

Spring 2021

Shaping a Queer South: The Evolution of Activism From 1960-2000

A. Kamau Pope

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SHAPING A QUEER SOUTH: THE EVOLUTION OF ACTIVISM FROM 1960-2000

by

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Bachelor of Arts
College of Charleston, 2016

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts in

History

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2021

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DEDICATION

To Pauli Murray, who taught me that “one person plus one typewriter constitutes a movement,” and always to Alison Piepmeier who modeled to me what that could be and continues to show me after all these years.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis came to fruition from thousands of people who have directly and indirectly influenced me and my work. My undergraduate studies at the College of Charleston developed me as a scholar and planted the seeds that grew into this thesis. First to Alison Piepmeier, who, before she passed in 2016, told me I was worthy of graduate school and that this was dissertation worthy. Mari Crabtree, thank you for grounding and giving me a footing in history as a discipline; you showed me the possibilities of what I could do as a historian.

At the start of this specific project, I sat in Valinda Littlefield's office with a vision of where this thesis would go, and throughout this process, her unyielding support and faith in me has kept me going in moments of struggle. My writing group under Andrea Henderson-Platt, with Mia Brantley, Calley Fisk, and Christiana Johnson, has been an asset as they have continuously edited and read this body of work as it has developed. Over the years, Jon Hale has shown me the significance of narrative and how we as historians can use stories to inform what we find in the archives. An invaluable and late addition to this work was T.J. Tallie, whose work and mentorship changed my perspective as a historian. Thank you, T.J., for challenging me to dig deeper and investing energy into my continued effort to understand what a queer South can be. Archivists at Duke University and Georgia State University, specifically Morna Gerrard (GSU) and Kelly Wooten (Duke), helped guide me in the archives during a pandemic; every scan, email, and phone call was significant in helping me develop this paper; kudos to you all and your teams.

This work continues to showcase my gratitude for the movement. Without Laura Mewbourn, J.F. Lyles, Anjali Naik, Jasmin Wilson, Marla Robertson, Princess Hollis, Jillian Brandl, Aisha Gallion, Kaj Brian, Micah Blaise, Chan LeBeau, Bri Sanders, Cora Webb, and so many others in Charleston, SC who worked within and around Girls Rock Charleston (now Carolina Youth Action Project), I would not have begun to conceptualize queer liberation in South. For my Southerners on New Ground (SONG) Forever Family; the founders: Pat Hussain, Joan Garner, Mab Segrest, Pam McMichael, Mandy Carter, and Susanne Pharr; the folks who brought me in and grounded me: Mary Hooks, Kate Shapiro, Serena Sebring, Paulina Helm-Hernandez, Ashe Helm-Hernandez, Caitlin Breedlove, Jade Brooks, Wendi O’Neal, Micky Bradford, Bia Jackson, Micky Jordan; and the ones whom we have loved and lost along the way: Joan Garner, Kat Johnson, Alexis “Murph” Murphy, Kiesha Webb, and others; thank you for being my political home.

While my chosen family is important, my family since birth has been vital to this project. To mom and dad (Teresa and George Pope) who took every phone call when I needed a break, to my siblings and in-laws, Frankie, Tammy, Janet, Barbara, Trey, Courtney, LaToya, Marlos, Cory, Meron, Mike, and Martha Sullivan; thank you for your love and faith. Of course, to my love, partner, and heart, Colleen, you bring me utter joy, and in times of stress, that joy has allowed me to persist and finish this thesis. As my “unofficial first reader,” I am grateful that you provide clarity to my work by asking all the questions that I never think of before I send it off to my colleagues. Without your watchful eye, support and brilliance, this project would have been even more challenging to come to be.

ABSTRACT

Queer activism extends itself to dismantles and challenges normativity in spaces that criminalize, oppress, and perpetuate violence towards queer folks. Using Cathy Cohen’s model of radical queer politics, this thesis examines the South as a place that has been shaped over time by queer activism. Beginning with 1960 and the founding of SNCC sets the tone of how the South is non-normative and queer in the context of the United States, yet still a perpetrator of white supremacy, sexism, and homophobia. With a sole focus on the region of the U.S. South, this paper diverges from the narrative of urban queer movements, and instead, it centralizes Southern queer activism. Activism in the South has been racialized and understood through critical race theory, but this thesis expands the analysis through the lens of queer theory. It signifies and provides dialogue centered around these various southern organizations and builds upon the narrative of being “here and queer.” This thesis is a front porch conversation starter that will name the injustice and liberatory factors that queer southern activists have used to thrive, exist, and resist in the region. It will amplify the broad movements these leaders participated in across three decades and examine the creative tactics used to form the concept and notion of a queer South.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACT UP	AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
SCLC.....	Southern Christian Leadership Conference
SNCC	Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee
SONG.....	Southerners on New Ground

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Activism has impacted the Southern region with its innovative leadership models, direct action tactics, and organizing. These innovations and tactics by folks who have challenged dominant normative structures in the U.S. South are inherently queer, whether they are LGBTQ or not. This paper examines movements related to racial, gender, health, and economic injustice and works to center how activists in the South fought against those disparities. The concept of “queering” the South includes much of the radical queer politics of the regions’ community organizers to challenge privilege, power, and normativity.¹ This paper will analyze queer movements in the South from 1960-2000 that challenged white supremacy and how activism has shaped a queer South.

Queer history typically emphasizes and spotlights LGBTQ social life and the pursuit of equality. Historians John D’Emilio, George Chauncey, and Lillian Faderman developed a substantial foundation about how lesbian and gay people existed in the 20th century. In recent decades, historians and scholars worked to expand the conceptions of queer identity in the United States, but the collective memory of queer organizing forefronts the fight for marriage equality and whitewashed memories of the Stonewall

¹ Cathy Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*

Uprising.² Moreover, these narratives often exhibit events that happened primarily outside of the South. A whitewashed narrative of this uprising, as seen in the 2015 movie *Stonewall*, fails to expose the multi-faceted national and regional acts of resistance and protest against police and state-sanctioned violence.³ This gap in scholarship and public memory is harmful because, at its essence, queer people of color led these radical acts in the late 20th century to contest criminalization, discrimination, and violence.

Although growing knowledge from historians and scholars on queer and trans people's lived experiences has brought awareness to our existence, the lack of attention on how race and place shape these experiences limits the visibility of Black queer and trans people.⁴ This limited visibility has had and continues to have dire consequences rooted in the marginalization, criminalization, and violence that queer people experience. While E. Patrick Johnson and C. Riley Snorton document oral histories of people's experiences in

² Work that has expanded understandings of queer history in the United States include: C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); E. Patrick Johnson, *Sweet Tea: Gay Black Men of the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); E. Patrick Johnson, *Black Queer Southern Women: An Oral History*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018); Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008).

³ Elena Kiesling, "The Missing Colors of the Rainbow: Black Queer Resistance" *European Journal of American Studies*. 11, no. 3 (2017): 13, accessed Sept. 12, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.11830>.

⁴ Johnathan Katz, *Gay American History* (New York: Crowell, 1976), George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America* (Columbia University Press, 1991), James T. Sears, *Growing Up Gay in the South: Race, Gender, and Journeys of the Spirit* (New York: Routledge, 1991), John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999)

the United States and move queer theory into the archives, there is so much more to research that underlines how Black queer Southerners have historically fought for justice.

These gaps in historiography also perpetuate public perceptions of queer and trans experiences as white and masculine and lead to continued violence and harm of queer people of color. Black transgender people, specifically Black trans women, experience violence and terror every year, including higher homicide rates.⁵ Many of these cases go unresolved, and police and media reports misgender the victims of violence. In 2019, 52 percent of these violent attacks occurred in the South.⁶ As of October 2020, at least 34 transgender and gender non-conforming people were murdered. Of those 34 murders, roughly 40 percent occurred in the U.S. South.⁷ These statistics amplify the importance of documenting queer and trans people's lives to validate their existence, especially southern LGBTQ people.

This research centers on Mississippi organizer Fannie Lou Hamer's quote that "nobody's free until everyone is free."⁸ Southern queer activists have historically been and continue to be on the frontlines organizing and fighting for justice. The broader queer liberation movements find their roots in resistance to blatant homophobia, criminalization, and violence historically marginalized people witness and experience. The vast social justice movements of the mid-to-late 20th century, led mostly by queer people of color, had

⁵ Kiesling, 12.

⁶ Human Rights Campaign, "Violence Against the Transgender Community in 2019," accessed Oct. 6, 2019, <https://www.hrc.org/resources/violence-against-the-transgender-community-in-2019>

⁷ Human Rights Campaign, "Violence Against the Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Community in 2020," accessed Aug. 31, 2020, <https://www.hrc.org/resources/violence-against-the-trans-and-gender-non-conforming-community-in-2020>

⁸ Maegan Brooks, and Davis W. Houck, eds. *Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer : To Tell It Like It Is*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010: 139.

many activists on the frontlines. From Pauli Murray to Bayard Rustin, queer and trans folks have been catalysts for change, and this research will study their legacies of resistance.

Centering southern queer activists' information from oral histories, newspapers, articles, and other archival holdings, this paper answers the following inquiries: (1) What makes the South regionally queer, a perpetrator of white heteronormativity, and an integral region for queer activism? (2) How did activists queer the South during 1960s-2000, and in what ways did that changed over time? (3) How have queer activists practiced authenticity as a revolutionary act of resistance? Specifically, what are the ways queer and trans people have created community and safety in regional organizing spaces? In answering these questions, this work provides a historical analysis of queer resistance towards racism, homophobia, and transmisogyny to create a queer affirming South.

The first section of this paper examines the complexity of the South as a region considered "other" or "different" compared to other areas of the United States. Nevertheless, in this difference, or queerness, the South still perpetuates power and privilege through various political and cultural norms. Activists and organizers challenge these norms to forge what I deem a "queer South," a place that continuously grapples and acknowledges the past while leaning on cultural rituals rooted in indigeneity, Blackness, and queerness to show us what it means to be free.

Following the framework of the South, the next section takes a chronological approach to examine critical queer organizers and moments of queer activism in the U.S. South during the late 20th century, from 1960-2000. Through the development of SNCC through Ella Baker's vision to the founding of Southerners on New Ground (SONG), Black women have been catalysts to movement building across the South, forging their own

radical queer politics. Still, queer activists' identities, as Black women, as LGBTQ, and/or as poor, had to be checked and negotiated to reach broader goals within these organizations (i.e., voting rights or access to healthcare for AIDS). However, queerness is ever-present, and folks work with organizations that validate only specific parts of their identities. It is not until the formation of SONG that queer political activism had a home that centered intersectionality and authenticity as a framework and organizing tool.

Lastly, this paper concludes with the innovative ways queer Southern activists have cultivated spaces to be their authentic selves. As queer people educate, agitate, and organize, these narratives also examine how authenticity has been a revolutionary act of resistance for those living at the intersections of racism, sexism, and classism. Alice Walker names this a practice of 'turning our madness into flowers'; that by witnessing fear, it will allow us to discover something wonderful.⁹

While each oral history and archival collection brings life to people who live on the margins in the South, this work is also grounded in the voices and stories that were not able to be captured. Whether it is people who have not come out of the closet, those pushed into silence, and or died from violence or suicide; these people are grounding us and guiding us to move work across the South to make this region more affirming of Black folks, of poor folks, of queer and trans bodies, of folks with varying abilities across all ages. As my good friend and comrade, Serena taught me, "we do this for our ancestors, we do this for the ones who come next, we do this because we are born free."¹⁰

⁹ Alice Walker. *The World Will Follow Joy: Turning Madness Into Flowers*. (New York: The New Press, 2013), xiv

¹⁰ Kamau Pope, "The Weapon of Black Joy", Dec. 2019.

CHAPTER 2

QUEERING AND UNQUEERING THE SOUTH

The South is an integral region of the United States that has a messy and problematic past. To the rest of the United States, the South is constantly “othered” or considered “backward” from an anti-Southern bias.¹¹ Simultaneously, the South is a perpetrator of white supremacist and heteronormative ideology, impacting marginalized people across the region. Before exploring how activists shape a queer South, it is vital to unpack how regionally it is considered queer and the ways power and privilege still manifest across the Southern region. This section provides theoretical grounding around the nuanced ways the South is queer yet internally positions white, heteronormativity at the forefront of its regional power structure. While the South is wielding this power, this section explains the “queer South” that activists in the South are shaping. A “queer South” is a space that centers and forefronts practices that amplify and acknowledge the collective struggle that Black, Latinx, and indigenous people hold; and from that pain, grief, and trauma, build and create a region that is liberatory, joyous, and equitable.

In the context of what is meant by queer, which is the construction of how power and privilege show up, the South can take many shapes. Regionally, the South is queer because of the anti-Southern bias across the United States. The misconception of the South as “backward” and “more racist” than the North constructs the South as the “other.” These

¹¹Anthony Hawkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004: 4.

notions were prevalent before the Lesbian and Gay Task Force's Creating Change Conference in 1993. When the Task Force could not secure a conference venue in Washington, D.C., and had to look elsewhere, they called leaders to find a new place to host it. Mandy Carter, a Black lesbian activist in North Carolina, got a call from the Task Force about where to host their 1993 annual conference, and she quickly offered that the Lesbian and Gay Task Force hold the annual meeting in Durham, N.C and they agreed.

With this being the first Lesbian and Gay Task Force meeting in the South, Mandy Carter recalled that conference goers' reactions ranged from "Is there an airport down there?" and "Why are we holding it in North Carolina? Isn't that where Jesse Helms is from?" Knowing there was a good base of gay and lesbian activists in the region, Carter challenged the anti-Southern bias and told them, "We're holding it in North Carolina precisely because that's where Jesse Helms is from!"¹² These conceived notions of the South showcase how the non-Southerners view the South as different region that lacks modernity and progress.

People outside of the South have misconceptions about how growth, change, and regression all occur in this region. However, even while considered "the other," the South is still the perpetrator of white supremacist ideology that is pervasive and present across all institutions, just with a different base of the same racist recipe that stews across a nation that rests on stolen land. Due to regional elitism, the South continues to find itself defined by its backing of slavery, its suppression of Black people, and white nationalism, while the

¹² "Rose Norman Interview w/ Mandy Carter", *Liberation in Our Lifetime: 20 Years of Southerners on New Ground*. (Virginia: Branner Printing, 2015), 18.

North coins itself as the liberator of Black folks.¹³ The breaking of the Union and the forming of the Confederacy pushed the South away from the “norm,” and the preservation of a “more perfect union” as defined by the constitution shattered.¹⁴ Therefore, the South’s hold on slavery and its work to ensure that it remained and spread to other regions of the United States make it unique and different from other regions of the United States and continue to define it today. Nevertheless, in its queerness as a United States region, the South’s uniqueness embodies power and privilege that only work for white cisgender/heteronormative hegemony.

While the South’s history is contained and considered the “queer” in the context of the United States, it is not what I refer to as a queer South. It is integral to take a bottom-up approach and look to the grassroots organizing, the demands that queer resistance calls for, and the people who are struggling to actualize those demands. Therefore, the queer South is the continued reclamation of cultural and environmental space, grounded in indigenous practices of the Native peoples of this land; it is the African traditions cultivated here through forced enslavement, it is the food that brings us together, and the vision of liberation that grounds us. In other words, a queer South is a radical cookout filled with historically marginalized people joined together in shared trust and respect through equity and justice. As Michael Twitty notes, Southerners are a family regardless of whether a

¹³James Baldwin, “Nobody Knows My Name: A Letter from the South.” *In Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son*, New York, NY: Dial Press, 1961: 122.

¹⁴ U.S. Const, pmb1.

person is Native, Middle Eastern, African, South Asian, East Asian, or Latin American; we are a dysfunctional family.¹⁵

Many scholars have acknowledged that a queer South is synonymous with LGBTQ South, where gay people can marry and queens can have drag balls.¹⁶ My definition of a queer South works to expand that; it is more than social, cultural, and political survival of one specific identity when other folks are struggling. A queer South includes the battle against voter suppression, challenging Right-Wing evangelicals, ensuring access to healthcare, and mobilizing for worker's rights. A founder of Southerners on New Ground, an queer-led organization in the South, named that "when the South is in motion for justice, the whole country shakes."¹⁷ Considering the South as a microcosm of United States society, in its shame, complexity, and conformity, positions possibilities for broader liberation. More so, the progression of radical Southern queer politics allows community organizers to look backward for progress and forward for change.

¹⁵ Michael Twitty, *The Cooking Gene : a Journey through African American Culinary History in the Old South* (New York, NY: Amistad, 2017): xvii

¹⁶ For examples of this look to: Samantha Allen, *Real Queer America: LGBT Stories from Red States* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2019); John Howard, *Carrying on in the Lesbian and Gay South* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Samantha Gregory Rosenthal, "Make Roanoke Queer Again: Community History and Urban Change in a Southern City," *The Public Historian*, 39(1), 35-60. doi:10.2307/26420962.

¹⁷ Lisa Levenstein, *They Didn't See Us Coming: The Hidden History of Feminism in the Nineties* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), 170.

CHAPTER 3

THE SOUTH AS A RADICAL PLACE OF QUEER POLITICS

3.1 SNCC: ELLA BAKER AND FORGING OF QUEER SOUTHERN POLITICS

Until the formation of organizations influenced by intersectionality like the Combahee River Collective or Southerners on New Ground, many movement leaders, particularly Black women, wanted all aspects of their identities (race, gender, class, sexuality, age, and ability) acknowledged in their fight for justice. Regardless of how they practiced their sexuality, these women forged a path of what I consider queer liberation in the South. Because Black women sat at interlocking systems of oppression, they understand Fannie Lou Hamer's mandate that "nobody's free until everyone is free."¹⁸ This aspect of queer liberation finds its roots in the battle for abolition, universal suffrage, and the modern civil rights movement. It was not until the later part of the 20th century that intersectionality became an integral organizational and political framework for queer and trans organizations. However, what is evident is that present-day queer activism in the South finds its roots in Ella Baker and the formation of SNCC.

The formation of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), founded in 1960, was due to Ella Baker's vision and leadership. Ella Baker's career in the long civil rights movement spanned decades before SNCC, and while there were various organizations she mobilized with, two main spheres were the National Association for the

¹⁸ Brooks and Houck, eds., 139.

Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). As instrumental as she was as a field organizer with NAACP and SCLC, Baker was a person of the people and was critical of the structures and decision-making conducted by leaders within these organizations. While working with the SCLC, Baker criticized King's leadership, noting that he was often distant from the masses.¹⁹ Baker notes that she never worked for an organization but for a cause.²⁰ While young folks were rallying mass-mobilizations and sit-ins, Baker knew that there was a brazen fighting spirit these students had, and she was committed to ensuring they were able to organize with agency and away from the patriarchal grasp they would have had if they worked within SCLC.

With the mass mobilization of young people and college students doing sit-ins across the South following the Greensboro, NC sit-in, the concept of SNCC emerged from a conference in Raleigh, NC. Baker, the only woman to speak, noted the differences between young activists of SNCC and leaders who had been organizing for decades like the NAACP and the four years of SCLC. A young organizer, overwhelmed and excited by Baker, said, "She spoke simply but powerfully. It was as if she was speaking right to you about such large and important issues. She was much more effective than the men."²¹

As the only woman given a microphone to speak at the conference further emphasizes Ella Baker's queer political activism. Ella Baker became a role model and heroine to young women, particularly Black women in the movement; she opened up the

¹⁹ Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Struggle for Economic Justice*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013): 104.

²⁰ Barbara Ransby, *Ella Bakers and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina, 2003): 222.

²¹ Ransby, 258.

possibility for how queer folk of the movement, i.e., anyone who was not a Black cisgender straight man, have a place in the Black Freedom Movement. She challenged the concept that Black men should lead the charge and women were to be wives or making flyers. Her vision and presence influenced organizers like Diane Nash to break from normative standards of being “behind the scenes” and challenged patriarchal notions of power.

After stepping down from SCLC in 1960, Baker planted her feet as a supporter of young folks as they developed SNCC. That year, they continued mobilizing and organizing sit-ins across the South. By 1961, SNCC gained a more considerable status during the Freedom Rides after taking on direct action from the Congress of Racial Equality, or CORE, which could not continue due to the excessive violence CORE members suffered.²² By 1962, SNCC began starting the voter registration movement, stationing young leaders in various counties in the South to mobilize the Black vote. This progression was not simple; leaders within SNCC battled whether to continue direct actions as a tactic or mobilize around voter registration. Ella Baker intervened and proposed SNCC have two wings focusing on direct action and voter registration, furthering her ideological framing on the young organization. She knew that registering Black people to vote in Mississippi would be retaliated with violence, which in itself was a form of direct action.²³

The Southwest Georgia Movement, an effort to mobilize around Black voter suppression in Albany, GA, and surrounding counties, was a localized branch of SNCC’s work to expand voter rights. In Southwest Georgia, SNCC took on door-to-door knocking, equipping residents with the tools to pass the literacy test and political education. A

²² Ransby, 277.

²³“SNCC debates direct action & voter registration at Highlander,” SNCC Digital Gateway, accessed, March 15, 2021, <https://snccdigital.org/events/sncc-debates-direct-action-voter-registration-at-highlander/>

movement leader once framed their experience as “...we spend days at a time visiting negro homes in the backcountry. We talk, we talk, and we talk. We are met with all grades of enthusiasm from very faint to very sincere.”²⁴ While SNCC primarily organized in the Deep South, they had national offices and reach, and many young people from different regions of the United States went South to join the movement.²⁵

One of those individuals to join SNCC was Faith Holsaert, a white Jewish woman raised in Greenwich Village. In my interview with her, Holsaert explained the journey South was a process of reconnecting with her Black “mother of affection” who raised her.²⁶ Charity Bailey, Holsaert’s “mother of affection,” had roots in the South and Holsaert felt as though mobilizing with SNCC in the South was a sense of obligation to her connection to Bailey; that this was a family journey to go South and better the people.

As a nineteen-year-old, Holsaert left her studies at Barnard College in 1961 and joined SNCC’s organizing efforts in Southwest Georgia in what she calls “Resistance U,” an opportunity to be seeded in movement work and learn from it.²⁷ Her efforts in Southwest Georgia positioned Holsaert in planning local and national organizing. At this point in her community organizing, she named that their work was “moment added to moment, sandwiches and scary car rides, citizenship lesson added to citizenship lesson, staff reports

²⁴ “Voter Registration Extends in Southwest Georgia,” SNCC Digital Gateway, accessed, Oct. 3, 2020, <https://snccdigital.org/events/voter-registration-expands-southwest-georgia/>.

²⁵ Davies Morgan, *From Sit-ins to SNCC: The Student Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012): 16 & 92.

²⁶ Faith Holsaert Interview, interviewed by Kamau Pope, Sept. 27, 2020.

²⁷ Faith S. Holsaert, Martha Prescod Noonan, Judy Richardson, Betty Garman Robinson, Jean Smith Young, & Dorothy M. Zellner, *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC*. (University of Illinois Press, 2010), 185

week after week.”²⁸ Her work also required canvassing and working against voter suppression in three counties. It also included relationship-building and planted seeds about what it could mean to be queer.

As a Jewish woman from the North organizing with Black folks in the South, Faith felt a sense of camaraderie and authenticity in the organizing circles within SNCC; yet in regards to her sexuality, Faith was deeply closeted at this point in her life.²⁹ While she was growing to understand her sexuality, she worked with queer organizers like Bayard Rustin to organize the 1963 March on Washington as a leader in SNCC. In her interview, Holsaert mentions a reaction with a fellow organizer whom she perceived to be queer. Holsaert states:

“She looked in her purse, and she said I have a diamond ring in here from a man in Florida. And you know, it always stuck with me. So I interviewed this person for Hands on the Freedom Plow, she wasn’t going to write on their own. And at the end, I said, Well, what about that man with the engagement ring? She looked at me, and she said, Faith, there was never any man with an engagement ring.”³⁰

Holsaert notes that her interpretation of this was a process of speaking in code. Carrying around a fake engagement ring was an object of security for this organizer.³¹ While she notes that no one in the movement would outwardly villainize people who were queer, it was an unspoken mantra that “yeah, that’s who they are.”³² However, even in that silenced ideology of queerness, Faith’s friend and fellow organizer put up a shield, a fake engagement ring to display heteronormativity and hide her queerness. Even in this space

²⁸ Holsaert, Noonan, Richardson, Robinson, Young, & Zellner, 188

²⁹ Faith Holsaert Interview, interviewed by Kamau Pope, Sept. 27, 2020.

³⁰ Faith Holsaert Interview, interviewed by Kamau Pope, Sept. 27, 2020.

³¹ In the interview Holsaert mentioned that she did not want to out this individual since this person is deceased, especially in respect to her family.

³² Faith Holsaert Interview, interviewed by Kamau Pope, Sept. 27, 2020.

rooted in justice, there was never acceptance or a call for people to show their authentic selves. As Holsaert continued organizing in Georgia, she faced arrest during a march in the spring of 1963. Holsaert left the jail cell feeling weak; it was not until that summer before the March on Washington that she was diagnosed with hepatitis and left the South to heal in New York.

Though it took years for Holsaert to move back and organize in the South after working with the Southwest Georgia Movement, her legacy and work with SNCC indicates the influence that queer people had on the Civil Rights Movement. Georgia altered Faith and set a foundation for what would be the rest of her life. As a fervent activist, she watched the March on Washington, something she had organized alongside movement leaders, on the television. Faith explained that the stint in Georgia altered her blood. When she contracted hepatitis, she could no longer donate or help another person receive a blood transfusion.

Southern organizing left its mark on Holsaert, and even more so, the aftermath of the Stonewall Uprising impacted her as well. When asked about the Stonewall Riots in 1969, Holsaert described it as the moment she finally got to see her people.³³ This out-of-state interaction is significant, Holsaert built and forged community amongst Black people and queer folks in the South, but Stonewall and the Northern experience remains a crucial moment of unabashed queerness clashing against white heteronormativity. It is pressing and integral that, while Stonewall was where she saw her people, the South, SNCC, and to a degree, Ella Baker's vision of liberation gave her the skill-set and tools of building queer community.

³³ Faith Holsaert Interview, interviewed by Kamau Pope, Sept. 27, 2020.

3.2 GAY LIBERATION FRONT AND A QUEER GEORGIA

Non-normativity and queerness have been silenced, oppressed, or criminalized. Since the dawn of colonization in the Americas, any convention of non-white, non-heteronormative people have been targets of law order. Though queer people have resisted this prejudice since the inception of the United States, the latter half of the 1960s was a catalyst for challenging criminalization.³⁴ For LGBTQ people, in particular, the 1969's Stonewall Uprising in New York propelled gay liberation to the forefront of the fight for civil rights. This section highlights the events that led to the Stonewall Uprising and how the event and broader mobilizations of marginalized people impacted queer Southerners.

Throughout the 20th century, queer and trans people often searched for places to build community yet being out subjected them to being fired from their workplace, imprisonment, or even death.³⁵ Patrons of gay bars knew when to expect raids, especially at Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village. The management of Stonewall, which mobsters ran, often received a warning when the police would raid the bar. Usually, police would arrive earlier in the evening before a larger crowd came, and resulted in no arrests.³⁶ What made this evening of June 28, 1969, at Stonewall different was that the raid was unknown, and the large amounts of police officers began to make arrests, so the queer and trans

³⁴ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarcerations in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010): 40-41.

³⁵ Jonathan Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside Limited, 1976), 11

³⁶ Martin Duberman, *Stonewall* (New York: Dutton, 1993): 193.

patrons, mostly people of color, resisted.³⁷ This resistance reverberated throughout the rest of the United States; it encouraged queer people to come out, develop social justice organizations that were built from Stonewall and the decades prior through organizations like the Daughters of Bilitis and Mattachine Society in the 1950s. This growth led to the founding of the Gay Liberations Movement and Street Transvestites Action Revolutionaries (STAR) to give a platform for LGBTQ people to demand equality. Uprisings at Stonewall and Compton's Cafeteria Riot happened in the North and the West coast, and these events were catalysts for queer liberation in these regions.

The South also had a distinctive version of a queer uprising in Atlanta, Georgia, that snowballed into broader gay liberation organizing in Atlanta. On August 5, 1969, at the Ansley Mall-Mini Cinema, this instance occurred where queer people gathered to watch a movie titled the "Lonesome Cowboy," which featured queer content.³⁸ Around 9:30 pm, officers from the city and county raided the space where 70 people gathered to watch the film.³⁹ The raid resulted in a mass exit, but with guards stationed at the door, everyone had their I.D.s checked.⁴⁰ One of the patrons, Abby Drue, stated that the officers made her "show my license, my I.D., where I lived, what I was doing." As a lesbian, she also stated

³⁷ *ibid*, 195.

³⁸ Michael Waters. "The Stonewall of the South that History Forgot" *Smithsonian Magazine*, June 25, 2019, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/stonewall-south-history-forgot-180972484/>

³⁹ "Newspaper clipping -- "Raid Closes Cinema, Warhol Film Seized"," *Georgia State University Library Exhibits*, accessed Oct. 12, 2020, <https://exhibits.library.gsu.edu/current/items/show/2399>.

⁴⁰ Waters. "The Stonewall of the South that History Forgot"

the police officer questioned where her husband was and took their pictures.⁴¹ This event was Atlanta's moment to join the burgeoning Gay Liberation Movement.

Though this raid did not result in a multiple-day riot with arrests due to police violence as Stonewall did, it launched Georgia's chapter of the Gay Liberation Front in October 1969.⁴² Gay Liberation Front ignited and pushed LGBTQ identities and culture on display and integrated queer life into society. The chapter in Georgia produced and distributed gay literature in the summer of 1970 and rallied to create the first Pride march in Atlanta in 1971. By 1971, due to state-sanctioned violence, Atlanta's Gay Liberation Front had to challenge policy that criminalized homosexuality.⁴³ The root of this mobilization was not Stonewall but from the frustrations and criminalization of queer people in Atlanta.

While Gay Liberation Fronts existed all across the country, the Georgia chapter faced a more nuanced and multi-faceted challenge that others did not. With the first Pride march came a resurgence of queer folk flocking towards the Atlanta capital. This growth of LGBTQ people in Atlanta pushed gay folks to be politically active, but within that created what Gil C. Robinson states a dichotomy of politics in the gay community. "There are gay people and homosexuals. Homosexuals think their homosexuality is just an incidental part of their life, and gay people tend to vote gay and be politicized. Not the

⁴¹ Patrick Saunders, "'It's a Raid!' Atlanta's Stonewall moment 50 years ago today", *Project Q Magazine*, August 5, 2019, <https://www.projectq.us/its-a-raid-atlantas-stonewall-moment-50-years-ago-today/>.

⁴² Boykin, Berl, interviewed by Andrew Reisinger, November 13, 2017, Great Speckled Bird Oral History Project, Social Change Collection. Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University

⁴³ *ibid.*

homosexuals. They say, ‘I have all the rights I need, and the economy is in horrible shape, so I’ll vote for Reagan.’”⁴⁴

This framing further iterates queer politics in the South that craft and shape a broader understanding of liberation for all people. Robinson showcases how some people were gay, and others were queer. Atlanta’s growth as a queer capital of the South fabricated and laid the groundwork for movement organizing in the 1980s, especially during the rise of the AIDS epidemic.

3.3 ACT UP IN THE 1980S

The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, or ACT UP, was founded in 1987 at the inaction of federal and state governments to educate, advocate, or legislate around the growing AIDS pandemic. By 1981, the United States had its first documented cases of Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS). For the first year of documenting AIDS, many people coined it as “gay plague” or “gay cancer,” a disease that caused gay men to get Kaposi’s sarcoma or KS.⁴⁵ A *New York Times* article documented forty-one homosexual men had cases of a rare and rapidly fatal form of cancer.⁴⁶ Over time, the CDC identified HIV, then AIDS, finding cases in the heterosexual population as early as 1984; meanwhile, gay people continued dying from this novel disease, and the federal government failed to intervene.⁴⁷ ACT UP engaged in creative and public displays of civil disobedience to force government bodies to pay attention and respond.

⁴⁴ Barbara Gervais Street, “The Gaying of Atlanta,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, Dec. 12, 1982.

⁴⁵ “‘Gay Plague’ under study”, *The Greenville News*, July 9, 1982.

⁴⁶ “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals”, *New York Times*, July 3, 1981, <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/07/03/us/rare-cancer-seen-in-41-homosexuals.html>

⁴⁷ Randy Shilts, *And the band played on: politics, people, and the AIDS epidemic* (New York, N.Y. U.S.A: Penguin), 586.

The demands of many ACT UP groups in the North were to educate the public and advocate for federal policies around AIDS Research. Much of this work was using pamphlets and media to spread awareness about how the disease spread. In March 1987, ACT UP NY put pressure on the pharmaceutical companies to stop profiteering off medication necessary for people living with HIV/AIDS.⁴⁸ Their work aligned with the lack of federal response to the AIDS epidemic and rarely focused on the local issues. The 147 chapters often collaborated with the New York chapter to challenge the Reagan administration and its inaction.⁴⁹

However, the Reagan administration largely underfunded and ignored the AIDS epidemic's impact on the United States. By 1987, in Reagan's first speech on AIDS, 36,058 Americans were diagnosed with AIDS, and over 20,000 people had died from the disease.⁵⁰ In his speech, he noted stories of people in rural Kentucky who were diagnosed with AIDS after using dirty needles but failed to name how it impacted the queer community.⁵¹ Reagan's silence and inaction led to the founding of ACT UP and their slogan "Silence=Death."

Compared to the North, the South often advocated and educated people about the AIDS crisis in the 1980s. What differed the Georgia chapter from New York was that much of their organizing was reactionary; Georgia's chapter of ACT UP spent much of their work challenging state legislative policies and dismantling public perception of queer life and AIDS. The Georgia chapter in Atlanta was a prominent force in the South to challenge

⁴⁸ ACT UP NY, <https://actupny.com/actions/>, accessed Nov. 8, 2020.

⁴⁹ Tamar Carroll, *Mobilizing New York: AIDS, Antipoverty, and Feminist Activism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015): 133.

⁵⁰ Shilts, 596.

⁵¹ Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the American Foundation for AIDS Research Awards Dinner", May 31, 1987.

policies around criminalization that would impact people with HIV/AIDS. Much of the work done by Georgia's ACT UP chapter encouraged education about queer lives and challenged misinformation about HIV/AIDS. For example, in posters and flyers, organizers of Georgia's ACT UP chapter informed Black women that they could also contract AIDS to challenge the idea that only gay men can contract it.⁵²

In April 1989, the Atlanta group worked with South Carolina activists to protest a South Carolina Provision that would force people with AIDS to quarantine; due to their rallying, the proposal did not go into law.⁵³ Their protest outside of the South Carolina Statehouse resulted in forty-one arrests; Georgia's ACT UP, along with other southern activists, demanded to create anonymous testing, cease the required testing of people who were perceived to have HIV, and reverse the decision to quarantine people with AIDS.⁵⁴ Due to the misinformation, the police wore rubber gloves as they arrested the protestors, highlighting the significance of educating and advocating for people with HIV/AIDS.⁵⁵

The Atlanta group collaborated and built coalitions with different people and organizations with similar missions. A young gay rights activist and co-founder of the Atlanta ACT UP Chapter, Andrew Wood, notes an example of their collaboration and support of building an AIDS Hospice with Jerusalem House in the Druid Hills/Virginia Highlands area of Atlanta in 1988.⁵⁶ In his oral interview, Wood explains the opposition

⁵² Q085_01_02. Terri Wilder papers, Archives for Research on Women and Gender. Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University.

⁵³ *ibid*

⁵⁴ Dan Hoover, "41 Arrested in protest of AIDS laws" *The Greenville News*, April 21, 1989.

⁵⁵ *ibid*

⁵⁶ Jerusalem House, "History", <https://jerusalemhouse.org/history/>, accessed Nov. 8, 2020.

towards building the hospice and how the public's misconception towards AIDS pushed them to connect with the community. He states:

“... the people who are trying to get Jerusalem house going came to us quietly and privately and said, What can you do to help us, we need to get our message out, and you guys seem to do this pretty well. And we just we don't, we're, even the community at large was not unified behind them. And so, you know, we were happy for this. And we organized, you know, the first thing we did was we organized an information campaign, and a petition drive, and we got the help of the mailman. And those neighborhoods who were carrying petitions and knocking on the doors of the people that we're delivering mail to, to get them to sign the petition to allow Jerusalem house to be built for these people. I mean, it was amazing.”⁵⁷

In New York, St. Vincent's, the first and largest AIDS ward on the east coast, opened four years before Georgia's activists developed the Jerusalem House.⁵⁸ During the 1980s, Georgia's ACT UP chapter, based in Atlanta, was an integral force of queer activism that fought for adequate research and facilities to support people living with HIV/AIDS.

While the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power was mobilizing around federal laws, the U.S. South had statewide policies they were battling. An oppositional force emerged in the Southern region during the 1980s and 1990s, the Christian Right. These individuals and organizations used anti-gay rhetoric against LGBTQ people by promoting family values and the traditional nuclear family. These right-wing evangelical leaders also put social and financial capital towards legislators and policy to support it. North Carolina conservative senator Jesse Helms, whom activists attending the 1993 Creating Change conference mentioned, led anti-LGBTQ conservatism in the South. Helms moved legislation in 1987

⁵⁷ Andrew Wood , interviewed by Andrew Reisinger, June 6, 2014.

⁵⁸ Andrew Boynton, “Remembering St. Vincent's”, *The New Yorker*, May 16, 2013, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/remembering-st-vincents>, accessed Nov. 8, 2020.

to prohibit federal funding of materials that “promote or encourage... homosexual activity.”⁵⁹

By the 1990s, Helms and the Christian Right became even more ingrained in the fabric of North Carolina politics and became a blanket understanding of Southern politics. The opportunity to hold the Creating Change conference in Durham, NC, was to send a message to gays and lesbians everywhere that these spaces do not have to be based in the nation’s largest urban centers to make a difference in the gay rights movement.⁶⁰ With a focus on networking and strategizing how to challenging anti-gay efforts in North Carolina with leaders like Jesse Helms, this sixth annual Creating Change conference was a pivotal shift in national organizations understanding Southern queer activism that was focusing on a more intersectional approach of freedom fighting to create a stronghold of organizing in the South.

3.4 SOUTHERNERS ON NEW GROUND (SONG)

Before Southerners on New Ground’s (SONG) founding in 1993, many Black feminist activists challenged movements to consider the various layers of oppression challenging Black women. A significant symbol of intersectional organizing was the formation of the Combahee River Collective and their 1977 statement. The Combahee River Collective was a collective of Black feminists who created a shared understanding of their politics. The statement forged the development of contemporary Black feminism, issues that arose from organizing as Black women, and their willingness to mobilize for

⁵⁹ Warren J. Blumenfeld, *Looking at Gay and Lesbian Life.: Updated and Expanded Edition.* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 335.

⁶⁰ Noah Bartolucci, “Gay Rights conference scheduled”, *The News and Observer*, Oct. 23, 1993, accessed Nov. 7, 2020.

specific political issues.⁶¹ In the section on “Problems with Organizing Black Feminists,” it states:

“The psychological toll of being a Black woman and the difficulties this presents in reaching political consciousness and doing political work can never be underestimated. There is a very low value placed upon Black women’s psyches in this society, which is both racist and sexist. As an early group member once said, “We are all damaged people merely by virtue of being Black women.” We are dispossessed psychologically and on every other level, and yet we feel the necessity to struggle to change the condition of all Black women. In “A Black Feminist’s Search for Sisterhood,” Michele Wallace arrives at this conclusion:

We exist as women who are Black who are feminists, each stranded for the moment, working independently because there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle—because, being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one else has done: we would have to fight the world. [2]”⁶²

This statement was a stamp of Black feminism and identity politics. It guided organizers nationally from the 1980s and 1990s in tackling conservatism and the War on Drugs. Additionally, the Combahee River Collective’s work led to the establishment of organizations that challenged various oppressive issues rather than single-issue struggles, which plagued the queer movement. In this framework, an organization like Southerners on New Ground or SONG was able to forge a pathway for queer liberation in the South.

The founding of Southerners on New Ground (SONG) in 1993 marked a significant turn towards an intersectional approach and fight for justice in the U.S. South. SONG came out of the 1993 Lesbian and Gay Task Force’s annual conference called “Creating Change.” This conference mobilized LGBTQ leaders across the country, but this conference specifically focused on social justice fights related to queerness. This single-issue tactic and approach frustrated several women at the annual convening, and through

⁶¹ Combahee River Collective, “Combahee River Collective Statement”, 1974.

⁶²ibid.

that frustration, an organization emerged. Founder Pat Hussain, a Black lesbian from Georgia, recalled that throughout organizing, she claimed, “I could work on civil rights... or I could work on issues of feminism...but they weren’t woven together.” At the height of the Gay Liberation Front and ACT UP, she noted the racism and sexism in the gay liberation movement spaces.⁶³ Mab Segrest, a lesbian labor organizer from Kentucky, spoke about NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) at the Creating Change conference. In her speech, Segrest welcomed people to Durham, where the conference relocated. Segrest closed her speech, stating:

This re-energized movement will be, in the Suzanne Pharr’s eloquent terms, “not a wedge, but a bridge”; not a point of division, but expansion and connection. To those who insist on denying us our full humanity, we will insist on the sacred humanity of all people. A bridge, not wedge. A bridge, not a wedge. It has a nice ring to it. We can say it like a mantra when we feel the Right getting too hot.”⁶⁴

Segrest’s concluding remarks of her speech above drive her passion for intersectional organizing and her vision of connecting gay issues to broader issues related to racism, classism, and sexism. Many of the attendees stated that NAFTA was an economic issue, not a gay issue, and challenged Segrest’s remarks. However, other progressives in the audience, including Mandy Carter and Pat Hussain, were called and moved by the intersectional issues approach, banded together to discuss the possibilities of becoming Southerners on New Ground or SONG.⁶⁵

SONG was intentional in its inception. The statement of purpose came out of building transformative models of organizing in the South. As three Black lesbians and

⁶³ Levenstein, p. 168

⁶⁴ “A Bridge Not a Wedge” *Liberation in Our Lifetime: 20 Years of Southerners on New Ground*. (Virginia: Branner Printing, 2015), 63

⁶⁵ Levenstein, 169.

three white lesbians, the six founders of SONG knew that it was not about being Southern, or gay, or lesbian... they wanted organizers to see the connections of their social justice struggles.⁶⁶As a region, they saw historically how the South had been the “fault line” for social movement success, so rather than become a national organization, they stayed in the South, a place they felt “most at home.”⁶⁷

In their first organizing efforts, the Mount Olive Pickle Boycott proved the significance and importance of intersectional organizing. The boycott was in solidarity with immigrant farmworkers in eastern North Carolina. According to Mandy Carter, she reflected that:

“We had to intentionally go to somewhere else that wasn’t just about being gay, and that let people understand that being gay isn’t just about being gay. It could be around broader issues than sexual orientation. Also, for a lot of groups like the farm labor groups, there are a lot of gay and lesbian members, and this approach lets them bring all of who they are to what they do. That has been a touchstone for SONG.”⁶⁸

This touchstone has been central since SONG’s inception and the growth of LGBTQ organizing in the South. As a movement that encompasses an individual’s whole selves, it provides many entry points and avenues for organizing, extending Ella Baker’s vision and central to queer political organizing in the South.

The most integral aspect of SONG’s work is how they worked on relationship building and fostering a community for queer people in the South.⁶⁹ In the 1980s and 1990s, Pat Hussain, much like Faith Holsaert in the 60s, spent many moments grabbing snacks in

⁶⁶ “Mandy Carter Interview by Rose Norman” *Liberation in Our Lifetime: 20 Years of Southerners on New Ground*. (Virginia: Branner Printing, 2015), 19.

⁶⁷ Wesley Hogan, *On the Freedom Side* (University of North Carolina Press, 2019): 44-45

⁶⁸ Mandy Carter, interviewed by Rose Norman, March 26, 2013.

⁶⁹ Levenstein, 178.

cars and suffering from headaches because she was too busy to eat. Upon founding SONG, Hussain said, “eating food became a force of organizing.”⁷⁰ In describing the spaces that SONG leadership were able to foster, historian Wesley Hogan notes that: “Music, spoken word, poetry, theater, dance, food, visual art—SONG committed to modeling all of these artistic forms “as a tool for social change and bringing people together across difference.”⁷¹ These modes of expression brought about cultural change and gave queer organizers a physical space to practice authenticity.

⁷⁰ Levenstein, 174.

⁷¹ Hogan, 49.

CHAPTER 4

THE WELCOME TABLE: AUTHENTICITY IN THE MOVEMENT

Music is the catalyst and root of mobilizing and organizing against oppression. DuBois exclaims that Black music articulates a message of the slave to the world; he goes on to explain that these songs also tell of death and longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways.⁷² This framework displays the ways Black music has always been a tool that sharpens authenticity and the realities of one's existence while also dreams of the possibilities of liberation. This section uses "Welcome Table," a gospel song rooted in the enslavement of Black people. The chorus states, "I'm gonna sit at the welcome table/I'm gonna sit at the welcome table one of these days, hallelujah/I'm gonna sit at the welcome table/Sit at the welcome table one of these days, one of these days."⁷³ The welcome table's symbolism is a place for truth, reconciliation, and even dreaming for a better future.⁷⁴ LGBTQ activists in the late 20th and early 21st century executed is the creation of a community in moments of isolation, fear, and oppression.

By the late 1990s and early 2000s, amidst SONG's organizing efforts, many people could find a space at the Welcome Table; to show up as their whole selves and build community in isolation. SONG worked to develop projects that constructed collective

⁷² W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (New York: Dover Publications, 1994): 157.

⁷³ "The Welcome Table"

⁷⁴ Priscilla McCutchen, "The 'Radical' Welcome Table: Faith, Social Justice, and the Spiritual Geography of Mother Emanuel in Charleston, South Carolina" *Southeastern Geographer*, Vol. 56, 1: 2016, 18.

power and prioritized relationship building in their early organizing efforts. During their 1998 People of Color Leadership Retreat, SONG fused relationship building, popular education, arts, and self-reflection at an Arkansas conference center. At this weekend retreat, twenty-six participants shared stories about moments in their lives that fundamentally changed them. These queer organizers could envision a place for themselves in the movement, a seat at the welcome table. One participant noted, “SONG operates by a format that I can only describe by building family into the movement. When you step into a SONG space, it’s like going back to your favorite aunt’s house for a special family gathering full of the type of deep conversations and face-splitting laughter you’ve longed for all year.” Another participant left the weekend feeling “happy and overjoyed to be gay.”⁷⁵

This radical joy makes Southern queer activism persist and thrive and makes an organization like SONG historically significant. Queer people, because of the efforts of activism, crafted out space where LGBTQ people can build community in the Bible Belt. By shifting away from the isolationism and shame of being LGBTQ, queer organizers in this retreat for people of color created community, built camaraderie, and envisioned a queer affirming South. Rather than spending and rooting these retreats in collective trauma, SONG supported organizers by going beyond the interlocking systems of oppression and finding joy in being their authentic selves.

In spaces where black and brown bodies gather to produce rich and profound moments of black love and laughter, which according to Javon Johnson, “lifts everyone slightly above the present and allows us to feel, to know in our bones, what black utopia

⁷⁵ Levenstein, 178

might be like.”⁷⁶ This joy, the joy of Black folk, gives weight to actual liberation and freedom. While this radical act of joy exists on a national level, what makes the South different is the possibilities of dreaming amidst the last gasps and physical manifestations of white supremacy. For every statue built by the Daughters of the Confederacy, every plantation still perpetuating Antebellum lifestyle as genteel, and to the continued lynching of Black trans women, queer activists in the South still translate fear, rage, and joy into something wonderful and continue to forge a queer South.

⁷⁶Johnson, 180.

CHAPTER 5

THE POSSIBILITIES OF A QUEER SOUTH

The South is a political battleground, fueled with the cycle of progression and regression, but what makes it significant is the possibilities of what could happen when queer liberation releases the South from the clutches of white supremacy and heteronormativity. As a region, the South is continuously a pinnacle and example of what the worst of the country has to offer, and in defense, blames the North for its issues or deflects by examining issues in the Northeast and West.⁷⁷ However, in this denial, omission of guilt, and being a queer region in the context of the United States, the South continues to be a perpetrator of domination and hegemony of “normativity.”

The model and growth of queer political organizing in the South, from 1960-2000, examines the change of movement over time and present visions of liberation that can happen. The 1960 founding of SNCC and the rise of the gay liberation movement in the 1960s informed the intersectional approach to queer politics. The political shift from “homosexual” as a lifestyle to “gay” as a politic became quintessential in thinking broadly about activism and mobilizing, as seen through ACT UP in Georgia and the founding of Southerners on New Ground (SONG) in North Carolina. These organizers and organizations drastically shifted the landscape of the South and crafted tactics, strategies, and ideologies rooted in Black Feminism and “gay or queer as political.” From the seeds

⁷⁷ Angie Maxwell, *The Indicted South: Public Criticism, Southern Inferiority, and the Politics of Whiteness*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014: 3.

planted by organizers like Ella Baker, Faith Holsaert, Mandy Carter, Mab Segrest, Pat Hussian, and countless others, Southern states, like Georgia and North Carolina, began to shape into a queer South.

A product of this radical queer activism is the development of political space where folks can live their authentic truths in a region that obstructs the livelihood of queer people. As a prime example, SONG strived to center relationship building as a tool of mobilizing and as a way of connecting with folks across the South. Breaking bread over food and setting a welcome table where folks can exist without fear could not have come to fruition without Ella Baker's vision of SNCC, organizing work put forth throughout the 1970s and 1980s to combat issues related to healthcare, and the founding of SONG out of the Creating Change Conference.

This piece's moments quilted together display a movement, a necessary struggle to create and cultivate a queer South. Moreover, much like a quilt, in this queer South, nothing truly matches, the patchwork is tricky to piece together, and parts of it become frayed. In the vein of radical queer politics, Southern activism that challenges normative structures of the South worked to thread the needle and put together this queer South. For many Southern queer folks, this worn quilt has patches of memories we want to forget but cannot, of hopes, dreams, and the echoing voices of our ancestors creeping through Spanish moss. It is in their echoes that we hold onto this quilt and ensure that their legacy remains, that their struggle fuels us, and we add to this quilt to continue to shape a queer South.

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