

Show Me What Democracy Looks Like:
Articulating political possibility in Durham, North Carolina

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¹ This is a fake name used for the sake of the privacy of organization members.

² Italicized sections that are attributed to people I interacted with in the field, such as this one, are paraphrased from field notes or from interview recordings.

³ For context, I had worked for a national senate and two union campaigns before and found the messaging process much more straightforward.

⁴ I put the term “left” in quotation marks in order to acknowledge that the practice of organ

Abstract

As in most U.S. cities, municipal voter turnout in Durham, North Carolina is stratified by race and income level. Local politicians win elections by catering to the predominately white and middle-class bloc categorized as "likely voters." In the face of this self-reinforcing, systematic political bias, a Durham coalition is attempting to construct a progressive voting bloc led by working-class people of color. Among other challenges, Justice For All members are consistently faced with the assumption that they are investing in the impossible. Drawing on participant observation conducted in the months preceding Durham's 2017 municipal election, this thesis asks: *1) how does the construction of "reasonable," and "radical" in political discourse work to privilege certain political formations while undermining others? 2) How do social actors articulate the legitimacy of political formations and strategies that have yet to be constructed?* I analyze Justice For All's formal communications strategies as well as countless conversations held in a variety of public and private spaces. I argue that, in each of these spaces, group members engage in a form of discursive theorizing that works to overcome the limits of hegemonic discourse and speak (as well as organize) new political formations into existence.

Introduction

“For now we see through a glass, darkly.” -1 Corinthians 13:12 KJV

“This is the thing that we need to do. We need to learn to be brave. We need to be willing to hope for something better. We need to recognize that we can only get there by acting, and acting together.” -Durham Political Activist

In June of 2017, an eclectic group of forty or so organizers, activists, and candidates for municipal office in Durham, North Carolina spent the better part of a Saturday in a poorly lit conference room. I mention that the group was eclectic because, unlike the majority of events I attended in Durham that year, this was not a meeting for a specific organization, candidate, or even political cause. In fact, some of the people in attendance were preparing to run against one another for city council. I mention the poor lighting because I was there working as a videographer for one of the organizations co-sponsoring the event. It was my first official task as a summer intern in digital communications. So, naturally, I missed all the most important moments while fiddling with my camera’s aperture; struggling in vain to capture the vibrant energy suggested by the event’s title: *Activist Academy: Tools to Win Power For A More Progressive Durham*.

In the midst of my first-day anxiety, however, there was one moment that made me forget my camera altogether. A panel of older activists were speaking on the history of local politics, describing some of the organizing tactics that helped make Durham a progressive, “left”-leaning city in the heart of a conservative, right-leaning state. One of the panel members was a co-founder of *The People’s Alliance* (commonly referred to as The PA), a progressive Political Action Committee, which was founded in the 1970’s and had since become the most

influential electoral power in Durham. Towards the end of the discussion, he received a question from the audience about his opinion on the organization for which I was working, a six-month-old upstart calling itself *Justice For All* (*in future I will follow the lead of the organization's members and refer to them as J4A*). The questioner had called attention to the fact that while PA was founded as a white liberal organization that worked in coalition with black political groups, J4A was billing itself as a specifically multiracial electoral coalition. The panel member responded that he, personally, was thrilled with the work J4A was doing, and added that back when PA was founded:

*It wasn't that we didn't want to organize together in one group... black and white folks I mean. It's just, at that time...we just wouldn't have even known it was possible.*²

This response struck me as so fraught with meaning, punctuated by the panel member's earnest hesitations, that it disrupted the day's activities and then redefined them with a renewed sense of purpose and urgency. The most immediate reason for this was that it forced the crowd to confront how the construction of race has consistently twisted political possibility in the United States. The fact that in the 1970's a group of white, self-defined "leftist radicals" could not conceive of an inter-racial political organization drew uncomfortable attention to how much had changed in the past forty years. The fact that this same group today is still predominantly white in a city that is majority non-white drew uncomfortable to attention to how much had not.

A second reason that the statement struck me so forcefully, which is not necessarily separate from the first, was that it helped me recognize that this event was, at its core, part of a

² Italicized sections that are attributed to people I interacted with in the field, such as this one, are paraphrased from field notes or from interview recordings.

larger project in pursuit of new political possibility. More precisely, it called attention to a paradox that weighs heavily on any such political project. The panel speaker had implied that people cannot do politics in a certain way until they are made to realize that it is possible; but how can they know it is possible before it has been done? This paradox would be my constant companion working in communications with J4A that summer, as would the frustrating sense that the very words I had with which to promote the organization were working against me. On some level, this thesis is an attempt to interrogate, if not to resolve, my lingering frustrations with that communications work. Therefore, it could be read as an attempt to answer the question: why was my summer job so much more difficult than I expected?³

In answering this question, I draw on two months of ethnographic research to try to better understand **1)** how political possibility is created and bounded in political discourse, **2)** why this process seems to privilege certain possibilities while limiting others and **3)** what strategies can individuals and organizations develop in order to overcome these limits? These questions emerged out of the specific context of J4A's electoral organizing in Durham, North Carolina. Therefore, the answers I provide are also specific to that context. However, I believe the action-oriented theorizing that takes place in J4A's cluttered office space has something vital to contribute to both the study of discourse and the study of politics more broadly.

The pursuit of political possibility

Before I elaborate on J4A's political project and the discursive struggle that is the focus of this thesis, I want to provide a brief account of why I believe this struggle has important implications for our current political moment. I arrived on the doorstep of J4A's office in search

³ For context, I had worked for a national senate and two union campaigns before and found the messaging process much more straightforward.

of new political possibility. After a series of formative, but ultimately disappointing, engagements with both “mainstream” electoral politics and “radical” activism, I was determined to find something to rekindle my faith in political engagement as space for collective empowerment.

My dual sense of disillusionment and hope was hardly out of place at the Activist Academy meeting. What my subjects lacked in light exposure they more than made up for in agitated enthusiasm. These self-defined progressives were fired up in the wake of an election season that saw a promising win at the state level (a Democrat unseated North Carolina’s incumbent Republican Governor) and what one organizer with Black Lives Matter referred to as a “catastrophic failure” at the national level. Not only had President Trump entered office promising to undermine many of these folk’s specific political goals, his win also seemed to signal that the progressive “left” was losing a broad ideological battle. (Brooks 2018)⁴. For the people at this meeting, this national context brought a heightened sense of urgency to their upcoming municipal election- which would take place exactly one year after Donald Trump’s Presidential victory. As one of the young organizers running the “skills training” declared, it was now more important than ever that Durham continue to break barriers as a progressive leader for the American south:

If there is one thing this election cycle has taught us, she added, it is that all across this country, people are ready for change.

⁴ I put the term “left” in quotation marks in order to acknowledge that the practice of organizing political and social beliefs along a binary spectrum spanning left to right is based on logics that are entirely socially constructed and context specific. I want to call attention to this construction because, as I will later argue, I believe it plays a significant role in limiting political possibility in the United States and beyond.

A similar sentiment has been echoed by political pundits across the U.S. since Donald Trump clinched the Republican nomination in 2017, and even before then. Throughout the 2016 national primaries, the popularity of both Donald Trump, and of Bernie Sanders in the Democratic race, were cited as evidence that many Americans had become increasingly receptive to anti-establishment messages. Importantly, both candidates promised to make fundamental changes to the broader system- either by “draining the swamp” or bringing “a political revolution.”⁵ While it is hardly novel for a Presidential candidate to champion change of some kind (Obama promised “change we can believe in” in 2012), this latest election cycle was marked by two major candidates who built their campaigns around criticism not only of the administration in power, but of the political system itself.

The apparent success of these messages makes sense when contextualized by public data on popular opinions of the United States government. Congressional approval ratings that have been declining since the early 2000’s and remained consistently at or below 20% since 2012 (Gallup 2018). This dissatisfaction with Congress has been accompanied by a quieter, but I would argue more fundamental, dissatisfaction with the U.S. electoral system. Criticism of corporate and individual donor influence, partisan gerrymandering, and discriminatory voting policies have become so ubiquitous as to be almost cliché (Hasan 2016). According to a Pew research study, overall trust in government has declined relatively steadily since the 1960’s,

⁵ Campaign slogans such as these do not, of course, truly represent an unproblematic sample of public sentiment that candidates have simply put into words. They are crafted to target specific audiences, at the very least “likely voters” and more often the candidate’s specific base, and are often designed to manipulate as well as to appeal to public opinion (Druckman 2001:233). For example, the Washington Post recently published a series of articles on the process by which the Trump campaign employed Cambridge Analytica, a political data firm, to develop and test the “drain the swamp message” using social media. The line does not necessarily capture a ubiquitous or even majoritarian attitude that Washington is in need of a shakedown. However, the fact it did seem to resonate with people online and at rallies does indicate some level of widespread dissatisfaction with the government.

dropping from an average score of 77% in 1964 to 18% in 2017 (Pew Research Center 2017). Perhaps above all, U.S. voters have expressed this dissatisfaction through deafening silence. Today, our nation's claim to “democracy” is riding on voter turnout rates that rarely break 50% even for Presidential elections, are consistently less than 20% at the municipal level, and are systematically stratified by race, class and educational attainment (Ballotpedia 2016).

Of course, students of U.S. history can easily point to the fact that our electoral process has never been particularly democratic, at least not according to the term’s definition in popular discourse (Merriam-Webster defines “democratic” as “relating to, appealing to, or available to the broad masses of people”)(Merriam Webster 2018). From the moment of its inception, our nation’s electoral system was designed to facilitate political participation among a small class of white, Christian, property-owning (and therefore wealthy), men whose ancestors came from the right Anglo-Saxon nations (Keyssar 2009: 335). However, the messages used by candidates and activists alike during the 2016 election cycle, as well as declining trust in elected officials, seem indicative of a political moment in which there is a rising level of popular anxiety around the dichotomy between our nation’s democratic self-image, and observable patterns within our electoral system.⁶ At the very least, it is a moment in which voters demonstrated a willingness to

⁶ That said, it is worth noting that the argument that the U.S. political system is fundamentally broken is as old as the nation itself. Indeed, the rhetoric of a “rigged system” that apparently resonated with people across the political spectrum in 2016 is rooted in centuries of articulation on the part of politically marginalized groups. For example, in 1876 Frederick Douglass was among a group of political activists who insisted that the election results had been rigged through rampant intimidation and structural disenfranchisement of black voters (Douglass as cited in King 2012). The conflicting ways in which different people remember this history is evident in that a group of predominantly white citizens have united under the mantra “Make America Great Again,” while a black and brown led counterforce has adopted the protest chant, “racist, sexist, filled with hate; America was never great!” Members of J4A fall into the second camp. Indeed, I first heard the “America was never great” chant when an organizer with J4A introduced it to a crowd of anti-trump protesters in downtown Durham.

support candidates that openly condemned national governing structures as systematically elitist, unjust, and undemocratic.

While this thesis will not offer a historical analysis of the social and political struggles that have constructed the current political moment, I do think it's important to acknowledge here that the popularity of Trump and Sanders' critiques was in part produced by other political actors who came, and made critiques, before them. A particularly immediate example is Sanders' campaign messaging about wealth inequality and corporate political influences that echoed similar messages popularized by organizers of the Occupy Wall Street protests in 2011 (which in turn echoed messages from a global protest movement that was epitomized, at least in the U.S., by a massive protest of a meeting of the World Trade Center in Seattle in 1999) (Hoel 2016:2). I mention these rhetorical linkages for two reasons. First, they provide an introduction to discourse as a product of political work and a force (or set of tools) that both creates and constrains political possibility. If Sanders' platform was in part made possible by organizers that came before him (including, of course, many that struggled before, between, and after the high profile protests I've mentioned), he was equally constrained by the discursive work of other political actors that constructed his political identity as a "democratic socialist" at once threatening and ridiculous (Hoel 2016:24).

Second, these particular linkages also give us some sense of how an articulation of dissatisfaction with the U.S. political system has moved from the "fringe" political space of street protests to the platform of a major Presidential candidate. In this thesis, I am primarily interested in how different articulations in discourse are moving in Durham, North Carolina among circles of progressive organizations, candidates, and residents. However, both the

discourse, and the challenges and opportunities that I will argue it creates can never be completely separated by the national and international struggles surrounding the city.

In their analysis of 21st century leftist political movements from Occupy Wall Street to the Arab Spring, Hardt and Negri begin by asking “why have the movements, which address the needs and desire of so many, not been able to achieve lasting change?” (Hardt & Negri 2017: XI) Thinking specifically in terms of electoral politics, the question that guides this thesis could be rephrased as, “if so many people, and leftists in particular, are unsatisfied with the status quo, why is it still so difficult for new kinds of electoral projects to gain traction?” There are many levels of analysis from which one might address this question. At the institutional level, we might point to how government and political systems (including the electoral process) are self-reinforcing. At the economic level, we might try to uncover who is profiting from the status quo and what kind of differential access they have to political power. I believe all of these levels of analysis are important. For this particular project, however, I focus instead on what I will call the discursive level.

This level is not, of course, really separate from that of the economy or of political institutions. As Torfing writes in a comprehensive review of discourse theory, “discourse is *co-extensive* with the social [emphasis mine]” and therefore inextricably enmeshed in economic and political relations of power (Torfing 1999:94). My decision to focus on discourse was, as I have indicated, born of moments when I found that - in addition to social, institutional and economic norms- one of the most significant barriers to J4A’s political work are norms that are constructed in discourse.

Political possibility and Justice For All

J4A's particular vision tries to transform the U.S. political system. Trying to build a different kind of electoral coalition. This work is indebted to a range of "leftist"⁷ political projects that have laid a broad, if at times troubled and self-contradictory, foundation for their struggle in Durham. Many of the modern leftist projects that have inspired J4A, such as local organizations like the Southern Vision Alliance and national movements like Black Lives Matter and Occupy Wall Street, do not engage directly-or at least not primarily- with electoral politics. Others, however, are also explicitly focused on building new electoral coalitions in their city. A prominent example of this in the United States is a coalition "of oppressed peoples" in Jackson Mississippi who have been winning local elections as part of their broader plan to achieve "self-determination, participatory democracy and economic justice in their city. J4A's own model, however, is more closely linked to that of a group in Barcelona, Spain called Barcelona en Comú. This protest movement turned political party built a coalition of tens of thousands of people and swept Barcelona's 2014 municipal election cycle with candidates who would have been considered unelectable just a few years previously (Charnock 2017).

While Durham, North Carolina is a long way from Barcelona, Spain, both in terms of geography and the social and political climate, J4A's project is guided by a similar strategic

⁷ I use the term "leftist" because it is both the most common term for the political orientation with which J4A is aligned, and the term that they frequently use to define themselves. However, I put the term in parenthesis because, as I will argue later, I believe that the left-right binary axis that constructs their positions as "radical" presents itself as a discursive obstacle that the group is forced to struggle with and against.

analysis.⁸ In J4A's specific context, the political analysis motivating the fifteen or so people that consistently lead various committees could be summarized as the following points:⁹ **1)** In Durham, there exists a base of politically marginalized people, primarily people of color and primarily working class, who share enough core interests and enough anger at the political system to be politically activated and united under an electoral platform. **2)** This group is large enough that if collectively organized as a "political vehicle"¹⁰ they could dominate municipal elections from mayor to county sheriff.¹¹ **3)** City level electoral politics is an ideal place to experiment with building new kinds of political communities and practices that could eventually be adopted on a wider scale.

An important implication of this third point is that while the group cares about influencing local elections, they envision these short-term campaigns as one tactic within a broader project of political transformation. This perspective is evident in the fact that even in the midst of a contentious municipal cycle, they put the majority of their resources into organizing in communities of people labeled "unlikely voters." Their long-term goal is to build a multi-racial, cross-class, coalition that is led by working class people of color, with organizational activities that range from collective voting, to community-generated alternatives to police security, to family game nights.

J4A's project seems to at least try to answer the demands of U.S. citizens (across the political spectrum) for more inclusive and 'democratic' electoral politics. However, while I was

⁸ While I am not setting to trace the extent to which the projects could be considered to be connected, I believe it is worth noting that the group members follow each other on twitter from either side of the Atlantic Ocean.

⁹ This summary is based on my observations at strategic planning meetings, conversations and interviews with group members, and the messaging content of J4A's website and social media pages.

¹⁰ This term is taken from J4A's website messaging.

¹¹ This is in part due to the fact that voter turnout rates for local elections averaged around 12% between 2009 and 2016.

working with them, I often found it difficult to articulate the legitimacy and urgency of J4A's mission to the very people I heard critiquing the exclusionary and oligarchical nature of local electoral politics. In my time working for them, I became intimately acquainted with that sympathetic smile people offer as a consolation prize when they don't fully understand what you're saying, and suspect that you don't either. I received this reaction from the mostly white and middle class progressives that populated the political spaces where I had worked previously (e.g. campaigns for Democratic candidates and progressive non-profits with social-justice based mission statements), from people living in the working class, predominately black and brown communities where Justice For All is focusing the majority of its organizing work, and from self-identified "radical leftist" who engage in politics primarily through issue-based advocacy and protests.¹²

These three groups, which broadly speaking represent the three primary constituencies that J4A is trying to organize with, often had different reasons for being suspicious of the project. I will discuss these in some detail later. However, what I found to be consistent (though by no means ubiquitous) across all groups was a tendency to dismiss J4A on the grounds that it just didn't make sense to them. This may be mostly a testament to my own failure to clearly articulate the vision and structure of the organization, but I will argue that this failure of articulation as well as failures of comprehension were in part produced by discursive norms that manifested as barriers for a political organization poses a direct threat to the political status quo. For example, my attempt to describe J4A to my white, liberal, college roommate went something like this:

¹² It would be misleading to suggest that these three "groups" of people represent all of the people J4A hopes to organize with, or that they are clearly bounded and distinct from one another. However, this is the categorical structure that J4A members themselves often (though not always) use when planning organizing and messaging strategy. I introduce it to give a sense of the demographic context in which J4A is working.

Roommate: So, could you explain what this group is exactly?

Me: Sure! So it's a coalition led by working class people of color in Durham. We're trying to build a political community and voting coalition oriented around a progressive vision for Durham's future

Roommate: Ok...but, like, what do they want?

Me: Umm...we want to make Durham a city where all people, regardless of race, class background, citizenship status, sexuality, are safe and have access to adequate resources to maintain a high quality of life

Roommate: Ah so you're like a progressive advocacy group?

Me: Well, no, we are actually trying to bring more folks into the electoral process so we can force elected officials to listen to our voices...

Roommate: So it's like a civic education initiative.

Me: Not really, we have a political platform and agenda. We're building a coalition to win local elections together.

Roommate: So you're trying to be like a new local party? Left of the Democrats?

Me: Well, no, I mean not exactly.

Roommate: Honestly it seems like Durham is so far left already I'm not sure why you need a whole new organization.

After a series of conversations like this one, I developed a new level of respect for the *J4A* organizers who could eloquently and (seemingly) effortlessly frame this political project that confounded the vocabulary I had available to me as a student of political science. Even after perfecting a "sales pitch" it often felt as though I was speaking to people through a layer of conceptual fog. It is one thing for people to have objections to *J4A* on the grounds that they disagreed with its platform or found its structure infeasible. What I found infinitely more frustrating, however, was the tendency instead to dismiss the project by conflating it with groups

that are fundamentally different or characterizing it as vaguely either “too radical” or “too compromising.”

These latter two conclusions are potentially valid critiques of the organization in fully elaborated forms. However, dismissals of *J4A* were instead often implicit and based on propositions that I wasn’t given the opportunity to contest. At times, it felt like I was reliving my experience at the June Activist Academy, trying to take photos in low light. On that day, the room had been full of vibrant energy that, with the proper tools, could have been captured and scrutinized in its full elaboration. However, my tool (a six-year-old camera that was used when I bought it) was simply not up to the task. As a result, the photos I produced for examination were grainy and blurred. When members of J4A try to promote their project in both public and private spaces, it often seems that they are facing a similar problem. The conceptual tools that they have at their disposal were not designed to capture the image they are trying to produce.

In the chapters that follow, I will elaborate on the theory (and practices) that I am drawing from in order to conceptualize discourse as both a social analytic and an object of study. I will trace this struggle across the municipal election cycle that began in June of 2017, and culminated with city council and mayoral elections the following November. In chapter one, I will describe J4A’s “discursive environment” by providing a brief overview of Durham’s current political culture, as well as the local histories that continue to shape discourse in the present. I will then introduce J4A as a “discursive agent” and provide a comprehensive overview of their mission, structure, and membership. In chapter two, I will draw on field work and interviews conducted early in the election cycle (from May through August) to outline some of the specific discursive challenges that J4A members are identifying and confronting in their political work.

Throughout this chapter, I demonstrate how specific propositions that have attained a level of hegemonic discursive power function to undermine J4A's political project.

In an interchapter between two and three, I describe a series of encounters with discursive challenges and strategies in the field. These anecdotes include both political strategizing and reflections on that strategy provided by six members of J4A's operations, campaign, and organizing teams. Finally, in chapter three, I describe J4A's trajectory leading up to the day of the November municipal elections. In doing so, identify and analyze J4A's use of a specific discursive strategy, which I refer to as the (re)appropriation of hegemonic discourse, in order to work through the discursive barriers described in chapter one. I argue that despite the inevitable limitations, J4A members have demonstrated this strategy to be an effective tool for projects that seek to transform electoral norms and stretch the limits of political possibility.

Political theory in 'the field'

My first assignment as J4A's digital media intern was to produce a series of short videos featuring members of the campaign team who would each provide answers to the questions: what is J4A, and why should you join us? Importantly, the "you" shifted slightly depending on who was featured in the video. Because the videos were primarily for sharing on social media, we expected a video featuring Suri¹³, an organizer with a local following in black liberation and anti-capitalist circles, to reach a different audience than one featuring Olivia, who had a background in labor and LGBTQ justice organizing but was currently a member of the Durham City Council. Joseph, the J4A operations leader who also served as my boss/mentor for the summer, explained that we wanted the videos to reach anyone with a progressive "alignment"

¹³ All names used in this paper are pseudonyms provided in the interest of protecting the identities of J4A members as well as other Durham residents.

who is feeling alienated from political engagement. The initial plan was to keep each video at around one minute and 30 seconds. I've always found it challenging to craft a coherent message in a short space of time. However, in this case it proved to be nearly impossible. This was because, in comparison to a campaign pushing for a single policy or promoting a candidate in an electoral race, J4A's mission is far more difficult to distill into easily digestible soundbites.

My first interview was with Asha, an organizer and lead singer/songwriter of a folk-rock indie-soul band. She began by describing how her background as queer, black, Muslim woman from a working class family informed her passion for creating an electoral coalition that would serve as a vehicle for building power among Durham's most marginalized communities. She described the policies she hoped this coalition would be able to implement and what it would mean for working class people of color to lead a powerful coalition. However, we immediately ran into the seeming impossibility of capturing what this coalition would look like, and what it could accomplish, in under two minutes. Asha worked through how to most concisely make it clear that J4A welcomed all Durham residents, while also specifying that the organization was centered on working class and black and brown voices. While editing on my computer later, I tried to smoothly transition between a list of the policies Asha believed were important to the organization's constituencies (such as affordable housing and livable wages) and her declaration that J4A was trying to build a powerful vehicle. In the end, Asha decided that the most important message she wanted to convey was that the struggles that marginalized people face can not, and should not, be tackled alone. J4A's "political vehicle" was ultimately just about working together to make all of our lives better.

As we cut and spliced Asha's message, both during our interview and on my computer editing software, I realized we were engaging in a form of political and discursive theorizing.

How do we expand political possibility? What kind of messages will resonate with different groups of people? These were questions I'd asked in Political Science classes and, I supposed, during previous political work as well. However, the sheer, exhausting, challenge of the work with J4A made me particularly aware of the fact that as we created and tested out messages on Facebook, at public events, and in daily organizing work, we were testing the limits of political discourse. Asha's conclusion that she should describe an electoral coalition as a collective means to overcome individual struggles provided the first of many lessons in how an organization like J4A can work creatively within the constraints of a discourse that constructs their project as radical and confusing. While I also conducted formal interviews with both members of J4A and members of their constituency, moments such as this one form the primary basis of research material for this thesis.

In 2009, Edward Schatz edited an anthology of research in political science that advocated for the canonization and development of the "political ethnography." In his introduction to the anthology, Shatz argues that the field of political science suffers from a lack of ethnographic data and analysis, warning, "if the study of justice, freedom, democracy, and order is to mean anything, it must take into account individuals' lived experiences and how they perceive those abstractions." (Schatz 2009: 10). While Shatz advocates for the extended use of ethnography in his own field, his critique provides a cogent analysis of what anthropology brings to the study of politics and political struggle. Indeed, my own research 'in the field' with J4A began as an attempt to define their struggle to expand political possibility specifically in terms of the lived experiences of the organization's members as well as, to a lesser extent, those of other organizations and people with whom they were 'struggling.'

Having said this, there is an important distinction to be made between the methodology that is implied by Shatz's framing of political ethnography and the anthropological tradition that I follow in this paper. Shatz advocates for a practice that sets out to "glean the meanings that the people under study attribute to their social and political reality" (2009: 5). By contrast, my own approach assumes that these "people under study" participate in struggles over meaning that construct-rather than merely try to interpret-what emerges as political "reality" (Hall as cited in Gurevitch et al. 1982:73). In this way, I follow in the footsteps of anthropologists who have developed a "cultural" approach to the study of politics(Starn 1997:3). In an introduction to an anthology of essays on "cultural politics and social protest," Orin Starn argues that this "cultural" approach begins with the premise that politics (and specifically protest) "necessarily involves struggle over ideas, over identities, symbols and strategies"(1997:3).

This 'premise' has roots in the political and cultural theory of scholars like Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, and Stuart Hall. However, in the field of anthropology it applied to an ethnographic method that is "particularly well-suited" to investigating the "emergent, processual, dialogic and decentered" processes that define political struggle (Holland 2008:100). In a 2001 article for the Annual Review of Anthropology, Marc Edelman argued that anthropologists had "remained on the periphery" of research on collective political projects (like that of J4A) in part because of their tendency to focus on "everyday as opposed to organized [political] resistance" (Edelman 2001: 285-286). However, in the 1990's an explosion of interest in the cultural origins and linkages of "new social movements," particularly in Latin America, provided the impetus for a body of literature exploring collective "cultural practice as a force for political transformation (Edelman 2001: 285-286; Alvarez et al. 1998).

In recent years, this cultural approach to the study of politics has informed anthropological research on political processes as varied as the construction of political identities, struggles over the moral implications of labor policies, the relationship between religious ideology and political struggle, and mobilization processes in social movements in the U.S. and abroad (e.g. Holland et al. 2008; Durrenberger et al. 2012; Glass 2009; Snarr 2011; De La Cadena 2010; Eltantawy et al. 2011). While my own study focuses on engagement with electoral politics specifically, though J4A members engage in other forms of political mobilization as well, I take up this theoretical perspective that treats the people under study as political agents participating in, and struggling over, the formation of both their political world and the meanings attributed to it. Specifically, I am interested in learning from the discursive theorizing that J4A members engage in while canvassing at bus stops, speaking at public forums, and agonizing over social media hashtags.

My research methodology follows the anthropologies rich ethnographic tradition. This thesis is, first and foremost, an ethnography of Justice For All as an organization. In particular, the majority of my research focused on the work of a semipermeable group of ten to fifteen cross-class and majority black and Latinx individuals leading J4A's various committees, or "teams," as they call them. In the summer of 2017, I spent June and July working for the organization's communications team and conducted in-depth participant observation during this time. Following this, I engaged in sporadic periods of participant-observation at public and private group meetings from August through January of the following year.

Throughout my research, I observed and participated in a variety of both formal and informal activities with J4A's members and the groups of people they are trying to organize in Durham. These included skills trainings, public rallies, internal planning meetings, block parties,

a benefit concert and informal gatherings at restaurants and bars. At these events, I engaged group members and their constituents in informal conversations about the political work in which they were (or were choosing not to be) engaged. I also conducted a series of semi-structured formal interviews with members of J4A's leadership team, as well as ten working class people of color whom J4A hoped to recruit as members and potential leaders of their organization. Eight of the interviewees identified as black and two identified as Latino or Latina immigrants. The purpose of this latter set of interviews was primarily to provide the basis for an internal report to be used by J4A's staff. I asked interviewees to identify barriers to political engagement as well as to describe what changes they would make to their city if they had the power to influence the city council and county commissioners. The hope was that the patterns that emerged from the interviews could help inform J4A's organizing and outreach going forward. However, I also draw on the interviews throughout this thesis as I interrogate J4A's struggle to recruit working class immigrants and people of color. Finally, my research also draws from J4A's messaging strategies as they appear on t-shirts, buttons, pamphlets, website messaging and social media posts. In my analysis of these strategies, I demonstrate how J4A's members participate in the development of what Chela Sandoval calls a "methodology of the oppressed" that "cuts through grammars of supremacy" and creates technologies for social transformation. (Sandoval 2000: 2).

Chapter 1

“Meaning, once it is problematized, must be the result, not of a functional reproduction of the world in language, but of a social struggle—a struggle for mastery in discourse” - Stuart Hall

A municipal election in Durham, North Carolina

— The story I’m telling in this thesis is not really about Durham’s municipal election. Or at least, I am not focusing on the candidates nor on the political struggle the organizations and citizens who endorsed and campaigned for them. However, my story is about a political struggle happening throughout the municipal election cycle. Specifically, it is about one organization’s struggle to make space for themselves in Durham’s political landscape, and the ways in which this required that they stretch the limits of what it means to do electoral politics. In order to trace these “limits” and interrogate the work that Justice For All is doing to stretch them, I must begin by introducing J4A in the context of their political landscape. For this reason, I begin my story in a large, overcrowded church, which was the preferred venue for many of the candidate forums that I attended in the summer of 2017.

This particular forum was hosted by a group called Durham Congregations, Associations, and Neighborhoods (CAN). It was held in the largest Church I had ever seen, and still the last people to trickle in were forced to stand along the outer walls for the duration of the three hour meeting. In addition to boasting the highest turn out, the forum stood apart from the others in that the room actually came close to mirroring Durham’s demographic diversity. While the crowd

was mostly older and middle class, it was one of the few events where I saw Durham's black, white and (growing) Latinx populations represented close to proportionality.¹⁴

Although Durham CAN does not make candidate endorsements, its influence in the community, which was demonstrated by the more than 600 people who attended their forum, made it an important space for candidates to try to gain an edge over their opponents. It was also an important space for Justice For All, with whom I was attending the event, to establish itself as one of the “associations” that candidates should be prepared to be accountable to. This forum was an excellent place to do it because it was structured around showing the candidates that Durham citizens would be the ones determining their success, both in their respective races and once in office. The candidates were given very little time to outline their platforms and instead spent the majority of the time listening to community members lay out the expectations that *they* had for Durham's future. As speakers ranging from high school students to undocumented domestic workers shuffled on and off stage, the meeting took on the feeling of a curated, if slightly disjointed, effort to frame the issues of the upcoming election. This is not to say that people took the podium and laid out sections of a four point plan. Instead, the framing process emerged through conceptual links between a variety of stories and proposals. For example, the current director of the Durham Community Land Trust began her speech by reminiscing on her childhood:

I am the daughter of a carpenter. I grew up in my father's workshop. He taught me to love building stuff. My mom had the heart of a social worker. Our home was a place where people could find comfort and security. Home is very important to me. It's personal.

¹⁴ While Durham is roughly 40% black, 40% white, and %15 Latinx, most of the social and political events that I attended were populated by crowds that were almost exclusively white, black, Latinx depending on who was putting them on. This experience was shared by almost everyone I spoke to, and many noted that in everywhere from schools to Churches, Durham remains a largely segregated town.

This introduction eventually segued into a proposal for expanding the community land trust and the designated affordable housing that it provides to Durham citizens. However, it mirrored similar frames that were used to talk about Durham's economic present and future more generally. One of the main topics of discussion throughout the election cycle was the city's ongoing process of rapid economic growth, and the disproportionate effect that it was having on working, middle and upper class citizens. This was an important issue for J4A as well. Because I was employed with their communications team, I paid particularly close attention to the terms by which the issue was being discussed. What I found was that the woman's framing, as well as that of many other speakers, invoked ideas that posed an indirect challenges for J4A's own political struggle.

In this chapter, I will be discussing the frames, and counter frames, that gave meaning and structure to Durham's political discourse during the 2017 election cycle. In doing so, I will explain how I am using the concept of "discourse," in this thesis and why I follow theorists like Michel Foucault, Chantal Mouffe, and Ernesto Laclau in treating discourse as sets of flexible, socially constructed fields endowed with essential, and often repressive, social power (Foucault 1972:37). Having described Durham's discursive environment, I will then introduce Justice For All (henceforth abbreviated as J4A) as a political organization and discursive agent. Finally, I will demonstrate why the discursive theorizing that I witnessed and engaged in while working with J4A provides an instructive analysis of specific contours of Durham's political discourse, and of the work that must be done by organizations intent on stretching its repressive limits.

Bull City Politics: Framing a discursive environment

The speech given by the current director of the Durham land trust was a definitive hit. As she spoke, her words elicited shouts of agreement and scattered applause from across the church pews. They also revealed something about both the resources and limits of the discursive landscape in which she was working. The woman began by grounding her commitment to the land trust in three other commitments: to building things, to familial security, and to home as a right and institution that is *personal*. While I have no doubt that this woman is indeed the daughter of a carpenter and a social worker in spirit, and does truly have a personal investment in the idea of home, her framing also draws on three powerful tropes in local and national discourse. In their review of framing theory in the social sciences, Chong and Druckman refer to tropes as the “culturally available frames” that exist within a discursive environment and can be used to establish the legitimacy of a proposed idea or policy (Chong and Druckman 2007:107).

The director’s first commitment is at least in part a means for preemptively heading off critics of affordable housing programs. By declaring her love of building things, she assured her audience that she is not trying to stand in the way of Durham’s current economic revitalization. In fact, her quintessentially American father had instilled in her our nation’s devotion to building, producing and innovating its way to whatever new frontier it conjures on the horizon (Peck & Theodore 2012:179). Later, she would use the popular term “equitable development” in order to insist that economic development and designated affordable housing can be reconciled as part of one, progressive project. Having established this, the director then eased her audience into a second commitment to the familial comfort and security provided by a loving mother. In addition to completing the image of her wholesome American family, this laid the groundwork for her argument that all people have the right to the comfort and security of a home. The

feminization of such a right, and its specific association with a nurturing, domestic mother figure, provides the idealized heteronormative compliment to her industrious, carpenter father. By making this association, the director implied that the right to a home is really the right to conform to the American moral standard for a traditional nuclear family (Fineman 1993).

Finally, the director ended her introduction by reminding the audience that *home*, and home ownership, is a *personal* thing. To me, this seems like an odd way to frame a community-owned land trust. The project, after all, is inherently a collective one. However, the coding of collective land ownership as *personal* makes sense as a means for framing the project simply a means for securing individual rights. The emphasis on the personal, like the heteronormative family and *building things*- conforms to broader political discourse surrounding public welfare in the United States. According to the logics of this discourse, welfare policy is legitimate to the extent that it secures people the individual right to fulfill their assigned social and economic role (Schram 1993:249-268). For example, that of an industrious father or nurturing mother. Conforming to these logics helps to normalize the land trust, taking something that could be thought of as a radical move towards a more collective form of living, and returning it a concept of home that is safely cloistered within nuclear families (Kitzinger 2005).

My analysis is not intended as a critique of the sincerity of the director's speech. Instead, I am trying to show how speech in general, and political speech in particular, draws from, struggles with, and reinforces "culturally available frames" already embedded in the discourse in which it participates (Chong and Druckman 2007:107). In this thesis, I will be arguing that the symbolic devices that these authors describe are not only present and useful but also limiting to the point that they pose a barrier to political innovation. For example, I would argue that the systematic framing of social welfare as accommodating to economic development and cloistered

within the family limits the kind of welfare policies that are politically viable. It also poses a specific challenge for an organization that wants to move towards the collectivization of both welfare and the political strategies used to attain it. For this reason, the framework for analyzing messaging strategy that is presented by this framing literature (at least as summarized by Chong and Druckman) is not sufficient for my purposes. Instead, I will be using a theory of discourse that draws most directly from authors recommended to me by J4A members, as well as from conversations with those members themselves. This conception of discourse is one that recognizes political debate, both direct and implicit, as taking place on a series of socially constructed fields that a) are sites of political struggle and b) are deeply implicated in systems of political power and state oppression (Laclau & Mouffe 1985:123).

Note 1: Theorizing discourse with Justice For All

The already unstable lines between political “theory” and political “praxis” are blurred beyond recognition in J4A’s tiny office space. There, one can find an earmarked copy of Hegemony and Socialist Strategy sitting next to a pamphlet on participatory budgeting (Democracy in Action!), and a map of voting precincts marked up with canvassing notes for Durham’s approaching municipal elections. When I sat in that office, reading Stuart Hall in an effort to make sense of the pamphlets and posters that surrounded me, one of my co-workers nodded at the book’s title and said that if I wanted to understand J4A should try Laclau and Mouffe. Their discursive theory, he explained, provides set of imperfect but useful tools to help conceptualize what J4A is working through and against. The tools that that these authors provide begin with the premise that “the meaning-given relations of discourse are social as opposed to logical or natural.” (Torfing 1999:41). In other words, everything from concrete

objects to abstract concepts attain meaning through social interactions between subjects who negotiate and accept that meaning together. For example, the meaningful pathos assigned to the word “personal” in the director’s speech is neither “necessary” nor “eternal” (Hall 1985:113). Instead, it is assigned that meaning within a socially constructed “signifying order” (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 82).

Laclau and Mouffe draw out three important implications from the concept of discourse as a meaning-giving symbolic order. First, all forms of communication, as well as other forms of signifying that might not be thought of as explicitly communicative, cannot escape interaction with the socially constructed order that gives them meaning in the first place (Torfing 1999:84; Foucault 1969:24).¹⁵ Second, because the realm of the social is saturated with social antagonisms that produce relations of domination, the norms that are constructed in discourse “systematically favor” the values and livelihoods of those in positions of power (Hall as cited in Gurevitch et al. 1982:65). Laclau and Mouffe describe this systematic bias in terms of the institution of “nodal points,” which are preeminent concepts (like the idea of the “personal”) that contain within them political biases that reinforce the current norms of social and political power (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985:121). Third, while these “nodal points” are powerful social forces, they are also sites of struggle and susceptible to intervention on the part of marginalized as well as dominant voices (Hall as cited in Gurevitch et al. 1982:65). This opens up the possibility for individuals and groups to stretch the boundaries imposed by a signifying order.

¹⁵ Foucault describes this symbolic order as one that is not limited to the written and spoken word, but includes other forms of signifying including everything from clothing, to scientific ‘laws,’ to social conventions. Together, these signifying practices participate in the constitution of knowledge which contains within it the basis of subjectivities and power relations as well as the basis for localized “meanings” (Foucault, 1972:30). While I will be focusing primarily on the linguistic components of discourse, this broader conception of discourse informs the way in which I approach J4A’s discursive struggle.

Drawing from this introduction to Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of discourse, we can understand J4A’s messaging strategy as a signifying struggle working within a certain socially constructed signifying order. Like any discourse, this order contains within it “culturally available frames” that reinforce political norms. Indeed, the frames are best described as not so much culturally available as culturally dominating. With this conceptual grounding in mind, I want to provide bit more context about the local signifying order in which J4A emerged. The following are three headlines from online media sources that do a surprisingly good job of summarizing the themes that dominated this context during Durham’s 2017 municipal election cycle:

“Why Durham is North Carolina’s hippest city.” - *Jennifer Rice for Vogue.com*
(April 7, 2017)

“Durham shopping center on verge of major revitalization” - *Andrea Blanford for abc11.com* (April 14, 2017)

“Anti-hate protesters rally in Durham, North Carolina after KKK rally rumors.” - *cbsnews.com* (August 18, 2017)

Despite the criticism one can easily make of the polarizing distortions created by media narratives, these headlines at least provide us with a glimpse of the self-images that Durham residents present to themselves, as well as to the world beyond their city limits. I selected these particular headlines because they capture three of the prevailing narratives that pervaded political discussion and debate during the 2017 municipal election cycle. The narrative embodied by the first headline celebrates Durham’s status as a symbol of the growing “hipster” south. This status is a source of pride for many Durhamites who cite organic-sourced coffee shops in old tobacco

warehouses and the popularity of a local bar's "Southern Fried Queer Pride" dance parties as evidence that Durham is the height of urban cool. It helps that with a population of just over 300,000 (as of 2015), Durham is still small enough to feel really local, and yet big enough to sustain a variety of bars and clubs as well as a diverse arts and music scene (US Census Bureau 2015).

According to a retired theatre director and longtime resident, whom I spoke with in front of his exponentially appreciated downtown apartment, Durham boasts *the perfect mixture of liberal culture and gritty history*. From what I gathered, this perceived "grit" is largely a product of Durham's industrial history and current racial diversity. According to the 2010 census, Durham's population is 37% White, (non-Hispanic); 41% Black; 5% Asian; and 14% Latinx (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). The origins of this racial diversity can be traced back to the mid-1800's when Durham became one of the first cities in North Carolina to make a relatively smooth transition from plantation-based agriculture to an industrialized economy (Anderson 2011:131). At a time when most southern businesses refused to employ recently freed slaves, Durham attracted black people around the state with abysmally low-paying jobs in tobacco factories and warehouses.¹⁶ Today, a growing Latinx immigrant population, attracted by an abundance of low-wage construction and farming jobs, have populated areas where one can find restaurants, grocery stores, and ice cream parlors where business owners and customers communicate primarily in Spanish.

The theater director's only complaint about his city was that his taxes had risen exponentially in recent years, which brings me to a second narrative indexed by the headline about the renovation of a shopping mall. This is a tale of sudden and dramatic economic success

¹⁶ When compared side by side, the national census of 1860 and 1870 reveal an increase of more than 300% in Durham's African-American population (Anderson 2011:131).

for a downtown area once viewed as a dangerous and dilapidated slum (or, as one J4A member translated, white people saw it as poor and black). Durham's black population has been celebrated by W.E.B. Dubois and Frederick Douglass as a model for internally organized economic advancement in the Jim Crow south (Dubois and Douglass as cited in Brown 2012:14, 27). For Durham locals in the present, this success is often epitomized by the memory of when, in 1898, the city became home to the United State's first black-owned life insurance company. However, the end of reconstruction in the late 1800's gave way to an era of increasingly brutal state-sponsored methods for maintaining white supremacy (Anderson 2001:188). Both de jure and de facto barriers to educational and economic advancement ensured that the majority of black residents remained far poorer than Durham's smaller, white population (Data USA 2015). The city was also hit particularly hard by de-industrialization and the decline of the tobacco and textile industries in the 1980's (Anderson 2001:611). However, thanks to a recent technology boom- accompanied by an influx of hipsters with disposable income- Durham has seen median income and property values skyrocket in recent years. As a result, the revitalization of everything from shopping centers to tobacco warehouses is a dominant theme in local news.

In August of 2018, reports of a KKK gathering in downtown Durham drew hundreds of protesters who had organized a counter-rally in less than a day. The headline celebrating Durham's commitment to "anti-hate" is rooted in the narrative of a city that thinks of itself as, to quote a frontrunner mayoral candidate, "a progressive beacon for the south."¹⁷ A history of progressive politics and black leadership, both habitually at odds with their conservative surroundings, have ensured that Durham is not only "left" of center, but defiantly so. When North Carolina's transgender ban made bathrooms a topic of national conversation in March of 2016, Durham churches flew gay pride flags and businesses changed their bathroom signs to

¹⁷ This is a quote from Durham Mayor Steve Schewel's 2018 "State of the City" address.

gender neutral. When three months later Durham raised the minimum wage for city workers to \$15/hour, local officials bemoaned the fact that a recently passed state law explicitly prevented them from raising the general minimum wage above \$7.25 (Mark Schultz for *The Herald Sun* 2017). Durham's defiant progressivism is perhaps most evident in the fact that on the rare occasion that it makes the national news cycle, it is usually by way of a contentious protest or, in a recent Fox News story, an unsanctioned toppling of a confederate statue (Jonathan Drew for *Fox News Associated Press* 2018).

The three narratives outlined here all played a major role in the conversations and debates I witnessed at campaign events, protests, and private gatherings in the summer of 2017. However, if an economically prosperous, politically progressive city with a hipster culture and *gritty* southern history sounds like the fantasy of a liberal college student that's because, at some level, it is. Specifically, it was my fantasy when during my first visit to Durham I had a meeting in a film studio that still smelled faintly of the tobacco that had once been stored in its workspace. It grew even stronger when I walked into my first overcrowded city council meeting. The boisterous atmosphere appealed to my latent patriotic zeal, and rekindled my wavering faith in the promise of participatory democracy. Or at least it did until I realized that the participants present were majority white and almost exclusively middle class in a city where the majority of residents are non-white and nearly 20% are living below the poverty line (Data USA 2015).

This unusually high poverty rate, which has actually increased with Durham's celebrated revitalization, is the first of many cracks in the optimistic image presented by the Vogue article (Willet, 2017). In fact, while I wouldn't argue that any of the three narratives I've described are complete false, they are all contested by conflicting versions that also played a major role in discursive spaces where J4A members were working in the summer of 2017. Traces of these

counter-narratives can also be seen in online media. For example, ten days after the Vogue article about Durham's hipster prowess a local journalist published the following op-ed:

“Durham doesn’t need anymore hipster cool” -Barry Saunders for the *Durham News & Observer* (April 17, 2017)¹⁸

Saunders’s title captured a sentiment I’ve heard echoed by many older Durham residents, and particularly black residents who lived in Durham when, as one landscaping business owner put it, *white people were still too afraid to come here!* For people like him, the ‘gritty’ history that holds such high-value hipster appeal (and is now packaged and sold in the form of locally brewed beers named for the “Bull City” tobacco company) is a lived experience of poverty, exploitation and political struggle.

Durham’s progressive values and rebellious spirit are both deeply rooted in black-led economic and political organizing that dates back to the late 1800’s (Anderson 2011: 131). This organizing produced the founding of an all-black run professional training school in 1909, some of the first protests against school segregation in the 1950s, and an at least proportionately black (50%) and left-leaning city council since the late 1990s (2011:130-190: Vann,2017:92). Much of the later political work was organized through an all-black political organization called *The Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People*, which was founded in 1935 but remains one of the most powerful forces in Durham politics today. In addition, the growing Latinx population that adds a new dimension to the city’s “hip,” urban charm is composed largely of a hyper-exploited class of workers who are either undocumented or tied to precarious, short-term

¹⁸ I would be remiss if I cited this op-ed and failed to add that less than one week later the same author published another article titled: **“My apologies. Now please call off the hipster army”** (News & Observer (blog) April 23, 2017)

work visas. Despite the immeasurable contributions of these workers to Durham's growing infrastructure and domestic services, many face the daily threat of detainment and deportation, and all bare the psychosocial burden of being systematically dehumanized in national and local political rhetoric. (Escobar, 2000). Latinx organizing is also an important facet of Durham's progressive political scene, and yet this group faces life-threatening forms of discrimination from black and white residents alike.

For these reasons and others, the influx of white, vaguely liberal hipsters excited to become the face of Durham's gritty culture feels like a slap in the face to many minority residents. The insult is made all the more painful by the fact that this influx has been accompanied by a period of economic growth that while benefiting some residents, has put many others out on the street. One member of J4A whose family has lived in Durham for generations summed up this sentiment with the statement, *I just don't want to see black people pushed out of Durham because we built it!* However, local headlines announce that in many working class communities, this is exactly what is happening:

“Durham County has an eviction crisis. Can a new diversion program help?” -Sarah Willets *indyweek.com* (July 19, 2017)

If the majority of Durham's population were benefiting from its newfound cultural appeal, it is likely that more people would be willing to just take it as a facile, but harmless, compliment. As it stands, increasing property values and the growth of a white collar jobs market has only made it more difficult for working class residents to afford taxes and rent. To make matters worse, the white-collar economic boom arrived on the back of a national recession during which the state unemployment rate more than doubled (Bureau of Labor Statistics). While

the unemployment rate has since declined, the majority of new jobs created have been service industry positions that pay significantly less than the manufacturing jobs that have all but disappeared (Freyer & Sirota, 2014: 13). As a result, nearly one in five North Carolina families are now surviving off of wages that couldn't have sustained basic food and housing at Durham's pre-boom cost of living (Sirota et al., 2014: 2). The rising rent costs have hit black Durham residents particularly hard because, unlike working class white people, discriminatory mortgage and loaning policies prevented them from buying homes when they were cheap (Norton 2015). Now, as generational renters, they have no equity in the property that has suddenly accrued exponential value beneath their feet. If they can no longer afford the rising rent, they are simply cleared out to make room for more affluent tenants eager to live near the heart of Durham's funky art scene. As a result, local news reports that in 2017 Durham courts saw hundreds of eviction cases *each month* and Durham's homeless population has been growing almost as quickly as its burgeoning *indie* restaurant scene (Willets 2017; Sorg 2015).

This is not to say, however, that the Durham residents and city official who take pride in the economic and cultural rise of certain sectors of Durham have made no effort to confront the unequal nature of Durham's economic revitalization. Indeed, the narratives and counter-narratives presented here are not so much distinct and opposing as conflicted and intertwining. This is also true of the final narrative that casts Durham as a progressive beacon. A more nuanced counter-narrative instead sees the city as a site of struggle between organizers and activists and a violently repressive local government and law-enforcement apparatus. This darker side to Durham's contentious political spirit can be seen in a second headline generated by the same "anti-hate" rally described above:

“Durham police in riot gear face off with demonstrators.” -WNCN (August 18, 2017)

While this headline is reporting the same story as “Anti-hate protesters rally in Durham, North Carolina,” it is choosing to emphasize local conflict instead of local unity. The description of Durham’s hyper-militarized police force hints at the ongoing struggle between anti-police organizers and a police and prison system that is a source of terror by many black and immigrant communities in Durham. I have been told by both Latinx immigrants who moved to the city within the last decade and black residents whose families have lived in Durham for generations that people *know better* than to call the police when they have a problem. An unusually high prison fatality rate, periodic cases of police brutality, and a recent increase in police cooperation with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) have all contributed to this lack of trust (Kane, 2017; Willets 2018, Sorg 2015).

Many local residents who identify as ‘leftist’ (and within that a range of other identifications including progressive, socialist, communist and anarchist) cite both the police force and persistent, racialized economic inequality as reasons why their city is not the progressive beacon that others would like to believe it is. However, at the same time, many leftist organizers began the 2017 municipal election cycle by declaring that Durham is a place where it is possible to break new ground in struggles for ending police violence and addressing racialized poverty. These “leftists,” by the way, include people of a variety of races and class backgrounds—some of whom might even be labeled hipsters. Indeed, many of the people doing the most thankless and dangerous work to build on the legacy of previous black organizers also enjoy *The Pinhook’s* Southern Fried Queer Pride dance parties. Indeed, I initially learned of these dance parties from a member of J4A whose band frequently plays at the Pinhook. What frustrates her is the fact that this dance party, which is coordinated by the bar’s queer, black, and politically active owners, shows up on the instagram feeds of a certain brand of affluent, mostly white

hipsters. Specifically, this is the brand who are driving up the cost of living while refusing to engage with the complex challenges facing many people in their city.

I mention these complexities around social antagonisms to demonstrate that Durham's conflicting self-images can't be stratified and attributed to clearly bounded groups any more than they can really be treated as distinct from one another. What is worth noting, however, are the ways in which certain narratives seem to carry more weight than others in different political spaces. For example, my own narrative about Durham emerged from the versions I saw consistently invoked and contested in campaign platforms, at community forums, and in private conversations during the 2017 municipal election season. While J4A was neither running nor endorsing candidates in the election, these spaces became the discursive environment in which they tried to generate support for their own electoral project.

Introducing a discursive agent

J4A's office space is a tiny, cluttered room, sandwiched between the offices of two other grassroots organizing groups-The Southern Vision Alliance and the Durham chapter of Black Youth Project. There is very little sense of distinction between the different offices, and through doors that are habitually left open one can see similar posters and pamphlets dedicated to empowering and defending marginalized peoples. When I first arrived on their doorstep, three members of J4A's leadership team were discussing the lack of sufficient funding for staff and technology (like a much-coveted mass texting service) that could help them better coordinate their growing base of volunteer activists. Olivia, the woman currently heading the fundraising team, observed that the challenge with finding donors was that people never want to give you money until after you've already done the work that you need their money for.

While the other members laughed at the irony of her ‘joke’ (ironic laughter, I would learn, is one of the hallmark characteristics of J4A’s group meetings), it spoke to a serious obstacle that they confront on a daily basis: they must constantly persuade themselves, potential donors, and potential members alike to invest in a vision that has yet to be fully articulated. This is true of any political project working towards a yet unmet goal, but J4A faces the added barrier that most of the people they are trying to organize with do not have a clear reference point from which to conceptualize an electoral coalition of the kind that they are proposing. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, as a part-time organizer named Oceile once said to me, J4A members are forced to speak through existing reference points that often do more to obscure than elucidate their own project.

For example, they explained to me at this meeting that I would be joining a campaign to build an electoral coalition with 10,000 progressive folks who will vote together to dominate municipal elections from mayor to sheriff, to district attorney. However, they would later explain to me that the core of their vision isn’t really about winning elections and while describing it in these terms makes it easier for people to conceptualize, it also obscures the transformative nature of their long-term goals. What’s more, the term “progressive,” at least as it is most often used in Durham political spaces, doesn’t accurately characterize their values. In fact, as Olivia later told me in her typical, half-joking fashion, progressive is so overused in Durham that it doesn’t really mean much of anything at all. This is in part because its radical impulse has been co-opted by an energetic but cautious brand of political movement that tames any major threat that progressivism might pose to the stability of the current political order(. However, fully introducing a vaguely progressive college student to a project that does not conform to her

conception of either progressiveness or electoral politics just wasn't going to happen in the time we had that first today.

Fortunately for me, my first assignment as a communications intern was to interview a variety of J4A members in order to create a series of promotional videos. I began each interview by asking the member why they joined J4A, and what they considered to be the vision for the organization. The interviewees' answers doubled as both snappy pitches for Facebook and Twitter and a wonderfully comprehensive onboarding process for me:

“In the political landscape right now, I see a lot of hopelessness. It’s not often that I see folks who look like me...governing.” - Flexx, organizer and “coach”

“Yo me uno a J4A porque ya me cansé de tanto? aislamiento...” (*I’m joining J4A because I’m tired of all of the isolation...*) - Carlos, translator and language justice advocate

“J4A is about breaking the racial, economic, and fear barriers that keeps Durham’s progressive majority from actually coming together and making change.” -Suri, campaign team leader

“It’s time to stop sitting on our couches and our porches talking about what needs to be done, and start doing it. I now realize that I am the one who needs to be called on.”
- Marcia, community leader and organizer

While members brought up a number of specific policies in their pitches, housing, policing and healthcare among the most prominent, the majority emphasized the desire to overcome feelings of social isolation and political powerlessness. They also expressed that there wasn't yet a political space for them in Durham. In some cases, this was because the existing PACs and organizations (Durham CAN among them) are dominated by middle and upper class residents, and their meetings are not accommodating to the schedules or perspectives of working class people. In others, it was because these political organizations did not accommodate their political values. One member of the leadership team informed me that she helped to found J4A because she wanted to create a space for black "leftists," and particularly poor, black leftists, to engage in electoral politics in Durham (the already existing electorally focused organizations were either predominantly white and middle class or, in the case of *The Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People*, predominantly middle class and politically moderate).

J4A was initially founded by a group of people who, in 2014, had run a campaign that made Olivia Williams the first openly queer, black woman to be elected to the Durham city council. Olivia, who is now on J4A's coordinating team, had a political background as an organizer and a public image coded radically left even within Durham's progressive political landscape. For example, in the days following a mass shooting at a nightclub in Orlando, Florida she posted a Facebook message insisting that if we are going to talk about reducing gun violence we have to talk about reducing the violence perpetrated by the United States police and military industrial complex (lest we imagine that further militarization is the answer to keeping communities safe). The Facebook message was met with calls for her resignation, accusations of treason, and a series of death threats. And yet, a little over a year later, her growing popularity was enough to secure her appointment to mayor pro tempore. Olivia's campaign manager from

the 2014 race, who now works in operations with J4A, explained to me that the group was founded to try to hold onto the energy and relationships generated throughout her campaign. The vision at that point was to build a coalition that would unite working class people, people of color and “radical leftists” who felt alienated from electoral politics. Today, this vision has taken on a platform with principles generated during a year of community outreach and listening sessions, and a structure intended to decentralize leadership while still maintaining an effective system for decision making and accountability.

While this structure evolved over the time that I worked with J4A, the backbone of the organization consistently took the form of three “teams”: organizing, campaign, and operations. There is one paid “leader” per team and the remaining positions are filled by volunteers. The operations team is divided into a variety of sub-committees including fundraising, technology, communications, and translation/language justice. The campaign team is similarly divided into engagement, mobilization, and coalition teams. Volunteers recruited from J4A’s activist/organizer network in Durham stepped in and out of leadership roles in these committees during my year with J4A.

The role of the organizing team, meanwhile, is structured around recruiting and building relationships with people from working class black and immigrant (which are majority but not exclusively Latinx) communities.¹⁹ For the majority of the municipal election season this team was led by two paid organizers, Asha and Sara. These organizers recruit and train volunteer “coaches.” These coaches, most of whom have previous political or organizing experience, then recruit, train and support volunteer community leaders. Over time, leaders that have demonstrated commitment and ability are asked to become coaches themselves. Both coaches

¹⁹ aylen, a local organizer who eventually joined the organizing team in 2018, explained to me that this model is adapted from the “snowflake organizing model”

and leaders are tasked with recruiting people in their social networks to sign a voter pledge (which asks that they declare themselves to be members of the organization's voting coalition), show up to meetings, and take on various leadership roles themselves. Coaches and leaders also help organize turnout for candidate forums and, in the fall of 2017, two collective marches to the polls for the municipal primary and general elections. J4A members refer to the process of building skills, relationships, and ultimately community with the leaders and coaches as "deep organizing." This is a slow process that doesn't fit well into traditional models for measuring success in electoral politics. However, Flexx, one of the volunteer coaches, assured me that it is the most fulfilling and transformative political work that anyone could possibly engage in.

During my time with J4A, I met between 20 and 30 people of a range of ages, ethnicities, and class backgrounds who took on leadership roles in everything from data entry to phone banking. However, there were six people in particular whom I interacted with on a weekly basis. First, there were the four members of the leadership team. They were all relatively young, with ages ranging from late 20's to late 30's. Joseph, a half Puerto Rican former campaign manager with a degree in social work, was head of operations. Suri, a professional organizer for a variety of black and queer liberation campaigns as well as former Durham school board member, was head of the campaign team. And Asha, a professional organizer by day and musician by night, was head of the organizing team. Three other people who became influential figures in my political and theoretical development were Flexx- a Filipino organizer and J4A coach, Carlos- a Mexican-American professional translator and language justice advocate, and Marcia- a community leader in a public housing community made up primarily of black, working class residents. I will introduce each of these players in more detail later.

The majority of the events that J4A hosted during the summer- marked by Facebook events announcing “mass meetings,” “leadership trainings” and “block parties” - focused on community building and honing a collective articulation of J4A’s mission and strategic plan. In the short-term, this plan is to build a multi-racial, cross-class coalition with 10,000 members by 2020, while having a hand in the outcomes of city council, sheriff and district attorney races in the meantime. Their long-term goal, at least as it is written on their website, is to re-make Durham with “an alternative economic model”²⁰ and a “practice of participatory democracy” that is rooted in transformative relationships and ensures that all citizens feel capable of making the changes they want to see in their neighborhood, city, and beyond.

Fittingly, the idea of J4A’s project as, in part, a process of discursive struggle was first introduced to me their Campaign Team leader, Suri, who is one of the most articulate people I have ever encountered. Suri’s at once commanding and gentle presence, combined with his ability to pepper eloquent inspiration with just the right amount of sass, make him an incredible public speaker and a celebrity among the local student activist groups where I first heard of J4A. Suri told me that the core of J4A’s work is trying to articulate:

Why should a working class black man see himself as a political agent, and see an undocumented queer woman as his natural political ally? The goal is to make ourselves, and

²⁰ The concept of a solidarity economy has roots in worker collectives during the Spanish civil war and community economic cooperatives in Colombia, Brazil and Peru. According to principles laid out at an international conference in Lima, Peru in 1997, a solidarity economy is “an economic that prioritizes people, the environment and sustainable development over all other interests [specifically over individual and government profits]” (Carta de principios de economía solidaria 2014: pp.1)

others, see that we are all oppressed by the current political order and that we are capable of changing it together.

He referred to this process as the *construction of a people*, a term he told me he borrows from Laclau and Mouffe. When I asked Suri how reading Laclau and Mouffe had influenced his personal organizing philosophy, he told me he wrestled with their work and did not consider himself fully *aligned* with their theoretical perspective. However, he considers their conception of hegemony and people construction to be useful for trying to create a “bridge” that *gets people from their current marginalized position in society to having a politic and a collective political identity*. While Suri had heard of Laclau and Mouffe before, he hadn’t found their work particularly moving until an organizer with All of Us or None, an advocacy coalition of formerly incarcerated Durham residents, had introduced him to an interview between Chantal Mouffe and Iñigo Errejo (the former campaign manager for Podemos, a Spanish political party that supported the rise of Barcelona En Comú in 2015). Suri told me he considers it to be one of the best political texts he’s read in terms of both *theoretical depth* and *practical application*. However, he added that his own organizing philosophy is rooted first and foremost in values that he learned from his mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. His mother in particular introduced him to collective organizing when she took on a leadership role in a community organization made up of black, low-income, single mothers. While he said these women did not necessarily think of themselves as doing political work, they did work together to collectively improve their lives on a local scale. Later, Suri developed a political analysis that is based in the belief if marginalized people are going to improve their conditions on a broad scale, they must work collectively to transform the U.S. political system as a whole.

The goal of “people construction,” Suri elaborated, is to establish new relations between people in a way that creates a new, collective identity, and alters their political, economic and social surroundings in the process. Of course, this process contains within it a great deal of work that is perhaps best analyzed outside of the realm of discourse (even though the work of, for example, bringing certain groups of people into a room together participates in social and political meaning and therefore has discursive implications). For this thesis, however, I am interested in the aspect of J4A’s “people construction” that explicitly struggles with norms upheld by the “signifying order” that has coalesced from Durham’s overlapping circuits of political discourse. I witnessed this struggle while creating social media videos and memes for their Facebook page as well as the daily private and public communication of J4A’s members. I also witnessed the creative strategies J4A members deployed for identifying and reframing the discursive barriers that were set before them.

Note 2: From articulation to hegemony

In addition to communications work, I also spent the summer interviewing Durham residents about their experiences with local politics. In one of these interviews, I found myself at a loss to respond to the interviewee’s perspective on Durham’s immigrant population, though I knew it was one shared by many residents. The interviewee had told me that while as a black woman she had experienced racism from white people, she didn’t hold that against white people in general. She said she knew that just because one person was backwards, it didn’t mean they were all like that. Later, when I asked about her experience with Durham social services, she scoffed and informed me that “the Hispanics” always get more help than black or white people. As far as she was concerned, those people were just a drain on city resources.

When I related this experience to Joseph, the head of operations with J4A, he explained that it was an example of how dominant discursive patterns work to keep marginalized people alienated from one another. There were a number of patterns in U.S. discourse that would make this woman view white people as forgivable individuals and latinx people as a single, threatening block. One of these coalesces around the proposition that both nations and the borders that divide them are some combination of either inevitable, morally righteous or both. By the logics of this proposition, Americans are privy to a set of rights (to American city's social services, for example) by virtue of their birthplace that people born outside the nation's border are not. Even among progressive Democrats advocating for immigration reform, most go out of their way to assure their constituency that they would never consider opening borders altogether (Weigel 2015). While there is an argument to be made that completely eradicating borders without any systematic plan would be bad for people on either side of them, the majority of arguments I've heard in the United States and in Durham begin with the assumption that it is not only acceptable but morally righteous to put America First!

Building on Laclau and Mouffe's elaboration of socially constructed discourse, Stuart Hall provides a framework for understanding how the moral preeminence assigned to national borders is produced through "practices of articulation." These practices are signifying acts (such as describing Latinx immigrants as 'those people'), that work to create and recreate "a connection or link which is not necessarily given," but which, through a habitual processes of re-articulation, attain a level of preeminence within a unified discourse (Hall 1985:113). One important implication of this concept is that "the so-called unity of a discourse" is itself produced through "the articulation [linking] of different, distinct elements which can be rearticulated in different ways"(Grossberg, 1996:142-143). This means that, just as each link

can be broken and re-linked in different ways, the meaning of any given proposition is only ever “partially fixed” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985:121). There are, for example, people around the globe (JAA’s members among them) who contest the moral legitimacy of borders and have done for centuries.

However, a second implication of Hall’s concept of articulation is that the relative unity of discourse- which creates the common understanding necessary for communication- must be produced by privileging certain links over others. This means that articulatory practices, particularly when instituted within systems of social, political and economic power “always include an element of force and repression”(Torfing, 1999:101). As a result of this privileging process, the moral legitimacy of borders has attained a level of discursive preeminence that Laclau and Mouffe refer to as “hegemonic.” Inspired by Antonio Gramsci’s notion of cultural hegemony, the authors define hegemonic discourse as a “system of nodal points which partially fix the meaning of the social in an organized system” and which support the interests of people in power (1985:121). In this case, the legitimacy of borders is a means for maintaining the current structures of geopolitical power, and by extension the power of those people benefiting under the current order. While the meanings generated within this system are subject to negotiation, they are constructed as occupying a neutral position that allows them to take on the appearance of natural, common sense. For example, within the system of discourse that surrounds discussion of migration and nation states, the legitimacy of borders is simply taken as a pre-given norm around which all arguments about immigration, even those that advocate for the eradication of borders, must organize themselves.

The concept of hegemony helps to clarify the way in which discourse participates in establishing and reinforcing oppressive relations of power. For example, a hegemonic commitment to the legitimacy of borders does more than uphold a sociopolitical order. In a more immediate sense, it reinforces the violent logic that made it possible for a Honduran teenager to be among the many immigrants in Durham detained by ICE and set for deportation in 2016. When asked why he feared being deported, the young boy responded that if he were forced to return to Honduras the gang that he had fled from would be sure to kill him (WRAL 2016). This is the context in which J4A is trying to theorize possibilities. Their attempts to understand and work through the discourse that undermines them are acts of collective self-defense as well as empowerment. This, I believe, is what Chela Sandoval meant when she said that for oppressed peoples “a profound commitment to sign reading emerges as a means to survival” (Sandoval 2000:85)

Chapter 2

“It is necessary to scrutinize not only the truth of what we speak, but the truth of that language by which we speak it.” -Audre Lorde

“Ok, so, they have Authority, (cash) Bail, Capital, ‘Development’ and...um...Egg McMuffins?”

“Ha!”

“No, I know, Eurocentrism!”

“No, no; Egg McMuffins is good! The mass production of malnutrition for profit.”

“At least they are one of the few places where folks can afford to eat...”

“But they don’t pay their workers a living wage.”

“Are y’all trying to make this meeting last all day?”

“Ok, ok, Egg McMuffins it is. Your turn, Ashlyn!”

There’s a feeling that I grew accustomed to during my summer with *Justice For All* that I’ve been struggling to put into words. It’s something on the verge of incredulous laughter, but it’s also very serious. I’ve come to recognize it as my body’s split reaction to ideas or practices that I agree with in principle, but which nevertheless feels unnatural in a given context. I felt this the first time I played a group bonding game with the J4A campaign team. There were ten of us playing, sitting on chairs and pillows squeezed together in Joseph’s pleasantly cluttered living room. Books and pamphlets were littered across various pieces of furniture and someone had set a plate of crackers and dates on a central coffee table. The house had the slightly disjointed feel of having been decorated by people whose organizational habits were a step above college

students and yet not quite ready to embrace fully coordinated interior design. It smelled of sage and other natural herbs. In short, it was exactly the sort of place where one might expect a group of radical organizers to plot their electoral takeover (and play political-themed group bonding games). And yet, like so many of the practices I participated in with J4A, the game felt out of place to me.

This sense of “out of place-ness,” and the ways in which it is both constructed and resisted in a political context, is the thread that links together the events of the following chapters. In many ways, *J4A* is an organization out of place in its own political landscape. In addition to promoting values and policy positions constructed as radically left, the group has laid out an electoral strategy based on engaging people specifically labeled “unlikely voters.” What’s more, it is the new (and to some minds superfluous) kid in town in a city with a well-established and already left-leaning matrix of electoral power. The challenges that these points pose to *J4A*’s legitimacy as an organization seem to be based in a kind of natural logic. Isn’t it natural to fear *radical* politics? How can you accomplish anything without a *smart* electoral strategy? Why start a new political organization when you could join those already doing *the same* work?

These are questions that members of J4A take seriously and my point in challenging their presumed “natural” origins is not to dismiss them altogether. Instead, I want to call attention to the fact that these are not simply questions that appear- with equal weight as any other- on an unmarked field where we might debate the merits of J4A’s founding. They are echoes of sets of propositions that have attained such a level of primacy, or hegemony, in local political discourse that they effectively “set the terms within which that politics proceeds” (Connolly 1993:3). William Connolly argues that it is important to interrogate these “terms of political discourse” in order to discover “the biases of a political system” (1993:7). This is undoubtedly part of the

theoretical work that J4A is doing on a daily basis. For them, however, the work of untangling discursive bias is oriented towards creating new possibility in an immediate and localized sense.²¹ It is, as Audre Lorde writes, a necessary task if they are to craft messages that reclaim language that has “been made to work against” them (Lorde 1984, 44).

In this chapter, I offer my own interpretation of the discursive challenges that J4A confronted during the Durham’s 2017 election cycle. As I trace these bumps along their political road, I describe how the group identifies the nature and function of specific discursive propositions that **a)** have attained a level of hegemony in local and national discourse and **b)** manifest as roadblocks that undermine J4A’s project. I should add here that in identifying these propositions I am not arguing that they are universally accepted in Durham discourse, nor even within smaller circuits of social and political networks in the city. Instead, I want to demonstrate how they appear before J4A members as powerful, established logics that threaten to undermine the group’s political vision and messaging. I begin with the conceptual work that emerged during a group bonding game in June of 2017.

The structure of the game was hardly unfamiliar to me. In fact, it had been a staple at the after school program where I worked as a high schooler. We sat in a misshapen circle, not unlike the lopsided formations I used to construct with reluctant elementary schoolers, and each tried to think of words that began with our assigned letter of the alphabet. The game begins with

²¹ This orientation does not necessarily distinguish J4A from all of the academic scholarship they draw upon. Certainly Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* could be read as a project oriented towards creating possibility as opposed to just tracing existing patterns in discourse. However, I believe it is important to specifically articulate this aim because of its contrast to what is often assumed to constitute legitimate scholarship. In the following chapters, I will argue that during my time working in communications strategy with J4A, I witnessed and participated in a kind of theorizing that attempts to create new political possibility in an environment where success may mean a difference of life and death. This kind of theorizing one’s own survival has something vital to contribute to the work of scholars of political discourse and messaging.

establishing a topic to which all the words must relate, after which the first person must offer a word beginning with “A,” the second a word beginning with “B,” and so on. The catch is that each person has to try to recite all the previous words before adding their own. In the J4A iteration, our theme for the first round was ‘what “they” use to oppress us. This was followed by a second round for which the theme was what “we” can use to fight back. The game did not include any formal proposition of who constitutes the “they” and the “we.” Instead, we worked together to construct series of heterogeneous images attributed to each group, ranging from prisons to egg mcmuffins on one side and community to musical fundraisers on the other (one of the group’s paid organizers is the lead singer/songwriter in a truly excellent folk-rock indie-soul band).

As I wracked my brain for a revolutionary-sounding word starting with F (Freedom, Fanon?), I was distracted by my conflicted feelings about the game itself. I thought at first that I was bothered by the ridiculousness of fitting a theme like leftist political analysis into a children's game. However, it was clear that this apparent incongruity was part of the point of playing in the first place. J4A’s members deal with relentless incongruity and ambivalence in their daily work lives. It comes with the territory when your political project requires that you invest in possibilities beyond the visible horizon. (Gaztambide-Fernandez 2012:78). J4A members frequently use humor to confront uncertainty and ambivalence head on. For example, one afternoon, while reviewing his over-burdened schedule on google calendar, Suri announced to the room: *After the revolution, there will be no calendars!*

This joke plays with the paralyzing criticism that a futurist-centered political project is an unrealistic pipe-dream (like the dream of a world with no need for online scheduling tools). At the same time, it speaks the un-ironic dream that under a future political and social formation

Suri would, in fact, have more free time. As was the case for Suri's joke, the ridiculousness of the bonding game was intentional. At the beginning of a meeting that would be stressful and contentious at times, it made space for teasing, mutual encouragement, and collective recognition of the awkwardness and hilarity that accompanies "radical" political work. The exercise was punctuated by laughter; at flippant responses, at Joseph's increasingly anxious insistence that we hurry up, and at the fact that we didn't make it anywhere close to Z for either round. Then, every once in a while, someone said *they have Glock 22's* or *we have Each other*, and no one laughed²²

I realized in retrospect that what irritated me about the game was not the general hilarity, but the things that emerged in these moments of seriousness. In these moments, we were forced to confront the harrowing reality that this group had emerged as a form of proactive self-defense. Their political project was forged in fire, kept alive by the determination to make their world habitable for themselves and for other marginalized peoples. These moments also carried the reminder that our silly game mirrored the challenging practices of articulation that were central to so much of J4A's political work. As we struggled to find the right words to name ourselves and the forces we were confronting, the most powerful force that seemed to loom over the meeting were the ways in which words themselves seemed to resist us (Bakhtin 2006: 293). I am confident that I was not the only one there to find the subtext of our game deeply uncomfortable. It weighed heavily in the room, the tension building until those moments when it was dissipated through fits of collective laughter.²³

²² The Glock 22 is the gun most commonly carried by police officers in North Carolina.

²³ My own understanding of the relationship between humor, ambivalence and social and political struggle is inspired Diane Nelson's discussion of "jokework" in the aftermath of civil war in Guatemala (Nelson 1999:187) and Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the social subversion embedded in "carnival" (Bakhtin 1984:11)

In the ambiguously progressive circles that dominate Durham's electoral politics, J4A's most basic goals are generally accepted as more than legitimate. At the most essential level, J4A is theorizing the possibility of a world where democracy means something closer to what it is already presumed to promise (the government of the people by and for the people), where the earth's abundant resources are shared in such a way that no one is forced to submit themselves to deadly or dehumanizing exploitation in order to survive, and characteristics like race, national origin, gender-identity, and sexual orientation are no longer factors in determining one's ability to pursue their desired form and quality of life.²⁴ In fact, Durham's most powerful electoral organizations cite similar goals in their public mission statements.²⁵ These are the progressive, majority white and middle class *Durham People's Alliance* and the more moderate (though still 'left of center'), black, and majority middle class *Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People*.

J4A members acknowledge that both of these groups have done, and continue to do, important work that has helped make Durham a city where their own project feels possible in the first place. For this reason, it is understandable that some members of these groups have argued that J4A's members should work within their organizations. However, the response of J4A's leadership team is that they have found it too difficult to operate out of spaces where their aspirations are dismissed not only on the grounds that they are undesirable or too difficult to implement (though these are critiques the J4A must also face), but instead simply by virtue of the

²⁴ The idea that democratic legitimacy is rooted in self-rule can be found in United States legal and cultural documents spanning from the period preceding the American Revolution to the present day. However, it is perhaps most famously embodied by Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address in which he implied that it is the United States alone which could ensure that "Government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from this earth" (Lincoln, 1863:3)

²⁵ Indeed the two most powerful PAC's in Durham, The People's Alliance and The Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People, both include in their mission statements commitments to racial equity and promoting the welfare of all citizens.

fact that they deviate too far from the established center around which all political aspirations are presumed to be organized. When Olivia informed me that the word progressive no longer has any meaning in Durham, this was in part a reflection on the fact that members of these PAC's use the term to paralyze rather than promote political changes. This is because Durham is *already* progressive and *already* left in terms of the pre-given standard to which people seem determined to conform. I argue that this "standard" is produced by an underlying proposition that has attained hegemonic status within Durham's discursive environment. This is the proposition that all political positions are necessarily organized along a relatively stable, binary axis that spans from the extreme left to the extreme right.

Note 3: Hegemonic propositions

In their discussion of hegemonic discourse, Laclau and Mouffe propose that hegemonic discourse and co-extensive social relations of power coalesce as a "hegemonic formation." They introduce this term as coupling of Antonio Gramsci's notion of a "historical bloc" and Michel Foucault's "discursive formation" (Laclau & Mouffe 1985:122) Gramsci theorized a "complex, discordant and contradictory ensemble" of "relational identities" that produce and reproduce a "relatively unified" social, political, and economic order (Gramsci cited in Forgas, 1988:192; Laclau & Mouffe 1985:122). Discursive formation, meanwhile, is Foucault's term for "the general enunciative system that governs a group of verbal performances" (Foucault 1972:116). The term "hegemonic formation" emphasizes the mutually reinforcing relationship between discourse and relations of power within a hegemonic order. According to Laclau and Mouffe, it is within this discursive and relational nexus that certain meanings and identities become "partially fixed" (1985:121).

In this chapter, I describe the ways in which members of J4A tease out specific elements that are part of the meaning that is instituted within a discursive (and relational) hegemonic formation (1985:121). Far more than just a curiosity, this work is an essential process of the organization's strategy. Identifying specific propositions that manifest as unspoken premises allows members of J4A to then craft messages that try to agitate or else make creative use of those propositions. For example, J4A members largely embrace the notion of themselves as both leftist and radical, and draw on the history of positive associations with radical leftist figures throughout U.S. and world history to strengthen internal moral and external image. Nevertheless, at least in the context of electoral politics, I argue that the construction of their project as "extreme" imposes debilitating (and sometimes deadly) limitations not only for J4A but for the horizons of political possibility in the city and nation at large.

Proposition One: Reading politics from left to right

Based on my experience, the hegemony of the left-right political binary often manifests in the form of a condescending smile. This was the discursive weapon of choice wielded by in the progressives spaces of local PAC meetings and forums (I also encountered, though less frequently, among members of the working class communities where J4A is engaging in deep organizing.) For example, at a candidate forum early in the election cycle one People's Alliance Member insisted that some people in Durham (including members of J4A) were advocating for an unreasonably radical slate of candidates, adding that, *Durham is already a progressive leader and we do want to maintain some level of 'balance' on our city council.*

What I find interesting about this woman's argument is the fact that her audience, a room full of mostly white, politically active, self-defined progressives, instantly understood what she

meant without her having to explain where her notion of “balance” comes from. It is possible, for example, that it came from the genuine belief that this “natural” center represents a democratic compromise between the desires of all people in the city (though given that only 12% of the city’s population even participates in municipal elections, it is difficult to imagine where her evidence would come from) (Durham County Board Of Elections, 2018). Regardless, her notion of balance was accepted as valid without her providing any such justification. We were, it would seem, collectively already on board with the proposition that the “leftist” views held by the given slate of candidates represented a natural extreme which corresponds to an equally natural center.

After this forum, I spoke with Alan, a white man who regularly volunteers with the J4A operations team. As a self-proclaimed data nerd, Alan loves to analyze public meetings in terms of subtle patterns in discourse and their implications for the present and future of Durham’s political landscape. After interviewing him once, I learned that I could almost always count on Alan to help me draw out some level of coherence from my scattered reflections on Durham politics. In this case, he pointed out that the people who call for a need to maintain “balance” (at least at gatherings of Durham’s politically active progressives) are always people who are living pretty comfortably under the current conditions. They are not, for example, going bankrupt over medical bills, being evicted, or being deported and separated from their families. However, rather than have to acknowledge that maintaining stability means different things for different people, they were able to simply advocate for ‘balance’ as if this were an unproblematic good unto itself.

One would expect this devotion to moderation among people who explicitly support the current state of the U.S. political system. However, the discursive power of the semi-rigid political axis is most frustrating for members of J4A when it is invoked by the people who at

least claim to share their desire for change. It allows them, for example, to declare opposition to systematic inequality and oppression, while still rejecting ‘radical’ change on the grounds that it is impractical. In the case of the forum described above, this argument is reformulated for Durham, where a progressive political baseline makes it one of the few cities where a movement to eliminate cash bail or secure guaranteed low-rent housing for current residents has real hope of gaining traction. Confronted with this opportunity, one woman immediately reconstructed the hegemonic power of the “mainstream” with the argument that Durham should be inherently concerned about straying too far “left.” What is revealed by encounters like this one is that even if the center of the U.S. political binary is not truly fixed in place, it still manages to paralyze political thought by forcing any possible transformation to explain itself in terms of the left-right axis (Hardt and Negri 2017:247). This paralysis appears even in a localized context where various political actors have a long history of pushing the political (and discursive) envelope.

This “extremism of the moderate,” a term Hardt and Negri use to emphasize the hegemonic power of a constructed center, is not the only avenue through which a left-right political binary presents itself as an obstacle for J4A(2017:245). The group must also contend with the fact that because their positions are coded “left,” they are habitually associated with prominent groups and institutions that bare the same code. An example of this presented itself to me at a primary polling station at a Durham high school. There, while approaching the nearly deserted voting area (primary election turnout rates are often in the single digits) I overheard a man warning his friend not to vote for a candidate who was a J4A member because she was “a communist” who wanted to “turn our city into the Soviet Union.” This man constructed a mental map that connected an organization with socialist messaging first to communism and then to a specific authoritarian communist regime. It is no small distance to travel, and yet to many

Americans, the connection probably wouldn't sound unreasonable. His comment served as a reminder that the Cold War era specter of authoritarian communism has yet to entirely relinquish its grip on the American political imaginary. Among more conservative circles in particular, socialist policies are still routinely treated as simply a degree or two more moderate on the left end of our natural binary. The broader impact of this link, however, became apparent when during the 2017 primary election Democrats and Republicans alike warned that there is no space for "democratic socialism" in U.S. politics (though Sander's challenge to this idea, built upon decades of socialist organizing across and beyond the U.S., was significant enough to attract the interest of pundits and academics alike) (Sam Frizell for *Time Magazine* 2015).

An explicit link between leftist politicians and communism is most typically found within more conservative circuits of discourse that are largely separated from the circuits where J4A is most actively working. As one member assured me, the group is not focusing on trying to persuade staunch conservatives that it is neither treasonous nor authoritarian to believe that people have the right to food, shelter, and protections from discrimination. However, communism is not the only specter that J4A is often associated with by virtue of its constructed leftism. A second, far more common association is made between J4A and the national Democratic party. Based on what I have related so far, the association of J4A with a more moderate institution may not seem like a problem. This is because I have focused on the organization's struggle to generate support among people who ascribe to what would be constructed as a comparatively moderate form of left progressivism. These people include the majority of members of Durham's major PAC's as well as many of the working class people of color that I interviewed, some of whom regularly vote in local elections (and many of whom do not). However, J4A is also trying to recruit from a diverse base of people who either consider

themselves to be radicals or else consider the political status quo to be so disheartening that they keep themselves removed from politics altogether. The former group is largely constituted of young activists and organizers who themselves identify as radical and engage in politics primarily through issue-based campaigning and activism. The latter, meanwhile, is largely composed of working class people of color who have overwhelming historical evidence that no party, nor even the local PAC's, are really interested in serving their interests. As one woman who works for city bus system informed me, *I have a word to describe our local politicians, that word is sell-out.*

For many people falling into both of these groups, a left-leaning organization engaging in local politics bears immediate resemblance to the left-leaning electoral organization that dominates their national news feeds. For people in the former category, this distinction is often treated as suspect because they assume (not without reason) that elections are a mode of political engagement that includes no productive space for the far left. For the latter, the concern (which is also not without legitimate motivation) is that political organizers from the left end of the spectrum are just looking for black, brown, and poor tokens to reinforce their own power. This means the J4A is constantly being put in the position in which it must explain why both its vision and strategies are in fact quite distinct from the national and local Democratic party. The weight of this association was made clear to me while interviewing a Mexican immigrant whom I hoped to recruit for J4A. When I began to describe the organization, however, he interrupted me almost immediately:

Sé que no tienes malas intenciones, he assured me, ¿Pero sabes que the liberals no han sido mejores para los inmigrantes? Hubo más deportaciones con Obama que con Bush (I know

that you don't have bad intentions, but do you know that the liberals have not been better for immigrants? There were more deportations under Obama than there were under Bush).

I tried to explain to the interviewee that J4A was different from the liberals that run the national Democratic party. However, I couldn't really blame him for refusing to join the group's mailing list. Like many other marginalized groups, latinx immigrants have learned from the Democratic party that "liberal" electoral organizations are often more interested in exploiting their stories than representing their interests. I would argue that part of the reason for this is that even members of electoral organizations -both national and local- who would like to support marginalized groups allow themselves to be constrained by the strategic conventions of electoral politics. This argument brings me to me to a second hegemonic proposition, which manifested with overwhelming force the first time I tried to talk about J4A to people outside of its tiny office space.

Proposition Two: The limits of electoral politics

My summer with *J4A* took place in the shadow of a national election that had gone disastrously wrong for the organization's members and their political allies. It was not just that their preferred candidate had lost (none of them, as far as I know, were fans of Hillary Clinton), but that Donald Trump's win posed a tangible threat to many of their lives. The fact that the nation seemed to have endorsed a platform that was blatantly xenophobic, homophobic, sexist, and racist signaled a very legitimate danger to groups of people already suffering high levels of stigma, exploitation, and state violence. Therefore, there was an easy argument to be made for focusing on winning 'back' elections as soon as possible. And yet, J4A was devoting the

majority of its budget to ‘deep organizing’ in communities that would be unlikely to turn out for the upcoming municipal elections in significant numbers regardless of their efforts. Some of these populations were immigrants who could not vote even if they desired to. Investing in this work, particularly at this early stage without a concrete ‘win’ in sight, required that J4A members endure both implied and explicit criticism that they were wasting their time and resources. These criticisms, I argue, were rooted in a second hegemonic proposition that frequently appeared as a justification for limiting the socially and politically transformative potential of electoral politics. This is the proposition that elections are a political process that can (and should) be separated from all other social and political practices, and are uniquely central to the functioning of a democratic system.

I was introduced to this proposition, and the problems it creates for J4A, when Joseph brought me along to a regional conference for progressive, local-level politicians, campaign managers and organizers. This conference was my first introduction to *J4A*’s work beyond their private office and in terms of learning to articulate *J4A*’s mission to potential supporters, it proved to be something of a trial by fire. The training took place in Greensboro and drew around 200 participants, most of whom were from North Carolina. In the opening session, which was part progressive pep rally and part promotional manifesto for the organization running the training, they introduced us to the concept of ‘transformative campaigning.’ When it comes to electoral politics, they asserted, our goal should be more than just winning. True progressives are dedicated to empowering marginalized groups by bringing people together to form a political base.

At this point, I was feeling proud to be associated with an organization whose mission epitomizes what the speaker seemed to be preaching. J4A, after all, was actually putting

engaging and empowering citizens above campaigning for their desired candidates in the upcoming municipal elections. However, as we moved into the trainings, it became apparent that this was not the model that anyone was advocating for in that space. During a campaign ‘field plan’ training, a three-time state representative lectured us on the strategy that brought her success against a conservative incumbent. She was a tough-looking white woman with an air of determination and a touch of self-righteous exasperation, the kind that is often acquired through years of being habitually underestimated. She walked us through a lesson in how to most efficiently spread limited campaign resources, noting that it’s much more cost effective to win over moderate likely voters than try to reach citizens without a history of voting. Each new voter, she warned, will cost you several times the price of a frequent voter who is teetering on the edge of voting for you or your opponent. This advice might be helpful for campaigns strapped for cash, but it also directly contradicts the message that a progressive politician should be working tirelessly to amplify and *listen to* the voices of the marginalized.

I could see Joseph’s mouth hardening into a line as the woman spoke. While he managed to hold his tongue during the presentation (conflicted diplomat that he is), he made his complaint to a member of the host organization in a later session. In a gentle but persistent manner, he informed a bewildered young woman that was “concerned” that much of the training had focused on winning elections without recognizing how the means used to secure the win might, and historically consistently have, reinforce structures of political marginalization. For example, in diverse southern cities focusing on winning over likely voters generally means catering to middle class white people at the expense of the immigrants, people of color, and working class citizens are all less “cost-effective.”

What Joseph and I discovered at this training, was that the obsession with winning the next election is also specifically damaging to J4A's attempts to articulate the urgency of their project. I left the conference extremely frustrated from my experience trying to describe J4A to other attendees. In many, though not all, cases I was met halfhearted nods and eyes that glazed over until the conversation turned to the 2018 congressional midterms. There seemed to be an unspoken consensus that however much we (the progressives) may want to expand democratic participation, winning upcoming elections are always the most urgent concern.

Importantly, my frustration was not just that the people I spoke to had chosen to devote their time and resources to winning elections over long-term base building. Instead, it was that when I described an electoral project that was treating voting as a tool for achieving long-term, transformative goals, my efforts were most often met with vague approval that stood in sharp contrast to the enthusiasm bestowed upon campaigns for municipal office. This glaring contrast, I argue, could only be reconciled through collective cognitive dissidence that made it possible for people to espouse the need for long-term, transformative change without implementing practices that demonstrated a commitment to such an idea. The hegemonic proposition that electoral politics are ultimately bounded by the next election cycle, is strong enough to influence discourse even in a room where trainers and participants alike have tried to explicitly denounce it.

Like the concept of a left-right political binary, the primacy assigned to voting in the U.S. political system causes problems for J4A members when they organize with other constituencies as well. This became particularly evident when, roughly two months after returning from the conference, Joseph and I were working on a Facebook video to release sometime in August (a month or so before the primary elections). Joseph had come up with the idea of summarizing

J4A's electoral aspirations by declaring: *It's time for Durham's progressive majority to move out of resistance and into power.* I thought the line was incredibly effective. However, Olivia immediately raised an objection to Joseph's message. As she pointed out, his framing seemed to imply that 'resistance' is a lesser, or at least less transformative, form of political engagement to J4A's strategy for taking power through elections. Not only was she certain that this would offend potential allies doing this resistance work, she also feared the reference to moving "into" something would exacerbate the suspicions of leftists who consider electoral campaigns to be *where the revolution goes to die.*

At least to an extent, this is an assessment that members of J4A (including Olivia, who is an elected official) are inclined to agree with. After all, leftists have their latest evidence in Bernie Sanders' Presidential campaign, which co-opted the word "revolution" to describe an effort to make an incremental step towards curbing corporate influence in politics and returning the Democratic party to the fiscal policy and social welfare stances that it held in the 1970's (before the era of President Reagan marked the beginning of a steady drift to the "right") (Chomsky 2002:57). However, even Sanders proved too radical for the Democratic party of 2016. While many of the self-identified leftists that I spoke with expressed vague support for Sanders' Presidential bid, the fact that he was treated as "radical" signified to them that the process itself is so reactionary as to be utterly paralyzing. The criticism that many leftists make of engaging in electoral politics, namely that the strategy lacks the potential for transforming the system, is consistent with my own description of electorally obsessed progressives from the Greensboro conference. Their decision to focus on winning in the short-term *did* seem to undermine the capacity for electoral organizing to become a tool for making political participation more accessible and transforming the system in the long-term. This is not, by any means, a new

phenomenon. Historically, voting has been a means for joining and improving the U.S. political system, but never a means for transforming the racist, sexist, and (globally exploitative) capitalist values around which that system was initially structured (Croush 2004). Turning out large numbers to the polls has not even been enough to secure consistent voting rights for marginalized groups in the present.²⁶

We ended up scrapping the *out of resistance line* for fear that it would both cause offense and obscure J4A's real motivation for building an electoral coalition in the first place.

Importantly, J4A is not focusing on electoral politics because they think winning elections will transform the system on its own. Instead, they believe that local municipal races can be a powerful site around which to organize the construction of a political *and social* community, while simultaneously putting some sympathetic voices in positions of local power. The challenge for J4A is that this project requires that they conceptualize elections in a way that defies the conceptual limits that many of the people they hope to recruit have come to accept as inevitable. I caught hints of this conceptual conflict from the first day I stepped into J4A's office. In my first campaign meeting, for example, Suri told me we would be voting to change ourselves as well as the society around us. I did not really begin to grasp its implications until Jasmine, a lead organizer and folk-rock singer/songwriter, introduced me to the theory behind the "basic unit of good organizing" known as the "one-on-one."

Simply put, a "one-on-one" is a conversation between someone with a political project and a person whom they are hoping to recruit for that project, or else "move" in some less explicit way. It is considered a staple of organizing models for everything from congressional campaigns to workplace union drives. When done well, the conversation feels like something

²⁶ As recently as 2017 the United State Supreme court struck down several North Carolina Voter ID provisions on the ground that they "target African-Americans with almost surgical precision" (Doe et al. McCrory et al. 2017:11)

between a late night talk with an old friend and a promising first date. When done poorly (something I have more than my share of experience with) it is unbearably awkward. This awkwardness, I would argue, is not just produced by poor social skills. In the case of electoral politics in particular, there is something that feels almost smarmy about a conversation that tries to be at once meaningful on a personal level, and angled towards persuading someone to participate in a political project. J4A's one-on-ones, it would seem, mix sociality with the presumed transactional process of building an electoral coalition in a way that is seen as distasteful. And yet, as Jasmine explained in her slightly destabilizing frank manner (her blunt energy is both intimidating and inviting), J4A is genuinely interested in forming meaningful relationships that are individually and collectively transformative. In fact, they consider community building around a political vision to be as if not more important than winning formal political power even in the long-term.

However, the process still has a tendency to feel disingenuous- as if the political setting presents an inherent problem for relationship building. Based on my experience, this is due to the inescapable sense that political work- and electioneering in particular- inherently transactional and therefore anti-social. It is a sense that could be traced to a number of specific propositions. For example, at one of J4A's mass meeting Suri explained to the crowd that our system is set up to isolate marginalized folks from one another by making them feel like voting should be an individualized, anti-social practice. Indeed a fellow University student to whom I was explaining J4A once raised the concern that building an electoral coalition undermines democracy by inhibiting the individual decision-making process. However, I would argue that this very proposition is itself rooted in the more fundamental proposition that is the subject of this section, namely that electoral politics a) can be separated from other social and political processes in the

first place and b) hold a place of moral and practical preeminence in a democratic system. While my focus is on how this undermines J4A's specific work, I think it is worth adding here that this proposition obscures the fact that comprehensive research has demonstrated the already inextricable links between social networks and voting, as well as the fact that the U.S. has never boasted a democratic system in which every person's individual decisions were counted equally and aggregated as the egalitarian will of the people (Rolfe 2012:179; Putnam 2001:286).

As we approached fall and the primary election, J4A set out to incorporate their conception of transformative, social politics into the overarching theme at their own candidate forum. This was achieved in practice perhaps even more than words. The woman who facilitated the forum, which was attended by mayoral and city council hopefuls, was named Andrea. She was J4A activist and black, single mother who had been recently homeless and never participated in politics until being approached by Jasmine that July. When I spoke to her about her role she told me joining J4A had been like joining a family, and that it had been personally transformative for her. This reminded me of the second online video that I made for J4A. It was an interview with a coach named Flexx, whose response to my question "what is J4A?" had been somewhat bewildering to me at the time.

J4A, Flexx told me, *is really about building a massive squad. And a squad is, like, your people- the people who have your back.* He insisted that while part of *J4A*'s work is to dominate local elections, an equally important part of the work is to bring food to each other in tough times, hook folks up with pro bono immigration lawyers, and talk one another through the pain caused by experiences with poverty, racism, and homophobia. Political organizing, in this formulation, is primarily a strategy for overcoming both social isolation and political powerlessness. Importantly, this moves politics from a space dominated by elite actors entering

into strategic partnerships to a space of empowerment for people most marginalized. This was the work J4A envisioned doing to transform politics and create a political space that is welcoming and empowering for those voices that are most marginalized in Durham's political sphere today.

Of course, Flexx acknowledged, it isn't easy to make folks see that politics can be this empowering space. Recruitment was slow going and even committed members of J4A struggled with the ambivalences that could never be fully dissipated in laughter. However, identifying the hegemonic propositions that are so often the source of strategic paralysis opens up possibilities for overcoming it. And while political discourse in Durham is littered with traps and tricks that undermine J4A's electoral project, members of the organization have also found ways to make use of the symbolic resources embedded in its ever-evolving landscape. In my final chapter, I will describe the pro-active processes of (re)appropriation and (re)framing that J4A is using to establish the legitimacy of their electoral coalition and theorize their political vision into existence. This discussion will bring us to the final stages of Durham's 2017 election cycle.

~ *Interchapter* ~

Poems, Jokes, and Tricky Gr@mm@r: Articulating Justice For All

Up to this point, I have primarily discussed my frustration with the moments when attempts to articulate J4A's message were met with confusion or disregard. However, as challenging as I found them to be, these moments also provided the impetus for the most exciting aspect of my work with J4A. If the previous chapter's focus on discursive challenges has left the impression that the group has had little success resonating with their constituency, it is time to provide a counterbalance to that image. It is certainly true that J4A struggled, particularly in the first couple months that I worked with them, to generate high event turnout and to recruit leaders from working class communities. However, by the time of their July mass meeting, they had graduated to a larger meeting space (one that could hold the close to 100 attendees) and several leaders from low-income black and Latinx communities had begun to take ownership of both events and outreach initiatives.

There was, of course, a great deal of work at all levels of the organization that went into making this shift possible. And whenever this work required communication, as organizing consistently does, it was always in part discursive. In chapter three I will discuss in detail a specific kind of discursive strategy, which I refer to as (re)appropriation, that J4A's members demonstrate in several avenues of their work. Before I do that, however, I want to first provide examples of how J4A's members interact with discourse more generally. These examples help to flesh out both the discursive obstacles that I analyzed more broadly in Chapter One, and the discursive strategies that will be the focus of Chapter Three.

Storytelling with Flexx

I used to think politics was boring, you know? I was just trying to make it through life. Trying to find a job that would pay the bills. I think that's a common experience for a lot of working class people. And for me, for a lot of my childhood I was raised by a single mother. She was a Filipino immigrant, working three jobs to try to support four children. I remember all of us living in a two-bedroom apartment. When you're in that situation politics doesn't really make the list of, like, needs. And when you don't see examples of people like you in powerful positions, or even in political spaces, that's very isolating?. But we moved around a lot, and what I noticed was it was the same story everywhere. So many folks struggling, and feeling isolated in that struggle.

We sat on Flexx's front porch, rocking in rickety chairs and appreciating the fact that we had to squint in the blinding sunlight (it had been uncharacteristically cloudy for the past week or so). It was one of those rare occasions when my experience in Durham seemed to fit the stereotypical image of the American South. Here we were, sitting on a front porch, listening to the sounds of dogs and lawnmowers and sipping on a cold drink. Except our drinks were water instead of sweet tea and the man sitting across from me was a first generation "americanized" (in his words) Filipino immigrant and a former drag queen.

Flexx told me that as a drag queen he often used performance and storytelling to start conversations about social issues common to Toussaint's queer community, including poverty and sexual assault. Today, he and other members of J4A frequently use personal storytelling to connect with community members and articulate the urgency of Justice For All's mission. Flexx shared the above story about his childhood when I interviewed him on his porch, but I had heard him share similar versions while speaking at a mass meeting. There, as well as in the interview,

he began by discussing his experience with poverty and isolation, and how he felt an aversion towards political engagement. He then described how this began to change when he happened upon groups of friends who brought him into political work that became a way for him to overcome the personal struggles he'd once treated as an insurmountable barrier to engaging in politics in the first place. In short, his answer to why working class people of color should invest time and effort in joining a political coalition is that he's done it and- beyond the successes and failures of specific campaigns- just the process of engagement has transformed his life for the better.

Flexx's personal story, which ends with him finding a home and supportive community in Durham, is the evidence he has to combat the narrative that politics is necessarily transactional, elitist, and unwelcoming to working class people. When he argues that a political coalition can be a "squad" of people who empower one another and have each other's backs in a variety of social and political contexts it is rooted in what he has experienced on a small scale with the cross-class and multi-racial activist community that he has found in Durham. J4A's goal is to unite that community around a coherent platform and visions, and perhaps even more importantly, expand the community by making it more welcoming to working class people of color who had not happened to make the same friends that Flexx did. This is by no means a simple or straightforward process, but Flexx's stories play an important role in how he can make J4A's coalition begin to sound more credible to an incredulous audience.

Canvassing with Asha

Possibly the most stressful day of my internship with J4A came in the form of a canvassing "blitz" in late June. I'd been asked to join Asha and a group of community leaders in

trying to recruit new members at the bus stops, restaurants, and stores on my university campus. At the time, I'd already had several years of experience canvassing for union drives and electoral candidates and had therefore grown relatively comfortable with the awkwardness that accompanies locking a stranger into "talking politics." However, I was nervous for this particular blitz for two reasons. First, I was still struggling to articulate the purpose of signing a J4A member pledge card in a manner that was both concise and compelling. Second, I was intimidated by the idea of Asha overseeing my fumbling attempts at organizing. To my horror, she decided to kick off the blitz by having me attempt to make a pitch to her, so she could respond with pointers for the group before we began talking to campus employees.

Asha has an aura about her that is at once inviting and challenging. She makes you want to prove that you are good enough to be worthy of the respect that she offers without question. She has seemingly ever-present open, dimpled smile that somehow manages to say both "I believe you" and "I know you can do better." While part of me was hoping I would melt into the ground and avoid embarrassing myself in front of her, I also recognized that I was incredibly lucky to receive a lesson in canvassing from her directly. Asha is an incredible organizer and activist who has built up something of a local fan base, and was once featured in a multimedia piece on Al Jazeera. Her presence in political spaces translates to an equally compelling stage presence and she performs as lead singer/songwriter in multiple bands influenced by punk rock, bluegrass, folk, and hip-hop. As a black, queer, Muslim woman from a working class family, she has said that her motivation to become an organizer was born out of the barrage of hate and struggle she has faced as a result of each of these aspects of her identity. When I interviewed her for the first J4A Facebook video, she told me that at the core of her work with J4A is the recognition that she is always going to struggle within the systems of oppression that dominate U.S. society, and

she knows how paralyzing that struggle can be when you are in it alone. The mission of J4A, she explained, is to gather enough folks so that when we struggle *together*, we actually have the power to win.

While this characterization of J4A makes sense in broad terms, I wasn't sure how it could translate to a quick pitch for why a campus bus driver should sign the J4A pledge card. I stuttered my way through an explanation of Durham's need for a new "political vehicle," until Asha finally put me out of misery with an earnest "ok, nice!" After nodding at me encouragingly, she suggested that instead of trying to immediately launch into a description of J4A's analysis, I should start by asking people to talk about their experiences and struggles living in Durham.

What J4A is really all about, she explained, is just working together to try to make the city better. When we first start a conversation with someone, what we want to do is listen to their story and find out what their personal struggle is. If it's clear that their values don't align with ours or that they really aren't interested in trying to improve their situation, that's fine, we move on. But what I know is a lot of working class people of color have just never had anyone demonstrate interest in their problems. They've had politicians ask for their vote, maybe, but the difference is J4A is all about giving people a platform to have their voices heard. So what we want to do is show that we want to hear what people have to say, find out what kind of changes they want to see in their city, and then offer them this opportunity to join a community of people who want help make those changes.

In addition to improving my questionable canvassing skills, Asha's coaching provides an illustration of the difference between J4A's "deep organizing" and the Get Out The Vote organizing more typical of electoral campaigns. While there is no way to avoid the fact that many people automatically associate political campaigns with the often shallow and exploitative

organizing practices of mainstream politicians, J4A's organizers can lead their pitches by demonstrating the values that make their project different. Of course, in this case (as in many others) discursive strategizing cannot really be separated from other organization practices. After all, J4A cannot make a convincing claim that they are interested in mutual empowerment and not political exploitation unless they demonstrate this with consistent actions (e.g. taking steps to make sure new members are able to have their voices heard in meetings) as well as words.

Poetry with Marcia

While Asha was the star of the campus organizing blitz, that day I also had the privilege of learning from another organizer with a talent for persuading people to bridge the gap, as Suri describes it, between individual struggle and a collective politics?. Her name is Marcia and, after being recruited by Asha, she had become one of J4A's most committed community leaders. Marcia is a black, single, mother whose chronic health problems had at one point left her both jobless and homeless with five children to care for. She told me that before joining J4A she felt certain that there was not a single person in the world who cared about her problems. She considered politics to be a realm that was entirely inaccessible to her. However, when Asha knocked on her door and showed real interest in her experiences with poor working conditions and inadequate healthcare, it marked a critical transition in her personal and political life. This is a similar narrative to the story Flexx uses to talk about the social and supportive aspect of political coalitions, and that Asha uses to argue that collective political struggle is just a more effective extension of the struggles marginalized people face on an individual level. However, at a block party attended by several hundred people with diverse class and racial backgrounds, she

demonstrated an ability to link her story with J4A's mission in a way that also bridged a variety of personal backgrounds and experiences.

Up until the block party, which took place in September, all of the events that I'd attended with J4A had remained distinctly segregated by race and class. The audiences at mass meetings tended to be majority white and middle class (though there was still more diverse representation than I'd seen at most progressive political events in Durham), while Asha hosted community dinners that were attended primarily by working class people of color. This block party, however, was the first event that seemed to truly represent J4A's aspirational self-description as a "cross-class, multiracial coalition." Roughly 250 people signed in over the course of an afternoon, of which roughly 50% were black, 40% were white and just under 10% were Latinx, and a handful were Asian or Middle Eastern immigrants. A Spanish translator attracted 10 or so non-English speakers during the closing speeches, while two people listened to a translation in Arabic. Given that Durham is roughly 40% black, 40% white (non-hispanic), and 15% Latinx, this was the closest I'd ever seen to a proportional representation of the city's demographics at any one event.

This alone was a victory for J4A. However, as would be expected, the pockets of people eating and talking together exhibited palpable discomfort with this unusually diverse environment. There was distinct segregation within the crowd that fell along both racial and class lines. A group of all black and all female wearing "National Domestic Workers Alliance" t-shirts maintained a healthy distance from the cluster of mostly white Ph.D. students standing nearby. Those speaking in Spanish congregated in a corner. When *The Wobble* blasted from J4A's borrowed speakers, a group of young woman started dancing. The group swelled to 20 or so people, not a single one of which was white. Meanwhile, two young, white families in floral

prints and Birkenstocks (well, at least one of them wore Birkenstocks) had set up picnic blankets and sat eating kale salad instead of the hot dogs and coleslaw provided by J4A.

Marcia was slated to speak to the crowd, and I found myself feeling increasingly worried for her. While I knew all these people were here because they felt compelled to at least learn more about J4A's political mission, I wondered what Marcia could possibly say to move all of them at once. Just from the people I recognized at the event, I knew there were pockets present who considered J4A a little too radically idealistic for their taste and others who were not entirely convinced that any true victories could come out of engaging directly with our fundamentally illegitimate political system. As it turned out, I needn't have been concerned. In addition to being a skilled organizer, Marcia is also a poet. She began her speech to the group by reading a poem about her experience joining J4A. She was still new to public speaking, and her voice shook slightly as she began reading. However, it grew stronger and steadier with each line. And while the park had been buzzing with sporadic conversations throughout the introductions that preceded Marcia's speech, the socializing came to a standstill as people towards the back strained to catch her every word:

My knees bruised from carpet burns, praying to the heavens to rescue me

My mouth filled with dirt and negativity

My weary heart was becoming an ice box, no longer wanting to be found

But who would waste time finding me anyway?

...

For the first time in a long time I feel like I am part of a family

This Justice For All family has embraced me along with my children

Coming from all different backgrounds, just trying to find some common ground

*No longer would I be the student in the back of the class hiding, praying not to be called on
Because I now realize, I am the one that needs to be called on!*

When Marcia finished speaking, there was a moment of complete silence. It was the first moment since I'd arrived at the event that it felt like the entire crowd was experiencing something together. While side conversations bubbled up again as other speakers took the mic, there was a shift in the crowd's collective energy that lingered for the remainder of the block party. Marcia's speech seemed to have served as a reminder of both the urgency and exciting potential of J4A's political aspirations. Her vulnerability, passion, and creative imagination reverberated throughout conversations in each of the (still largely segregated) demographic pockets: How do we grow our networks more quickly? What can we do to support each other through evictions and health crises right now? People may have been asking these questions before, but after her speech I overheard them coming from every direction. Marcia may not have resolved the tensions and uncertainties held by and between attendees, but her words provided an emotional and theoretical grounding powerful enough to redirect focus towards collective values and goals.

Laughing with Joseph

In one of my favorite moments at the J4A office, someone from a room over interrupted a tough discussion about a missed deadline with the only half-ironic reminder that linear time is just a white supremacist construct. While the shouts of laughter provided only a temporary relief from confronting a frustrating situation, it was enough to ensure that the discussion resumed in a friendlier and more optimistic tone. Jokes like this one were so pervasive in J4A's office space that at times I wondered whether comedic talent was a prerequisite for joining the leadership

team. However, if one member were to be labeled the office jokester it would most certainly be Joseph. His deadpan cracks provided reliable entertainment that broke up the monotonous hours I spent editing videos and posts in our shared office space. For my part, I provided him with a reliably gullible audience. When I told Joseph that I found J4A in general to be an unusually comedic environment, and asked him if he thought that was relevant for their organizing philosophy, his expression grew thoughtful.

You know, he told me, it's interesting that you'd provide that feedback. We actually got into a really big argument back in January about whether or not to include "Laughter For All" in our list of core values.

Wow, really?

My response must have conveyed how utterly sold I was on this notion because Joseph began nodding earnestly before his expression cracked open into a winning smile.

No, of course not.

Oh. As ridiculous as I felt, Joseph has a way of making you feel valued precisely because you are the butt of his joke and I couldn't help but laugh along with him. I did, however, eventually press for a serious answer. *Humor, he told me, is a mechanism for maintaining resilience.* I'd noticed that Joseph often cracked jokes at moments when he, or the people surrounding him, were feeling particularly stressed. Working as operations manager for an underfunded, under-resourced organization that is trying to work against institutionalized structures of power, stress seemed to be his constant companion. At times this stress was produced by the countless logistical issues that found their way onto his overburdened plate. Other times, however, it arose from trying to build and sustain hope and cooperation among the oppressive social dynamics embedded in U.S. political culture.

For example, one day in the midst of a campaign meeting, Joseph updated the group on his communications with a white political organization that had reached out wanting to provide support for J4A's campaign. Joseph had asked if the organization's members could host a series of film screenings in their homes, along with discussions about the issues the J4A was currently focusing on (mass incarceration police violence). The organization's member replied by proposing that they host won organizational screening and asked if J4A would send a member to facilitate. Joseph concluded this update by (half) joking that while it's great for white people to actively try to be allies to groups led by people of color, maybe they should begin the process by not creating more work for the POC organizations. The other members present chuckled and groaned, and I know I can't have been alone in feeling the weight of all that was folded into Joseph's joke.

First and foremost, I knew that Joseph generally liked this organization, believed they were doing important work, and was friendly with several of its leaders. The joke felt less like an attack on them than a recognition of the racial dynamics that inevitably strained the relationship between J4A and this group. A long history of white people casually demanding the labor of brown and black people under the guise of it being for their own good, even in spaces oriented around racial justice, was rearing its head. In Joseph's case, this dynamic was one that he felt an obligation to confront head on. Despite being half Puerto Rican, and having primarily been raised by his Puerto Rican mother and grandmother, he was the only member of J4A's leadership team that identified as white. His experience of racial power structures was therefore very different from Olivia, Suri, and Asha's. In part because of this, he often took on the role of the designated ambassador to insensitive white folks who might be potential allies, but still had a ways to go in their political development.

However, I was sure that this was not how he would characterize the organization that had offered its support before this meeting and that he considered to be in J4A's best interests to work something out with them. However, the fact remained that the immediate outcome of their offer of support was that he had one more issue to resolve in his crowded work day. In order to express his frustration with the situation, he cracked a joke. In a room of coworkers who shared his sense of humor and understood his frustration, the joke became a means of collectively working through the oppressive power relations that J4A members face on a daily basis. It also turned Joseph's (useful) rage into a discursive tool that made space for laughter and bonding in the midsts of a two-hour, "all business" campaign meeting.

Translating with Carlos

I ended up making nine thirty-second to one-minute videos featuring paid and volunteer leaders at Justice For All. One of my later videos was with Carlos, a professional translator and language justice advocate. He is half Mexican-American, half white and first became involved with political work when, as a college student, he interned with a labor rights organization that works with immigrant farmworkers in Durham, North Carolina. Carlos told me he was inspired to join J4A because they were the first organization he'd seen that was committed to uniting a range of marginalized populations, including Spanish-speaking immigrants, through broad-based organizing. He wanted to help me produce a campaign video in Spanish to share with Durham's large, and growing, Spanish speaking population. We immediately ran into difficulty, however, with translating *Justice For All*. The language barrier emerged from clashing values as opposed to syntax- though in this case, the two proved to be one and the same.

Traditionally Justice For All would translate as Justicia Para Todos. The final word, **todos**, is a literal translation of “all.” However, its gender is masculine. If you were to address a crowd of women you would refer to them as “**todas**,” the feminine counterpart to **todos**. By the traditional rules of Spanish grammar “**todos**” is the correct verb form for both all male and mixed gendered groups. However, many people, Carlos among them, now argue that treating the male form as neutral contributes to patriarchal supremacy and oppressive gender norms. Therefore, they try to use other, ungendered verb forms- the most common being the use of -x at the end of a word (e.g. Latin**x** is used in place of Latino). J4A is committed to this gender equity cause but, as Carlos explained to me, its members are also committed to being accessible and welcoming to Latinx immigrants who in many cases have never been exposed to this kind of language justice movement. They have to remain conscious of the fact that the use of new verb forms may be alienating to people who find it confusing or elitist. Therefore, in the case of all written material, the group had settled on writing Justicia Para Tod@s. The use of the “@” symbol keeps the word from being technically gendered, but it also still looks like a stylized form of the verb’s natural vowel (and one that, to the careful observer, appears to be both part “o” and part “a”).

While this solved the written barrier, we found ourselves faced with a new problem for our spoken message. After all, Carlos could not pronounce an @ sign as a natural-sounding vowel. The first solution he suggested was to simply say “todas y todos.” This would sound slightly awkward to some native speakers, but at least be clearly intelligible without completely disregarding language justice. However, he then reflected that this solution was not ideal because part of the goal of using genderless wording is to make space to acknowledge people who identify as neither male or female. Saying “todos y todas” only acknowledges the existence of two genders. After a brief period of deliberation, we concluded that because we were likely to

reach far more Latinx people who find language justice alienating than non-binary folks, Carlos would go with *todos y todas*. However, we included a written text message on the screen with the gender bending “@” sign on display.

This translation problem crystalized a number of the challenges that emerge for J4A as they try to communicate in multiple languages that are not constructed to support the legitimacy of their values and aspirations. In order to craft an effective message, Carlos had to struggle with the gendered grammar of the Spanish language, the complicated ways in which class and educational hierarchies are inscribed in language (coding some terms as elitist), and the ways in which both the English and Spanish languages systematically erase the identities of non-binary folks. In taking on the challenge, he was forced to do the work of trying to compromise between the values, needs, and expectations of different populations while also trying to stay true to his own values.

When I asked him to describe how he navigated linguistic situations like this one, Carlos told me he tried to focus on embodying practices that he believes would be normalized in a just and equitable society. In the case of translating “all” as *todos*, *tod@s* or *tod@s*, the complication was that the practice of welcoming a marginalized, immigrant population into political spaces conflicted with the practice of affirming non-binary identities. However, he told me that the hope is that if J4A can bring Latinx immigrants into relationship with non-binary people, as well as people of a variety of other marginalized identities, then these groups can work together to develop the common understanding and linguistic terms that would make it possible to affirm all of their identities together. The long-term goal is to collectively breakdown hegemonic discourse in ways that feel meaningful and liberating even for group members whose identities are not the ones directly attacked or invisibilized by a given term or grammatical convention. The possibility

of reframing hegemonic propositions in order to make space for this vision, and the strategies J4A's members are employing to realize this possibility, is the subject of my final chapter.

Chapter 3

“Voyager there are no bridges, one makes them as one walks.” -Gloria E. Anzaldúa

It’s time to win back our government and put it to work for all of us. Corrupt politicians and big corporations have rigged our political system to favor the wealthy and powerful. Together, we are building a cross-class, multiracial movement to defeat the politics of division and greed and elect officials who will fight for a city where everyone can thrive.²⁷

This declaration, which can be found on Justice For All’s website beneath the subheading: *Our Purpose*, articulates J4A’s core criticism of the U.S. political system. While they make this criticism in order to propose the need for fundamental restructuring starting at the local level, it seems worth noting that much of this language wouldn’t have looked out of place on a campaign poster for either of the major Presidential candidates in 2016. For example, the insistence that “it’s time to win *back*” a “rigged” government echoes Donald Trump’s mantra that “the system is rigged” and his promise to “make America great *again*.” This particular parallel became a source of contention during a meeting that I attended in early August.

It was nearly five months since J4A had kicked off its campaign and hosted its first mass meeting, and the group had convened to reassess their evolving structure, progress towards their goal of reaching 5,000 members, and overarching messaging strategy. A major topic of discussion early in the meeting was the question of how the group was balancing its resources across its multiple teams and political objectives. From the organizing team, Jasmine reported

²⁷ This language has been altered slightly for the sake of maintaining anonymity.

that there was a need for more support for newly recruited activists from working class communities ready to take on leadership roles. The other members present agreed that because this “deep organizing” remained the most essential part of their work for realizing their long-term vision, they would divest from the campaign team and opt against endorsing and campaign directly for candidates.

Later, Suri reported from the campaign team that the group was proving its ability to turn out respectable numbers of both moderate progressives and vocally radical “leftists” to its mass meetings. This, along with the connections and local celebrity of several leadership team members, had earned them enough of a local name that prospective candidates were interested in attending a J4A voters forum. Suri had a number of concerns, however, among them the extent to which attendees to the mass meeting were feeling committed to a common vision that would endure past the end of the election cycle. Questions about this vision and its long-term viability were raised again when the meeting turned to the topic of messaging. In the context of this line of questioning, a young, white woman who works in operations raised the point that the line “it’s time to take back our government” seems to invoke the Trump campaign’s revisionist nostalgia messaging. After all, she pointed out, how can we be taking our government back when poor, POC folks never “had” it to begin with?

James, a graduate student who was facilitating the session, conceded that the group does not want to imply that they are fighting to return to a previous era when America was “great.” However, he added that they had been using this frame even before the 2016 election because the North Carolina state government had once been far more favorable to their positions (before a

Republican *take-over*²⁸ in 2012). This meant that the idea of taking it “back” would resonate with people still angry over this political shift. The line is made all the more relevant by the fact that many local residents consider the Republican dominance to be illegitimate. Their belief has earned powerful validation in recent years as Federal courts have ruled that both voter ID law’s and electoral redistricting instituted by the Republican-controlled legislature constituted illegal efforts to undermine the democratic process for the sake of maintaining partisan control (1:16-CV-1026). Therefore, *winning back our government* implies not only the ousting of Republican leaders but also restoring the democratic process. The woman ultimately conceded that the language was more useful than problematic, even if it felt like an equivocation. However, her initial objection- and James’ response- provide an important reminder that when I speak about “J4A’s” messaging tactics, I am talking about messages developed by a group of individuals who disagree and negotiate internally even as they struggle with discourse more broadly (Benford and Snow 2000:626).

The fact that the case for taking back a rigged government is now associated with President Trump is certainly a source of frustration for J4A members. After all, it is an analysis that has been used by leftist organizers to renounce U.S. economic and political system for centuries. The fact that this analysis has been co-opted by a nationally successful right-wing populist movement, and to a lesser extent establishment Democrats who incorporated a sanitized version of the critique that our system is “rigged” into their national platform after the Sanders campaign made it a national talking-point during the Democratic primary (2016 Official Platform of the Democratic Party). However, as one J4A activist pointed to the group, there is something to be said for the fact that the possibility of treating the U.S. political system as

²⁸ This is a term I heard used by a range of people (including both self-identified moderates and self-identified anarchists) to refer to the 2012 state elections when Republicans won both the governorship and a veto-proof majority in the state legislature.

fundamentally flawed seemed to have broken into mainstream discourse (on both the left and the right) in ways that had seemed impossible even under the Obama administration.

For the moment, this anti-establishment message had been absorbed by the very forces of racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and class-based supremacy that leftists hoped to undermine. However, as I have argued, the “partially fixed” nature of socially constructed discourse is such that any frame or proposition contains within it many different possibilities (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 134; Hall, 1985:77). Therefore, the expansion of hegemonic support for certain aspects of J4A’s analysis, even if they are used to fundamentally different ends, may actually create discursive possibility as well as frustrations. In the previous chapter, I described how members of J4A identify and struggle with propositions in hegemonic political discourse. In this chapter, I delve more deeply into that struggle by looking at a specific kind of theorizing that J4A’s members use to overcome the challenges posed by hegemonic discourse. This is the process of trying to articulate new possibility *within* the limits of the available discursive resources, but in such a way that nevertheless moves towards making those limits obsolete. I refer to this process as (re)appropriating propositions in hegemonic discourse.

Note 4: (Re)appropriating hegemonic discourse

Early on in my work with the communications team, I came to the conclusion in order to articulate J4A’s vision we would have to persuade others (and ourselves) to completely abandon previous conceptions of what it means to participate in electoral politics. However, this is a task that would lack any imaginable process because even J4A members themselves can only begin to speak about electoral politics by struggling through the terms provided by the symbolic order in which they are working. Even if they could invent an entirely new political discourse, one

uncontaminated by linkages to the propositions that undermine their work, its very purity would render it all but useless for organizers trying to articulate new possibility and relations within social and political networks that are themselves messy and impure (Law as cited in Asdal et al, 2007: 347).²⁹

Amidst the words and images on J4A pamphlets, speeches, and Twitter posts, it becomes clear that their strategy is not to avoid hegemonic themes in discourse, but rather to appropriate them to their own ends. There is an important distinction to be made here between treating hegemonic discourse as a rigid “prison house” imposed from above (from which one must try to escape) and instead treating it as a field of collectively constructed, if no less repressive, material (Jameson 1974). Laclau and Mouffe describe the potential of the material discourse via Althusser’s critique of the Marxist notion of “ruling ideology.” Deviating from Marx’s economic determinism, Althusser argues that ideology is collectively constructed by the daily practices, and particularly social interactions, of all people participating in its order. Laclau and Mouffe argue that “the most profound potential meaning” of this argument is that “the social constitutes itself as a symbolic order” which is at once inescapable and susceptible to a myriad of social interventions (Laclau & Mouffe 1985:84). In other words, when we treat discourse as having “a material existence” we are not only better able to interrogate the ways in which is used to fashion prison bars, we also open up our capacity to discover that it contains, within its wrinkles and folds, the potential for breaking them apart (Althusser & Brewster, 1971:167) .

*In her book *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Chela Sandoval provides a political action-oriented framework for operationalizing the “materials of ideology” (Sandoval 2000:62). While*

²⁹ Extrapolating from Donna Haraway's image of the cyborg as a heterogeneous, impure, subject sociologist John Law argues that politics, in a similar vein, “has always been messy, impure, heterogeneous.” (Law as cite in Asdal et al, 2007: 347)

*Sandoval treats ideology as deeply implicated in forces of domination, she is interested in how oppressed peoples can act “with and against the very symbolic arrangements that power avails” to develop “technologies of resistance” to those forces (Sandoval as cited in Gaztambide-Fernández 2012:55; Sandoval 2000:111). At their best, these technologies work to “self-consciously appropriate and reappropriation ideology” for the purpose of bringing new kinds of relations into being (Sandoval, 111). This process of appropriating and reappropriating ideology provides an excellent analogy for J4A’s interaction with hegemonic discourse in their messaging strategy. There is, however, one amendment that I would make to Sandoval’s strategic frame. This is because it is more precise to refer to J4A’s messages as **re-appropriating** discursive material that itself was born of struggle and came into existence already fraught with contradictory meanings. Specifically, J4A’s messages often work to reappropriate radical ideas that have been co-opted by reactionary political movements.*

An example of this process that became particularly visible during the 2016 elections was the dilution of the concept of political revolution. This term has long been used by a variety of radical groups (with a variety of political ideologies) to refer to a drastic, and in many cases violent transformation of a political system (Polk 2008). However, Bernie Sanders’ Presidential campaign adopted this phrase to signify a Presidential bid that hoped to push the Democratic party slightly left, but posed no fundamental challenge to the legitimacy of the U.S. political system (Sanders, 2017).³⁰ This use of the term revolution may have primarily been a move to make Sanders’ campaign more appealing to the politically disillusioned. However, it also served

³⁰ This observation is not intended to suggest that J4A has an entirely antagonistic relationship to the Sanders campaign. Several members expressed support for his doomed Presidential bid and I was assigned a section of a book written by Sanders’ campaign manager as part of my onboarding process. Joseph told me that he and other members read it as well, treating it as a useful, strategic guide written by someone who was a potential ally (even if they did not agree with Sanders’ broad acceptance of the legitimacy of U.S. democracy).

to neuter the concept itself, celebrating it in through deceptive, de-radicalizing process that simultaneously “removes its threatening edge,” and reinstates the hegemonic limits of political possibility (Hale 2002:507).

When members of J4A make their own call for a “political revolution,” and use it to mean radical transformation that begins at the local level, they emulate Sandoval’s notion of ideological appropriation because they are making creative use of the fact that Sanders’ campaign has helped popularize the term in mainstream discourse. However, I will refer to this work as discursive reappropriation in order to recognize the fact that the term never belonged to Sanders, nor to any single person or group, in the first place.

The Ward Three Seat: Making the radical reasonable

While J4A made the collective decision not to endorse candidates, they did turn out a group of folks to The Durham People’s Alliance (PA) endorsement meeting. While candidates and their supporters arrived at the meeting with their eyes on the approaching election, the gathering also became a site for framing and reframing Durham politics at large. Winning support within the PA had been a key strategy for Olivia’s campaign in 2014. In general, the PA is the electoral organizing to which J4A’s leadership is most closely affiliated (most are dues-paying members). This is partly because the PA has the most consistently pro-working class and minority rights agenda of any group that takes an active role in electoral politics. It is also because their endorsements have become so powerful in recent years that Andrea Benjamin, a professor of political science at a local university, has argued that they are in the business of “picking winners” (Benjamin & Miller 2017).

Between 2008 and 2016, there were a total of 12 city council races in Durham. The PA endorsed 10 of the 12 winning candidates, while the city's other two major PAC's, the moderate, black and middle class *Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People* and the "pro-business" *Friends of Durham* had endorsed only three winners each (Benjamin & Miller 2017:7).

Fortunately for J4A, they often found they had a relatively friendly audience in the PA.

However, members of the organization often invoke the limits of the left-right political binary to articulate friendly objections to J4A's "radical" proposals. The candidate endorsement meeting of September 2017 proved to be no exception.

The endorsement meeting took place three months after my first J4A campaign meeting and three months before the municipal election. By this time, J4A had become a well-known entity at least among the politically active, left-leaning Durhamites who attended the meeting. What remained to be seen was how this crowd would react to the concerns J4A hoped to bring to bear on the election debate. Even before taking my seat in that big, white church (these may be progressives, but it is still the American south) I sensed tension boiling beneath the hugging and the friendly chatter. I sensed it in an older, white woman nervously eyeing a young, Asian woman with a Black Lives Matter t-shirt and several facial piercings; in the clustering of a group of young, notably more racially mixed attendees (many of whom were J4A members) together in one corner; and in the shaky smiles of both the older incumbents and their younger challengers who were in attendance. I thought that perhaps this was normal for this meeting, after all, most people in attendance had to be aware that in the past five years nearly every municipal candidate endorsed by *The People's Alliance* went on to win the election. However, by the end of the night-the latter part of which would be spent closing down a bar on a Tuesday- I would hear both triumphant and reproachful declarations that we had borne collective witness to a political coup.

There were a number of different ways that people characterized the apparent rift that emerged during the endorsement meeting. Some defined it as young vs old (I heard this generally from older people), some as white v.s. still predominantly white but significantly less so (I heard this from those who counted themselves among the less so). From what I saw, both of these characterizations have some truth to them. However, it seemed to me that the rift was most clearly organized around two different conceptions of the current state of Durham politics. The width of this conceptual divide became particularly evident when the floor was opened for debate over which candidate to endorse for one of three city council wards. The meeting was sectioned off into four periods of open debate, one for each of the three wards up for election and one for the mayorship. Each debate section began with a member of the PA elections committee providing an overview of the candidates and their campaign platforms. After this introduction, the floor was opened for an indefinite time during which anyone who wanted to could raise their hand to speak in favor of one of the candidates. As the more than 400 people in attendance moved towards their collective decisions, impatience with the length of the debate period showed itself in early applause and the occasional exaggerated groan. However, this impatience seemed all but forgotten when it came time to debate the endorsement for Ward Three.

The Ward Three race had been a topic of interest around the J4A office since June, despite the fact that they had decided against officially endorsing anyone. At this stage in the municipal season, there were two major contenders for the seat. One was a generally well-liked, “progressive” white man who was the current incumbent and had received the PA nomination three years previously. His challenger was a young, black, queer, woman who worked as a defense lawyer at the North Carolina Center for Death Penalty Litigation. Alston, the challenger, was campaigning on the promise to act in opposition to the positions Moffit had taken on several

residential zoning cases. At the beginning of the debate, a member of the PA elections committee argued that Moffitt's votes had put a commitment to increasing property value over his responsibility to protect low-income renters. This declaration was met with a smattering of muttered protests from the audience. However, when the floor was opened for debate it became clear that many people in attendance, including several members of J4A, shared this criticism of Moffitt. That said, most of the debate did not focus on residential zoning policy, or on any specific policy at all for that matter. Instead, advocates of both Moffitt and Alston emphasized the character and experience of their chosen candidate. For example, an older white woman who had been among those protesting criticism of Moffitt's zoning vote read a prepared statement in his defense that mostly ignored the votes themselves. She rose with purpose when it came time for her to speak, swallowing the nervous tremor in her voice and assuming the tone of a disappointed parent:

Don Moffitt is a strong progressive with extensive knowledge of city law including zoning regulations. He is a hard worker and long-time friend of the PA who is dedicated to finding the practical solutions we need to make our city even stronger.

While this statement was clearly in part a defense of Moffitt's votes on zoning projects, the speaker did not elaborate with any kind of argument for or against the specific positions that he took. Instead, she advocated on behalf of Moffitt's character, describing him as *knowledgeable, hardworking, and practical*. She concluded her appeal with the insistence that Moffitt's virtues and capacities were what Durham *needs* in order to become *even stronger*. Embedded within this conclusion are four premises that reveal a specific vision of Durham's

present and future. First, both Moffitt and Durham are already *progressive* and *strong*. Second, Moffitt's zoning votes were part of the process of *practical* problem solving that Durham needs. Third, his *extensive knowledge* is worth mentioning because it is something that his opponent lacks. Four, refusing to endorse Moffitt this second time around would mean betraying a *long-time friend of the PA*. With these implications in mind, it is clear that this woman is advocating for loyalty to the current system and the people who have built it.

Regardless of whether she is “right” or “wrong,” the woman’s argument (which was echoed by a many others throughout the debate) is supported by the hegemony of the left-right political binary in the U.S. This hegemonic proposition pre-defines what is considered moderate at the national level as the natural center around which all positions and projects must be organized. Therefore, it validates the notion that because Durham is left of North Carolina and the U.S. more generally, it must be already progressive enough. It also validates the equation of the status quo with *practicality* and, by contrast, proposed changes with dangerous naivete. Finally, it is the reason that this woman did not even have to say that Alston’s supporters have unrealistic expectations for what is politically possible in Durham. The implied limitations of political possibility are already constructed in the discourse that gives meaning to words like *practical* and *strong progressive* in the first place.

The woman’s statement resonated enough with her audience that many borrowed her language in their own statements. Indeed *practical*, *hardworking* and *friend to the PA* briefly attained the status of buzzwords as the debate dragged on. However, both these words and the hegemonic propositions that give them their meaning were met with a challenge before the night was over. This challenge was posed by a number of people at the meeting, some affiliated with J4A and some not. However, it was best articulated by a young black man, whose t-shirt bore a

J4A logo that was only partially obscured by a bright orange scarf³¹. From the moment he began to speak, it was clear that his vision for the present and future of Durham was worlds away from those who considered it to be progressive enough:

Our people are under attack. Poor folks, queer folks, transgender folks, black folks, other folks of color, immigrants-both with and without papers. People are dying from lack of healthcare, from lack of food and housing, from police violence, from hate crimes. We are up against powerful and dangerous forces, which now control the state legislature and the White House. If we are going to survive, if we are going to make a future world that is habitable for us, we need elected officials who are fighters. Vernetta Alston is a fighter.

While the moderator had repeatedly insisted that people remain quiet until it was their turn to speak, the young man's declaration was met with an outbreak of rebellious applause. It was also met with a wave of palpable discomfort. His words had created an unwelcome disruption that went far deeper than accusing Moffitt of making poor decisions on zoning policy. In fact, he was not disputing his opposition's characterization of either Moffitt (the practical moderate) or Alston (the radical). Instead, he was disputing the character of the city and country in which these two candidates were running for office. The opening line *our people are under attack* doesn't conform with the rules of a universe in which Durham is already a *progressive beacon* and the task of its public official is simply to help it stay true to its current course. This is not to say that Moffitt's supporters believed Durham to be perfect, nor that Alston's completely disregarded the local victories already won by politicians and organizers alike. However, the

³¹ This young man was affiliated with J4A. I cannot identify him more specifically due to the People's Alliance endorsement meeting confidentiality rules.

differences between these two statements nevertheless illustrated a staggering disagreement over what exactly was at stake in this municipal election.

I was far from the only one at the meeting to be struck by this apparent conceptual gap. During the debate, I overheard a young Asian woman mutter to her friend that Moffitt's supporters were blinded by their race and class privilege. As I was leaving later that night, an older black man warned me that some of the young people in attendance were disregarding the realities of the world we live in. In some sense, members of J4A might agree with him. They are certainly trying to suggest a different way of reading political realities. However, I would argue the disconnect that emerged in the meeting was not over reality- by which I assume the older man meant the social, economic and political situation in Durham- but over how that reality should be measured. For example, people on either side of the divide contextualized Durham's social, economic and political situation in terms of its relation to the state and nation at large. The difference between how this relation was invoked could be explained as the difference between being (mostly) satisfied that North Carolina has one of the lowest African-American poverty rates in the country and being (mostly) enraged that a) it remains significantly higher than the poverty rate for white North Carolinians and b) we take it for granted that a significant portion of U.S. citizens of any race must inevitably live in poverty (Census Bureau(CPS) 2017).

These two different reactions reflect different bars for what could be considered a successful outcome for an antipoverty effort. They also lay the foundation for different conclusions about when, and to what extent, it is necessary and reasonable to take risks in order to raise that bar. The "satisfied" response might be that Durham can't expect to decrease its poverty rate if so much of the country is doing even worse. The "enraged," response, meanwhile, might be that if things are this bad across the country then perhaps we need to consider more

radical changes to the structure of our economy and political system. J4A, I would argue, is engaged in the process of trying to get people to raise the bar in terms of what they expect from electoral politics and elected officials. As Joseph told me during my first week, rather than treating Durham's progressivism as a steady beacon, J4A sees it as a potential ground zero for stretching the limits political possibility even further.

Whether it was because of previous organizing by the Alston campaign or the debate that took place on the floor, the PA assembly voted overwhelmingly in support of Alston. They also voted to endorse the more radical-seeming challenger of another well-liked moderately progressive incumbent. After the meeting, I joined a group of J4A members for celebratory drinks at a local bar. It was there that I first heard the endorsement results referred to as a coup d'etat. It was also there that it became clear that this night was a victory for J4A not simply because the group preferred Alston over Moffitt. They were also celebrating what the night's events seemed to signify for what could be made possible in the future. One member, who was not on the official campaign team but close friends with several of the founders, noted that in any other city he would not only have voted for Moffitt but campaigned for him. In Durham, however, being progressive by the rest of the countries standards as simply *no longer good enough*.

This statement, I would argue, illustrates how the PA "coup" was at least in part a discursive one. A hegemonic proposition that had previously dominated the space, namely that Durham was already progressive *enough*, had been challenged in a disruptive and meaningful way. The member who spoke on behalf of Alston did not simply conform to the hegemonic rule of the left-right political axis by trying to make Alston seem like a more moderate candidate. Instead, he invoked the language of political crisis -which had attained mainstream status in

Durham in the wake of the 2016 Presidential election- to redefine the moderate as *no longer good enough*. Specifically, he forced the gathering to- at least for a moment- trade in their poverty statistics for the names and faces of people dying for lack of food and shelter. His words were disruptive because they carried within them a reminder that it is easy to be satisfied with the rate of homelessness when you have a home, and easy to be impressed with the progress of racial and gender equity when your race and gender remain the dominant and ‘unmarked’ category (Haraway 1991:176).

In future conversations with the man who spoke at the PA meeting, he stressed that the work of J4A is connected with and indebted to the work of liberatory projects that came before it. In this case, his discursive work recalls that of Martin Luther King when, in a letter written from inside Birmingham jail, he professed his belief that the greatest enemy of black freedom was “not the White Citizen's Councillor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice” (King 1963: pp. 19). In a similar attack on the paralysis of moderation, the speaker at the PA meeting used the terms of crisis to reframe Alston’s radicalism- not as less radical-but as reasonable and necessary in the current political moment. Regardless of how this frame is destined to fare in future debate, that night it was met with a smattering of unsanctioned applause.

March to the Polls: Theorizing voting as collective liberation

In the weeks that followed the PA endorsement meeting, members of the J4A coordinating team were faced with deciding how active they would be in campaigning for the endorsed candidates. Joseph had informed me earlier that J4A was considering making its own endorsements as well. However, the group ultimately opted against it. They co-coordinated one

candidate forum but continued to devote the majority of their time to community dinners, skills trainings, and rallies that emphasized collective empowerment instead of support for any specific candidates. In order to make this decision, J4A's members had to articulate to both themselves and others that this long-term coalition building process was no less urgent than winning the impending elections.

Because the elections were now close enough to become a permanent fixture in local political discourse, it was nearly impossible to pitch the long-term electoral coalition without connecting it to the November vote. This presented a challenge not only because of the significance many people ascribed to the election, but also because of the exasperation that it inspired in many others. In contrast to the audience at the PA endorsement meeting, many of the people that J4A was trying to organize were skeptical of the value of engaging in electoral politics at all. Some of these people, like a hospital cafeteria worker that I interviewed over the summer, remained unconvinced that any of the candidates would truly represent her interests. Others doubted that any elected official could make significant political changes from within the city government as it is currently structured. Still others were overwhelmed by the time and energy required to acquaint themselves with the candidates, or else could not access information in a language in which they were fluent. Finally, immigrants who lacked citizenship status, people convicted of felonies, and anyone under the age of 18 could not vote even if they wanted to. These challenges to the strategic appeal of voting on the one hand, and the apparent primacy of the impending election on the other, posed conflicting problems for the legitimacy of J4A's slow-going "deep organizing" process.

As I argued in the previous chapter, the logic that helps sustain these conflicting problems is at least in part rooted in a proposition that has attained hegemonic status in U.S.

political discourse. This is the proposition that voting to elect public officials is the individualized right and duty of a citizen that **a)** either is or should be isolated from collective social or political projects and **b)** is *uniquely* central to the legitimacy and function of a democratic government.³² This proposition presented problems for J4A before and all throughout the election cycle. However, its implications manifested with particular force when, in early November, I stood in the middle of a crowd of 200 or so people, typing out a caption for “live” video on J4A’s Facebook page. The crowd had gathered for a collective March to the Polls in November organized by J4A in coalition with other groups. It was intended to serve as both a declaration of victory (before the election results came in) and as a space to generate momentum for moving forward after the elections. This saddled the event’s speakers, most of whom were members of J4A, with the daunting task of articulating to their audience that this act of collective voting was not really about voting per se, and that their project would begin as opposed to end with the election results coming out in the following week.

The rally was held in a rented space that was a roughly fifteen-minute walk from the polling station and felt like a cross between a church and a high school gymnasium. When I arrived to help set up the decorations and donation table seemed dwarfed by the expansive floor and high ceiling and I was worried that the sheer size of the room would make the event feel

³² As I argued in the previous chapter, this proposition constructs voting as an act of loyalty to the U.S. political system and implies that the success of an electoral coalition must be measured in terms of whether it produced a candidate’s victory in the most recent election. It also constructs an attempt to collectivize voting through a project grounded in social relations as morally suspect because it defines voting as necessarily anti-social and relationships organized around collective voting as hyper-transactional. Finally, this proposition is what made it possible for one of my fellow university students to insist that collectivizing voting is dangerous because it undermines the right to *individual political decision making* (even while acknowledging that the ‘right’ to political decision making is unevenly distributed, largely based on wealth and social capital, and dominated by the over-resourced, elite-controlled behemoths that are the Democratic and Republican parties).

under-attended. As it turned out, I needn't have been concerned. By the time the first speech began the crowd had swelled to the largest political gathering I'd seen since the endorsement meeting. However, while I recognized many PA members in the audience, the demographic makeup of the room was very different from that of the meeting in August. The group looked to be roughly half white and half people of color, the vast majority of whom were black. There was also a small but notable contingency of Latinx folks, and a number of people wearing t-shirts that declared them to be union members, farmworkers, and domestic workers. While the event was described as a Justice For All rally, it was being co-hosted by the *Durham Association of Educators* and *We Dream in Black: National Domestic Workers Alliance*.

That said, the attendees were still majority middle class, even if only by a small margin, and non-black people of color were decidedly underrepresented compared to their percentage of the population in Durham (roughly 14% of the total population). Organizers had found that many Latinx immigrants in particular were, understandably, afraid to involve themselves in politics given the anti-immigrant rhetoric institutionalized by Trump's successful campaign. However, one Latinx organizer present at the meeting insisted that many immigrants, especially those who already had citizenship status, were motivated to take action specifically because of Trump's rhetoric. Anger with Trump, and the determination to find ways to undermine his influence, likely also had had something to do with the fact that many people in attendance fit the category of those who typically reject voting altogether. This, at least, is what I was told by one young man who identified as an anarcho-communist and informed me that he most commonly engaged in politics by way of protesting alt-right and other white supremacist gatherings with a local antifa (anti-fascist) chapter.

The collective presence of these people who often remain isolated from one another both socially and politically, was possibly the biggest win yet of J4A's short career. However, it also meant that in addition to framing voting in terms of a broader project, the event's speakers were also tasked with speaking across the disparate expectations of someone who actively campaigned for one of the candidates, someone still unconvinced that voting is more than a patriotic performance, or someone who had come to the rally despite lacking the proper identification status needed to vote at all. And while it was tempting to look at the diversity of the crowd as something bordering on a progressive utopia, tensions between the different constituencies were not far below the surface. For example, as I was setting up my camera equipment I noticed one 20 something woman with short red hair and a t-shirt bearing the words "There Are No Prisons in My Queer Utopia," was looking warily at a middle aged woman proudly showing off photos of herself in a pussy hat at the Women's March. The younger woman, a self-identified anarchist, later explained to me that the pussy hats were incredibly transphobic and epitomized exclusionary white feminism at its worst. Perhaps more concerning, however, were the clear racial and class segregation across the room. The pockets of people remaining relatively isolated from one another served as a reminder that being in a room together is the beginning, not the end, of J4A's political road. The internal disagreements and tensions might have been easy to ignore if the group had simply formed a short-term alliance to get a candidate elected. However, the construction of the long-term, individually and collectively transformative "squad" that Flexx had described to me would require that these tensions be tackled head on.

Some of the steps towards generating a sense of collective purpose were fairly straightforward. For example, the scheduled speakers included people from a wide variety of backgrounds and, during the opening speech, two professional translators announced that they

would be providing translation services in Spanish and Arabic throughout the rally. Other steps, however, required less obvious tactics for reframing the limits of who and what could be included in the scope of a March to the Polls. My first lesson in this process of reframing came in the form of a Facebook notification. Just minutes ago, I had taken a live video of the opening speech through J4A's Facebook and posted it under the caption: *We are voting for Justice For All!* Almost immediately, someone had logged into the account and changed the caption to *We are taking action at the ballot box and in the streets to transform our city!!*

I must admit that when I first read the edited Facebook caption I had to stifle an exasperated groan. It seemed to me that "taking action at the ballot box" was an unnecessarily vague and even disingenuous way to characterize voting. Why, I wondered, do we need to pretend that what we are doing at the polls was anything more or less than trying to ensure that our preferred candidates attain the legal power and symbolic influence of an elected official? More importantly, I felt certain that potential J4A allies who were used to talk about elections in terms of voting would find this language as heavy-handed as I did. Therefore, I feared the message would feel too awkward to really resonate with these people. It did not seem to me that J4A had sufficient reason to defy conventional terminology. After all, by this time I had more than my share of experiences with how utterly paralyzing awkwardness can be. It is often more difficult to debate with an eye roll than with explicit opposition that at least takes your position seriously.

However, in retrospect, I realize this reaction was a reflection of my own hegemonically limited view of both the scope of electoral politics and the implications of the frames employed on J4A's Facebook page. When I asked Joseph about his edit to my post, he explained that J4A wanted to avoid creating the impression that voting was the only important thing to have

happened that day. Instead, they wanted to make it clear that even though J4A was aspiring to be a coalition that engages directly with electoral politics, they were treating voting as *one of many tactics* that fit into a broader project of transformative political change. This move was in part about acknowledging the presence and value of people who'd joined them in *taking action* but hadn't been able to actually vote (including people under eighteen, convicted felons, and immigrants who lacked citizenship status). It also laid the groundwork for framing their project as an inversion of a typical electoral coalition. When the emphasis is placed on voting, it is generally assumed that people form electoral coalitions for the purpose of winning elections. This is certainly billed as the main purpose of the national Democratic and Republican parties. For J4A, however, winning elections is not the end but rather a means for strengthening ties, restructuring democratic institutions and readying the ground for a new political future. They recognize that winning power through local elections is a useful way to both strengthen bonds and make the surrounding political environment safer for their growing community. In other words, they are winning elections in order to support the formation of their coalition.

With this context, it became clear that Joseph's Facebook post was a step towards overcoming the paralysis of hegemonic limitations to the scope electoral politics. In this case, the hegemonic proposition was the voting is such an essential, individual political act that describing it in terms of taking collective action is somehow transgressive. Joseph's terms appeared clunky and obtuse to me not because they were disingenuous, but because their author was trying to spin new possibilities out of resistant discursive material. While I feared the idea of "taking action at the polls" would feel less accessible to the progressive, leftist and politically marginalized groups that J4A was trying to reach, the purpose of Joseph's message was to reframe the electoral process and make it *more* accessible than my narrow conception of voting

allowed it to be. This (re)framing process is anything but straightforward, and no one understands its exhausting contradictions better than organizers embroiled in the theoretical and practical work crafting a Facebook caption.

Of course, social media was not the only domain in which J4A members worked to frame their March to the Polls. Before the actual marching began, a series of speakers made a collective attempt to knit together the diverse clusters of people and ideas that populated the room. Their work was rewarded with energy and applause. People spoke about the issues they were facing in their personal lives, and the economic and social changes they hoped newly elected officials could bring to their city. Some spoke of their experiences with both subtle and violently explicit discrimination, others described the burden of economic exploitation, and still others provided examples of how these things intertwine. People highlighted the work that people from all corners of Durham were doing to improve their communities- and affirmed the need for elected officials who would support that work. Then, as the rally approached its climax, Suri rose to prepare the crowd for their triumphant march downtown.³³ He began by pointing out that this event was being held during early voting as opposed to the actual day of the elections. The reason for this, he reminded the crowd, was that the group couldn't have voted together on election day:

On the official day of the election, folks are required to vote at designated polling stations. We are divided from one another based on our zip code. This is not an accident. We already know that people in power set up elections in a way that tries to make sure some voices are heard louder than others. Just this year, judges ruled that North Carolina lawmakers used

³³ While Suri is often the one to deliver speeches on behalf of J4A, the messages he delivers are the result of conversations and formal planning with a variety of group members.

voter ID laws to undermine the political power of black, brown and poor folks. Now, we can see that on top of their ID laws and their gerrymandering, they also try to silence us by keeping our folks isolated from one another. They know that the only way marginalized people can take political power is by working together. That's why they are always looking for ways to break us apart.

In many ways, Suri's speech sounded similar to those that came before. He identified a problem faced by marginalized people in Durham and traced it back to an unjust political system set up to serve the wealthy and powerful. However, his particular narrative contained within it a creative process of reframing. By associating separate polling stations with voter ID laws and gerrymandering, he problematized a policy that is typically taken for granted. The implications of this analysis are more than just a recognition of yet another way in which the electoral system fails Durham residents. Within the context of his speech, the individualized nature of voting became a means for undermining- as opposed to protecting- people's voices. This characterization directly contradicts the assumptions about the limits of voting that I identified in the previous chapter. The hegemonic conception of electoral politics as antisocial and rooted in individualism constructs collective voting as actually undermining individual voices. However, by identifying the ways in which voices are already marginalized, and posing collectivization as the solution, Suri flipped this construction on its head.

I am here, Suri told the crowd, because I know that the only way for me to get free is if we all get free together. My liberation is bound up with all of y'all's.

Suri's speech echoed the philosophy of intersectionality and collective liberation, political movement concepts that I had learned at student organizing conferences and which have their roots in black feminist theory and praxis (Hull et al.1982). At this meeting, Suri made a

move towards bringing electoral politics *more clearly* within the scope of a collective and liberatory project. The goal, which he laid out even more explicitly at a later meeting, is to *collectivize voting* and turn it into a tool for building power and making space for a new political community in Durham. Within the scope of this political vision, electoral politics is explicitly based in community and networks of relationships. Rather than reinforcing the legitimacy of the current democratic system, this electoral project insists on redefining what that democracy should look like.

As is the nature of discursive struggle, Suri's words were taken up, negotiated and re-articulated in a variety of ways even before the event's end. Some people, for example, chose to leave before the march- in some cases still refusing to vote, and in others preferring to keep voting a solitary affair. Still others could not vote and, despite the appeals of various people in the room, found the idea of marching and then waiting outside demoralizing as opposed to empowering. The majority of people stayed, however, and together we marched downtown in a burst of color and sound. People carried signs promoting the movement to raise the minimum wage to \$15/hour (Fight for \$15!), calling for the demilitarization of police, and announcing that Black Lives Matter. People banged on makeshift drums while chanting "No justice, no peace!" and "This is what democracy looks like!" When we arrived at the polling station, we were met with looks of surprise and, in many cases, discomfort. In other cases, however, people approached me with open excitement. Two young women who had just driven up to the polling station pulled me aside to ask what was going on. They were clearly impressed with the size and energy of the crowd.

Well, I began, we are trying to build a political community...

Making a quick pitch for J4A to the women at the polls was still a challenge for me. However, I found that day that my words were not as clumsy and self-sabotaging as they once had been. Thanks to three months spent struggling with J4A, I could frame our project in terms of opposition to a broken political system and tie collective voting to collective, intersectional liberation. Even more helpful was the fact that as I spoke the words “multiracial and cross-class coalition,” and “taking action at the polls (I just couldn’t bring myself to say ‘ballot box’), our conversation was interrupted by a rousing chorus of “Whose streets? Our streets!” The multi-racial, cross-class crowd that surrounded us were celebrating their collective vote with chanting, hugging, and a barrage of selfies that would become Facebook profile photos for them to tag each other in later. This provided a better articulation of J4A’s vision than any words I could ever hope to find.

The explanation that I did provide to the two women was a far cry from Suri’s eloquent speech, but it was enough to persuade them both to sign a J4A pledge card. For me, and I would argue for J4A as a whole, this victory felt as meaningful as the election results that came out one week later. It matters a great deal who holds elected office, but changing democracy, as Surionce told me, also requires that we change ourselves. The leadership team members of J4A came away from the election immediately refocusing on planning their own end of year celebration. They were commemorating the new leaders and more than 4,000 new members that had joined their coalition in 2017. The new year would bring with it new obstacles and new reasons to doubt that they could maintain momentum as the municipal election season, and the sting from Trump’s Presidential victory faded into the background (at least for those people who were not being directly affected by his decisions and rhetoric on a daily basis). However, the discursive victories of the summer and fall brought new confidence and new subtleties to their case for new

possibilities. This, as Chela Sandoval writes, is how “technologies of resistance” to a hegemonic order work to “make the languages of emancipation more subtle, more rich, multiple, supple and flexible, with ‘all possible degrees of dignity’ at their disposal. (Sandoval 2000: 111).

It may have only been 200 or so people voting collectively at Durham’s polls in November, and the election itself (for which turnout- despite nearly doubling Durham’s average rate- was still less than 20%) may still be a far cry from the democratic process they envision for the city. However, the declaration they made at the polls; and at skills trainings, community dinners, and one-on-one conversations was one of possibility: this is what democracy *could* look like. This is what it looks like when people work together to cut through the hegemonic weight of condescension and disbelief and articulate a vision for “squad” politics. In the words of one J4A activist, a man in his early 20’s who had joined the group in July:

We are here to show those motherfuckers up top that we ain’t about no games. And we really want to make a change. I want to add fuel to that fire and really help bring us together. Because that is how we are going to make a better Durham.

Conclusion

This is what democracy looks like?

A week after our March to the Polls, I found myself in an overcrowded bar sharing a booth with an environmentalist based in rural Appalachia and the most relentlessly practical anarchist I've ever met. The latter was obsessively refreshing several web pages, each displaying live election results for municipal races in Durham and across the country. The bar, which had been booked out by Alston's campaign, was pulsing with triumphant excitement hours before elections official end. By then, it was already clear that Alston would win ward three in a landslide. I recognized many of the people gathered for the victory party (including my booth mates) as members of Justice For All. And several members of the leadership team showed up in time to cheer on the drag queen who serenaded Alston the moment her win became official (her victory anthem was Celine Dion's *My Heart Will Go On*). This was a moment of victory for J4A too, and yet also the beginning of a new set of challenges as they immediately refocused on continuing to grow their coalition.

After the votes were tallied for all the local races, the anarchist beside me was one of many people to declare that Durham had just elected the most progressive city government in the south, if not the entire nation. While November proved to be a month of progressive wins across the country, Durham garnered attention from national news sources as evidence that the "progressive revolution" was coming to the south (Yeoman 2018). Certainly this was cause for celebration in the J4A office, but it was also cause for critical reflection on what this victory meant for them, and how they wanted to frame it for their work going forward. When it came time to swear in the newly elected mayor and city council members in January of 2018, the meaning of the election itself became a site of discursive struggle.

J4A organized a rally outside of city hall where the mayor and city council members were being sworn in swearing, The mayor-elect, who had announced on his campaign website that he was “progressive before it was cool,” declared that Durham was ringing in a new era of resistance to the reactionary, conservative forces surrounding it at the state and national level. Just outside of City Hall, however, a group of people gathered to insist that the Durham government had a long way to go before it could really claim to be a beacon of progressive hope for the black, brown, and working class folks living within its borders. This is not to say they didn’t share the mayor’s hopefulness, they simply wanted to cast this hopefulness in their own terms. As a member of the Durham board of educators declared in her opening speech, this victory had to be treated as a mandate for new political possibilities as opposed to an affirmation of the current city government. The woman elicited cheers and fake groans when she announced that she was giving everyone homework:

This is the thing that we need to do. We need to learn to be brave. We need to be willing to hope for something better. We need to recognize that we can only get there by acting and acting together. We can win. We are winning. We just need to get better at it.

Both inside and outside of City Hall, people were celebrating a “win” for democracy. Inside, this victory belonged to the municipal election process, celebrated the fact that the voter turnout rate had nearly doubled compared to the previous municipal election in 2015. Outside, however, J4A’s members were careful to be very specific about who deserves credit for that turnout rate. They insisted that victory belonged to the organizers and activists who had worked alongside them, and to the kinds of collectivized, democratic practices they were trying to build

in contrast to the electoral process as it currently stood. Therefore, the indoor and outdoor celebrations marked conflicting, if not always antagonistic, fronts in a discursive struggle over the meaning of a successful, democratic process. The self-conscious nature of this struggle was epitomized by the chant that the protestors used to conclude their rally: *show me what democracy looks like; this is is what democracy looks like!* This chant did more than just excite the crowd with its satisfying, syncopated rhythm; it declared that this election was just the beginning of J4A's discursive struggle to redefine the limits of political possibility in their city.

Show me what democracy looks like!

Of course, similar to my experience pitching J4A at the March to the Polls, the power of the democracy chant was rooted not only in what was said, but who said and in what broader context. When J4A members shouted that they represented “what democracy looks like,” their argument carried weight because of the labor they had put into constructing a coalition and influencing the election results they had come out to celebrate. It was also punctuated by the fact that during the rally the group modeled a practice of the broad-based solidarity that they hoped to normalize. During the rally, a diverse group of scheduled speakers demonstrated the possibility of working class folks, black folks, Latinx immigrants (both registered and undocumented), LGBTQ folks and formerly incarcerated residents could make their voices heard under one platform. It is fitting, therefore, that the chant's call line is “show me what democracy looks like” as opposed to “tell me.”

This emphasis on “showing,” expressed within a chant that is itself spoken collectively, is indicative of a common dynamic that emerged throughout the course of researching and writing this thesis. This is that my discussion of J4A's “discursive” strategies was never fully able to

extricate itself from discussions of other organizing practices that J4A is using to theorize new political possibilities into existence. These include the structuring of their organization, the allocation of funds, the people whose presence was requested for different meetings and, of course, the lineup of speakers recruited for a rally. As these practices intertwine with written and spoken discourse, they take on the form of Gramsci's "praxis," envisioned as the productive relation between thought and action that creates possibilities for transformative political work (Gramsci et al. 1971:19).

An emphasis on discourse, I argue, is useful not because as it creates a distinct strategic category, but because it brings a specific and inherently relational lens to the study of collective attempts at realizing political transformations. Discourse is constructed through the many different mechanisms by which individuals communicate about themselves and the world to one another. Therefore, discursive hegemony as well as the practices that reinforce and challenge it all begin and end with the relations that engender communications, and miscommunications, between people. I believe that this lens has a great deal more to offer for scholars looking to enrich the study of political work that pulls at the seams of hegemonic relations of power and tries to generate the theoretical/practical depth, breadth, and imagination to remake the world in its own image.

From Durham to Palestine

In addition to indexing J4A's commitment to an ongoing discursive struggle, the "democracy chant" also raises a number of unresolved questions about the broader context and significance of this struggle. The chant takes up, in content if not form, one of the most popular

debates in global political philosophy.³⁴ And while J4A's members have much to contribute, they are not the first to challenge the hegemony of U.S. democracy any more than they are the first to employ the "show me what democracy looks like" chant (I first heard it at an NAACP rally in Raleigh, North Carolina). So, what can we say about the context of J4A's struggle? How deep are its roots? Where is its horizon? What can it mean for democratic practice beyond the city limits of Durham, North Carolina? I believe the answers to these questions begin with the moments when the world beyond Durham made its voices heard by the world within. The chanting that concluded the rally outside of City Hall was one such time.

While I have examined J4A's work primarily through a localized lens, I want to conclude by remembering that this work is embedded in a rich and heterogeneous tradition of similar (and dissimilar) attempts to transform democratic politics. I recently encountered an article from a conservative website titled "Sorry, Trump protesters: this is what democracy looks like" (Mandel 2017). Responding to the "democracy chant," and specifically to its use by protesters at Trump's inauguration, the author points out that Trump's Presidential victory was itself a product of the United States' version of democracy. She goes on to assert that the apparently incongruous presence of signs promoting Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ Rights, and Peace for Palestine is evidence that the anti-trump protesters have "no clear objective in mind besides anarchy" (Mandel 2017). In addition to showcasing persistent resistance to intersectional organizing, this article reveals two important features of the "democracy chant." First, it has roots that spread far beyond Durham, North Carolina. Second, J4A's members are hardly the

³⁴ According to Encyclopedia Britannica "the central problem of political philosophy is how to deploy or limit public power so as to maintain the survival and enhance the quality of human life" (Sampaolo 2017). From the earliest writings, spoken traditions, and practices regarding political formation that emerged in societies across the globe, possibilities for collective self-rule have been a part of this debate.

first to use it in the context of challenging traditional ideas about what democratic practices are legitimate, and what kind of political formations are possible.

The origins of the “democracy chant” can be traced to Seattle, Washington where an international coalition organized a massive protest of the 1999 World Trade Organization conference (Baur et al. 2013: pp. 1). Aggregating a variety of pro-labor, anti-capitalist, indigenous, and environmental causes, the group found common ground in a collective opposition to “corporate globalization”(Juris 2008:294). The protest is now cited as the beginning of the Occupy movement in the United States. However, the organizing that surrounded it had roots in a global justice movement that began with protests of the International Monetary Fund and other global financial powers in Peru, Bolivia, and South Africa dating back to 1975 (work that itself has roots at least in the revolutionary decolonial projects of the 1960’s and 70’s, but of course could be traced back further still) (Smith and Feagin, 1987). While I first heard the chant in North Carolina, it wasn’t at a J4A rally. Instead, it was while marching at a protest in Raleigh, North Carolina organized by the local chapter of the NAACP.

There, a crowd of nearly 10,000 people was marching for what could also be seen as an “incongruent” set of causes, ranging from immigrant rights to raising the minimum wage. Part way through the march, I found myself marching near a group whose sign bore the message “Demilitarize: From Durham 2 Palestine!” This particular cause was born of the discovery that the Durham police force sends new recruits overseas to train with the Israeli armed forces. Some members of the Durham chapter are Palestinian or Israeli immigrants, while others have suffered violence or imprisonment at the hands of the prison industrial complex in the city of Durham. From the perspective of these people, there is nothing incongruous about struggling to end United States military and police violence together.

Similarly, at the anti-trump protests, people across the United States endeavored to articulate why democracy *must* look like coalitions of people working together to end a host of seemingly unrelated forms of state-sponsored oppressions. This is the core of J4A's own use of the term as well, though they add the specific dimension that they are using it to articulate their desire to collectivize electoral politics. Therefore, J4A's use of the chant could be considered yet another form of discursive appropriation. However, in this case, the act of appropriation is guided by a philosophy of collective liberation. J4A members consider themselves to be partners in struggle with Occupy, and with Demilitarize Durham to Palestine as well. Importantly, this partnership is more than just symbolic. J4A members show up to the Demilitarize meetings and have folded the organization's demands into their own campaign to "Decriminalize Durham," which they ran as both issue-based and Get Out The Vote campaign centered around Durham's Sheriff and District Attorney elections in May of 2018.

The spring election season proved to be a major victory even before the votes were counted as the newly elected Durham City Council voted to take up the recommendations made by the Demilitarize Durham coalition voted to oppose ties between the local police force and the Israeli military. Beginning shortly after 9/11, cities around the country have been sending recruits to Israel to train in counterterrorism with the nation's armed forces. This practice has been critiqued both on the grounds that the Israeli armed forces are guilty of countless human rights abuses perpetrated against Palestinian citizens, and that the trainings encourage a style of policing that feels more like a military occupation than community safety (Speri 2017). In April of 2018, Durham's city council became the first U.S. governing body to officially denounce these training programs. According to their official statement, they did so because "the council opposes international exchanges with any country in which Durham officers receive military-

style training.” This historic statement was made possible by the organizing that resulted in the election of city council members bold enough to take this stand, as well as the organizing that went into creating the petitions and protests that they were responding to. This is precisely the method by which J4A hopes to continue to make historic changes the policies and practices upheld by the Durham city government.

These historical and present-day contexts indexed by and embedded in the “democracy chant” complicate its function as a discursive tool in Durham. However, they also convert it into a discursive marker of the web of linkages that sustain, and in some cases are sustained by J4A’s political project.³⁵ The chant represents one of countless terms that could be traced back to countless, and in many cases “incongruous” political struggles across the country and globe. For J4A, the effort to collectivize these struggles (*from the local context outward* according to Suri) is both a mobilizing strategy and the articulation of a collectivist political vision.

Future research on the discursive theorizing that is necessary to actualize such a vision might trace the international contours of politically motivated struggles over what government, democracy and electoral politics should *look like*. However, I would be equally inclined to advocate for more specificity. Tracing a localized discursive struggle provides insight into the daily grind of theorizing political possibility for tomorrow, and for the day after that, and the day after that. There is something spectacularly radical about the tedium, frustration, and ambivalence that emerges in specificity - and the relentless practices of articulation, camaraderie, and laughter that people use to keep all three at bay. If nothing else, attention to local contexts reminds us that neither discourse nor politics have ever fulfilled the standard of coherence

³⁵ Despite its local focus, J4A’s work has already inspired people around the country. In the time that I was working with them, political organizers from Philadelphia and New York City paid visits to the office. During the same period, an organizer who had moved to Seattle called to tell me that his coworkers there (also leftist political organizers) had heard of Olivia’s improbable city council victory and wanted to know if they could meet her over skype.

promised by a grammatical scheme or political treatise. The devil is in the details but so, I would argue, are the most lucid glimpses of salvation (or, more accurately, tainted and partial transformation). When all else fails me, I take heart in the words of civil rights activist Bernice Johnson Reagon: “if you feel the strain, you may be doing some good work.” (Reagon 1983:363).

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