A more detailed look at Hurston’s oeuvre, though, could be said to provoke such a characterization of her writings. *Moses, Man of the Mountain* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in particular, look askance at various modes of hegemony and offer important critiques of political power; *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, in my opinion, takes the historical purview of *Moses, Man of the Mountain* and the contemporary concerns voiced in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and melds them into a thorough, trenchant critique of patriarchy, racism, and colorism that speaks powerfully to the many ways that ideologies of supremacy malevolently perpetuate oppression.

8 For an excellent contextualization of Hurston’s work in the fields of ethnography and anthropology, see Maria Eugenia Cotera’s *Native Speakers*, University of Texas Press: Austin, TX (2008), especially pages 23-39, 71-101.
asked to register and acknowledge their desires—we are also made to recognize their every claim to political belonging and recognition. In order for this to happen, Hurston and Rukeyser try to move us beyond a hierarchal or alienated relationship to the text through their radical use of specificity and their experimental methods of contextualization.

Thus, by insisting that there were voices that needed to be listened to, Rukeyser and Hurston not only presented people as objects for audiences to sympathize with; going further, they suggested that the very framework of representation—both aesthetic and political, as discussed in the first section of this chapter—needed to be revolutionized in order to place author, reader, and textual subject beside one another, in dialogue with one another.

Turning back to Stott, we can find the heart of the problem that Hurston and Rukeyser addressed, each in her emphatic, iconoclastic way: “Social documentary is instrumental, and its people tend, like the innocent victims in most propaganda, to be simplified and ennobled—sentimentalized, in a word” (Stott, 57). While no one can doubt that Rukeyser does in fact create heart-rending portraits of the laborers and their families in Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, and no one can forget the quite vigorous attacks on Hurston that accused her of stereotyping and sentimentalizing a black folk culture, it must be seen that both authors use these representational strategies as mere entry points to a bigger conversation about what it means to be a black citizen of the United States. By fixating on these entry points above all else, we lose sight of the great elaboration and interrogation of democracy and representation more broadly.

In what follows, I explore and map out the complicated pathways of representation and presentation in Mules and Men and The Book of the Dead in order to suggest a hermeneutics of space through which to appreciate and encounter the two texts. In this way, I hope to show, we
can gain a new appreciation for the radically democratic vistas of the two authors by reevaluating their work as *work*—as *labor*—as *praxis* with a specific methodology and impact in the world.

III. *Mules and Men*

Hurston’s ethnographies, novels, and memoirs were critical interventions in their time. Due to their deeply interesting narratives and techniques, Hurston’s texts functioned to enlighten audiences as well as provide a case for the uniqueness of black aesthetic practices and experiences. Hurston’s work also problematized visions of “folk” that saw Southern black men and women as simple, atavistic, or as representations of a nostalgic past.

Contrary to what several of her critics accused her of—most notably, Richard Wright—Hurston’s representations of the folk sought to speak forth the rich, textured, and imaginative lives of the people she grew up among, knew, and loved. In response to Hurston’s contemporary critics—as well as continuing perceptions of Hurston’s works that take her texts, unabashedly and uncritically, to contain purely authentic folk portraits and ethnographically justified axioms of rural black life—Rosemary V. Hathaway argues that “The very issues about which Hurston's critics took her to task, and the very things that make [*Their Eyes Were Watching God*] vulnerable to touristic reading—its representation of folklife, its use of dialect, and its apparent lack of political grounding—are the same issues that can be reread and reinterpreted to create a more complex understanding of the novel, and of Hurston's view of tradition” (175). While it might feel justified to teach Hurston’s texts as historical or ethnographic portraits that widen a student’s understanding of diverse American experiences, Hathaway suggests we reread and reinterpret Hurston’s work in such a way that we comprehend and privilege Hurston’s complicated perspective(s). Sonnet Retman offers a related and productive critique of the
authenticity Hathaway cautions us against, taking as her target the entire 1930s and 1940s world that gave birth to documentary as we now know it, a world in which authenticity was a prized category. Says Retman, “By exploring the manufacture of the folk in conjunction with commercial capitalism and populist discourses of nation building, I hope … to shed light on our contemporary negotiations with mass-mediated identity and consumer culture, and our grappling with the ‘real’ and the ‘authentic’ in narratives of self, community, and nation” (3). Later in Real Folks, Retman discusses Mules and Men at length, showing how Hurston’s signifying ethnography functions as a satire by poking at and complicating the very notions of folk authenticity she is supposed to be verifying. What I argue, in addition to Retman, is that she restages and reroutes the question of authenticity into one of truth in the Freirian and Baldwinian sense (discussed above), performing a textual alchemy that produces truth even while it demolishes the edifices of authenticity.

Daphne Brooks, focusing on the important and overlooked sonic dimensions of Hurston’s methods, argues that Hurston quite radically spatializes black existence even while she works to create a historical record of black sound (while Hurston’s attention to sound and orality has been well catalogued, her performances and her own involved musicality, as Brooks points out, have not often been considered by scholars). Brooks argues that in her singing, “With that weird, quirky, piercing voice, Zora folds the folk musically into the realm between head and heart and sonically mediates that space through her own form of what cultural critic Sonnet Retman refers to as ‘signifying ethnography’” (Brooks, 622). Although I do not consider Hurston’s singing

---

9 María Eugenia Cotera details the extraordinarily complex relationships Hurston had with her mentors and patrons, including her correspondence with Franz Boas. Cotera tells us that Boas did not have a great amount of faith in Hurston’s techniques and expressed quite a bit of discomfort with her seemingly improvisatory fieldwork, since it did not adhere to the objective anthropology he was trying to establish. See footnote 18 for the relevant passage, especially 71-82.
voice in the space of this chapter, I am interested in Hurston’s sonic mediation “through her own form,”—her own form as a person, and her own form of signifying ethnography. Hurston’s self-implication in her fieldwork methodologies enables her to key into the “heterogeneity of black regional expression” and existence (Brooks, 622).

Thus, although many often consider(ed) her texts to embody “authentic” images of “American folk,” especially in pedagogical contexts, what her work reveals above all else is the variety (and the vagaries) of communal experience. For example, although framed through ethnography, Hurston’s *Mules and Men* reveals a deeply dynamic, hard-to-capture vividness that eludes any folkloric master narrative. While giving examples of folk tales and knowledge, or as they are referred to in *Mules and Men*, lies, Hurston carefully ties these stories together to create not a portrait of folk life, but a moving (in every sense of the word) picture of black life in Eatonville, Florida and its surrounding communities. We might briefly call Hurston’s creative methodology “novel citizenship”—the forging of a new vision of citizenship as well as establishing an imaginative space within which to explore this citizenship. It is “novel” because it is new, and also because its performativity is always already present, acknowledged, textualized, and utilized.

These lies contain deep sources of historical knowledge, function as tales—and tools—of survival, relate humorous anecdotes, serve to pass the time, contain mnemonic power and strengthen familial and communal connections and genealogies. Lies contain larger truths—about memory, about race relations, about the experiences of slavery and forced diaspora, about humor, about knowledge, about present conditions, about evil, about goodness, and about

---

10 An instructive perspective against the use of folklore to establish a master narrative or semiotic web of interpretation is elaborated by Ralph Ellison in “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke,” in *Shadow and Act*, Vintage International (New York): 45-59.
futurity. Deliberate fictions, the lies operate like Barthes’s myths in that they form a textual and semantic layering around objects, ideas, and communal experiences. The lies open up and are re/presented to the readers as experiences—experiences to be hermeneutically approached and encountered.

In a famous scene from *Mules and Men*, Hurston’s encounter with the men and women of Loughman, Florida, who are all housed at the Everglades Cypress Lumber Company’s work camp, begins with none of the ease or smoothness of her encounters in Eatonville. None of the workers or their family members will approach Hurston, given her beautiful new car and expensive Macy’s dress. She weaves a tale about herself as a bootlegger’s girlfriend and gradually makes inroads with some of the men around a campfire. Soon, a man named Pitts begins conversing with her, letting her know the fine way he would treat a woman of her class and bearing. Hurston tells us:

*I laughed and the crowd laughed and Pitts laughed. Very successful woofing. Pitts treated me and we got on. Soon a boy came to me from Cliffert Ulmer asking me to dance. I found out that was the social custom. The fellow that wants to broach a young woman doesn't come himself to ask. He sends his friend. Somebody came to me for Joe Willard and soon I was swamped with bids to dance. They were afraid of me before. My laughing acceptance of Pitts’woofing had put everybody at his ease. James Presley and Slim spied noble at the orchestra. I had the chance to learn more about “John Henry” maybe. So I strolled over to James Presley and asked him if he knew how to play it.

“Ah’ll play it if you sing it,” he countered. So he played and I started to sing the verses I knew. (64-5)*

The men and women at the camp are from all over Florida and the South, and they have come together to dredge swamps, cut down trees, and create lumber. Their celebrations, often coincident with payday, tend towards the vivacious and engaging—often, Hurston describes her immense, intense feelings of joy as she witnesses the people of the camp telling stories, dancing, fighting, singing, gambling, and eating. Often she joins in—as in the passage above. Indeed,
Cotera and Retman show that Hurston was quite deliberate and radical in her affective proximity to the men and women of Eatonville and the Cypress Lumber Company camp. What this passage illustrates, perhaps above all, is the very self-conscious way that Hurston goes about creating trust and confidence. She does not disavow her nice car or nice clothes—but finds ways to explain them that are reasonable to the people around her. Furthermore, her “laughing acceptance of Pitts’ woofing had put everybody” at ease. This according of respect to the workers takes the form of Hurston erasing her status as an academic, and establishing an egalitarian relationship between herself and the people at the work camp. She does not completely erase her purpose for coming to the camp, though:

After [the first celebration] I got confidential and told them all what I wanted. At first they couldn’t conceive of anybody wanting to put down “lies.” But when I got the idea over we held a lying contest and posted the notices at the Post Office and the commissary. I gave four prizes and some tall lying was done. The men and women enjoyed themselves and the contest broke up in a square dance with Joe Willard calling figures.

The contest was a huge success in every way. I not only collected a great deal of material but it started individuals coming to me privately to tell me stories they had no chance to tell during the contest. (65)

Here, Hurston reveals her true purpose to the laborers and the others who dwell in the camp—and rather than driving them away from her, they come to her with their many stories. The contest concludes with prizes and dancing—it takes the shape of any other community celebration at the camp. Thus, a strange request—one that “at first they couldn’t conceive of”—seamlessly accords with the camp’s social fabric and habits. Not only is the lie-telling contest

---

11 See especially Cotera, pp. 82-90 and Retman, pp. 152-183
12 Quick note: lies is the term used for what are broadly known as tall tales. In Mules and Men, according to the principles laid out by Hurston and the people who tell the lies, lies constitute a system of folk knowledge by serving multiple functions: they can be affirmative tales of slaves tricking masters, of a hero named John, of the Devil, and of God; they can be admonitory stories that enforce social codes and mores; they can be explanatory and genesis-type stories about various biological or cosmic facts.
accepted by the community, Hurston tells us that “it started individuals coming to [her] privately to tell stories they had no chance to tell during the contest.” The members of the community see the lies as irreverent and culturally esoteric, but after Hurston sponsors a contest, people come forth to distribute and share their knowledge. By staging and purposefully aestheticizing and publicizing the lies, Hurston establishes a space in which to externally value and privilege the stories. One might argue that Hurston’s methods of incentivizing the telling of these tales offers a material means of affirming and privileging knowledge that many of the men and women she meets initially think is unworthy of collection and dispersal. For example, by setting up the contest, Hurston establishes an internally coherent and internally objective measure through which to rate and remunerate these tales, which were previously thought to be too esoteric for objective consumption and evaluation. While this argument certainly explains the success of the contest and the subsequent willingness—indeed, eagerness—of people to share their lies with Hurston, it does not quite approach the incredibly close relationship Hurston built with the men and women she met and from whom she collected stories. By ingratiating herself to the laborers and their families, Hurston gains access to the spaces and statements of everyday life that allow her to contextualize the lies and bring to life the textual subjects in *Mules and Men*. While this enlivening methodology breaks the bars of objectivity, it also speaks to the real work Hurston does in creating a shared space of experience, which Retman argues is an effective rhetorical strategy of subtly foregrounding the positionality of the author, and by identificatory extension, the reader: “As she drives, talks, and sings with her informants, she shares contemporary time with them. By proxy, so do we” (175).13

13 See also Retman, 172-5, in which she describes Hurston’s experience at a “toe party.” Hurston builds suspense, describes her own feelings and experiences, and involves the reader in a very
For example, because of her successful integration with the community, Hurston gets to accompany the laborers out to the swamps and hears many lies on the way out from the camp. Presumably, Hurston incorporated some of the lies from the contest, as well as some of those privately related to her, in the many subsequent pages of *Mules and Men*. Sidestepping the possibility of a perfect memory, it is quite reasonable to speculate that Hurston restages and enlivens the stories by incorporating them in believable and dynamic contexts. David Todd Lawrence suggests as much in his description of Hurston’s “experimental ethnography”: “Without the fictional contextualization, the isolated tales would provide only a partial understanding of how they function in a dynamic discursive moment. So the material Hurston adds does not just link up … folktales, it instead provides a colorful and plausible scene in which the folktales are situated” (4). In other words, *Mules and Men* is not quite ethnography, not quite novel, not quite memoir, not quite performance: the text lives in a space beside those generic descriptors, and instead seeks another method of representing its subject and subjects. What *Mules and Men* revels in is the articulate messiness of humanity—for Hurston, dignity arises from this very state of imperfection. The men and women who populate *Mules and Men* speak and live through the text, even as they are willfully fictionalized, even as the border between truth and fiction gets fuzzy and frazzled. In contradiction to the assumption that *Mules and Men* can be easily understood or incorporated as ethnography, that its people are precise representations of Florida’s black folk, we can see it as a revealing and revelatory presentation of impossible representation. What are we left with? Do we have “the voice of the people”? I am not sure. Still, the situations Hurston depicts may or may not be fictional, but they certainly give us a radical image of participatory art.

deliberate way throughout this part of *Mules and Men* (which occurs in the very first chapter of the book).
What these lies show, perhaps above all, is a vibrant, tenacious complexity that postures as a stable set of anecdotes and images that emerge from a community informant’s perspective on her own cultural milieu. The sheer number of lies, most of which are set off by smaller type and indented, narrowed margins, might seem to bespeak this complexity. However, rather than interpreting the large volume of anecdotes, tales, and lies as revelatory (in every sense) of a dynamic community—indeed, as a testament to the incommensurable diversity of communal and individual experience—many of Hurston’s readers saw her work as a set of fixed, typical portraits. The lies were seen as documentary evidence, rather than as textual building blocks of communal and cultural discourse. Yet, much like we will see with Rukeyser’s “aslant documentary” and its disruption of documentary’s formal expectations, Hurston’s own aslant documentary methods destabilize the very ideas of folk purity that a cursory reading or careless perspective might accuse her of. As Michele Wallace argues, the men and women Hurston meets fight, curse, and behave badly, even while they provide a pathway to “lost” or folk wisdom. These men and woman are alive—they are people, not representations or representatives, regardless of how much others at the time wanted them to be either bucolic folk or model minorities. The very specificity with which Hurston imbues these citizen subjects is what gives them their living textual splendor, and also what releases them from the bonds of readerly expectation. That is, when characters cease to hew to the demands of others, they become subjects rather than objects.

Thus, Hurston is assembling a narrative while dissembling. She is informant and tourist, borrower and lender, author and reader, commander and laborer. She paints what at first seems like a still-life portrait of African American experience in Florida, whereas in actuality she is

---

doing something akin to programming a hologram that shifts in and out of sight. Perhaps more accurately, the particular beauty Hurston creates can be analogized to a piece of serialist music played by an orchestra: the clusters of notes, melodies, harmonies, and components are already laid out, and each performer may repeat the clusters of notes as many times as they like—all while performing as an orchestra. In *Mules and Men*, for example, Hurston places the lies in a living context: they are dialogically (and often competitively) related, often in response to a previous lie, suggestion, experience, or mnemonic reminder. As a result of this living context, the lies are often thematically and epistemologically related. In Chapters 5, 6, and 7 of *Mules and Men*, when the workers at the Everglades Cypress Lumber Company progressively discover they do not have to work for the day and make their way to the river to fish, the tales and lies are often brought about by the sounds and sights of nature. The lack of mockingbird calls on that Friday awakens an interest in the small group of men and women on their way to the river; Big Sweet, one of Zora’s friends and, very importantly, perhaps her chief protector at the Cypress Lumber Company camp, enlightens her fellow travelers with a story about mockingbirds helping an erstwhile (and hellbound) human friend of theirs on Fridays (94-5). She tells this lie in response to a friend named Eugene Oliver, who says the silence of the birds is unnatural. Big Sweet says it *is* natural, in fact, because the mockingbirds are not on earth; rather, they are in hell ferrying grains of sand to quench the fires of perdition in order to rescue their immoral friend—something they do each and every Friday. In telling this story, Big Sweet establishes three strands of epistemological and narrative framework that the other people in the group take up, play with, and extend in immediate response to her tale: first, mythical human-animal interactions; second, animals relating to humans as a result of human morality or immorality; and third, a day of the week as it relates to work or worship.
Big Sweet’s story leads into some humorous, competitive storytelling about catfish, because Joe Wiley is reminded of the cleverness and sense that other animals have besides the mockingbird—and how, textually, animals assist humans or put human actions into stark perspective (largely in response to the second epistemological and narrative framework laid out by Big Sweet, as outlined above). He prefaces the story by saying, “If them mockin’ birds ever speck to do dat man any good they better git some box-cars to haul dat sand. Dat one li’l grain they totin’ on their bill ain’t helping’ none. But anyhow it goes to show you dat animals got sense as well as peoples” (95). He introduces the story as one about animal cleverness, and he then segues into a story about catfish that references a day of the week—like Big Sweet’s mockingbird tale: “Now take cat-fish for instances. Ah knows a man dat useter go fishin’ every Sunday” (95). Joe Wiley transitions from mockingbirds to catfish, from Friday to Sunday. The story carefully and cunningly weaves the three strands of Big Sweet’s story into a thematic web that upholds its own narrative and thematic logic. Again: first, the story is about an animal that encounters a human; second, like the first, the story is about a presumably hellbound man who immorally prefers fishing to church worship (he ignores his wife and his pastor in order to go fishing); and third, the story is about a day of the week. Although Joe Wiley’s story varies in its emphases and particulars, they emerge from a similar discursive and cultural preoccupation. Many of the stories in *Mules and Men* can be clustered into a wide number of preoccupations, pedagogical intentions, and discursive explorations of cultural epistemology.

Indeed, David Todd Lawrence argues, “Without the fictional contextualization, the isolated tales would provide only a partial understanding of how they function in a dynamic discursive moment. So the material Hurston adds does not just link up two folktales, it instead provides a colorful and plausible scene in which the folktales are situated” (19). For Lawrence,
Hurtson’s introductions and settings put the lies into living context—giving readers an idea of how lies are used to construct folk epistemologies. Furthermore, Lawrence argues, “In order to effectively employ the stories in this ethnographic model, they must be though of as a complete performance activities rather than just isolated textual recordings of single events” (7). Thus, rather than functioning as an anthology of folk stories, folk knowledge in Hurston is re/presented through performances situated, in Lawrence’s terms, in an “extended context” to better establish their ethnographic value and setting. While Lawrence is correct about the vivifying contextualization of folk knowledge, one must also understand that Hurston’s ethnographies also perform incredible political work. Beyond ethnographic preservation of a lost and lapsing state of society, Hurston’s work constitutes a vital political praxis that takes, as its case, the “folk” and their knowledge in order to make an argument about the coming shape of democracy.

The wide array of applications for the lies, as well as their many separate prompts and emergences, speaks to a possible cognitive map that Hurston seeks to create. This map, through its spatialization of relationships, furnishes the beside, as theorized by Sedgwick; this beside allows the subjects implicated through the text’s novel hermeneutics (subject-characters, subject-author, subject-reader) to engage in a dialogue along their many borderlands and intersections.15

By providing a cognitive map of the African American experience in Florida, Hurston suggests a means of “exploring” or “viewing” black folk culture that at the same time defies the stability and objectivity that might be expected of any object of study. What emerges is a

15 As discussed in the introduction to Migrant Modalities, Sedwick’s theorization of beside leads directly to Gloria Anzaldúa’s centrality to my praxis. Anzaldúa’s extension of the borderlands as a space of methodological insight and philosophical inquiry as well as an ethnographic space in need of properly specific study is absolutely fundamental to each and every inquiry I engage in throughout this dissertation. The theory I put forth in the introduction, inspired by Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La Frontera, is what I call travesía hermeneutics, and can be understood, in brief, as a shorthand descriptor for the praxis I explicate more fully in this chapter’s introduction.
subjective experience of someone else’s experience—a mediation that necessitates a novel hermeneutic approach—one that seeks a *subject* of dialogue, rather than an *object*. Although it is belaboring the point to suggest that many of Hurston’s readers miss the point, this is certainly what emerges in recent Hurston criticism, especially that which takes on Hurston’s contemporaries and detractors. Sonnet Retman points out that one must read *Mules and Men* with an ear attuned to the atypical and boundary-pushing means by which Hurston redefines and signifies upon conventions of ethnography, folk studies, and anthropology. Says Retman, “Citing the conventions of modernist anthropology, particularly its emphasis on participant observation fieldwork, wherein the researcher forms personal relationships with community informants and participates in the life of the group, Hurston shows her readers how these conventions produce images of the folk—and she makes them aware of their own complicity in the process” (24). As readers, we must read with an awareness of our complicity. Interpretation requires imagination—the making of images, literally—and we create images according to previous experiences, cultural expectations, and the discursive possibilities offered by syntax and semantics. What we approach the text with is what Hurston is playing upon—in terms of black “folks” from Central Florida, in terms of ethnographic and anthropological re/presentation, as well as fictional practice. What do we expect the “folk” to do? What do we expect them to represent? Retman helpfully identifies some of the many uses the “folk” and folk culture were put to in the early to mid 20th Century:

---

16 An instructive and personally formative text I have in mind that examines the very premises of hermeneutics is Hans Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1993), especially pp. 265-307. In the conclusion to *Migrant Modalities*, I explore this text more fully in order to lay out a more general theory of hermeneutics, a concept I reinvigorate within the space of this dissertation by elaborating on its necessarily political premises and effects.
Featured as stalwart protagonists in much of the period's documentary, the folk took center stage in various narratives of recovery across the political spectrum. In some of these stories, this folk embodied a purportedly precapitalist way of life, an enduring stoicism in the face of the marketplace's erratic excesses. In other accounts, they represented an embattled group in need of government intervention—'pseudo-peasants' on the verge of vanishing due to the ravages of capitalism and unpredictable forces of nature (Smith, *Making the Modern*, 298). Viewed either as relics worthy of preservation or as victims deserving of aid, the folk were perceived as a pastoral resource integral to the nation's healing and crucial to the brokering of new deals. (1-2)

Here, Retman argues for the centrality of “folk” to national discourses and a common thread in American self-perception that considers “folksiness” important to the individual’s patriotic worth. As “a pastoral resource integral to the nation’s healing and crucial to the brokering of new deals,” the folk became the bridge between America’s past, present, and future. As opposed to “moderns,” the folk dialectically operated as definitional foundations as well as markers against which one could set oneself. Furthermore, literary practices often emphasized this distance by participating in touristic reading—a method of re/presentation and interpretation that emphasized distance and utilized the “folk” other as a means to the end-as-a-Modern-American.\(^\text{17}\) The folk were nostalgic still images into one’s past, as well as stark reminders of what progressive, modern America was moving away from, rather than ends-in-themselves.

In *Mules and Men*, Hurston obliges us to consider the discursive memes and semes we have grafted onto folk culture. In presenting an “authentic portrait” of the black folk in Central Florida, Hurston gives us a purely textual representation of cultural life shared through stories and lies. In his preface to *Mules and Men*, Franz Boas suggested that it is “the charm of a loveable personality and of a revealing style which makes Miss Hurston’s work an unusual

\(^{17}\) Hathaway sees touristic reading as a technique that must be critiqued, in order to better define and refine one’s own methodology: "[A] critique of 'touristic reading' has the potential to pull together many current theoretical concerns of folklorists, including the following: questions of 'authenticity' and 'representativeness,' questions about the performative aspects of tourism, and questions about the links between ethnography and fiction" (171).
contribution to our knowledge of the _true inner life_ of the Negro" (Mules and Men xiii, emphasis added). Hurston’s textual tapestry strikes Boas as revelatory of a “true inner life”—but is Hurston refusing us an actual glimpse of interiority? In doing so, she does not negate or deny interiority, but rather insists upon the need to see all presentation as representation—a discursive amalgam that plays upon readerly expectations of authenticity. Rather than giving us straight-up authenticity and “true inner life,” Hurston confronts this expectation with an interpretable text—and the reader’s textual view turns inward. Reading Mules and Men is not so much about “the true inner life of the Negro” as it is about the way we interact with others and their readability. John Laudun argues that

> In both [Their Eyes Were Watching God & Mules and Men], human subjectivity, in the texts through which we understand it, is dialogically constituted to the extent that sometimes readers are at a loss to know who exactly is speaking. And that would seem to be the point. I am arguing that to explore these dialogical structures, both in their representation and in their function as discursive strategies (such as framing), is to suggest an alternative way to read Hurston. (49).

By presenting the possibility of this alternative interpretative practice, Hurston melds the subjectivity of the reader with that of the textual subject (in every sense). Therefore, the route of interpretation cannot be unidirectional, and it does not lead solely _away_ from the self, but _toward_ the self as well. That is to say, because of Hurston’s aesthetic praxis, we arrive at a political praxis as well: the text leads to a new way of imagining oneself, the world, _and_ therefore a means of imagining a new way of re/presenting oneself in—and to—the world. Fittingly enough, it is through her very indeterminacy and textual play that she is able to speak “the true word” that transforms the world, to beckon back to Freire, or, to recall Baldwin, that she is able to commit herself to human freedom and fulfillment.

To suggest Hurston was not striving to preserve something she valued and saw slowly sliding into the annals of history, however, is to falsely represent her work. For Hurston, an
Eatonville native, the black life of Central Florida was an important and unique cultural touchstone. Quoted above, Laudun argues “sometimes readers are at a loss to know who exactly is speaking,” and the point is not to emphasize this inscrutability above all else, but to instead recognize that this loss is often due to the intensely polyvocal nature of (especially) *Mules and Men*. The sheer number of speakers in *Mules and Men* is beautiful and overwhelming. Hurston almost seems to suggest that something like a Burkean sublime can be reached through the storytelling of a large number of people—except for the fact that Hurston’s “sublime” is predicated in the everyday, rather than in the shocking. The point is to portray the diversity of cultural knowledge and community life—and it is also to give voice to the many people Hurston encountered on her travels. She gives voice and name, and these representational tactics give a depth and breadth to *Mules and Men* that suggests, perhaps, that Boas is partly right in highlighting Hurston’s attempt to give a “true inner life.”

The contradiction contained in this movement towards and away from representational inscrutability reveals the complexity of Hurston’s aesthetic and political project. At a time when political dignity was at the heart of much literature—from the Popular Front to the Harlem Renaissance to the Proletarian Writers to the Southern Agrarians—Hurston’s *Mules and Men* (not to mention *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Moses, Man of the Mountain*) revels in a contradictory, complex re/presentation of dignity and textuality, labor and playfulness, difficulty and didacticism. There is a story to be told, even if it does not rigorously hew to convention. It can be argued that Hurston participates in a tradition of re/signifying (upon) the conventions and expectations of her readers, peers, and mentors. Similarly, when discussing Frederick Douglass’ *My Bondage and My Freedom* Priscilla Wald suggests, “Douglass shows not only how the freer story is only partially available to him, but also how it contributes to his lesser status, to the
subordinate black selfhood that he cannot accept. The cultural importance of that story, and the free selfhood it articulated, made indirection an important part of an alternative story. Accordingly, Douglass represents his self as a story that could not be fully told” (Wald, 16).

Written ten years after *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom* is Douglass’s response to the contradictory impulses that undergirded abolitionist affect at the time—they respected his skill as a speaker even while desiring a degraded slave with whom to utilize persuasive appeals to *pathos* and *ethos*. As Wald shows, Douglass’s second autobiography takes on what we could call the “folk figure” of the degraded slave, which, as Lynn Festa has persuasively argued in the context of postcolonial theory, undergirded much white abolitionist rhetoric.18

This static representation of the “folk” deeply troubled Hurston, and her grappling with tokenized representation led her to trouble the foundations of ethnography and folk studies, which is perhaps why her work is taken up so often by folk historians and scholars. Rosemary V. Hathaway argues, “We need to regard the uses of folklore and other traditional cultural material in texts not as static sites of pure representation or 'unbearable authenticity,' but as places where

---

18 See Lynn Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD (2006), especially chapter 4, “Making Humans Human.” Her argument regarding Josiah Wedgwood’s extraordinarily famous and widely circulated medallion, which inaugurated the popular portraiture of the kneeling slave supplicating his wearer with the question, “Am I Not A Man And A Brother?” A contextualized example of this medallion, which also gives an excellent example of local history writing, can be found at the following link: [http://www.thepotteries.org/did_you/005.htm](http://www.thepotteries.org/did_you/005.htm).

Festa’s account of the sentimental figure of the degraded slave allows us to see an interesting parallel to Retman’s *Real Folks* and the use of “the folk” in 1930s documentary and Popular Front discourse. For example, Festa articulates the shared focus on a sentimental figure in this way: “Colonial expansion means that readers must find ways of recognizing human likeness while maintaining other forms of difference. The sentimental community upholds a common identity, not by forging bonds directly between seemingly like individuals, but by creating a shared relationship to a common but excluded object about which the community has feelings” (*Sentimental Figures*, 4). 

115
culture and identity are actively constructed and contested. We need to stop looking for the familiar and instead seek out the places in multiethnic texts where boundaries collide and collapse” (Hathaway 187). Hathaway points us in the direction of Hurston’s radical and democratic representational praxis. Hurston pushes the boundaries of “static sites of pure representation,” seeing them as discursive jumping-off points rather than end-points. She plays upon the “means and ends” logic of Kantian ethics: people are ends-in-themselves rather than means-to-ends; however, their representation is a means-to-ends. That is, these “static sites of pure representation” are not the ends-in-themselves—in Hathaway’s terminology, sites of “unbearable authenticity.” Instead, the “folk” in Mules and Men, Their Eyes Were Watching God, and Moses, Man of the Mountain are the entryways to a deeper and more radically democratic view of black citizens in Central Florida.

In “The Case of Blackness,” Fred Moten offers the language of “the case” as a hermeneutical intervention into questions of representation and lived experience. Moten wants to “linger in, rather than quickly jump over, the gap between fact and lived experience in order to consider the word ‘case’ as a kind of broken bridge or cut suspension between the two” (180). The gap that lies between fact and lived experience is where interpretation becomes crucial; that is, it is where philosophy must take place—where philosophy must consider the case. Furthermore, Moten says:

I’m interested in how the troubled, illicit commerce between fact and lived experience is bound up with that between blackness and the black, a difference that is often concealed, one that plays itself out not by way of the question of accuracy or adequation but by way of the shadowed emergence of the ontological difference between being and beings. Attunement to that difference and its modalities must be fine. (180)

By way of discussing Moten’s call to attuning ourselves to the ontological shades of “difference between being and beings,” I would like to pose a question that Moten himself asks: “What is it
to be an irreducibly disordered, deformational force while at the same time being absolutely indispensable to normative order, normative form?” (180) For Moten, blackness and black differ according to the social way they are lived and experienced, and the epistemological means through which they are grasped and (ab)used. Hurston’s “folk” lie precisely in “the case,” and representationally function in an uneasy gap between fact (Hurston’s Mules and Men, after all, is marketed and understood as ethnography, and the lies are, in fact, truly folk stories) and “lived experience” (the inscrutability and the absoluteness of the lives being represented on the page). The very irreducibility of the lives of the men and women represented by Hurston defies any attempt to take them up as fact; by the mere fact that they are represented, we cannot take the lives we read about as factually lived experiences, either. What we are left with is the ethical and philosophical problem of reading, of interpreting, of attuning ourselves to the difference between being and beings, and the modalities of that difference.

Another of Joe Wiley’s lies reveals Hurston’s devotion to dignity. In this story, John, a heroic folk figure used in many of the stories, performs the requisite (and demanded) amount of work for his master.19 Much like Prospero with Ariel and Caliban, Ole Massa cajoles John and tries to manipulate him into extending his enslavement.20 Yet John takes his freedom, as it was promised to him, and heads north to Canada.

“Fur as John could hear 'im down de road he wuz hollerin’, ‘John, Oh John! De children loves you. And I love you. De Missy like you.’
John would holler back, ‘Yassuh.’
‘But ‘member youse a nigger, tho!’

19 Hurston’s glossary to Mules and Men has the story of “Jack or John” as its first note: “Jack or John (not John Henry) is the great human culture hero in Negro folklore. He is like Daniel in Jewish folklore, the wish-fulfillment hero of the race. The one who, nevertheless, or in spite of laughter, usually defeats Ole Massa, God and the Devil. Even when Massa seems to have him in a hopeless dilemma he wins out by a trick. Brer Rabbit, Jack (or John) and the Devil are continuations of the same thing” (Mules and Men 247).
20 See William Shakespeare’s The Tempest, I.ii.
Ole Massa kept callin’ ‘im and his voice was pitiful. But John kept right on steppin’ to Canada. He answered Ole Massa every time he called ‘im, but he consumed on wid his bag.” (90)\(^2\)

In this passage, Ole Massa and his family lay claim to John through emotional appeal, yet push him away by trying to remind him of his place in the world. Ole Massa keeps calling, presumably indefinitely, and John “answered Ole Massa every time he called ‘im, but he consumed on wid his bag.” In this story, John takes up the tension between what one might call the “Arielite” and “Calibanic” notions of freedom: in *The Tempest*, Ariel’s radical version of freedom is unbounded and literally magical, while Caliban’s vehement and historical idea of freedom is specifically tied to prior land claims and an ineradicable, inescapable, overwhelming sense of violence’s burdens on all moments past, present, and future.\(^2\) John, in leaving all claims behind and moving to a free land, hews to the known road *and also* specifically ties his freedom to a claim in space and place. Ole Massa’s infuriating and “pitiful” calls echo up the road to freedom, and John “answered Ole Massa every time,” but John’s dignity stands him up all the way to personal and landed freedom in Canada.

IV. *The Book of the Dead*

---

\(^{21}\) I will return to this passage at the chapter’s conclusion

\(^{22}\) I take much of my thought on Caliban from preparing sections from *The Tempest* to read at Garden State Youth Correctional Facility (Yardville, NJ) and Albert C. Wagner Youth Correctional Facility (Bordentown, NJ), specifically relating to the ideas and definitions of emancipation explored by Shakespeare. I must also express my gratitude to the students, many of whom encountered Shakespeare for the first time, for relating to the text and providing crucial experiential and philosophical insights into a concept we too often take for granted—freedom. I am also extremely indebted to George Lamming’s essays “In the Beginning” and “The Occasion for Speaking” in *The Pleasures of Exile* (University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, 1960), pp. 14-22 and 23-50, respectively, and Houston A. Baker’s *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1987), especially pp. 53-69.
Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead* poetic sequence, from the larger book *U.S. 1*, makes a similar claim to the dignity of the working men and women represented therein.23 For Rukeyser, much like Hurston, writing meant traveling to a community and engaging it thoroughly and rigorously. She not only engaged communities as a researcher or sympathizer, but also as an ally and communal catalyst. Her trip down to Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, was a fact-finding mission that was also an aesthetic and political mission. The *New Masses*, the leading Leftist publication before the *Partisan Review* and a frequent employer of Rukeyser’s, had written several scathing articles and editorials against the utility company running the operations at the Hawk’s Nest tunnel, Union Carbide. This generated quite a bit of interest regarding what the *New Masses* called an industrial disaster—but that Union Carbide said was simply typical and exaggerated workplace injury. The disaster did not lie in any dramatic or violent tunnel collapse, but in the fact that hundreds of laborers died from silicosis, a disease that was not yet recognized as an industrial hazard that employers were legally required to prevent.24

On her trip to Gauley Bridge, Rukeyser could not stop herself from thinking of West Virginia’s deep historical roots, from its indigenous peoples to the farmers, settlers, and miners that moved into the state from the 17th Century onwards. Of especial import for Rukeyser, as it was for many others, was the haunting presence of Harper’s Ferry, site of John Brown’s

---

23 In italicizing *The Book of the Dead*, I follow Tim Dayton in *Muriel Rukeyser’s The Book of the Dead*, cited below. Although Rukeyser describes the entire sequence as a single poem, for the sake of clarity and for simplifying the process of referring to each section of the long poem—each of which has its own (sub)title—I have decided to italicize the title of the longer poem and use the conventional quotation marks around the poem’s titled sections. In each citation of critical material relating to the long poem, I have italicized the long poem in order to avoid any confusion.

24 Rukeyser’s papers, both at the Library on Congress and the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library, contain many articles clipped from the *New Masses*, the *New York Times*, and various regional newspapers that discussed the debates around silicosis. Rukeyser was particularly interested in the Wisconsin State Legislature’s grappling with the matter, perhaps as an example for the West Virginia disaster she was contemplating.
courageous, divisive, and inspirational uprising. Rukeyser was also taken with Gauley Bridge’s Civil War history, as it was the site of a 40,000-soldier battle and eventually the Union Army’s West Virginia headquarters. Rukeyser romantically and sweepingly described Gauley Bridge in a “Story Outline for Gauley Bridge,” which she sent to Columbia Pictures as an idea for a film. Rukeyser begins the outline with a grand historical arc, but also a specific, keen perspective on the often-forgotten cyclical nature of migration (in that memories, bodies, and roots can never be as cleanly separated out or severed as the American Dream myth would like us to believe):

This story is a chapter of the great American migration. It is not concerned with the westward sweep of the frontier-breakers, or, in our own day, of the dust bowl refugees—but rather with one of the shifts that feed and follow such sweeps…. This is a story of one of these shifts; of how several thousand Americans arrived, for one reason or another, in a beautiful steep valley in West Virginia where there was a job to do, and where hope was held out to them…. [T]his land knew the struggle with itself and for itself, in pioneer and farmer and miner, and this struggle for power—water-power and man-power—was only a new phase of the story.25

In this précis for the film company, Rukeyser gestures to the broad stakes of the Gauley Tunnel disaster. She claims that this “was only a new phase of the story,” an unsatisfying nod towards the eternal battle between competing forces. Importantly, though, this comment does not exactly express dialectical materialism—an important point to remember, given that this might be what is expected of a committed Leftist like Rukeyser. That said, her grounding of the disaster in a seemingly eternal historical feedback loop belies the claim made earlier in this chapter—namely, that Rukeyser’s radical specificity is what sets her apart.

When moving through this manuscript, which Rukeyser immediately says is “Adapted from the poem published in U.S.1,” one notices a shift from the broad to the personal, from the

abstract to the concrete: she refers to many of the familiar names from the poem, and goes to pains to describe the many important scenes in which these men and women will take part. Notably, this scenario is for a feature film, which would presumably have employed a professional cast. Even more notably (or perhaps tellingly), the letter from Eve Ettinger at Columbia Pictures says “I read your outline for a picture on silicosis very carefully, and I am sure it has swell possibilities for a documentary film.”26 A feature film about laborers could not register as anything but a documentary for a film executive—and this confusion is precisely what Rukeyser’s imaginative power and aesthetic achievement often engenders: the demand for and expectation of authenticity is often so strong that her important political work, grounded on an emphatic pluralism and a sense of radical democratic praxis, cannot be seen. In what follows, I argue that the confusion must be embraced not as confusion, but as a specific mode of intersectional critique grounded in multiplicity and a commitment to remaking democracy as a participatory civic rather than an alienated civic (in that one speaks for oneself, rather than having an “authority” speak for one).27

As an activist and a poet, Rukeyser saw herself in an integrated, fully participatory role. For example, in a poetry reading in April 1969, Muriel Rukeyser went to Pittsburgh along with Robert Bly, David Henderson, Ted Berrigan, W.S. Merwin, Ed Sanders, and Robert Zmuda, and she addressed the audience directly, eloquently, passionately:

They say this is all protest, what we’re doing, what the students are doing, what all the anti-war people are doing. But it’s not anti-war. It’s for peace, and for peace as a fierce, marvelous quality of life…I wish as poets that we make things

26 Letter from Eve Ettinger of the Columbia Pictures Corporation, LC I.42:7
27 Although I fully acknowledge my tendentiousness in referring to our Constitutional Republic as an alienated civic, I believe this is the only way one can both accurately and succinctly describe the process of voluntarily relinquishing one’s voice through electoral politics. In my use of alienated, I owe a debt to Marx’s theory of alienated labor as labor that is removed from a use-value or material economy into an exchange-value or commodity economy.
wherever we protest, that we make our poems where we are against something, that we plant grass where we walk in demonstrations, that we make something new, each time."\(^{28}\)

Emerging from a tradition of negative protest and resistant politics, Rukeyser here nonetheless insists on a fiercely positive and affectively derived (and oriented) revolutionary politics dedicated to constantly making the world new. It is our duty to make newness enter the world, suggests Rukeyser, and we must do it for the sake of existence’s entirety—we must fiercely feel and fiercely make change. She also makes it quite clear that the poet must be aware of his or her place in the space of the world: wherever she or he has an impact, they must address that impact: “we plant grass where we walk in demonstrations.”

Rukeyser’s peace is an active, world-making peace. In 1951, 18 years prior to her reading in Pittsburgh, she wrote in the *Berkeley* journal of modern culture,

> As we live our truths, we will communicate across all barriers, speaking for the source of peace. Peace that is not lack of war, but fierce, and positive; many lives, many poems, many acts of love. We hear them crying to us absent and here, the wounds, the young and the unborn—we will define that peace, we will live to build that meaning. Until the peace makes its people, its forests and its living cities. And then we will create another peace.\(^{29}\)

Again, we see her describe peace as “fierce,” and this time she adds “positive.” Peace isn’t passive or finite. Instead, Rukeyser’s formulation posits an endless, active, and multitudinous structure of constant renewal and reinvigoration. Indeed, what is most insistent and (ins)urgent is the desire for peace and for healing—this is emphasized in her paratactic, nearly biblical syntax (and diction, for that matter). Through this rhetorical repetition, she ties heterogeneity and

---


multiplicity together in order to “live to build that meaning” of peace that includes the wounded, the young, and the unborn poets of the future.

Although these two statements are roughly 18 years apart, her *ars poetica* remained remarkably consistent throughout her life—from the earliest stages of her professional career in 1931 to her final works in 1979 and 1980. What I would like to trace out here is the overarching methodology and philosophy that drove so much of Rukeyser’s poetry, specifically *The Book of the Dead*, thus defining her passionate belief that the personal and the political were always one. Rukeyser’s commitments to revolutionizing the present through critique, description, documentation, dialogue, and a fierce, positive commitment to peace and democracy as a marvelous quality of life all come together to form the core of her democratic engagement with others.

In Rukeyser’s many writings, I find a proleptic theorization of what Lauren Berlant does in her latest book, *Cruel Optimism*. For example, Berlant theorizes our encounter with the present as something always improvisatory and always performed. The present is something we make and remake, and this is quite close to the heart of Rukeyser’s theory of political action. Says Berlant, “If the present is not at first an object but a mediated affect, it is also a thing that is sensed and under constant revision, a temporal genre whose conventions emerge from the personal and public filtering of the situations and events that are happening in an extended now whose very parameters (when did the 'present' begin?) are also always there for debate” (4). Here we have an affective, phenomenological theorization of the present as a sensual and temporal genre, whose boundaries and contents must be improvised and critiqued. Berlant’s argument that the present is “a mediated affect” “under constant revision,” which is “always there for debate,” is very much like Rukeyser’s demand that the present be a process of making and remaking—of
“plant[ing] grass in demonstrations,” of “mak[ing] something new, each time” we act. The present must be looked to in order to theorize the future, not looked beyond (neither history nor the future should be privileged over the present). Critique must always be located in a cogent understanding and affective engagement with the present.

Given how similar Rukeyser’s understanding of the present is to Berlant’s, we see that her approach to activism emerges from anything but a typical Marxist understanding of materialist historicism, especially because it is committed to the specificity of the present. Even while the past has led inexorably to the present, Rukeyser resists the brazenly self-assured Marxist tradition of inevitability and replaces it with a much more affectively driven understanding of the need to make the present better. She enacts a prophetic discourse that neither declares the predestined nor condemns the inadequacy of the present: she is not Lenin and she is not Jeremiah. Rather, she devotes herself to an immanent critique that sympathetically extends to those who suffer in the present, seeking ways to create spaces for life and love. To repeat from her Berkeley piece, “We hear them crying to us absent and here, the wounds, the young and the unborn—we will define that peace, we will live to build that meaning.” By calling out the specificity of the present moment and one’s place in the world (replacing the grass that one has trampled—not just any grass), Rukeyser insists on recognizing one’s positionality. In so doing, she urges us to live in the world in such a way that we are beside others, that we engage in a dialogue of equals. As I have argued above, this has its foundation in dignity—in both its conferring and its possession. Because Rukeyser refuses to separate herself out from her space and time, because she refuses to separate herself as a poet from her political life as a citizen, she has an astounding ability to meld her voice to the voices of others without seeming to establish a fundamental hierarchy between perspectives.
Other Rukeyser commentators have noticed this distinct and characteristic of her life and politics. As Raphael C. Allison explains, “For Rukeyser, ‘imagination’ entails complex examination, multiple perspectives, and a pluralist belief that such multiplicity yields strengths” (5). It is in this dedication to complexity, multiplicity, and specificity that Rukeyser is closest to Hurston. As with Hurston, Rukeyser’s idiosyncrasy lays in her radically open approach to life as the intersection of politics and poetics. She demands openness—both of herself and of her readers and listeners. The future, for Rukeyser, did not lie in ideology commonly understood: the future was not rigorously circumscribed by doxa of any sort. Instead, in Rukeyser’s poetics and politics, ideology once again becomes a “science of ideas” that comes along with a method of testing, of opening oneself to experience, and of inscribing this experience into poetry. Indeed, as Allison further points out, “Rukeyser believed that her task was to produce texts that dramatized this process of plural forms and experiences in order to challenge fascistic fantasies of total domination” (8-9). In Allison’s estimation, Rukeyser’s primary political drive was a leftism driven above all by a resistance to singularity, domination, and determination. Even while it was an anti-fascist ideology, it raised the ire of fellow Leftists, especially Marxists, who preferred historical materialism’s explanatory power to an open-ended, experimental future based upon an urgent improvisation in the present.30

30 It was this same anti-fascist presentism that motivated her coverage of the Scottsboro Trial, prompting an unpublished piece entitled “Women and Scottsboro,” found in the Library of Congress, in which she sees the people involved and touched by the Scottsboro nightmare as motivated, emotional individuals whose consciousness was being drawn towards more expansive notions of class and race—and thus towards a democratic thirst—not as a new source of proletarian anger to be swayed and utilized. For more on this, see Alan Wald’s Exiles From a Future Time, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC: 2001, especially pp. 299-306, and How Shall We Tell Each Other of the Poet? ed. Anne F. Herzog and Janet E. Kaufman, Palgrave, New York: 2001 (1999). The entirety of How Shall We Tell Each Other of the Poet is a beautifully wrought and carefully compiled collection dedicated to exploring and sharing Rukeyser’s life and artistic output, and includes submissions from Adrienne Rich, Richard
Walter Kalaidjian, in his reading of Rukeyser’s *U.S.*, asks, “why exactly did Rukeyser’s long poem [*The Book of the Dead*] provoke such universalizing expressions of resistance on both the left and the right?” (70). The answer Kalaidjian provides is much like Allison’s, and rests on Rukeyser’s resistance to orthodoxy: “Rukeyser elicited such aggressive responses, arguably, because she embraced a new, revolutionary mode of cultural identity—one that departed from the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century figurehead of what Michel Foucault would dub some forty years later as the ‘universal’ intellectual: the one who ‘spoke and was acknowledged the right of speaking in the capacity of master of truth and justice’” (70). Kalaidjian further notes, “However neglected today, Rukeyser’s specific cultural critique in *The Book of the Dead* nevertheless marks a decisive displacement of both the affirmative poetics of the bourgeois academy and proletcult verse—a displacement that is inscribed in her long poem’s situation and setting, in its narrative representation of the people, and in its dialogic mix of the period’s representative discourses and rhetorical styles” (71). Rukeyser does not affirm the others by *saying so*—rather, she does so by effacing and defacing the idea of a metaphysical or authoritative voice even while she grants specificity to the citizen subjects in her poem. Like it is in Hurston, this paradoxical maneuver is easily misunderstood and criticized; unlike Hurston, Rukeyser’s goal is not at all related to satire, even though she is dedicated to subversion.

---

31 In her excellent dissertation, Sarah Kerman is motivated by the intransigent questions of voice raised by reading the poem. She says, “Presenting a surplus of emotional authenticity distributed among multiple speakers, the poem provokes anxiety over the source of its impassioned political critique—the voices of workers and their families? Rukeyser as arranger and editor of those voices? Or Rukeyser as lyric narrator, who alternately observes and exhorts? The interplay among these disparate voices goes so far, at time, as to produce confusion over who, precisely, is speaking, a problem foundational to critical interpretations of, and disputes over, the poem. For, while the poem clearly uses quotation to raise its political and rhetorical stakes, it is unclear whose struggle we become involved in,” Kerman, *Speaking for Americans: Modernist Voices*
In her poem “Mearl Blankenship,” Rukeyser brings together her voice and the voice of a laborer who wrote a letter (of unclear destination) to New York City describing the situation in Gauley Bridge. Her means of distinguishing the voices is superficially quite evident: the poem is structured such that Blankenship’s letter is indented, and Rukeyser’s own words are in short, non-indented stanzas:

He stood against the stove
    facing the fire—
Little warmth, no words,
    loud machines.

Voted relief,
    wished money mailed,
quietly under the crashing:

“I wake up choking, and my wife
    rolls me over on my left side;
then I’m asleep in the dream I always see:
the tunnel choked
    the dark wall coughing dust.

I have written a letter.
    Send it to the city,
maybe to a paper
    if it’s all right.”

Dear Sir, my name is Mearl Blankenship.
I have worked for the rhinehart & Dennis Co
Many days & many nights
    & it was so dusty you couldn’t hardly see the lights.
I helped nip steel for the drills
    & helped lay the track in the tunnel

---

and Political Representation, 1910-1940, University of Pennsylvania, 2010 (Accessed through ScholarlyCommons): 148. At the risk of exhuming New Critical arguments, the ambiguity Kerman discerns in The Book of the Dead does not have to be located in clarity or its lack. Rather, and this is where I gladly depart from the New Critics, the ambiguity must be understood as part and parcel of Rukeyser’s deliberate habit of refusing to separate herself out in order to examine new modes of democratic praxis.

32 The letter upon which “Mearl Blankenship” is based is now located in Rukeyser’s papers at the Library of Congress, and was sent on March 13, 1936 to an unspecified denizen of “Room 10005-245 Seventh Ave, New York, NY.” LC I:42.7.
& done lots of drilling near the mouth of the tunnell
when the shots went off the boss said
If you are going to work Venture back
& the boss was Mr. Andrews
& now he is dead and gone
But I am still here
a lingering along. (82-3)

Above, we see the first five stanzas of a seven-stanza poem. The poet and Mearl Blankenship are placed into conversation with each other through this format, and what strikes me is the depth of sympathy and imagination that occurs in this format: Rukeyser begins by giving a succinct description of Blankenship—of his exhaustion, of the machine-made loudness surrounding him, and of his political action: “voted relief.” She then imagines Blankenship’s words on the left, enclosed in quotation marks, and then also imagines his letter anew, by indenting it and setting it off from the rest of the poem. Tim Dayton observes, regarding the six lines beginning with “& when the shots went off the boss said/…/ a lingering along,” that “Rukeyser makes the lines into coherent phrasal units…and establishes a rough regularity: two four stress lines followed by two three-stress lines, each with a pyrrhic foot [two unstressed syllables], and two syllabically shorter three stress lines” (42). Dayton notes that Rukeyser largely maintains the language of the letter, for example the alternative spellings of “tunnel(l)”—but, oddly enough, capitalizes a few words that aren’t originally capitalized (such as “Many days”), adds some periods (the original letter has no periods at all), and omits some words (and alters some phrases, like “mixed the steel for the drills” she changes to “nip steel for the drills”)—largely to work with alliteration, assonance, and consonance, and to formally cut and place the lines from the letter in order to heighten their poetic effect. The extra-dramatization of the letter—which is already sorrowful and dramatic—is achieved through reformed lineation, which extends some lines from the letter, and then gradually narrows the lines at the end of the poem to reproduce the gasps of a silicotic migrant.
laborer. Is this poetics as dramaturgy? What is Rukeyser enacting here? She melds her voice—through form, essentially—with that of Mearl Blankenship, one of the thousands of black migrant laborers recruited to dry-drill into pure silica without masks, without prior training, without warning. In a sad footnote to the Hawk’s Nest Incident—where roughly 500 miners died from Silicosis—it has been noted in many places that the labor contractors, Rinehart and Dennis, avoided hiring trained, experienced miners who would never have dry-drilled through silica, and instead recruited through word-of-mouth advertising and rumor mostly in Georgia, among primarily black communities.33

So, what is Rukeyser hoping to achieve through this poetic melding? Is she saying something about experience—or about the limits of experience? What can the poet write about? Does the poet contain multitudes? How improvisatory is the poetry here, especially since she takes a pre-written letter and reworks it? However, is not the very nature of improvisation the ability to take something that exists already and remake it—to work off of an established set or pattern? To call forth Albert Murray and Fred Moten, what’s going on in the break here?

33 One of the best works on the incident is by Martin Cherniak, entitled The Hawk’s Nest Incident: America’s Worst Industrial Disaster. The Hawk’s Nest Incident approaches the Gauley Tunnel incident from a public health perspective, and as an interdisciplinary work, works as a political analysis, a medical analysis, a sociological survey, and a historical overview of what is still the deadliest industrial disaster in American history. Tim Dayton’s Muriel Rukeyser’s The Book of the Dead also does an excellent job of contextualizing Rukeyser’s role in relation to the larger story of the Gauley Tunnel disaster. Dayton concisely provides some facts that say so much, yet indicate how little can truly be said, about the classist, racist nature of the disaster: “The inability of the tunnel workers to resist the abuses inflicted by their employers may in part be explained by the nature of the workforce. To drive the tunnel through more than three miles of solid rock, a workforce was assembled that was largely though not exclusively migrant in character. As noted, fewer than 20 percent of the men who worked inside the tunnel—the only place where dust concentration made silicosis a danger—were locals, according to Union Carbide's records. Most of these migrant workers were black. As a result, the majority (around 75 percent) of workers inside the tunnel were black. By recruiting black laborers into mostly (80 percent) white Fayette County, the employers sought to ensure some distance between the tunnel workforce and the population. This plan worked to a great extent” (19).
The methodology Rukeyser engages in is radically democratic in its focus. She reduces her role as a poet to description, and gives over the bulk of the poem to Blankenship’s voice. Still, the descriptions are rather loaded. In this way, one could argue that she engages in what Kalaidjian earlier called “proletcult” verse, an aesthetic tendency criticized by William Stott and Sonnet Retman, among others, that tends to uphold the masses as messianic harbingers of the revolution to come. What characterizes this tendency is manifold: the text could rely on a transformation narrative, from ignorance to awareness; it could rely on stereotype or portraiture to emphasize sociological arguments (à la *Sister Carrie* or *Native Son*); and/or it could assert a general proletarian innocence, which is related to the folk ideal. However, in the sixth stanza of the poem, Rukeyser imbues description with a strangeness that makes us question her earlier descriptions: were they simply loaded descriptions? Was she trying to quickly shorthand a specific portrait of a Mearl Blankenship?

```
He stood against the rock
facing the river
grey river grey face
the rock mottled behind him
like X-ray plate enlarged
diffuse and stony
his face against the stone. (“Mearl Blankenship,” 83)
```

Stone and grayness dominate the description. Her simile, “the rock mottled behind him / like X-ray plate enlarged,” seems to constitute the affective fallacy, pure and simple. What emerges, though, is an underlying logic to the affective fallacy: how can you look at a man suffering from

---

34 Stott argues that the tendency to “make innocent” is dishonest at best, since it avoids obvious facts of lived experience, and it also deadens the narrative. Retman describes the overall 1930s desire to find a native folk that could contain a remnant of the national past, specifically referring to the geographical and urban-rural divides that seem to persist in our national history, saying “Precisely because the South was often viewed as a feudal exception to northern industrialism, it was also seen as a pristine, rural enclave of anachronistic folk cultures vanquished elsewhere by modern commerce” (19).
silicosis, his head against a spotted rock, and not see that his world, and as a consequence, our shared world, has changed? The affective fallacy is not operant simply to improve the facility of metaphor; instead, it serves to show that human-nature interactions have come together through the figure of oppression: exploitation of the earth has led to exploitation of humanity. Mearl Blankenship’s black face has turned gray from ill-health, from anxiety, from staying underground to dig out the silica—a color theme Rukeyser reprises by referencing the “white dust” over and over in the course of The Book of the Dead—white dust that covers all. In “George Robinson: Blues,” the speaker is the organizer of the workers in the laborer’s camp, and he says, “Looked like somebody sprinkled flour all over the parks and groves, / it stayed and the rain couldn’t wash it away and it twinkled / that white dust really looked pretty down around our ankles” (88).

In “Alloy,” which not only denotes the compounding of metals, but also one of the sources of exploitation (Alloy was the name of the town where all the unearthed silica was shipped for the use of Union Carbide), we see “Crystalline hill: a blinded field of white / murdering snow, seamed by convergent tracks; / the travelling cranes reach for the silica” (95). The white covers everything like a dispersed sprinkling of flour, or like “a blinded field of white,” just like gray is the color of stone and the color of Mearl Blankenship’s face. This chromatic uniformity, brought about by exploitation, shows us that everything is connected. And therefore, if everything is connected, Rukeyser seems to insist, how can she separate herself out?

Rukeyser says: “One opens, yes, and one’s life keeps opening, and poets have always known that one’s education has no edges, has no end, is not separated out and cannot be separated out in any way, and is full of strength because one refuses to have it separated out.”

What are these new horizons and these new challenges of the present? What does it mean to

---

35 LC I.16:3: Rukeyser typescript, stamped p. 000295
refuse to separate oneself out? This is a fully participatory ethos of democracy—it does not suggest that poets speak for and above others via distanced representation, but attempts to keep the present constantly dialogic and navigable.

Ultimately, we can see in Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead* is a formal, poetic means of vitalizing and politicizing personal speech. Rukeyser formalizes the political speech and political action of the laborers in the section of her long poem entitled “Praise of the Committee.” The committee in the poem is a people’s defense committee organized by the laborers, their families, and their allies. Rukeyser, as with “Mearl Blankenship,” splits the poem by indentation, but also adds italicization in this instance.

> These are the lines on which a committee is formed
> Almost as soon as work was begun in the tunnel
> men began to die among dry drills. No masks.
> Most of them were not from this valley.
> (“Praise of the Committee” 79-80)

The committee’s formation is given spatial and temporal priority—and then we are immediately told why the committee is formed: the laborers, from “as far inland as Kentucky, Ohio,” are thrown together in a work camp in order to mine the white substance that the West Virginia utility companies wanted so badly, and at a cheap cost. These laborers, and some of their families, are made marginal in the work camp. They must work because they’ve come for work, and have no other options. Mrs. Jones, one of the migrant mothers, reports that she went around the state looking for medical and political support for her sons. She tells Rukeyser:

> The youngest boy did not get to go down there with me,
> he lay and said, “Mother, when I die,

---

36 I owe this observation to Tim Dayton’s *Muriel Rukeyser’s The Book of the Dead*, in which he notes that the committee here is not the congressional committee that later investigated what is now known as the Hawk’s Nest Tunnel Tragedy and determined that silicosis was an industrially caused disease (see Dayton, 71-77). For many readers, myself included, this is a rather easy mistake to make.
I want you to have them open me up and see if that dust killed me. Try to get compensation, you will not have any way of making your living when we are gone, and the rest are going too.” (“Absalom” 84-5)

Mrs. Jones lost three sons to silicosis, as well as her husband. These four men were among the thousands made to “dry drill” silica without masks, and the dust flowed into their lungs and never left. Who is left to speak for the dead? Rukeyser goes to great lengths to remove herself, even though it is undeniable that she must acknowledge herself to be speaking for the dead. Yet, in emphasizing the speech of others, in giving someone’s voice as the narrative voice throughout the poetic sequence, and by constantly referring to the need to not forget, to speak out, to understand, to listen, Rukeyser tries her damndest to find a way to speak with the dead and the living, to engage in a dialogue. She is not the savior who swoops in and whisks out; instead, in perhaps an impossibly anachronistic gesture, she is a traveling bard in a nearly forgotten oral tradition, a receptacle and vehicle for the stories of others—is she The Book of the Dead itself? Even then—no. Mrs. Jones gives voice, for the first time in the long poem, to the drive of the poem, to its aim, to its specific raison d’être: “He shall not be diminished, never; / I shall give a mouth to my son” (85).

V. Love

Rukeyser, to a certain degree, musses the line between fact and fiction in a way that echoes Hurston. However, her intention in altering the words of her interlocutors was mainly to square with her attempts to create a prosodically rigorous and experimental long poem. Rukeyser does not establish context in the way Hurston does, or even for the same reasons that Hurston does. However, she establishes a dialectic between the individual and society in order to offer an
insurrectionary alternative to a national (and industrial) history that is all too willing to marginalize and forget the black laborers in Gauley Bridge. Stephanie Hartman argues that “She also counters the focus on the isolated individual … by using montage to put individual ‘portraits’ such as those of [Mearl] Blankenship and [Arthur] Peyton into a larger context, indeed, into relationship: she presents the workers both as named individuals and as members of their class” (“All Systems Go,” 215). Rukeyser contextualizes the laborers in part to forward a larger revolutionary history of class struggle; by specifying them, she not only gives weight to their individual stories, she also provides the concrete particulars that anchor the universal struggle in the real world. Hartman suggests this is also because by “converting individual suffering into collective knowledge, [Rukeyser] reach[es] beyond grim facts to imagine a conceivably better future” (211). Rukeyser gives the laborers their proper place in history, not only in order to reveal their suffering to our collective witness, but also in order to “imagine a conceivably better future.” How is this possible?

In this man’s face
family leans out from two worlds of graves—
here is a room full of eyes,
a single force looks out, reading our life.

Who stands over the river?
Whose feet go running in these rigid hills?
Who comes, warning the night,
shouting and young to waken our eyes?

Who runs through electric wires?
Who speaks down every road?
Their hands touched mastery; now they demand an answer. (“Praise of the Committee, 82).

Who, Rukeyser insistently demands. Who stands, whose feet go running, who comes, who runs, who speaks? As laborers, “their hands touched mastery”—the awesome and terrible power of the Earth. The silica they breathed into their lungs was used to temper the steel to create dams,
factories, and other structures in the surrounding areas. Their bodies, buried in a cornfield before their families could dress them in finer clothes or address them one final time, are thrust into the earth. “Dust to dust,” indeed.

Yet Rukeyser wants to shake us out of our complacency. What do we feel when we poetically witness the scenes of industrial terror in The Book of the Dead? Rukeyser offers up the voices of the laborers and their families—collected from interviews, letters, and congressional hearings—in order to make us not only witness, but listen. And not only listen, but respond. How deeply we fail these workers and their loved ones when we do not engage in this dialogue. Indeed, Rukeyser warns us against the mere act of seeing, of merely witnessing, and calls upon us instead to bear witness:

Words on a monument.  
Capitoline thunder. It cannot be enough.  
The origin of storms is not in clouds,  
our lightning strikes when the earth rises,  
spillways free authentic power:  
dead John Brown’s body walking from a tunnel  
to break the armored and concluded mind. (“The Bill,” 106)

“It cannot be enough.” Reviving the body of John Brown, Rukeyser reminds us of what it truly means to bear witness, “to break the armored and concluded mind.” No longer “a-moldering in the grave,” John Brown’s body walks forth from the same West Virginia soil in which he and his fellow fighters died, a revenant whose presence speaks to the long history of struggle Rukeyser reminds us of. In the opening stanza of her poem “The Soul and Body of John Brown,” published two years after The Book of the Dead, Rukeyser announces, in the terrifying language of Jeremiah- and Isaiah-like prophecy, what it means to bear the witness of the dead:

His life is in the body of the living.  
When they hanged him the first time, his image leaped  
into the blackened air.  His grave was the floating faces  
of the crowd, and he refused them in release,
rose open-eyed to autumn a fanatic
beacon of fierceness leaping to meet them there,
match the white prophets of the storm,
the streaming meteors of the war. ("The Soul and Body of John Brown, 115).

“F” and “m” are the dominant sounds, a consonant mixture of thickly ethereal air pushing
through lips and an earthy humming into closed lips. “he refused them in release,” an “open-
eyed” revenant who spoke of the indignation and violence faced by the nation’s enslaved. As in
*The Book of the Dead*, John Brown is not—and cannot—die. He makes the crowd witness,
making their “floating faces” his grave. They bore the shame of his execution, but as Brown
himself would say, any shame paled in comparison to the great shame of the nation—the slavery
and bondage of millions.

Yet, will they speak? Did they realize? Rukeyser challenges and dares us in the same
way, implying that the laborers who died from silica poisoning are executed through negligence,
and face being doubly executed through the fading of memory. *Never forget*, dares Ruekyser. At
*The Book of the Dead’s* conclusion, in the eponymous section, “The Book of the Dead,”
Rukeyser reinforces the need to see and then also to speak:

What one word must never be said?
Dead, and these men fight off our dying,
cough in the theatres of the war.

What two things shall never be seen?
They : what we did. Enemy : what we mean.
This is a nation’s scene and halfway house.

What three things can never be done?
The hills of glass, the fatal brilliant plain. ("The Book of the Dead,” 107)

Rukeyser warns us against proclaiming the laborers dead—in this case, it’s an invocation against
forgetting. She wants us to memorialize rather than monumentalize: that is, to speak their
memory and commit their lives to memory, rather than rest content with etching their names into
static slabs of stone. Furthermore, “these men fight off our dying, / cough in the theatres of the war.” The Gauley Bridge project is established as a theater of war; not only that, but as Tim Dayton and Ann Herzog remind us, Rukeyser is connecting the migrant laborers in West Virginia with the Republican soldiers of the Spanish Civil War, whom she constantly honored in her life and poetry.³⁷ Both wars were lost: the migrant laborers got about $22 each for their “troubles”; the Spanish Republic fell to Franco and lost Spain to fascism.

“What two things shall never be seen?” Rukeyser asks, suggesting the buried lives of the workers and the hidden costs of their labor; she also knows that the enemy will not reveal what they “mean.” All that is unseen creates “a nation’s scene and halfway house”: a purgatory of sorts, a place in which we are beholden to power, although not confronted by the bars in a prison cell. “What three things can never be done?” Rukeyser asks. We cannot “Forget.” We must not “Keep silent.” We shall not “Stand alone.” Rukeyser calls upon us to stand beside the workers, to commemorate them and bear witness to the lives they led.

Here is the poem’s conclusion:

Voices to speak to us directly. As we move.
As we enrich, growing in larger motion,
this word, this power.

[....]

fanatic cruel legend at our back and
speeding ahead the red and open west,
and this our region,

desire, field, beginning. Name and Road,
communication to these many men,
as epilogue, seeds of unending love. (“The Book of the Dead, 110-1)

³⁷ Rukeyser wrote an article for the New Masses about her trip to the abortive “People’s Olympics” in Barcelona, which came to an abrupt conclusion before they started as the Spanish Civil War began. She also wrote several poems about the Spanish Civil War, including “Mediterranean,” which was originally published as a small pamphlet or chap-book to raise money for the Spanish Republic’s war effort.
Rukeyser suggests that her voice is not the primary invocative voice of the poem. The voices come from beyond her, and at the poem’s finale, she lets us know that she is as much of a witness as we are. The voices have been speaking with her—and she has been listening and reading just as we have. “This word, this power” remains oblique: what is the singular word to which she refers? This word reaches out to us, and as we keep extending and expanding the frontiers of human existence and capacity with a “fanatic cruel legend at our back,” we are told to recall “Name and Road”—to always dwell in the particular and specific; to never forget. Communication must take place, among the living and the dead, “as epilogue, seeds of unending love.” Rukeyser finishes this poem with love—this is the revolutionary call that we must heed.

In her classic study, Methodology of the Oppressed, Chela Sandoval speaks of “Love as a Hermeneutics of Social Change.” Love is the interpretive practice that we bring to others and ourselves, in order to move beyond the discourses that bind us and tear us down. She makes recourse to Roland Barthes’ A Lover’s Discourse and Image/Music/Text, and the hopeless promise of love that is located in “a kind of opening, or ‘lapsus’” (Sandoval, 147). Sandoval argues, “The third meaning in Barthes’s work, ‘theoretically locatable but not describable,’ he writes, can now be described as a passage from language to process, a passage from narrative to an erotics of being, to ‘soul’” (140). Is this space the place where the unknown “word” in Rukeyser’s poem comes from? Is love “this word, this power”? Sandoval says this about revolutionary love: it is “a ‘breaking’ through whatever controls in order to find ‘understanding and community’: it is described as ‘hope’ and ‘faith’ in the potential goodness of some promised land” (140). The promised land: Rukeyser gestures toward this in the perpetual motion of her poem’s finale, as we “speed ahead the red and open west, / and this our region, // desire, field,
beginning.” We are the ones who make our future, and as we speed along human history and consciousness, we desire and we seek new beginnings.

To conclude, I would like to return to Hurston—and, more specifically, to a passage I have already discussed. We return again to John, the multi-form and multiply told folk protagonist, who has saved his master and misstress’s children from drowning in a pond, and “So Massa told ‘im to make a good crop dat year and fill up de barn, and den when he lay by de crops nex’ year, he was going to set him free. So John raised so much crop dat year he filled de barn and had to put some of it in de house” (Mules and Men, 90). So as not to break a promise, and although he is loath to do so, the master lets John go.

Contrasted to Sandoval’s ideation of love, Ole Massa’s is a baleful, manipulative love. This is indicated not only by his reason for calling out that he and his children love John—to guilt him into staying on the plantation—but also by the fact that Ole Massa’s notion of love cannot extend to his wife’s feelings. Ole Massa speaks for her, just as he speaks for his children, saying that “De Missy like you,” indicating his pitiful subservience to the sexual ideology of racism, as well as insisting that he knows his wife better than anyone, and can therefore discern the difference in her feelings. In reminding John of his blackness and supposed class and racial inferiority, Ole Massa seeks to undermine John on his journey. Yet, we are told, John “consumed on wid his bag”—always moving north toward a promised land that he approaches with strength, hope, and faith. John responds every time he is called—he will not forget where he’s been and who he has
seen; but can Ole Massa see the new John, or will he always remember and pine for the old days? Returning to Caliban and Prospero, can the master ever understand the consequences his oppression has created? He cannot and does not, and he cannot transform the world through love—not only is his notion of love awry and askew, but he is not even cognizant of the world, and thus cannot transform what he cannot see or understand. John, though, sees the world and sees it needs transformation. While the master calls him forth, trying to conduct Althusserian interpellation, John responds to the hailing but does not turn back.38 His eyes seek the space where his fulfillment might be attained, where his voice will be given dignity, where his life will be his.

38 I am absolutely indebted to my Princeton colleague Brittney Edmonds for this observation, especially the fact that this scene is a proleptic rendering of interpellation as Althusser imagines it in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)” from Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays.
Chapter 3: “Pastures of Plenty”: Movement Politics and the Politics of Movement in Woody Guthrie and Sanora Babb

“The man with words is not the only man who thinks and weeps with the deep question of his being. Let no one ever think himself apart in this. Let him sit down and talk to any man and feel his shame; the unsayable things come out as clear and simple as a bell at night in every word he speaks. He wants more than bread and sleep; he wants himself—a man to wear the dignity of his reason.”

—Sanora Babb, Whose Names Are Unknown

I’d like to rest my heavy head tonight
On a bed of California stars
I’d like to lay my weary bones tonight
On a bed of California stars
I’d love to feel your hand touching mine
And tell me why I must keep working on
Yes, I’d give my life to lay my head tonight
On a bed of California stars

I’d like to dream my troubles all away
On a bed of California stars
Jump up from my starbed and make another day
Underneath my California stars
They hang like grapes on vines that shine
And warm the lovers glass like friendly wine
So, I’d give this world just to dream a dream with you
On our bed of California stars

—“California Stars,” lyrics written by Woody Guthrie, music composed and performed by Wilco

I. Migrant Witness and Migrant Whiteness

At the same time that Hurston and Rukeyser engaged in ethnographic and documentary research to visibilize black migrant workers in the American South and Appalachia, Sanora Babb worked quietly, and often without much recognition, in the Western states documenting the

---

1 I am indebted to Dr. Rachel “Rae” Gaubinger for the knowledge that “California Stars,” one of my favorite songs by the band Wilco, appears on their album with Billy Bragg, Mermaid Avenue, a collaboration fostered by Nora Guthrie, Woody Guthrie’s daughter.
migrant work camps that sprung up among Okies fleeing the wrath of the Dust Bowl. Hurston’s admirable self-advocacy is well documented, and it ensured her a great amount of autonomy to work on the projects she wanted to work on, with her own methods and directions. Rukeyser’s refusal to capitulate to political critiques of her work, from her New Left comrades and from rightists disinclined to view her outspoken pedagogy and poetry favorably, ensured that her work, like Hurston’s, gained aesthetic and political independence. Babb, in a different undercommons mode than either Hurston or Rukeyser, hewed her path through the aesthetic and political wilds of the 1930s, 1940s, and beyond. Because she has not attained the stature of Hurston and Rukeyser, though, does not mean that she refused to advocate for herself or her work. Indeed, a glance at Sanora Babb’s life reveals just what an incredible and tireless author, fighter for justice, and advocate for migrants she was throughout her life.²³

² Much work on Babb comes from news media and dissertations. See Kenneth Burns’s The Dust Bowl PBS documentary (2012); the Harry Ransom Center’s website dedicated to Babb <http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/exhibitions/web/babb/intro> (the Ransom Center also houses most of Babb’s papers, along with her sister Dorothy’s photographs of migrant workers in California); a website dedicated to Babb <http://www.sanorababb.com/>; a story by ForeWord Reviews on Babb that touches upon the resurgence of interest in Babb after Burns’s documentary <http://www.icontact-archive.com/s2qh3_mmxmJvO4YEK6LU_ofV6ELF925?w=4>; a brief overview of her work from the Rocky Mountains Modern Language Association <http://rmmla.innoved.org/conferences/conf02-scotsdale/getabstract065a.html>; and Abigail Genée Hughes Manziella’s Permanent Transients: The Temporary Spaces of Internal Migration in Four 20th-Century Novels by U.S. Women Writers, dissertation for PhD from Tufts University, May 2010, accessed via ProQuest. A brief overview of her work can be found in Douglas Wixson, “Radical by Nature: Sanora Babb and Ecological Disaster on the High Plains, 1900-1940,” in Regionalists on the Left, edited by Michael C. Steiner (Oklahoma University Press, 2013): 110-133.

³ Babb’s personal history is quite extraordinary. She was born in Oklahoma and moved to southeastern Colorado as a youth. She worked for the FSA as a social worker. With her sister, she documented the migrant workers in California, especially in camps. She was the bride in one of the first official interracial marriage in California History when she married James Wong Howe. In the 1930s, she had romantic affairs with William Saroyan and Ralph Ellison. She was blacklisted by HUAC in the 1940s and moved to Mexico City. This is not even half of her story, though. Babb’s memoir, An Owl on Every Post (1970) and her largely autobiographical novel, The Lost Traveler (1958), detail more of her vast and interesting life.
It might be said that Babb’s tactics and aesthetics are quite similar to Rukeyser and Hurston’s documentary poetics, since Babb utilized documentary and journalistic modes in her fiction and her work as a government FSA educator and employee. At the heart of *Whose Names Are Unknown* (1939/2004), we encounter the struggles of working men, women, and children as they strive to make themselves legible to a system that sees them as nothing but expendable, interchangeable labor. Babb moves between expansive, abstract description and the struggles of a specific family, the Dunnes (this is similar to Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*—the influence, as will be discussed below, ran from Babb to Steinbeck, even though Steinbeck’s work was published before Babb’s was scheduled to be originally published). Babb’s novel mixes these concrete and abstract reflections within the text, utilizing free-indirect discourse, “found object” inclusion (the use of text from handbills and eviction notices, as well as fictionalized epistles), and diaristic writing to make a case for proletarian power while also demanding the recognition of individual migrants. Babb does not seek to (re)create a folkloric migrant culture, though, and the Dunne family is not like the archetypical Joad family.

I am particularly invested in exploring and writing about Babb, having first learned of her from Ken Burns’ 2012 documentary, *The Dust Bowl*. Her field notes and research notebooks were involuntarily lent to John Steinbeck (by Babb’s boss, Tom Collins, who is the dedicatee of Steinbeck’s novel) to aid the writing of *The Grapes of Wrath*. In a terribly ironic blow that revealed the sexist, consumer driven culture in which Babb was writing, her own novel, which

---

4 Initial outlines and abstracts of this dissertation placed heavy emphasis on Steinbeck. Watching *The Dust Bowl*, however, convinced me that Babb’s writing should be engaged with more widely. While I have an article on Steinbeck in preparation (“Dialectical Storytelling and the Problem of Two Endings in *The Grapes of Wrath*”), I feel it is important to dedicate my space to Babb in this chapter. While the Steinbeck-Guthrie connection is quite evident (Guthrie’s *Dust Bowl Ballads* have songs named after the Joads, for example), the connection between Babb’s style and Guthrie’s is just as worthy of examination.
was already contracted for publication, was rejected a year after Steinbeck’s novel was published because it was seen as piling on to a literary “trend” that had already been cornered—publishers said there was no more room for another Dust Bowl novel.\(^5\)

Babb, unlike Steinbeck, hailed from the Dust Bowl; like Steinbeck, she was interested in exploring the lives of the men and women from the agriculturally devastated American heartland. Whereas for Steinbeck it could be (and in fact, \(is\)) argued that he sees the Joad family as political symbols that could be exchanged with any number of other particular family names, in Babb’s *Whose Names Are Unknown* it is the case that the intimacy she accomplishes is a direct attempt to make the names of the farmers and laborers known, rather than interchangeable (and thus perhaps unknown because overly known, in an enforced universality).\(^6\) Evident from the very first—the novel’s title—is Babb’s commitment to telling a differential, specific story of some of the men and women whose names were unknown, but whose stories functioned as mythical representations of the degradations and depravations of the Dust Bowl disaster.

What I will mostly be exploring in this chapter is the space where grief, disaster, and anger converge into a localized moment of labor-oriented, radically democratic politics—specifically, as informed by the Popular Front ideology prevalent in the American Left at the

---

\(^5\) In her 2004 review of the recently published novel, Pamela J. Annas notes, “In one of those shifts of fate familiar to writers, especially new writers—and this was Babb’s first novel—when she turned her manuscript in to Bennet Cerf [co-founder of Random House and the leading figure in the landmark court case, *United States v. One Book Called Ulysses*, 1933] in 1939, Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* had already hit the bookstore shelves and become a bestseller. Cerf, and subsequently editors at Scribners, Colliers, and Viking, turned down *Whose Names Are Unknown*, saying another novel on the same subject wouldn’t sell” (10).

\(^6\) Abigail Manzella, noting a distinction between Steinbeck and Babb, argues, “By skipping the expected discussion of their longest migration, the novel highlights the many smaller migrations that dominate their existence. In this second half of the novel, characters perpetually move from place to place in hopes of turning the yeoman myth into a reality, but once in this cycle of movement, the movement itself marks them as migrant workers and homeless bodies, excluding them from success and warning others to keep them moving” (74).
time. As Robbie Lieberman puts it, “The acceptance and influence made possible by the Popular Front generated tremendous inspiration and excitement within the American Communist movement. The Popular Front meant new coalitions, mass organizations, and rhetoric as Communists turned to supporting Roosevelt and the New Deal, building the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), extending civil rights, and aiding the Spanish Loyalists” (5). The long decade of the Popular Front, an ideological position of alliance officially declared by the Communist International in 1935, and perhaps waning once U.S. involvement in Korea began in earnest in 1948, was characterized by a strategic attention to interlocking theoretical and practical concerns (although, in the name of beating fascism, explicit concessions were made, particularly regarding racial justice—lest it be forgotten, FDR’s New Deal policies were enormously beneficial for white, “yeoman” class farmers and industrial laborers, often at the expense of, especially, African American, American Indian, Chinese American, and Latino workers). Aesthetically, the Popular Front ushered in a new populist, demotic framework for creative writing, dramaturgy, journalism, music, and the visual arts. These concerns, mainly, were characterized by “a focus on American democracy which stressed the virtues of the common man and the dignity of oppressed groups such as the Negro, the functional character of folk [art] as a response to the particular experiences of American history, and the relationship of American folk [art] to its prototypes in the cultures of other nations” (Lieberman, 38). Often, this art took the shape of so-called “proletcult” creativity, in which largely middle- and upper-class artists utilized “folksy” sounds, styles, and words to create politically conscious versions of realism:7 “A romantic view of the American past and present permeated Popular Front culture,

---

7 The Cohen brothers 1991 film, *Barton Fink* (starring John Turturro and John Goodman), satirizes the “proletcult” style to great effect. Turturro’s character, Barton Fink, an extreme version of playwright Clifford Odets (*Waiting For Lefty* [1935]), sets up shop in Los Angeles
focusing on the people and their democratic traditions and heroes, the natural resources of the country, and the potential richness of life in America for every individual. The American land and people were glorified by the radio plays of Norman Corwin, the films of Pare Lorentz, the writings of John Steinbeck, and the ballads of Woody Guthrie” (Lieberman, 41). This socialist realism, however, often exploited its subjects, rendering them as objects of political knowledge and native wisdom. Much as Hurston and Rukeyser did, however, Babb strongly resisted this objectification and created a unified work of art that refuses to metonymize and reduce the humanity and dignity of her subjects.

Indeed, Sanora Babb’s *Whose Names Are Unknown* expresses a desire for social and political change by engaging intimately with the lives of the men and women affected by oppressive social, economic, and political systems. She utilizes information she gathered in her FSA fieldwork, weaving documented experiences and documentary representations to create a space for the Dust Bowl migrants to tell their own stories. Similarly, Woody Guthrie’s performance aesthetics enacted localized moments of radical democratic thought and feeling, which he cultivated through an incredibly flexible and improvisatory performance style. Richard Reuss notes, “For Guthrie, as with other traditional artists, the composition or performance of a song was a creative act born out of the dynamics of a given moment in time…. To Woody, each draft or performance of a song was a new creative experience rather than the revision of an old one” (288). Guthrie’s legendary memory allowed him to memorize dozens of verses for songs, and he performed songs differently according to the crowd, to his feelings, to the political situation at hand and abroad. As a famous raconteur, Guthrie was also able to make up verses on the spot, which can be heard in several of his recorded songs through his hesitations (both lyrical

and tries to write a script “about the common man” even while ignoring the stories of a common man, John Goodman’s traveling insurance salesman.
and melodic—this is exemplarily evident in his recording of a children’s song, “Why, Oh Why,” for Moses Asch), his laughter, his muddled words and rhymes. There is a purposive endearment that Guthrie develops through this intentional abandon.

In this chapter, I am also concerned with the specific politics of leftist whiteness in the Popular Front, especially as it is most commonly historicized. The very fact of the Dust Bowl erupted into public consciousness with the harrowing representations of poor white farmers driven to despair and driven off of their homesteaded land. Whereas whiteness was often aspirational on the part of late 19th and early 20th century European migrants, whiteness was taken as a given for poor farmers from the South, the Midwest, and the Dust Bowl. For Babb and Guthrie, however, these poor white migrants did not become symbolic catalysts for action along the lines of “it can happen to us too,” a position that ultimately leads to a reinscription of racial hierarchy—both artists were quite aware of the intersecting lines of class, race, and poverty, and also knew that ideologically and economically, the United States was invested in maintaining a “folk class” of poor white workers.

While I engage with Sonnett Retman’s work on Hurston in particular, Real Folks also delves into the politics of representing and maintaining folk culture more broadly. WPA pamphlets and propaganda, as well as Lomax & Co.’s collection of folk music across the United States, were very invested in setting apart certain parts of the country to maintain them in their current form. This often meant, of course, that “unalloyed” regions were meant to remain untouched and unspoiled. Rural electrification, for example, did much to homogenize popular culture and aesthetics, and this “spoiling,” while of incredible material benefit to rural people and peoples, was seen as destructive of a certain “cultural backwardness” that was necessary to preserve a “folk” culture.
articulate a different sort of whiteness, one that does not suggest that the migrants are ideological or mythical descendants of all previous white migrants. In *America’s Own Refugees*, for example, Henry Hill Collins, Jr. argues, “The migrant of today would, seventy-five years ago, have been a pioneer. Securely imbedded in our traditions and folkways are the tales of these pioneers and settlers that followed them” (4-5). Henry Nash Smith, in *Virgin Land*, describes this settler ideology, which led quite starkly, with lock-step, to the desperate, destructive, futility of small farmers in what would become the Dust Bowl:

“With each surge of westward movement a new community came into being. These communities devoted themselves not to marching onward but to cultivating the earth. They plowed the virgin land and put in crops, and the great Interior Valley was transformed into a garden: for the imagination, the Garden of the World…. [T]he master symbol of the garden embraced a cluster of metaphors expressing fecundity, growth, increase, and blissful labor in the earth, all centering about the heroic figure of the idealized frontier farmer armed with that supreme agrarian weapon, the plow” (123).

Indeed, the settler colonial project, subsidized and enforced by the federal government and nascent state governments, generated enormous symbolic energy through the “cluster of metaphors” surrounding white pioneer life, which Nash lays out. Against this alignment and assumption, Babb and Guthrie offer a transformed idea of whiteness, one that recognizes that the pioneers and settlers, often seen as important white keepers of America’s cherished frontier myth, ruined the arid Great Plains soil they conquered; that their farming practices and aspirations, when continued, led to the ecological and economic disaster of the Dust Bowl. Yet Babb and Guthrie do not squarely place the blame on these small farmers and townspeople. Instead, they lay the indictment at the feet of the banks, industrial farms, and various levels of government that steadily worked to profit off of the increasingly desperate labor of small farming families, creating new systems of tenancy that emerged from Southern sharecropping (owing money to banks rather than to racist land holders, however, shows that the new systems of
tenancy at work in the Midwest and West were founded in emergent modes of speculative finance capital and not in the sharecropping system’s anti-black desire to continue the extreme exploitation of black farm labor). These systems steadily eroded family land ownership, even as the banks gave the families the capital to sow and reap their harvests. Thus, as was seen on an astonishing scale when the Dust Bowl disaster reached its peak, the question arose: what could the families in Southeastern Colorado, the Oklahoma panhandle, North Texas, Western Kansas and Western Nebraska pay their rent with, especially when the bleak droughts of the 1930s devastated their crops and hopes?

Sanora Babb responds to this dire situation by developing and enacting a descriptive praxis that has the potential for consciousness raising and political transformation. This is a praxis that one also finds in the music of Woody Guthrie, who blends the aesthetic tendencies of Babb with someone like Hurston in his popular folk songs. That is, Guthrie invokes grand historical narratives and dialectical materialism while still singing about and representing reported stories by people without privileged access to established musical or literary production to disseminate their narratives. This is most evident in the wide array of verses for many of Guthrie’s songs, as well as in Guthrie’s practical conception of his songwriting and song dissemination as modes of gift giving, of understanding his art through the idea of use value, rather than exchange value. Guthrie often chose which verses to perform almost on the spot, depending on the historical, political, or regional context (and many of these iterations were recorded, often by Moses Asch, the founder of Asch Records, which eventually became known as Folkways Records). Many of Guthrie’s WWII era songs deal with anti-fascism—and give rise to one of the most enduring images of Guthrie and his guitar, upon which he placed a sticker proclaiming, “this machine kills fascists.” In tying his musical artistry directly to the working
class—his instrument is a machine, upon which he labors and produces goods to help the war effort—Guthrie announces the need for a revolutionary approach to destroy the evils present in fascism: statist capitalism, militarism, ethnic hatred, and nationalistic internationalism through world domination.

In the space of this chapter, I will be attending to Guthrie’s performance dynamics, as heard on several recordings made with Asch Records, well as his relationship to distribution, fame, and copyright. Famously, Guthrie didn’t care about who played his music and when, or even if, they gave him credit (unless it was a corporation that sought to profit from this borrowing). What he wanted most of all was to energize his listeners (and, given the extended and persistent backlash against Guthrie as a “pinko,” such as by political commentator Glenn Beck, you can see how his music is still quite invigorating). In providing his audiences with “free gifts” through his performances, Guthrie often short-circuited usual notions of ownership: he invited his listeners to sing along, to learn the songs and perform on their own. Songs were passed around, communally heard, and disseminated in both public and private. Guthrie’s songs, whether originals or standards, achieved a variety of shapes and sounds as they moved from mouth to mouth, from setting to setting, and from person to person, as the songs were learned and listened to across America.

Through reaching his listeners, Guthrie hoped to activate a utopian, multivocal, democratic ensemble that could still come together under a politics that fought for the rights of laborers across the Americas, even while singing with its different strains, melodies, and voices.

Looking forward to my final chapter, I see Guthrie’s “Farmer-Labor Train” as a political and

---

11 Interested persons would write to Guthrie’s Brooklyn address, and he would send a copy of his *Ten Songs* to the indicated return address. Often, he would include doodles, mall sayings, personal notes, and other marginalia.
musical antecedent for Odetta’s famous train rhythms. Both Guthrie and Odetta depict the moving lives of the labor class as they struggle with the everyday. Odetta looks back at an America that maintained discrimination and racism as devices of political and socioeconomic control, seeing its unwelcome presence well into the 20th Century. Her rewritings of folk standards, sorrow songs, spirituals, and hymns take up musical history, positing a political narratology that remembers history even as it seeks to revolutionize a racist society, much like Guthrie’s musical utopias imagine a non-existent America, a possible America that he exuberantly declares inevitable. This music “gives us the feelings we need to get where we want to go” (Kun, 17). As such, this is an America where everyone’s stories are sung and woven together into new sorts of ensemblic performances.

Whereas *Cane* was a paradigmatic foregrounding text, I use Guthrie’s oeuvre as an indicative index of possible futures and political potential, especially within the genre of political folk music. Taken together with Babb’s novel, Guthrie’s music reveals the stakes of radical art expressing radical politics, as lensed through the experiences of migrants in the midst of economic crisis and upheaval. Even more, since these migrants were examining the class and racial stakes of their economic migrancy, Guthrie and Babb shed important light on the radical, democratic possibilities of the heady and complex Popular Front years. More than a view into a scene of lost possibility, though, they reveal the responsibility behind making an urgent effort to allow voices to speak for themselves, to be themselves, and to “wear the dignity of reason” that makes migrants human. Their narratives tell stories that imagine, in their various ways, that a better world is possible—and that what we have to do is be moved by, explore, and listen to these stories and songs.
II. Sanora Babb and Radical Migrant Politics

Douglas Wixson, in his invaluable studies of Sanora Babb’s life and work, notes that refugees from the High Plains often embraced Babb with open arms, specifically because she was one of them. Growing up in Oklahoma, Kansas, and Southeastern Colorado, Babb moved with her family through the part of the nation that would become known as the Dust Bowl, which acquired its name largely due to the destruction of its top soil, the uprooting of its native grasses, and the subsequent dust storms that swept across hundreds of miles of inhabited land. Knowing firsthand the privations of the small farmers on the High Plains, Babb became a trusted and reliable worker for the Farm Securities Administration (FSA), especially as it worked to established government camps for Dust Bowl refugees and migrants as they sought work in California’s massive agro-business. Tom Collins, Babb’s supervisor, worked with her to convince the people moving through California to turn to the FSA camps to find reliable food, shelter, services, and facilities (such as toilets, showers, and water pumps). These camps offered important alternatives to the grower’s camps with their company stores and wages-in-credit, as well as the squatter camps that the majority of the migrants lived in (Babb, Babb, & Wixson, 92).

Wixson notes that the FSA camps were incredible resources for the migrants, while also observing the specifically racialized impetus behind the establishment of the government organization and its camps. He says, “Founded in 1934 as the Resettlement Agency, the FSA was established to aid dispossessed Anglo farmers, not the migrant workers, mainly Mexican and

______________________________________________________________________________
12 “Deeply socialized by the same postfrontier conditions that historically had fostered individualism and conservative politics, Babb reconnected with her childhood and youth in the tent camps and along the dirt roads in California where new arrivals squatted in their cars until they found work. Initiating cooperative arrangements for their children’s education and health, organizing labor demonstrations for better conditions, and recording the refugees’ stories, she was able to enter the intimacy of the dispossessed farmers’ lives and share their experiences” (Babb, Babb, & Wixson, 6).
Filipino, who had done the harvesting in the years before the diaspora of Dust Bowl migrants flooded California’s Central Valley in the ‘dirty thirties’” (125). The broader awareness of agricultural toil—or, perhaps, the broader public appeal of exploited white farm workers, whose faces, most famously photographed by Arthur Rothstein and Dorothea Lange, generated enormously empathetic responses—led to the creation of specifically targeted social and economic “safety nets”: the government run camps that could each house hundreds of migrant workers (although, as was quite evident, these “safety nets” provided at best temporary shelter and food, since migrants still had to move to find work).

In *Whose Names Are Unknown*, Babb gives a first-hand account, through the narrator’s voice, of why these camps provided such a boon to the migrants and proved such a thorn in the side of the Californian growers who wanted to sustain their political power. Through the distanced voice of the narrator, the observation that the willful maintenance of migrant disenfranchisement played an enormous role in actively disempowering the workers and denying them spaces to politically organize:

Of course, there were other means of preserving the migratories as such. One of the most effective was a particular system of bookkeeping, ordained to keep migratory workers from registering and voting. All members of an organization of big farmers kept a record of their workers’ car license numbers and the date they entered into the state. When a worker had been in a county for six months, by law, he could register. If convenient for the crop at hand, the worker was let out just before that time. As he moved on asking for work from other farmers, their records showed he should be on his way to another county. (200)

The hyper-bureaucratic means through which workers were kept track of—even as they were

---

13 This finds its horrifying parallel in 2016, with the gradual scaling down of legal punishments for drug offenses, coterminous with the rise of heroin and crack cocaine use in suburban white communities. As long as crack and heroin were “black problems” and “brown problems,” and as long as meth was a “redneck problem” in rural communities, drug laws mandated the enforcement of astonishingly draconian sentences that were easily traceable along racial and geographic lines.
disallowed from registering as voters—bespeaks the types of organization that were allowed:

“big farmers” are allowed to form collectives that actively prevent their workers from organizing into unions or collectives. If migrants were not allowed to vote, they could not utilize their right to a public voice through the ballot; this, at its heart, provides for Babb the most important argument for direct democracy, or, as it is referred to in the novel, with documentary accuracy through a leaflet slipped under a door, “D.F means Democracy Functioning” (174-5). Paul Virilio’s *Speed and Politics* provides a useful distinction that furthers Babb’s point, arguing that proximity does not mean inclusion. Indeed, proximate migrant populations are often used in binarizing arguments to sharpen the logic of expulsion when making the case for citizens versus non-citizens, for bearers of rights versus bearers of bare life:

> The ‘right to lodging’ is not, as was claimed, the ‘right to enter the city.’ Like the inorganic mass of wild animals, the proletarian horde carries a menace, a load of unpredictability and ferocity. It is allowed as 'domestic' to gather and reproduce near the dwellings of men, under their watchful eye. The problems of human *habitation* properly speaking are absolutely differentiated from those of the proletarian cattle, of its *lodgings* in the barnyard of the castle, in the outskirts of the fortified city. As with the stable or enclosure, the temporary lodging of the migrating masses implies their relative distance from the dwellings of men, in other words from the city. (Virilio, *Speed and Politics* 34)

Temporariness is opposed to permanence; camps are opposed to bounded settlements, to the

“fortified city.” Habitus, in the sense meant by Pierre Bourdieu, extends to the citizens, whereas “the proletarian cattle” are meant to inhabit their “lodgings.” Elaborating the idea that California was a new “city on a hill,” the growers and politicians in California actively refused to allow migrants to settle, to be inhabitants within the state.14

---

14 See, especially, James N. Gregory’s incredibly illuminating history of migration from the Dust Bowl, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (1989). Gregory’s work undoes the myth of absolute poverty among migrants from the Dust Bowl, while still maintaining the discursive importance of environmental and agricultural devastation. Even while Gregory critiques the idea that *all* Dust Bowl migrants were impoverished yeoman farmers,
In my discussion of *Whose Names Are Unknown*, I will discuss several narrative strands that culminate in the novel’s final moment of love as a revolutionary praxis. Beginning with a discussion of whiteness as a racial construction, I contend that Babb reimagines the putatively interracial Popular Front as depending less on a lumpenproletarian “class transcends race” philosophy than one that embraces and indeed relies upon difference. I then take up the presence of other voices in the novel, specifically as represented formally through the representations of handbills, diary writing, and free indirect discourse. “The power of her novel lies in its creative restructuring of reportage and personal experience into literature. Babb hewed close to testimonial witnessing in novelizing her personal observations, focusing on day-by-day existence, recording the adversities, stoic endurance, and humor of her characters’ beleaguered existence” (Wixson 130-1). This strategy is similar to *Mules and Men* and *The Book of the Dead*, especially since Babb relies upon actual other voices to create these formal irruptions into the text. I will then briefly discuss the role of labor organizing as a formal and political strategy within the novel. Finally, I will discuss Babb’s vision of political love as an organizing, revolutionary praxis, especially as a mode of acknowledging others that maintains dignity and humanity.

Babb herself, albeit briefly, takes up the issue of non-white labor organizing, especially as practiced by Filipino union members; she also includes African American and Mexican he nonetheless proves that a still astonishing number of the migrants were, in fact, small land owners and farmers. Gregory’s work is especially important in revealing the class distinctions that enabled certain migrants to access economic privilege (see, especially pp. 6-35). Woody Guthrie’s important and popular song, “Do Re Mi,” in fact, was a pointed criticism of the fact that the LAPD, at once point, took it upon themselves to act as state border patrol agents, demanding that migrants have a specific amount of funds ($500) in order to enter the state of California and seek work.
American union members within the text. Later, I will focus more deeply on Milt Dunne’s—
the Dunne family’s male head of household—interactions with a black farmworker and labor
organizer named Garrison. For now, I will briefly lay out the novel’s inclusion and description of
Filipino farmworkers. In the following passage, Babb subtly lays out an indication of the
intersecting nodes of need that drive farmworkers to work in horrible conditions, implying that
racial difference, perhaps, lies almost entirely in the privilege to work or not work in extreme
conditions.

“The terrible summer desert heat drove the white men out of the valley, but these
men [“fast-working, and nimble-fingered Filipinos, the resident hardworking
Japanese and Mexicans”] could endure it, partly because they were conditioned to
stand it, partly because they must if they were to earn a living. The need that
forced the Filipinos into the scorching fields was the same that sent them to the
loneliness and alien cold of Alaska, into the stinking, sweating fish canneries to
work days and nights without sleep when the fish were running” (160).

Perhaps influenced by Carlos Bulosan, one of her literary interlocutors and friends, Babb gives a
broad description of the Filipino diaspora and its importance to industrial food production in the
United States. She mentions that Filipinos, Japanese, and Mexicans “were conditioned to
stand” the heat, presumably due to their presence in the area’s farm labor force; additionally, she
notes that these workers needed to work in the “summer desert heat,” “because they must if they
were to earn a living.” Tying the exploitation of Filipinos in particular to the broader U.S. means
of agricultural production and consumption, Babb remarks upon the “need” that forces Filipino
workers into extreme and alien labor contexts. Importantly, she includes a subtle critique of
white privilege (although certainly not discussed as such) along the lines of labor and racial

_____________________________

15 An unfortunately persistent issue, the erasure of Filipino labor organizers in the literature and
filmic representations of California and migrant labor has been a truly disappointing aspect of
progressive art, from Steinbeck to the recent Cesar Chavez biopic.
16 See, in particular, E. San Juan, Jr.’s “Excavating the Bulosan Ruins: What is at Stake in Re-
Discovering the Anti-Imperialist Writer in the Age of US Global Terrorism?” in Kritika Kultura
expectations and norms, suggesting that Filipino workers forge into “alien” and hostile environments in order to make a living, while white farmworkers journey to less climactically severe—that is to say, greener—pastures.

Given the trust that Babb earned from the many migrants she encountered, she was able to compile detailed notes, reports, and observations about their lives. Her notebooks, as mentioned above, were given to Steinbeck. There is some confusion about how her notebooks came into Steinbeck’s possession, and whether or not she approved of their going to the other writer. In his PBS special, Ken Burns suggests that Collins lent Babb’s notes to Steinbeck without her knowledge. Wixson gives a different account, which attributes volition to Babb. Steinbeck still flouted her expectations of the exchange, though, and the commercial publishing market still refused to take a chance on her novel, even if she already had a contract for it. Says Wixson,

Collins and Babb met frequently to exchange their views on what they had experienced and on ways of improving the conditions in the camps. Collins asked her to share her field notes with Steinbeck, as he had done with his own. The success of the theater version of *Of Mice and Men* (1937) had vaulted Steinbeck into literary prominence. The spirit of little magazine contributors had deeply influenced Babb: to view writing as a common enterprise, to share ideas and to criticize one another’s work were her apprenticeship in writing. She had gone to ‘school’ on the steps of the Los Angeles Public Library, where she had spent afternoons with John Fante, Carlos Bulosan, and other young writers discussing their work, trading tips, and enjoying one another’s success in placing a story. Now she felt the urgency of making known the plight of the ‘Okies.’ It was in this spirit that she lent her field notes to Collins, who passed them to Steinbeck. (Wixson 126)

Wixson reveals that for Babb, the most important consequence of her writings was “making known the plight” of the High Plains migrants. Steinbeck’s blockbuster *The Grapes of Wrath* certainly accomplished this, but for Babb, the personal cost was enormous.
As two critics—Wixson and Abigail Manzella—\(^{17}\) have noted, Steinbeck’s highly successful and powerful novel differed quite significantly from Babb’s *Whose Names Are Unknown*, even if they shared source material. Wixson and Manzella locate this difference in Babb’s personal experience, as well as her attention to the migrants’ lived experiences, such that she resisted the impulse towards falsely dialectal and folkish symbolic representations of the migrants’ speech. Wixson argues, “Her literary radicalism is a form of critical realism in which the characters and events problematize social and political realities, based upon her own reportorial observation and personal experience. The refugees, she perceived, were not hapless, uninformed ‘Okies’ who came late to political consciousness” (127). The idea of “hapless, uninformed ‘Okies’” is central to *The Grapes of Wrath*. This is even truer of John Ford’s 1940 film adaptation of Steinbeck’s novel, in which Tom Joad slowly comes to achieve his radical proletarian epiphany and walks off towards the sunlit, presumably red horizon. What Babb instead saw was an already politically conscious, intelligent, and aware group of people who were wary of outsiders, even if they were radicalized labor organizers or CPUSA party members. R. Serge Denisoff, referencing work by folklorists and sociologists, calls approaches such as Steinbeck’s the “‘simple Americans’ technique. This technique was designed to appeal to the masses, transcending class and political divisions” (14). What this meant, beyond an economy of style and a simplicity of presentation, however, was that works of art took up the “simple folk”

\(^{17}\) Online database and library searches reveal that up until now, these are two of the few critics who have written at length on Sanora Babb. See Wixson, “Radical By Nature: Sanora Babb and Ecological Disaster on the High Plains, 1900-1940,” in *Regionalists on the Left*; Wixson’s critical compilation and analysis of writings by Sanora Babb and photographs by her sister, Dorothy Babb, *On The Dirty Plate Trail*; and Abigail Manzella’s doctoral dissertation, *Permanent Transients: The Temporary Spaces of Internal Migration in Four 20th-Century Novels by U.S. Women Writers*, accessed via ProQuest. See also Jennifer Marie Harrison’s doctoral dissertation, *Oppositional Narratives: Embedded Tales, Social Justice, and the Reader*, accessed via ProQuest.
and espoused native, inevitable wisdom through these symbolic, largely mythological representations of “real Americans.” As noted in Chapter 2, this precise intersection of mythological style and symbolic expectation is where Rukeyser and especially Hurston radically intervened in the process of literary representation. Babb also asserts a different, more empathetic vision of “the folk,” such that there emerges a particularism or specificity, an anti-mythic means of asserting the universal dignity of concrete persons. Different in style than Steinbeck’s formal dialectical materialism in The Grapes of Wrath, which occurs on the level of the oscillation between Joad family chapters and what critics generally refer to as “intercalary chapters,” Babb’s dialectical materialism does not separate out the concrete and the abstract in order to suggest a formal synthesis. Rather, she intently and consistently shows a class consciousness that upholds the dignity of the individual in tension—in combination—with larger communal concerns. Yet she does not subsume the voices of her characters to these larger concerns; even as they speak to experiences, movements, and ideas that are “larger than life”—such as revolution, political organization, agrarian justice, and racial justice—they do not become metonyms or avatars for these political ideas. They remain humans in the mantles of their dignity, rather than reduced, idealistic spokespeople or folksy representations.

Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than the fact that Babb goes to great lengths to name most of the characters in Whose Names Are Unknown. Thus her novel not only serves to defy the anonymity-inducing eviction notices that began “To John Doe and Mary Doe, whose true names are unknown,” which she includes to great effect in the novel; she also resists the impulse to subsume real lives to the demands of symbolic political certainties (Babb 220).  

18 Babb’s tactic of naming characters is especially profound when compared to The Grapes of

18 I argue for this tendency most strenuously in the next chapter, especially in my section on Tomás Rivera’s ...y no se lo tragó la tierra (1971).
*Wrath*, in which perhaps the most powerful and dynamic character, the Joad family’s matriarch, is only and forever known as “Ma Joad.” Regardless of all of her strength and dignity, Ma Joad is consistently reduced to—and solely identified with—her role within the nuclear family. Julia Dunne, the Dunne family’s female head of household, is not only a wife, a mother, and a worker (like Ma Joad), or a decision maker and a mythicized, rooted political conscience in the novel (which is also Ma Joad’s role); she is also a creator of content, a shaper of the text whose diary entries are made into art. Her own written words shape the novel, and this is where her role departs from Ma Joad’s, whose highly dialectally rendered words become, like Mrs. Rachel Poyser’s in George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* (1859), sometimes mawkish statements of “aw shucks” folk wisdom. Julia Dunne represents her own world, and as such, renders the space of the novel into a manifold, multiply realized series of scenes of radically democratic relationships and ideas. This move, on Babb’s part, constitutes an important praxis for speaking with the migrants she is writing about. Rather than writing through an archetypal lens, Babb focuses on the particular workings of identity construction and negotiation taking place in the Anglo American migration from the Plains to California. Turning to May Joseph, whose theorization of the performance of culture in marginalized migrant communities, shows why Babb’s narrative is such a potent corrective to the myth of the Anglo American pioneer:

> In the United States, the expressive stagings of citizenship in the culture of new immigrants enact the need to reinvent community in the interstices of political visibility. Often such stagings coalesce around former histories, current allegiances, and future possibilities, accentuating the arenas of ambiguity that are more successfully bound in the public expressions of national minorities. What gets elided in these utopian stagings of imagined community are the struggles to link former political histories with what Lauren Berlant describes as the practice of private citizenship in the United States. (Joseph, *Nomadic Identities* 11)

Though, certainly, narratives such as Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* or John Ford’s film adaptation of the novel, or the continued cultural perception of the Dust Bowl migration as a
public failure to uplift the descendants of pioneers (as argued in Collins’s *America’s Own Refugees*, for example), do indeed attend to the political problems faced by the migrants, they do so at the expense of particularity. These narratives construct a myth that does not critique the material conditions that led to the problem in the first place, and in so doing, do not attend to the migrants’ desire and “need to reinvent community in the interstices of political visibility.” Instead—and this is the continued problem behind the national myth of the Dust Bowl migration—the migrants have been folded back into white national(ist) history, and the important, radical moment of the Popular Front has given way to a tired iteration of the myth of (white) American exceptionalism.

I now want to focus, in particular, on four scenes or narrative strands: the first, depicting a violent clash between migrants and “native” Californians; the second, Milt Dunne’s developing relationship with a black migrant worker, Garrison, and the novel’s problematic and complicatedly selective use of dialect; the third, Babb’s critique, through Julia Dunne, of alienated and alienating representations of the Dust Bowl refugees, and Babb’s own use of differential representational strategies; and finally, the idea of love as an organizing and communal praxis. The first occurs when some white farmworkers are at a town store in California. They are confronted by vigilante men, armed, Pinkerton-like brutalizers of workers whose sole role is to intimidate union efforts and terrorize marginal laborers into submission. These vigilante men have been hired by an unnamed grower who does not want the workers buying goods in the grocery store or discussing the possibility of organizing against him and other growers in the county. The workers, talking with one of the farmers who has hired them in

---

19 In the vein of Guthrie’s song “Vigilante Man,” named after the vigilante men in *The Grapes of Wrath*, I will refer to these strikebreakers as vigilante men. See, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tSZ57LJg684](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tSZ57LJg684); see also Ry Cooder’s slide guitar performance of the song on the BBC, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4KmbUCwkyE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4KmbUCwkyE).
the past, stare at the vigilante men and resentfully refuse to show deference. The vigilante men, angry, shout, “‘Get out of the way, okies, or we’ll give you some.’ The men did not move. ‘Git outta the way, you white niggers!’” (154). This passage viscerally and viciously reveals two things: first, the means through which the white migrant farm workers were seen as racially inferior, largely via their class status and their marginal status as nomadic laborers without permanent homes; second, this passage reveals the deeply anti-black logic behind the class-based racialization of the workers, such that calling them a racial epithet with the modifier “white” suggests a purposeful, un-recognizable (to the vigilante men), morbid racial betrayal that hinges upon their downward mobility.

This scene is directly referenced later in the text, as Milt begins working in cotton. He notices “A tall Negro [who] worked alongside Milt keeping the same pace” (184). Milt feels a strong desire, bolstered by his physical proximity to his fellow worker, named Garrison, and “the same pace” they hold as they work through the cotton. This scene, and the chapter as a whole, does quite a bit with a Hegelian framework of mutual recognition, in which each person constitutes the other as a subject, rather than an object. When they begin talking, Milt consciously works through his received expectations and racial assumptions: “Milt waited automatically to hear the ‘suh’ and when it did not come, he was relieved. He had been wondering how he would say it, tell him not to. *We’re both picking cotton for the same hand-to-mouth wages. I’m no better’n he is; he’s no worse.* The memory of being called a white nigger in Imperial Valley lay in his mind unforgotten, sore, like an exposed nerve. Milt looked at him. Garrison looked back, his eyes straight, and there was no difference” (185). Hegelian recognition again structures the passage, and in particular, resists the “master-slave” or “master-bondsman” subject-object relationship. Beginning with Milt’s desire to remove class and race distinctions,
indicated by his unvoiced desire to “tell [Garrison] not to” call him “suh,” (rendered, here, in dialect, a point to which I will return in a few pages) and concluding with their direct eye contact, in which “Garrison looked back, his eyes straight, and there was no difference,” the passage carefully articulates a process of mutual recognition in which each person, as a subject, affirms the status of the other as a subject.

This passage, while important in expressing the Popular Front view of racial equality, in an initial read seems to elide the differences in likely lived experience between Dunne and Garrison. It is interesting, indeed, that Dunne remembers, “like [it was] an exposed nerve,” “being called a white nigger in Imperial Valley.” The passage, in the finality of “there was no difference,” seems to complete the circuit of the elision, offering a philosophy of similarity that perhaps hinges on whiteness as the locus of normality. The solid attempt to locate solidarity in and through labor becomes clunky in the process of linking being called a “white nigger” to Garrison’s experience as a black farm laborer; the attempt to empathize, though genuine, simplifies the diversity of the working class experience. Yet, as Dunne thinks about Garrison, he realizes that “We’re both picking cotton for the same hand-to-mouth wages. I’m no better’n he is; he’s no worse.” Dunne seems to locate the similarity primarily in their mutual labor, in their side-to-side work in the cotton. Babb’s distinct contribution to Dust Bowl art can be located in this mutuality, in the firm decision to include an African American worker as a subject, as a human with dignity, within the novel as an important character; unlike Steinbeck’s murdered Indians on hills or even Guthrie’s rather generalized references to the African American experience, Babb shows Garrison to be an experienced farm worker who speaks for himself, whose respect Milt craves, and who is a major leader in the labor organization that the Dunne family joins up with.
At the end of the conversation, Milt reveals his naïveté to Garrison, specifically in regards to the racial segregation enforced upon the workers in their living quarters. One work camp has been provided for white workers, and another for non-white workers: ‘“You’re not in camp?” Milt asked. ‘No-o,’ Garrison said smiling in a way that Milt did not understand. ‘We got a camp of our own three miles away.’ Milt understood the implication then, but he dared not voice his sympathy in the face of this man’s dignity” (185). Milt, a bit slower on the uptake than he’d like to be, doesn’t quite understand Garrison’s smile until he is explicitly told that there is a racially segregated camp “three miles away.” Presumably, this camp has been established for workers of color who work at several nearby farms, as well as to provide safety from angry whites, both migrants and locals.\textsuperscript{20,21} As in the previous passages, communication takes place between the lines of the spoken. Once again, silence, understanding, and empathy make up the language that does the work between two people.\textsuperscript{22} Milt comes to understand that segregation is

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{20} The Library of Congress points out that FSA camps were often segregated by race. In regards to Mexican and Mexican American agricultural workers, these camps were set apart specifically to prevent racial violence against the workers: <https://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/immigration/mexican6.html>.

\textsuperscript{21} Jane Adams and D. Gorton, in their article “This Land Ain’t My Land: The Eviction of Sharecroppers by the Farm Security Administration,” point out that the FSA, in its efforts to “modernize” rural American, often resorted to displacement and resettlement tactics to make space for new model communities. Although they focus on Mississippi and Louisiana, their article provides considerable insight into the ways that legal and de facto segregation informed FSA policy. “[W]hen the FSA developed the nine-thousand-plus-acre Transylvania Plantation [in East Carroll Parish, Louisiana] as an all white project, displacing the plantation’s long-established African-American settlement, the African-American sharecroppers’ protest would reverberate throughout the black press, which was taken seriously by the New Deal” (324). Though Adams and Gorton point out that not all projects involved resettlement, in every case the land utilized, if not inhabited, was either previously worked over and agriculturally developed.

\textsuperscript{22} Julia Dunne’s father, known as “Konkie,” is often depicted as communicating through a “sideways nod,” which bears his empathy towards others.
\end{footnotesize}
at work, but does not extend verbal sympathy, most likely because it will sound like pity or hollow verbiage, undercutting “this man’s dignity.”

Later, after Milt agrees with several hundred of his fellow workers to sit down and refuse to work, though without consulting with the labor leadership first (thus not ensuring that the workers can receive union funding for food and material support), he realizes that he has involved himself in an action that disappoints Garrison. Though Garrison, as one of the labor leaders, will sit down along with his fellow workers, he thinks the action has been conducted too soon: “Milt looked at Garrison and saw his face was serious, worried. He glanced sideways at Milt and shook his head slowly…. When Garrison was ahead of him, it seemed to Milt he could guess by the tired stoop of the man’s burdened shoulders that he was disappointed in him. Milt felt sorry. Somehow he wanted this man’s respect, and suddenly he was not ashamed to acknowledge it to himself” (187). Rounding out the passage, again, is a direct referent to mutual recognition and respect. Communication, once more, emerges through physical movement and language. Furthermore, Milt realizes that he is “not ashamed to acknowledge” that he wants Garrison’s respect—that he wants to be held up to and achieve Garrison’s standards and expectations, rather than demanding that Garrison respect him by dint of racial difference.

While these passages indicate Babb’s idea of racial solidarity, the text undercuts its idea of representational equality through one of the most utilized and popular writing strategies of the 1920s and ‘30s: the use of dialect to render black voices. Whose Names Are Unknown conspicuously refuses to render white speech in dialect, which makes Babb’s choice to represent Garrison’s speech, as well as his wife’s, in dialect. This decision folds black speech into the novel’s examples “found speech,” since the only other times dialect is explicitly used is in written letters included in the text, such as the letter Mrs. Long—a friend of the Dunne family—
receives from her sister. The implications seem rather clear, though Babb did not consider them: for all of her attempts to represent Garrison as a fellow man, she formally, syntactically aligns him with the objects within the text. The novel’s other characters of color, Garrison’s wife and a Filipino labor organizer named Pedro, both speak “in accents,” though Pedro’s speech is written in standard English. In fact, we are told that Pedro peaks with an accent, even as his speech is rendered normatively: “His English was precise and clipped by his accent” (194). The question arises, then, why not render Pedro’s words into dialect—or anyone else’s, for that matter? Why only Mrs. Long’s sister’s letter and Garrison’s and his wife’s speech? That Babb was self-consciously pushing against the stereotype of the uninformed “Okie” remains the only answer—so then it is more interesting that through narratorial intervention she makes sure we know Pedro’s English is “clipped by his accent,” and that rather than telling us that Garrison spoke with an “accent,” she directly and without comment renders his speech dialectally. Less than a complete and damning failure, however, this artistic decision shows the limits of the white imaginary, and reveals that Whose Names Are Unknown, though a progressive and racially democratic text, chooses to use black speech as a Barthesian “reality effect,” along the lines of regionalist literature (and not, as Hurston does with dialect in her own work, as part of a distinctly modernist project). Yet even as I point out this complication, which though subtle is still illustrative, Babb does succeed in providing a progressive, egalitarian view of what she believes race relations could be.23

23 This overall observation is perhaps due to my training as a literary scholar. I believe it is definitely not a specious point, even as I argue that it does not ultimately completely undercut what Babb is trying to do. The framework of Hegelian recognition and subject formation that Babb provides, for example, is quite radical when compared to her fellow white writers of the time. The choice to render black speech in dialect, when all white speech is rendered in “standard English,” though, is an interesting and perhaps unconsidered artistic decision on her part. This is especially so, considering how widespread the dialectal rendering of white migrant speech was,
The other instance of highly visible dialect is Mrs. Long’s sister’s letter, sent from California in the first part of the novel. Two pages long, this letter is formatted differentially, both in terms of indentation and font size. It is included into the text as a whole, from salutation to valediction, and is characterized by misspellings, non-standard punctuation, run-on sentences, and a wide variety of important material information, such as prices, wages, and concrete factual observations (54-6). The letter, written in non-formal, non-standard English, is meant to indicate Mrs. Long’s sister’s educational and class status, and as a “found object,” provides realistic detail (and, no doubt, an outlet for Babb’s own, very important research for the FSA). The news borne by the letter—conveyed to the entire community—though depressing, makes the Dunnes, along with the Long family and the Starwoods, with whom they travel to California, realize that they need to depart; after all, low wages are better than no wages, they figure, and their farms are all but lost to the local banks.

The most conspicuous “found object” in the novel is Julia Dunne’s journal of the month of dust—possibly, though not certainly, the month-long dust storm of April, 1935, at the height of the Dust Bowl disaster. Known for the “Black Sunday” dust storm of April 14th, 1935, the long month of dust storms produced an astonishing amount of dust that completely covered the high plains and even travelled as far as the East Coast. Julia Dunne’s diary comprises the entirety of chapter 17, notably setting the chapter off from the rest of the novel, even while embedding it into the very fabric of the narrative. This chapter constitutes an entirely different narrative voice, a carefully, diaristic series of entries that provide historical and subjective accounts of the especially in the 1930s and 1940s. Thus, the failure is Babb’s and not Milt Dunne’s, problematic as this distinction may be.

24 See <http://www.srh.noaa.gov/oun/?n=events-19350414> for news headlines and a brief account of the “Black Sunday” dust storm from April, 1935. In Julia Dunne’s diary, April 14th is not the worst day of the dust storm, which is why I hesitate to positively identify the date as 1935.
disastrous storms. Introducing the diary entries is the novel’s standard narratorial voice, which reports that Julia, while cleaning around the house, sees the diary and re-reads it. After—and only after—she reads it, do we get a turn: “She read her description of the first storm and felt frightened, and pleased with herself. She closed the tablet and placed it on a shelf and went about her work” (90). Julia, as an observer, is “pleased” with her creative labor, and as readers, we get the opportunity to examine her writing as well. The diary begins, “April 4. A fierce dirty day,” immediately after we are told she “closed the tablet and placed it on a shelf and went about her work” (Ibid.). The rest of chapter 17, from pages 90-95, contains the contents of Julia’s account of the rest of the month. The distancing from Julia’s perspective is important in this chapter. Rather than being directly involved in her consciousness as she writes or as she thinks—which we get in other places in the novel, particularly through Milt Dunne’s italicized, stream of consciousness irruptions into the narratorial flow—we examine her writing after it has been completed. This distancing is not disempowering; rather, it gives us access while not giving us complete transparency. Her creative work contains her thoughts and her feelings, but we do not share the process of thought. For Babb, it is important to understand that Julia Dunne is creative, that she makes language and text, and that she constitutes an important and agentive purpose within the novel, separate from her status as “mother” (which, again, is the symbolic role that Ma Joad, for all of her centrality in The Grapes of Wrath, is essentially reduced to).

This long example of creative observation within the text is contrasted to artists whose engagement with the Dust Bowl refugees Babb critiques in the novel. As an FSA worker whose commitment the agricultural laborers was evident in her involvement in the day-to-day operations of the FSA’s government camps, Babb shared unease with artists who came and went. These photographers, journalists, and writers collected images and then left—and besides
providing shocking and sensational narratives for the media, Babb was not sure whether these visits materially benefitted migrants. Near the end of the novel, Babb, filtered through Julia’s point of view, provides a criticism of these artistic practices. As Julia considers stealing a loaf of bread from an unattended grocery store basket, bearing the storekeeper’s daily delivery of bread, she remembers when a young man was incarcerated to serve eleven years for the theft of groceries:

That was the day the famous writer and the photographer from the big picture magazine were along, so they went to the judge at his house and told him how hungry the old woman was. The judge thanked them and said he thanked them again because it was the first time he had thought of these okies as human beings. The writer and the photographer and the government man felt happy that everything was understood, and the people in camp felt better. When the boy came up for trial right away, the judge sentenced him to eleven years in San Quentin. Breaking into, stealing, transporting to another county. But most of all being an okie. But the judge remembered the visitors. He went with two more men to see the mother, and they took her a basket of groceries.

Julia was frightened, remembering how the old woman howled at the men and chased them away, how she shook her fist and fell down in the mud. She could hear her howling, far away in her mind, and the tears started to her eyes in awe and fear. (213)

The judge, in front of “the famous writer and the photographer from the big picture magazine” (perhaps stand-ins for Steinbeck and Rothstein, or maybe even James Agee and Walker Evans), makes a good impression by claiming that they’ve changed his mind—that “it was the first time he had thought of these okies as human beings.” Babb satirizes this satisfaction, juxtaposing the fact that “the writer and the photographer and the government man felt happy” with the judge’s astonishing sentence for the theft of groceries: eleven years in San Quentin “most of all [for] being an okie.” The ineffectiveness of “appearances,” which the judge attempts to keep up with his visit “to see the mother,” bearing “a basket of groceries.” Bringing these groceries, “a free gift” paid for by the judge’s “remember[ing] the visitors” and desiring to perform a kindness, reminds her of the fact that her son has paid dearly for attempting to provide her with the same
amount of food—a week’s worth of food, perhaps, paid for with eleven years in San Quentin. The “famous writer and the photographer” have made no impression on Julia Dunne, but as she remembers “how the old woman howled at the men and chased them away,” “tears started to her eyes in awe and fear.”

This awe and fear, so devastating and motivating for Julia, becomes the affective register seed of the revolutionary democratic politics the migrants begin to enact by the novel’s end. A few pages after Julia remembers the old woman, the migrants gather and decide to fight back against the eviction and incarceration of their fellow workers, especially those who have done the dangerous work of organizing their labor. Gathered together, vibrant with outrage and hope, the migrants take an eviction notice given to one of their members and repurpose it as a letter of solidarity. The notice states—and this is a historical document that Babb has worked deliberately into the novel—“To John Doe and Mary Doe, whose true names are unknown” (220). From this, Babb has created the title to her novel: Whose Names Are Unknown.

The migrants, in their anger and brilliance, take “John and Mary Doe, whose true names are unknown” as a call to arms, and identify with the undercommons possibility within the reclamation of this enforced anonymity. The eviction notice is turned over—literally overturned—and on the back is written a letter to “Sister Martha Webb,” a young girl who was helping the farmworkers organize. “The rest of the page was filled with ‘Mary Doe’ and ‘John Doe,’ written many times in as many different handwritings. They each signed in the same way and passed the letter on” (220). Crafting a political bloc out of enforced anonymity, the workers announce themselves as one. This oneness, though, does not destroy the many. The workers announce, through their uniform signatures, that their union will be strong, that they will take the impersonal, alienating names they are given by state power and use these moments of alienation
against those who would erase them and their lives.

Near the end of the novel, right after the workers have signed the letter with many lines of John Doe and Mary Doe, they remain gathered and speak together, not hushed, not rushed, yet maintaining an urgent desire to remain together and fight for their dignity. Babb, introducing a speaker’s words, gives an entire backstory within parenthetical em dashes, before completing the introduction with the man’s physical posture:

One of the men—whose father died of pneumonia when he was moved from camp, and who with his two brothers took care of his mother and her old sister—leaned back on the bed and spread his arms out in a stretch that looked like a wide embrace.

“Gee, it’s a good feeling to be together. It’s sure good to feel the love of one another.” The word love lay in the warm air of the little tent for each of them to feel in the unashamed and simple truth of his knowing. No one spoke for a long time. (221)

The man’s “wide embrace,” right before he says that it’s “sure good to feel the love of one another,” gives weight to his capacious sentiments. Love becomes actual in this scene: “love lay in the warm air of the little tent for each of them to feel in the unashamed and simple truth of his knowing.” Like Milt Dunne’s realization that he is not ashamed of wanting Garrison’s respect, here the workers are “unashamed” of knowing exactly what the man who declares “the love of one another” means. Love becomes a gift, more than a representation of feeling, in this passage. It is what constitutes the gathering, it is what connects the men and women in the tent; even more, it is something that is admired, that is felt by each person even as it is the thing that makes them one.

This moment of love—warm, affective, unashamed, simple, and truthful—as constitutive and constant becomes the essential component of Whose Names Are Unknown’s radical democracy. A praxis built of love and geared towards truth, reminiscent of Baldwin and Freire, here becomes the defining moment of the novel. Compared to the ending of The Grapes of
 Wrath, this scene does not have the same shocking symbolic value of Rose-of-Sharon breastfeeding a dying man with the milk that would have sustained her dead baby; nor does the novel contain the utopian potential of a radicalized Tom Joad leaving a womb of bushes and brambles that he’s created, in the dead of night, to organize workers, thus completing the utter dissolution of the Joad family, even as a hopeful future might be in the making. Yet by reproducing the scene of organization, of workers’ dignity and will, Babb’s novel provides actual labor, labor built out of love, giving a clear image of workers uniting, loving, fighting, and staying together.

III. Guthrie’s Migrant Representations, from Plow to Page to Performance

When the Dunne family stays at the government camp, Milt Dunne walks through it, exploring the atmosphere and noting various scenes. Babb utilizes a variety of literary techniques, moving from straightforward direct discourse into stream of consciousness narration, indicated by italics and non-standard spacing between words. At first, Milt is surprised by the sound of music:

Suddenly he heard the small picks and rings of an orchestra tuning up, then a burst of gay music. Unbelieving, he looked toward the tent the sound came from, and through the wide flaps pinned back he saw a boy of about eleven standing by a huge bass fiddle, seeming to pound the strings with his small right hand, bringing forth grave and wonderful tones. Below him sat another boy, about nine, strumming a mandolin. A young girl with her back to the door was playing a violin. Deep in the dusk of the tent a man played a banjo. Over and through it all the heavy, somber strings throbbed like a great heart. (146)

Happening upon a family’s music making, Milt is struck by the “burst of gay music” of the group. In particular, though, he is drawn to the “grave and wonderful tones” of the “huge bass fiddle,” whose “heavy, somber strings throbbed like a great heart.” Milt pauses in front of the
tent, peering in, estimating and noting the ages of each child and the various stringed instruments played by the children and the older man.

As Milt continues to watch the band, he is brought into a meditative reverie by the wafting music.

They played on, not resting, and Milt watched the small boy’s pliant hand rising and falling on the responsive strings. He felt the dizziness again, swinging across his eyes and through his ears in time with the music. … He thought of Lonnie, sleeping all day to forget her hunger. He thought of Julia and Mrs. Starwood forgetting theirs. He thought of the carrots tomorrow, the weeds in the carrots. He thought of Friday and surplus commodities. His mind was clear and light like air. Music wafted through it like a feather. He felt very tall. His broken shoes whispered in the soft dirt far below. Lonnie sleeping Friday weeds carrots three feet wide a woman screaming quarter of a mile tomorrow surplus commodities walking music water running forgetting forty cents a day sleeping forgetting forty cents floating like air clear water running sparkling through the brain surplus brain commodities sleeping a feather of music tickling this is my tent sitting down like a cloud floating music faces fluffy sound in my ears flying away. (147)

The harmonizing strings, in particular the beat-like thrumming of the double bass, bring Milt into a “fugue” of sorts, wherein he initially thinks of his and his family’s troubles in direct discourse narration, and then the text breaks into stream of consciousness narration as he recapitulates these worries and earlier scenes from the novel in fragmented, italicized words and phrases. Looking forward to the next chapter, this is similar to Tomás Rivera’s 1971 ...y no se lo tragó la tierra, in that this stream of consciousness mixes observation and thought from previous parts of the text. Repeated words, such as “sleeping,” and an emphasis on the “s” and “f” sounds reveal a sussurous of music, “a feather of music tickling,” “fluffy sound in my ears flying away.” The music alternately grounds and lifts Milt, making him think “this is my tent” even while he imagines “sitting down like a cloud floating.” Notably, his “sitting down” on the ground meditatively lets him imaging being “like a cloud floating.”
consciousness narration, we see that Milt’s “broken shoes whispered in the soft dirt far below,” whispering, perhaps, along with the family band’s music.

More than an ephemeral enjoyment of music, this passage illustrates the importance of music in migrant life. Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* also contains multiple scenes of music making, from a camp dance with a string band to a porch concert featuring a single guitar. Music gives voice to migrant life, while also enabling scenes of communal listening and engagement. Music, as this passage illustrates, is a gift shared by and between migrants, an integral part of the communal fabric. This image of music as gift giving and sharing, to me, forms the undercurrent of Woody Guthrie’s music writing, music making, and the political project he envisioned through his art. Guthrie’s musical imaginary, motivated by his desire to politicize struggle through balladry and psalmody, is so often expressed through the language of gift, harmony, and dignity. In *Bound for Glory*, Guthrie’s 1943 “fictionalized autobiography,” he lays out a long scene of listening to two sisters playing music for their baby brother, which is then overheard by many other workers at a work camp in Redding, California.25 Guthrie writes, “One of the sisters turned a string or two, then chorded a little. People walked from all over the camp and gathered, and the kid, mama, and dad, and all the visitors, kept as still as daylight while the girls sang” (252). Beginning with the “warm up” and the “tuning,” Guthrie verbally gathers the crowd, linking them through multiple uses of the conjunctive “and.” The way Guthrie describes the scene is reminiscent of a pilgrimage, of a concert: “people walked from all over the camp and

---

25 About Redding, Guthrie writes, “In a bend of the Sacramento [River] is the town of Redding, California. The word had scattered out that twenty-five hundred workers was needed to build the Kenneth Dam, and already eight thousand work hands had come to do the job. Redding was like a wild ant den. A mile to the north in a railroad bend had sprung up another camp, a thriving nest of two thousand people, which we just called by the name of the ‘jungle.’ In that summer of 1938, I learned a few little things about the folks in Redding, but a whole lot more, some way, down there by that big jungle where the people lived as close to nature, and as far from everything natural, as human beings can” (*Bound for Glory* 245).
gathered.” The scene of music is a charged and unique scene, one that coalesces the many into one crowd (which is still, nonetheless, individuated through the use of “and”).

As Guthrie continues, he notes that he “just reared back and soaked in every note and every word of their singing” (Ibid.). He immediately goes on:

It was so clear and honest sounding, no Hollywood put-on, no fake wiggling. It was better to me than the loud squalling and bawling you’ve got to do to make yourself heard in the old moved saloons. And, instead of getting you all riled up mentally, morally and sexually—not, it done something a lot better, something that’s harder to do, something you need ten times more. It cleared your head up, that’s what it done, caused you to fall back and let your draggy bones rest and your muscles go limber like a cat’s. (252-3).

Though some critics, such as R. Serge Denisoff, have accused Guthrie of being a “folk entrepreneur” for making such statements about wanting folk music to be “clear and honest sounding” even while inventing and disseminating his own folk music idiom, this passage bears and privileges a remarkably similar affect as Babb’s description of Milt Dunne responding to the family band’s music.26 When Guthrie writes “It cleared your head up … and let your draggy

---

26 As an example of what Denisoff means by “folk entrepreneur,” here is a passage in which he describes John L. Handcox and Jim Garland: “Both Handcox and Harlan refugee Jim Garland provided artifacts of proletarian culture, not contaminated by commercialism, which fitted into the folk consciousness of the late 1930s. The musical forms or vehicles both employed were from their natural genre. It was only when both perceived themselves as conscious spokesmen of the ‘folk’ that their traditional role was transformed into that of a folk entrepreneur (one who exploits a market outside the original folk group). This is an essential point. When Handcox sang his songs in the ranks of the STFU, he was not using folk song to be a proletarian. Rather, the Negro preacher was singing the tunes he and his listeners were born and raised with. Handcox was expressing his social indignation in a genre endemic and natural to his community. This is a far cry from his role in the North; there he became, in the eyes of Marxists, a spokesman for proletarian culture” (36). Denisoff’s point here is intriguing, but ultimately infuriating. The fault he finds seems to not lie with Handcox, Garland, or anyone else in their position; rather, it seems to come about through their idealization by others. Taking advantage of this situation does not seem, to me, quite as bad as Denisoff makes it out to be. Though Denisoff ultimately seems to place blame with the Marxists in the North, he still seems to place the significant heft of blame on Handcox and Garland, since both “perceived themselves as conscious spokesmen.”
bones rest and your muscles go limber like a cat’s,” it might as well be Milt trying to explain his feeling of the music “floating like air clear water running sparkling through the brain.”

Guthrie extends the scene of listening beyond the crowd surrounding the girls, though.

He writes,

Two little girls were making two thousand working people feel like I felt, rest like I rested. And when I say two thousand, take a look down off across these three little hills. You’ll see a hat or two bobbing up above the brush. Somebody is going, somebody is coming, somebody is kneeling down drinking from the spring of water trickling out of the west hill. Five men are shaving before the same crooked hunk of old looking-glass, using tin cans for their water. A woman right up close to you wrings out a tough work shirt, saves the water for four more. You skim your eye out around the south hill, and not less than a hundred women are doing the same thing, washing, wringing, hanging out shirts, taking them down dry to iron. Not a one of them is talking above a whisper, and the one that is whispering almost feels guilty because she knows that ninety-nine out of every hundred are tired, weary, have felt sad, joked and laughed to keep from crying. But these two little girls are telling about all of that trouble, and everybody knows it’s helping. These songs say something about our hard traveling, something about our hard luck, our hard get-by, but the songs say we’ll come through all of these in pretty good shape, and we’ll be all right, we’ll work, make ourself useful. (253)

These songs, expressive of the difficulty of working-class migrant life, speak to the “two thousand” people in the space, whether they are sitting and listening, shaving, working, washing, or whispering. Like the story of Jesus feeding a multitude with a basketful of fish and a basketful of bread, the two girls give sustenance to the many. Indeed, Guthrie suggests a communion-like atmosphere, a ritualistic partaking of a sacred substance—song—that brings the multitude together through shared pain, through shared experiences. Bryan Garman, linking Woody Guthrie to Bruce Springsteen through the “hurt song,” describes the social, performative nature of these songs: “Written in working-class language, hurt songs express the collective pain, suffering, and injustice working people have historically suffered, and articulate their collective hopes and dreams for a less oppressive future” (70-1). Hurt songs, argues Garman, best take up and represent actual class concerns. Quoting Guthrie, Garman argues that “Guthrie was
convincing that only folk music, a form which captured the voice of the people, could represent ‘the real stuff’ of class struggle and ‘use the Truth … like a spring of cold water’ to bring about social reform” (69-70). Like Milt Dunne’s “clear water” and Guthrie’s “cleared head,” this idea of expressive and affective, socially oriented music leading to political effectiveness reveals the foundation of an artistic praxis that sees art not as secondary, ornamental, or “merely” entertaining; instead, in this view, art is primary, substantial, and of course entertaining—indeed, entertainment and enjoyment become political, become expressive of dignity, especially in the face of degradation.

The passage above, describing the “two thousand,” furthermore nicely illustrates Guthrie’s ideas about songwriting, in particular his idea behind creating affective, collectively-driven political solidarity. Joe Klein, in his biographical study of Guthrie, describes Guthrie’s theory of writing lyrics: “He took a classic high-culture position arguing against agitprop exhortation. You didn’t have to slam people over the idea; it was more artful and effective to show than to tell. He argued that writing a ballad was the ultimate test of a songwriter” (208). Though Klein focuses on Guthrie’s lyrical chops, it is interesting to extend this argument to Guthrie’s fairly schematic use of chords in his songs. Most vary between two and four chords. Essentially, he often goes between G major, D major or D7, and C major, one of the most common chord combinations in many a guitar repertoire. Combined with his narratively-driven lyrics, these chords make it quite possible for a song to catch on, to be learned and spread. If the chords are easy to remember, then rhythms can be improvised, melodies altered to suit one’s own preferences in delivery and melodic line, and the process of memorization can take place according to a straightforward mnemonic series of chords. Craig Werner, tying Woody’s style to the call and response tradition, notes that in Guthrie’s music, “Once the call has been issued, the
audience is free to respond in any way it sees fit…. Other voices, each drawing on its own vertical process, can agree, argue, redirect the dialogue, raise new questions… The position of leadership can pass from individual to individual, community to community” (74). Guthrie’s “simple” songs were easy to learn, but the complexity of their situatedness, of their contextualization within shifting scenes of performance, bespeaks a deep commitment to speaking with others, to making sure songs are always speaking with—rather than to, or for—audiences. Thus, though Klein links the idea of “showing rather than telling” with “classic high-culture,” perhaps suggesting an elitist-cum-modernist approach to aesthetics, it can be seen as part of a deeply democratic performance strategy, as well; largely, Klein derives the argument from the idea that Guthrie sought to give audiences credence, to let interpretation drive the politics, rather than have politics be so explicitly stated. This trust in the audience echoes Babb’s own sentiments, as she writes a story less about a family’s coming into political conscience, as Steinbeck does through the Joads, and more about a family’s continued attachments to working class solidarity and struggle. Pamela J. Annas notes, “Babb’s characters are radical long before they reach California” (10). Wixson, quoted above, remarks that for Babb, “the refugees … were not hapless, uninformed ‘Okies’ who came late to political consciousness” (127). For Babb and Guthrie, then, the idea was less to provide practical political and revolutionary education through their art, than to lay out stories that were autochthonous, representative, and derived from the lived experiences of the migrants.

Denisoff, however, gives a slightly different, if related, argument for Guthrie’s straightforward chord schemas. For Denisoff, Guthrie was perhaps the archetype of what he calls the “folk entrepreneur,” someone who utilized the supposed ethos of the folk and folk music in order to propagandize, as well as to make commercially profitable art. Specifically citing 1939 to
1942, aligned with the major heyday of Guthrie’s popularity, Denisoff argues, “During this time ‘folk music’ became what one listened to at informal gatherings and social affairs given by radicals. Folk entrepreneurs were featured performers at benefits for migratory workers, refugees of the Spanish conflict, and fund-raising drives for militant unions…. Woodrow Wilson Guthrie, known simply as ‘Woody,’ idealized the renaissance” (68). Denisoff further argues that in order to profit from this important, driving moment in Popular Front politics, coinciding with the entry of the U.S. into World War II, Guthrie and others (the Almanac Singers, especially) utilized what he calls the “song of persuasion”:

A song of persuasion may be thought of as a propaganda song which employs the instrumental and stylistic techniques generally associated with folk songs. The music itself is relatively simple when contrasted to symphonic orchestrations. Guitars and banjos are the instruments customarily used. The structure of the music frequently is tied to a three-chord progression such as G-C-G-C-G-D7 or E-A-E-A-E-B7, with lyrics being stressed. This latter feature makes it ideal for propaganda purposes, since the music does not detract from the message. Equally, the lyrics in many cases are easily adapted to contemporary situations. (6)

Regardless of Denisoff’s marked distaste for political folk music—elsewhere, he argues that many folk musicians, especially black musicians, who began recording and profiting from their art made the shift from his idealized version of “folk artist” to “folk entrepreneur”—his description largely fits Guthrie’s preferences. The three chord progression allows for great iterability and improvisation of melody, it facilitates memorization of both tune and lyrics, and, as he notes, allows songs to be “easily adapted to contemporary situations.” This, perhaps, is Guthrie’s most astonishing and impressive feat: he memorized hundreds of songs and hundreds of verses, altering the song according to the specific moment, performance scene, and audience.

In *Bound for Glory*, near the end of the chapter in which he observes the two girls playing their songs, Guthrie decides to join up. He gives, at the end of this passage, a strong ethical motive for his memorization of the countless songs he played on his travels:
I let them run along for a little while, twisted my guitar up in tune with theirs, holding my ear down against the sounding box, and when I heard it was in tune with them I started picking out the tune, sort of note for note, letting their guitar play the bass chords and second parts. They both smiled when they heard me because two guitars being played this way is what’s called the real article, and millions of little kids are raised on this kind of music. If you think of something new to say, if a cyclone comes, or a flood wrecks the country, or a bus load of school children freeze to death along the road, if a big ship goes down, and an airplane falls in your neighborhood, an outlaw shoots it out with the deputies, or the working people go out to win a war, yes, you’ll find a train load of things you can set down and make up a song about. You’ll hear people singing your words around over the country, and you’ll sing their songs everywhere you travel or everywhere you live; and these are the only kind of songs my head or my memory or my guitar has got any room for. (254)

Here, Guthrie links the process of music making and composition with the issue of reception and listening. What interests him, he explicitly says, is the synthesis of “your words” and “their songs,” such that an entire musical corpus is built from the everyday and political concerns of working people; even more, this music is migrant music. Guthrie’s emphasis on pronouns, wherein “your words” signify the speaking self—he’s referring to himself in the second person, albeit in the capacious way that spoken language often combines the first and second person through “you” and “your” as empathetic pronouns—and “their songs” signify the voices that have informed and shaped the conscious self’s repertoire, signal the fundamentally, unalterably relational notion of composition that underlies his work. Interestingly enough, the guitar that he begins playing on, which during World War II Guthrie labelled with a sticker proclaiming “This machine kills fascists,”27 is here again given agency in musical selection—as part of a series set

---

27 Of immediate import to the slogan on Guthrie’s wartime guitar, Jimmy Longhi, who along with Cisco Houston and Guthrie briefly joined sailors on a US Navy ship in order to provide entertainment, has written a long anecdote relating to Guthrie’s insistent, defiant demand that the ship’s black sailors be allowed to join the white sailors on deck to enjoy the entertainment. As part of the anecdote, Longhi described a scene in which the black commanding officer, Daniel Rutledge, was given Guthrie’s guitar: “When Woody offered to let Rutledge play his guitar, the black officer noticed Woody’s slogan—this machine kills fascists—and improvised a sermon on the connection between the war against Hitler and the struggle against American racism….
of by “or,” Guthrie states that “my head or my memory or my guitar” only have room for songs
dedicated by and to the people whose voices, words, and lives inform them.

In this passage, however, Guthrie signals his move beside the realm of “folk music,”
rather than squarely operating within it as a casual native informant (the descriptor of Guthrie as
a “folk musician” is most commonly used to describe him, though it is heavily disputed by
folklorists and folk music scholars). This is largely because Guthrie here reimagines folk music
and balladry as more than a rehearsal of the past; rather, he thinks of his music as an oral history
of the present, of a new set of particulars through which people can articulate themselves,
especially since he sees this music circulating in and through performance repertoires and mass
media. Richard Reuss argues, “spatial isolation and relatively simple technological and
communications systems have formed the basic criteria for determining folk society in the
United States. My quarrel with this traditional definition is that it is too limited. Other factors
besides geography, minimal formal education and industrialization, and lack of mass media may
combine to enable a group to produce lore, as … in Guthrie’s case” (275). Reuss pinpoints the
problematic scholarly criteria for defining “the folk,” which in addition to being too narrowly
defined, hinges upon the problematic maintenance of an impoverished, isolated class of people

When the men responded ‘Change! Change!’ Rutledge held Woody’s guitar ‘above his head like
a weapon’ and hammered home the main point of the movement that returning black veterans
would help define and carry through: ‘An’ the walls will come tumblin’ down!’” (Werner, 75;
the longer anecdote is related from 75-6). See also Longhi’s Woody, Cisco, & Me: Seamen Three
in the Merchant Marine. The “walls will come tumblin’ down,” referencing the battle of Jericho,
is a powerful symbol in Odetta’s “Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho,” as well. Another connection
of note can be found in Dave Marsh’s edited collection of Guthrie archival materials, Pastures of
Plenty: A Self-Portrait, we find a scrawled drawing on a calendar page from Monday, August
31st, 1942. Underneath enormous block letters proclaiming “Beat Fascism!” we find a drawing of
a tombstone upon which is written “Here lies Jim Crow.”

Mark Allan Jackson argues that when listening to Guthrie’s songs, it is important to note that,
“Rather than stand as pure history, these songs and their subject matter provide access to the past
for a purpose. Guthrie wanted those who encountered his songs to take in the tale and then
recognize the example of resistance inherent in each” (14).
whose cultural, folkloric contributions are valued above their own desires. This is not to say that isolated communities who wish to remain so do not have that right—rather, it is to say that the desire to preserve a culture “like it used to be” or as “authentic” while partaking of that culture from a distance, either through class difference or relative proximity, produces a highly problematic relationship of production and consumption.29

In his study of blues and folk music, Gene Bluestein coins the term *poplore* to describe the incorporation of folk culture and material into popular culture and broad reception.30 Noting that mass media has absolutely and indelibly changed the ideal of the untainted or undiscovered musician, Bluestein argues, “All the notable figures of twentieth-century folk fame (including white rural singers and black blues people) are actually poplorists…. Grounded in a kind of double helix of black and white source material, these tunes, rhythms, texts, and vernacular styles (especially the blues) have been the basis for all musical developments since. They have been copied, extended, and often, like bluegrass, totally re-invented by such talented and creative poplorists as Guthrie” (89). Bluestein has a rosy view of musical appropriation; that said, his point that “poplorists [such] as Guthrie” reincorporate and copy previous styles is in fact

---

29 This is the logic behind much gentrification, wherein class-mobile people move into specifically targeted, “authentic” or “rough” or “cool” neighborhoods, and then subsequently bemoan that neighborhood’s loss of “authenticity” once the consumption of that neighborhood becomes more widespread, or once that neighborhood’s denizens decide to take advantage of wider interest to generate profit from the consumption of their space and their commerce. The desire to preserve an “authentic” people is necessarily objectifying, since authenticity only benefits the consumer of that authenticity, specifically through the generation of cultural capital (and, of course, through the denial of actual capital to the bearers of that authenticity).

30 “So even to this day, major artists of the past (as well as such contemporaries as Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger) are either excluded from evaluation or selectively examined in such a way as to avoid evidence of such issues as the influence of non-folk sources on their work and the powerful individualism of their expression. // Folklore, in my view, needs to be understood in a new way. Here I use the term *poplore* as a positive rather than pejorative expression. Folklorists generally consider poplore an invasion of folk tradition by insidious popular and commercial materials” (Bluestein 6).
explicitly named by Guthrie as the primary propulsion and reason behind his music. Guthrie, it should be remembered, performed in interracial musical groups such as the Almanac Singers, played with Huddie “Lead Belly” Ledbetter and Josh White (both of whom are also sometimes accused by scholars and listeners of “selling out” and becoming political once they began performing and recording with Guthrie, Seeger, Cisco Houston, the Lomaxes, and others); and, more than can be said for many of his successors in the folk revival (and, certainly, more than the anglo rock musicians who literally built the house of rock—or, perhaps, the “hard rock cafes”—on top of the foundations of traditions built by black blues musicians and rockers, which were cynically razed and gentrified to make space for “the new”), publicly acknowledged and gave performance space to singers and artists whose work influenced his. Guthrie’s impact, in Bluestein’s assessment, shows that “Poplorists such as Guthrie have been the most important figures in bringing together the musical and ideological implications of folk and popular culture in our time” (90). This was certainly also—perhaps more—true of Bessie Smith, for example, or Lead Belly, and later on Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Ricky Valens, and groups like Los Tigres del Norte. Ultimately, Guthrie’s important bridging of anglo folk music culture and popular culture, especially through his savvy use of media technologies, reveals not exploitation and crass commercialism, but a valuation and emphasis of the popular such that it becomes a “sense of

---

31 Guthrie’s collaborations and friendship with Lead Belly is outside the scope of this project. Will Kaufman gives a brief account in Woody Guthrie, American Radical, specifically in reference to Guthrie’s discussion with Henrietta Yurchenco regarding Lead Belly: “[Guthrie] convinced Henrietta Yurchenko [sic], host of the WNYC program Adventures in Music, to give Lead Belly a chance on the air. Learning from Lead Belly, Guthrie told her, was ‘one of New York’s [sic] greatest pleasures’—particularly for his reinforcement of plain speaking and singing in what Guthrie perceived as an overwhelmingly timid and politically evasive broadcasting culture…. In Lead Belly’s music, Guthrie saw an entire people and an entire political revolution stirring…. Thus to leave Lead Belly out of the broadcasting mix, Guthrie told Yurchenko, was ‘like leaving the alcohol out of the wine or leaving the spring out of the clock’” (51).
popular culture as the culture actually made by people for themselves, which is different” from ideas of popular culture as a manifestation of mass cultural entertainment (Williams, 180).  

Indeed, Guthrie was uniquely situated in his ability to spread his musical and political message. Finding himself in Los Angeles at a time when radical radio allowed for music and political commentary to seamlessly mix, Guthrie was able to develop a popular personality that he claimed led to thousands of admiring letters sent to him care of his radio station, KFVD.  

Edwin Cohen notes,  

The Depression years altered permanently the face of American folksong through the unparalleled growth of the radio and recording industries…. Rural electrification through TVA and the Columbia River projects brought cheap electricity to homes, and the lowered prices meant that ‘a higher percentage of farms acquired radios, electricity, and running water during the 1930’s than in the previous decade.’ Concomitant [sic] with the maturity of radio was the expansion of the phonograph industry…. These sharp increases in radio audiences and the sale of radios and phonograph records altered folksong by developing a vast audience never previously approached in size by the folk singer. (12).  

Cohen continues, arguing that “The American folksong because of these influences did one of two things in the 1930’s and 1940’s: it became virtually extinct in all but some of the more rural, backward areas of the country; or, it changed its form to accommodate some of the aspects of song previously reserved for the popular song; that is, it became a popular song with a

32 The entire quote, from which I’ve taken a snippet, is: “Popular [in the early twentieth century] was being seen from the point of view of the people rather than from those seeking favour or power from them. Yet the earlier sense has not died. Popular culture was not identified by the people but by others, and it still carries two older senses: inferior kinds of work (cf. popular literature, popular press as distinguished from quality press); and work deliberately setting out to win favor (popular journalism as distinguished from democratic journalism, or popular entertainment; as well as the more modern sense of well-liked by many people, with which of course, in many cases, the earlier senses overlap. The sense of popular culture as the culture actually made by people for themselves is different from all these” (180).

33 For a brief history of his time at KFVD, see http://woodyguthrie.org/biography/biography3.htm. Guthrie was an extremely popular radio personality, until his employment was cut short in 1940 due the fact that his unapologetic, on-air support for Josef Stalin became too aggravating for the station owner to bear. See Will Kaufman’s Woody Guthrie: American Radical (2011), and Briley, 43.
folk feeling and folk sense” (13). Denisoff takes a completely different interpretive tack than Cohen, though, arguing that politically charged folks songs by known and recorded artists “reflected a fusion of social movement technique, ideology, and traditional folk material…. [T]he songs were no longer folk songs but, rather, examples of folk consciousness. Folk songs had become ‘songs with conscious messages, composed with calculated awareness’” (25).
Denisoff’s concern, it seems, is that songs like Guthrie’s are no longer “informant” texts that provide unconscious, unmediated windows into folk life and folkways. Denisoff’s ire with Guthrie in particular, though, leads him to rest the force of his argument on a city-country divide that he wishes to maintain: “As Archie Green has noted, not one Guthrie propaganda song was found among the Okies and Arkies who fled the Dustbowl for California. His political material was well accepted, predominantly by urban radicals and Communists in New York and elsewhere” (136). Gene Bluestein criticizes this assertion, calling it “less than accurate:

But the idea that Guthrie’s work won no place among the population involved in the Dust Bowl migrations (many of whom still resent the epithets Dorson uses) is less than accurate. And, like many other critics, Dorson and Denisoff pass over the implications of the ‘unique hybrid of rural and oral cultures’ that Guthrie represents. Because Guthrie was born of middle-class parents in a small Oklahoma town, academic folklorists have viewed him as inauthentic; his traditional-sounding, folk-based work cannot be folk song because it has clear authorship and lacks the requisite lower-class antecedents. From this point of view, Guthrie is obviously a ‘revivalist,’ a pernicious term that implies lack of association with the folk process. (88-9)

The completely untenable binary between “folk song” and “folk revivalist” or “folk entrepreneur,” for Bluestein, leads critics to make the assumption that because Guthrie made up his own songs, they could not possibly have been popular amongst the people for whom he performed. For Bluestein, the most malicious claim made by Denisoff and others is that “clear authorship” equates to a “lack of association with the folk process.” The folk, in other words,
have no politics, no desires outside of the quotidian and domestic—a claim belied by the long
tradition of border ballads from Scotland to Spain to Mexico to California, and even more so by
the songs sung by the enslaved the world over, in particular the United States and the
Caribbean.34

Thus, rather than betraying folk music, as Denisoff would have it, Guthrie and other
artists, such as Lead Belly, Josh White, Cisco Houston, and Aunt Molly Jackson, along with
incredibly important Blues women during the 1920s and 1930s, such as Bessie Smith, Mamie
Smith, Ma Rainey, and Ethel Waters, participated in the construction of poplore, synthesizing
folk music with popular culture and creating a new type of “people’s music.” This was not
merely to profit from emerging markets (though this was quite often a welcome development for
the musicians themselves); indeed, these enduring artists tapped into the voices and desires of
their listeners—not only those on the radio or who bought records, but those who came to see
them in concert halls, saloons, billiard halls, dance halls, union halls, and impromptu
performances—prompting sing-alongs, lyric memorization, imitation, and affective engagement.

In my estimation, Woody Guthrie used these voices and desires to advance a particular
mode of politics. In his music, performance enacts democracy—he shows how direct democracy
works. In his lyrics, he so capably moves between mountains, dams, grand historical narratives,
and factories to people, local places, and specific times that he gives the audience a dynamic mix
of imaginative possibility and calls to action. Guthrie saw performance as a political and musical
process, and how he sought to cultivate a quite radical relationship between himself and his
audience—whether through radio, in a concert hall, at a work camp, or at an impromptu

34 Indeed, I wonder how the late Denisoff or any other demander of authentic, non-political folk
music is ever able to reconcile the presence of music among the enslaved, the incarcerated, the
subaltern; how these critics are able to wash away the sometimes subtle, sometimes defiant
sounds and messages contained in so many of these songs.
gathering—that modeled a utopian, direct form of democracy. I am interested in examining how Guthrie performed, how he saw his role as a performer, and how his musical style—his idiosyncratic guitar playing, his many collaborations, duets, and group performances—directly informed his performance ethos.

Most of all, Guthrie embodies and subjectivizes the “great historical bum”—his characterization of the peripatetic, always marginalized, radical and radically conscious working person—through his musical performances. He wonders what it means to be a worker who travels throughout space and time, declaring solidarity with fellow working people from the Garden of Eden to the titanic industrial war economy of the early 1940s. Is he simply ventriloquizing the history of laboring classes, asserting the teleological inevitability of the present moment? Or, is he suggesting that all of us must be aware of history while participating in this time of enormous human progress? Perhaps both: what Guthrie makes us hear in his music is the justice behind labor struggles and the promise of economic and historical change.

Greil Marcus, in *The Shape of Things to Come*, argues that this prophetic mode of criticism (akin to Cornel West’s critical reinvigoration of prophetic discourse) often arises from a single person’s drive to voice justice: “Out of a throng of selves, what is one body of prophecy? Before it is anything else it is a single American, claiming his or her birthright, as a single body standing in, if only for a moment, for all other Americans. People are out there; someone has to hear. And then what?” (15) Rather than taking up Marcus’s idea of “a single body standing in” through a moment of (perhaps) justified prophetic discourse, I would like to locate Guthrie’s intervention in Marcus’s question—“And then what?” Guthrie sees the “throng of selves” that becomes “one

---

35 This issue also arises in the critical reception of Tomás Rivera’s *...y no se lo tragó la tierra*, which I take up in Chapter 4.
body of prophecy” (which Marcus quotes from Allen Ginsberg) as a listening public and as the people whose songs and lives he sings. Linked to his status as a pop cultural figure, Richard Pascal argues that “Guthrie clearly sensed that recording grooves, airwaves, and movie screens were the open roads of the modern era which might be exploited for the Whitmanesque purpose of arousing the masses to a realization of their inherent dignity and latent wisdom and power” (51-2). Pascal explicitly ties Guthrie’s artistic voice and aesthetic strategies to Whitman’s self-styled prophetic mode, in which the artist synthesizes the voice of the many into the artwork he or she creates.

One answer Guthrie might be said to proleptically provide to Marcus’s question—“And then what?”—takes shape in his song, “Farmer-Labor Train.” In this driving, upbeat song, Guthrie’s music creates a space of indignation and righteous optimism as he invites every listener to join him in singing the songs that he hopes will give voice to a new concept of popular democracy:

There's folks of every color and they're ridin' side by side
Through the swamps of Louisiana and across the Great Divide,
From the wheat fields and the orchards and the lowing cattle range,
And they're rolling onto victory on this Farmer-Labor train.

This train pulled into Washington a bright and happy day,
When she steamed into the station you could hear the people say:
“There's that Farmer-Labor Special, she's full of union men
Headin' onto White House on the Farmer-Labor train.”

Guthrie’s imagining of farmworkers joining union workers and chugging into the nation’s capital speaks to the radical politics he supported and expressively sang about throughout his career. He

---

37 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x0rEtUcKOeU>, Lyrics taken from <http://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Farmer-Labor_Train.htm>. The woodyguthrie.org website maintains Guthrie’s original spellings, line-breaks, and grammar. For an example of the song’s chord structure, see <http://bettylou.zxruss.com/farmerlabortrain.htm>. Guthrie uses the same chords and melody to sing another song, called “The Wabash Cannonball.”
imagines a train, defiantly Leftist and defiantly desegregated, pulling “onto victory” “into Washington” and “onto White House”: all of these nouns—including, intriguingly, victory—are allocated specific spaces. Thus the workers insert themselves into and onto spaces of hegemony—even victory, as a place and space, calling the utopia of a worker’s victory into being. Furthermore, seeing as Washington, D.C., was a segregated city, this integrated train insists upon being recognized by Washingtonians who look on, as well as the Washingtonians who make political decisions. The Farmer-Labor train rides into the U.S.’s political center with an agenda of fighting for the rights of working-class men and women. Syntactically, Guthrie pulls together the various workers through the repetition of the conjunction “and.” He also does this when linking actions. “And,” as a conjunction, is used as a radical unifier of difference—it is a conjunction that ties together while still maintaining difference as a necessary ontological and epistemological category. As Guthrie uses it, the conjuctive “and” maintains the particularity of clauses and actions while still constructing a sentence with a political motive. Syntactically and dictionally, “Farmer-Labor Train” weaves together a narrative of alliance and political empowerment in the utopian space of song and future action.

A rollicking guitar and a train-like, joyful harmonica that enters into breaks before each verse accompany the hard-driving lyrics. Guthrie harmonizes with Cisco Houston on the choruses and when channeling the wailing whistles of the train. Guthrie’s unrestrained, joyful voice and optimistic, driven storytelling combine with his fast, cut-time, foot-stomp-inducing guitar playing. By the end of the song, after enumerating various types of workers and their locations, Guthrie imagines the admiration of a people that respect the rights of all workers, positively construing and calling forth an American public that didn’t quite (and still doesn’t)

38 <http://www.woodyguthrie.de/farmlab.html>
always seem to persist or exist: an/other America that fights against class hierarchies, racism, and
the silencing of certain people(s).

In his song “Slip Knot,” which he also recorded as “Hangknot,” Guthrie directly ties
racialized violence to the extant legal system. I will be specifically reading the version her
recorded for Moses Asch, from the Asch Recordings, Volume 4. In this performance, Guthrie
wonders, through a series of questions and observations, why racist vigilantism has become the
law of the land. Beginning with a plucked melody on the guitar’s upper strings, Guthrie plays a
repetitive series of notes for almost four bars, before ending this introduction with strummed
chords. He immediately goes into the verses, beginning with a direct, repeated question. “Did
you ever see a hangman tie a slip knot?/ Did you ever see a hangman tie a slip knot?/ Yes, I’ve
seen it many a time and he winds and he winds,/ After thirteen times he’s got a slip knot.”
Utilizing the eight bar blues form, Guthrie uses repetition to drive his question, and utilizes end
and internal rhyme to emphasize his critique. For the most part, Guthrie uses “Slip knot” as the
final word in three of the four lines of each verse in the song (the only exception is “not/ not/
again/ slip knot” in the second verse). He internally rhymes “time” with “winds,” repeating the
latter twice to emphasize the inevitable violence of lynching, of its repetitive and consuming
construction of finality. By saying “After thirteen times he’s got a slip knot,” I would suggest,
quite forcefully, that this lyric reminds us (or, at least, this anachronistic and willful reader) that
the nation was and is made, from the ground up, from violence and the racial expulsion of
specific bodies from the national body of rights bearing citizens.

39 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LtBuj6S1Rc0>.
40 Although I will not be discussing it, Guthrie’s song “Vigilante Man” is also quite appropriate
here. Though he is referring to the vigilante enforcers hired by California growers (like the hired
thugs that Babb refers to, or the gang of men who murder Preacher Casy in The Grapes of
Wrath), he is also referring to vigilantism in general. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EcKbeSPE-uA>.
Beginning with his pointed question ("Did you ever see a hangman tie a slip knot?")

Guthrie immediately implicates his listeners in the racial violence of lynching. Either we know,
and we are victims of racialized violence, or are perpetrators (both actively and passively) of this violence; conversely, we do not know—and we should, because this violence constitutes a legal system. In the second and fifth verses, Guthrie begins his lines with "Tell me," further demanding answers. He wants an explanation and questions the normative, the expected, the received narratives of racist violence as a mode of justice. By prefacing the slip knot, after the first verse, with the prepositions "that" or "the," Guthrie attempts to make the rope literal, to make it "thingly" rather than conceptual. Especially when, in the third and fourth verses, he asks specifically, "Did you ever lose a brother on that slip knot" and "Did you ever lose your father on that slip knot," he refuses to suggest any slip knot; rather, he wants to be particular, to be concrete. Guthrie, here, makes the slip knot an actual thing in the imagination of the listener, demanding empathetic awareness.

For the final two verses, Guthrie repeats the same lines, with a few minor differences. He says "laws" instead of "law" in his repetition, and says "of" instead of "for" after "laws," expanding the reach of racist violence into a systemic manifold that reaches into the lives of many. In the final verse, he repeats the very final line, making this verse a "ten-line blues" verse, and the final line constitutes a "hanging" (non)conclusion, a surplus of bewilderment emphasizing the use of racist vigilantism as a terroristic legal system:

I don’t know who makes the laws of that slip knot,
I don’t know who makes the laws of that slip knot,
But the bones of many a men are whistling in the wind,
Because they made their laws with a slip knot.
And because they tied their laws with a slip knot.
Even though Guthrie says he doesn’t know “who makes the laws of that slip knot,” he still refers to the fact that “they made their laws with a slip knot.” This is a diffuse accusation, though perhaps Guthrie is indicating that though there is no one person who has written the laws of lynching (though, of course, this is not true—many a specific person wrote lynch laws and lynched people), the fact remains that an entire apparatus of “they” made the laws and benefit from it. Singing that “the bones of many a men are whistling in the wind,” Guthrie points out that the evidence is there, that suffering at the hands of racists is visible and audible—so, he seems to be asking, who is listening?

This desire to sing the songs and tell the tales of the murdered activates much of Guthrie’s oeuvre, and a paradigmatic example is “1913 Massacre.” In his introduction to this song, Guthrie begins slowly, melancholically, individually plucking notes from a chord for two bars. He then begins singing, invoking a “recitatif” delivery mode, a staple of ritualistic religious song, in which a cantor sings around a sustained note structure. He emphasizes the song’s beat by using his thumb to pluck out a walking bass line in “common time,” giving the song a swaying, slow beat. He begins the song with an invitation the audience, (reminiscent of “Slip Knot”): “Take a trip with me in 1913/ To Calumet Michigan in the Copper Country/ I’ll take you to a place called Italian Hall/ And the Miners are having their big Christmas Ball.” The use of prepositions here is interesting, as in “Farmer Labor Train” and “Slip Knot.” Rather than inviting singers to take a trip with him to 1913, he says “in 1913.” This folds the listener into Guthrie’s powerful and anachronistic imagination, in which the “great historical bum” can move through time as an empathetic fellow laborer and traveler. In essence, Guthrie assumes the listener’s empathy. In this space and time, Guthrie is guide and fellow observer. After setting the scene and

41 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oz7ogugulZE>.
laying out working conditions and the pay structure for the miners (“less than a dollar a day”), he tells us, “There’s talking and laughing and songs in the air./ And the spirit of Christmas is there everywhere, / Before you know it, you’re friends with us all,/ And you’re dancing around and around in the hall.” No longer asking questions of the miners or merely watching from the wings, we are now part of the ball itself, ensconced in the milieu. Yet no sooner are we enjoying ourselves, dancing with the miners and their families in 1913, than the “Copper boss thug men” falsely “scream ‘there’s a fire’” and cause a stampede that causes the death of dozens of celebrants. Children, especially, get smothered in the crush. Recitatively, meditatively delivering the sorrowful lyrics, Guthrie wails, “Such a terrible sight I never did see/ We carried our children back up to their tree/ The scabs outside still laughed at their spree/ And the children that died there was 73.” Of course, Guthrie “never did see” this incident, though the lyrics are meant to convey the horrors of the crushing stampede. Of the 73 dead, 59 were children.42

Though Guthrie was not a witness to the incident, his active historical imaginary forcefully demands that we, as well, place ourselves directly in the midst of this violence and imagine the terrifying specter of crushed children, a consequence of anti-labor brutality and vigilantism. Taking the children “back up to their tree,” he imagines everyone—the miners, himself, and listeners—bringing the victims back to the Christmas tree, gathering together in a scene of sorrowful martyrdom. The piano, which earlier was said to be playing joyful Christmas tunes, is now playing songs of mourning: “The piano played a slow funeral tune/ And the town

the town is lit up by a cold Christmas moon. The parents they cried and the miners they moaned. ‘See what your greed for money has done.’” The song ends with the final word coinciding with the final note, with a final accusation of greed. In the recording, “your greed” is multi-directional: Guthrie means to convey the words “moaned” by the miners can also indicate the listeners. Though within the space of the song we have been dancing and witnessing, we might also be guilty of greed—it is up to us, then, to move or be moved, to affect or be affected. Our involvement in the song, as listeners, runs from the beginning to the end, from invitation to potential accusation, from joy to sorrow.

Ultimately, Guthrie’s radically imaginative musical praxis invokes movement politics through the politics of movement—the politics of being moved, as well as acknowledging the artistic, creative, and political potential of the people he sings about: “He’s at his best when he sounds most like himself, most like the singer who welcomed the actual sounds of those voices into his own consciousness…. Democracy sings in each of us individually, Woody intimates, as long as we understand who we are—what we sound like—is shaped by and at best responds to everyone we hear” (Werner 70). Notably, Guthrie always imagines others as fellow musicians and fellow travelers—whether requesting published versions of his songs, or playing beautiful music that he wants to join in with (as when he plays alongside the two little girls in the California field), or picking up on the easily memorizable lyrics and chord structures to his songs.

The enduring power of his music illuminates that “To be precisely what Guthrie was demanded the precise pattern of his tragic exile, which equipped him to mediate imaginatively, in his person and his works, between the world of the poor and the dispossessed and those who had never touched that world except as readers, tourists, journalists, artists, or photographers”
(Cantwell, 135). Cantwell’s assessment provides a reason for why Guthrie’s songs still recall the potent and heady promise of the Popular Front, and moreover how this music creates spaces for encounter, for knowledge, and most importantly, for the acknowledgement and recognition that make us and others subjects, together.

IV. A Final Word

“Together” is the word with which each section of this chapter, one on Babb, one on Guthrie, has concluded. This might be the defining political and personal motive behind each artist’s work; certainly, it describes the thematic bond that links their texts. More importantly, “together” furnishes a name for the writerly affect (in the Barthesian sense, indicating an open text whose meaning is made through the reader’s interpretation, rather than through a closed system of obviously intended meaning) through which readers, encountering and interpreting each artist’s work, is able to work themselves into these constructed worlds of fiction and music. In other words, Babb and Guthrie create political feelings, and these feelings are the basis of an invitation to feel with, to locate oneself beside the texts at hand.

Babb and Guthrie crack open the limitations of aesthetic representation by crafting an aesthetics of affect. For Babb, this occurs through the variety of aesthetic methods I have examined, from documentary poetics to imagined journals to free indirect discourse and stream of consciousness narration to a reimagining of the Hegelian dialectic. Through this diversity of methods, Babb constructs a praxis that radicalizes democracy, bringing the reader into the work alongside the workers. No paean to pity, this Dust Bowl text urges us to consider how love might be used to construct the revolutionary politics of our utopian desires.
For Guthrie, the crafty confusion of pronouns and prepositions creates an unstable listening field, offering up new ways of imagining oneself, whether historically or in the present moment. Not only that, but the “free gift” of his music ensured that his music, which he disseminated widely and joyfully, could truly become “the people’s music.”

May Joseph, theorizing the category of “nomadism,” argues that,

Nomadic citizenship fractures coherent categories of belonging, offering instead the incomplete, ambivalent, and uneasy spaces of everyday life through which migrant communities must forge affiliations with majority constituencies. Nomadic citizenship comprises a series of unstable relations through which ideas of citizenship, nationality, and sovereignty are invented along the road to statehood. (17)

From within the “uneasy spaces of everyday life” that emerge in the fracture of “coherent categories of belonging,” Babb and Guthrie found the lives and labors they felt compelled to represent. Though both were born to stably middle class families, in each case, a father’s tribulations ruined the family fortune and both were cast out into the world as travelers (Babb’s father was addicted to gambling and drink; Guthrie’s father was a land speculator who couldn’t stop speculating on land until he was dead broke). In each case, these travelers became deeply invested in the crumbling world they knew, of men and women whose lives were wrecked by the Dust Bowl. Thus, partially through personal experience and identification with the plight of the Dust Bowl migrants, and partially through a fierce commitment to people who had little access to unalienated or non-exploitative textual mediations and renditions of their lives, Babb and Guthrie fashioned unique modes of speaking with, rather than for, the people they wrote and sang about.

I would like to conclude by working, twice more, through some of Guthrie’s words:

As I was walking that ribbon of highway
I saw above me that endless skyway
I saw below me that endless valley
This land was made for your and me
From Guthrie’s most famous and enduring song, “This Land is Your Land,” these lines consciously and prophetically describe the vision of the song’s speaker. Placing himself squarely in the middle—in the midst—Guthrie stakes his place (and ours) on that “ribbon of highway.” Always on the move, always moving, always witnessing and experiencing and feeling, this is the enmeshed, ever-experiencing historical and political mode that Guthrie imagined would truly radicalize and democratize the United States.

Finally, at the end of their edited collection of Guthrie archival materials, *Pastures of Plenty*, Dave Marsh and Harold Leventhal include one of Guthrie’s final diary entries, written through the debilitating, crushing pain of his Huntington’s Disease with its attendant chorea. This disease ensured he could never play the guitar again; it stopped this paradigmatic “rambling man” from ever easily moving on his own again. The pain with which he wrote these words, his by then always-shaking hand working across the page, is unimaginable. Yet, the scene of creation must be imagined, just as he tried to envision a just, dignifying world when writing his desires out in his painfully executed longhand. Entitled “The Word I Want to Say,” this journal entry imagines an absolutely sacred, unifying word that keeps everyone together through love and dignity:

> The odd thing is about this word that it is no one certain word, but fits in the ring and tone sound of every word. It is the word inside of all of our other words, the word that gives our words a shape and a form, and a clearer sense. This is the free word that no jail can hold, no cell can keep, no chain drag down, no rope can lynch, no weapon can hurt or hinder. I say this word is that one word that makes all democracy clear, plain, and keeps democracy alive, and I keep this one word alive. I will die as quick and as easy as I can to keep this one word living, because it keeps my whole race of people living, working, loving, and growing on to know more and to feel more. This is the word I want to say. (248)

“The one word”—like Rukeyser’s “one word” at the end of “The Book of the Dead”—is sacred, is dignifying, is entirely and radically creative. Imagined as a sacred, unspoken, unifying
signifier, this is a word “fits in the ring and tone sound of every word,” a description of language usually befitting theological views of a prelapsarian or a post-rapture world. Guthrie, however, believes that this actually and potently exists, that it “is”—not that it was or will be. This is the word, when kept “alive,” “keeps my whole race of people living, working, loving, and growing on to know more and to feel more.” It is a word that makes a world—our world. It is a word that refuses sanctuary to none and offers love to all.
Chapter 4. Traveling Borderlands and Communities of Difference in Tomás Rivera and Lydia Mendoza

Gracias a la vida que me ha dado tanto —
Que me ha dado la marcha de mis pies cansados.
Con ellos anduve ciudades y charcos
Playas y desiertos, montañas y llanos
Y la casa tuya, tu calle y tu patio.

—Mercedes Sosa, from “Gracias a la vida”

Lejos estoy del suelo donde he nacido.
Inmensa nostalgia invade mi pensamiento,
Al verme tan solo y triste cual hoja al viento —
Quisiera llorar, quisiera morir, de sentimiento.

—Lydia Mendoza, from “Cancion Mixteca”

I. Bordering Democracy

In May and June 2014, the New York Times ran a series of stories on one of the main migrant pathways from Texas to the Upper Midwest. Following I-35, the author and his stories move northward and follow the migrant path that winds from Texas to Oklahoma, to Kansas, Missouri, Iowa, and Minnesota. The essays track the journeys taken by Latina/o, African, and Asian migrants on their paths to economic and existential well-being, as well as their interactions with the “native” Anglo population; the stories also examine the many ways that migrants (re)imagine their homelands and how they interact with the spaces they have left behind. A language of political and rhetorical grandstanding runs through the pieces, often addressing immigration politics and border security writ large. Especially as it is personified and verbalized by the Anglos interviewed for the stories, this language suggests that bodies move north and remittances flow south—and both are out of control.

The individual stories examined in the 39-part series undermine any overarching
narrative, though, except for perhaps a narrative about the movement of bodies as a bare political fact. Damien Cave, the series’ author, and Todd Heisler, the series’ photographer, wend their way from Laredo to Duluth, interweaving within their narrative arc documentary reporting and photography, public opinion polls and statistics, interviews, and editorial commentary. What Cave and Heisler show is a complicated journey for migrants, especially in their encounters with so-called “natives” (mostly, Anglo- and other European-descended-Americans). This idea of the “native,” of course, ignores the violent history of migration to the Midwest that sought to turn the Great Plains into America’s Breadbasket.¹

Most of Cave and Heisler’s non-white stories, especially in the South and the lower Midwest, describe Latina/o immigrants. Because I-35 is—and has been—an incredibly important route for migrant laborers moving north and south, this journalism is particularly welcome. Yet, as the New York Times describes the stories, Cane and Heisler “chronicle how the middle of America is being changed by immigration.”² By using the passive voice, this description bespeaks an “invader/resistor” binary. Further, “being changed” suggests a stasis, a “norm” that is under siege. This norm, as an ideology, gets transferred onto space—a space, it is assumed by many, that should be a preserved, legible place that one can shorthand as “home”—or, going further, as “homeland.” What is so disturbing about Latina/o migrants, Cane and Heisler show (perhaps unintentionally), is that they show that place—that home—is fundamentally alterable. That is to say: place, as a medium, is a material that migrants interact with. In this chapter, what I am interested in is how migrants move through and with space, such that a textuality of place is

¹ For an exceptional analysis of this process, see Richard Slotkin, Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860 (1973) and Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land: The American West and Symbol and Myth (1950).
created as a praxis for existing in and understanding one’s immediate and surrounding world. Part of this process, I find, is an idea of traveling borderlands, in which I draw attention to the presence of the borderlands in various, varied spaces. By examining how migrant Mexican American labor communities are marginalized and borderized in their movements through America, however, I do not want to reinforce a model of “colony and metropolis,” or to suggest that the margins are doomed to forever serve the center. Instead, I want to explore how Rivera and Mendoza show migrant communities performing improvisatory interventions on the themes of citizenship across a diverse geography of marginalized spaces that do in fact get transformed into empowering and autonomous speaking positions. Thus margins become centers, and this happens through self-actualizing methods of representation practiced by Rivera and Mendoza.

This chapter’s argumentative focus is at once local and transnational, specific and abstract. I contextualize my work within the interventions made by Mary Pat Brady and Marissa K. López. Brady shows that the border’s constitutive function within national and ethnic identity formation must be understood as a process, especially in that Chicanidad emerges from the instability of the border. Brady’s argument intervenes in nationalist arguments surrounding Chicana/o literature, showing that along with national, ethnic, and racial formation, gender formation is also necessarily understood as a primary aspect of borderlands existence. She argues that the border is an a priori spatial category across and in which bodies interact and are constructed: “If the production of space is a highly social process, then it is a process that has an effect on the formation of subjectivity, identity, sociality, and physicality in myriad ways. Taking the performativity of space seriously also means understanding that categories such as gender, race, and sexuality are not only discursively constructed but spatially enacted and created as well” (Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies 8). Marissa K. López extends Brady’s theorization
across space and history, showing that Chicana/o identity has always been articulated as a transnational and historical identity that emerges from responses to American and Spanish empire, not only as a coalitional late-1960’s response to Anglo American nationalist discourse. My project takes up the directions of both theorizations: Brady’s, which develops the local and specific instances of Chicanidad along the very real U.S.-Mexican border, and López’s, which reveals the deep processes of identity construction and expands the idea of the border to take up the history of its contestation and articulation across many national(ist) discourses. I do not mean to suggest that I synthesize the claims dialectically, that I expand them, or that I strike a middle ground between them. Instead, my argument locates itself alongside Brady and López, taking up their transnational, transhistorical, and intersectional claims as invitations to dialogue. As such, I seek to place my argument beside them, adding the strain of Mendoza and Rivera to the already rich conversation.

In this chapter I am take care to understand, as Ramón Salvidar argues in Chicano Narrative, that “It is time to see Chicano narrative as something more than a simple mirror of the life and folklore and heretofore invisible segment of American society” (6). There is a tension, in other words, between expanding the literary and cultural conversation to include Mexican American authors and musicians and to seeing these cultural productions as the work, or performing the work, of native informants, a point I have argued in previous chapters as well. As David Treuer, Laura Doyle, Valerie Smith, Rey Chow, and Gerald Vizenor have argued in other contexts, it is important to resist the impulse to read minoritarian texts anthropologically, as

---

ways to enter into or understand “other” cultures and cultural discourses. Saldivar’s admonition in *Chicano Narrative* reminds us that Mexican American cultural production moves with an aesthetic and political urgency that troubles methods and norms of representation, rather than suggesting that the act of representation—the visibilization of minoritarian labor and experience—in-and-of-itself as a panacea. While visibility is undeniably important, it is just as important to see this visibility for its content, not simply for its presence. As Vizenor argues in *Manifest Manners*, the creation of native informant others in aesthetic and political discourses often creates a presence that in fact functions as an absence: “[Simulation] is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (9). These models, when constructed as native informants, tend to fall into “model minority” discourses. The perpetuity of these model representations, and the cultural function of the “noble savage” or “noble native” is such that we often tend to look for minoritized others who represent revolutionary possibility or authentic existence. As argued in Chapter 3, this is often a critique of Steinbeck’s Joad family, and is, in particular, one of the nodes of narrative resistance that Sanora Babb offers us.

In this chapter, I argue that Lydia Mendoza and Tomás Rivera imagine the border, with its tenuousness, fragmentation, and contradictoriness, as a necessary and vital space from which to issue empowering speech that reconsidered the shape and flow of American democracy. The idea that fragmentation is a constitutive and powerful aspect of Chicana/o identity is not new. John C. Akers in “Fragmentation in the Chicano Novel: Literary Technique and Cultural Identity” and Chela Sandoval in *Methodology of the Oppressed* show how fragmentation, while commonly seen only as a symptom of (post)modernity and late capitalism, is a potent and

---

4 The history of these “models” can be traced to 18th century (and earlier) French and English philosophers and writers like Rousseau, Montaigne, Diderot, Madame de Graffigny, David Hume, John Smith, and Thomas Gage.
politically charged characteristic of so-called Third World literary and cultural production. Rather than being what authors and cultural producers struggle against in their search for artistic “unity,” fragmentation for Sandoval and Akers—as well as Pat Mora and Gloria Anzaldúa, among others—instead describes the world as it must be understood and negotiated. In other words, the world operates through difference—and this difference must be recognized and accepted, rather than supervened or unified.

First, I seek to add to the conversation the idea of “traveling borderlands,” meaning that for Chicanas/os, the border comes with us wherever we go. This idea is similar to W.E.B. DuBois’s double consciousness, in that traveling borderlands, as a concept, locates itself in one’s relationship to power, signaling the linguistic and experiential differences that often create borders in local spaces, wherever migrants go. Even on the level of naming, this difference is acted out. Finally, traveling borderlands takes up the performative and spatial characters of the border by showing how these processes are acted out throughout the Mexican American migration journey, not simply in relation to the U.S.-Mexico border as a specific site, even if that site is the originary locus of the migrant’s contested identities. These processes, in Mendoza and Rivera, are foundational for their interrogations of democracy as such, and also provide the fabric through which to craft a new model of radical democracy.

Second, this chapter provides perhaps my most explicit and foregrounded engagement with travesía hermeneutics, the praxis I have been developing throughout the project. Travesía hermeneutics opens up the textual and political possibilities of radical democracy as a literary, musical, and existential praxis. Both in terms of form and content, Mendoza and Rivera engage lived experience as a performance of and on the themes of citizenship, belonging, and movement. Each artist examines how these themes necessitate new models of radical democracy.
that might account for the lives of Mexican Americans as they bump up against representational limits in terms of majoritarian political discourse. Articulating new modes of representation means directly challenging the foundational logic of political representation and suggesting that something is needed in excess of, or beside, representational democracy to create a truly egalitarian, democratic society. In this, I follow Alicia Schmidt Camacho’s *Migrant Imaginaries*, in which she “contends that for much of the twentieth century, Mexican migrants exposed the limits of the nation form—meaning its instruments of governance and its structures of legitimation” (10). Yet I also explore how Rivera and Mendoza do more than expose limits—they also elaborate new “structures of legitimation” by moving away from national(ist) recognition of personhood and citizenship and toward what looks quite a bit like utopia.

Finally, I examine the differential modes of accounting for the shapes and sounds of migrant communities in both artists, showing how these structures and frameworks are shaped by the momentous and mundane moments of communalism and democracy as instantiated by text and sound. Their work, seen in the light of foundational work done on space in Chicana/o and Latina/o literature,\(^5\) engages heavily in space and place as settings for performed, lived experiences. Their texts also engage quite uniquely with the idea of a Latino race, suggesting that race, as a performed category, is also bound up in histories of nostalgia and its rearticulations, whether through myth-making, nation-building, or assertions of a shared social and communal identity. This, of course, is quite in line with white and black nationalism (crude as this short-handing may be); I suggest, however, that instead of articulating sameness and mythological

\(^5\) See, for example, along with López and Brady: Alicia Schmidt Camacho’s *Migrant Imaginaries* (2008), Stacey Alba D. Skar’s *Voces Hibridas* (2001), Deborah Vargas’s *Dissonant Divas* (2012), Josh Kun’s *Audiotopia* (2005), Alexandra Vazquez’s *Listening in Detail* (2013), Ramón Saldívar’s *Chicano Narrative* (1990) and *The Borderlands of Culture* (2006), and José David Saldívar’s *Border Matters* (1997).
nostalgia as a nationalist poesis, Rivera and Mendoza imagine a wholly new means of thinking and theorizing la raza, and in so doing, undo nostalgia as myth-making, instead positing it as a remembering of actual, past experience—in other words, nostalgia is not pining for a lost and perhaps unknown homeland, but is instead recalling the lives one has lived, has left behind, and would like to remember in the moment. Through its performance, especially in Mendoza’s music, nostalgia becomes material, rather than abstracted and mythical. Even further, this materialized nostalgia participates in a new mode of national building in which the past in-and-of-itself is not a space to be inhabited or reconstituted or reclaimed; instead, nostalgia is utilized as a praxis for building what is not yet known in conjunction with what is already known. Ultimately, this nostalgia is used to create a space of dual national experience, rather than synthesizing or combining experience under the guise of a single polity or policy. As Homi Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture*,

> What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (2)

I show how Rivera and Mendoza examine in-between spaces and terrains in order to “initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration,” especially as within migrant communities. Taking Bhabha’s suggestions a bit further, I find that Mendoza and Rivera articulate a specific “idea of society itself,” and it is rooted in an autochthonous definition of direct, radical democracy.

My argument around nostalgia ties intimately into sound, especially in my discussion of Mendoza, whose particular performance strategies recreated and also decreated the homeland for
her audiences. With her twelve-string guitar, she sounded out the memories, desires, and narratives of her audiences and suggested new models of community that took shape within the concert hall. From corridos to ranchera ballads, her music was by and for her people, much like Guthrie’s. Unlike Guthrie, however, Mendoza cannot be said to have purposely enacted a syndicalist or Popular Front praxis; taking up her autobiography alongside her music, however, we can see that she did indeed have a vision for the dignity of Mexican American migrants, and much of it was sounded out through her music.

The idea of flow, finally, describes the formal and contextual underpinnings of Rivera’s and Mendoza’s work. In order to (re)present a moving community, one must be critically attuned to its flowing constitution. As such, I pay special attention to movement as a symbol and literary device, as well as to movement as a formal description of style and structure within the artists’ works.

II. Tomás Rivera’s Communal Imagination and the Problem of Allegory in ...y no se lo tragó la tierra

Tomás Rivera’s ...y no se lo tragó la tierra is one of the most lauded Chicana/o literary texts of the twentieth century. Written from 1967-8 and first published in 1971, Rivera’s work won Quinto Sol Press’ first literary prize, and as a result, Tierra was brought out as a dual language text. This first edition was translated as ...And the Earth Did not Part. Arte Publico Press, another storied Chicano press, published another translation, This Migrant Earth, in 1986,

---

6 Although the Chicano Literary Movement, as an iconic grouping of (initially, mostly male) writers, is considered to begin with the explosion of Corky Gonzalez’s “I am Joaquin” onto the literary and political landscape of 1967, Marissa K. López convincingly argues in Chicano Nations that the origins of Chicana/o Literary production must be placed much earlier, and should be located in a transnational axis of cultural production. López suggests a number of possible starting points, including 1848 and the Mexican American War, and earlier, with Mexican rebellions against Spain in 1810.
two years after Rivera’s untimely death at the age of 48. Translated by renowned Chicano author Rolando Hinojosa (like Rivera, a Texan), This Migrant Earth was actually referred to as a “rendition.” Hinojosa’s evocative rendition re-ordered the text in translation and also provided an impressionistic, rather than literal, translation. In 1994, the text was adapted into a film, entitled and the earth did not swallow him. This independent film was directed and screen-written by Severo Pérez, distributed by Kino International, and led to heightened interest in Rivera’s life and work. In 1995, Arte Publico unveiled a new, much more literal translation by Mexican American poet Evangelina Vigil-Piñón, entitled …y no se lo tragó la tierra / ...And the Earth Did Not Devour Him. This edition, upon which I have relied entirely throughout this chapter, capitalizes the title in translation, shifts the translation of tragó from “swallow” to “devour,” and contains the original Spanish text, film stills from the previous year’s movie adaptation, and Vigil-Piñón’s English translation.

This rapid-fire recounting of Tierra’s history is not merely to perform the text’s fame or material accessibility, nor simply to perform a canonization of a text that somehow still remains relatively unknown and undiscussed outside of its large Mexican American readership (even if I would like to see both increase). By rehearsing the text’s publication, adaptation, and translation history, I seek to show how deeply moving is the text, as well as how complex its presentations and receptions have been for the last 44 years. What I seek to do in this section is reorient the direction of Tierra’s academic reception by suggesting that the canonical and widespread interpretations of the novel close of its powerful hermeneutic and political possibilities. In particular, the critics I will discuss read the book, for the most part, as an allegory with a closed or esoteric system of signification. Moving away from this highly symbolic reading of Tierra will not, as critics seem to fear, dissolve the text’s Chicanidad. In what I find to be a highly
suspect gesture, the critical history surrounding *Tierra* suggests that allegory is the only way to account for the text’s cultural specificity as well as its political messages—that it is the only way the text can stay Chicana/o while also showing how Chicana/o struggles are universal human struggles.

This tendency to read *Tierra* as an allegory finds its most fitting and disappointing manifestation in the book’s 1994 film adaptation. The film takes pains to reduce the number of vignettes from 14 to 12, a reduction in keeping with the critical consensus that the book is symbolically structured as 12 vignettes/months with two framing stories. The film also names the young boy Marcos, thus granting the general idea that the book was about him, rather than the community. The neatness of the film, emphasized through its adapted structure and its identification of the young boy, suppresses the anarchic multivocality of the original text, thus capitulating to the hermeneutic closure promised by allegory.

As the film’s adaptation makes clear through its naming of the central narrator, there is a strong tendency to consider the text as a unified novel and bildungsroman. Naming the narrator Marcos heightens the identificatory power of the young migrant boy (in that we sympathize and maybe even identify with him), and furthermore suggests that the entire narrative takes place within his mind. While there is indeed textual credence for situating *Tierra* within the life of this young narrator’s mind, a point emphasized nearly to exhaustion by both early and recent discussions of the novel, I find that answer suppressive of the text’s radical promise as a communal narrative made up of many voices and experiences.

In this essay, I would like to reorient and reopen the academic reception of *Tierra*, suggesting that the canonical and relied-upon interpretations of the novel close off its powerful hermeneutic and political possibilities in the present moment. Because the vast preponderance of
Tierra’s initial and continuing critical reception interprets the text as a powerful allegory of political consciousness and political responsibility, largely through the argument that the text is shaped as a year, with twelve stories framed by an opening and a closing story, representing a year that is lost and then found. In this essay, I show that moving away from this highly symbolic reading of Tierra will not, as many critics seem to fear, dissolve the text’s Chicanidad. Instead, the text offers new connections to the material world, specifically revealing a text that rather than speaking for or on behalf of Chicanos in a strictly representational sense, offers a model for examining how an author can speak with a community in its shifting, flowing connection to the world and its contemporary contexts. Attending to Tierra’s multivocal, multiply dialogic construction reveals a text full of breaks, improvisations, and intimacies, all of which enable new potentials for communal belonging and imaginations of the self within this community.

The critical history surrounding Tierra suggests that allegory is the surest way to account for the text’s cultural specificity as well as its political message—that allegorization is the only way the text can stay Chicana/o while also showing how Chicana/o struggles are universal human struggles. I want to undo this assumption and also undo the overdetermined readings produced by this allegorization, showing instead that Rivera articulates a radically different idea of community that reimagines the possible frames of universality, suggesting a new, as yet undetermined possibility for political action and organization. Therefore, by locating the specificities of difference in Tierra, particularly through the book’s differentiation of character through sound and repetition, as well as by reassessing the book’s formal structure and closely tracking the its fluid and capacious yet resolute articulations of communal belonging—especially through the text’s untamable, vivifying multivocality—I show how Rivera constructs Chicano identity through a concrete, rather than abstract, textuality of negotiated, differentially conceived
place. The text does abstract many of its political concerns, which is perhaps what has led to continuous importance of allegorical interpretations; however, the text performs these abstractions in order to critique the very subsumption that allegory relies upon. That is to say, Tierra does not assimilate Chicana/o concerns to the universal, particularly since the idea of universality has undergirded the degradation of migrants, the hierarchal racialization of humans, and the exclusion or rehabilitation of non-normative identities. Indeed, the text’s radical promise exists in its construction as a communal narrative made up of many voices and experiences.

Ultimately, Rivera imagines a wholly new means of thinking and theorizing Chicanidad, and in so doing, undoes the idea that racial or ethnic memory is a process of individualistic or nostalgic mythmaking, instead positing the value of differential experiences. Mexican American ethnic memory, then, is not a nostalgic pining for a lost, idealized, and perhaps unknown homeland—Aztlán, the mythic origin of the Aztecs. In Rivera’s text, the performance of memory and experience becomes material, rather than abstracted and mythical. Even further, these materialized memories and experiences form the fundament of a praxis for building what is not yet known in conjunction with what is already known—and it is done communally, dialogically, yet concretely, rather than abstractly or individualistically.

Ramón Saldivar argues that “Tierra functions aesthetically and ideologically as a memorial to and partial reconstitution of the forgotten history of a people’s oppression and struggles” (77), suggesting that Rivera’s intention is to monumentalize struggle and reify it. To monumentalize struggle in this way—imagining the book, not to mention the young narrator, as a memorial—is to encode and solidify it within a monolithic view of history determined by necessity; indeed, the only way this process can occur is through interpreting the young narrator as an allegorical representation of Chicanidad as a whole. Yet Tierra undoes allegory and
situates the narrator less as a symbol of his community, than as an interlocutor with it.

The symbolic construction of the young narrator as an allegorical monument leads one to make claims, like Scott A. Beck and Dolores E. Rangel do, that situate *Tierra* within uneasy binaries. Comparing *Tierra* to Helena Maria Viramontes’s *Under the Feet of Jesus*, the latter which they see as an embodiment of feminine and feminist action, Beck and Rangel assert that “Rivera’s position can be characterized as masculine passivity”; further, they state that “Rivera leaves us wondering just what will his man-child protagonist actually do, if anything, to better his lot in life.” In this description, the young boy becomes both symbol and extratextual fantasy. That is, because symbolically the boy becomes “masculine passivity,” extratextually he becomes a disappointing “man-child” who “leaves us wondering” what he will do. Beck and Rangel seem to take at face value, then, that the young narrator is a native informant who activates fantasies outside of the text, even as he becomes a symbol of passivity—and, by extension, acquiescence. Add this reading to Saldivar’s, in which Rivera’s young narrator becomes a repository for allegorical history, and you might come away with the following conclusion: not only is all third world literature allegorical, but allegory empties content of its autonomous meaning, leading us to the conclusion that the content—which is now an art object—can only speak within its frame as a native informant.

This idea of the boy’s allegorical status is reinforced by the general consensus that *Tierra* is made up of “12 stories.” These twelve stories, it is assumed, symbolize “El año perdido/The lost year,” which Ralph Grajeda calls the book’s “introductory selection” (71). In this structural

---

8 See Grajeda, Olivares, Saldivar, & others.
9 This suggestion has taken the shape of an assumption in the critical literature. See especially Olivares (1985), Saldivar (1990), Llosa Sanz (2007), and González-Berry & Rebolledo (1985).
rendering of the novel, the first story and last story are framing pieces connected by the losing of a year in the first and its recovery in the final. Grajeda most emblematically states the critical assumption regarding Tierra’s structure: “The form of the book is thus cyclical. Though there is no attempt at shaping a strict correspondence between specific months and particular stories, the twelve stories in a general sense are symbolic representations of the year that the protagonist attempts to recapture” (72). This reading is certainly present within the text. In a passage from “Debajo de la casa” quoted above, the young narrator thinks to himself, “Y tengo tanto en que pensar y me faltan tantos años. Yo creo que hoy quería recordar este año pasado. Y es nomás uno. Tendré que venir aquí para recordar los demás” (74) / “And I have so much to think about and I’m missing so many years. I think today what I wanted to do was recall this past year. And that’s just one year. I’ll have to come here to recall all of the other years” (151). The book marks recollection as a specific, willed gesture that takes place in a specific space—beneath a house. Yet the “text-as-year” reading of the novel glosses over the distinction between recollection and, as Grajeda puts it, recapture. Recapture suggests that the memories are exclusively within the young narrator’s experience and person. Recollection, on the other hand, suggests a certain distance from memory as an object or narrative and the self. The Spanish, perhaps, makes this distinction more clear: the verb used is “recordar,” which, while typically translated as “remember” or perhaps “recollect,” has a cognate in “record.” Record, as a metaphor for memory as a graphical function, puts the narrator’s action squarely within an artistic or writerly frame, rather than an informant frame. In essence, I am arguing that this distinction between recollecting/remembering/recording and recapturing is precisely what the allegorical reading, as epitomized by the cyclical text-as-year reading, erases. Recording and remembering maintain difference—recapture is an absorptive gesture that morphs into a
colonizing analytical and critical metaphor.

*Speaking with*, as a descriptive term, is particularly important for understanding Rivera’s canonical Chicano text. Julio Ramos and Gustavo Buenrostro, editors of *Tierra’s* 2012 Argentinian edition, argue, “Rivera elabora una lengua próxima que encuentra nuevos acompañantes en las encrucijadas del mapa imperial puntualizado por los incesantes flujos colonials, relevo del poder y ocupaciones no sólo ‘extranjeras’ o ‘metropolitanas’ sino consecuentes también de las incesantes reterritorializaciones internas que definen la historia imperial, colonial y nacional” (18). Ramos and Buenrostro describe “una lengua próxima”/“a future/next language” as a insurgent, emergent language of the multitude, which allows an anti-colonial mapping strategy under the flag of a revolutionary metalanguage (or perhaps underlanguage). Though I largely agree with Ramos and Buenrostro—particularly in the idea that Rivera offers an alternative discursive practice, and that this discursivity actively creates a specifically and locally Chicana/o map—I strenuously disagree with the “totalizing” imperative their reading locates in *Tierra*. Largely, this is because Rivera was so heavily invested in creating particularity, in finding the small moments of dignity and humanity that work against totality, even while still affirming communal and political unity. Instead, I locate Rivera’s critique of neoliberalism’s totalizing effects within the local, rather than in an alternate vision of totality. In particular, I find that Rivera’s text elaborates an instantiation of what might be called differential or oppositional consciousness, as theorized by Chela Sandoval in *Methodologies of the Oppressed*: “The oppositional consciousness … travels differentially but with literacy across and

---

10 “Rivera elaborates a future/next language that finds new companions in the intersections of the imperial map, that is punctuated by the incessant flows and fluxes of coloniality, by relays of power, and by occupations that are neither ‘foreign’ nor ‘metropolitan’ but emergent from the incessant internal reterritorializations that define the related histories of empire, colony, and nation” (18, translation mine).
through cultural spaces: it is a mobile, flexible, diasporic force that migrates between contending ideological systems” (30). Migrating between systems and hewing to the interstitial and oppositional, this consciousness declares to absolutism, no unerring fealty to totalizing ideological systems. Instead, located resolutely within the local even while plying national or transnational discourses, oppositional consciousness offers emergent modes of thinking the political self, all of which attend to the local, its needs, and its desires.

*Tierra* contains fourteen multipage vignettes—which I will alternately refer to as stories or sections—that are separated by brief, untitled, interstitial paragraphs that appear on separate pages between the stories. In homage to the regional literature from which the text emerges, I will call these interstitial paragraphs “estampas,” or, impressions; Rivera himself called these sections “dialogue[s] or situation[s]…. [C]uadros [NB—portraits] which I placed between the stories to give the total work a cohesiveness that I thought was needed” (Ramos and Buenrostro, 249).11 The text begins and ends with a young boy, who I will refer to as the text’s “framing narrator,” a descriptor that marks the young boy’s specific presence as a voice in the text, in opposition to the text’s dominant interpretation, which sees the young boy as the symbolic, unifying whole whose thoughts and words constitute the entirety of the text.

Rivera’s method as a writer, as noted by critics including Nicolas Kanellos, Brooke Fredricksen, Álvaro Llosa Sanz, Mary A. Selieger, Luis Leal, and James H. Abbot, was driven by his powerful and intense memory.12 Eliud Martinez claims, “Tomás … was born to witness,
to remember and to tell. An unusual memory is clearly evident in his literary work, which established a model for preserving the oral history of our people, in writing” (42). Álvaro Llosa Sanz argues that *Tierra* bears evidence of Rivera’s use of a classical rhetorical strategy, which he calls “arte de la memoria”: “Se establece por tanto un discurso retórico de arte de la memoria para fijar un pasado y proponer un futuro a partir de los momentos de cambio que sufre una comunidad” (288). What interests me far more than whether Rivera’s aesthetics are based on an inherent quality (his memory) or his erudition (his engagement with classical rhetoric), is the implication of his shifting, flowing position as a writer and imaginer: he voices the many, he voices the few, and he does it in a way that generates a communal dialogue that seems to slip away from his control, and as a consequence, the young narrator’s as well. Thus the dense and expansive multivocality of *Tierra* bespeaks a matrix of intersecting movements and narratives, producing a map of many flights and trajectories. To maintain these many possibilities and their as-yet-unknown promise, it is paramount to resist the allegorical impulse.

That said, what interests me far more than whether Rivera’s aesthetics are based on an ethnographic information bears the comparison out, and it is through both writers’ creative departures from frames of authenticity that their art speaks back to oppression, whether that oppression is cultural, racial, or political. Though I will focus on *Tierra* in this essay, both texts reveal the stakes of the literary, especially as an art with the discursive flexibility to illuminate imaginative, creative models of encountering and theorizing ethnic belonging, especially in spaces that deny the dignity of migrants.

13 “[Rivera] establishes, therefore, a rhetorical discourse of ‘theater of the memory’ in order to establish a past and propose a future that emerges from moments of change undergone by a community.” Llosa Sanz, in fact, goes on to argue that each of the twelve stories functions as a “imagen o cuadro” [image or painting], in the style of Roman Catholic religious images. Intriguingly, Llosa Sanz sticks to the “twelve stories” structure, when arguing that there are fourteen stories would allow him to compare *Tierra* to the Stations of the Cross (in the Catholic tradition, there are fourteen Stations of the Cross). Even though this would make his allegorical reading of the book more compelling, I resist this potential reading, which I find myself drawn to, due to the oversized symbolism a comparison to the Stations of the Cross would necessitate. [*This is Llosa Sanz’s own translation of “arte de la memoria,” as he describes it in the abstract to his article.]
inherent quality (his memory) or his erudition (his engagement with classical rhetoric), is the implication of his shifting, flowing position as a writer and imaginer: he voices the many, he voices the few, and he does this in a way that generates a communal dialogue that cedes his authority, and as a consequence, the framing narrator’s. *Tierra*’s dense, expansive multivocality produces a map of many flights and trajectories, of many possibilities and their as-yet-unknown promise.

*Tierra*’s first story, “El Año Perdido/The Lost Year,” begins with a young, unnamed boy feeling lost and expressing this internal chaos: “That year was lost to him…. It always began when he would hear someone calling him by his name but when he turned his head to see who was calling, he would make a complete turn and there he would end up—in the same place…. One time he stopped at mid-turn and fear suddenly set in. He realized that he had called himself. And thus the lost year began” (89). The text begins with a declaration of loss and a condensed description of interpellation, as Althusser might have it. Initially, the young boy feels called forth—but he doesn’t know by whom. Then, he realizes that not only is he the recipient of this interpellation, he himself is the symbolic figure doing the calling out. This would seem to support an allegorical reading of the text as a bildungsroman—after all, if the boy is alienated from himself, then the only way out is to transcend his alienation by synthesizing the voices and experiences of the text into himself: self and other are separate, no longer, and bildung has taken place. Yet I hesitate at this, particularly because rather than opening out, this reading turns inward—or, I should say, this reading seeks to internalize everything exterior to the text. Indeed, the role of the creator/narrator/author, from this perspective, is self-justifying. In a text that’s as anti-authoritarian, agnostic, and communally driven as *Tierra*, turning inward, rather than sublating the voices into a transcendental figure—itself a discomfiting conclusion—would
subsume the voices into a speaking authority, a Leviathan-like sovereign made of the bodies of its subjects, that speaks for them.

In one of the early stories, “La mano en la bolsa/Hand in the pocket,” which seems to be an older man’s recollection of a childhood trauma,\(^\text{14}\) the independence of the narrative from the young framing narrator’s control establishes it as part of the text’s communal dialogue. After Don Laíto and Doña Bone, the story’s antagonists, force the story’s narrator—whose identity is unknown—to help them bury a migrant they murder, they present him with a small token of their gratitude, which them becomes a symbol of the terrifying hold they hold over him:

Me traían un presente. Un anillo. Me hicieron que me lo pusiera y recordé que era el que traía aquel día el mojadito. Nomás se fueron y traté de tirarlo pero no sé por qué no pude. Se me hacía que alguien se lo hallaba. Y lo peor fue que por mucho tiempo, nomás veía a algún desconocido, me metía la mano a la bolsa. Esa maña me duró mucho tiempo. (25)

They had a present for me. A ring. They made me put it on and I remembered that it was the one the wetback had on that day. As soon as they left I tried to throw it away but I don’t know why I couldn’t. I thought that someone might find it. And the worst was that for a long time, as soon as I would see a stranger, I’d slip my hand into my pocket. That habit stayed with me for a long time. (101)

The ring becomes a symbol of the narrator’s oppression, but it is uncertain just who the narrator is in relation to the book’s framing narrator. The story is presented not simply from the first person perspective, but as a story told to another—to the reader, perhaps, or maybe within hearing of (or even to) the book’s framing narrator. Indeed, the story begins, “¿Te acuerdas de don Laíto y de doña Bone?”—“Remember Don Laíto and Doña Bone? That’s what everyone called them but their names were Don Hilario and Doña Bonifacia. Don’t you remember? Well, I had to live with them for three weeks until school ended. At first I liked it but then later on I

\(^{14}\) Abbot and Hinojosa, in fact, claim that this horrifying incident happened to Rivera himself. That said, I do not believe that Rivera means for Tierra to be autobiographical; regardless, all of Rivera’s own indications place the book within fiction as a genre, rather than nonfiction.
didn’t” (22/98). The story begins with the second person: ¿Te acuerdas? Don’t you remember? Establishing “La mano en la bolsa” as a recounted story in this way indicates its dialogical drive; moreover, we get a sense of the story’s oral roots: there is inferred conversation, back and forth. “Remember? … Don’t you remember? Well…” This is the beginning of a story, a prodding, an invitation to hear—or perhaps re-hear—and engage with the story in order to create a shared space of communal meaning. The immediacy of the second person shows the importance of this story’s “spokenness,” as well as the oral culture that Rivera is trying to translate onto the page: “Te acuerdas?” Remembering, though, is not the only point: the act of telling the story, sharing it, so that it is overheard, activates the communal imagination.

In particular, the communal imagination is activated and engaged by “La mano en la bolsa” in order to respond to the story’s central traumas: an older man is remembering himself as a young, scholarly boy; in the story, he gets manipulated, abused, and made an unwilling party to a murder by two people who promised his parents, who are travelling with the harvest, they would give him food and shelter so that he could finish the school year. It is a story told aloud by the narrator in order to work through his trauma, especially as indicated by its conclusion, when the speaker relates that the “hand in the pocket” habit stayed with him for years—it is something that has been laid aside as a secret, as something untellable, but by relating it to others, the speaker is able to take the hand out of the pocket and voice what has been silenced by fear and oppression. He is no longer bound and silenced by the ring and the abuse it represents; he is able to speak for himself, to speak himself. His story, no longer encircled by silence, becomes part of the communal fundament and imagination. Throughout Tierra, multivocality is constructed such that stories contain multiple referred to, rather than inferred, others. Thus even at the rhetorical level, what you might call a polymorphous, multiply-directed apostrophe shapes
Another means through which multivocality is expressed in *Tierra* is through four estampas written as interstitial dialogues; each of these is sudden, ephemeral, laden with rumor, and touches upon important migrant concerns. I will focus on the first dialogue, after *Tierra*’s second story, “Un rezo.” This estampa’s dialogue begins with a question: “Comadre, ¿ustedes piensan ir para Iuta?” In the Spanish, this is written “I-U-T-A,” a phonetic rendering of “Utah” that visually expresses its awkward unfamiliarity to the speakers. The other speaker responds, “We don’t think there’s such a state. You tell me, when’ve you ever heard of that place?” The other speaker argues that since he’s that farm labor contractors are spreading the word, it’s clear that Utah is, in fact, a real place. There are shades, in this conversation, of the bills and notices that flit in and out of *The Grapes of Wrath*—rumor and labor contracting being two of the hugest—not to mention most exploitative—drivers of migrant labor.\(^\text{15}\) The final touch of rumor in the dialogue closes it out, as the speaker who first raised the question of Utah, after being asked where it is, says, “Well, we’ve never been there but I hear it’s somewhere close to Japan.” Interestingly enough, Utah is part of the Mexican land that was ceded as a result of its invasion by the U.S—not to mention the fact that the state is named after its dominant original inhabitants, the Ute nation. Utah is specifically included in the calls for Aztlán’s *reconquista*, made by militant Chicanos at the time of *Tierra*’s publication. Yet rather than showing a divorce between proletarian Mexican American farmworkers and revolutionary Chicano nationalists, this dialogue centers its critique on the material labor practices and neoliberal power relations that not only

\(^{15}\) This is also a major issue in *Mules and Men*, *The Book of the Dead*, and *Whose Names are Unknown*, three other texts I discuss in *Migrant Modalities*: the ways that migrants are enticed towards labor and then exploited upon arrival have become some of the most painful and shocking examples of neoliberalism’s sinister dependence on supply and demand at the expense of vulnerable people.]
alienate laborers from the means and modes of production, but that remove the land, as a literal and metaphorical place, from the people that live and labor on it.

At this point, I would like to focus on the fact that *Tierra* contains 14 stories. Ramos and Buenrostro, whose recent Argentinian edition of *Tierra* elaborates a new archival perspective on the composition of the text, note that when Rivera first sent the book to the Premio Quinto Sol prize committee, it contained 13 stories: “Los anexos muestran que además de la 13 historias iniciales, Rivera escribió 5 historias entre enero y Agosto, entregando al comité editorial un total de 18, de las que 14 fueron seleccionadas como parte de la versión que hoy conocemos” (185). In addition, as Ramos and Buenrostro remind us, Julián Olivares (who edited and compiled the definitive edition of Rivera’s collected works) has shown that the final text written for the revision up to 14 stories was “Cuando Lleguemos”—the penultimate story in the published version (Ibid.). “Cuando Lleguemos” is the most demonstrably multivocal of the text’s stories: 14 separate voices speak in this story, a suggestive parallel, especially given the fact that it was written after all of the other stories.

What intrigues me about this number, 14, is that it suggests a sonnet, with each story suggesting a line of sorts. I will not go so far as to definitively call *Tierra* a sonnet in prose form, but I will insist that thinking of the book as more akin to a sonnet than a year provides a creative, improvisatory mode of entry that truly attends to the book’s dialogical, flexibly connective structure and moves us away from a strict, teleologically oriented and symbolically enclosed narrative. Comparing *Tierra* to a sonnet gives us an idea of it as a unity outside of the teleological and metaphysical inscriptions required by allegory. That is, the text can operate

---

16 “The appendices demonstrate that in addition to the 13 initial stories, Rivera wrote 5 stories between January and August (of 1970), submitting to the editorial committee a total of 18 stories, of which 14 were selected as part of version that we know today” (185).
more as a community of stories and voices rather than a unified field represented by a spokesperson who has been formed through allegory. I would like to go further and suggest that *Tierra*, if it is sonnet-like, uses the turn or volta to query, reconsider, and take off from what precedes it. This unmooring of *Tierra*’s telos—suggesting that the ending is a “turn” rather than a “recapture” or “recapitulation”—moves the idea of unity away from an allegorically reified young boy and towards a more truly communal ethos and aesthetics. When I have taught this text in the past, I often place it on a syllabus that includes Claude McKay’s *Harlem Shadows* and Gwendolyn Brooks’ *Annie Allen*, both of which utilize the sonnet to great effect, especially in order to illuminate African American life in and against the frames of classical literature. As in McKay’s and Brooks’ poems, there is a cracking open of the sonnet form. Still lyrically oriented, the singular, mediating voice is actively displaced by the multitudes that speak in *Tierra*.  

This especially holds true if we consider that the echoes of previous stories are *overheard* rather than necessarily experienced by the narrator. Nicolás Kanellos, in a reading of *Tierra* through his expertise in theater and drama, argues that the idea of dialogue, especially as overheard, rehearsed, and laid out on the page, is the most important function of the book. Says Kanellos, “Thus, of the different narrative devices utilized in [*Tierra*], the one that most effectively and with the greatest impact communicates the life-style, worldview and culture of the Chicanos is dialog. That is, the testimony of the people themselves, with their most candid and humble voices, is the factor that makes this novel one of the most powerful pieces of Chicano art” (54). The many voices work to construct a topological text, folding in and out,  

17 There is another interesting connection, and I am eager to further research this, between *Tierra* and books of a similar construction, such as *Cane* and Ernest Hemingway’s *In Our Time*—*Cane* contains 14 stories and interstitial poems; *In Our Time* switches between “impressions” and short stories. *My Name Is Aram*, William Saroyan’s quintessential Armenian American short story collection, also contains 14 stories.
making perhaps unexpected connections, marking and reveling in intimacies that are impossibly in the allegorical mode. The idea of the text as a manifold finds its most startling and intriguing consequence when reading Tierra’s final story. In this final story, all of the previous stories are recollected, but new, previously unheard and unread details and voices emerge as each story is remembered. Thinking of the text’s rhymes and resonances might also give an indication as to why two of the three interstitial dialogues are written directly after stories in which the Korean War figures prominently—why is dialogue being used after two texts in which sons are lost to war? Is there a reconstituting or ameliorative purpose to the dialogues? As a text that seems overwhelmingly male and overwhelmingly young, there are rhyming sections that focus on the oppression of women, on the forgotten wisdom of a community’s elders. There are wonderful, emergent possibilities in the idea that the text’s literariness, if paralleled to a sonnet, provides an irrepressible number of voices, relationships, and narratives.

Although I have been describing Tierra as containing fourteen stories or sections—which, to be very clear, it does—in the majority of the critical literature, arguments often hinge on the claim that the text contains twelve stories: twelve for the months in a year, though they are not seen as corresponding to particular months. This is because in the critical consensus, the first and last vignettes are seen as framing stories, suggesting that the twelve vignettes between these two framing stories all take place in the mind of the text’s narrator, who is, presumably, the unnamed young Mexican American migrant boy whose perspective introduces and then concludes Tierra. These twelve stories, it is thus assumed, symbolize “El año perdido/The lost year”—the text’s first section. This is the way the text has been taught and described, for the

---

18 This suggestion has taken the shape of an assumption in the critical literature. See especially Olivares (1985), Saldívar (1990), Llosa Sanz (2007), and González-Berry & Rebolledo (1985).
most part, since its publication in 1971. Julian Olivares, the editor of Rivera’s collected works, assumes the “twelve stories” position, as does Ramon Saldivar, whose excellent Chicano Narrative remains one of the classics in the field. Ramos and Buenrostro, in their scholarly introduction of the text to the Argentine reading public, assert that the first and last stories “enmarcan 12 historias correspondientes cada una a un mes del año en la vida del joven protagonista de la novela: ‘el año perdido.’ Esta intención estructural ya aparecía en un índice preliminar en que Rivera también había asignado al último texto el título alternativo de ‘El año encontrado’” (186).

Saldivar develops a deep, sympathetic reading of Tierra that contributes most crucially to the allegorical tendency of the book’s literary criticism, situates the novel as one of the most subtly difficult and provocative texts in the Chicano/o canon. Saldivar puts forth the claim that the text operates through a dialectical structure and philosophy. It does this, he argues, by situating ideologies of personal agency and subjectivity in agonistic relation to political awareness and obligation, ultimately synthesizing the poles into a critical historical consciousness similar to Woody Guthrie’s “great historical bum” or Vladimir Lenin’s vanguard party. Says Saldivar, “With … the active subject’s—the proletariat’s—creation of the historical world as part of the dialectic of subject and object, comes the possibility of the articulation of an authentic class consciousness. Rivera does not offer us so much a story of personal redemption as an allegory of historical crisis” (84). With this reading of Tierra and its dialectical movement between subject and object in the service of creating (an instructive or didactic) historical-

---

19 Bill Gleason, a professor of English at Princeton University, recalls quite clearly that at UCLA in the late 1980s, Tierra was taught a paradigmatic example of political allegory.

20 The first and last stories “demarcate 12 stories, each one corresponding to a month of the year in the life of the novel’s young protagonist: ‘el año perdido/the lost year.’ This intention for the book’s structure was already apparent in a preliminary table of contents in which Rivera himself had assigned the final text the alternative title, ‘El año encontrado/The recovered year’” (186).
political allegory, Saldívar alerts us to Rivera’s cultural embedding as a Chicano author writing at the height of Chicano nationalism (importantly, there is no –a suffix, only the –o). For Saldívar, the role of the migrant child narrator is to centralize, allegorize, and discursively encode the voices of his community within the framework of a larger, longer, deeper political struggle. In a sense, the others voices build up and construct the narrator—these voices are in the service of the narrator. Further, Saldívar argues:

[Rivera’s] anonymous narrator liberalizes the ‘subjectlessness’ of the corrido narrator, as he is born into a world of absence and loss, seeking to discover his identity, to inscribe his name in the text of history…. [L]ike Abraham called by the insubstantial voice of Yahweh to test his faith and confront his destiny, the child is called to bear witness to and compose the testament of his history. He is no patriarchal prophet, but he has apparently been chosen. (77-8)

The centrality of the young boy narrator in Tierra seems indisputable; after all, most of the estampas and stories seem to focus on a young boy’s experiences (not all, though). This is an issue definitely abetted by the fact that a very small proportion of the narrative voices are women’s voices. Although I concede Saldívar’s point that the narrator is a “witness,” I find that constructing a binary between “personal redemption” and “an allegory of historical crisis,” as Saldívar does, severs Tierra from its radical political promise as a text of many voices, largely because it still depends on the assumption of a single narrative consciousness.

Instead, the narrator gives space to many voices, allowing them to take up not only his thoughts, as many critics, not just Saldívar, would have it, but also the actual shape of the text. It’s important to bear in mind the vibrant oral tradition in the Mexican American Southwest, represented by raconteurs whose enthralling stories are scenes of communal listening and participation. Tierra’s young narrator has received, has heard, has been told these stories, and the

---

urge to allegorize the text relies upon a critical sleight of hand that obscures the voices who tell him the stories in the first place. The text’s political consciousness is a communal consciousness, expressed intersubjectively, in dialogue—not necessarily filtered through the narrator’s unique, indisputable perspective.

When the voices work themselves out, they break out of the frames of easy intention: they speak for themselves in anarchic, self-determined ways that create a community of many voices and desires. In one of the estampas, after “La noche buena” and before “El retrato,” read, “Before people left for up north the priest would bless their cars and trucks at five dollars each” (135). He makes enough money from these blessings that he’s able to go back to Spain. He returns with letters and postcards in order to motivate them towards his idealized ends. Yet, “It wasn’t long before words began to appear on the cards, then crosses, lines, and con safos symbols, just as had happened to the new church pews. The priest was never able to understand the sacrilege” (Ibid.). The people in the parish literally write themselves into the symbols of authority—they create spaces by marking them discursively; they physically reshape the symbols and trappings of power by surrounding themselves with a semiotic web of their own making, a network that cannot be and will not be understood by the priest.

And this is because Rivera’s book flows—it does not stand still—much like the migrants it depicts cannot be stilled. Tierra is a powerful and difficult celebration of Chicana/o life in its varieties of experience. As Alicia Schmidt Camacho points out, “The ‘spiritual strength’ that Rivera records in the minute articles affixed to the postcards and church pews are not simply articulations of faith but enunciations of presence against erasure. Their small statements of self-possession, ‘con safos,’ resist the dehumanizing effects of their labor” (Camacho, 8). While the young narrator becomes a chronicler of his community, it seems to me that he adds his
experience to the many, thus speaking with his friends and family and neighbors, rather than for them or at them—in this way, the labors and loves in the text are preserved in their difference, rather than cannibalized by the young narrator. If we see the text as filled with a multitude of voices, rather than occupied by a single voice, the text takes on a completely different political valence.

In the book’s final story, “Debajo de la casa/Under the House,” the young narrator thinks to himself, “Y tengo tanto en que pensar y me faltan tantos años. Yo creo que hoy quería recordar este año pasado. Y es nomás uno. Tendré que venir aquí para recordar los demás.”/ “And I have so much to think about and I’m missing so many years. I think today what I wanted to do was recall this past year. And that’s just one year. I’ll have to come here to recall all of the other years” (74/151, italics original). The book marks recollection as a willed gesture that occurs in a specific place—beneath a house. In his allegorical reading of the text, the critic Ralph Grajeda argues that the cyclical nature of the book operates according to a logic of recapture (a conclusion shared by many critics)—the boy must enfold the rest of the text into himself. Says Grajeda, “the voice we hear is not that of an individual hero intent on discovering and expressing his own subjective reality, but of a Mexican American—a pocho—in the significant process of discovering and embracing representatively his community’s experience and culture. The end toward which the narrative is directed is a social identity” (72). Alvaro Llosa Sanz argues, “Sólo entonces nos damos cuenta realmente de que la función de este personaje, personaje que identificamos ya con el del primer capítulo, es el de reunir en sí todo lo anteriormente disperso, mediante un ejercicio de integración que se realiza en la memoria” (282).22

22 “Only then [at the very end of the novel] do we really note that the function of this character, with whom we have identified since the first chapter, is to reunite in himself all that previously was scattered; this occurs through an integrative process realized through his memory” (282).
For Grajeda and Sanz, communalism can only take place through the young boy’s subsumption to the stories that have come before—he is, essentially, a messianic figure whose “coming into consciousness” is in actuality the creation of a universal and final signifier through which all meanings and narrative are unified. Olivares, similarly, takes the idea of unity as central to the text. Although he begins with unity as an aesthetic category, he slides into thinking of it as a political goal that elides difference: “Symbolically, the protagonist’s revelation points to that unity that Rivera himself searches for in the creative process. The author creates a character who, in turn, is a creator. Upon recreating the experiences of his people, the youngster creates himself in his own discovery. He arrives at a communion with the ‘other’ which is the collective humanity of his people. The youngster’s I grows larger than himself, leaving behind the solitary self and becoming a collective personality” (70). While agreeing with Olivares’s description of “communion with the ‘other,’” especially since it essentially names the process of communal participation, I hesitate at Olivares’s claim that the boy becomes “a collective personality.” A collective personality deflects Tierra from autonomy and radical democracy to a more alienated form of political speech that depends upon a spokesperson for visibility to official forms of recognition. In this reading, difference becomes meaningless, except insofar as it gives the spokesperson more credibility. Credibility, I feel, is not what Tierra is after, even as it operates within the realm of aesthetic realism. “Realism-as-credibility” falls into the trap of casting the young narrator, and the text as a putatively allegorical whole, as a native informant. Although it is counterintuitive, I would like to suggest that reading Tierra against the grain (of allegory) unfetters the text from expected frames of reception and understanding, confronting us with what we might call “the discomforting fact that the natives are no longer staying in their

Translation is mine.
frames” (Chow, 28). The text, as an anarchic dialogue of many voices speaking their own truths, should be read less for ascertaining authentic Chicano experience and more about examining self-determined spaces of speech and action.

The allegorical reading of the novel requires a glossing over of the distinction between recollection or recording and recapture. Recapture suggests that the memories are exclusively within the young narrator’s experience and person—they are there to be taken and brought back into the fold. Recollection or recording, on the other hand, suggests a certain distance from memory as an object or narrative and the self. In other words, there is mediation; there is a necessary difference between the self and the memory. The Spanish, perhaps, makes this distinction more clear: the verb used is “recordar,” which, while typically translated as “remember” or perhaps “recollect,” has a cognate in “record.” Record, as a metaphor for memory as a graphical function, puts the narrator’s action squarely within an artistic or writerly frame, rather than an informant frame. Additionally, “record” has its root in “cor-” or “cord-,” for heart. The Old French is “bring to remembrance”—suggesting a difference between the self and the thing or person remembered. The narrator and the other voices in the text are equally authorial, creative, and imperfectly rendered, rather than “recaptured,” as though they were all unified wholes to begin with—as though the voices are those of native informants. In essence, this distinction between recollecting/remembering/recording and recapture is precisely what the allegorical reading, as epitomized by the cyclical text-as-year reading, erases—and in order to do so, it requires that the voices operate as native informants, rather than resonating on an autonomous frequency. Recording and remembering maintain difference, whereas recapture is an absorptive and colonizing interpretive metaphor.

In “Debajo de la casa,” voices—all italicized—move in and out of the narrative,
separated by ellipses; they appear as fragments of conversation, either spoken to the narrator, or spoken within the hearing of the narrator. The framing narrator is beneath a house—underground, away from society. This aspect of the text is definitely reminiscent of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (including the anonymity of the narrator), except that in Ellison’s text, the narrator has surrounded himself with bright, perpetual lights. In “Debajo de la casa,” we encounter the framing narrator beneath a house, letting memories flow through him. As mentioned above, in this final story all of *Tierra*’s previous vignettes come together within the narrator’s consciousness. In an italicized monologue-like long passage, voices move in and out of the narrative, separated by ellipses; they appear as fragments of conversation, either spoken to the narrator, or spoken within the hearing of the narrator. In this passage, we encounter the young narrator beneath a house, letting memories wash over him:

_Bueno, y ¿qué es el precio del estaño ahora? ¿Por qué no se vienen con nosotros la próxima vez? … ya se está vieniendo el frió. Te apuesto que mañana va a amanecer todo el suelo parejito de escarcha. Y fíjate como las grúas ya pasan cada rato … el domingo va a haber casamiento. De seguro nos van a dar cabrito en mole con arroz y luego luego el baile, y el novio bien desesperado porque se venga la noche … fíjese, comadre, que nos asustamos tanto anoche que se apagaron las luces. Estábamos jugando con los niños cuando de repente todo oscuro. Y luego no teníamos ni una velita._ (74)

_And tell me, what’s the price of tin these days? Why don’t you all come with us next time we go? … The cold weather is setting in. I’ll bet you that tomorrow morning the ground will be all covered with frost. And notice how often the cranes fly by … There’s going to be a wedding Sunday. For sure they’ll serve us cabrito in mole sauce, with rice, and then the dance, and the groom, anxious for night to arrive… I tell you, comadre, we got so frightened last night when the lights went out. We were there playing with the children when all of a sudden it was pitch dark. And we didn’t even have one candle._ (150)

All of the words in the passage relate to previous stories, and while some repeat information from previous stories, others add onto what we already know. In every case, the words can be considered as “overheard speech,” which the narrator is then repeating. Entirely in
italics, this passage represents thought through a stream-of-consciousness style. In other words, these are the actual voices of the storytellers themselves, not the young narrator’s as he hides beneath a house, thinking about all the stories he’s been told. He does not speak them aloud—rather, he goes over them, he brings the scenes back to life and repeats them—he “re collects” them. Importantly, these snippets convey words and information that not given in the vignettes. This difference between the snippet and the vignette reveals these memories as active, as away from the narrator’s control.

“Debajo de la casa/Under the House” continues, the river of memories flooding the narrator’s mind. The passage below is taken by most critics to be the ethical and political center of the novel, and it has shaped the claim that the young narrator must be read as a symbol for Chicano political consciousness:

—Quisiera ver a toda esa gente junta. Y luego si tuviera unos brazos bien grandes los podría abrazar a todos. Quisiera poder platicar con todos otra vez, pero que todos estuvieran juntos. Pero eso apenas en un sueño. Aquí sí que está suave porque puedo pensar en lo que yo quiera. Apenas estando uno solo puede juntar a todos. Yo creo que es lo que necesitaba más que todo. Necesitaba esconderme para poder comprender muchas cosas. De aquí en adelante todo lo que tengo que hacer es venirme aquí, en lo oscuro, y pensar en ellos. Y tengo tanto en que pensar y me faltan tantos años. Yo creo que hoy quería recordar este año pasado. Y es nomás uno. Tendré que venir aquí para recordar los demás.

(74)

I would like to see all of the people together. And then, if I had great big arms, I could embrace them all. I wish I could talk to all of them again, but all of them together. But that, only in a dream. I like it right here because I can think about anything I please. Only by being alone can you bring everybody together. That’s what I needed to do, hide, so that I could come to understand a lot of things. From now on, all I have to do is to come here, in the dark, and think about them. And I have so much to think about and I’m missing so many years. I think today what I wanted to do was recall this past year. And that’s just one year. I’ll have to come here to recall all of the other years. (151).

For Saldívar, this passage indicates the ultimate political coherence of Tierra, especially visible in the “great big arms” that “embrace them all.” This reading makes perfect sense. Yet, I
strongly believe that to suggest that the novel’s ultimate gesture is one of allegorical unification is to ensure that, throughout Tierra, difference occurs in the service of its own erasure. By this I mean that the different voices, if they are unified within the voice and mind of the narrator in the service of allegory, are necessarily melded and made identical. Indeed, the embrace and the ability to “talk to all of them again, but all of them together,” the narrator notes, can occur “only in a dream,” reinforcing the immateriality of allegory. Even more, and this is quite important, suggesting that this embrace is the novel’s final gesture actually denies the novel’s actual ending gesture, which is the final passage on the handout, as well as the novel: “He had made a discovery. To discover and rediscover and piece things together. This to this, that to that, all with all. That was it. That was everything. He was thrilled. When he got home he went straight to the tree that was in the yard. He climbed it. He saw a palm tree on the horizon. He imagined someone perched on top, gazing across at him. He even raised one arm and waved it back and forth so that the other could see that he knew he was there” (152). There’s a vast web of connections—an intersectional democracy of voices. The image of connection sketched out is one that maintains difference, suggesting that the connections between nodes of difference—both subjects and objects—form the material of the world. The final gesture is not an embrace, but a wave. This gesture hinges on difference, and it does so in a way that suggests a completely alternative creative agency, especially pertaining to others.

In Tierra, the young boy is a storyteller and artist, a narrator who, like Rivera, speaks with, rather than for, his compañeras and compañeros, enunciating a communal politics that insists on fierce particularity. This isn’t an unlinking of Tierra from its Chicanidad, and it’s certainly not a critique of movement politics and their historical—and continuing—effectiveness. What I’m offering, though, is a critique of the means through which allegory is too often used in
an instructional or indicative sense. Reading *Tierra* against the grain of allegory unfetters the text from expected frames of reception and understanding, confronting us with “the discomforting fact that the natives are no longer staying in their frames” (Chow, 28). The text, as an anarchic dialogue of many voices speaking their own truths, is less an authentic Chicano self and more an examination of how self-determined spaces of speech and action lead to the communal articulation of Chicanidad in its multiplicity.

To maintain the particularity and dignity of the individual voices in *Tierra* (even if unnamed) is not to capitulate to bankrupt ideologies of dehistoricized or sovereign individuality; neither is my criticism of Saldivar’s allegorical reading meant to disestablish the important political work done on the level of the communal and the historical. Instead, I would like to situate myself beside this binary and invoke the radical potential of *Tierra* as an actualized direct democracy. In this reading, the possibility of allegory remains, although it is not the only signifying and symbolically determinative narrative operation.23

To borrow what Alexandra Vazquez argues in the context of Cuban music, Chicana/o literature presents us with “a situation that demands flexibility and multiple forms and forums” (208). Rivera’s *Tierra* is one such form that generates meanings of and by Chicana/o existence in the United States. Paying particular attention to the routes of radically and idiosyncratically democratic thought in *Tierra* also makes the text a forum that convenes in multiple forms and venues. As Eliud Martinez says, “Rivera’s characters feel deeply. They know love and they dream…. Rivera the storyteller conveys their bewilderment, the awe and wonder they experience on migrant journeys to unfamiliar places like Utah and Minnesota” (49).

23 The allegorical reading, regardless of my critique, still provides a powerful reading of the book, especially since it is perhaps the most straightforward, or readily available, explanation for the narrator’s memorialization and literal incorporation of his community’s stories.
Carlos Gallego, in his 2014 *Arizona Quarterly* article “Topographies of Resistance: Cognitive Mapping in Chicano/a Literature,” argues against the general reading of the novel as allegory as well, but with a different critical direction and outcome than mine. Gallego argues,

[T]he novel’s (and the genre’s) emphasis on cognitive mapping as a type of epistemological praxis that precedes political action. It is precisely the desire for totality underlying cognitive mapping that I find privileges an economic or geopolitical reading over a cultural or identity-based analysis. Moreover, I find that this commitment to the geopolitical as a knowable or mappable reality positions the novel in a modernist rather than postmodernist cultural tradition.

(29)

Gallego’s argument takes up the call to turn to the spatial in literary criticism in accordance to the geographical drive of Chicana/o literature, especially as articulated by Mary Pat Brady and Melissa K. López.24 Yet, his turn moves against “identity-based analysis,” which he later calls one of the “tired themes”—and this is a direction I find discomfiting. Rather than doing away with identity as such, I find it more important to look deeper within identity in order to discover its intersecting drives, desires, and constitutions. Furthermore, Gallego’s reading of the novel as “modernist rather than postmodernist” capitulates to Fredric Jameson’s sentimental model of the modernism-postmodernism divide, in which modernism maintains allegorical and political coherence, whereas postmodernism evades aesthetic or historical unity by embracing fragmentation and arbitrariness.25 And even as Gallego argues against “the protagonist as being

---


25 See Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capital* (1991), or the article by the same title that contains the germ of the book, in the *New Left Review*, Issue 146, July-August 1984, pp. 53-92. Jameson argues, with a masked sense of nostalgia, that postmodernism signals the aesthetic’s mirroring of capital in an era of multinational capital and global monetary flows. To put it his argument crudely: for Jameson, art, like labor, becomes evanescent and diffuse rather than materially anchored and concrete. Chela Sandoval, in *Methodology of the Oppressed*, shows at length how this modernity-postmodernity binary is hopelessly imprecise when describing cultural and aesthetic productions from oppressed people and peoples, in particular
representative of community or identity construction” (Ibid.), he uplifts his reading as a “desire for totality”; simply put, he wants a different totality or unity, one that emphasizes a classical (that is, “modernist”) model of political resistance. This cannot be an argument in and of itself, though—at least, not without an entire host of privileging assumptions that undermine Tierra’s power as a text that vibrates with difference. Rather than doing away with cultural analysis and identity, I find it more important to look deeper within both of these matrices in order to discover their intersecting drives, desires, and constitutions. The power of the literary, especially when imagining alternative and radical politics, is doubly important for considering the many ways that ethnicity is expressed; in particular, the literary, particularly as Rivera plies it, imagines novel modes and methods for linking cultural politics, identity, and material critique—even if utopian, even if creative, even if, ultimately, impossible. What interests me most of all is the way that artistic creativity forges connections to others, and how, in the case of the migrant, this creative project becomes even more urgent.

In Tierra, Rivera examines, materializes, and makes a geography of interstitial, minor, intimate, urgent moments in order to instantiate what Homi Bhabha calls, “those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences … [that] initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration.” (2) Especially as a migrant author writing about migrant communities, Rivera is careful to create a text that enables dignity; that speaks with a community, rather than for or to it. Tierra is irreducible in its multiplicity; to unify it under the banner of allegory would be to reduce its hermeneutic and political mobility. Even more, moving away from a monumentalizing, allegorical reading of Tierra allows us to see how the characters flow and move, showing migrancy to be a both a space and a praxis of critical

U.S. Third World writers, not to mention the possibilities for political action in the contemporary moment.
knowledge. People and voices cannot be easily tracked down, reduced, or reified by the agents or representatives of state ideological power, and this differential and autonomous strategy is of paramount importance for a community in asserting its empowerment, its dignity, and its freedom.

III. Lydia Mendoza’s Moving Homelands

When writing on and about Lydia Mendoza, it is essential to realize just how central she has been to the Mexican American imagination, especially among migrants and workers from the 1930s to the 1980s. With an incredibly long career, spanning from her early childhood to her 80s, Mendoza played corridos, rancheras, and other traditional Texan and Mexican songs for adoring audiences throughout the borderlands and beyond. Her primary audience was in the U.S. and was comprised chiefly of Mexican immigrants scattered throughout the nation. Two of those fans were my grandparents, Ignacio Gomez and Maria Luisa González Gomez. Ignacio first saw her as a youth performing in “La Plaza de Zacate” in downtown San Antonio—she was still performing with her family at that time, and he remembered their music fondly. When speaking to Maria Luisa about her memories of Mendoza as well as her late husband’s, she recalls the time Mendoza came to Phoenix. She performed at a banquet hall, and families filed in and sat around tables. There was a big dance floor cleared in front of Mendoza, with tables and chairs arrayed around it. When Mendoza started playing, recalls my grandmother, she and my grandfather did not stay seated, “pero nosotros bailaron—tu sabes como le encataba bailar a tu abuelo.”26 My grandmother often recalls my grandfather’s legendary love of dancing, and from this particular

26 From a phone conversation on November 17th, 2014. Her comment translates to: “But we danced. You know how much your grandfather loved to dance.” Except where specifically noted, all translations and transcriptions in this portion of the chapter are my own. All mistakes are my own.
moment in time, that is the important memory: their moving, their dancing, their togetherness across and along the dance floor. She does not remember the songs that Mendoza played—most likely selected from her beloved repertoire of ranchera valses and corridos—but she remembers the atmosphere. I wonder, when watching a video of Mendoza performing “Tango Negro”\(^{27}\) while resting her chin on her caressed guitar, eyes opening and closing, feeling the vibrations rustling through her jaw and cheeks and arms and legs, whether she imagined the dancers that night in Phoenix, or if she had her eyes open and saw my grandparents, one pareja among many others, their brown bodies and bright clothes blending with everyone else’s. I wonder if, in that vibrant kaleidoscope of raza pride, my grandparents ever struck Lydia Mendoza’s eye and she followed them, even briefly, as she played some of their favorite rancheras.

Yolanda Broyles-González, collaborator with and editor of Mendoza in the creation of the most important scholarly work about the singer and her life, clearly and at length lays out the sociopolitical context of Mendoza’s music. In *Lydia Mendoza’s Life in Music / La Historia de Lydia Mendoza* (2001), Broyles-Gonzalez says of Mendoza,

I have at times thought of Lydia Mendoza as a powerful labor organizer and/or curandera (healer), for she has served as a collectivizing and galvanizing force for raza laborers and as a voice of collective self-power. Later she extended her influence to the incipient middle class and other ethnic groups as well. Her voice and guitar have been prime conduits in consolidating a collective consciousness and social healing for raza farm and factory laborers, for railroad and mine workers, for the army of migrant labor. These are the people who have crisscrossed the United States and Mexico in the mass migrations that began in the twentieth century and extend into the twenty-first. The music performed by the itinerant Lydia Mendoza has transcended physical and temporal boundaries, serving as a multivalent bonding counterforce to the disintegrative forces of displacement, uprooting, exile, migration, and Eurohomogenization/assimilation that emanate from elitist Euro-American institutions and transnational capital, as well as from the repressive nation-states and their bureaucracies. As a traveling

\(^{27}\) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zg9MOB71tWY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zg9MOB71tWY).
public singer, she offered her voice and interpretive genius as a vital nexus and bridge among raza dispersed across national and state borders. (181)

This crisscrossing itinerary, as part of a larger migratory pattern, certainly holds true for Maria Luisa and Ignacio, whose migrations took them from San Antonio to La Mesa, Texas, and then to El Mirage, Arizona, where Ignacio found permanent work for himself and his family in the Arizona cotton, onion, and turnip fields.\(^{28}\)

On the night my grandmother and grandfather saw Mendoza play in Phoenix, I am interested in my grandmother’s kinesthetic memory of the performance space and her actions within it. This memory that moves, in every sense of the verb, is what I find most intriguing about Mendoza’s body of work, especially as it is recorded on the bodies and minds of her listeners. I am after what Diana Taylor calls the repertoire, which “enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, non reproducible knowledge” (Taylor, 20). Mendoza’s musical repertoire, as it was used in her concert performances, generated a concomitant repertoire of movements, memories, and moods among her audiences. I rely primarily on a concert Lydia Mendoza played in Santa Barbara, California, on April 27\(^{th}\), 1986, recorded by Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez and included as a companion CD to Broyles-Gonzalez’s publication of Mendoza’s oral autobiography.\(^{29}\) This Santa Barbara concert album, from start to finish, reveals the depth of

\(^{28}\) Maria Luisa’s journey began in Monterrey, the capital city in Nuevo León, one of Mexico’s northern states, before she met Ignacio, married him, and moved with him to Texas. Before he met Maria Luisa, Ignacio had a long, migratory journey from Southern Texas to Northern Mexico and back again, before heading to Detroit for a few years. His journeys while “soltero” were quite varied and far-flung, but he always seemed to find his way back to Texas.

\(^{29}\) The record, when it was issued, was actually mistitled \textit{En vivo desde New York (Live from New York)} because the original was not labeled. Broyles-Gonzalez gives a concise history of how this came to be: “The recordings … were made in concert during Lydia Mendoza’s last year as a performer. We recorded it in Santa Barbara, California, on April 27, 1986, the day she and I sat for the last installment of her life-telling. It was just a few days before her seventieth birthday.
Mendoza’s engagement with her audiences. She banters with them, like most musicians do—and she also asks for recommendations and suggestions on what to play next. Broyles-Gonzalez notes that,

Lydia Mendoza was trained as a child in that ancient oral tradition of *música de talón*: the trade of wandering street musicians who commingle among their principal audience: poor people who socialize on the streets and (more recently) in restaurants on a day off from work. Thus Mendoza was obliged to master the repertoire of the oral tradition, singing by heart those songs the people requested; weaving and mending the cloth of raza culture, of that shifting collective consciousness enacted in the circle of songs. (186)

Broyles-Gonzalez, by referencing “the circle of songs,” seems to suggest an almost Gadamerian hermeneutic circle, such that known and shared experiences shape communal interpretive practices. This is supported by Broyles-Gonzalez’s description of Mendoza’s praxis as “weaving and mending the cloth of raza culture,” a powerful description of the flowing nature of the artist’s cultural production and communal engagement. When taking requests and responding to her audience, one can hear Mendoza actively participating in this weaving and mending.

Sometimes, though, Mendoza forgets a song. When I first listened to the Santa Barbara concert recording, Mendoza’s lapse of memory, and how deftly she handled it, was what initially got me thinking about how deeply engaged she was with her audience. At the beginning of the recording of “Dos Palomas al Volar,” Mendoza begins talking—“Muchísimas gracias, bueno, ahorra vamos con la que s…” the audience interrupts her, leaving her sibilant “s” (perhaps the beginning of “sugieren”/“suggest”) hanging in the air. Her listeners shout suggestions and she waits patiently until they die down. She speculatively strums a few chords and notes from

and just a few weeks before a severe stroke ended her long performance career…. [The album] was issued by Mr. Salomé Gutiérrez of DLB Records of San Antonio, Texas, after Lydia Mendoza passed her copy of our recording on to him—during recovery after her stroke. (DLB has recorded Lydia Mendoza since 1966.) Since Mendoza’s copy of the recording was not marked, Mr. Gutiérrez issued it as En Vivo desde New York (Live from New York). In reality it was live from Santa Barbara” (225-6).
“Cuesta Abajo” before she stops and announces that she cannot remember it. Mendoza tells the audience, “por ahí me piden ‘Cuesta Abajo,’ pero yo lo cantaba muchos años pasados…pero ahorita no me recuerdo. Sino, con muchísimo gusto, les compensaría. Entonces, ahorra vamos con ... la ... ‘Dos Palomas al Volar.’”30 The audience lets loose with joyous cheers—“Dos Palomas al Volar,” is, indeed a beautiful compensation. The song’s title perhaps evokes Mendoza’s widespread nickname—“La Alondra de la Frontera” (The Meadowlark of the Border), as do its lyrics about two doves learning to fly that leave “por nuevo nido”—for a new nest. Although this song largely tracks onto sentimental notions of lost love, the song also bespeaks the loss of home and the novel relations that come about through migration.

Although publics and counterpublics emerge around most public events, styles, and cultural productions, the comments on YouTube uploads of Broyles’s recording of Mendoza’s concert especially touch me, largely because they describe my own feelings so powerfully. For example, in the upload of her recording of “Celosa,” we can see: “gracias enserio por este tipo de cancion que las suben ala red y es muy dificil de encontrar, este tipo de canciones an hecho una union hermosa entre mi abuelita y yo gracias en vd.”31 Because of personal connections—

30 “Over there, you all are asking me to play ‘Cuesta Abajo’ [‘Downhill’]. I played it many years ago but right now I don’t remember it; that said, and with much pleasure, I will compensate you all. So then, we’ll go with ‘The,’ ahem, ‘Dos Palomas al Volar’ [‘Two Doves in Flight’].”
31 “Jt Roman”: “In all seriousness, thank you for uploading this type of song to the net—it’s very difficult to find. These types songs have created a beautiful union between my grandmother and me—thank you.” All of “Jt Roman’s” spellings are original, and I have chosen not to “[sic]” his words—my written Spanish, when I venture it out into the public realm, is filled with the same uncertainty around accents, sentence structure, and spelling. I have never understand it when people say that Spanish is “written how it sounds,” especially when we all speak it so differently. The Lydia Mendoza YouTube clips I reference in this chapter (except for the video of “Tango Negro”), along with several others from the concert, are audio recordings that I uploaded onto my personal account. They can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/user/franciscondine/videos>, “Celosa,” where the mentioned comment exists, can be heard at <http://youtu.be/9X-L39r1oTI>.
Mendoza allows me, too, to connect with my grandmother in nearly indefinable ways—these comments seem to bespeak a strange nostalgia. How is it that children and grandchildren can yearn to re-encounter past experiences that they never had—that they can feel tinged by cultural histories and narratives that have indelibly (yet so distantly) touched them? What is the shape of this yearning, and how does it manifest intergenerationally? Jonathan Flatley, in *Affective Mapping*, argues, “To recover that which has been forgotten … puts one into contact with this vast archive of changing compounds and strange products” (73). I am especially interested in how histories of migration and migrant labor are communicated across generations, and how these memories inform musical productions and literary narratives, especially through, as Flatley helps us think of them, vast and complex archives of cultural narratives and repertoires. This is especially important to understanding how Mendoza’s music creates a space of imagination and desire that speaks quite specifically to Mexican Americans.

Deborah Vargas, in her work *Dissonant Divas*, cautions us against uncritically pursuing a history of Mexican American women’s musical production that establishes Lydia Mendoza as its hero and monolith. The iconicity accorded to Mendoza, argues Vargas, reinforces the “heteromasculinist rule of canonical musical histories” (xvi). This occurs, continues Vargas, because Mendoza has been given what she calls “exceptional exemption” status. Vargas’s nomenclature here further exposes and critiques respectability discourses around amnesty; in particular, the language of “exceptional exemptions” signals who is covered by the DREAM Act and given a path to citizenship. The DREAM Act was, until quite recently, the only (and quite restricted) means of applying for citizenship for countless undocumented men, women, and children. This exceptional exemption operates by being the exception that strengthens the rule; thus, “Lifting artists such as Lydia Mendoza to the level of exceptional status not only forecloses
on the experiences of other performers but also works to reproduce a normative ideology of
gender, sexuality, and race among Chicana cultural producers” (xvii). Because of Mendoza’s
longevity and her prodigy with a 12-string guitar, her importance to the Mexican American
community translates quite well to other, more normative (and perhaps determinative) listening
publics. Indeed, as Vargas points out, all too often Mendoza is held up as a standard which all
other Mexican American women musicians must aspire to and achieve. This monumentalizing of
Mendoza situates her squarely within the tradition of an “Adelita”—a woman warrior whose
purity, piety, courage, and strength should be emulated by all Mexican women. Making
Mendoza into an icon further acts as a justification for, as Vargas puts it above, “foreclose[ing]
on the experiences of other performers.” What is fascinating about Mendoza, though, is how she
herself sings about a variety of experiences and proposes various means of empower-
tment. To
Vargas’s point, it is precisely this complexity of message that gets streamlined into a more
palatable narrative by—and for—a more hegemonic listening and academic public than was
intended.

In the style of Alexandra Vazquez, I want to listen in detail and speak with Mendoza as
she articulates a “traveling borderlands” that sounds out the heterogeneous yet communal
experience of being Mexican American. Says Vazquez, “To listen in detail is a different project
than remembering. It is not archeological work done to reconstruct the past. It is to listen closely
to and assemble that inherited lived matter that is both foreign and somehow familiar into
something new” (Listening in Detail, 8). As with Flatley’s quasi-alchemical reference to a “vast
archive of changing compounds and strange products,” Vazquez calls upon us to attend to the
living, unique, and ever-renewing lives, songs, and stories that we inherit. What Mendoza sounds
out is an enormous range of experiences that builds up a Chicana/o counterpublic that thrives
through its differential, manifold attachments to these experiences. This is a complicated
counterpublic that thrives on a multi-part harmony, if I might borrow from Josh Kun, thus
becoming “the story of both nation formation and de-formation, the audible soundtrack to a
nation as it continually packs and unpacks itself” (19). What Mendoza gives her audiences, to
borrow from Kun again, is “‘audiotopias,’ small, momentary, lived utopias built, imagined, and
sustained through sounds, noise, and music. This, of course, requires another adjustment, to think
of music in terms of space and in terms of its spaces … the spaces that music helps us to imagine
as listeners occupying our own real and imaginary spaces” (21). For migrants in a music hall or
on a dance floor, these “real and imaginary spaces” get flooded by feelings, by ideas, by
whispered or hummed lyrics, by movements that assert one’s self according to the intuited and
felt rhythms of the music as well as one’s dance partner.

Yet the migrations, movements, and complexities of Mexican America begin before these
real and imagined spaces. They begin even before the sacrificial altars of the Aztecs and the
arrival of the Spaniards, appear in the problematic myth of Malintzin/Malinche, continue on to
genocide and mission schools, unfurl onto an independence movement led by warrior priests, the
loss of Mexico’s territory north of the Rio Grande and the deaths of los niños de Chapultepec,
veer into the story of the puppet King Maximiliano and the Battle of Puebla on May 5th, charge
into the Twentieth Century like Pancho Villa leading his horsemen during the Mexican
Revolution, shout with outrage like the students murdered in El Zocalo, Mexico City’s storied
central plaza, as they dared to challenge a corrupt government, continue on through NAFTA, the
maquiladoras, drug cartels, and the massacre of 43 teachers in training from Ayotzinapa College
in 2014. These ideas, feelings, and bodies cross borders like the Yaqui who fled the genocidal

---

32 See especially *Audiotopia* pp. 16-21 and pp. 29-47.
Mexican army, like the workers who sought better lives before and after the revolution, like the braceros who were invited and then disinvited at the pleasure of industrial farms and local, state, and federal government; Mexican American history crosses borders (as with my family in Mexico) and is crossed by borders (as with my family in Texas). With a diaspora that is always already under contestation and (re)definition, how can a story be told that neither falls back on triumphalist nationalism nor resorts to the defeatism of absolute fragmentation? Vázquez, at the conclusion of *Listening in Detail*, suggests, “listening in detail might be a way to unearth a camaraderie that is felt if not exactly named. To listen in detail suggests an alternative way to engage phenomena across populations that does not strive to make large claims, build an immovable artifice, or forge static rubrics” (213). Lydia Mendoza, with her construction of traveling borderlands and moving memories, offers us a number of paths otherwise from the nationalism/fragmentation binary, a path that instantiates radical, utopian, ineffable, indescribable, small, ephemeral, yet lasting and potent democracies through the very act of engaging her listening publics.

When introducing “Luis Pulido,” the second song on the Santa Barbara album, Mendoza says “Muchísimas gracias! Thank you! Pues por allí me están pidiendo un corrido—.”33 The audience interrupts her, “Luis Pulido!” “Luis Pulido!” Some other suggestions are ventured, but are drowned out by more calls for “Luis Pulido” and audience laughter that acknowledges just how many times that song’s title has been called out. Mendoza says “Como no. Con mucho gusto, voy a, bueno voy a cantarles para cambiar un poquito, lo que voy a cantar es un corrido que se llama ‘Luis Pulido,’ y luego viene ‘La Amor de Madre’…y lo que ustedes quieran.”34 She

33 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_cFx3b3N3C4>.

34 “Many thanks! Thank you! Well, over there you are asking me for a corrido …. Why not. With much pleasure, I’m going, well I’m going to sing a song to change it up a little—what I’m
launches into a four note scale and fudges some of the notes—plucking single notes from a
twelve-string guitar is hard work. She plays a bit of the introductory melody, repeating it once
with some accompanying chords before settling into the “vals” rhythm, the 3/4 meter that
characterizes so much Mexican border music.

Y allá del rancho La Peña les traigo el nuevo corrido.
Por andar haciendo señas mataron a Luis Pulido.
Y quien iba imaginarse que lo matara un amigo?

Alegre estaba la fiesta, se celebraba una boda.
Pulido ya muy tomado le hacía señas a la novia.
Y a veces quería besarla, como si estuviera sola.35

The song begins by situating Mendoza as a troubadour—“from over there at La Peña Ranch I
bring you the new corrido.” Seeking to create a specific performance space, the lyric Mendoza
sings goes “the [el] new corrido,” not “a [un] new corrido.” The use of the definite article
temporally and spatially situates the audience in the present moment, and the story proceeds as
though it were a new story—even though the audience knows the song and has asked for it.
Indeed, the audience yells and yips during the first line of the song, engaging in an ecstatic co-
performance with Mendoza. This moment shows the imaginative power created by Mendoza’s
performance—indeed, in much music, generally. But what makes “Luis Pulido” special, as sung
by Mendoza, is what follows—the audience doesn’t sing along, but calls itself forth into the song
in an intriguing, visceral manner.

35 From over at La Peña Ranch, I bring you the new corrido
For going about making love, they killed Luis Pulido.
And who would have imagined that they’d kill their own friend?

The party was joyful, a wedding celebration.
Pulido, already quite drunk, was making signs [hitting on/making eyes] at the bride.
And he sometimes tried to kiss her, as though she were alone.
This moment in the recording comes when the lyric “Pulido se tira un grito que se oye en el rancho entero.” One of the male audience members lets out a piercing, gritty yell—un grito que se oye en la sala de concierto entero—right after Mendoza enters the final syllable of “entero.” This grito functions as an engaged, contrapuntal addition to the music. The other audience members appreciatively laugh and applaud. Broyles-Gonzalez notes that the grito is an important component of the ranchera genre (which is characterized by love songs, for the most part), but not of the corrido as such. This grito, then, is especially important, given that the corrido is a male-dominated form, not only in terms of the musicians who perform them, but of scholarly attention. Broyles-Gonzalez further notes that “Rancheras are not only about words; they are also about a resonance that transcends the conscious rational cerebral dimensions. The melodic lines and their interpretations by varied artists (referred to as *interpretes de la canción* within Mexican culture) have profound effects, often culminating in the ritualized grito, or piercing primordial scream, which powerfully releases emotions” (197-8). In the instance of “Luis Pulido,” the grito, as an imaginative and performative engagement, situates the song within an imagined, communal present—it is an anarchic and anachronistic intervention in the song’s interpretation. As Broyles-Gonzalez notes, the ranchera and its interpretations “have profound effects,” suggesting that the grito, although it is improvisatory, is perhaps welcomed or invited by Mendoza herself.

Through the grito, Pulido moves out into the audience—even though Pulido is wayward, according to the song’s moral message, an audience member decides to give him voice. The verse before “el grito” is quite short and changes the tone of the song, introducing new chords that, although maintaining the major key, sound like an admonition within the melodic and 

---

36 “Pulido lets out a shout, that is heard all over the entire ranch.”

37 It can be heard in other songs on the album, such as “Por un Amor” and “
harmonic context of the song. The chords almost sound like they are about to launch into a new
song altogether. The song moves toward the conclusion through a verse describing the gunfight
between Antonio—the groom—and Luis Pulido. At the song’s end, though, we can hear that
these new chords, when they repeat, function as a chorus. The moral content of the song, then,
appears as a chorus. Although the chords are repeated, the lyrics are not—the first time the
chords are played, Antonio warns Luis Pulido not to make love to his bride. The second time,
after bullets have been fired and the dust has cleared, Luis Pulido is dead, and the song ends—
¡tan tán!—after the moral of the song has been related: “Y así se acaba siempre el hombre, que
sigue a mujer ajena.”

In a corrido, it makes sense that the “chorus” would be identified through a series of
repeated chords, rather than repeated lyrics. This is because the corrido is a ballad and story, and
the economy of the song often demands that the lyrics keep progressing the narrative, rather than
taking up time and space repeating a chorus. (This is not always the case, but it is especially so
for “Luis Pulido.”) Using repeated chords illuminates the sonic structure of the song, but in a
more subtle way than repeated chords and repeated lyrics. This subtle structure allows this
corrido in particular to articulate and emphasize its moral or political content, since it follows the
general corrido tradition of ending with the chorus’s chords. Thus the lyrics tell the story, and

38 “And that’s how he always ends up, the man who goes after another’s woman.”
39 For some examples, see “El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez,”
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cVpuKZRIA0g>, which is the basis of Américo Paredes’s
With His Pistol in His Hand, and “La Bala” by Los Tigres del Norte
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NU7sQl6aEpU>. “La Bala,” like many Los Tigres del
Norte songs, uses a 4/4 meter, rather than 3/4, which is Mendoza’s preferred meter. “La Bala”
has almost a “funky” beat, since its accents are on the second and fourth, beats. The band
alters between this rhythm and a more straightforward “common time” (first and third)
rhythm. This makes the band’s music quite amenable to the two-step, which is, I think, why their
music is so popular to dance to. Los Tigres del Norte are discussed in José David Saldívar’s
the music provides the sequential and associative structure of the song as a whole. This gives most corridos an almost recursive sonic feel, as moral and political messages are related through their musical delivery, rather than through lyrical repetition. This “feel” is shaped at the level of musical form, rather than at the level of verbal content. When Antonio’s initial admonition leads to a more generalized warning at the end of the song—“that’s how he always ends up”—the through lines are underscored sonically.

Yet what to make of the fact that the lusty drunkard “always ends up” dead, and that an audience member gave voice to Luis Pulido’s outrageous and defiant grito? The grito, in the Mexican and Mexican American imaginary, speaks to another specific temporal moment—the declaration of independence from Spain in 1810. *El grito de Dolores* names the act of independence as a fierce shout, a bold and defiant yell that breaks the bonds of empire. I read the audience member’s voicing of Luis Pulido’s grito as a declaration of autonomy, and the rest of the audience’s loving and appreciative reaction as an acceptance of this autonomy. Thus in the moment of the shout is born a community than can celebrate its dignity and determination, that can, in the moment of the song, come into being in its own terms. In other words, the grito is a break—it is improvisatory, yet it is well-known and rehearsed within the audience’s imaginary. It is a moment in which the audience can articulate itself within and beyond the context and moment of the song. The grito actualizes the break, makes scratchy and grainy the gutsy act of making and naming oneself. Choosing Luis Pulido as the person with whom to identify, rather than Antonio, the enforcer of the song’s moral code, is part of this defiance. Listen to the lyrics after the shout: “La hembra que a mí me cuadra, la quiero, porque la quiero / Y si alguno se me
atraviesa, se lo despacho a San Pedro.”

Luis Pulido is quite brazen in announcing both his threat—“I will send anyone who crosses me to Saint Peter”—and his desire—“I want her, because I want her” or maybe even “I love her, because I love her.” The self-justification is outrageous and courageous, and it is precisely this defiance that the audience latches on to. For a migrant worker to embrace the violent threat uttered by Luis Pulido is also to put oneself at odds with the moral beliefs and traditional norms that establish heterosexuality (although it can certainly be argued that Pulido is voicing the unspoken or unconscious desire for violence that undergirds heteropatriarchy); more than that, the grito enunciates an existence that threatens the racial and ethnic fabric of the nation in which the migrants have built themselves new lives. This is not to say that the migrants wish to murder anyone, or that they are wholesale tossing aside the expectations of heterosexuality; however, they are suggesting agency and autonomy, and the song reinforces the desire for self-making. Following Josh Kun, we might see how the song and the shout offer differential modes of announcing one’s nationality and identification, of “voicings of patriotisms not grounded in any one specific, bounded geopolitical territory but instead dispersed across unpredictable cartographies…. [T]hese emergent models of citizenship get performed across and within national boundaries, rather than obeying the rules and demands of strictly mapped national formations” (10).

In With His Pistol in His Hand, Américo Paredes tells the long story of “El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez,” and how the song brought into being a desire for dignity and empowerment within a Mexican American community long threatened and oppressed by the Texas Rangers. About Cortez, Paredes wrote “And so it was that Gregorio Cortez was not found guilty of any wrong because of the sheriffs he had killed. And he killed many of them, there is no room for

40 “The woman that suits me best, I want her, because I love her. / And if anyone crosses me, I’ll send them to Saint Peter.”
doubt. No man has killed more sheriffs than did Gregorio Cortez, and he always fought alone. For that is the way the real men fight, always on their own” (51). In this idealized recitation of Cortez’s mythical status, Paredes gives voice to what exactly enacted the powerful imaginative force of a legend, and why the hero of the corrido is someone with whom one might identify. Although Cortez’s story—a violent standoff with Texas lawmen because a Texas Ranger had murdered his brother—is quite different in both its consequences and its message than “Luis Pulido,” one can see how this baseline of defiance activates the corrido and its imaginary. Says Paredes, “It was as if the Border people had dreamed Gregorio Cortez before producing him, and had sung his life and his deeds before he was born” (125). In other words, the power of myth is that it is often self-fulfilling. For Mexican Americans, the myth of the violent hero is a means of fighting oppression, and initially it might seem no different whether that hero is named Gregorio Cortez or Luis Pulido. Yet, in the context of “Luis Pulido” and its performance, as well as the audience’s performative engagement with the song, we can see that a difference does arise, and it is found in the audience’s active and audacious enactment of the revolutionary shout.

Given that I have been arguing that the grito occurs in the break, I want to call Fred Moten into the conversation, when he argues that he “want[s] to show the novel, the new, the improvisational, at work in ensemble—which is to say in music, in utopian desire, in institutions strange and peculiar, and in their echoes and aftermaths, deconstructions and reconstructions—through both the despair of tragedy and the joy of (elegiac) resurrection” (Moten, 98). The grito, as an identification with a man who has decided to ruin a wedding and threaten the guests before he gets killed, shows how the audience takes up “Luis Pulido” and deconstructs its relatively straightforward narrative. In a sense, the song ends in tragedy, especially if the audience allies itself to a murdered man—yet, that grito, played over and over again as I listen to the song and
write these words, suggests “the joy of (elegiac) resurrection,” especially as it offers the audience’s version of “utopian desire.” Josh Kun, in theorizing audiotopias, says, “We should be thinking of pieces of music—be they songs, samples, lyrics, chords, harmonies, rhythms—as ‘audiotopias,’ small, momentary, lived utopias built, imagined, and sustained through sounds, noise, and music. This, of course, requires another adjustment, to think of music in terms of space and in terms of its spaces—the spaces that the music itself contains, the spaces that music fills up, the spaces that music helps us to imagine as listeners occupying our own real and imaginary spaces” (21). Ultimately, then, “Luis Pulido” is just a song—even while it is infinitely more than “just a song”—and the audience’s identification is not simply a measure of its alliance with a murdered man, but an autonomous and inspired act of music-making along with Lydia Mendoza. The utopian, then, is performed and brought into being in the impossible, ephemeral moment of Luis Pulido’s existence, as a shout, within the audience.

In the 1986 recording, another powerful moment of audience engagement occurs with “Celosa.” Mendoza begins by testing out chords, making the audience laugh, and then tuning her guitar before launching into the opening notes of the song. The moment she sings “No se por qué dices que has visto en mis ojos / Estaba llorando por celos por tí,” the audience sighs quite audibly and claps. This is a sigh of recognition—not only the song, but also, perhaps, of the song’s message. She continues, “Por mas que me veas a veces llorosa, / No creas que siento el amor que perdí.” As it turns out, she has seen her former lover walking with another woman, (“pasastes con otra por verme sufrir”) but says instead of crying, “me voltee la cara y me puse a

---

41 “I don’t know why you say you’ve seen me / Crying out of jealousy for you”
42 “Even more, that you’ve seen me weepy / But don’t believe that I feel the love I lost”
43 “You passed by, with another woman, to see me suffer”
While she has cried, she longer does—and her former lover has no power over her. This is an empowering song, indicative of Mendoza’s habit of writing songs that are, as Broyles-Gonzalez indicates, “important feminist blueprints that deeply engaged (and continue to engage) our thinking about gender and sexual relations” (189).

In the next verse, she describes the depth of the jealousy and pain she once felt. The visceral lyrics, coupled with the major key waltz rhythm, produces an intense sentimentality, a nostalgia with which many of us can commiserate. The visceral way that Mendoza engages and calls forth the senses gives the song much of its power. Her lyrics mention warm mouths, the lingering feelings of touch, and her delivery alters in its dynamics—from quite soft to almost shouting—in order to mimic the highs and lows of feeling one experiences in and out of love.

She sings, “I can’t deny that I once felt jealous for you,” especially right after he left her without giving her even a kiss goodbye. I have left out the first four bars/two lines of the verse:

\[ \text{Después que fue mío el calor de tu boca,} \\
\text{Y yo que en tus labios, mil besos te di.} \\
\text{Jamás he sentido lo que era un cariño} \\
\text{Jamás he sabido lo que era sufrir.} \\
\text{Por qué te has marchado sin darme ni un beso} \\
\text{Por pena Dios mío me siento morir.} \]

In particular, I would like to focus on the final line quoted above, which she sings right before launching into the song’s chorus, before she reiterates that she no longer feels her previous jealousy. The “por pena Dios mío me siento morir” is a masterwork in the use of dynamic and

---

44 “I turned my face and began to laugh.”
45 “Once the warmth of your mouth had been mine
And on your lips, I placed a thousand kisses
Never [until you] had I felt a caress
Never [until you] had I known suffering.
Because you left me without even a kiss,
The pain, my God, I feel myself dying.”
delivery to move the audience’s imagination. She barely breathes out “por pena,” making everyone lean in to really hear—she draws it out, so that you can still hear it. Then she almost speaks, rather than sings, “Dios mio,” giving its delivery a powerful emphasis, relating to the listener just how much the “pena” has floored her. This is a moment, like the grito in “Luis Pulido,” that breaks open a whole new hermeneutic possibility. It is one of Mendoza’s many performance details; as Vazquez writes, “Details might be interruptions that catch your ear, musical tics that stubborn refuse to go away…. [S]aludos, refusals, arrangements, sounds, grunts, gestures, bends in voice. There is no way to know the intention, to get under or to demystify these choices, but they can be engaged as creative work” (19). Mendoza’s creative work in “Celosa” does not inspire as sharp or intentional an engagement as it did in “Luis Pulido,” yet it creates a wholly different and important space through which her listeners can organize and orient themselves.

From the absolute nadir of feeling like dying because of the emotional pain of loss and jealousy, the song then moves into the chorus. The sorrowful line leads directly to the chorus, and with the beginning of a new musical phrase in the chorus, the song’s narrative of self-sufficiency, growth, and experience emerges directly from the pena experienced by the song’s narrator. Thus the song can again announce, “Si lloro no creas que es por tu cariño que yo he perdido / No vale la pena derramar mas lagrimas por un amor / Yo ya llore bastante al imaginarme que me olvidarias / Antes yo lloraba pero ya no lloro por tu corazon.” In this way, the harrowing “por pena, Dios mio, me siento morir” is transcendentally woven into the overall tenor of the song, giving strength to the final affirmation of the self through opposition.

---

46 “If I cry don’t think that it’s for your lost caress / It’s not worth the pain to shed more tears for such a love / I already cried enough imagining that you’d forget me / I once cried, but no longer do, for your heart.”
emotional power of the song comes from precisely how low the singer has felt—if she cannot admit the pain and suffering of jealousy, then perhaps the listener would not entirely believe her. But with the pain and the joy, with the moving back and forth between the two, the listener can travel across the borders between grief and pleasure, perhaps singing back to Mendoza, using a song like Mercedes Sosa’s “Gracias a la Vida”: “Gracias a la vida, que me ha dado tanto / Que me ha dado la risa y me ha dado el llanto.”

As a continuation with the audience’s sigh when she began “Celosa,” “por pena Dios mío me siento morir” is an incredible line that builds a space of shared experience. Although the song as an object delineates a universal mood or humanity, Mendoza’s performance of it in Santa Barbara, to a crowd of largely Spanish-speaking, working-class men and women, gives it a specific heft. “Celosa” was one of the most popular songs performed by Mendoza; however, its most famous interpretation was by one of her friends and fellow Texans, Eva Garza, who made the song an enormous hit in Mexico. Garza’s version of the song, which helped establish Columbia Records in Mexico, is nostalgic and knowing, much like Mendoza’s. She is accompanied by a mariachi band—trumpets, violins, guitars, and bajo sexto (akin to an acoustic bass guitar)—which gives the her version the feel of a torch song, as well as situating it as part of the long ranchera and mariachi tradition that established Mexico’s international sound through singers like Matilde Sánchez, Amalia Mendoza, Lucha Villa, Lola Beltrán, Pedro Infante, and Jorge Negrete, and continued through later popular singers like Vicente Fernandez, Alejandro

47 Thank you to life … / That has given me laughter and has also given me weeping”
48 Deb Vargas discusses Garza at length in Dissonant Divas. Garza’s story is interesting: she was born in the U.S., married a Mexican national and moved to Mexico, and her career truly took off once she settled in la patria. “Celosa” was a huge hit for Garza, selling millions of copies. For a short, quite informative piece on Garza, see <http://www.mysanantonio.com/entertainment/article/The-return-of-Eva-Garza-4290979.php#photo-4214806>.
Fernandez, and the late Jenni Rivera. Mendoza’s version is not better, but it is different, and it is
different in a way that creates a completely new affective resonance with the audience. As
Broyles-Gonzalez points out about Mendoza’s playing style, she tuned her 12-string guitar in a
completely unique manner, giving her the ability to play the bajo sexto’s lines as well as the
regular guitar’s chords and melodies. In a sense, she forms a band in and of herself, and this
gives her playing a different stage presence than a mere acoustic guitar set. Yet even more than
an attempt at an acoustic wall of sound, her playing style represented a sort of singularity,
perhaps an isolation, that the crowd took up and embraced. One need only hear the crowd
sighing, improvisationally taking up the lyrics she sings, shouting, and interacting in myriad
ways, to understand how deep was their connection to Lydia Mendoza.

I can imagine a recording of her concert in Phoenix, with the tables out of the way, with
men and women shouting for their favorite corridos while they sit and watch the other dancers,
or while they eke out a few more dance steps in the lull, while they hold each other and laugh
and shout suggestions; and Mendoza says “Como no, con mucho gusto” as she begins playing
“Cancion Mixteca,” or perhaps “Dos Palomas al Volar,” or maybe even “Mexico Lindo.” If it’s
“Cancion Mixteca,” my grandfather hikes up my grandmother’s hand, placing it on his shoulder
and taking the lead while Mendoza plays the slow, beautiful, teary waltz. If it’s “Dos Palomas al
Volar,” I imagine them skipping and twirling through the two-step, laughing and sweating as
they keep up with the other dancers. I like to imagine, though, that she plays “México Lindo,”
and every time she gets to the chorus, I envision my grandparents dancing, along with everyone
else, making eye contact with those around them, and belting out “México lindo y querido, / Si
muero lejos de ti, / Que digan que estoy dormido, / Y que me traigan aquí.”49 That beautiful, contradictory, impossible sentiment: “bring me back here.” Even while their “here” is in Phoenix, while their bodies move in unison in a banquet hall to the music of Lydia Mendoza, they can imagine themselves wherever and however they’d like to be.

IV. Conclusion

What Rivera’s and Mendoza’s art does above all, in particular in the works I have examined in this chapter, is bring into being spaces for protest and feeling that might not be legible to or accessible from prevailing national and nationalist discourses. Thus resisting the allegorical impulse when encountering Tierra becomes more than merely a reading position or an interpretive claim; it becomes as much an act of creating new spaces for existence and articulation that are based on autonomy rather than restriction as it is about resisting the impulse towards asserting a new hegemonic nationalism. Indeed, there is so much happening within Rivera’s text and Mendoza’s songs that to attempt to reify or pin down their texts within a stable, discursive field removes the imagination, empathy, and creativity of both the artists, as well as their audiences and their subjects. Alexandra Vazquez, describing the enormity of archives and the particular methodological challenges inherent to approaching moving (in every sense of the word) texts, uses the term “all this” to gesture to the often overwhelming complexity of the world we live in, and the equally complicated and daring art that attempts to describe it: “By ‘all this,’ I mean these indescribable but present symptoms of being messed up, the inherited distortions of past and present…. From the outset, I refuse to transform the difficulty of ‘all this’

49 Mexico beautiful and beloved, / If I die distant from you, / Tell them that I’m only sleeping, / And then they’ll bring me back here.” For Negrete’s inimitable version, see <http://youtu.be/1jd_kdq2jJ>. 
to a smooth political utility, to a singular and pragmatic program to correct a situation that demands flexibility and multiple forms and forums” (Vazquez, 208). Acknowledging issues of both critical position(ality) and the status of textuality, Vazquez illuminates the need to bring flexibility to the task of interpretation and engagement. Intersectional praxis, perhaps, also describes the supple critical framework that shapes and reshapes itself in order to make space for the “indescribable,” the “inherited distortions of past and present,” the “difficulty” of “all this” that must be included in a radical democracy. Ultimately, Rivera and Mendoza show that there are new—or, if not new, then largely unacknowledged—modes of communal politics that are not about elaborating specifically or consciously Gramscian counter-hegemonies or decisively revolutionary vanguards; instead, their texts are subtler—each author seeks to address counterpublics in such a way that any sort of politics begins from within, according to a community’s own desires and needs.

These small yet wondrous democracies move and evade discursive capture, even as they search out means for empowerment and material betterment. In the case of Rivera, this means asserting the fundamental dignity of the men, women, and children who work in America’s homes and fields. For Mendoza, it means creating a sonic architecture to undergird the spaces migrants create for themselves, in which they move in impromptu and beautiful choreographies to shape their desires and dreams.
Conclusion: Alice Walker, Odetta, and Acts of Radical Presence

My extended conclusion begins with a discussion of Alice Walker’s novel *Meridian*, a text that committedly explores modes and methods of relationality, largely by radically revising the meanings and forms of community. *Meridian* recovers, narrativizes, and embodies (historical) particularities of black experience in the United States. This novel asks what community means and interrogates the ways that people come together, and specifically questions received history and expected knowledge. In *Meridian*, Walker explores the activism of the 1960s and ‘70s, seeking to make sense of interracial activism, alliance, and relationships during the high point of radical activism in post-WWII America. Walker questions the hopes and expectations, as well as the disappointments and futilities, of activism at the time. Why did no revolution come about? What did the passage of Civil Rights legislation accomplish immediately after it was passed? *Meridian* brings radical activism back to the South—where SNCC and other Civil Rights groups had their origins. In locating activism away from metropolitan centers like the Bay Area, Chicago, and New York, Walker seeks to recognize and reaffirm the importance of the South in black American experience.

In the final section of this conclusion, I will discuss the folk musician Odetta. I am specifically interested in the process of rewriting, renewing, and remembering reflected in and through Odetta’s wide-ranging oeuvre. Most interesting to me is the “soundscape” of her music, and of the affective encounters found in the political and aesthetic implications of her revisions and re-imaginings of folk standards. Although she sometimes sings a cappella, most often when performing a sorrow song such as “Another Man Done Gone,” Odetta generally accompanies herself with her guitar. She also recorded quite often with two musicians, guitarist Bruce
Langhorne and bassist Victor Sproles, two important session musicians.¹ Her incredible versatility and technical ability on the guitar allows her to rewrite songs by previous masters of the folk genre, such as Leadbelly and Woody Guthrie. Her particular performance style provides a densely rhythmic and melodic guitar “background” for her powerful voice, allowing a wide range of musical styles and genres to be present in her oeuvre.

Often, Odetta evokes the rhythm of trains, integral sites of migratory experience of laborers, African Americans in particular. The train rhythms undergird her music with a chordal, propulsive counterpoint which she laces through with melodic notes, bringing these notes “out” while moving across her guitar’s fretboard. This harmonic-melodic play creates a three-level dialogue between accompaniment and voice sometimes heard in Leadbelly and Guthrie, but most commonly found in the playing styles of blues guitarists such as Robert Johnson. These two examples—“train” rhythms and counterpoint—are but a sampling of what I hope to conduct in this chapter.

Like Guthrie’s “rambling man” or “great historical bum,” Odetta strives to speak of and speak to American workers. This chapter will argue that Odetta’s style is indebted to a folk tradition of depicting migrant workers and migrant experiences, sounding out an optimism bound up in a revolution of political, as well as labor, praxis. I follow the lead established by Matthew Frye Jacobson in his work on Odetta. By properly politicizing and contextualizing Odetta’s experimental folk music, I believe we can see how truly radical were here interventions, how inestimably significant was her influence on rethinking and reshaping democratic praxis. Odetta,

¹ Firmly ensconced in the Greenwich Village folk music scene, Langhorne performed with other artists such as Joan Baez, Richie Havens, Buffy Sainte-Marie, and Peter, Paul, and Mary; he is also, importantly, the inspiration behind Bob Dylan’s “Mr. Tambourine Man.” Victor Sproles generally performed alongside major jazz musicians, in particular Stan Getz, Chet Baker, Sun Ra, and Art Blakey, among others.
like Marx, Benjamin, Luxemburg, and C.L.R James, saw that the past was an unforgettable, crucial feature of the future, not only the present—and this activated and undergirded the political philosophy of her music making.

*Meridian* and Odetta’s musical stylings provide fruitful nodes of critical contact, particularly in the way both artists disrupt the present, as well as traditional narrative forms, to tell the stories of the most marginalized persons. Both utilize traditional forms to open up fissures in the expected or received narrative, transforming the present and the past in order to remake the possibilities held by the future. Odetta and Walker *go back* in order to *bring forth*. By this I mean that they imagine and rephrase the narratives of history, whether musical or literary. By repeating, reordering, or rewriting what is traditionally or commonly “known” historically, Walker and Odetta express the multiplicity of historical (and, by default, contemporary) American experiences. In their reformulation of classic(al) forms and American scenes, both artists voice the varieties of diasporic experience.

By concluding here, I seek to tie together preceding conversations about space, race, sound, and flow through the works of Odetta and Walker. Thanks to Farah Griffin’s suggestions, I will be bringing the dissertation full circle by connecting Walker to one of her former teachers, Muriel Rukeyser. While at Sarah Lawrence, Walker studied poetry with Rukeyser. Indeed, Rukeyser’s theory of the “unborn poets”—those who will come and remake the world—is perhaps most fully expressed in her poem, previously unpublished and now present in her *Collected Poems*, “To an unborn poet,” which was inspired by and dedicated to Walker.

I do not mean to suggest that Odetta and Walker are the *telos* or endpoint of a historical narrative, and I do not mean to establish them as the logical endpoints or exemplars of my arguments. Situating them at the end of *Migrant Modalities* is a subjective, aesthetic judgment. It
also reveals an intention of mine: to revel in the difficult, circuitous, anachronistic possibilities contained within history and its interpretation. Odetta and Walker are by no means “the end of history,” but they are the at the end of this particular history of literature, largely because I believe their works take everything explored in this dissertation as foundational wisdom, thus embarking on radical aesthetic journeys that push the limits of appreciation and understanding—and it is this “living on the limit,” the borderlands, that I would like to investigate to conclude.

By placing Walker at the end of the dissertation, I am asserting the circular nature of human flow, as well as the importance of “home” and “origin” in the narratives of migrants. When reading Walker, it is quite important to consider this connectedness, as well as her attention to the spatial and temporal dimensions of home and its attendant experiences and affects. Because Walker is so invested in exploring home, both as a region and as a habitation, especially in the context of migration, I find her work to be an incredibly important resource for exploring and comparing the concepts migrancy and movement.

In this chapter, I will seek to do justice to the ways that Odetta and Walker accomplish the making present and making heard of bodies and experiences in historical narratives. Throughout their work, these two artists make known the spaces in which history takes place, as well as the lives upon which history is written. History has a feel and a sound—it has a quality beyond the written word, and Odetta and Walker explore the fullness of history, its experiences, and, paradoxically, its possibilities.

II. Alice Walker’s Meridian and the Moving Politics of Radical Democracy

Beyond her name, Meridian Hill, the titular character of Alice Walker’s Meridian, inhabits the middle. She negotiates a complicated affective world, a complicated political world,
and a complicated text, which is purposely crafted, according to Walker herself, as a “quilt” or a “collage”: “I wanted to do something like a crazy quilt, or like Cane…something that works on the mind in different patterns” (Tate, 176). The connection Walker draws to Cane is interesting—for my own project, especially so, since Walker’s powerful connection to Rukeyser and Hurston is also quite evident—particularly because of the multivocal tenor it gives to the text—and, indeed, the text contains the internal voices and thoughts of characters besides Meridian: we get the voice of Meridian’s mother, Mrs. Hill, Truman Held, and Truman’s wife, Lynne Rabinowitz. In addition, we get the stories of Louvinie, a slave who had her tongue cut out and buried it under a tree which then grew miraculously; the stories of Meridian’s grandmother and great grandmother; and Meridian’s father’s thoughts, philosophy, and parts of his story. Not only this, we get stories and voices within Meridian’s own, and Meridian’s story, told through an atypical chronology that works through anecdote and flashback. Karla Holloway, describing textual strategies in Moorings and Metaphors, describes texts such as Meridian as recursive, arguing, “The focus of a recursive text is to layer ways of memory and discourse and the mythic figures within language and culture until each is folded into the other. Recursion is a generative activity that depends on a succession of events. Multiplied texts have figurative dimensions that continually reflect other, deeper dimensions. Their language and their imaginative visions suggest a certain depth of memory that black women’s textual strategies are designed to acknowledge” (14). The variety of stories, and the shapes taken by these stories, reveals an open, shifting text, a text that Janelle Collins argues “is resistant to essentialized readings because Walker refuses to privilege one discourse over the other. Furthermore, the gaps that exist within the competing discourses manifest themselves in Meridian” (161-2).²

² “Collins also argues that “The formal fragmentation of the text underscores fragmentation in
Meridian mediates stories, sorts through them, and feels them. To a large extent, Meridian’s being and becoming throughout the novel is a process of affective engagement and learning through listening to others. Joseph A. Brown argues that because of this, “Meridian becomes her name…and, unknowingly, is invested with the powers of the crossroad” (313). The mystical elements of the crossroad, which Brown delves into more deeply in his article, suggest that Meridian, like Papa Eleggua/Legba or Coyote, contains contradictions and abides in them; less akin to Whitman’s unifying spokesperson who contains multitudes, however, Meridian is more like Coatlicue, the metaphorical example Gloria Anzaldúa uses for describing her philosophy of difference. Multiple scholars argue that Walker is a paradigmatic figure of “quiet” or “listening”—in the critical literature, these adjectives describe an attitude of receptive abiding à la Anzaldúa, and less actual silence. This abiding within the contradiction, within the multiplicity of discourse and history that constitutes her life and experience, enables Meridian to continually re/learn, to refuse convenient answers.

As analytical descriptions of Meridian as “quiet” are quite abundant, so are readings of the primary physical metaphor that Walker uses to depict her: an overwhelming paralysis that constructs of subjectivity. The competing discourses within the text also suggest that personal subjectivity is not constructed in opposition to political subjectivity; rather, both are constructed through resistance to dominant and subdominant discourses. While Alice Walker’s later novels generally overshadow her second in the critical conversation of African American literary study, it is Meridian that functions to identify, unravel, and subvert the discourses which construct and constrict black female subjectivity” (188). This point, on fragmentation, is akin to Joel Peckham’s regarding Cane in chapter 1 and John C. Akers’ regarding …y no se lo tragó la tierra in chapter 4, in addition to constituting a large amount of critical literature analyzing U.S. Third World, Postcolonial, and African American literature.

4 See pages 25 (fn. 13), 45 (fn. 9), 49, and 68-69, above.
overtakes Meridian whenever she exerts herself politically. Regarding this paralysis, in which Meridian experiences visions of wholeness, we read:

It was as if the walls of earth that enclosed her rushed outward, leveling themselves at a dizzying rate, and then spinning wildly, lifting her out of her body and giving her the feeling of flying. And in this movement she saw the faces of her family, the branches of trees, the wings of birds, the corners of houses, blades of grass and petals of flowers rush towards a central point high above her and she was drawn with them, as whirling, as bright, as free as they. Then the outward flow, the rush of images, returned to the center of the pit where she stood, and what had left her at its going was returned. When she came back to her body—and she felt sure she had left it—her eyes were stretched wide open, and they were dry, because she found herself staring directly into the sun. (58)

The paralysis, paradoxically, leads to “movement,” action through which she sees “the faces of her family, the branches of trees, the wings of birds, the corners of houses, blades of grass and petals of flowers,” all of which are active, since they “rush towards a central point high above her.” This non-anthropocentric vision of the self within nature counterintuitively grants her a more central purview: by refusing to divorce herself from all other life, she accesses a privileged, more “truthful” reality. In this way, Meridian’s mystical movement provides a new way of engaging self and other, of realizing and conceiving of the politics she enacts in her everyday life. This is something she struggles, in many ways, to voice to others.

Indeed, this “in the midst”-ness Meridian experiences is part of the “architecture of self” that the novel works through. The spatialization of her vision is quite striking—she is “drawn with” “branches,” “wings,” “corners,” “blades,” and “petals”—all fragments that are at the edges of (and the horizons that announce and define) the larger wholes they constitute. Notably, this passage eschews a preposition we might expect: “in” (I even had to check my transcription of the passage when writing the longer chapter.) Meridian is not drawn in with the many objects surrounding her. Instead, the ambiguity of the language suggests both a movement inwards towards the center described in the passage, and also that Meridian is drawn—sketched—with these objects from the world. She is made up of them, in other words. This image of self-as-
other, of this composition making Meridian “as free as they,” is of a kind with other descriptions of the self that the novel lays out, and is a process that Meridian herself willfully engages in throughout the text.

Yet not all of Meridian’s realizations come to her through mystical visions. In another lengthy passage, after she goes to church and realizes, overwhelmingly, that she needs to see and hear cultural practices differently, she comes to realize that she has finally arrived an answer for the most pressing political and theoretical question presented in the novel: whether or not she would kill for the revolution. She realizes that she would kill—not for the revolution itself, though, but to prevent the killing of anyone else. Re-imagining the church congregation’s words and inspired reactions to the preaching and singing, Meridian vocalizes—or, at least, hears more “truly,” their voices:

“Understand this,” they were saying, “the church” (and Meridian knew they did not mean simply the “church” as in Baptist, Methodist or whatnot, but rather communal spirit, togetherness, righteous convergence), “the music, the form of worship that has always sustained us, the kind of ritual you share with us, these are the ways to transformation that we know. We want to take this with us as far as we can.”

In comprehending this, there was in Meridian’s chest a breaking as if a tight string binding her lungs had given way, allowing her to breathe freely. For she understood, finally, that the respect she owed her life was to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it, and not to give up any particle of it without a fight to the death, preferably not her own. And that this existence extended beyond herself to those around her because, in fact, the years in America had created them One Life. She had stopped, considering this, in the middle of the road. Under a large tree beside the road, crowded now with the cars returning from church, she made a promise to the red-eyed man herself that yes, indeed she would kill, before she allowed anyone to murder his son again. (200, first emphasis mine)

Meridian realizes, “in the middle of the road”—reminiscent of Guthrie’s “historical bum” in “This Land is Your Land,” the trickster gods of the crossroads, and Anzaldúa’s Coatlicue—that she can now “breathe freely,” because she understands that “the respect she owed her life was to continue.” This is, in many ways, a fictionalized moment of rejecting the Hegelian dialectic
altogether—or, at least, in the reading that Kojève and Lacan give of the dialectic, she takes up the slave’s/bondsman’s position, which is the realization that s/he will in fact fight to the death to defeat the master and become free—thus hewing to another philosophical model of power and recognition altogether. This model is otherwise from what Hortense Spillers calls the “*dominant symbolic activity*, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, [which] remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation” (208, emphasis mine). John F. Callahan argues that in this scene, Meridian “is now a participant and, therefore, her voice is faithful to the inner rhythms of their story. Here culture, especially music, humanizes politics—those small actions that intensify and change the lives of the people and their children” (177). This realization indicates what Thadious Davis, giving a general overview of Walker’s work up to 1989, says is a major aspect of her work: “Reparation or redemption may be undertaken by a single individual in whom Walker vests the responsibility for survival, because it is the action of a single individual that has caused the breakdown of experience or identity in private lives, and ultimately in the public or social life of the group” (28). Meridian realizes that she owes respect to her own life, “to live it, and not to give up any particle of it without a fight to the death.” This is a powerful position to take, and bespeaks Meridian’s forceful dedication to staking an uncompromising defense of life. Simone Weil, in her powerful essay “The *Iliad*, or the Poem of Force,” lays out an equally uncompromising equation of anti-tyrannical force with justice-oriented political praxis: “Only [s]he who has measured the dominion of force, and knows how *not* to respect it, is capable of love and justice” (192, emphasis mine). What Weil and Meridian share is an absolute commitment to “love and justice” by opposing “the dominion of force” and taking upon themselves the awe-inspiring responsibility of defending other humans; as Truman Held puts it at *Meridian*’s end, she
willingly takes on the “terror” of “bearing the conflict in her own soul which she had imposed on herself” (220).

The process of abiding in the middle, of receptively taking in responsibilities and stories, defines Meridian Hill. Yet rather than becoming a passive repository for others and their voices, Meridian synthesizes and enacts these voices and stories. Thadious Davis argues that for Walker more broadly, “one way of structuring the ‘common thread’ is by means of generations; she values the strength and purpose black generations have given her writing, but she refuses to reduce their meanings to platitudes or to ignore the complexities of their lives” (29). Dianne F. Sadoff suggests, like Davis, regarding Walker more broadly, that she “designates her precursor an author of black legend and black female liberation, a woman who facilitates what Adrienne Rich calls ‘re-vision’ and who enables female possibility; her dedication—that is, her inscription and devotion—to Hurston acknowledges that, without predecessors, a writer cannot write, since texts enable other texts” (117). Yet the same holds true for Meridian, whose creative living and loving are energized and enabled by the knowledge that others have existed before her, exist alongside her, and will continue to exist as long as people are “One Life,” as she put it above. Susan Willis argues that “It is not surprising that language is crucial to Meridian’s process of becoming. From slavery to the present, black women have spoken out against their oppression, and when possible, written their version of history” (85). Indeed, as Callahan notes, “Unlike the others, [Meridian] cannot answer simply as an individual and a contemporary because for her social and political change is bound up with love and with the witnessing, participatory form that belongs to a true community” (156); he also argues, “To heal her soul and restore the spirit of words, Meridian listens and responds to the voices of the dead, particularly those black and Native American ancestors who haunt Walker’s Georgia as they did Jean
Toomer’s” (154). What all of this critical literature indicates is Meridian’s absolute commitment to participating in communion with others, to devotedly and responsibly re-fashioning narratives into use rather than exchange, particularly as they can be used by others for their own empowerment. Indeed, Meridian, thinking to herself, decides, “I will come forward and sing from memory songs they will need once more to hear. For it is the song of the people, transformed by the experiences of each generation, that holds them together, and if any part of it is lost the people suffer and are without soul. If I can only do that, my role will not have been a useless one at all” (201). For Meridian, the stakes of remembering and of “revision” as a process of bringing into the present, of gesturing towards the possible future, become fundamental elements of her intersectional praxis.

Because this praxis is abiding and receptive, she realizes that she can maintain her role as an activist because she works to enact the autonomous and self-determined political desires of the people she interacts with. Callahan argues that “To Meridian voice is a blessing and a call-and-response, an act performed in kinship with what is sacred to self, others, and the world. While those around her demand correct responses, she struggles to know the right response to dilemmas of personal and political experience” (154-5). Meridian refuses orthodoxy, since it cannot flexibly respond to actual lives—what orthodoxy maintains in theory it struggles to adequately enact in practice. Anthony Reed, describing what he calls “Freedom Time” in African American poetry, argues that the novel methods and approaches to textual- and self-understanding that flourish in black experimental writing push against teleological understandings of the self within collective identity. He says, “My hesitation is with the ways “all” and “always” threaten to still art-making and the practices of its reception—reading, viewing, or listening—into ontologies, the unfolding of a pre-existing unity, rather than the
practices through which a collectivity understands itself as a collectivity, or understands what collectivity can be” (web). Meridian herself sees language as a revolutionary gift that must be used for the empowerment of everyone around her, that must be used rather than stilled or ossified. Most importantly, language must regain its use value and thus become a transformative tool for encountering the world, rather than functioning as a commodified object governed through exchange value. Recalling Freire’s definition of praxis as the speaking of the “true word” that seeks to transform the world, Meridian sees language as a revolutionary gift that must be used for the empowerment of everyone around her.

As part of this, Meridian has constructed a “wall of language” in her room. Truman Held, walking into her home and the room she sleeps in, is shocked to find the way Meridian has architecturally rendered the room:

The door to Meridian’s house was not locked, so Truman went in and walked around. In the room that contained her sleeping bag he paused to read her wallpaper—letters she had stuck up side by side, neatly, at eye level. The first contained Bible verses and was written by Meridian’s mother, the gist of which was that Meridian had failed to honor not just her parents, but anyone. The others were signed ‘Anne-Marion’ (whom Truman knew had been Meridian’s friend and roommate in college) and were a litany of accusations, written with much viciousness and condescension. They all began: ‘Of course you are misguided…’ and ‘You have never, being weak and insensitive to History, had any sense of priorities…,’ etc. Why should Meridian have bothered to keep them? On some she had gamely scribbled: ‘Yes, yes. No. Some of the above. No, no. Yes. All of the above.’

Above and below this strip of letters the walls were of decaying sheetrock, with uneven patches of dried glue as if the original wallpaper had been hastily removed. The sun through a tattered gray window shade cast the room in dim gray light, and as he glanced at the letters—walking slowly clockwise around the room—he had the feeling he was in a cell. (23)

Truman sees a cell—likely imagining the room as a prison cell. Yet Meridian’s receptive abiding indicate that this is perhaps the wrong kind of cell: it is, instead, an anchorite’s or anchoress’s
cell, a voluntarily inhabited space of absolute, isolated contemplation. Meridian’s recreation of the space is fascinating: she has surrounded herself with her own words as well as the words of those who see her as an absolute failure. Susan Barker notes that “[Meridian] finds a way to see them in a new critical context which no longer obscures her vision” (Barker, 15). Indeed, though she responds humorously yet earnestly to some of this (“she had gamely scribbled”), she seems to keep these as prompts, as reminders that her mother and Anne-Marion, regardless of their animosity, are voices and lives that are enmeshed with and thus constitute her own. Naming what she calls “the new mestiza consciousness,” Gloria Anzaldúa describes her as having “a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else” (101). Though much scholarship on Meridian focuses on Meridian’s relationship to her mother, this body of work largely sees the relationship as an antagonism that must be transcended through love and forgiveness in a scene where Meridian asks a dream-vision of her mother to forgive her and another woman, taking care of her while she’s sick, utters the words “I forgive you.” This idea of love, taken on its face, does indeed suggest that a psychoanalytic process of reparation has taken place. Jennifer C. Nash, pushing against uncritical uses of “love” as catch-all political arguments, suggests a specific definition of love that emerges from black feminist scholarship and political praxis: “Love, then, is a practice

6 Julian of Norwich’s Shewings, first published in 1395 as Revelations of Divine Love, offer a paradigmatic example of the visionary literature produced by those who decided to live as anchorites/anochoresses. One can only imagine, though, that many of those who decided to live their lives bricked into a single room likely produced a much more terrifying strain of literature.

7 At one point, she and Truman discuss her former roommate Anne-Marion’s letters: “‘And why can’t Anne-Marion leave you alone?’ asked Truman, nodding at the letters on the wall. ‘Anyone who could write such hateful things is a real bitch.’ ‘To tell the truth,’ said Meridian, ‘I keep the letters because they contain the bitch’s handwriting.’ ‘You’re kidding?’ asked Truman. ‘No, I’m not,’ said Meridian” (32).
of self, a labor of the self, that forms the basis of political communities rooted in a radical ethic of care” (14). Indeed, Nash continues, “Black feminist love-politics also reshapes the public sphere by offering a distinctive conception of remedy. Rather than looking to the state for remedy—as intersectional projects often do in their sometimes ambivalent call for doctrinal remedy—black feminist love-politics asks how affective communities can themselves be a site of redress” (15). By couching this moment within Meridian’s imagination, Walker offers a reparative idea of love as “a labor of the self” that emerges from “a radical ethic of care.” The woman Meridian hallucinates as her mother is neither her mother nor her analyst; instead, this moment is an act of creation within Meridian herself, and the forgiveness she achieves alters the public sphere of that moment, alters the public sphere of her political commitments and relationships to many others, and works within Meridian as an act of self love and self care.

Indeed, returning to the scene above (describing Meridian’s architecture of words) gives a different, more suggestive possibility for interpreting Meridian’s relations to others: that although forgiveness has occurred (even if in a hallucination, Meridian feels forgiven), the past pain still remains—both as prompt and as lesson—and neither completely defines the relationship. Instead, “she turns the ambivalences into something else”: she literally re-fashions the room from the ambivalence, from the moments of difficulty that have taught her to love herself.\(^8\)

In this “cell,” Meridian has torn out the wallpaper, exposing “uneven patches of dried glue” adhering to “decaying sheetrock.” The metaphor is not subtle: Meridian has ripped off the flimsy surface covering the decay. This sheetrock is unstable and compromised, as is the entire

\(^8\) Indeed, Truman tells her, “‘Your ambivalence will always be deplored by people who consider themselves revolutionists, and your unorthodox behavior will cause traditionalists to gnash their teeth’” (219, emphasis mine).
house, most likely. In a poem Meridian writes near the end of the novel, which she hangs above the other papers on the wall, she lays out a vision of healing and creativity:

there is water in the world for us 
brought by our friends 
though the rock of mother and god 
vanishes into sand 
and we, cast out alone 
to heal 
and re-create 
ourselves. (213)

In this poem, “the rock of mother and god/ vanishes into sand.” This is a reimagining of the biblical parable of the house with solid foundations, which was built on rock. That house, often taken by the Roman Catholic Church as one of the examples of Peter/Petros/Rock as the patriarch, is here shown to be unstable, as vanishing. Cast out from “the rock of mother and god”—the archetypical figures of care and power—“we, cast out alone/ to heal/ and re-create/ ourselves,” must act and make. Importantly, Meridian’s poem suggests that we are cast out to heal, not that we are cast out and heal. Grappling with the self “alone,” the we must “re-create” outside of the old standards of power and mythical discourse.

Hanging this poem up in the room she has created, as part of the architectural surrounding of self, Meridian preserves her words as part of the many, other voices that constitute her: “These poems she did not burn. She placed them just above Anne-Marion’s letters, after which she did not look at the letters, the poems, or even the walls, again” (214).9

9 She has also added to the wall a photograph that Anne-Marion has taken and sent to her of the Sojourner tree. This tree figures importantly in the text (38-48), as it is a miraculous magnolia tree on Saxon College’s campus, the college Meridian attends. It achieved its miraculous status after Louvinie, a slave, has had her tongue cut out: “Choking on blood, she saw her tongue ground under the heel of Master Saxon. Mutely, she pleaded for it, because she knew the curse of her native land: Without one’s tongue in one’s mouth or in a special spot of one’s choosing, the singer in one’s soul was lost forever to grunt and snort through eternity like a pig” (44). The students at the college chop the tree down in an enraged protest against the death of a young,
Suggesting completion, or, at least, abiding, Meridian does “not look at the letters, the poems, or even the walls, again.” She leaves, and as she does, Truman remains in her room, surrounded by her architecture: “Truman turned, tears burning his face, and began, almost blindly, to read the poems she had left on the walls. He could not bring himself to read the letters yet. It was his house now, after all. His cell” (220). Linking back to page 23, Truman again imagines that the room is a cell, although now it’s his. He thinks, unnerved, of “the next guideless step” (Ibid.).

The novel’s final moment is one of terror, of awe, of imagining a future world through the self and community, as a paradise that must be made:

Truman felt the room begin to turn and fell to the floor. A moment later, dizzy, he climbed shakily into Meridian’s sleeping bag. Underneath his cheek he felt the hard edge of her cap’s visor, he pulled it out and put it on his head. He had a vision of Anne-Marion herself arriving, lost, someday, at the door, which would remain open, and wondered if Meridian knew that the sentence of bearing the conflict in her own soul which she had imposed on herself—and lived through—must now be borne in terror by all the rest of them. (220)

Fainting, Truman confronts the reality that Meridian has left him to find his way, to find his truth. Maintaining the metaphorical language of the prison (suggesting that Truman, perhaps, is overstating the terror of this moment), he realizes that they all must follow Meridian’s example of coming-into-consciousness. This ending, unlike the ending of The Book of the Dead or of Whose Names Are Unknown or ...y no se lo tragó la tierra, abides in a wounded consciousness, remains in “wonder[ment]” and “terror.” This is no satisfying or healing or unifying ending; it is, however, a revolutionizing ending, one that puts responsibility on the reader and on Truman.

10 I would, indeed, suggest to any critic, writer (or character, in this case), or person in general who wishes to use prison as a metaphor that he or she or they visit a prison. Prison is no metaphor: it is a horrible and gruesome reality for more than 2 million human beings in the United States, and many more across the world.
Willis argues, “At the novel’s conclusion, Walker gives us to understand that Meridian has mastered—not the whole struggle—but herself in that struggle. Rid of the sickness, her wooly head restored, she discards her cap and packs her bag to set out once again upon the road to confrontation. While one individual’s coming to grips with self can be a lesson for others, it cannot be their solution” (93). Thus though Meridian has restored herself, she “cannot be their solution,” but instead provides “a lesson.” The difficult, terrifying work of radical democracy often means confronting realities other than one’s own; it means remaining astonishingly, powerfully open to the overwhelming otherness of others, to constructing a solid, just, empowering world out of difference. Meridian, in the middle, has found her way. “All the rest” of us, in the middle, must find ours.

III. Odetta’s Sounds of Movement and Protest: Building Towards

When Odetta Holmes passed away in 2008, a wide variety of commemoration took place, from lengthy obituaries in leading newspapers such as the New York Times, to academic conferences, such as the major tribute to her life, work, and memory planned at Princeton University (which was in the works before her passing). Sonia Sanchez’s “21 Haiku,” published in the Harvard Review and performed at the Princeton symposium, form an intriguing entry into any consideration of Odetta. Rethinking the strict formal parameters of the haiku (though how strict these parameters are, especially in translation, is up for debate), Sanchez aims for the more impressionistic and philosophical mode that the haiku as a form enables, rather than adhering to the 5-7-5 syllable structure of the three line form. Making an elegy out of the ephemeral, Sanchez uses her twenty-one haiku to line out her grief at Odetta’s passing. I will be
interspersing Sanchez’s haikus throughout this section, working through the elegy and intimacy she conveys in her poetry to Odetta.

14.

your songs journeyed
in a country padlocked
with greed

In these lines, Sanchez gives voice to Odetta’s important contributions not only to folk music, but to the political project that her music opened up. It might seem as though these lines directly link Odetta’s music to Guthrie’s, particularly in the fact that these “songs journeyed/ in a country padlocked/ with greed,” and indeed, the importance of Guthrie to Odetta’s oeuvre is undeniable. Yet what I am most interested in, here, is the ways that Odetta takes up, particularizes, and aesthetically reimagines Guthrie’s music. Where Guthrie plays plucked chords, Odetta strums, creating a resonant, echoing effect and affect. Where Guthrie’s voice stands above his guitar, Odetta’s voice works within the soundscape her guitar creates in order to provide a more enmeshed aural quality to a song. These distinctions do not always hold: Guthrie’s performances with Lead Belly, the Almanac Singers, and Cisco Houston put the lie to the suggestion that his voice always stands apart from the other instruments, and Odetta’s a cappella performances create a completely different soundscape than her guitar-accompanied songs. Yet, the distinction is instructive insofar as it points to the crucial work Odetta does when re-hearing, re-sounding, and revising the work of artists such as Guthrie.

In this section, I will be performing a close reading of three Odetta songs, “Pastures of Plenty,” “900 Miles,” and “Why Oh Why.” All three are covers of folk songs: “Pastures of Plenty” and “Why Oh Why” are Woody Guthrie songs, and “900 Miles” is a song recorded by multiple folk, blues, and popular singers such as Terry Callier, Bob Dylan, Billy Merman, and Ramblin’ Jack Elliot (a more popular version of the song is called “500 Miles” and is
copyrighted—a troubling yet insightful difference indicating one the ways that folk music can be altered and then profited from). Rather than focusing on her versions of Lead Belly work songs and prison songs or songs from the Sorrow Song tradition, I want to focus on these three songs because of the ways Odetta signals and sounds out the black migrant experience through her specific renditions. Through these revisions, she simultaneously renders the songs more capacious and highlights the specific exclusions faced by black migrants, both in the white folk revival tradition and in the segregationist labor, housing, and travel practices enforced upon black workers. Confronting listeners with the raw realities of segregation and racism, these songs suggest that the margins can be places from which to speak—we have to listen, though.

5. you opened
   up your throat
   to travellers

Sanchez, in these three lines, indicates that Odetta’s music, though creative in its re-imagining of the folk tradition as it took shape in the 1950s and 1960s—that is, the largely, or at least visibly, white scene of the Greenwich Village folk revival—is also about using her voice to speak and sing the songs of the black experience. Sanchez says that Odetta “opened” her throat, a deliberate and welcoming action, for “travellers” [sic] to use and render their stories.

By suggesting that Odetta does the opening, this image of Odetta as perhaps a passive conduit of song does not reify her as an object, though it’s a transformational metaphor that Sanchez returns to again, when she writes,

8. on stage
   you were a
   soldier of hands
These lines resonate with the way Odetta reworks one of Guthrie’s most important songs, “Pastures of Plenty,” particularly in her broadening of the song’s original sound and lyrical vision. A vision of migrant agricultural labor, this song creates a lonely sound in Guthrie’s rendition, beginning with a harmonica that lays out the melody, reminiscent of the traditionalist “shape note” singing in certain U.S. Protestant communities. He additionally achieves the lonely sound through his wailing voice and his quickly plucked chords. He delivers the lines in a recitative mode, largely adhering to the same two chords while singing his melodic lines in and around them throughout the song. He often ends on “unresolved” notes, heightening a sort of unease. Richard Pascal argues,

The most Whitmanesque of all Woody Guthrie’s songs—and arguably his finest—is ‘Pastures of Plenty.’ Composed in 1941 while Guthrie was employed by the Bonneville Power Administration, ‘Pastures of Plenty’ manages to be both paen [sic] and protest song. It is a naturalistic hymn to the American land and its protean adaptability to the socially useful powers of technology, as well as a subtle denunciation of the inequitable social conditions which prevail upon that land. (46).

Pascal identifies this song as “paean” and “protest song,” as a “hymn,” and this is most certainly the mode the song takes up. Pascal describes the song’s lyrics for the most part, claiming that the words are Whitmanic, “montage-like in descriptive and narrative technique…almost mystical in mood and implication” (Ibid.). Taken by themselves, this may be true; indeed, though Guthrie is often at home in the religiously feeling recitative, the song as a whole does not quite sound like a hymn. Odetta’s version, however, creates a deep, resonant tone through the recording procedures

11 For Guthrie’s version, hear: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BH2DJvgNlMA>. For Odetta’s version, hear: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bh97owEnu-Y>. For Guthrie’s original lyrics, see: <https://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Pastures_Of_Plenty.htm>.
she uses. Through a lightly strummed series of chords, some of which depart from the major fifth and major seventh chords that Guthrie exclusively uses, her rendition more subtly shifts from chord to chord. Her song, also, is resolutely in the minor key: both the sung melodic line and the instruments maintain this minor feeling throughout the song (Guthrie’s song is much stranger, in this regard: the guitar and harmonica play in a major key throughout the song, whereas his vocal line sometimes shifts into the minor). Odetta utilizes musical dynamics to great effect, moving from forte at the beginning of every delivered line to piano at the end of most. She fades in and out of sound, purposely creating a vocal lilt. Victor Sproles plays a generally repetitive bass line throughout the song, shifting into a lower range of notes whenever Odetta sings the final line of each stanza. Sproles’ bass notes definitely reveal his comfort as a jazz musician, and he plays a perpetual, syncopated series of notes that run up and down the frets (not something he did on every song he recorded with Odetta). Combined with the steady, lightly strummed chords played by Odetta and Bruce Langhorne, the song, as recorded, produces an echoing sound. The “cleanness” of Guthrie’s guitar and voice give way to a sostenato, and this achieves a definitively different version of “Pastures of Plenty.”

The question, then, is whether Odetta’s version of “Pastures of Plenty” reimagines the song as about the black migrant experience, rather than the anglo farmers envisioned in Guthrie’s original. Formally speaking, the song’s synthesis of musical traditions (blues, jazz, “folk,” and hymnal) suggests this. More importantly, Odetta’s lyrics completely shift the perspective of the song. Where Guthrie often sings “We,” Odetta replaces it with “I”—though at certain points she

---

In an unpublished conference paper delivered at the 2009 American Studies Association Annual Convention, Matthew Frye Jacobson argues that Odetta’s rendition of Guthrie’s “Ramblin’ Round Your City” “takes the listener with much more immediacy into the social realm of dispossession, hunger, uncertainty, and bitterness” (9). This describes her version of “Pastures of Plenty,” as well.
keeps the “We.” She crafts a different lyrical perspective, whereas Guthrie moves between “We” and “I” throughout the song. It’s certain, though, that Odetta’s pronomial substitutions create a significant difference in the song, and combined with important lyrical alterations, Odetta creates a song less about a hopeful utopian future, and more about consistent marginalization and disenfranchisement. Consider a comparison of these stanzas, the second verse in each song:

I worked in your orchards of peaches and prunes
I slept on the ground in the light of the moon
On the edge of the city you'll see us and then
We come with the dust and we go with the wind
(Guthrie)

I wandered all over your green growing land
Wherever your crops are I’ll lend you my hand
On the edge of your cities you’ll see me and then
I come with the dust and I’m gone with the wind.
(Odetta)

Odetta replaces “worked” with “wandered,” but still maintains the labor performed, replacing “I slept on the ground in the light of the moon” with “Wherever your crops are I’ll lend you my hand.” Guthrie sings of sleep, Odetta of permanent nomadism. Guthrie names “orchards of peaches and prunes,” whereas Odetta maintains a more abstract image of “green growing land,” suggesting a more paradisiacal space through which she wanders, and in which, ultimately, is rendered marginal.

Guthrie sings “you’ll see us,” and Odetta sings “you’ll see me,” indicating an exclusion, a separation that Guthrie’s song doesn’t quite capture. Looking back to the way Sanora Babb depicts the stark segregation of migrant labor camps, Odetta seems to indicate the double exclusion of black migrant workers: excluded not only from the city, the black migrant laborer is also excluded from the camp. Finally, the final line shifts the “We” into “I,” echoing and redoubling exclusion. Later on in the song, though, she sings Guthrie’s final line in this stanza,
using “We come with the dust and we go with the wind” to conclude two additional verses (one which she repeats and adds at the end of the song). This replacement of Guthrie’s lines with the repetition of the ephemerality of “come with the dust” and “gone with the wind”\(^{13}\) does the work of speaking the black migrant experience in the agricultural landscapes of the West. Indeed, the line Odetta replaces is, “We'll work in this fight and we'll fight till we win.” Odetta’s substitution gives the song a more hopeless feel, it seems, significantly indicating the lost promise multiracial, multicultural politics promised by Guthrie’s Popular Front inflected song.

Odetta brings the song to its conclusion by repeating the second verse. Thus, rather than concluding with “Cause [my] pastures of plenty must always be free” (the difference between her line and Guthrie’s is indicated by the bracket) in the fifth verse, her sixth verse brings back the “dust” and “wind” line, with two additions: she adds the contraction “‘ll,” asserting futurity: “We’ll come with the dust and we’ll go with the wind.” This might be seen as reinforcing the hopelessness of exploited migrant labor; yet, in keeping with Guthrie’s original, according to Pascal, perhaps her version of “Pastures of Plenty” also “contributes to the impression of mystical insight: the breadth, precision, and temporal telescoping of events and images signify the visionary’s ability to ‘see farther’ in space and time, and to ‘see’ the relationship of detail and overview, and of past, present, and future” (47). This seems unlikely, though, except insofar as her bleak vision of the future sees the degradation of racism continuing, highlighted by the repetition of these ephemeral, tragic lines.

10.
you asked: is there
no song that will
bring rain to this desert?

\(^{13}\) Not to mention this line’s resonance with Margaret Mitchell’s blockbuster novel of the romanticized South, perhaps emphasizing the marginality of black voices in the work of white artists.
Perhaps, though, as Sanchez indicates, Odetta is using the tragic lyrical mode to question, to
gesture towards hope even in—or because of—its absence; to push for a radical re-envisioning of
labor and race relations, to “bring rain to this desert.”

In her version of the folk song “900 Miles,” either Odetta or Brue Langhorne begins by
playing a syncopated series of four chords, descending, and repeats these three and a half times
before a guitar, playing in the lower registers, plays the main melodic line.14 The guitars build a
foot-stomping beat. Interweaving, building an atmosphere in a minor key, they build towards the
entry of Odetta’s voice, which you can hear taking a breath three beats before beginning to sing,

Walking down this-a railroad track
I’ve got tears in my eyes
Trying to read a letter from my home
If this train run me right,
I’ll be home by tomorrow night,
Cause I’m 900 miles from my home.
And I hate to hear that lonesome whistle blow.

The last three lines of the stanza become the chorus of the song, which Odetta sings at the end of
every verse. The guitars improvise throughout the song, and each one takes a turn playing either
the rhythm or a version of the melodic line. The space between the verses varies, sometimes
taking only a bar or two, sometimes taking a much longer series of bars while the guitars play off
of each other in their improvisatory journey.

The song weaves a story of trying to ride the train home, a reversal of the typical idea of
migration. That is, rather than migration describing a one-way journey, away from the South and

14 Odetta’s version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NlwiPsb-zW0>.
Terry Callier’s version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qVTVoMIg5D4>.
Woody Guthrie’s version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BlhwRkV8On8>.
Joan Baez’s version, “500 Miles”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B_K6z3HiRAs>.
Peter, Paul, and Mary’s version, “500 Miles”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ADN1LEp3H0>.
towards the putative labor haven of the North, the migrant’s song that Odetta sings tells of wanting, terribly, to come home. Willing to “pawn you my watch/ I’ll pawn you my chain,/ Pawn you my gold or diamond ring,” the lyrical subject gives up all their jewelry in order to make it back home.

Each time Odetta ends the verse with “Cause I’m 900 miles from my home,” making the verse six lines, she waits four beats to sing “And/Though I hate to hear that lonesome whistle blow.” This hesitation, adding an extra verse, provides the song with the difficult emotions of the migrant journey. The lonesome whistle, blowing, echoes the migrant’s feelings of alienation and distance. The blowing whistle often signals departure from a station or the crossing of a major road. The importance of multidirectional migration as depicted in this song speaks to the consistent flow of people, goods, and culture between African Americans in the South and African Americans who moved to the cities and farms of the North and the West.¹⁵

In the final verse, Odetta repeats the first verse, and seems to purposely blur the second word, making the line either “I’m a woman down this railroad track” or “I’m a walking down this railroad track.” Either way, it sounds, more exactly, like she’s saying “I’m a wammin down.” Particularly because of the precision of the rest of the vocal delivery, this blurring seems deliberate. Is she building the gendered politics of migration into the song, through the repetition and difference of this final verse? She may be, though she undoes the masculinity of other versions of this song through other means—specifically, by not singing about her “woman,” which most male singers of the song do.

A comparison of Odetta’s version of the song with three others is illustrative (see fn. 14). First of all, the male singers specifically gender the migrant as male. They also begin in separate

¹⁵ See Carol Stack’s All Our Kin (1974), for example.
lyrical places, for the most part. Guthrie’s version begins with the pawning of a wagon, and, in his darkly humorous way, says that he’ll be home “unless the train jumps the track.” He also, in his typical way, utilizes pronouns to great effect: “Well, I’ll pawn you my wagon/ And I’ll pawn you my team,/ I’ll pawn you my watch and my chain.” He continues, gendering the song: “If this train runs right/ I’ll see my woman tomorrow night/ I’m tired of living this way.” He finishes another verse with “If that train’s on time,/ I’ll see that little woman of mine,/ Cause I’m tired of living all alone.” Linking the migrants journey to the journey of a single, lonely man, Guthrie equates home with womanhood (and the train is a woman, in another line). This is where Odetta’s song, even if the final verse is “walking” rather than “woman,” departs from the gendered association of home with womanhood: she sings, every time, “I’ll be home by tomorrow night.” Either way, her lyrics are more capacious, more illustrative of the fact that many women traveled north and west, often alone, and also, quite often, returned to the South on a regular or semi-regular basis.

Callier’s version begins with the multiple guitars, like Odetta’s, but is sorrowful rather than beat-driven. Partially, he achieves this by quickly plucking out each individual note of the chord, unlike Odetta, who plays a fast, repetitive series of chords. Callier, intriguingly, draws out every line of the first verse, before transitioning the song into a strummed, sped-up delivery. The bass guitar, though, does not build a beat but instead plays in ominous three note stretches, retaining the song’s melancholic, sad and frustrated atmosphere. Singing, “If my woman tells me so, then I can’t railroad no more/ I’ll sidetrack my engine going home,” Callier genders the song’s lyrical subject, aligning the song with a blues man’s plaint of adversarial heterosexual love.
Baez, in her typical fashion, sings the song like a church hymn, inviting the audience—her congregation—to sing along with her; perhaps, for this reason, she sings “500 Miles,” the version of the song made popular by Peter, Paul, and Mary, rather than “900 Miles.” The solemnity of this version builds a certain sadness into the song, but misses the fierceness of the combat against desperation contained in “900 Miles” as performed by Callier and Guthrie, and definitely as performed by Odetta. Their version, “500 Miles,” is definitively a plaintive love song: “If you miss the train I’m on/ You will know that I am gone.” “900 Miles,” though, is not addressed to the object of one’s affection; rather, the song indicates a desperation to get home—perhaps after receiving a sorrowful letter announcing a death, or after receiving a letter bursting with love, or a letter delivering the news of rejection—and to rejoin one’s home community. The journey, it seems, is unannounced, and is undertaken at great cost.

20.
your mouth
a sweet wind
painted with hieroglyphs

When Odetta sings the feelings of this unannounced, emotionally and materially draining journey home, she cracks open an enormous range of affective and political possibilities that are constrained within either the romantic or masculinist lyrical subject of the other versions discussed above. Linking “900 Miles” to other texts of black women on the move, such as Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*, Anne Petry’s *The Street*, Paule Marshall’ *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Dorothy West’s *The Living Is Easy*, Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*, Ayana Mathis’s *The Twelve Tribes of Hattie*, and also more historically oriented works such as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, not to mention songs such as Bessie Smith’s “You’ve Been a Good Old Wagon” (among countless other songs), Odetta considers the complicated issues that arise from the gendered differences in migration. Rather than only and specifically wanting to get home to a
woman, for example (which seems, in many versions, to be the driving motive for return),
Odetta’s song maintains the queer possibility of return for a woman, while also opening up a
broad range of other desires: coming home to see one’s family or perhaps one’s children,
returning because of the disappointments of the migration journey, returning because of
loneliness; or, as I hear it, returning home for a short trip before heading away again—the line
“And I hate to hear that lonesome whistle blow” contains recurrence and perpetuity, suggesting
that this train whistle is heard and heard again on journeys of departure and return. The
necessities of migration require consistent contact with the sounds of this train whistle, and the
inescapability of that sound, emphasized by the lyric’s inevitable repetition at the end of every
verse and its *hesitated* delivery, suggest that the migrant whose song this is dreads yet needs the
whistle as it announces arrivals and departures.

18.
finally we remember
how you gave life
to memory

The enlivening capaciousness of Odetta’s versions of folk songs is, finally, indicated in
her recording of Woody Guthrie’s “Why Oh Why.” Guthrie’s version is a silly, funny ditty
meant to be played for children. He goofs off in the song, sometimes inventing answers to his
absurd questions on the spot. He laughs, stammers, and rushes, conveying the improvisatory
playfulness of the song. For example, when he sings “Why can’t a mouse eat a streetcar?/ Why,
oh why, oh why?/ Because a mouse’s stomach could never hold big enough to hold a streetcar,/Good bye, good by ” he bungles the delivery of the final line. This is funny, conveying a sense of
bewilderment. Though the song is a dialogue, Guthrie sings each voice with the same tone and
timbre, completing each verse with “Good bye, good bye, good bye.” This suggests a certain

---

*16* Guthrie’s version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fOAz3uCsS-E>.
distance between the questioner and the answerer, and though the song is definitely a children’s song, it suggests no real intimacy between the different “voices.”

Guthrie further uncouples the song’s childlike series of questions and answers by turning the song into a political statement. After announcing he doesn’t know the answers to every question, he transitions into a political attack against the economic system: “What makes the landlord take money?/ Why, oh why, oh why?/ I don’t know that one myself./ Good bye, good bye, good bye.” The song, then, seems to be building towards a political denouement, couched within a children’s song. This is certainly in keeping with Guthrie’s ethos, and after attacking the greed of landlords and the fact that “there’s no pennies for ice cream,” he moves back into silly, rushed verses about why rabbits can’t chase eagles (“Because the last rabbit that took out and chased after an eagle didn’t come out so good and that’s why other rabbits don’t chase eagles and that’s all I know about rabbits and eagles”), why grandpas and grandmas are not the same person, and why wind can’t blow backwards.

Odetta’s “Why Oh Why,” though, begins much more solemnly. Rather than beginning with a specific question, we hear the following sung dialogue, accompanied by Odetta strumming her guitar and plucking bass notes with her thumb:

Why and why and why and why
Why and why and why?
Because because because,
Good night, good night

17 Odetta’s studio recorded version: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rrA3zqDjZ5Q. For a live version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YoXII0XmObM>. This live version is extremely interesting, because the audience laughs after her lines—and also because a Japanese translator speaks between her verses. She absolutely plays up the performative aspects of the delivery, highlighting the weepiness of the child and emphasizing parental astonishment at the types of questions children sometimes ask.
Odetta differentiates the voices in two ways: first, the questioner—clearly a child—sings in a mopey, teary voice, a voice that sings with the cadence of a question. Odetta conveys this with a breathy delivery, swallowing the ends of some lines and shifting from loud to soft notes quite suddenly; she also sings further away from the microphone. The answerer—the child’s parent—sings more confidently, with Odetta moving closer to the microphone. Rather than using unstable dynamics, the parent’s voice is clear, maintaining the same volume throughout the lines. Where Odetta differs quite strongly from Guthrie, though, and this is what makes the song so incredibly unique, is that she uses hesitation. Rather than run-on answers and laughter, Odetta vocally conveys amusement, frustration, perplexity, and hesitation—she sounds like a parent trying to put a child to sleep, and this is conveyed by the most signal and important difference between the versions: she sings “good night” rather than “good bye.”

This important distinction builds important parental intimacy into the song. Given that Odetta’s songs chiefly convey the migrant experience, which in song, at least, is often lonely, stark, and alienating in its lack of intimacy, “Why Oh Why” becomes a song of radical intimacy, of stability within the migrant journey, of relation conveyed before and after the song, rather than simply within the space of the song. “Good night” indicates perpetuation, suggests “I’ll see you tomorrow,” and creates an important, intimate affective space that seems to exist outside of the song. The presence of a morning builds futurity into the song—a different type of politics than Guthrie’s explicit critique of renter’s exploitation and poverty. What does it mean, both in Odetta’s time and now, for a mother to sing her child to sleep? For a black mother to tuck her child into bed in a world of antiblack violence? “Good night” does not rhyme with “Why oh why,” which “Good bye” does. By refusing the rhyme, Odetta takes the song away from its “songliness” and makes it a poetry of the everyday life and love of mother and child.
The hesitation Odetta builds into the mother’s responses works very differently from Guthrie’s silly run-ons. The breaks in response convey a certain “realism” of dialogue, suggest to listeners that an actual conversation is taking place. In particular, the verse beginning with “Why can’t a cow have a kitten?” illustrates this process.

Why can’t a cow have kittens?
Why, and why, and why?
Huh, well…Because… … Cows have… little calves and…
Cats have little kittens, and… … Besides dear,
it’s easier that way: good night, good night.

Unlike the previous answers, which were delivered with amused certainty, this verse stumps the mother. She begins to answer with a slight chuckle, “Huh,” but then quickly runs out of steam. “Because … … Cows have…little calves and…” The guitar keeps strumming, sounding like a ticking clock, and the space is filled with the silence of voice and the presence of atmosphere. Every time more is added to the answer, the response seems more and more tautological, more unsatisfying to the little person who is tearfully trying to figure out a world that doesn’t make sense—why can’t have a cow have kittens? (And try responding at an appropriate register without having a science textbook open, too.) The answer rushes after the second “and”:

“Besides dear, it’s easier that way: good night, good night.”

What Odetta builds into these lines, through hesitation, through the difference in dialogical voice, through the strummed guitar underneath the conversation, through the revision of the lyrics, is a radical and loving intimacy. It’s radical because it is otherwise—it conveys the political as always, above all else, the personal: the relationships we build and sustain, the love we contain in our words and convey when we speak them or sing them. This is no small thing. In the face of degradation, in the midst of movement, Odetta builds a world of intimacy in this song of mother and child, a small conversation, a tucking in, a bond. What does it mean to love in a
world where racism, labor exploitation, and xenophobia persistently check the lives of people of color, where bodies are labelled for expulsion and souls are marked for destruction? Odetta suggests there is a way to love, and though it may seem small, it is intimate—and it creates a world.

4.
dilated
by politics
you dared to love
Bibliography


Carby, Hazel. “Becoming Modern Racialized Subjects.” *Cultural Studies* 23.4 (July 2009): 624-


Collins, Janelle. “‘Like a Collage’: Personal and Political Subjectivity in Alice Walker’s *Meridian.*” *CLA* 44.2 (December 2000): 161-188. Print.


Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. E-book, created by José Menéndez: [1845]. Print.


Lipsitz, George. *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Poetics of


Lutenski, Emily. “‘A Small Man in Big Spaces’: The New Negro, the Mestizo, and Jean Toomer’s Southwestern Writing.” MELUS 33, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 11-32. Print.


Peckham, Joel B. “Jean Toomer's *Cane*: Self as Montage and the Drive toward Integration.”


Socha, Kimberly. “‘To Discover and Rediscover’: The Textualization of Individual and Communal Memory in Tomás Rivera’s ...y no se lo tragó la tierra/...And the Earth Did Not Devour Him.” Hipertexto 9 (Invierno 2009): 64-73. Print.


