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# The South Ain't a Lost Cause: A Counterstory

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE SOUTHERNER IDENTITY

When I think of the South, I think sweet tea, grits, New Orleans, hip-hop and rap, queer communities, the Civil Rights Movement, and the New Migration of young Black people moving to the South. I think about the place I call home and about my loving family. I think about the wonderful friends I made in college who have become just as close as family. I think about the educators who made an impact on my life. I think about all the customs and traditions embedded in Southern culture—saying “please and thank you,” wearing church hats for Sunday Best, and serving deviled eggs at every family gathering. While these are the things I consider when thinking about what it means to be a Southerner, it's not necessarily the dominant narrative. If I were to ask non-Southerners about the South, they might say they think of religious indoctrination, hillbillies, incest, conservative ideologies, and it being the embarrassing part of the country. While these may be the images that come to mind to non-Southerners, they aren't the images I immediately think of.

A fond memory I have about being a queer Southerner is when I was the president of my college's LGBTQ organization and I was tasked with organizing trips to Pride in Atlanta, Georgia. What was so special about organizing this trip was recreating the feelings I felt when I attended my first Pride event—feelings of radical love, acceptance, family, and total self-expression. While the political rhetoric and policies in the South may seek to silence and erase queer people, these attempts do not refute the existence of queer Southerners and the love and acceptance we have for one another. Because Southern Right-wing rhetoric and policies seek to silence and erase us, Pride is that much more important. Growing up in the closet in the Bible Belt led me to believe I was one of few queer people living in the South; however, attending a Southern Pride festival and parade disillusioned that belief. I sought to recreate those feelings in other Southern queer college students, especially ones who had never been to Pride—and many who had grown up in Right-wing religious households never being able to express their queerness or see other queer Southerners. When I saw the look

### Abstract

With so many dominant narratives about the South being “the embarrassing part of the country” because of its seemingly conservative politics, it's easy to think of this region of the United States as a place beyond redemption. In this piece, I describe the current state of Southern politics (e.g., voter suppression, gerrymandering, and other Right-wing attacks), and how these policies have led to a misleading narrative of the South that ignores the political work of Black queer Southerners. After an analysis of Southern political discourse, I craft a story about a Black queer community organizer tasked with amplifying the voices of marginalized Southerners during a presidential election for a campaign that wants to write off the South for its conservative policies. My counterstory not only rejects the majoritarian narrative that erases the progressive work of Black queer activism, but also provides a heuristic for exposing racist power structures and politically investing in marginalized communities.

### Keywords

critical race theory, Southern politics, counterstory, activism, Intersectionality

in those first-year college students' eyes that said, "We have *this* in the South?" I knew I had not only countered the narrative they had heard about our region but had also provided them a space to experience the very love and acceptance queer Southerners show each other. Even though these experiences are integral to forming queer Southerners' identities, they are overshadowed by the more Right-wing political discourses of the South.

Southern politics tend to make headlines for their conservatism. After Virginia Republican governor Glenn Youngkin's inauguration, he "signed 11 executive orders on his first day in office, including one . . . banning the teaching of critical race theory" (Dress). Georgia passed a new election law that would "require a photo ID to vote absentee by mail, cut the period to request an absentee ballot and place limits on ballot drop boxes . . . It would also make it illegal to hand out water to voters [in] line. In recent elections, Georgia voters, particularly those in Black neighborhoods, have waited many hours in line to vote" (Berry). In Alabama, "Another bill seeking to restrict teaching on race, gender and religious concepts in Alabama public institutions is now under consideration in the state legislature [and] also prohibits higher education institutions from promoting or advancing those concepts and allows instructors to be fired if caught doing so" (Griesbach). A lot of people tend to think of the South as beyond repair, or for a lack of better words, a lost cause. My use of "lost cause" bears no connection to the pseudohistorical denialism that promotes the idea that the Confederacy was fought for heroic reasons and not slavery. My use of "lost cause" when referencing the South is about the ever-growing mentality of Southern progressives and Leftists who do not see the South as a place of failure. My use refers to a movement of Southerners who are actively working to enact racial justice and counter the discourses about the South not being worth fighting for. With Southern politicians attempting to ban critical race theory, Black history, and LGBT information, countering dominant narratives is crucial for social justice.

## POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

I come to counterstory as a Black queer Southerner with the intent to purposefully counter majoritarian narratives about the South that not only erase the work and culture of Black Southerners but also continue racist laws and policies like voter suppression. I have had several conversations with people who view the South as an inherently racist place void of progressive and antiracist ideas instead of a place in deep need of political investment. Whenever people inform me that the South is a racist place, I like to remind them that the Civil Rights Movement was born out of the South and that several of our civil rights leaders are Southerners. I argue that the South is not a place of only white people but a place where Black queer voices are often silenced, erased, and in deep need of amplification. This silencing is why counterstory is so crucial in conversations like the one about voter suppression. These majoritarian narratives that the South is an inherently racist place void

of progressive people prevent political engagement necessary to dismantling systems of oppression that continue to silence and erase nonwhite, non-cis-heteronormative voices and experiences. Counterstory allows me to take those experiences of Black queer Southerners—such as my own—and amplify them as a way to not only counter the majoritarian narratives that exclude us but also to use them as a heuristic for what we should be doing to dismantle the very systems silencing disenfranchised Southerners.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*, Aja Martinez defines a dominant narrative as "a majoritarian story [that] distorts and silences the experiences of people of color and others distanced from the norms such stories reproduce" (23). Stereotypes about the South lead to these kinds of majoritarian narratives that erase the very marginalized communities people assume the South seeks to oppress. In their YouTube video, AJ+ quotes H. Gibbs Knotts, an academic researching and writing about Southern politics: "Six years ago it [identifying as a Southerner] would have meant probably you're a white southerner and probably you are a supporter of the current racial structure where African Americans were relegated to second-class citizens" ("What Makes The South" 00:48-01:01). With so many conversations about Confederate flags and statues representing "southern pride" or "southern heritage," acknowledging and understanding the identities of Black Southerners is key to countering these dominant narratives seeking to erase Blackness and queerness in the South. Countering these dominant narratives would include amplifying the cultural impact Black and queer Southerners have had on the South. Additional countering would include reiterating the social justice and political work enacted in the South that seeks to further liberate Black and queer people.

Because "more than 55% of the country's Black population" lives in the South, I argue that the South is not a lost cause ("What Makes the South" 05:03). Additionally, to address the sociopolitical concerns happening in the South, we must first counter the dominant narrative that the South is a place of whiteness, heteronormativity, and conservative ideology. For this essay, I have decided to counter this narrative via a critical race theory (CRT) methodology and method known as *counterstorytelling*. CRT itself is a legal framework used "to focus legal discourse on issues of power, race and racism to address power imbalances, especially as these are racialized" (Martinez 6-7). Martinez also asserts that CRT attempts to "develop a jurisprudence that accounts for the role of racism in American law and that works toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating all forms of subordination" (7). Stories about the South being a lost cause directly ignore the conditions that silence people of color. Voter suppression laws, gerrymandering, de facto school segregation, mass incarceration, and poverty are all structures of racism that potentially lead to red states. To perpetuate the narrative that the South is a lost cause

would completely ignore the work of “organizers in Georgia, many of them Black women, who have spent years trying to get people to the polls” and the “restrictions designed to keep Black voters away” (North). Because racist structures like voter suppression directly lead to majoritarian narratives about the South, providing counterstories will decenter whiteness and better expose the structures that lead to these majoritarian narratives.

In *Counterstory*, Martinez explains the different tenets of CRT. The tenets of CRT that engage with the South being a lost-cause narrative are “challenge[s] to dominant ideologies,” “intersectionality and antiessentialism,” and “centrality of experiential knowledge” (9). A challenge to dominant ideologies “questions arguments against policies [. . . and] practices that claim neutrality . . . while justifying a passing over of people of color” (11). The problem with challenging dominant ideologies about the South “resides in the resistance met from those who invoke abstract liberal concepts like equal opportunity” (11). Assuming states vote red because they vote against their own interests proposes the idea that everyone has the right and access to vote to begin with and ignores racist structures like voter suppression, mass incarceration, and gerrymandering. Concerning intersectionality and antiessentialism, Martinez states that “CRT denounces essentialism, countering culturally racist assumptions that attempt to describe or explain socially constructed racial groups as homogenous in the way they think, act, and believe” (14). I apply this tenet to narratives that categorize the entirety of the South as a racist place filled with uneducated people, which completely ignores populations of educated Black people doing antiracist work. Finally, Martinez states that because

white people do not often acknowledge the experiences of people of color, the critics recognize and developed the methodology of counterstory to relate the racial realities of people of color while also providing methods for minoritized people to challenge “the myths, presuppositions, and received wisdoms that make up the common culture about race.” (15)

I argue that the narrative of the South being a lost cause stems from both the non-Southern Left’s assessment of people of color’s political work and experiences and the Right’s seeming ownership of South. Both sides propagate this erasure. Counterstories rely on the “centrality of experiential knowledge” from people of color, and my counterstory relies on my experiential knowledge as a Black queer Southerner participating in sociopolitical work. Counterstory operates as both methodology and method. As a methodology, it is “the verb, the process, the critical race theory-informed justification for the work” (2). Counterstory as a method is “the noun, the genre, the research tool” (2). She notes that as methodology, counterstory “exposes research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of color” and “recognizes that experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate and critical to understanding racism that is often well disguised in the rhetoric of normalized structural values and practices” (3). Martinez claims that the “rubric for counterstory resides in whether the story is informed by the tenets toward advancing a better understanding of how law or policy

operate; it is “not to vent or rant or be an exhibitionist regarding one’s own racial struggle” (qtd. in Martinez 16).

My counterstory as method is a narrated dialogue featuring composite characters. Like many other scholars using counterstory, my characters “represent more than just a single individual and are intentionally crafted as composites that primarily embody an ideology as informed by a “*trensa*” of personal experiences” (Martinez 25). My composite character Laura embodies white feminism, performative activism, and northern liberals, and in the dialogue, she represents the student. My composite character Haven embodies Black feminist epistemologies and Southern Leftist organizers and is the teacher—outside the traditional classroom setting—in the dialogue. Both composite characters are used to understand the concept of intersectionality, specifically the power relationships among race, class, and gender, by showing how their different and intersecting identities inform their politics. Furthermore, the characters are contextualized with the labor of Black women organizers—the community from which intersectionality was originally coined. I choose narrated dialogue as my method for counterstorytelling because it allows me the “opportunity to develop [my] ideas through exchanges between characters that represent and voice contending viewpoints about contemporary issues” (34-35). Because counterstory should be theory informed, my counterstory can be analyzed through intersectionality and Tamika Carey’s rhetorics of impatience. The exigence for rhetorical impatience is the discursive process known as *temporal hegemony*, which Carey defines as “a system . . . where ideological and material structures converge into a culture of hostility that pushes equity for a group further out of reach” (270). Rhetorics of impatience are

performances of frustration or dismissal and time-based arguments that reflect or pursue haste for the purpose of discipline. Enacted through bodily, tonal, and verbal indicators and arguments of exasperation or displeasure, they reveal how rhetors perceive self and community interpretive mandates or black feminist/womanist ethics. They reflect knowledge making traditions and discursive practices that, among Black women, involve “talking back,” “turning it out” and “calling a thing a thing,” or radical truth-telling, and they reveal a distrust of circular discussion, deflection, or distraction. (270)

Additionally, my counterstory subscribes to the following CRT tenets: permanence of race and racism, challenges to dominant ideologies, intersectionality and antiessentialism, and centrality of experiential knowledge and/or unique voices of color.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 2017, when Roy Moore ran on the Republican ticket to become the Alabama US senator during the special senate election, plenty of non-Southerners had something to say. This special election between Moore—who had been accused of sexual misconduct by multiple women between the ages of fourteen and

twenty-two—and Doug Jones, a former US attorney for Alabama who prosecuted two Ku Klux Klan (KKK) members for bombing the 16th Street Baptist Church, caused quite the controversy. Several called on Alabama to do the right thing and not elect an alleged pedophile. For example, on *The View*, Sunny Hostin stated, “History is watching. Don’t be on the wrong side of history” (“Roy Moore’s Wife Kayla” 02:50-02:54). *Vice News* organized a GOP focus group of 12 Alabama republicans and questioned why they were supporting Roy Moore despite the allegations. Comments under the video say things like, “And yet without fail the people of that state continue to put the exact same people in power. I don’t even know if they expect change or if they’re just comfortable living in what is continually statistically one of the worst states you could live in,” and “You are now entering Alabama . . . turn you clock back 100 years” (“Why These Alabama Voters”). *AJ+* released a similar video to determine why some Alabamians supported Moore. The title of the video is “Why Alabama Supports Roy Moore,” and one comment under the video answers, “Inbreeding and Jesus is my guess?” Other comments include, “People in Alabama can’t think for themselves. I’m glad I live in Virginia,” and “Its Alabama folks. They are not exactly the sharpest tools in the shed folks. Generations of inbreeding will do this” (“Why Alabama Supports Roy Moore”). Many were not hopeful that Alabama would elect Doug Jones, the Democratic candidate, because Alabama has historically been a red state, and before Jones won the election, no Democrat had held that senate seat in 25 years. Even *Saturday Night Live (SNL)* parodied the special election, noting the ridiculous idea that Alabama would elect an alleged pedophile over the attorney who prosecuted two KKK murderers. In an *SNL* cold open, Kate McKinnon plays Jeff Sessions, and Mikey Day plays Roy Moore. In the skit, McKinnon says to Day, “I’m Alabama, but you sir, are *too* Alabama” (“Roy Moore & Jeff Sessions” 03:28-03:33). This narrative perpetuates a stereotype of the South, specifically that Alabamians can excuse Jeff Sessions’s controversies of election campaign violations, ties to Russia, and racist history as an attorney general even though prominent Black legislators advocated against his appointment during Trump’s administration because Sessions “used the n-word and joked about the [KKK]” (Sakuma). Roy Moore is not the only politician who had people thinking the South was a lost cause.

While Jones was able to win the special election, he did not win re-election during the 2020 senate election against Tommy Tuberville. In fact, Jones did much worse than he did against Moore. In the 2020 election, Jones was only able to collect 39% of the vote, whereas in the 2017 election, he collected 50% of the vote. Even though Tuberville opposed abortion, denied the science of climate change, and allied himself with Donald Trump, he did not have any sexual misconduct allegations. Additionally, he and Jones campaigned in the middle of a pandemic, which was certainly affected by people dying from COVID and the complications of mail-in voting. Once Tuberville was elected, and he began speaking more to the public, his lack of political training was clear, which only exacerbated the “South is a lost cause” narrative. Even Stephen King

perpetuated this narrative, writing on Twitter, “Tommy Tuberville wouldn’t even debate Doug Jones. Hey, Alabama, do you know a chickenshit when you see one? Or—ha-ha—when you DON’T see one?” (@StephenKing). Someone replied to King’s tweet, saying, “They almost voted in a child molester so I doubt they care about cowardice” (@ruberryfinn). The tweeter, @ruberryfinn, implies Alabamians do not care about cowardice or child molestation. This narrative that both King and the replier perpetuate is one that situates Alabama as a state of immorality and ignorance. Narratives like these incorrectly overgeneralize and essentialize the South and help extend the myth that it is an inherently white-supremacist and politically ignorant region.

This essentialism of course ignores the fact that 96% of the Black vote went to Doug Jones and that Black people make up 26% of Alabama’s population. This distinction is important to note because in some northern states that have the same, or close to the same, population as Alabama, Black people do not even make up 3% of the population. In a Facebook video, Trae Crowder, author of *The Liberal Redneck Manifesto: Draggin’ Dixie Outta the Dark*, asks a question Southerners hear often: “Why [do] people where [we’re] from vote against [our] own self-interest?” This question, which Crowder investigates, is a question fueled by ignorance of Southern politics and by a blatant disregard for the work people of color, women, queer populations, and other marginalized communities engage in to amplify silenced voices and to promote progressive politics. Additionally, this question, and all the discourses surrounding Alabama politics, is reflective of a larger issue: the dominant majoritarian narrative circulating about the South.

## COUNTERSTORY

*Y’all d’ve Been Flipped These Southern States Had Y’all Listened to Black Folks*

My eyes drifted to the projector screen as I watched the slideshow change from the title slide to the “introductions icebreaker” slide. It called for us to pair up with a person sitting next to us and briefly introduce ourselves. I looked around the room—predominantly white—full of campaign staffers working for the Biden campaign. The campaign staffer leading this workshop encouraged us to spend a few minutes introducing ourselves and told us we would come back as a larger group to discuss our first assignments.

“Hi,” said a soft voice. I turned to see a white woman with brown eyes and long, straight, dark brown hair in a “Nevertheless, She Persisted” t-shirt. On her shirt were three buttons: a “Joe Biden 4 President” button, a “Love is Love” button, and a “BLM” button. “I’m Laura. My pronouns are she/hers.” She held out her hand for me to shake.

I took her hand and shook it. “Hi, I’m Haven. My pronouns are they/them.”

“Oh, cool! Are you nonbinary?” she asked in a more excited tone.

I chuckled and nodded. For most people it would be obvious I was queering my gender expression. I was a tall Black person wearing a “Biden 2020” t-shirt with a black pencil skirt. My scruffy beard sat below my large pink eyeglasses. “Yes, I am.”

“That’s so great. I love that for you.” Laura crossed her legs. “So, have you worked on a campaign before?”

“I actually haven’t,” I said to her. “I recently graduated college—degree in political science—and right out of college I got a job working as a community organizer for an advocacy group in my home state.”

Laura’s eyes widened with more excitement. “Oh wow! I also just graduated with a degree in political science from Columbia University. While I was in college, I worked on Hillary Clinton’s campaign as well. Where did you attend?”

“I went to the University of Alabama.”

Laura seemed perplexed. “What made you decide to attend that college?”

“Well, I’m originally from Alabama,” I said. “It’s where I currently work. I took a flight here to DC.”

“Oh wow, you’re from Alabama. What is that like? I can only imagine.” She let out a sigh and shook her head. “That last election you guys had was rough. An alleged pedophile? I mean, come on, that’s wild.”

I wanted to roll my eyes, but I contained myself with a grin. “I like it there. All of my folks currently live there, so whenever my job flies me out to DC, I get a li’l homesick. The food there is great, and so is the culture.”

She nodded, looking somewhat concerned. “That’s good to hear. I guess I was more so thinking about all the racist religious stuff happening down there, especially since Trump was elected.”

I slowly nodded, wanting to know what exactly she was trying to imply about my home. We were speaking about two different aspects of Alabama. I didn’t get a chance to ask any follow-up questions about our conversation because our attention was redirected towards the projector screen that had once again changed slides. Now we would be focusing on our assignments—canvassing. Laura and I had been assigned to a group to work on canvassing in the state of Alabama. As we were gathering our belongings to leave the workshop, Laura tapped my shoulder.

“Have you ever done canvassing before?” she asked.

“I have for the advocacy organization that I work for, but never for a political campaign.”

She shrugged. “I’ve done it before with Hillary Clinton’s campaign. I had a friend who was canvassing in northern Alabama, and she told me it was a complete waste of her time and eventually she just gave up.”

“Why’s that?” I inquired as we walked towards the door.

Laura chuckled. “Oh, I don’t need to *whitesplain* it to you, Haven. Alabama’s a red state. It was never going to Hillary anyway. It’s nowhere near being close to being a swing state, so there’s not even a good rationale for us doing canvassing work there. We should be focusing our attention elsewhere.”

I sighed softly to myself. This was certainly going to be a long canvassing assignment, but maybe it would also be a learning moment for Laura.

“Well, I for one am excited about getting the opportunity to canvas in Alabama. There’s a huge queer population and Black and brown population, and it’ll be good for them to know that there are people on Biden’s campaign who care about them.”

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Returning to Alabama would certainly be nothing new for me, as I was born and raised there. As we took a plane to Alabama, I reflected on Laura’s friend who had campaigned for Hillary Clinton in northern Alabama. I knew from the election map that most of the counties notably went to Donald Trump. Laura told me she had known about Cullman County being labeled a sundown town and wondered how 1% of the population was made up of Black people. As I was eating my complimentary pretzels on the flight, her comment made me think about my biracial college friend Jared, who was born and raised in Cullman. As I gazed out the plane’s window, I thought about that 1% of Black people—those two hundred something Black people (United States). I too wondered why they lived in Cullman. Was it family? Was it a job? Was there some other socioeconomic factor not allowing them to move somewhere else. Jared was half Black/half white and had been raised by the white side of his family in Cullman, and despite being raised in a city noted as being a sundown town and voting overwhelmingly for Trump in the 2016 election, Jared was one of the most politically active Leftists I knew. He hadn’t been living in Cullman during the 2016 election, but if he had been, I’m sure he would have been pissed to know a group of canvassers skipped over his town because it was historically red. He also would have been offended if someone had claimed he voted against his own interests or that he almost elected an alleged pedophile simply because of his location.

When the plane landed and we walked through the Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport, Laura began telling me about her career. "I work as a policy director for Planned Parenthood. It just seemed like the most reasonable job to go into. At Columbia, my junior and senior year, I was the president of College Democrats, and I did a lot of work for that organization to help make school policies at Columbia more equitable."

I smiled as we reached baggage claim. "That's great! I didn't get involved in many clubs in college, but I did help protest to stop Milo Yiannopoulos from speaking on our campus. We had an alt-right group start at UA, and they wanted to book him to speak."

"That's terrible," she said. "Where did you say you worked again?"

"Sorry, I didn't tell you. I work as a community organizer for the Southern Poverty Law Center."

"Oh neat," she said. "I think I've heard of them! What kind of work do you do?"

"I mainly work with the lawyers and civil rights cases occurring in different Southern states," I said. I grabbed my suitcase off the conveyor belt. "My own work with the center is helping litigate white-supremacist cases while also promoting racial-justice educational programs."

"Wow," Laura replied. "I didn't know the work was that extensive."

"The center was founded in the 70s and started as a law firm to prosecute the KKK and has since expanded," I said as we were exiting the airport.

Our first activity for that day was a meeting in Montgomery, the state's capital. Laura and I were sharing a hotel in Birmingham, but we had a driver who was working for Biden's campaign in Alabama. He picked us up at the airport. I felt the wet humid air grace my face as we exited the terminal and got into the car. Our drive to Montgomery was about an hour and a half. We listened to 95.7 JAMZ.

"It's nice to meet you," said our driver. "Where are y'all coming from?"

"I'm originally from New York. I work as a policy director for Planned Parenthood in the central New York area," Laura said, looking out the window. "I previously worked on Hillary's campaign."

"Oh cool," our driver said. "I volunteered for her. What about you?"

I saw his eyes in the rearview mirror. "I'm originally from here and still live here. I fly back and forth to DC because of my job with the Southern Poverty Law Center."

"Nice. So do y'all think Biden has a good chance of winning?"

It was late January, but it still felt too close to call in my opinion. After suffering four years of Donald Trump and seeing the growing emergence of his supporters and white nationalists, I wasn't too convinced.

"I really think he has a good shot," Laura said. "Our goal for this campaign is to inspire people that he's going to heal the soul of America. Trump has obviously done a horrible job as president, and I think our job as campaigners is to ensure that the more moderate Republicans who don't like Trump don't vote for him. That's our best shot at getting Biden elected."

I was still looking outside the window at other cars as we sped down the interstate. "I think his best shot at getting elected is getting the Black vote (Ray). Granted, I'm a little uncomfortable about his past and about how Democrats think Black folks are obligated to elect them since we, historically, tend to vote blue."

I could see Laura slowly nodding in my peripheral vision. "I agree the African American community is immensely important in helping elect Democrats, but I think the real concern are the never-Trumpers. We know, just based off history, statistics, and polls, that African Americans are going to vote for Joe Biden. He has *that* part of the vote." She paused, trying to choose her words carefully. "But I think it would still be unclear on who would win if Biden didn't at least try to reach out to that large voting bloc that is moderate Republicans and conservatives or Independents who don't normally vote blue but also don't want to vote for Trump. Studies show they're likely to stay home. We're here to get out the vote—encourage them to vote for Biden."

Laura waited for my reply, but I had spent so many years in college arguing on social media with conservatives from my home state on AL.com that I didn't have the energy to even reply to Laura about my disagreement. I felt our goal should be ensuring voter access for the many communities of color who were facing voter suppression, but after battling conservatives about voter suppression, I was exhausted from trying to get any white person—liberal or conservative—to understand the significance of getting communities of color to participate in civic engagement like voting.

She continued. "While I was in college, working towards my degree in political science, I took a course on voting and American politics and we talked about the effects of the 2016 election and how more Democrats should reconfigure their campaign strategies for more middle-of-the-road voters, specifically people who may be Independents but vote red."

I finally looked away from the windshield of the car. "I disagree," I said. "I feel like the largest voting bloc are people who don't even have the right or access to vote to begin with. My sister works an hourly-wage job. I don't. I'm salaried, so whenever I take off to go

stand in line at the polls to vote, I still get paid. My sister has to request off, and because she's not on the clock, she doesn't get paid. Because she doesn't want to lose money, she usually ends up going after work, the time most hourly workers go vote. During the 2016 election, she stood in line for three hours. And if so many polling places in communities of color hadn't been closed down, she wouldn't have had to wait that long in line to vote, whereas some white people can vote in like six minutes" (Fowler).

"Well, I guess I didn't think about it from that perspective," said Laura.

"I took a Black feminist theory class," I told her. "In it we talked about a lot of different progressive movements leaving out Black women because the movements don't account for the overlapping identities Black women possess. Sometimes white feminists don't account for race, and antiracist activists don't account for gender. When feminists don't account for race, they don't help women of color, only white women. When antiracists don't account for gender, they don't help women of color, only men of color. Even though they're progressive movements, they can still preserve racism and sexism (Crenshaw 1242-1243). When you took your voting class, did y'all discuss Kimberlé Crenshaw?"

"No, I don't think so," said Laura. "But I know of her from social media. She was cited as one of the people feminists should read."

I nodded. "Crenshaw is someone I would recommend reading whenever you get around to it. She has a lot to say about the relationship among gender, race, and class—all of which, when considered, can help ensure more equitable voter access."

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Laura and I met some higher-ups in the Biden campaign staff who were specifically working in Alabama. Then we went back to our hotel and got a good night's rest. The next day, we got up pretty early in the morning, 7 a.m. to be exact—or as we Southerners call it, the ass crack of dawn—and our first stop was canvassing in Jefferson County. We started knocking on doors in a predominantly white neighborhood. The houses were fairly large, a lot different from what I lived in growing up. We walked over to our next house, which was a tall two-story home with bright red bricks. The front lawn was perfectly cut, and the giant front door was a soft yellow—truly a spectacle of wealth. The doormat had "The Smiths" written on it. So far, we hadn't had any luck in this neighborhood. Most of the people told us they would be voting for Donald Trump in the election. We skipped over the houses that had "Trump 2020" signs in their front lawn. Laura made gagging sounds as we passed them.

"Hello, can I help y'all?" a woman asked after answering the door. She smiled at Laura, but then looked taken aback when she saw my mixing of masculinity and femininity.

"We're with the Biden for President campaign," Laura said.

"Could we have a few moments of your time to ask you a few questions?" I asked.

"I'm sorry hunns," the woman said. "My husband and I have already made up our mind on who we're voting for—Trump. Have a blessed day."

She closed the door and Laura let out long groan. We started to walk down the driveway, and Laura pressed her fingers against the bridge of her nose. I could see her body tensing. "I know this is only our first neighborhood, but I just feel like this is a waste of our time—a waste of our energy. Look at this!" She pointed to some of the houses we hadn't canvassed yet that had Trump signs in their yard. She opened the app on her phone that we were told to use to collect data on the voters.

"I know you're frustrated," I said to her, trying to calm her down, "but the South ain't a lost cause." As we were reaching the midafternoon, I could feel the humidity starting to strike back up, despite it being January.

"I know your family still lives here, Haven, but I don't understand why you continue to live here. Once I graduated high school, I would have gone to college somewhere less," She paused. "Somewhere less racist, less oppressive. Somewhere that at least voted blue in the 2016 election." She checked her phone to look for the next house for us to canvas. "I would have gotten the fuck out of the South as quickly as possible if I were in your condition."

I frowned. "What condition are you talking about, Laura?"

"Look, I have a friend who works with me in New York and he's originally from Mississippi. He's gay, and he told me once he graduated from college he moved straight to New York because he was tired of dealing with the South's homophobia."

I couldn't tell if my body heat rising was from the humidity or my uncomfortableness with what Laura was saying. Of course, being a native Southerner, I knew it wasn't the humidity. It was Laura's words.

"I believe every Southerner who's marginalized who *wants* to leave the South should be able to," I told her. "I'm glad your friend is happier in New York, but just because he moves there doesn't mean he's not going to face discrimination as a gay man."

She looked as if I had stated something factually incorrect. "New York is a lot more LGBT friendly than Alabama."

"Laura, have you ever even been to Alabama before this trip?"

"No, I haven't."

"So how could you possibly know how LGBT friendly Alabama is?" I sighed. "Central Alabama Pride, a nonprofit organization that promotes queer pride, has been celebrating for about 43 years. There are also queer organizations like AIDS Alabama that help with housing, sex education, and STI prevention. Equality Alabama is a nonprofit civil rights organization advocating for queer rights. Not to mention, culturally, that a lot of Alabama colleges have LGBTQ student groups. We even have high schools with Gay-Straight Alliances. Hell, I just attended a board meeting about opening the first LGBTQ-affirming charter school in Alabama. And that's *just* in Alabama without considering other Southern states."

We both stood on the sidewalk of the street staring at each other. Laura began fanning herself with the *Biden for President* pamphlets we were supposed to be handing out. The humidity must have been getting to her. She also started to frown, which I assumed was because she was becoming frustrated with my defense of the South.

"Well, have you been to New York?"

"No, I haven't," I responded.

"Okay, so how would *you* know that New York *isn't* more LGBT friendly?"

"I never made the claim that New York wasn't more LGBT friendly, like you did with Alabama. I asked how would *you* know how LGBT friendly Alabama is, but that's my point—you don't know because you didn't grow up queer in the South." I crossed my arms. "You do know that the South has the biggest LGBT population, right?" (Hasenbush, Flores, Kastanis, Sears, and Gates 7). "And you also know that queer people are more likely to be Black and brown than cis-het people, right?" (Hasenbush et al. 8).

"Haven't you almost elected a *pedophile* as its senator. Your state still has Confederate flags flying around and Confederate statues erected! Last year the United Nations said Alabama has some of the worst poverty in the world for a first-world nation. This state has notoriously been red for decades now, and I don't see why we have to spend time canvassing a state we know will go to Donald Trump when we should instead be focusing on more important battleground states. Yes, there are Black people here that will vote for Biden—I get that, but it'll never be enough to make up enough votes for the state to go to Biden. I know you don't think the South is a lost cause, but if I were Black . . ."

"Girl, please stop talking! Please stop talking right now!" I interjected. I was becoming impatient, and my previous approaches didn't seem to be working. I needed an instructional and discursive [performance] of urgency, a way to disrupt this form of misogyny that was going to lead to my—and other Black queers'—disrespect (Carey 270).

Her mouth was still open, shocked at my interruption. "Why are you going off on me?"

"I didn't go off," I said. "I stopped you from saying something you would undoubtedly regret." I crossed my arms. "I stopped you because what you were about to say was disrespectful to me and several other Black people. I stopped you because your disregard for work Black women organizers in the South conduct to fight voter suppression is a form of misogyny. I stopped you because you clearly either don't understand or don't care about the racist structures in our society that make it much harder for Black people to vote in this country, so someone needs to check you, and that person is me" (Carey 270). "Please don't listen to respond. Listen with the intent to understand. Don't listen to just what I'm saying and how I'm saying it. Listen with an understanding of my positionality as a Black queer Southerner and all of the contexts and discourses about me and what I'm saying to you" (Ratcliffe 205).

I knew this response might not be the most respectful way to respond to her, but this interaction necessitated a time-based response because of the temporal hegemony white supremacy employs to halt racial equity, specifically voter suppression (Carey 270). Truthfully, I had become impatient with not only Laura's dismissal of the South but also with the lack of progressive political investment in Southern communities who truly need it. My impatience as a Black queer person prompted me to repossess and redress the situation. My impatience later led—unbeknownst to me—to an act of indignant agency. By repossessing the conversation with Laura, I was not only combatting her deflection, but I was also enacting a sense of political self-care, by stopping something that could deplete me (283). Now that I had repossessed the conversation, I needed to confront this disrespect with purpose (280).

As I took a deep breath, I thought to myself: *Nah, I got time today*. I looked at Laura and spoke: "The South has a lot of flaws, I will give you that, Laura, but one of the main reasons it continues to go red is because of things like voter suppression. I gave you a very light version of voter suppression when mentioning my sister. Voter suppression is when lawmakers pass bills criminalizing providing food and water to voters standing in line, especially when we know that polling lines are notoriously long in communities of color (Ray). Voter suppression is felon disenfranchisement, especially when we know people of color face harsher sentences than white people and that the United States has been in a process of mass incarceration since the 70s (Fortis). Voter suppression is when lawmakers are redrawing district lines they gerrymander to manipulate the outcome of an election. Voter suppression is the passage of voter ID laws that require voters to have specific and sometimes restricted forms of ID to vote, which disproportionately affects people of color. These are all things happening in Southern states that are preventing people, especially people of color, from being able to vote and change states from red to blue. There are people here who don't want to leave because they have built families, friendships, careers, and lives in the South. Others



are just completely incapable, because of socioeconomic reasons, of leaving the South, and the more we simply decide not to help dismantle these structures grounded in racism, the more we help continue legacies of white supremacy.

So, no, I don't think advocating for progressive candidates and policies in the South is a waste of my time because there are people in the South who need them. I don't judge marginalized Southerners for leaving, but I don't want to turn my back on people who need my help. Even if I'm not here physically all the time, I'm still helping in any way I can to mobilize racial justice. Telling people of color they should leave the South isn't helpful, and it ignores the cultures and families we've facilitated here. It also ignores the financial burdens of having to move to a new state. The work I'm doing here is truly changing people's lives, and we have to remember that some of our civil rights icons came from the South—MLK, Rosa Parks, Ida B. Wells, and John Lewis.”

I could see that both of our facial expressions had calmed down now and that Laura was genuinely listening to what I was saying. “And what did everyone say when we didn't elect Roy Moore? Everyone was talking about how Black women saved America. Black women did not save America—they saved themselves. Black women organized and voted in their own interests, despite the narrative that southerners vote against their own interests (Ray). And it just so happened that these interests Black women voted for were interests that addressed equity at the intersections of gender, race, class, and more. And guess what? Black women and communities of color were able to do all of that despite the voter suppression they endured (Ray). So, I say this to you, Laura. It might do y'all northerners good to stop thinking about the South as red states beyond repair and more as states of voter suppression—states that need less stereotyping and more community organizing. And I'll say this for the final time: the South ain't a lost cause. It's worth continuing the work to change; moreover, we owe it to the Southerners whose voices are silenced by several systems of oppression.”

Laura stood there, reflecting on everything I had said. Eventually, she nodded, seemingly in agreement with what I had said. “You're right, Haven. I was totally not considering how my racist assumptions could impact elections. I'm sorry.”

I smiled at her. “It's fine. What's important now is that you acknowledge you were making those assumptions. Your next step in this process for racial equity should be aiding in the political investment of marginalized Southerners.”

She nodded and looked at the app on her phone to track voter data. “Maybe we should start looking at neighborhoods in this area that are especially low income or communities of color? Make our presence known that we're here for Joe Biden?”

I nodded. “I think that's a great idea. And while we're at it, let's also be sure to ask them if they know their polling locations for the election, and then we can also ask if they need assistance getting to their polling locations.” We both began to walk back to the rental car we had gotten for our trip. “And we gotta make sure they're registered to vote, first of all, and if they're not, we can help them get registered.”

I finished canvassing that day with Laura with no more mention of how it was a waste of our time. The night we finished campaigning I got in contact with Black Voters Matter, an organization dedicated to voter registration and getting out the vote as a means to empower communities of color. I knew they had played a significant role in helping elect Doug Jones in the 2017 special senate election and were also helping with the 2020 election. I smiled to myself in the darkness of the hotel room as I reread my application for a state organizing manager position in Alabama. I shrugged. “Fuck it, I'll do it” (Carey 277), I said, and clicked “submit.”

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A few months later I had started working as a state organizing manager for Alabama's chapter of Black Voters Matter. My goal was to increase voter registration in communities of color and to work alongside my colleagues at the Southern Poverty Law Center to legally end voter suppression. A lot of the work I had done with the Center was geared towards educating people about topics like racial justice, but with the Black Voters Matter job, I was now educating the public about justice-oriented issues on the ballot. I provided free community programs to the public whenever there were state and local elections. These programs made legible the difficult political language and legalese in proposed amendments or candidate platforms. Not only was I aimed at increasing voter registration within communities of color, working with legal professionals to prosecute instances of voter suppression, and educating the public on state and local issues, but I was also working to counter those same narratives about the South Laura had been socialized to believe.

I was traveling across the country as a community organizer to spread the word about Southern Leftists. I was giving lectures to colleges and universities and facilitating workshops with other activists and organizers seeking national change. My goal when I facilitated these workshops was not only to counter the assumptions and narratives these activists and organizers already held and spread about the South, but to also provide them with a set of strategies. These strategies could be used to stop the silencing of marginalized voices, such as gerrymandering, voter ID laws, and other restrictive voter laws. Restoring communities' access to voting was a way to ensure the amplification of their voices in political discourses.

One of the most recent workshops I was at was for a nonprofit seeking to address issues of poverty in the South—particularly Alabama. I was standing in front of a projector screen with a

slideshow to my right. I was explaining to these northern organizers ways to get out the vote to ensure that that piece of legislation seeking to raise the minimum wage would pass.

An organizer raised their hand. “I think what’s confusing to me, and might be confusing to others on our team, is the reason for allocating our resources and energy to people who don’t seem to want it.” He paused for a moment. “For example, we’ve gone to the Alabama State Legislature several times to advocate for this very bill, to get representatives to sponsor it, pass it, and do the right thing. More times than not, these representatives refuse to take us up on our offer, and every time it happens, I have to think to myself, why do I keep doing this if they don’t want our help? These representatives obviously don’t care about their constituents and the constituents are obviously continuously voting for them, so they support their policies. I mean . . . am I wrong?”

Silence filled the tiny conference room we were jammed into. I sat with the question for a while, truly trying to understand where this organizer was coming from. I must admit, it would have also made me angry if I had tried to organize and advocate for something that was going to make the lives of Southerners better just to be ignored. I knew that frustration he felt—I had been there before in my early days of organizing. Before I responded, I listened because I wanted to understand where he was coming from and why he was making this claim.

I crossed my arms with a slight nod. “I understand what you mean. I had those same feelings when I started organizing. In this context, we gotta remember it’s easy to blame the constituents for the situations they’re currently in, but we shouldn’t. People in the South don’t deserve to live in poverty just because some people voted for representatives who don’t want to raise the minimum wage. There are progressives there who vote for people who would sponsor your bill. We owe it to those people to advocate for their rights just as we do for states that have less voter suppression” (Crain).

He sighed. “Right, but I don’t get how we’re supposed to get them to care?”

I frowned. “That’s a good question.” I looked at the slideshow on the projector screen, which was currently showing a statistical breakdown of election results by race. “The good thing about doing this particular work is that there are a lot of people out there who already *do* care. Not only that, but a lot of people also want to express how they care by voting for politicians with progressive ideas who want to make their lives better. The issue here is less about them not caring and more about them lacking the access to show how they care—voting.” I crossed my arms. “We, as organizers, cannot continue putting out the same campaigns expecting more people to vote in our favor when they don’t even have the right to vote to begin with. We have to start supporting initiatives aimed at increasing civic participation. I’m coming to y’all today from both

Black Voters Matter and the Southern Poverty Law Center. My work is getting people who have been disenfranchised the right to vote and providing them an adequate political education to be prepared for the election.”

An idea popped in my head, and I sat down at the table with the other organizers. “So, let’s think about a scenario real quick, okay? Your nonprofit has a bill you’ve brought to the legislature several times, right?” Most of the organizers nodded. “And your complaint is that these same politicians—who were elected by their constituents—don’t wanna pass a bill to increase the pay of their constituents. Alabama doesn’t have any current state minimum-wage laws, so it adheres to the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 (United States). Now let’s just think about election day. Most of the people who would want to raise the minimum wage would be working a minimum-wage job, right? So, they know the reality of how difficult, nearly impossible, it is to live on seven dollars an hour. The systemic issue with elections right now for hourly workers is that they have to take time off work—unpaid time at that—to go vote. Usually, people of color are the ones working these poorly paid jobs (Cooper). And knowing that communities of color are usually ones with intensely long lines at polling places (Fowler), we can make an educated guess that it would be quite difficult for them to vote for people who have their best interests at heart when their current representatives make it so hard for them to vote to begin with. Supporting initiatives like Black Voters Matter can increase voter turnout so constituents can vote for politicians who would want to pass your bill.”

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By June, I had been working my ass off helping marginalized communities get better voter access and helping create counternarratives about the South. Doing both at the same time, in my mind, was important. Knowing June was Pride Month meant I would be able to celebrate with my queer friends in my home state of Alabama. Even during a month of celebration though, I still had to do the organizing work I felt was helping so many people. I registered to have a table at a Pride festival among other merchants. I came with several iPads to get young queer Southerners registered to vote and provided them with pamphlets of candidates who would be working to provide them a better future. At the festival I was able to register a few hundred young queer people. Many of the ones who told me it was their first Pride event told me the upcoming presidential election would also be their first time voting in an election. They told me they were happy to see me there helping others get registered to vote and providing political education.

Later that night I coordinated with a local gay bar for drag queens to raise money to pay for a shuttle bus on election day to provide transportation to people who needed it. I stood in the back with my other queer Southern friends watching a drag queen jump into a split to a classic 90s pop song. We had raised well over our expectation for the shuttle bus and would be able to put that extra money towards more fundraising.

My friend Jared danced along to the song. "I'm so happy to have this queer community here in the South, and I'm so glad we're working hard to fight for a place we call home."

I nodded. "It's a constant battle for us, trying to tell people we matter, even if we live in a gerrymandered state with voter suppression."

"You're right," Jared said. "All us queers met in college and formed a family that, for some of us, is a stronger bond than our biological family. If anyone knows what it's like to have to build a found family in a place where we're silenced, it's queer Southerners of color."

"And we know our stories better than anyone," I replied. "We know what it takes to fight for our home, and it's *because* of our bonds through oppression that we know equity comes from making an effort to fight for the people here who can't do it themselves."

"Yes ma'am!" he shouted, and we toasted our drinks. "Now let's go tip these queens some more."

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