

Julian Mayfield and Alternative Civil Rights Literatures

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On August 28, 1963, the Civil Rights Movement had its most triumphant media spectacle in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, a moment still enshrined in public memory due in large part to Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. But precisely because of the sheer visibility of this event, it has eclipsed other moments that tell different stories about the era, including that of another march for civil rights deliberately held on the very same day an ocean away, in Accra, Ghana. In the summer of 1963, Accra was an exciting place for international civil rights activists: an independent former colony of Great Britain, Ghana was widely viewed as a model for the rest of the decolonizing continent, and its president, Kwame Nkrumah, was not shy about leading his country in ways that ignored Cold War paradigms underwritten by US power. In this environment a group of African American expatriates staged a corollary to the March on Washington that was unflinching in its criticism of the US government's position on race. While the ethos of the March on Washington was embodied by King and his call for the recognition of universal human equality as integral to the American Dream, the Accra demonstrators marched on the US Embassy specifically to decry the lip service paid to equality on the international stage as the Kennedy administration stalled on civil rights legislation at home. Placards carried by the protesters emphasized the connections between US race relations and the decolonizing Third World with slogans such as "Don't Preach Freedom Abroad and Apartheid at Home," "You Can't Buy Africa, Latin America, and Asia," and "Stop Genocide in America and South Africa" ("Give" 1963). Such claims of "apartheid" and "genocide" were deliberately provocative, and they speak to the limited range of critique available in the United States, even after the civil

rights successes of the 1950s. While King could lament the promise of an American Dream as yet unfulfilled, black expatriates in Ghana, many of whom had left the United States precisely because King's brand of nonviolence seemed anemic to them, could question the very terms of his approach to civil rights reform.

Although others had originally conceived a protest in Accra to coincide with the March on Washington, the event's organizational center was the African American writer and intellectual Julian Mayfield, who had begun his arts career in the late 1940s acting, directing, and writing plays in New York and was a well-known novelist and activist by the time he moved to Ghana in 1961. Mayfield, along with fellow expatriates Maya Angelou, W. Alphaeus Hunton, and two others, presented a petition to the US Embassy that, as historian Kevin Gaines puts it, "blasted Kennedy for the shortfall between his administration's rhetoric on African American civil rights and African freedom and its tacit support for the status quo both at home and on the African continent" (2006, 171).¹ This action, appropriately theatrical for someone who began his adult life on the stage, was a highpoint in a journey that had taken Mayfield from a civil rights activist and leading light of both the Harlem Writers Guild and the black theater scene in the early 1950s, to a novelist and journalist based in Puerto Rico in the mid-1950s, to an increasingly radical intellectual who by 1960 had traveled to revolutionary Cuba and run guns for Robert F. Williams, the NAACP leader internationally famous for engaging in armed battles against white supremacists in North Carolina. During those years, Mayfield later wrote, "life became intolerable in the United States for active dissenters from the Martin Luther King philosophy. The people who run most of the news media had decided that only the King voice was legitimate" ("Tales"). Mayfield escaped the valorization of King by moving to Ghana, where he enjoyed regular contact with "radical" luminaries such as Nkrumah and W. E. B. Du Bois (who, in a poignant coincidence, died in Accra the day before the march on the embassy). Although he has remained largely absent from black literary histories, Julian Mayfield was a prolific figure connected to a number of important moments for postwar civil rights reform, and his still under-explored writing opens a window on those literatures that engage questions of race and rights in ways markedly—and purposively—distinct from the dominant narrative of the Civil Rights Movement, and as such has not been recognized as "civil rights literatures" at all.²

In suggesting that we conceptualize Mayfield's life and work in the context of civil rights, this essay participates in rethinking how we understand both the "Civil Rights Movement" and "civil rights literature." Cultural historians such as Robin D. G. Kelley (1996), Penial Joseph (2000), Nikhil Pal Singh (2004), and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall (2005) have stressed the historical and political problems associated with collapsing the short Civil Rights Movement (1954–1965)—sometimes called the King Years, the Heroic Years, or the "classical" phase—with the variety and complexity of the Long Civil Rights Movement, a figuration that acknowledges civil rights energies from the New Deal era of the 1930s to the ascendancy of Black Power thinking in the 1970s. As Singh observes, the King-centered "account of the civil rights era has become central to a civic mythology of racial progress in late twentieth-century America" (2004, 5) that tends to ignore persisting economic inequality. Hall concurs, noting of highly visible Civil Rights Movement spectacles: "If the continuing story of school desegregation has been obscured by a narrative of post-1965 declension, the struggle for economic justice has been erased altogether" (2005, 1258). According to Joseph, the "historical and political narrative of the 'movement'" centered on the "Heroic" period "obscures and effaces as much as it reveals and illuminates," and thus "relocating the black political radicalism that has been chronologically situated during the late 1960s in an earlier political landscape dominated by the southern movement's struggles against Jim Crow reperiodizes civil rights and Black Power historiography by underscoring the fluidity of two historical time periods too often characterized as mutually exclusive" (2000, 7). For Joseph, the 1950s roots of black radicalism have been too facetly distilled into what he describes as a "series of clichés and false binaries that completely ignore the international dimension of black thought[:] . . . 'Violence versus nonviolence,' 'Martin versus Malcolm,' and 'Separatism versus Integration'" (8). Like the other historians mentioned above, Joseph challenges histories that uncritically reproduce the Heroic narrative by ignoring the civil rights contributions of black and white radicals in the Marxist tradition, work that has also been undertaken in literary studies by scholars such as Alan Wald, Cheryl Higashida, Jodi Melamed, and Mary Helen Washington, who have made great strides in recovering the work of black radical literary writers.³ As Joseph writes, "Locating the roots of late-1960s black radicalism within the internationalism of the black left of the late 1950s constitutes what

I describe as an ‘alternative narrative’ or history that challenges the ‘silencing’ that permeates all sites of historical production.” Elaborating another dimension of this idea, Melamed theorizes “race radicalism,” which she defines as “antiracist thinking, struggle, and politics that reckon precisely with those aspects of racialization that official liberal antiracisms screen off: the differential and racialized violences that inevitably follow from the insufficiency and nongeneralizability of human value under US-led transnational capitalism and neoliberal globalization. Race radicalisms are materialist antiracisms that prioritize the unevennesses of global capitalism as primary race matters” (2011, 47).

Following Joseph’s call for an “alternative narrative” to the Civil Rights Movement, this essay explores in more detail an “alternative” archive of civil rights literature that has affinities with “race radicalism,” especially in its refusal of what Melamed calls the “injunction to take US ascendancy for granted and to stay blind to global capitalism as a racial-political matter” (10). Such an archive takes shape against a background of “civil rights literature” as it is most often described, a category naming texts about marches, protests, or boycotts, or about the dehumanizing effects of legalized segregation and white supremacist violence.⁴ That “standard” civil rights literature includes novels such as Douglas Kiker’s *The Southerner* (1957) and Carson McCullers’s *Clock without Hands* (1961) (about federal mandates to integrate public schools); John O. Killens’s *Sippi* (1967), Alice Walker’s *Meridian* (1976), and James Forman’s *Freedom’s Blood* (1979) (about characters who become involved in protests connected to the organized Movement); and more contemporary works reimagining key figures or seminal events of the era, such as Lewis Nordan’s *Wolf Whistle* (1993) (about Emmett Till’s 1955 murder), Charles Johnson’s *Dreamer* (1998) (about King), and Anthony Grooms’s *Bombingham* (2001) (about the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham). Recognizable as “civil rights literature,” these and similar works concern the King-centered movement or historical events that catalyzed this movement; they are set in the American South, focus on segregation and its attendant evils, and posit civil rights change in terms of federal mandates for legal equality and achieving a general consensus among Americans that enacting racial equality is but a matter of moral choice (the *To Kill a Mockingbird* school of civil rights reform).

In comparison, Mayfield’s work may not seem to be participating in the discourse of “civil rights” at all, and, set not in the American South but

in the North and on the international stage via Accra, his work certainly does not conform to the “Heroic Years” model. But he is nonetheless always interested in the intersections of race, class, and Cold War politics, and, ranging beyond the “clichéd” civil rights narrative Joseph describes, his works contribute to an “alternative civil rights literature.” Precisely because his writing operates outside familiar frameworks for conceptualizing what counts as civil rights literature, though, Mayfield’s writing draws attention to aspects of the US and global color line obscured in work invested in the progressive narrative of civil rights reform. It does this in six interrelated ways: 1) remaining skeptical that integration will meaningfully redress the systemic entrenchment of US racism given the pervasiveness of “racial capitalism”; 2) challenging the dominant voices in black leadership on matters such as violent resistance; 3) recurrently criticizing US hegemony, both in terms of “racial capitalism” and in what Nkrumah called the “neocolonialist” cast to US foreign relations; 4) insisting that US race relations always be contextualized in terms of European colonial history and US neocolonial power; 5) emphasizing black history as both a recuperative source for civil rights and as a way to mark and celebrate black difference; and 6) particularly in fiction, exploring the subtle ways that “race” circulates in US and global cultures.⁵

In its rebuke of the King-centered narrative, then, Mayfield’s work amounts to a contestation of the way that “civil rights,” “civil rights literature,” and even the notion of “integration” have been reified in those accounts that limit the scope of civil rights to the organized Movement’s most visible features and preoccupations.⁶ I am not claiming that such a critique is exclusive to Mayfield’s writing but rather that attending to it opens one to a range of “alternative civil rights literatures” in the 1950s and 1960s that share a like-minded sensibility, including work by Ann Petry, Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, and Du Bois. These and other writers produced work in the 1950s and after not primarily set in the South or concerned with documenting the evils and ironies of segregation but focused instead on the importance of black history and of an internationalist view for contextualizing the civil rights struggle, and on exploring the more complex ways that “race” had meaning in the postwar United States. Such focus provides a powerful framework for imagining racial liberation, a framework that has remained largely invisible to discussions of civil rights literatures.

Fusing art and politics: a biographical sketch

Born in South Carolina in 1928, by the early 1950s Mayfield was already a successful actor, having appeared in numerous theater productions, most notably the musical *Lost in the Stars*, an adaptation of *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948), Alan Paton's fictional exploration of South African racial discord. During that time, Mayfield also began writing his own work, from the one-act plays *A World Full of Men* and *The Other Foot*, produced in 1952, to longer plays, *Fire* and *417*, also produced off Broadway, the latter serving as the basis for his first novel, *The Hit* (1957). In those years Mayfield coedited *Freedom*, a newspaper founded by Paul Robeson, worked with the Council for African Affairs, acted in a revival of John Wexley's play *They Shall Not Die* (about the Scottsboro Boys), and became an active member of the Harlem Writers Guild, a group that included such important writers as Killens, Angelou, Childress, and John Henrik Clarke, among many others (see Scarupa 1979). He also produced civil rights-minded drama such as Ossie Davis's first play, *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), directed Davis's *Big Deal* (1953), and arranged for the young Lorraine Hansberry to write a script for a fundraiser for Robeson. In 1954, Mayfield married physician Ana Livia Cordero, and the couple moved to her native Puerto Rico, where he was a regular columnist for the *Puerto Rico World Journal* and also wrote his first two novels, *The Hit* and *The Long Night* (1958), both of which were published to general acclaim in the States. In 1959, the Mayfields returned to New York, where he became increasingly active in both domestic civil rights activism and the black literary scene; early that year he was a key participant in "The First Conference of Negro Writers," sponsored by the American Society of African Culture. In the summer of 1960 he traveled to Cuba at the invitation of the revolutionary government, where he met Robert F. Williams, the NAACP leader who had become notorious for meeting white supremacist terror with armed resistance in Monroe, North Carolina. By December of that year, Mayfield would think enough of Williams's brand of militant leadership that he and historian John Henrik Clarke delivered machine guns and other material to aid in what he described as the "race war in Monroe, North Carolina, where I had seen white men and black men taking pot shots at each other every evening" (Mayfield 1963a, 181).⁷

In 1961, increasingly disillusioned with US racial politics (and a person of interest to the FBI), Mayfield moved to Ghana, where Cordero administered a health clinic and would become personal physician to the

elderly Du Bois, who had been living in Accra since October of that year. While in Ghana, Mayfield became more active in politics, writing speeches for Nkrumah, editing *The World without the Bomb*, papers from an international summit held in Accra aimed at achieving world peace in the atomic age, and founding the *African Review*, among other activities. During this period, he became more vocal in his criticisms of the US government and its relationship with the Third World. In 1966, mere weeks before President Nkrumah was overthrown in a coup d'état, Mayfield moved to Spain, where he finished an unpublished novel, "Death at Karamu," and then back to the States, where he co-wrote and starred in the film *Uptight* (1968), set in the days after King's assassination and focusing on black radicals planning armed revolution in Cleveland. In 1971, Mayfield's life took another unexpected turn after he moved to Guyana and accepted the post of special adviser to the Ministry of Information in Prime Minister Forbes Burnham's government. Having split with Cordero, Mayfield married Joan Cambridge, a Guyanese writer, and remained in Guyana for several years, intermittently working on a biography of Burnham that never came to fruition. By the late 1970s, back in the States once again, Mayfield had a reputation as an international black radical and writer adept at "fusing art and politics," as a 1975 *Washington Post* profile put it (West 1975, B1). Despite his relative notoriety, Mayfield's efforts to publish his many (still) unpublished works were at least partly hampered by his political activism, and his later life was increasingly consumed by teaching. Plagued by debt, in the late 1970s and early 1980s he tried his hand at writing best sellers while teaching at Cornell, the University of Maryland, and Howard University, where he was writer-in-residence in the late 1970s. With various writing projects still in the works, Mayfield suffered a heart attack and died in 1984, aged 56.⁸

As this sketch attests, Mayfield led an extraordinary literary and political life, and its full importance remains woefully underexplored. Here, I consider his literary output in some depth in an attempt to suggest the six ways such work helps establish an alternative to the Heroic civil rights narrative, pointing to a rethinking of how literature might intervene in the realm of civil rights. After exploring Mayfield's three published novels, I look at some of his shorter and unpublished work from the 1960s and 1970s that suggests how his thinking on civil rights was changed by his disillusionment with the King narrative and his subsequent move to Ghana.

Acquisition for the sake of acquisition

Mayfield's first published novel, *The Hit*, expands a one-act play, 417, which he wrote in the mid-1950s.⁹ In contrast to works set on the front lines of the organized Movement, *The Hit* takes place in Harlem, and rather than explore legal restrictions such as voting disenfranchisement or daily existence in a Jim Crow environment, it focuses on northern "racial capitalism," representing how a desire to integrate into American fantasies of capitalist acquisition actually serves to obliterate the possibility of black autonomy and self-definition. If *The Hit* is a "civil rights" novel, then, it operates in the field of "race radicalism" as described by Melamed, insisting on "global capitalism as a racial-political matter" (2011, 10), as a threat less of whites oppressing blacks than of blacks oppressing themselves by assuming the primacy of capitalism and capitulating to its values and mandates.

In the novel, Hubert Cooley is a self-described "slave" indentured as a building superintendent for tenements on 126th Street. A failed businessman, Hubert barely scrapes by financially, and is defined by an all-encompassing "dream" to hit the local numbers game and win enough money to leave his wife, flee New York, and start a new business in California. For black people in Harlem, the novel suggests, the numbers game represents both a perversion and the purest expression of a capitalist system that produces inequalities that one can never transcend—even though the game is prompted by that very fantasy of escape. Hubert's compulsive gambling is driven by his "dream" of being upwardly mobile, a "solid and persistent" (1988, 69) dimension of the American experience.

The Hit's plot illustrates a diagnosis offered by Mayfield's friend Lorraine Hansberry in 1959. She decries "the villainous and often ridiculous money values that spill over from dominant culture and often make us ludicrous in pursuit of that which has its own inherently ludicrous nature: acquisition for the sake of acquisition. The desire for the possession of 'things' has rapidly replaced among too many of us the impulse for the possession of ourselves, for freedom" (1981, 8–9).¹⁰ Drawing on the same black radical tradition as *The Hit*, Hansberry's argument helps us see how Hubert's "desire for things" has eclipsed his impulse to possess himself, a problem compounded by the fact that although the capitalist economy purports to be racially objective, it in fact conflates whiteness with value, and so the system is always "rigged" against him. Rather than dwell on Hubert's racial difference from white culture—as would be required in a work set in the Jim Crow South—Mayfield thus emphasizes how Hubert

identifies with capitalism: “He had heard it said that buying and selling were the life’s blood of the nation. He believed in law and order—he had taken no part in either one of the two Harlem riots where people broke windows and looted stores. He believed in the system and that Woolworth and Blumstein [white business owners] had a right to keep their places in it” (1988, 79). Here blood, historically a trope for what determines racial status, is replaced by the flow of capital, the “life’s blood of the nation.” Hubert is willing to detach himself from identification with other blacks if it means he can succeed according to capitalist norms (illuminating why “he did not want to go to Africa or any other place where there were so many Negroes” [4]).

Hubert muses that, even without being “blessed with fairer skin,” becoming rich would allow him to transcend the color line (6). In one version of his dream, Hubert has “supper in the diner of a streamliner speeding toward San Francisco. The black waiters were smiling and bowing as they set the meal before [him]” (16–17); the waiters’ blackness and their “bowing” emphasizes the “whiteness” of Hubert’s dream. Mayfield is finally critical of this dream not only because Hubert himself conflates capitalist success with whiteness, but also because such a fantasy actually estranges Hubert from himself. In the context of capitalist fantasies of success, for example, “a man with a Cadillac had certain sacred and divine rights” (122). Hubert here ascribes such “rights” not to all human beings but only to those fortunate enough to own a Cadillac—a biting commentary on the tendency of capitalism to attribute value without regard to even the legal system, which is held up by many standard civil rights novels as the final arbiter of who gets what rights.

The deeper meaning of “The Race”

Mayfield’s second novel, *The Long Night*, again involving the numbers game, explores a young boy’s experience of the weight of black history. In the opening chapter, Frederick “Steely” Brown’s mother hits her number and sends her son to collect her twenty-seven-dollar winnings. “If you lose that money, boy,” she says, “don’t you come back at all” (1988, 30). After Steely gets mugged by the older boys in his own youth gang, he spends the long night of the title hatching various schemes for replacing the money, ranging, in terms of capitalist norms, from the respectable (working for the local pharmacist, Mr. Litchstein) to the acceptable (borrowing it from a local pimp, Sugar Boy) to the illegal (purse-snatching and bike stealing). In the wee hours of the morning, growing increasingly

desperate, Steely decides to roll a drunk. Picking out a suitable target passed out on a stoop, he goes through the man's pockets until in a Dickensian coincidence the man is revealed to be Steely's long-lost father, an alcoholic intellectual who had abandoned the family some time before. In this final twist, the novel unites two thematic strands: Steely's efforts to rustle money in a hard-scrabble environment and the gaping hole left by his father, who stands for a certain kind of black radical always preoccupied with "The Race."

Steely's father, Paul Brown, in fact illustrates how Mayfield moves from a realist account of hard times in Harlem in *The Hit*, to an account of such hard times informed by black history in *The Long Night*. Where in *The Hit* Hubert naively believes race can be transcended through the accumulation of capital, in *The Long Night* Paul tells his wife, "Don't you know that money makes you unhappy?" (1988, 23–24). He thus focuses on attaining more education because "the race needed lawyers" (26), so that, in contrast to *The Hit*, this novel is centrally concerned with the study of "The Race." Like numerous novels from this period—including, to take one example, Ann Petry's *The Narrows* (1953), in which the protagonist feels as though "he were carrying The Race around with him all the time" (1988, 138)—*The Long Night* demonstrates that an important dimension of civil rights literatures is a connection to "The Race," a sense of blackness issuing from a shared history and its attendant feeling of collectivity, a counterpoint to Hubert's integrationist fantasy in which his blackness would be evacuated if he only had enough money.

From an early age, Paul has inculcated in Steely a connection to black history, and indeed in the opening pages we learn that he is named after Frederick Douglass, one among a pantheon of black heroes that includes "Toussaint L'Ouverture, a black Haitian who had revolted against Napoleon and liberated his people from slavery" (16). If Steely learns about white heroes by consuming pop culture like comic books and television shows, his father must make a conscious effort to school him on figures who embody the black radical tradition, such as L'Ouverture and Douglass (he also stresses the importance of contemporary black role models such as Jackie Robinson, whom Paul takes Steely to see at Ebbets Field). In this way, Steely learns that the meaning of "blackness" inheres not merely in the color of one's skin but rather in an identification with "The Race," the most visible examples of which are both the people in his community in Harlem and those historical figures uncompromising in their critique of, and resistance to, white oppression and European colonial power.

The Long Night is invested not only in calling attention to the existence of black radicalism but also in exploring how contemporary black characters deal or don't deal with such cultural and historical legacies. For all his high-minded rhetoric about leading the race, Paul manages only to talk, drink too much, flunk out of law school, and abandon his family. When Steely considers the distance between his father's actions and his uplifting discourse about "The Race," he thinks: "Now, for the first time, he began to see contradictions between what people say and what they do" (88). An important episode in this regard occurs when Steely overhears his father's late night, drunken debate about "The Race" carried on with a law school classmate while Steely is supposed to be in bed. This discussion makes Steely feel himself to be "in the very core of an exciting movement, for he was a Negro and his father was a Negro and it seemed that Negroes were the most important people in the world" (74). Such an inversion of white norms is possible only because Paul has encouraged his son to see himself as empowered, and to see black history as something worthy of study: the "movement" in which Steely finds himself has little to do with the dominant Civil Rights Movement discussed above, and everything to do with creating a context in which a boy like Steely might believe he is capable of becoming Jackie Robinson or Jack Johnson or Superman. Steely can only dimly understand the "movement" as an awareness of black history and one's intellectual and emotional relationship to this history, and Paul himself can hardly embody that tradition in the microcosm of his own family.

Despite the Jackie Robinsons of history, Steely hears his father complain, "We've been getting our freedom in drips and drabs. . . . They've made us toe the line by dangling the great American dream in front of our noses. 'Just be a good boy,' they say, 'and don't cause too much trouble and we'll treat you a little more like a human being'" (75). For Hubert Cooley, the "dream" is desirable, if unachievable; for Paul Brown the dream itself is a sham, part of an elaborate power play that always forces black people into the position of asking for human recognition rather than enjoying it as a universal right. This is the problem that Steely learns to recognize as he "lay awake trying to digest the meaning of all he had heard. Always there were new ideas or new ways of looking at old ideas. He had no way of understanding the literal meaning of the words; he felt, rather than comprehended" (76). Steely's experience as a member of "The Race," even if he cannot understand it rationally or articulate it verbally, is in fact a central point of *The Long Night* and a feature of alternative civil rights literatures more generally: the works

help us understand race and racial arguments in a non-“literal” way, so Paul’s complaint that his “freedom” has been denied is itself less important than Steely’s desire to experience the deeper meaning of things, to claim his own knowledge of the complex ways of the world, a desire linking *The Long Night* to the best-known African American novel of the 1950s, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), in which the narrator “learn[s] to look beneath the surface” (1980, 153).¹¹

Such *sub rosa* identification with “The Race” is emphasized again in *The Long Night*’s conclusion when, reunited with Steely, Paul contextualizes their father-son bond: “You remember what I told you about Toussaint and Fred Douglass and all those great black men who lived before you and I were born? Well, you’ve got to believe in them . . . even if you stop believing in me. . . . Because, you see, you’re right. I did give in . . . under pressure, I gave in. . . . I just folded up because I wasn’t strong enough” (Mayfield 1988, 152). If for Paul awareness of black history can outweigh even familial bonds, this awareness involves not only domestic history, as in *The Hit*, but also the legacies of colonialism, illustrated partly through the presence of a character called Black Papa. Black Papa haunts the streets of Harlem chanting an unintelligible song: “*Cina, cina, cina, / Dogwé sang, cina lo-gé,*” and Steely’s friends taunt him with a counter-rhyme: “*Black Papa, Black Papa, / Can’t talk propuh, can’t talk propuh*” (36). While Steely thinks more about Black Papa, he remembers that his father had once explained to him that “Black Papa had been a Haitian seaman who found himself stranded in New York,” and because Steely’s historical awareness extends to figures like Toussaint, he “reasoned that if Black Papa were Haitian, he was one of Toussaint’s people. He wondered if the great liberator could have looked like this little old man with the pushcart. He tried to picture Black Papa in stately dignity, his arms folded across his chest, epaulets on his shoulders, commanding an army against Napoleon. He did this frequently, but he could never really imagine Black Papa as Toussaint” (37). Late in the novel, however, when Steely once again hears Black Papa’s song, the meaning of blackness for him has changed: Black Papa’s “black skin showed ashen, and his eyes seemed darker and deeper than they had by daytime” and although the chant was “only a simple prayer, Steely’s father had told him, a prayer to a Haitian sea god,” now “the very strangeness of the sound stirred the boy’s imagination” (116). An affective gesture that sets him apart from the boys who mock Black Papa, Steely’s imaginative connection to him depends on his knowledge both of Black Papa’s

origins and of just the broadest outlines of Haitian history, an awareness highlighted by *The Long Night's* epigraph, drawn from the same "Voudoun prayer to the Haitian sea god Agwé" as Black Papa's. Black Papa's presence in the novel thus suggests a kind of postcolonial displacement, mirrored by Paul's own unraveling. A member of a new generation, Steely is the one who must learn to negotiate the legacies of black history while likewise negotiating the pitfalls of the Harlem environment if he is going to thrive where his father failed.¹²

In contextualizing a boy in Harlem in relation to world history, *The Long Night* reflects Mayfield's growing interest in Cold War internationalism and domestic race relations in the mid- and late-1950s. Having returned from Puerto Rico after *The Long Night* was published, Mayfield had joined the Communist Party because it seemed to him "the most powerful, radical organization" he could find, and this radicalism was evident in his participation in the "First Conference of Negro Writers," sponsored by the American Society of African Culture (AMSAC) in 1959 (quoted in Washington 2014, 258). As Washington has explored in depth, this conference is an important moment in 1950s black literary history, bringing together "an embattled internationalist Left . . . determined to advance black cultural and political self-determination" with "a conservative flank . . . promoting narrow national definitions of integration and race" in the presence of "US-government sponsored spy operations . . . authorized to monitor and contain black radicalism" (241). Associated with the "embattled internationalist Left," Mayfield criticized those black writers and ordinary citizens who were eager to integrate into the white mainstream.

The published version of Mayfield's AMSAC speech has become his best-known essay, "Into the Mainstream and Oblivion," and it clarifies his aims both in his previous work and in his next novel, *The Grand Parade* (1961). Referring to the panel on "social protest" that had taken place at the AMSAC conference, Mayfield writes:

Many of the speakers felt that social protest as we have known it has outlived its usefulness. They knew, of course, that racial injustice still flourishes in our national life, but they felt that the moral climate has been established for the eventual breakdown of racism, and that they need not therefore employ their literary tools to attack it in the same old way, that is to say, directly and violently. To this participant it seemed that the younger writer was seeking a new way of defining himself. (1960, 30)

This struggle for self-definition, Mayfield goes on to explain, is especially acute as black writers strive to produce “mainstream” writing; that is, writing that is not “merely” social protest. For Mayfield, this desire for “mainstream” recognition parallels the push for legal integration, raising the danger that black literary difference might be obliterated. If “integration,” he writes, means “the attainment of full citizenship rights in such areas as voting, housing, education, employment, and the like,” then it is, of course, desirable. “But if, as the writers have reason to suspect, integration means completely identifying the Negro with the American image—that great-power face that the world knows and the Negro knows better—then the writer must not be judged too harshly for balking at the prospect.” Indeed, Mayfield will go on to argue that the black writer ought not to aim to seamlessly integrate into the white American Dream—as Hubert Cooley does in *The Hit*—but rather to offer a critique of the dream itself: “For him the facade of the American way of life is always transparent. He sings the national anthem *sotto voce* and has trouble reconciling the ‘dream’ to the reality he knows” (33).¹³ As James Smethurst has observed, this essay “remarkably anticipates the position of many revolutionary nationalists a few years later in [Mayfield’s] insistence on black democratic rights while rejecting what he sees as the imperialist stance of the United States” (2005, 121). And it is indeed the distance between the facade of the American way and its deeper realities that preoccupies his final published novel, *The Grand Parade* (1961).

Integrating the first great rulers of the earth

Where *The Long Night* enlarges *The Hit*’s focus on the difficulties of life in Harlem by contextualizing those difficulties in relation to black history, *The Grand Parade* considers how that history is enmeshed with politics, questioning the centrality of charismatic leaders in the highly visible civil rights struggle for school integration. In this novel, Mayfield focuses on the complicated politics of the fictional city Gainesboro, in a border state very much like Maryland, as it attempts to enact federal law mandating school integration. Of its large cast of characters, two of the most prominent are Douglas Taylor, the city’s white mayor, and Randolph Banks, a black city councilman, who seems at first a model of heroic black leadership. Both play an important role in the growing protest against school integration, and although they seem to have very similar backgrounds, “the resemblance was superficial” (Mayfield 1963b,

88). Throughout the novel, “race” is connected to both politics and history. Politically, race motivates the effort to integrate the school and spurs the novel’s more traditional civil rights plot; historically, race informs the “well-spring of experience” emerging from the larger history that in *The Long Night* Paul Brown wants so desperately to inculcate in his son, a history that makes Randolph’s “status and identity” (1988, 88) vexed while Douglas’s seems secure. Indeed, in *The Grand Parade*, as well as in Mayfield’s later, unpublished novels and his many published nonfiction essays, the signal concern is with how global black history informs the current civil rights climate in the United States. As Mayfield’s first novel to tackle civil rights in terms similar to works like Kiker’s *The Southerner* or Lee’s *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *The Grand Parade* still stands apart from them by means of two interrelated arguments: first, that contemporary civil rights action can only be understood through black history; and, second, that in light of such an understanding it is naive to think that meaningful civil rights reform will be enacted solely through the efforts of what literary critic Robert Patterson calls “messianic leadership,” the widespread civic myth that “places the responsibility for the Herculean task of securing the group’s civil rights on one person” (2013, 4). Instead, *The Grand Parade* suggests that to yield real-world civil rights change, attention must be shifted from the heroic actions of individual politicians or civil rights leaders to the enmeshing of money, history, and politics.

In setting his most obvious civil rights novel not in the oppressive, violent South but in a border state, Mayfield explores what happens in a city where the plan to implement federal mandates of school integration seems merely pro forma: “School segregation in Gainesboro was an anachronism. . . . Even without the Supreme Court decision outlawing it, it would have crumbled soon under its own weight” (1963b, 69). Despite this conventional wisdom, a newspaper advertisement appears proclaiming integration as “The Greatest Threat to the American Way of Life” (68), the handiwork of Clarke Bryant, former sociology professor from Hattiesburg, Mississippi, who has come to Gainesboro to found a White Protection Council. Through this incitement *The Grand Parade* explores in detail Mayfield’s remark in “Into the Mainstream and Oblivion” that “the facade of the American way of life is always transparent.”

For all the dealings and double-dealings that make up the political scene in Gainesboro, the fight over integration is predicated on white ignorance of black history. Noteworthy is not simply the fact of Bryant’s opposition to integration but also his particular arguments, which depend

on a kind of rationality that makes sense only from a certain historical point of view. When, for example, Bryant calls on Rosalia Stanley, a wealthy white civic leader who “believed, vaguely, that all men are created equal” (1963b, 148), he aims to convince her that segregation is “rational” because history has demonstrated black people are culturally inferior to whites. “They want Negro equality,” Bryant explains, “although no Negro ever has anywhere, so far as I have been able to learn, developed a state of culture approaching civilization. . . . These race levelers want to combine a people who are hardly out of the trees with Caucasians who have contributed to the world the finest, most advanced civilization in human history” (138). Of course, his phrase “so far as I have been able to learn” points to Bryant’s severely limited sense of world history. When Rosalia ventures that there are “black nations” (150), Bryant replies, “Of course, there are Liberia and Haiti. . . . Liberia, probably the most backward country on earth after a hundred years of independence. And Haiti, a prosperous nation until the blacks slaughtered all the whites” (151). Eventually, such examples convince Rosalia that black people are inherently inferior, unworthy of equality. Bryant elaborates: “The Negro has never produced any meaningful civilization anywhere at any time in the entire history of mankind. . . . I’m a racist, yes, but not in the way you think. I don’t preach violence. No thinking Southerner does. And I *do* believe in equality of opportunity, the right of every person to better himself. But I do not believe all men are created equal. History definitely proves that all races were not created equal.” At this point, the omniscient narrator intervenes:

Rosalia would have been astonished, and Bryant would never have believed, that the first great rulers of the earth, so far as scholars could determine, were neither white nor yellow, but black men who controlled empires from the valley of the Ganges, the banks of the Euphrates, and the Nile Rivers. From her studies, the motion pictures, and dozens of novels, she had come by the vague notions of the Roman and Greek empires, but she had never heard of the great black kingdoms of Ghana and Mali, of the Mossi and the Songhay empires, nor of their kings and emperors who ruled by laws in systems as complex and enduring as those of the better-known Gauls, Huns, Saxons, and Jutes. (151–52)

Offered by the narrator and backed by the authority of “scholars,” this historical account seems dependable in a way that Bryant’s obviously racist version is not, and readers are thus taught something about history even as Rosalia herself never is.¹⁴ As Lawrence Jackson points out, in 1961 this “information in and of itself was toxic to the ‘colored’ water fountain sign, the back-of-the-bus tradition. The epistemological revision was also reforming some of the assumptions behind the longed-for value of interracial collaboration” (2011, 458–59). Understanding such “epistemological revision” indeed illuminates how *The Grand Parade* handles the Movement. The narrator tells us:

Those who write history tend to place themselves, or men much like themselves, of the same complexion, texture of hair, and spread of nose, at the center of the universe. . . . Thus, Rosalia could not be expected to know that the “Dark Continent” was a figment of the imaginations of white historians to justify the devastation of the African slave trade, which laid waste black civilizations and rang down a curtain of colonial darkness over proud and ancient cultures. (Mayfield 1963b, 152)

It is the general American failure to even recognize the existence of black history that, as Mayfield argued in “Into the Mainstream and Oblivion,” motivated black Americans to see experience beyond what he called “the narrow national orbit—artistic, cultural and political—and [to soar] into the space of more universal experience” (1960, 32). As he wrote in 1963, “It is this total erasure of the past, of a sense of having ever belonged to anybody, that perhaps accounts for the bitterness, the frustration, and the pain of my generation, which now seeks, often too uncritically, an identification with the spirit of black nationalism sweeping the African continent” (1963a, 179). To help redress this cultural and historical erasure, *The Grand Parade* attends to the general histories of ancient Ghana and Egypt mentioned above but also to particular texts and figures central to a black radical intellectual history.

The closest thing *The Grand Parade* has to a messianic black leader is a character introduced late in the novel, Dr. Harold Bishop, the lone black person on the school board. As the board debates whether to enact federal mandates to school integration amid the protest from white citizens fomented by Bryant, Bishop emerges as a voice of conscience, a voice explicitly tied to black radicalism, thinking as he does about how

Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* has inspired him to abandon a desire for personal gain in favor of helping "The Race." By highlighting Bishop's connection to Du Bois and a black radical intellectual history (Du Bois is an exemplar of black radicalism in Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism*), Mayfield both stresses the importance of black history and complicates the messianic model of civil rights leadership. Bishop is instrumental in finally pushing through school integration in Gainesboro, but his contribution can only be understood as the fruits of a black radical tradition and its potential influence on back-channel politics. Far from ascribing superhuman powers to a handful of heroic people who might transcend the social and cultural mores of the day, *The Grand Parade* traces a line from Du Bois to Bishop precisely to draw attention to the shallowness of politicians who take up civil rights because it is fashionable, as is the case with those who campaign on change; "Every other word out of his mouth was equal rights this, equal rights that," sneers one character about an opportunist politician (15). For Bishop, a problem with many black leaders in the United States, especially in comparison with leaders in other countries, is that they are all talk and no action: "They talked loudly of fighting for freedom and liberty, but they were careful never to do anything that might jeopardize their jobs and their ranch-style houses. Everybody wanted freedom, but few of the leaders were willing to sacrifice for it. Thus the movement of the black American crawled along at a snail's pace while the rest of the colored people of the world seemed to be speeding toward their objectives" (228). As in Mayfield's other novels, here capitalism, committed to "acquisition for the sake of acquisition," impedes meaningful civil rights change, a dynamic calling into question the dominant civil rights narrative that envisions general progress only within the frame of the capitalist American Dream. And though ultimately the school is integrated, thanks to Mayor Douglas's leading the children to class, readers know that this seemingly heroic action is the result not of Douglas's pure heart but of his need to shore himself up against scandal, and to better position himself for a run for higher office.

Love and death in Songhay

It was a similar view of civil rights change in the "King years," Mayfield explains, that prompted his move to Ghana in 1961. In his unpublished "Tales of the Lido," he describes the only time he met Martin Luther King, Jr. in person, at a gathering at Harry Belafonte's apartment in New York. Mayfield asks King if he *really* believes that nonviolence will lead

to appreciable change, and when King affirms that belief, Mayfield finds this response naive and unnecessarily conciliatory. “The reason I mention Dr. King,” Mayfield writes, “is that he was indirectly responsible for a lot of us turning up in Africa. . . . If you were not on the King bandwagon in the early sixties, it was best to get the hell out” (“Tales”).

In Ghana, Mayfield became increasingly active in politics, in the ways mentioned above, and wrote a thrice-weekly column in the *Evening News*, the ruling Convention People’s Party newspaper, among other journalistic endeavors (see Mayfield 1963a, 197). Although his journalism and political activities took precedence over his literary production in these years, some surviving manuscripts point to how Mayfield was conceptualizing international civil rights in his fiction and drama after leaving the States. In work written during and after his time in Ghana, Mayfield habitually sets the action in Songhay, “a new country with an old African name,” very much like post-independence Ghana (“Fount”). Songhay’s president, a figure reminiscent of Nkrumah, struggles to modernize the nation while contending with competing political pressures—from local tribalism to the influences of the Americans, Russians, and Chinese. In “Death at Karamu,” an unpublished novel that Mayfield completed around the time he moved from Ghana in 1966, a murder plot is set against the backdrop of post-independence Songhay, where, as one character puts it, there is “need for Songhay to keep her doors open to both East and West without falling into the pocket of either” (“Death”). Borrowing some plot elements from “Death at Karamu,” his play “Fount of the Nation” centers on “the president of a newly independent African nation [who] battles to preserve the spirit of freedom and the integrity of his people while struggling with internal plots and external pressures” (“Playbill”). As he works to build a deep-water harbor for his country, the president faces opposition from everyone from local businessmen to the CIA, and negotiations become so complex that at one point he compares his ship of state to a “little black canoe” “shooting the rapids trying to avoid the rocks, which all have names . . . Americans, Chinese, Russians, the damn British” (“Fount”). In Mayfield’s view, then, Songhay’s autonomy is compromised by Cold War power struggles, even as the United States claims to support the rights of all peoples, whether foreign or domestic.

Songhay’s fraught relationship with the United States is also the theme of an important short story Mayfield published in 1972, “Black on Black: A Political Love Story.” Narrated by an African American expatriate in Songhay whose résumé is cribbed from Mayfield’s (“In Songhay,” the narrator explains, “I was the editor of a magazine; back in the States I had

written a couple of books, been an actor, and had directed a play or two” [1972, 58]), the story charts the tempestuous relationship between Nana Matusi IV, a “progressive chief” in Songhay, and Bessie Bates, a headstrong African American singer who has recently immigrated to West Africa. The difficulties of their relationship are informed by the conflicting ideological demands being made on contemporary Songhians. Described as an honest chief who genuinely cares about improving the country, Nana insists on doing things the “African way,” which he contrasts to the influence of “European and American values”: “Everything good in African life is being sacrificed on the altar of European and American values. . . . Social discipline has broken down. Boys and girls are being *thrust* into adulthood without a knowledge of their past, something unimaginable a generation ago” (62). Through Nana, Mayfield explores the circulation of American ideology beyond the geographic confines of the United States, and what this means for a more capacious sense of “civil rights” in a black-run nation such as Songhay/Ghana.

The central symbolic moment of “Black on Black” comes with a protest against the US Embassy that echoes the real-life protest discussed at the beginning of this essay. It commences with an eloquent speech about “400 years of European and American deviltry, oppression and racism, culminating in their current attempt to overthrow the present free government of Songhay” (64). Stirred by this indictment, the heated crowd overruns the embassy barriers and tries to burn the American flag—but an African American staff member at the embassy emerges, snatches the flag, “and walk[s] back . . . almost with a goose step, the Stars and Stripes clasped to his chest as if it were a precious infant.” The crowd is startled by the sight of a black man rebuking their criticisms and who in fact seems to embody “American deviltry,” a phenomenon that speaks to the shifting perspective on civil rights on the international, neocolonial stage. Framing “race” in terms of whiteness and blackness is insufficient for understanding the various internal and external pressures in a nation like Songhay, where ideology comes to trump race as the marker of difference; the day after the embassy protest, the government newspaper warns: “BEWARE THOSE AMERICAN NEGROES” (65). In this way, civil rights progress in West Africa involves recognizing how black Americans abroad have been put in the service of US ideology even as they are still subject to an array of *de jure* and *de facto* discriminations back home. From an international perspective, racial progress in the United States—symbolized by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the

Voting Rights Act of 1965—is thus exposed as compromised not only by the inequalities, economic and otherwise, that persist in the States but also by Cold War mandates that all but forced countries like Songhay to align with either the US or Soviet sphere of influence. As Mayfield put it in the mid-1960s, “The American who rants about ‘the free world,’ ‘the rights of man’ and ‘the liberty of the individual’ knows in his teeth that he is lying. . . . [Americans] are the world’s greatest carriers of the neo-colonialist mentality” (1965, 11).¹⁵

I’ve argued that in Mayfield’s work we see how civil rights literatures might depart from the King-centered narrative by exploring instead how racial subjugation has been inherent in capitalist exploitation and by bringing to bear an international perspective on race—thus raising questions about the degree to which legal civil rights reform in the States amounted to meaningful change. In this regard, we might read Mayfield’s work in conjunction with a wider range of authors in the 1950s and 1960s, including Killens, whose novel *Youngblood* (1954) unites interest in racial reform with the labor tradition, constituting as monumental a civil rights novel as his later work set during the Movement, *Sippi* (1967); Petry, whose Connecticut-set *The Narrows* (1953) provides one of the richest meditations on the meaning of race in the 1950s, offering an important context for thinking about civil rights legislation; Hansberry, whose play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) is justly remembered as a paradigmatic civil rights text, but whose other work such as *Les Blancs* (written between 1960 and 1965 but staged only posthumously, in 1970) explores the international context of US civil rights reform emphasized in her activism; Childress, whose play *Trouble in Mind* (1955) illuminates how direct action like the Montgomery Bus Boycott must be paired with an understanding of how language shapes perceptions of racial difference, and whose collection *Like One of the Family* (1956) focused on the relationship between black domestic servants and their white employers, brilliantly enacts a critique of “racial capitalism”; and even late-career Du Bois, effectively marginalized by the Civil Rights Movement, whose *The Black Flame* trilogy (1957–1961), following the life of one character from Reconstruction to his death in 1956, offers a Marxist-inspired long view of civil rights reform.¹⁶

Taking its place among such work, Mayfield’s writing contributes to what I name “alternative civil rights literatures,” texts that, without conceiving of themselves solely as protest literature in the vein of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), still register what in 1979 Mayfield called

black “confinement” (Scarupa 1979, 14). Departing from the dominant civil rights narrative centered on King’s program of nonviolence, these works nonetheless participate in the same field of action as the more familiar features of the organized Civil Rights Movement, imagining possibilities for black life and liberation uncoupled from federal mandates to desegregate or ensure voting rights. As Mayfield’s work attests, there were far greater possibilities for civil rights engagement than merely representing organized action against legalized inequality in the United States. In taking a wider, internationalist view, Mayfield exposes the dominant civil rights narrative of progress and integration into the capitalist American Dream as deeply entrenched in material inequalities and in propagandistic representations of American racial and economic equality abroad. That Mayfield himself has been so little studied by literary scholars speaks to the degree to which “civil rights literature” has been bound to a particular view of the Movement. In attending to his work, scholars of postwar literature and culture can advance the important task of conceptualizing a more elastic sense of what might count as civil rights literatures.

§

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Notes

1. For a fuller account of the Accra protest, see Gaines 2006, 168–73.
2. Although Mayfield does occasionally appear in literary and cultural histories, it is usually in reference to his activism as an expatriate in Ghana. Kevin Gaines (2006), for example, has done extensive work on Mayfield; see also Walters 1993. For the few studies that discuss Mayfield’s fiction, see Richards 1988;

Julian Mayfield and Alternative Civil Rights Literatures

Munby 2011, 91–98; and Washington 2014, 269–73. In his magisterial literary history of black literature and criticism, Lawrence Jackson (2011) discusses Mayfield in the context of the 1950s black arts scene, especially the Harlem Writers Guild.

3. See Wald 2014; Higashida 2013; Melamed 2011; and Washington 2014.

4. This is the case, for example, in the works discussed in the recent *Cambridge Companion to American Civil Rights Literature* (2015). Although its editor, Julie Buckner Armstrong, is rightly skeptical of the “dominant narrative” (Armstrong 2015b, 6) of the Civil Rights Movement and advocates for the associated need for literary scholars to resist “easy-bake narratives” (2015a, 92) such as Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help* (2009), the volume nonetheless tends to engage texts that focus on the organized Movement, Jim Crow, or controversies surrounding school or housing integration, and it is less interested in the characteristics of Mayfield’s writing I discuss.

5. I invoke the term “racial capitalism” in the sense described by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, who uses it “to emphasize that unfettered capitalism as well as racialism produced the Jim Crow system and to suggest similarities between the North and the South” (2005, 1243, n. 27). The term has a long and complex history within the field of African American studies; for a foundational book that explores the idea in depth, see Robinson 2000. For Nkrumah’s explanation of neocolonialism, see Nkrumah 1966.

6. For recent discussions of civil rights literature that aim to complicate our understanding of this category (but still tend to focus on work explicitly about visible Civil Rights Movement events, and as such are focused predominantly on literature set in the American South), see Metress 2008, Norman 2010, Monteith 2013, and Armstrong 2015a and 2015b.

7. See Tyson 1999, 147, 204–5. Mayfield detailed his support for Williams’s militant leadership in “Challenge to Negro Leadership” (1961a). For Mayfield’s impressions of Cuba, see “The Cuban Challenge” (1961b).

8. In addition to Tyson 1999 and Scarupa 1979, these biographical paragraphs draw on the entry “Julian Mayfield” in *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (1984), written by Mayfield’s friend William Branch; Mayfield’s *New York Times* obituary, written by James Brooke (see Brooke 1984 and Richards 1988, v–xvii); and various materials from the Julian Mayfield Papers at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

9. The published version of *417* is relatively accessible; see Mayfield 1955.

10. Hansberry delivered this piece for her keynote speech at the AMSAC conference in 1959.

Steven Belletto

11. Of course, “standard” civil rights novels might also concern nonliteral learning, although to the extent their goal is to, say, help effect school integration, at a certain point they must depart from the nonliteral to advocate concrete action.

12. For another reading of *Black Papa*, see Munby 2011, 95.

13. By 1968, in a review of Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*, Mayfield would argue that the black experience “is integral to the American experience, not a marginal back street, and that the nation’s survival may depend on how quickly it understands this and changes accordingly” (1968, 638).

14. For a discussion of how black history had been systematically suppressed by Europeans over the four hundred years leading up to the twentieth century, see Robinson 2000.

15. See also “Uncle Tom Abroad,” in which Mayfield argues that the way to spot what he calls *homo Tomo americanus*—an American Uncle Tom abroad—is to observe that, though he might claim to be a “radical,” he “never does or says anything that might annoy the local US Embassy” (1963c, 39).

16. This is a but a small sampling of what I call “alternative civil rights literatures.” One could certainly name further examples, and other scholars have paid sustained attention to authors and texts that share affinities with this sort of work. Jodi Melamed, for example, reads Chester Himes’s *The End of a Primitive* (1955) as an illustrative “example of race-radical literature” (2011, 89).

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Steven Belletto

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