

8-11-2015

# How the Performances, Song Lyrics, and Activism of the Indigo Girls Demonstrate the Mutable Composition of Southern Identity

Alison Law

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HOW THE PERFORMANCES, SONG LYRICS, AND ACTIVISM OF THE INDIGO GIRLS  
DEMONSTRATE THE MUTABLE COMPOSITION OF SOUTHERN IDENTITY

by

ALISON LAW

Under the Direction of Gina Caison, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

A common misconception about the southern region of the United States is that any one part of the region can stand alone as an accurate representation of the territory as a whole. To refute any notion of a homogeneous South and demonstrate the dynamic nature of an individual or community identity, I examine the history, song lyrics, performances, and activism of the folk-rock duo the Indigo Girls and their hometown of Atlanta, Georgia. This project applies the theories of locational feminism found in Susan Stanford Friedman's *Mappings* and New Southern Studies in Tara McPherson's text *Reconstructing Dixie*. Analyzing the biographies, song lyrics, performances, and activism of the Indigo Girls as an archive of southern literature allows us to understand the fluid, multiplex nature of regional identity and view Atlanta as one "borderland" in a heterogeneous U.S. South.

INDEX WORDS: Indigo Girls, Amy Ray, Emily Saliers, Locational feminism, Southern studies, Cultural studies, Performance studies, Southern identity

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2015

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DEMONSTRATE THE MUTABLE COMPOSITION OF SOUTHERN IDENTITY

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August 2015

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis to my husband, Zach, who made sacrifices, great and small, to support my return to school. Yes, reaching our goals is fun. I also dedicate this project to the memories of Trudie, Sting, and Chewie.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I gratefully acknowledge Dr. Gina Caison, whose enthusiasm for this project propelled me down the path and whose guidance prevented me from “pushing the needle too far” at many turns. If I still suck at writing transition sentences at the end of this process—and I suspect I do—it is not her fault. Dr. Janet Gabler-Hover introduced me to locational feminism and allowed me to experiment with this theoretical framework in her feminist literary theory class. Dr. Scott Heath’s scholarly interests in music as critical discourse made him the perfect third reader for this project.

I met Morna Gerrard through the Georgia LGBTQ Archives project, and she connected me with Georgia State University’s Special Collections and Archives: Activist Women Oral History Project, which provided invaluable resources for this project. I offer my appreciation to Charlotte Pence who introduced me to the scholarly analysis of song lyrics and answered my questions about the collection of academic essays she edited on the subject. I owe tremendous thanks to Stacey Singer and the Girls Rock Camp ATL organization for empowering me and so many others to pursue our creative and intellectual interests, with no apologies. Lastly, I wish to express my thanks to Amy Ray and Emily Saliers whose body of work continues to inspire countless people to explore the various facets of their lives and to claim their own evolving identities.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

A common misconception about the southern region of the United States is that any one part of the region can stand alone as an accurate representation of the territory as a whole—its land, its people, its politics, its religious beliefs, and its culture. Further, in the popular imagination, for many this homogeneous South is populated solely with stereotypical southerners, individuals who self-identify as white, male, heterosexual, Protestant, politically conservative, middle-class, and diehard Southeastern Conference (SEC) football fans. The truth is that many different Souths exist within the U.S. South—the values shored up by Mississippi’s Gulf Coast contrast greatly with those cresting the mountain community of Asheville, North Carolina, and the Mardi Gras atmosphere of New Orleans, Louisiana, swings to a different beat than the country music capital of Nashville, Tennessee. These varied Souths shape and influence diverse people who coexist and contribute to ever-developing definitions of southern identity. This project aims to debunk the myths of a homogeneous South and a static southern identity by examining the histories, song lyrics, performances, and activism of the folk-rock duo the Indigo Girls and their hometown of Atlanta, Georgia.

This thesis encompasses the thirty years that Amy Ray and Emily Saliers have been performing together as the Indigo Girls, but ventures beyond to explore the Atlanta of the 1960s and 1970s, when the city first served as a haven for those interested in the expansion of civil rights protections. This backdrop influenced the Indigo Girls, their music, their activism, and their choice to self-identify as southerners. Ray and Saliers first met when they attended the same elementary school in Decatur, Georgia, a suburb of Atlanta. In contrast to the homogenized “white, male, conservative...” southern identity introduced above, the Indigo Girls have established themselves as openly gay women artists and activists who use their platform to

advocate on behalf of numerous causes, including the environmental protection of Native American lands, immigration reform, and equal rights for women and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA) communities. The Indigo Girls perform these multiple facets of identity in their songwriting, in their live and recorded performances, and in their promotional materials, such as listing the causes they support on their website and in the liner notes of their LPs. These performances and documents serve as a valuable archive of southern history, an archive that speaks to issues in feminism and New Southern Studies. Relying heavily upon Susan Stanford Friedman's *Mappings* and Tara McPherson's *Reconstructing Dixie*, I argue that the Indigo Girls' archive records the fluid, multiplex nature of southern identity and depicts Atlanta, Georgia, as one "borderland" in a heterogeneous U.S. South.

In the first chapter of my thesis, I delve into the biographical information available on Amy Ray and Emily Saliers and their career together as the Indigo Girls. The source material is a compilation of published articles and interviews, blog posts, liner notes, website copy, biographies, and other resources written by or authorized by the Indigo Girls. This archive educates us about their families, their upbringing, their travels, educational and musical pursuits, and the political and social causes they support.

I also analyze select Indigo Girls' songs to show how the lyrics correspond to different places and events in their lives and the authors' thoughts on their evolving identities. Scholar Charlotte Pence outlines this approach to the close reading and study of songs in her introduction to *The Poetics of American Song Lyrics*, the first collection of academic essays on analyzing songs as poetic texts. Adam Bradley details a similar process for analyzing the poetics of hip hop and rap in his text *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop*. I use the scholarly methods outlined

by Pence and Bradley to trace southern identity's path through space and time in the lives and song lyrics of the Indigo Girls.

In select songs written at different times in their lives, Ray and Saliers have mused on what it means to them to be southern. In her song "Trouble," Saliers submits a well-known custom of breaking bread together to resolve disagreements ("Here in the South we fix something to eat") before imagining a progressive future where "a girl can get a wife" ("Trouble" n.p.). Ray runs away from a conservative, capitalist "southern style" she encounters as a college freshman at Vanderbilt University in her Indigo Girls' song "Nashville." However in her a more recent song "Become You," Ray confronts one of her rural Georgia neighbors about "old confederacy" values that she says have haunted the U.S. South and sometimes made it difficult for her to self-identify as southern ("Become You" n.p.). These songs counsel listeners to connect with the feelings and emotions that correspond to the varying definitions of "southern," and move forward through action. As McPherson writes in *Reconstructing Dixie*: "In the end, it is not enough for white southerners simply 'to see' or even to tell; we need also to act [...]" (225). Ray and Saliers present new ways of feeling southern: feeling love and compassion for their homeplace without colluding in or getting mired down in the region's history of racial injustice, opting instead for a path of political and social activism. The duo communicates ways to get involved and take action in everything they do; the Indigo Girls list organizations they support in the liner notes in their CDs, on their website, and frequently mention the groups during interviews and on stage. Besides, as Ray quipped in a 1989 interview, "I've probably done benefits all my life to deal with white middle-class guilt. Now I've gotten over that thing" (Murray B1).

In the second chapter of my thesis, I counter the sole scholarly article currently available about the Indigo Girls, in which Kate Greene classifies Ray and Saliers as “misfits.” Greene appropriates the “misfits” label from sociologist John Shelton Reed’s 1971 survey of southern identity (Greene 159). While Ray and Saliers do not identify as the stereotypical white, politically conservative, Protestant, heterosexual male whose profile frequently represents southern identity—they self-identify as white, liberal, lesbians with non-denominational spiritual beliefs—the Indigo Girls’ and their music accurately represent a dynamic South that served as the stage for the American Civil Rights Movement. Furthermore, I argue that the early and regular exposure to this diverse and politically active convergence of cultures was part of the Indigo Girls’ early configurations of their southern identity, what McPherson refers to as exploring a southern identity that venerates “the other” instead of “the same” (202). Ray and Saliers are very much products of *their* South, a community that continues to evolve in the borderlands of metropolitan Atlanta.

Growing up in a large city where they regularly interacted with other members of the LGBTQIA community gave Ray and Saliers more latitude to accept both their identity as southerners and their identity as out lesbians. Atlanta, like other urban areas of the United States, has often represented a safe space where gay and lesbian individuals can meet and intermingle. Living in a large city also grants a certain level of anonymity where individuals can explore and perform various aspects of their identity without small-town scrutiny and condemnation from people who have known them all their lives (Dews 18). This boundary between the rural and the urban materializes in a collection of essays called *Out in the South* in which gay and lesbian artists write of their personal experiences of growing up in the U.S. South. Many of the

contributors write of moving away from their rural hometowns for more tolerant and diverse urban centers where they found new models of being southern.

The third and final chapter of my thesis focuses on another factor that resists the easy classification of southernness: the performed nature of individual or community identity. Friedman bases her argument that constituents of identity are fluid partially on the work of queer theorist Judith Butler. Butler theorizes that drag is one example of the instability of an essential gender (xxiv). To illustrate this point, I'll analyze one of the music videos of the Indigo Girls produced at the height of their major label career. Ray and Saliers dress in drag in the video for "Galileo," an act that I argue aligns with Friedman's approach to performance as a way to play with gender, sexuality, and other facets of identity—both on the personal and professional levels—as forms of masquerade (Friedman 25). "Galileo" and other music videos show how the Indigo Girls performed different aspects of their identity—as women, as openly gay artists who were part of a burgeoning gay rights movement in the early 1990s, and as socially and politically conscious activists.

Coming from a region that is often complicit in its own stereotyping, Ray and Saliers defy any notions that they are downplaying the negative aspects of the U.S. South's brutal past of racial violence. New Southern Studies scholars McPherson and Scott Romine write of a new plantation economy that sanitizes the past or freezes it at its most nostalgic moments for the benefit of tourists. But Ray razes the ground of the former Angola plantation in Louisiana in her song, "The Rise of the Black Messiah." This Indigo Girls' song reveals the narratives of three black men who spent most of their lives in solitary confinement in the Louisiana State Penitentiary built on a former plantation. Ray proudly self-identifies as southern, yet she is not

afraid to expose the past injustices of slavery and lynching and what she considers their current incarnation, the mass incarceration of African Americans, in these lyrics:

Yeah your great granddaddy

He worked that land

With shackles on his feet and on his hands

He built them levees

He chopped that cane

He died in the mud in his chains

And now you stand where he once stood

Shackles on you all the same (“The Rise of the Black Messiah” n.p.).

I refer to the work of performance studies scholars Diana Taylor and E. Patrick Johnson to argue that songs like “The Rise of the Black Messiah” and the Indigo Girls’ performances on behalf of numerous social and political causes are integral to capturing an archive of southern history that resists freezing or boutiqueing the region. This archive points us to a complex, heterogeneous South that has always already existed.

To conclude, by examining the South that fostered the identity and careers of Ray and Saliers, this thesis shows how the songs, performances, and activism of the Indigo Girls represent a heterogeneous, fluid South. This South differs considerably from the homogeneous, static South that Greene describes in her article and challenges the author’s characterization of the Indigo Girls as “misfits.” Recent events in the lives of Ray and Saliers and in their home region underscore that if we continue to analyze the Indigo Girls’ lyrics as we would other literary forms, we also gain intimate knowledge of the past, present, and future concerns and diversity of today’s U.S. South and those who identify themselves as southerners.

## 2 “HISTORY OF US”

In her 1998 text *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*, Susan Stanford Friedman prescribes what she calls “locational feminism” as a way to reunite the plural conceptions of identity spun off from the first, second, and third waves of feminism, and to incorporate relevant tenets of multiculturalism, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, and poststructuralism (4). Locational feminism is a singular movement that recognizes the heterogeneous and fluid nature of identity, of both individuals and communities, and attempts to map the changes imposed by time and place. Further, Friedman argues that mapping identity is “unthinkable” without first considering the various borders of difference and without seeking the narrative associated with one’s way of being in a specified time and place. According to Friedman, if we were to attach a global positioning device to one’s identity, we could track its movements inside, outside and in between the real or imagined boundaries of difference. Identity is ever changing, and embedded in the coordinates of each location visited during the lifetime of a human being—or by extension, to a community of beings—is a corresponding narrative and record of places previously visited. In *Mappings*, Friedman writes, “People know who they are through the stories they tell about themselves and others” (8).

As a scholar of popular culture and New Southern Studies, Tara McPherson shares Friedman’s interest in the narrative identity of a people and place over time. As she writes in the introduction to her 2003 text, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*, “The South today is as much a fiction, a story we tell and are told, as it is a fixed geographic space below the Mason-Dixon line...” (1). McPherson adopts Benedict Anderson’s concept of an imagined community and applies it to the various ways in which people have imagined the U.S. South in books, films, advertisements, and other media. To

illustrate Friedman's and McPherson's theory of a narrative identity, I examine the changing public identities of Amy Ray and Emily Saliers, better known as the Indigo Girls.

## **2.1 "I'm tryin' to tell you somethin' 'bout my life. / Maybe give me insight between black and white." – "Closer to Fine"**

In order to trace the formations and reformations through time and place, we must first visit the point of origin of the Indigo Girls' story. The beginning coordinates locate us in New Haven, Connecticut in 1963 for the birth of Emily Saliers. One of four daughters born to Jane and Don Saliers, Emily spent the first ten years of her life in New Haven, where her father attended graduate school at Yale. Saliers remembers the college town as a crucible of activism when she was a child; the Black Panther movement thrived, and students often protested the conflict in Vietnam. The Saliers family was poor and lived in government housing. Saliers, who is white, attended classes at a predominantly African-American school (Saliers DVD).

Amy Ray was born at Grady Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia in 1964. Ray self-identifies as a proud fifth generation southerner based on the fact that relatives on both sides of her family have been born and raised in southern states. She says her family instilled in her the importance of knowing her "relations" and the history of the land (Ray DVD 1). Ray's father, Larry, Sr., grew up in Lakeland, Florida, but moved to Atlanta to attend college and medical school at Emory University, which is where he met Ray's mother, Frances Ozilline Walker. After five years of living abroad as part of Dr. Ray's service in the U.S. Navy, the Ray family returned to Georgia in 1964. Like Saliers, Amy Ray is one of four children ("Larry Ray Obituary" n.p.).

Saliers and her family moved to Georgia from Connecticut in 1974, when Emily's father accepted a professorship at Emory's Candler School of Theology. Although Saliers is not a native of the South, she has lived in this region of the United States for most of her life and

identifies herself as southern (Greene 155). Ray and Saliers first met when the two were students at Laurel Ridge Elementary School in Decatur, Georgia, a suburb of Atlanta. Since Saliers is a year older than Ray, the two did not become friends until they played guitar and sang together in high school (*Uptown Lounge* DVD). Decades later, when writing about their high school music-making experiences in their *A Year a Month* blog, both women recall using fake IDs or securing parental permissions to perform cover songs as “The B Band” or “Saliers & Ray” at select Atlanta watering holes.

I suggest that this first chapter of the Indigo Girls’ story constitutes what Susan Stanford Friedman calls establishing one’s roots. Riffing on the postcolonial theories of James Clifford, Friedman uses the homonym of “routes/roots” to distinguish between two established approaches to identity formation (151). The “routes” portion of the metaphor connotes an individual or communal identity that is constantly forming and reforming through the destabilizing effects of travel. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak refers to this as being “always on the run.” She argues that people should not link their identity to an imagined or real space, commonly called “roots,” because it privileges place and blinds them to other facets of identity that can only be perceived through nomadism (Spivak 37). Friedman is not as quick to spurn the concept of roots; she tends to side with Paul Gilroy and Benedict Anderson, two critics who see value in investigating a person’s spatial origin or an imagined community in order to track identity’s movements.

Entering into the “routes/roots” debate, Tara McPherson shows that rootedness—connecting identity to a fixed space—is common in the United States. Her research in *Reconstructing Dixie* shows that few Americans leave their hometowns permanently (216).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> McPherson acknowledges in a footnote that she relied on the University of Pittsburgh study published in the *Shreveport Times* in 1991 for her research. I verified McPherson’s information by locating a brief summary of the study findings that *American Demographics* published in its July 1, 1991 issue.

Rootedness is even more prevalent in the U.S. South where most residents of Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia return to the states where they spent their childhoods in the last years of their lives and “lived an average of 90 percent of their lives within 25 miles of their final residence” (Waldrop 10). We see examples of this rootedness in the Indigo Girls when Amy Ray mentions her ancestral ties to the southern states of Florida and Georgia, and when Emily Saliers adopts the descriptor “southerner” because she has lived in Georgia since 1974. However, Friedman qualifies that identity is a negotiation between roots and routes; often individuals must leave home or experience some kind of displacement in order to adequately define what “home” means to them (Friedman 151).

Saliers became conscious of her shifting notions of identity and home after graduating from high school in 1981 and attending Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana. She poignantly describes the transformation that would take place within her each time she made the eleven-hour train ride between Atlanta and New Orleans:

I loved the rocking movement of the train, the lonesome whistle, the unknown lives and scenery whizzing by, framed by the large glass windows. It was much fodder for daydreams and song lyrics, and was a portent for the shifting, fluid connectivity and displacement of a life lived in constant motion, one I still crave, even when I am still (*A Year a Month*, E.S. 1983).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In 2013, the Indigo Girls began documenting their shared musical career, one year at a time, through a series of monthly blog posts hosted on the Tumblr platform. The blog, entitled *A Year a Month*, includes separate posts written by Amy Ray and Emily Saliers, both covering a particular year, beginning with the year 1981. Digitized mementos, including photos of the duo on tour, old concert flyers, and handwritten set lists often accompany the blog posts. The subject line of each post is often the initials of the Indigo Girl contributing the post, followed by the year about which she is writing. For example, a post that Amy Ray authored about the year 1998 is titled “A.R. 1998.” This differs from the date that the Indigo Girls publish the posts on *A Year a Month*. For the purposes of this thesis, I have cited the blog title *A Year a Month* followed by the post title, which includes the initials and year covered therein.

Writing about the experience in 2013, Saliers alludes to this first major passageway between home and college as the route where she developed her yearning for a musician's rootless existence.

Yet, Saliers had a difficult time adjusting to life away from her roots in Atlanta. She describes the two years that she spent in New Orleans as "frightening and transforming" because she was exploring new intellectual and creative pursuits while suffering from acute homesickness. Saliers worked part-time in Tulane's library and prepared for a future as an English teacher. She also devoted time to her artistry, writing songs in her dorm room and playing live shows for patrons of The Penny Post coffeehouse (*A Year a Month*, E.S. 1982).

Ray experienced similar feelings of homesickness and discontent during her freshman year at Vanderbilt University. Not only was she separated from Saliers, her musical compatriot, Ray was coming out as gay and was in a long-distance relationship with her first girlfriend who was some three hundred miles away at the University of Georgia. Although she found a welcoming environment selling records and comic books in a family-owned store in Nashville, Ray felt largely disenfranchised in the city and on campus. She later wrote that she encountered widespread homophobia and could not relate to her fellow students, which she described as "conservative young Republican kids who majored in Fraternity and Sorority life" (*A Year a Month*, A.R. 1983). Wrestling with her sexuality, confronting a new town in Tennessee, and encountering peers who exhibited opposing political and social beliefs, Ray wrote "Nashville," one of the first Indigo Girls' songs dealing with identity. In order to map Ray's identity at this pivotal stage in her life, one must analyze the song "Nashville" as literature, a narrative associated with this particular time and place. To find the critical tools needed to analyze songs, we must access the close reading techniques applied to poetry.

## 2.2 “Three hits to the heart son / And it's poetry in motion” – “Three Hits”

The practice of close reading and analyzing a poem, first made popular in 1938 with the publication of *Understanding Poetry* by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, has only recently been applied to songs. On September 15, 2003, three days after the death of country music legend Johnny Cash, U.S. Senator Lamar Alexander publicly asked why schools were not teaching the songs of Cash, a man whom the *New York Times* had eulogized as “country music’s foremost poet of the working poor” (Holden B7). Continuing his remarks on the Senate floor, Alexander lamented the fact that few colleges and universities—including Vanderbilt University, where Brooks and Warren had first studied together—were considering songs as part of their literary criticism curricula (Pence 4). Although Alexander’s speech merely echoed the thoughts of numerous other scholars throughout the years, it prompted at least one direct response from Charlotte Pence, who was then a composition and poetry instructor at Belmont College in Nashville. Pence created a course at Belmont on the poetics of country music, and eventually edited the first collection of scholarly essays on the literary criticism of song lyrics, *The Poetics of American Song Lyrics* (Pence xi).

Adam Bradley, one of the contributors to *Poetics* and a scholar of African-American literature and popular culture, explains why some critics have argued against treating songs as poetry in his 2009 text, *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop*. Bradley writes that songwriters often rely on the musical arrangement to provide rhythm for their lyrics, whereas poets build meter into their verse through the structure, punctuation, and arrangement of the words. Academia also considers popular songs less formal than poetry (Bradley xvi). Bradley counters in *Book of Rhymes* that we need only harken back to the oral tradition of lyrical poetry, revered by the ancient Greeks, to see the threads connecting literature to song. He contends that rap has a

“dual identity as word and song” because the literary form relies on a beat that is present with or without musical accompaniment, and contains a complex structure that rivals the most formal poetry (xvii).

Pence concurs, teaching that the structures of a sonnet appear in some contemporary country songs. Her research shows that a schism between poetry and songwriting occurred sometime just before or during the early sixteenth century, around the same time that the sonnet grew popular. The lack of musical accompaniment changed the subject matter of verse; sonnets began to contain more intimate expressions of the writer’s interior life. As Pence writes: “Troubadour poetry was meant as performance art, but sonnets were meant as self-reflection” (27). The sonnet’s characteristic self-reflection, still present in modern songs, often surfaces as the narrator’s explication, or puzzling something out, then concludes with a shift in thinking or behavior.

Introspection and lyrical complexity are hallmarks of the Indigo Girls’ oeuvre of original songs. Ray and Saliers have always composed their songs separately, only coming together to arrange the chords and harmonies after each partner has fully constructed the words and basic notes and rhythms. Ray and Saliers were both English majors in college and continue to be well read. Many of their literary influences inspire their songwriting, such as the Saliers-penned “Virginia Woolf” and “Three Hits,” a song that Amy Ray wrote for the poet Frank Stanford (*A Year a Month*, A.R. 1991). In a 2013 interview, Ray encouraged other musical artists to read poetry, novels, and books on the craft of writing to help develop their own “solid playbook of songs” (Phenicie n.p.). I equate Ray’s “playbook” to a book of rhymes, “the basic tool of the rapper’s craft” (Bradley xi).

In the seven years between Lamar Alexander’s speech and the editing of *Poetics*, Pence

witnessed a shift in the academy's perception of songs. She writes that songs became "worthy of critical attention" (xviii) due to the growth of the field of cultural studies and the use of the venerated method of close reading (xiii). When analyzing songs, Pence applies the questions routinely associated with close reading, such as "Who is the speaker in the song? Who is the speaker talking to in the song? Who is the audience?" (xviii). However, Pence also probes the historical and political circumstances surrounding songs and their authors, a methodology that may have dismayed New Critics like Brooks and Warren but intersects nicely with locational feminism. Friedman advocates that all disciplines examine their subject matter in relation to the "axes of difference," which she lists as gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion, and national origin in *Mappings* (Friedman 4). I follow the aforementioned hybrid methods prescribed by Pence, Bradley, and Friedman when close reading select Indigo Girls' song lyrics for this project, analyzing select songs to understand the different aspects of identity they reference and pinning them to different times and places. Since this thesis focuses on southern identity, I will examine this point of difference first.

### **2.3 "When we get a little distant some things get clearer / Yeah give em the space some hearts grow nearer" – "It's Alright"**

Now that we have a foundation for the critical reading of song lyrics, we return to Ray's song "Nashville." In a blog post about that turbulent first year of college, Ray writes that she composed "Nashville" in response to what she characterizes as the "...Old South's racism, classism, and all the negative parts of a wealthy old southern university and a conservative music city" (*A Year a Month*, A.R. 1983). Ray, the first-person narrator of the song, personifies the city and directly addresses Nashville. If we look at the song's first verse as the first stanza of a poem, we read that the 19-year-old Ray has decided to leave Nashville:

As I drive  
From your pearly gates  
I realize that I just can't stay  
All those mountains  
They kept you locked inside  
And hid the truth  
From my slighted eyes ("Nashville" n.p.).

As someone who has always been interested in music and religion, Ray explores both topics when she writes about driving away from the "pearly gates," a euphemism commonly used to describe heaven. Dubbed the "Music City" in the 1800s, Nashville beckons to artists from country and other musical genres. Ray visited Vanderbilt in the 1970s when her older sister was a student there. She described the campus as "progressive and crazy," and the city as host to a burgeoning punk scene that attracted avant-garde bands like Black Flag (Angelico n.p.). Perhaps Ray did not consider that the same hallowed ground that attracted her contemporary intellectuals and musicians had once served as headquarters for the Agrarian movement. For Vanderbilt University is where John Crowe Ransom and eleven other Southern Agrarians took their stand against industrialism and called for a return to a pre-Civil War economy and culture in 1930. Fast-forward some fifty years later and Ray discovers the other hidden truth that progressive Vanderbilt's intellectual boundaries had been infiltrated by the prevalent political climate of the early 1980s; when Ray was a college freshman, Ronald Reagan was president, and Nashville was home to a large population of conservative Republicans. Hence, in this first verse, we witness Ray experiencing this culture shock and saying that she has been slighted and locked out of a place that she mistakenly thought would be a haven for her.

In the pre-chorus verses, Ray alludes to her reluctance to leave her girlfriend when she writes of coming to Nashville with a “half-open heart” and “illusions of a brand new start” (“Nashville” n.p.). The songwriter seems to be wrestling with her decision to leave in the first iteration of the chorus, asking the city if it isn’t somehow complicit in her inability to complete her college education at Vanderbilt:

Nashville  
 Can't I carry the load  
 Is it my fault that  
 I can't reap what I sow  
 Nashville  
 Did you give me half a chance  
 With your southern style  
 And your hidden dance away  
 You dance away  
 And you dance away (“Nashville” n.p.).

The phrase “your southern style” is interesting because it implies that there are different ways of being southern. Ray, someone who has voiced strong familial and geographic ties to the U.S. South, rejects the southern style that she encountered in Nashville as a 19-year-old college student. While the first chorus ends ambiguously with the “hidden dance” imagery, Ray further explains what she means by Nashville’s southern style in the second refrain:

In Nashville  
 You forgot the human race  
 You see with half a mind

What colors hide the face  
 Nashville  
 I'd like to know your fate  
 I'd like to stay a while  
 But I've seen your lowered states today  
 I've seen 'em today  
 Honey I swear I've seen 'em today (“Nashville” n.p.).

The above indicts Nashville on counts of closed-mindedness and racism rooted in the spatial birthplace of the Agrarian movement and refracted through the prisms of time and political and social change. Ray disassociates herself and ultimately flees this presentation of southern identity, for in the final lines of the song she writes:

I'm running away I'm running away  
 I'm running I'm running  
 I'm running away (“Nashville” n.p.).

Ray repeats certain words and phrases throughout Nashville, both to drive home her points and inject movement into the song.

It may seem contradictory for Amy Ray to self-identify as a southerner, reject the “southern style” of Nashville, and ultimately return to Georgia, a state located south of Tennessee geographically. Borders, both real and imagined, and narrative come into play here. Ray and Saliers experienced discomfort when they moved away from Georgia because they had traversed the boundaries of their imagined community—a progressive, metropolitan Atlanta. They, like other members of their imagined community, had narrated a South composed of liberal, middle-class suburbanites who embrace diversity across the boundaries of gender, race,

class, and sexuality. Friedman writes that migration and change are necessary components of the “ongoing process of formation and re-formation” of identity (153). In other words, one cannot fully understand what tenets of identity she accepts or rejects until she leaves her “roots” for “routes” elsewhere. When Ray and Saliers transferred to Emory University and moved back to Atlanta in the summer of 1983, they returned to a homeplace they had reimagined as a tight-knit, diverse, progressive, and socially conscious community.

The reimagining continued when Ray and Saliers resumed playing music together and started traveling more frequently to gigs in nearby southern cities, such as Charleston, South Carolina, and to larger cities outside the region, like New York. One well-worn tour route took Ray and Saliers from Atlanta, Georgia to shows in New Orleans, Louisiana and Austin, Texas, and back. Saliers chronicles one of these trips in her song “Southland in the Springtime” (*A Year a Month*, E.S. 1988). One begins to visualize the imagined borders that Saliers was constructing around her adopted homeland of the southern United States as she began touring:

And there's something 'bout the Southland in the springtime  
 Where the waters flow with confidence and reason  
 Though I miss her when I'm gone it won't ever be too long  
 Till I'm home again to spend my favorite season  
 When God made me born a Yankee he was teasin'  
 There's no place like home and none more pleasin'  
 Than the Southland in the springtime (“Southland” n.p.).

The lyrics of “Southland in the Springtime” establish the boundaries of what McPherson refers to as “the emotional South,” a triangle of feeling southern that includes sentimentality combined with a sense of homeplace and a feminine construction of the region (216). Saliers uses the

feminine pronoun “her” when referring to the South in the third line of the chorus and appropriates a Civil War, North/South metonym when she refers to herself as a “Yankee.” When Saliers writes and sings of her sentimental feelings about traveling and love for her homeplace, she is constructing her own emotional South. McPherson says that going home for southerners is not just a return to a physical space or geography; homecoming is reclaiming “a sense of region and regional difference, of ways of feeling southern” (216).

This longing for home—as both a feeling and landscape—is also evident in an interview that the Indigo Girls gave in 1990 for their *Live at the Uptown Lounge* video. In the interview, Ray and Saliers have just returned to Georgia after six months of touring and opening for popular music acts such as Neil Young and R.E.M. in large stadiums and arenas. Ray says:

We did a lot of big cities, so at the end it kinda got like New York and D.C.—just like cities. You know what I mean? I got really homesick just for like grass and trees and things (*Uptown Lounge* DVD).

However, this construction of feeling southern is a risky proposition. McPherson voices her ambivalence about an emotional South when she quotes Lillian Smith and asserts that “guilt is a particularly southern crop” that white southern culture has cultivated to manage or divert attention away from negative incidents in the region’s past (214).<sup>3</sup> McPherson theorizes that southerners have been culturally trained to respond nostalgically to certain cues, such as the beautiful landscape and mild climate present in the U.S. South. She analyzes various examples of southern culture to locate instances of southerners deploying emotion differently—to acknowledge and to accept rather than to ignore the region’s warts. However, it’s not clear in “Southland in the Springtime,” nor in the fledgling Indigo Girls narrative, that Saliers and Ray

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<sup>3</sup> The Lillian Smith quote, which appears as an epigraph to chapter four of McPherson’s text, reads, “Guilt...is...the biggest crop raised in Dixie” (McPherson 205). The quote appears in Smith’s essay collection *Killers of the Dream*.

were yet prepared to do the emotional work that they accomplish later in their careers. As an example, in 1985, leading up to a high profile show at an Atlanta club called The Moonshadow Saloon, Ray decided that the duo needed a more professional band name and consulted a dictionary for inspiration. Drawn to the word “indigo” because of its aural properties and the deep blue that it represented, Ray suggested the name to Saliers, who added “girls” because of the alliterative quality of the word pairing. Thus, Ray and Saliers began performing together under their new identity of the Indigo Girls (*A Year a Month*, A.R. 1985).

Almost thirty years later, Ray seems self-conscious as she answers the oft-asked question, “What is the story behind the name Indigo Girls?” during a 2013 *WoodSongs Old Time Radio Hour* interview. She laughs a little nervously in the video recording as she explains that indigo “is a lot of things” that never came up during the naming process and advises other groups to be careful when selecting their names “because once it’s [the name’s] yours, it’s yours” (*WoodSongs* n.p.). Ray writes in *A Year a Month* that she and Saliers did not consider the indigo crop’s troubled history as a product of southern slavery when brainstorming a band name. Indigo was a highly prized source of blue dye that southern planters harvested to supplement their booming rice and timber exports. However, exposure to the different processes used to create the indigo dye significantly shortened life spans of the enslaved people who worked with indigo (“Indigo” n.p.). While she may have been peripherally aware of the indigo plant’s dark history in 1985, Ray admits she did not have the “historical or moral maturity” back then to attach any deeper significance to the band name, nor did she foresee the Indigo Girls’ longevity (*A Year a Month*, A.R. 1985).

Ray and Saliers may not have envisioned a long career together as the Indigo Girls in the mid-1980s, but they did take the first steps to a future in music. They completed their

undergraduate studies at Emory and decided that instead of applying to graduate school and pursuing teaching careers, they would focus on becoming professional musicians. In 1987, they independently released their first full-length album, *Strange Fire*. The Indigo Girls promoted the album to college radio stations and toured extensively along the East Coast. In July 1988, four days after performing a landmark set at New York City's famous Club CBGB, the Indigo Girls signed with a major label, Epic Records (*Watershed* DVD).

After the release of their self-titled LP in 1989, the Indigo Girls found a global audience and radio airplay with the single "Closer to Fine." The debut album quickly went gold (sold more than 500,000 copies), and the Indigo Girls picked up their first Grammy Award<sup>®</sup> in the Best Contemporary Folk Recording category (*1999 Website Bio* n.p.).<sup>4</sup> However, commercial success invited intense media scrutiny. On their first European tour, Ray and Saliers fought with members of the foreign press who confronted them with preconceived notions of their identity not just as Americans, but also as southerners.

Initially excited to answer questions about their identity as popular musicians, the Indigo Girls were surprised when they found themselves instead debating reporters on larger issues like religion and racism in the U.S. South. "In England, every interview lasted 30 minutes longer than it was supposed to, because we'd get into a big fight with the journalists," Ray laments in a 1989 interview with the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* (Murray B1). When later asked to identify the first time they fully adopted the label of "southerner," Ray and Saliers both pointed to these initial confrontations with the foreign press over race and race relations (Greene 166). Given that this tour marked the first time that Ray had traveled to a different continent and the first time that

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<sup>4</sup> The Indigo Girls were also nominated for the Best New Artist Grammy in 1990. They lost to Milli Vanilli, a duo that later had the title stripped from them after they admitted to lip-syncing their songs. Neither the Indigo Girls nor any of the other nominees received the award after the Milli Vanilli controversy. For more, see Stephen Holden's article in the *New York Times* "Winner of Grammy Lost By Milli Vanilli: No One."

the Indigo Girls had interacted with reporters in a significant way, they were forced to contemplate and defend their status as members of mostly privileged classes in terms of their race, ethnicity, national origin, and income. This experience epitomizes what Friedman calls feminism's discourse of positionality. The discourse of positionality explains that different situations dictate whether an individual is in a position of privilege or powerlessness, of othering or being othered. This theory does not contradict locational feminism's main principle that identity is multiplex, but recognizes that one or more differences increase in significance in different times and places, muting other features of identity (Friedman 23). In this case, the Indigo Girls were disheartened when their national origin and race played a more prominent role in their identity than their musicianship.

Ray and Saliers continued to grapple with their sense of southern identity in later works. The politically conservative landscape that Ray rejected and ran away from when she entered her 20s would present itself again as she entered her 30s and moved from Atlanta to a secluded area outside Dahlonega, Georgia. This new setting was the backdrop for one of the more overt lyrical examinations of southern identity, 2002's "Become You." The speaker, or "I" in "Become You," is Ray. The "you" in the song is one of Ray's rural North Georgia neighbors who still binds his southern identity to the values of the Confederate States of America. Ray alludes to the American Civil War in the first verse when she writes "I heard you sing a rebel song;" the metonym "rebel" tells us that the neighbor whom Ray is addressing is sympathetic to the rebels who fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War. The next verse "Sung it loud and all alone" tells us that Ray refused to join the neighbor in his support, and perhaps, that she considers the rebel sympathizer to be in the minority in his performance of rebel loyalty. Ray continues to tell her neighbor that "we"—she and her neighbor, but also other southerners and society as a

whole—can no longer afford antebellum values that have cost their shared homeplace much in the way of reputation, economy, and human life. Here’s a closer look at the first verse of “Become You”:

I heard you sing a rebel song,  
 sung it loud and all alone.  
 We can't afford the things you save,  
 we can't afford the warranty.  
 I see you walking in the glare  
 down the county road we share.  
 Our southern blood, my heresy,  
 damn that ol' confederacy (“Become You” n.p.).

If we analyze Ray’s first verse as the first stanza of a poem, we see that she uses the first couplet to acknowledge what differentiates her from the rural neighbor. In the next couplet, Ray speaks of the things they have in common: the same county road and southern heritage. Then Ray pivots to the role of the other—a lesbian, a heretic—when positioned in a rural southern community or seen through her neighbor’s eyes. She relishes the role of the outcast if it means that she rejects Confederate values.

The language becomes more ambiguous when we arrive at the chorus of “Become You”:

It took a long time to  
 become the thing I am to you.  
 And you won't tear it apart  
 without a fight, without a heart.  
 It took a long time to

become you, become you (“Become You” n.p.).

The speaker is still Ray using the first person “I,” but the second person “you” seems harder to define. Is Ray still engaged in dialogue with her rural neighbor, the rebel sympathizer? And what is the “thing” that took a long time for her to become? Does she mean that it has taken a long time for her to become an outspoken critic of Confederate values or a lesbian in the South? This option makes the least sense given Ray’s long history of activism and support for inclusivity and human rights. Does Ray mean that it has taken a long time to be considered a neighbor to her rural listener despite their differences? Perhaps. Does Ray mean that it has taken a long time for her to accept her southern identity? This is the best explanation of the “thing;” it has taken Ray time to both appreciate her heritage while rejecting the tenets of the Civil War- and Jim Crow-era South. It has taken her a long time to cobble together her own definition of southern identity.

When Ray says “become you” the first time, she is directly addressing her neighbor and telling him, “I am just like you, and I want you to see me as a human being and proud southerner even though we have fundamentally opposing views of our homeplace.” However, the second time that Ray sings “become you” in the chorus, she is addressing *her* South—what she perceives as the positive attributes of the region while condemning the antiquated and negative aspects of the South’s racist past. Ray wrote “Become You” after engaging a neighbor in a dialogue about his concept of southern identity. This conversation again made Ray question the boundaries of her southern identity:

I have deep roots in the South and I love my heritage. I feel connected to the ground where I live more than any other place I put my feet. The complexities are plentiful and dark, but also redemptive and beautiful. In my rural hometown I’ve learned a lot from my neighbors; there’s a lot to be gained from dialogue. It’s

given me more compassion, but also more energy to fight for equality and Reconciliation (*Dream* CD liner notes 27).

Friedman maintains that understanding these narrative poetics is essential to mapping an individual's or culture's character since identity is an act of constant becoming as opposed to a fixed point in time or space. She says that identity is first constructed as the stories that individuals and their communities tell about themselves. Second, the production of identity constitutes its own cultural narrative, and finally, power struggles—hegemony, resistance, and desire—weave into the collective stories. None of these narratives of identity is possible without some sort of intercultural encounter, just as the Indigo Girls engaging with members of the foreign press or Ray dialoging with her rural neighbor. These intercultural encounters continually construct roots and routes of the identity discourse (Friedman 153).

McPherson argues that the “past is a fluid term in Southern consciousness, almost always seeing into and shaping the present” (32). Friedman uses Homi Bhabha's concept of “beyond” to outline a terrain that incorporates the past while acknowledging that identity is always in flux (Friedman 10). McPherson writes that southerners must implement emotion and affect to conceptualize and reconceptualize a heterogeneous southern identity that moves beyond any imagined political or cultural center (31). Ray adopts emotion and affect when challenging other inglorious aspects of the South's past in her song “Salty South.” She wrote the song in response to her reading of the 1991 historical novel *Killing Mister Watson* by Peter Matthiesen (*Dream* CD liner notes 17). Matthiesen reimagines the life of a little-known Florida “entrepreneur and outlaw,” Edgar J. Watson, who haunted the Everglades at the turn of the nineteenth century (Matthiesen paperback jacket copy). The “Mister” that Ray addresses in the first verse of “Salty South” is presumably E. J. Watson, the book's protagonist, but she could just as easily be talking

to her father or another member of his family who lived in Florida. She directs the listener to tell her the untold stories of Florida's history:

Mister, pull up a chair, I got time for tears  
 So tell me all the stories that you never did  
 Of the Salty South, the Seminoles held out  
 While Geronimo died in a lonely jail (“Salty South” n.p.).

Ray alerts the listener that she is prepared to deal with the emotional aspects associated with the untold stories about the indigenous people who were killed or forced to leave their homeland during Indian removal.<sup>5</sup> Ray admits in one of the “Salty South’s” final verses that she only has framed photos of sunsets, beautiful pictures that are completely devoid of the pain of the South’s numerous ugly histories:

I remember the wind  
 As it was settlin'  
 And every sun goin' down was a picture then  
 But we look back at 'em framed  
 They all look the same  
 There's no sense of time, no sense of pain (“Salty South” n.p.).

Ray as the songwriter understands that the only way to remove the blockage caused by white privilege and white guilt is through narrative, through listening and processing the shame and anger associated with these true tales of injustice. McPherson quotes from Lillian Smith’s “The Role of the Poet in a World of Demagogues” to describe this process as letting “the poet battle the demagogue over the soul of the South” (232). This is a battle that the Indigo Girls have been

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<sup>5</sup> The mention of the Seminoles refers to President Andrew Jackson and the federal government’s attempts to dislodge about 5,000 Seminoles from Florida in the first half of the nineteenth century. See James W. Covington’s *The Seminoles of Florida*.

waging not only by imagining and reimagining their homeplace in the U.S. South, or by writing songs about their ways of feeling southern, but also through their activism and performances.

### 3 “GET OUT THE MAP”

In a 2007 article for *Southern Quarterly*, political science scholar Kate Greene classifies the Indigo Girls as “misfits” (159). She appropriates the term from a taxonomy of southern identity established in the research of sociologists John Shelton Reed and Larry J. Griffin.<sup>6</sup> From their social psychological perspective, being southern is an individual choice dependent upon each person’s understanding of a collective definition of southern identity, which is often policed by shifting laws, images, or societal structures. Whether or not someone chooses to self-identify as southern is based on that person’s “biography, perception of the region and its inhabitants, and social interactions” (Griffin 8). As Greene interprets this research, the Indigo Girls qualify as “misfits” because they identify themselves as southern, while acknowledging certain stereotypes associated with the region, and deviating from those stereotypes. If we apply Greene’s logic to the biographical information and close reading of select Indigo Girls’ song lyrics found in thus far this project, we might agree that the Indigo Girls are “misfits.” However, as we also know from the first chapter, the identity of an individual or community changes through space and time, problematizing any tidy classification of the South or its people. In addition, Greene’s characterization of Ray and Saliers as “misfits” relies on outdated research and an antiquated methodology that do not consider the heterogeneous, evolving nature of the U.S. South or its people.

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<sup>6</sup> Greene uses the framework of southern identity found in Larry J. Griffin’s 2006 article in *Southern Cultures*, “The American South and the Self,” which expounds on and updates the research of John Shelton Reed. The categories of southerners, including the “misfits” label that Greene applies to the Indigo Girls, can be found in Reed’s 1983 text *Southerners: The Social Psychology of Sectionalism*. Also worth noting is Reed’s most famous quote. While giving color commentary at the 1996 Summer Olympics, Reed said, “Every time I look at Atlanta I see what a quarter of a million Confederate soldiers died to prevent.”

### 3.1 **“But my life is more than a vision / The sweetest part is acting after making a decision” – “Hammer and a Nail”**

Defining the collective identity of a region is integral to a social psychological system of cataloguing the individual identities within that region. Griffin makes this sound like a simple proposition when he writes: “Each region of the United States has a particular identity hewn from history and culture” (7). In order for this argument to work, though, one must assume that regions are homogeneous and amenable to one overarching version of history and culture. To the contrary, one of the difficulties of outlining a singular regional identity, and southern identity in particular, is that few people can agree on what qualifies as “the South” or what it means to be “southern.”

In *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity*, James C. Cobb writes that the southern region of the United States has historically been defined by its exceptionalism, or opposition to the rest of the United States, which is often referred to erroneously as “the North” (2). He references David Jansson’s model of “internal orientalism” to describe the binary relationship between the South and the rest of the United States, just as Said’s orientalism established the theoretical Orient/West binary (Cobb 3). Cobb argues that this oppositional North/South relationship began at least a hundred years before the American Civil War, just prior to the United States declaring its independence from England. A number of factors differentiated the southern colonies of Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia, from their New England and middle colony counterparts. The South was home to a widely dispersed, rural population, with poor transportation systems. The southern colonies established a plantation-based economy dependent on enslaved labor, which clashed with the new nation’s Enlightenment ideals of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Finally, the South had few

educational or journalistic institutions while New England became the epicenter of American learning and publishing (Cobb 3). All of these factors situated the South opposite the rest of the United States; in fact, the South resembled the Caribbean more in terms of culture and climate, and since many prolific U.S. writers and ethnographers of the time never traveled to the South, the region often became known as the “Extended Caribbean” or “American tropics” (Cobb 12).

Regional differences became more pronounced as the new nation matured and residents of the U.S. South realized that their culture had become the focal point of “northern,” nee American, derision. As Cobb writes:

Aware of their exclusion from the northernized vision of American identity, but unwilling to abandon slavery and the culture and lifestyle it sustained, white southerners would only grow progressively more defensive and hostile. Turning inward upon themselves, they would withdraw into the same idyllic “dream world” of the southern plantation fantasy[...](33).

As exclusion morphed into exceptionalism, a dichotomy of North and South evolved—Puritan Roundheads versus Royalist Cavaliers; democracy versus aristocracy; industrialism vs. agrarianism; Republican versus Democrat; and so forth. The problem with this discourse of southern exceptionalism and the North/South binary is that, like much of history, it only recounts the narrative of white men. This fatal flaw repeats in John Shelton Reed’s 1971 survey; this source of the label “misfits” later used by Griffin and eventually Greene when referring to the *Indigo Girls* focuses solely on white North Carolinians (Griffin 8). While Griffin, and Greene after him, acknowledge that “those who identify as Southern are not just white, Protestant, conservative men,” their interpretation of the data collected in the 1991-2001 Southern Focus Polls remains fairly silent on aspects of identity outside of race and the number of years a person

has lived in the southern United States (Greene 156). For example, Griffin notes that while African Americans were a little less likely to view the South and its inhabitants positively, the differences between black southerners and white southerners polled were “generally small” and make “suspect any statement about Dixie as a ‘whites-only’ culture today” (16). He admits in a footnote to this statement that black and white respondents “differ substantially” when it comes to the meaning of certain southern symbols, such as the Confederate battle flag, and “do not share the same collective memories of American and southern history” (Griffin 27). Griffin’s article ignores any data that may have been collected on gender, sexuality, education, population density, or economic status, opting instead to support Reed’s methodology with secondary ascriptions such as friendliness, religiosity, and southern accent (Griffin 8).

In her article, Greene mentions other categories of difference and allows that being southern is just one identity among many different identities that the Indigo Girls embrace. She invokes feminist Audre Lorde before labeling the Indigo Girls “southern environmentalist socialist feminist lesbian folk rockers” and states that all the descriptors after “southern” are what qualify Ray and Saliers as “misfits” (Greene 159). This is Greene’s strongest argument in the article for the “misfits” label. Friedman also references Lorde and her generation’s discussion of identity in *Mappings*. Prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s, the feminist discourse of multiple oppressions or “double jeopardy” allowed that women could simultaneously suffer discrimination not only due to their gender, but also to their race, sexuality, or any number of other presentations of identity (Friedman 20). Friedman rejects the notion of multiple identities, opting instead to call these multiple oppressions “axes of difference.” Still, Greene persists in borrowing a flawed collective identity of the U.S. South as male, white, middle-class, heterosexual, Protestant, rural, and politically conservative. This definition does not accurately

reflect the South that Ray and Saliers claim. In fact, I contend that the Indigo Girls readily identify as southern because they have experienced and perceived the region to be more than a homogeneous, one-size-fits-all space. To arrive at the same conclusion, Greene need only take a closer look at Atlanta's geopolitical history to understand that rather than being "misfits," the Indigo Girls and their music reflect a dynamic, heterogeneous South produced in the borderlands of a major metropolitan city.

Borrowing the title from Gloria Anzaldúa's book *Borderlands*, Friedman defines a borderland as a site where different cultures blend and clash, producing a hybrid identity. This rhetoric of hybridity, Friedman says, emerges from the "cultural grafting" that occurs when people from different societies and backgrounds migrate from one space and coexist in a new space (24). The term "borderland" certainly applies to the diverse suburbs and neighborhoods of Atlanta where the Indigo Girls grew up and played music together.

Decatur, Georgia, is home to Emory University, an internationally renowned institution of higher education that attracts students and faculty from around the world. As mentioned in the first section, Saliers and her family migrated to Decatur in 1974 when her father accepted a teaching position at Emory. Don Saliers is an ordained Methodist minister who exposed his family to various educational and religious encounters. Emily Saliers remembers her father bringing home seminary students from foreign countries every Sunday after church. Over Sunday dinner, the Saliers family debated religion and questioned their guests about other countries' spiritual and political beliefs (Saliers DVD). Ray also spent her formative years in Decatur and joined many of her family members among the ranks of Emory University alumni.

If we travel west from Decatur, closer to the downtown area of Atlanta, we find the Little Five Points community, a revitalized business district located inside the city of Atlanta. Before

signing with Epic Records in 1988, the Indigo Girls performed several nights a week at the Little Five Points Community Pub. For Ray, the Little Five Points of the 1980s was a “very bohemian area in Atlanta” that was home to “the hippies and the punks and the queers and the drag queens and drag kings and old married couples and families” (*Talk of the Nation* n.p.). She and Saliers were also aware of the neighborhood’s recent history as a hub of lesbian-feminist political activity.

In 1961, with the desegregation of Atlanta city schools and neighborhoods and the American Civil Rights Movement well underway, then Mayor William Hartsfield dubbed Atlanta “the City Too Busy to Hate.” These sweeping changes were not without repercussions (Kruse 3). As greater numbers of black families bought homes in traditionally white neighborhoods, white families moved to the suburbs just outside Atlanta. The “white flight” phenomenon of the 1960s left Little Five Points and other urban areas open to gays, lesbians, and other marginalized members of society who saw possibility and hope in the nonviolent protests and civil rights victories for African Americans.<sup>7</sup> Little Five Points attracted large numbers of “primarily young, white, middle-class lesbians” who were in Atlanta to attend college, usually at Emory or Georgia State University. In a footnote to their article on *Southern Spaces*, Chesnut and her co-authors acknowledge that a few women of color or from working-class backgrounds belonged to the Little Five Points community during the 1970s. However, the majority were middle-class white women whose families could afford to send them to college. The footnote refers readers to Lillian Faderman’s 1991 text *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*. Faderman explains

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<sup>7</sup> In a footnote to their article on *Southern Spaces*, Chesnut, et. al. reference Tina McElroy’s article “Reborn: Shops and Businesses Popping Up” published in the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* on August 23, 1978. This brief article describes the transition that took place in the Little Five Points neighborhood in the 1970s and points to “the city’s growth and suburban flight” as well as the “razing” of a number of houses “to prepare for expressways” as the causes of this transition. To learn more about Atlanta’s “white flight” and suburban growth, see books by Kruse and Rutheiser.

in *Odd Girls* that it wasn't until the late twentieth century that educational and professional opportunities opened up in a significant way for women. Even then, working-class women and women of color often were not financially able to support themselves without marrying a man, and it was taboo for female members of the upper class to attend college with a goal of working outside the home. Therefore, middle-class white women made up the majority of the first communities of out lesbians (Faderman 12). These young women lived in gay, female-only communes and supported feminist political causes, first organizing under the auspices of Atlanta's Gay Liberation Front (GLF) in 1971 (Chesnut n.p.).

Feeling like the agenda of the gay men of GLF was overshadowing their movement, a breakout group of women established the Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance (ALFA) in 1972.<sup>8</sup> ALFA functioned "as both an activist group and a 'safe group space' for Atlanta's lesbian community" (McPherson 197). With its headquarters in a house in Little Five Points, ALFA welcomed lesbians not just from other parts of Atlanta but also from other areas of the country (Chesnut n.p.), effectively making Little Five Points "a kind of southern 'lesbian Mecca'" (McPherson 198). In the decade following the emergence of this other-friendly space, Ray and Saliers—two upper middle-class white alumna of Emory—were performing three nights a week at the Little Five Points Community Pub. This is not the South that Greene defines as white, male, conservative and Protestant (159). To be clear, I am not arguing that the stereotypical profile of southern identity that Greene describes doesn't exist; rather, I am arguing that it coexists with many other variations of people and places in this region of the United States.

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<sup>8</sup> McPherson identifies this group as the Atlanta Feminist Lesbian Alliance (AFLA) in *Reconstructing Dixie*. Using the Duke and Emory University Library websites, I confirmed that the correct name of the organization was the Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance (ALFA). After ALFA disbanded in 1994, the bulk of ALFA's newsletters, periodicals, documents, and feminist texts were donated to collections at Duke and Emory.

### 3.2 “So what is love then, is it dictated or chosen / Does it sing like the hymns of 1000 years, or is it just pop emotion” – “Mystery”

Riper for analysis in the Southern Focus Polls would have been data on whether the respondents who self-identified as southern lived in small towns or in large cities. I argue that some of the most significant boundaries of difference in the U.S. South are the real and imagined borders between rural and urban areas. Without the benefit of the aforementioned demographic breakdown, I rely on narrative—the guidepost that Friedman and McPherson both submit as essential to mapping identity’s changes through time and space—to bridge the divide between a monolithic view of regional identity and an equally flawed idea that the entire southern landscape is comprised of welcoming villages for members of the LGBTQIA community.

A collection of narratives entitled *Out in the South* relates the personal experiences of gay and lesbian artists who identify themselves as southerners or who are natives of the U.S. South. Like Friedman, the editors posit that identity is complex and ever changing. In her introduction to the 2001 text, Carolyn Leste Law writes that many gay and lesbian natives feel compelled to leave the South in order to explore openly their sexual identity, which has created a “queer diaspora” over the years (Law 4). The individual stories from *Out in the South* often confirm both Friedman’s and McPherson’s theories that individuals form a better understanding of their regional identity when they leave the region or interact more frequently with people from other cultures. As Donna Smith writes in her contribution to the volume:

In 1982, I moved to San Francisco to become gay, and there I found out that I was southern. Of course, this story is not literally true, but it does reflect an emotional truth, for it was not until this move to San Francisco that I felt gay and southern; it was there that I began to experience a gap between where I was from and who I

was becoming—a gap that gave new meaning and self-consciousness to both identities (Dews 127).

Indeed, many writers in the collection say they sought refuge in larger cities, whether those cities were in other areas of the United States or still within the geography of the U.S. South. When asked to reflect on their own coming out stories, Ray and Saliers both acknowledge that growing up in a major metropolitan area with so many examples of difference made it somewhat easier for them to identify as gay. Saliers says it was difficult when she was in high school to understand what she was feeling because no gay student alliance or “vocabulary for gayness” was available to her (Saliers DVD). Ray says it has been hard for some members of her family, whom she has described as “very conservative in some ways and different from me” (Ray DVD 1) to accept her sexual identity, although her two older sisters are also gay (Dyer n.p.). The Indigo Girls, who have never been romantically involved with each other, came to terms with their sexual identities separately, in their college years, and found community in an audience of mostly lesbian friends and fans.

Their fan base grew even larger in the early 1990s when the Indigo Girls joined other mainstream women artists like k. d. lang and Melissa Etheridge in openly admitting that they were gay. In 1993, Ray and Saliers performed at the Gay Pride March on Washington in front of an audience of a million people, including one of Ray’s older sisters and her partner (*A Year a Month*, A.R. 1993). Ray wanted to be out, but Saliers worried initially about the career consequences of going public with their sexuality in a male-dominated, heteronormative music industry (Carson 35). The Indigo Girls’ earlier songs never declare or draw attention to their sexual orientation, remaining purposely ambiguous when touching on topics of love and relationships. One example is the Saliers-penned song “Power of Two,” which features the verse:

You know the things that I am afraid of  
 I'm not afraid to tell  
 And if we ever leave a legacy  
 It's that we loved each other well ("Power of Two" n.p.).

While the lyrics from "Power of Two" are sometimes ambiguous, the corresponding 1995 video for the song is anything but. The music video features a number of same-sex couples in sepia-toned, snapshot poses of love and devotion, as the Indigo Girls sing, "I took us for better and I took us for worse / Don't you ever forget it" (*Watershed* DVD). That same year, "Power of Two" was included on the all-female soundtrack for the motion picture *Boys on the Side*, which featured a lesbian relationship between two of the main characters (Schillinger n.p.).<sup>9</sup> "Power of Two" has become an anthem for same-sex marriage, even inspiring the 2009 Broadway production *Power of Two*, which featured original musical numbers about gay coupling (Holden C5).

The first time the duo included lyrics that spoke overtly about their sexuality was in the second verse of "It's Alright," a song on the 1997 CD *Shaming of the Sun*:

And it's alright if you hate that way,  
 Hate me 'cause I'm different,  
 Hate me 'cause I'm gay.  
 Truth of the matter come around one day  
 It's alright ("It's Alright" n.p.).

"It's Alright" responds to critics and communicates that the Indigo Girls were becoming more comfortable in their musical careers and as well-known icons of the gay rights movement. Ray says that a small, self-funded tour to support careers in the arts turned into a "galvanizing

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<sup>9</sup> The Indigo Girls make cameo appearances in *Boys on the Side*.

moment” in the Indigo Girls’ identification as out lesbians (*A Year a Month*, A.R. 1998). When administrators canceled the Indigo Girls’ appearances in several southern high schools, due to what Ray characterizes as homophobia, a number of students and parents staged walkouts in protest. In response to the protests, the Indigo Girls scheduled shows targeting fans of all ages in two of the cities where their supporters walked out and were often suspended from school—Knoxville, Tennessee, and Columbia, South Carolina. Students attended the concerts for free. Ray, a staunch defender of her ever-changing homeplace, in retrospect, writes, “It was pretty brave for kids to do this in 1998 in the South” (*A Year a Month*, A.R. 1998).

In addition to their sexuality, another facet of identity that has drawn protests and earned the Indigo Girls the label of “misfits” in Greene’s scholarship is Ray and Saliers’s mutable religiosity. Again, Greene’s argument is weakened when you separate the religious makeup of the metropolitan area of Atlanta from the rest of the region’s largely Protestant constituency. Nor does Green’s argument account for the ways in which identity changes over the course of one’s life. As an example, Ray and Saliers both grew up in Methodist families. Ray was very active in her church’s youth group and decided to make her home in the North Georgia Mountains as an adult because it was close to Camp Glisson, a Methodist church camp where Ray fondly recalls spending many summers (Dyer n.p.).

As mentioned before, Saliers’s father Don is an ordained Methodist minister and theologian. Though raised in a religious family, Saliers says she has struggled with organized religion in her lifetime because it has often been a source of pain and exile for lesbians and gays. While she does not subscribe to all the tenets of Christianity, Saliers says she does believe in a higher power that she refers to as “God.” Her songs contain many religious allusions (Saliers DVD). In 2005, Saliers co-authored a book with her father entitled *A Song to Sing, a Life to Live:*

*Reflections on Music as Spiritual Practice*. Saliers and her father write about the intersection of music and faith and equate studying music over a period of time to living in a certain part of the country for a time: “For the two of us—and for many others—music has been crucial to finding personal identity and discovering communities to which we belong” (*A Song to Sing* 75-76). The father and daughter duo encountered resistance when they toured to promote their book in 2006. A conservative faction of the United Methodist Women’s Assembly protested in advance of the Saliers’ performance at the group’s annual conference, saying it was wrong for a Christian organization to present a platform to an “outspoken lesbian activist” (*Christian Century* 18). Don and Emily Saliers went forward with their planned appearance, interspersing stories about faith with music from different genres. However, this was just one of many performances that would be disrupted by the Indigo Girls’ status as political activists, arguably one of the most problematic aspects of their ever-changing southern identities.

#### 4 “DESPITE OUR DIFFERENCES”

In the music video for their 1992 song “Galileo,” the Indigo Girls perform identities that are way off the map of the thoughtful, serious, and outspoken terrain they often travel. On screen, Ray’s head and shoulders rest atop a black and white, bathing suit-clad torso and legs, while the words, “I was gorgeous and mindless once; it was fun” are superimposed on the screen. Later in the same video, Saliers “confesses” via another on-screen textual message that she was timid and subservient at one time, but this behavior didn’t take her far. To illustrate her point, Saliers shuffles back and forth in a confined space, simultaneously bowing her head and steeping her hands while dressed in a pink silk kimono and black geisha wig. These statements and images greatly conflict with how Ray and Saliers have most often portrayed themselves in the thirty years that they have been performing together as the Indigo Girls. In the video, Ray and Saliers finally appear out of costume, side by side, smiling and lip-syncing the words to “Galileo.” This transition from the over-the-top costumes to Ray and Saliers in plainclothes, singing and strumming their guitars, clues in the audience to the song’s irreverent nature (*Watershed* DVD). “Galileo” is a lighthearted approach to the serious topic of reincarnation, questioning as renowned astronomer and physicist Galileo might have whether or not the residue of past lives affects how human beings act in their current incarnations. The song’s writer and lead singer Saliers repeatedly questions in the chorus, “How long till my soul gets it right?” and tries to locate the origin of her present fears and current iteration of self (“Galileo” n.p.).

Judith Butler might respond to the song by saying, as she does in her seminal work *Gender Trouble*, that no true origin of identity exists; rather, individuals perform gender and other aspects of identity through a repetition of culturally inscribed acts (143). I argue that the “Galileo” music video is a significant narrative marker in the Indigo Girls’ evolving story of

identity because it gives viewers purview into the musicians' questioning of who they are at a specific moment in time. In 1992, Ray and Saliers were twenty-eight and twenty-nine years old respectively, but in terms of being public figures recognized by a global audience, the Indigo Girls were just toddlers. Their musical career was still young and largely dictated by their record label Epic Records. In the "Galileo" music video, we witness the Indigo Girls cross-dressing, playing both male and female characters from different time periods and different geographies. The cross-dressing on another concept from Butler, the use of drag to subvert gender, or more precisely, to eliminate any naturalized view of identity. To conclude that Ray is dressing in drag in the "Galileo" video when she adheres a fake mustache or beard to her face and wears a three-piece suit and hat is to assume that she is a woman when she is out of costume. The performance or ruse, if you will, is the thing that shows us how unnatural and constructed identity truly is (Butler xxiv). From a feminist perspective, one can and should criticize the Indigo Girls (and the team that collaborated with them on the "Galileo" music video) for their choice to portray certain caricatures of difference, which perpetuates stereotypes and othering. However, to focus solely on that appropriation is to miss altogether the message that the Indigo Girls are sending: making assumptions about a person's identity solely based on how they dress or how they act is problematic. As the Indigo Girls lyrically wonder what makes a person act a certain way in the song "Galileo," they are trying on different identities through costume play in the video, teasing out the "false" narratives.

The costume play and parody in the "Galileo" music video provide a powerful metanarrative into the lives of the Indigo Girls in 1992. Ray and Saliers were still trying to adapt to the new facets of their identity as successful, famous women musicians. The lyrics of the song even respond satirically to their nascent (in 1992) identity as somber folk-rock singers and

activists when Saliers writes, “I’m not making a joke / You know me, I take everything so seriously” (“Galileo” n.p.). As they toured other parts of the world and encountered other cultures, the Indigo Girls also experimented with new conceptions of themselves as global citizens who were also proud of their southern roots. In the “Galileo” music video, Saliers wears an Atlanta Braves baseball jersey and hat, an obvious nod to the Indigo Girls’ Atlanta roots. In *Mappings*, feminist critic Friedman incorporates Butler’s disruption of sex/gender fixities but moves beyond gender and sexuality to explore other facets of identity (77). Friedman writes that identity is “always already a heterogeneous mixture produced in the borderlands or interstices between difference” (24). If McPherson were to apply Friedman and Butler to southern identity in particular, she would agree that identity is constantly being constructed and reconstructed. However, she says there is a tendency in the field of New Southern Studies to fix or freeze southern culture. The risk inherent in this cultural pause, according to McPherson, is that we “boutique” the South; we exalt the region’s unique or quaint elements, such as southern accents or southern hospitality, while ignoring its history of slavery and racial injustice, freezing the U.S. South at its most stereotypical moments and setting impermeable boundaries (McPherson 9). Greene and her sociologist predecessors Reed and Griffin say that “misfit southerners” are aware of the negative stereotypes associated with the region they call home, but choose to emphasize the South’s positive qualities and downplay any negative attributes (Greene 156). In this chapter, I explore the ways in which the Indigo Girls have performed different aspects of their identity at different times in their lives, both through their musical performances and through their activism on behalf of a multitude of political and social causes. These performances ultimately roll up into a greater archive of southern history, further tracking the shifting boundaries of the U.S. South and its people.

#### 4.1 “He graded my performance / He said he could see through me” – “Closer to Fine”

If we return to Butler’s views on gender, one of Friedman’s axes of difference, then we can closely examine the distinction between performativity and performance of identity. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir famously writes, “One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one” (Beauvoir 301). Butler agrees with Beauvoir and other feminists that gender is not essential, but is produced and reproduced through the stylization of our bodies, a series of internal responses that anticipate external social expectations of how one should behave as male or female (Butler xv). But Butler broadens the discussion beyond masculine and feminine constructs to explore sexuality. How do non-normative sexual practices call into question the stability of gender as a category of analysis? Ray and Saliers both identify as lesbians and feminists, but Ray has wrestled with gender identity throughout her lifetime. Ray says she enjoyed a “free and genderless” childhood where she felt free to explore her interests in science, nature, animals, and music, but as she matured, her notions of being did not match her family or society’s ideas of how a girl should dress and act (Ray DVD 1).

Just as she explored her southern identity in the song lyrics of “Become You,” Ray has explored the gendered aspect of her identity through her music, mostly in songs she produced as a solo artist for her independent label Daemon Records. Ray founded the not-for-profit label Daemon Records in 1990 in part to support other musical acts that she liked, but also to build a platform for her punk, rock, and country solo experiments outside of the Indigo Girls. *Stag*, Ray’s first solo album, includes several songs that confront the singer-songwriter’s “frustrations with imposed standards of gender all around us” (“*Stag Details*” n.p.). The 1998 murder of gay college student Mathew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming, inspired the song “Laramie.” The song “Lucystoners” calls out Jann Wenner, the publisher of *Rolling Stone*, and others in the music

industry who promote the music of male singers and bands while sexualizing or ignoring female musicians. One song on the 2008 CD *Didn't It Feel Kinder* hints at Ray making peace with her identity as a woman, the “she” in the lyrics to the song “She’s Got to Be”:

She’s got to be with me always

To make sense of the skin I’m in

Sometimes it gets dangerous

And lonely to defend

Marking time with every change

It’s hard to love this woman in me (“She’s Got to Be” n.p.).

Ray, who has noted that she always felt more comfortable performing masculinity, often dresses in men’s pantsuits and ties and sings in a lower tenor register. She has said that she may have considered sexual reassignment surgery to transition to a man had she known more about those options growing up. She empathizes with those who suffer from gender dysphoria and understands their need to transition to another physical manifestation of their gender, but also believes that society should view gender on a spectrum instead of as a binary in order to account for those who do not match either the masculine or feminine labels, as she notes in this 2014 interview:

You might be so masculine that there is no way your female body reflects who you are. OK, so great, those who feel that way can transition, but what do all the people in the middle do? They don’t feel completely mismatched with their body, but they don’t feel like they’re validated as being masculine or feminine within the body they’re in. That’s the thing that the binary world really screws with—there’s people who have no place (Rosenblum n.p.).

For Butler, performativity is slightly different from performance in that performance assumes that someone is knowingly playing a role different from one's conception of himself or herself in society (Butler *BigThink* video). In the "Galileo" music video, the Indigo Girls subvert gender and other preconceived notions about their identity by dressing in costumes. Ray and Saliers both take turns dressing in men's and women's clothing, performing caricatures of a geisha, an opera singer, a Mafioso, a swashbuckler, and a pope, among others. To Butler, performing in drag is just another example of the instability of gender in which men and woman poke fun at the naturalization of gender (xxxix). To Ray, Saliers, and other female artists who were popular in the late 1980s and early 1990s, dressing in drag or performing different roles in music videos was a strategy for surviving in the male-dominated music industry. Annie Lennox, female lead singer of The Eurythmics, was one of the first women artists to destabilize a music video culture predicated on providing a heterosexual telescope for the male gaze by donning a neon orange buzzcut and men's dress suit and tie; she also wielded a riding crop in a boardroom in the video for her song "Sweet Dreams" (Whiteley 123). Lennox's performance harkens back to the gender destabilization that Butler observes when individuals perform in drag. As Butler writes in *Gender Trouble*, "We come to understand [through the performance of drag] that what we take to be "real," what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality" (xxiv).

The on-screen gender destabilization mirrored seismic changes that were occurring in the often male-dominated music industry in the late 1980s and early 1990s. One month before Ray and Saliers signed with Epic, *Musician* magazine ran a series of articles featuring Sinéad O'Connor, Tracy Chapman, and Michelle Shocked. The caption that appeared on the magazine's cover read, "Why the best new artists of 1988 are women" (Whiteley 171). The feminist

movement of the United States in the 1980s was dedicated to embracing women of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds and experiences (2). Nowhere was this change more apparent than on the radio and in college clubs and bars in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Indigo Girls were direct benefactors and progenitors of this fem-folk-rock revolution. Fem-folk-rockers' performances differed vastly from those of the sexualized objects often seen dancing in form-fitting dresses in the music videos of Robert Palmer or Madonna on MTV. Acknowledging that men comprised the majority of decision-making positions in a music industry that profited from portrayals of heterosexual desire, the Indigo Girls, k. d. lang, Annie Lennox, and many of their popular music counterparts chose androgyny as the safest option for presenting themselves to the public (Whiteley 152). Throughout their career, Ray and Saliers have most often performed live and in videos clad in jeans and t-shirts. Although Ray admits that appearance plays a big role in the marketing of artists in the music industry, she and Saliers never felt pressured by their record labels to perform more feminine or hypersexualized versions of their identity, saying "there's no way we were going to be sex objects" (Ray DVD 1).

#### **4.2 "I know the kids are still upsetters / 'cause rock is cool but the struggle is better" – "Go"**

Traveling from the performative aspects of gender and sexuality, one can look to the field of performance studies to trace the Indigo Girls' shifting identity in respect to their part of a larger archive of southern identity. In her 2003 text *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Diana Taylor shares examples of how performance communicates the cultural memory and identity of a person or community (xvi). Taylor says that too often scholars fetishize the written word when it comes to learning about a culture. Much can be gained from the examination of cultural performances, including "dance, theatre, rituals,

political rallies, funerals—that involve theatrical, rehearsed, or conventional/event-appropriate behaviors” (Taylor 3). The daily rituals repeated by a people, such as reciting the pledge of allegiance to the U.S. flag or singing the *Star-Spangled Banner* are two examples of an embodied practice that help us know a culture’s identity (Taylor 3). If we look at the musical performances, but also the interviews, self-authored blog posts, and public demonstrations of the Indigo Girls, we learn that one of the most revealing and dominant aspects of their identity is their activism.

Born first of a desire to give back to their local community, the Indigo Girls’ activism coincided with their first professional performances in the mid-1980s. Knowing that they could not ignore the epidemics of homelessness and AIDS and HIV that afflicted the Little Five Points neighborhood at that time, Ray, Saliers, and other local musicians regularly played benefit concerts for soup kitchens and organizations that provided meals to people with AIDS and HIV. Ray says that her activist inclinations preceded her musical support of causes. She attributes this entrance into activism to her upbringing in the South and to her faith: “I don’t know if it’s a southern thing—a spiritual base to your activism or something—but we all came up through this time of, you know, in your community, you have to give back” (Ray DVD 1). In her interview for Greene’s article, Ray differentiates southern activism from “northern” activism in that southern activism is faith-based or inspired by religious beliefs; in contrast, Ray views activism in other parts of the United States as more secular or intellectual in nature (Greene 170).

As the Indigo Girls have broadened their geographic and intellectual horizons, they have also expanded the scope of their activism. For example, on their second studio album with Epic Records, *Nomads – Indians – Saints*, the Indigo Girls issued a call to action in their song

“Hammer and a Nail.”<sup>10</sup> The lyrics “Gotta get out of bed / get a hammer and a nail” accessed the image of hundreds of volunteers building homes in Georgia for the Atlanta-based nonprofit organization Habitat for Humanity (“Hammer and a Nail” n.p.). As they experienced financial success, the Indigo Girls funneled their resources into larger, global projects, such as convincing a corporate sponsor to donate video cameras to the Zapatistas in Mexico, or traveling to Cuba to learn about the U.S. embargo of that country (Ray DVD 1).

A concern for environmental protection intersected with an interest in Native American history and culture in 1991 when Ray and Saliers met Native activist Winona LaDuke at a benefit concert. Together with LaDuke, the Indigo Girls established the Native-run organization Honor the Earth to raise awareness and funds for Native American environmental groups throughout North America (*HonorEarth.org* n.p.). While the Indigo Girls now have an advisor who helps them evaluate the political and social causes they support, both financially and by listing them on an “Activism” page on their band website (*IndigoGirls.com*), Honor the Earth remains their primary cause (Saliers DVD). The Indigo Girls have toured the country to perform benefit shows for Honor the Earth and have participated in protests and meetings between Native American tribal leaders, politicians, and celebrities concerned about issues like the dumping of hazardous waste on tribal lands, the harmful effects of coal-fired power plants on reservations, and more recently, the proposed Keystone XL Pipeline (*HonorEarth.org* n.p.).

Neither Ray nor Saliers identify as Native American, which is why they do not serve on the board of directors of Honor the Earth. Ray says the Indigo Girls’ role is “to build bridges between Native and Non-Native communities,” carrying the message of environmental protection from Indian Country to the corridors of Congress (*A Year a Month* A.R. 1995). Saliers

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<sup>10</sup> The song title “Hammer and a Nail” and subject matter of the song undoubtedly allude to the 1962 folk song “If I Had a Hammer” by Peter, Paul and Mary.

says she wishes to share the Native American reverence for the land with other Americans through the Indigo Girls' involvement with Honor the Earth:

Most Americans, we're so removed from where we get our food and how the gas goes in the tank and where all the power energy comes from, but traditional Native Americans, they're tied to the land so intricately there's not a separation between the land and their lives. It's a beautiful and powerful reality that we'll never know in the same way, but that we can learn so much from (Saliers DVD).

Through the Indigo Girls' participation in Honor the Earth, Ray says she has learned to view Native Americans as a vital part of today's society, as living communities of people instead of lessons in a history book or displays in a museum (Ray DVD 1). In other words, the Indigo Girls' activism on behalf of Honor the Earth has evolved to be both local and global as they better understand the heterogeneous, fluid composition of communities.

Through their activism and involvement with other cultures found in the United States and beyond, the Indigo Girls seem to have avoided one of the traps that McPherson says many white southern writers and memoirists fall into: they have not allowed racial guilt and melancholia to creep into the space formerly occupied by repression and nostalgia for the homeplace (McPherson 217). It would have been all too easy for Ray and Saliers to follow this pattern given their socioeconomic status as educated white women who grew up in upper middle-class suburbs. Friedman refers to this as contradictory subject positions of identity—a discourse where the Indigo Girls are considered oppressed for their gender and sexuality and simultaneously privileged because of their race, education and economic status (21). It is easy for critics to dismiss their music and activism as panning to a southern audience who drinks from the same spring of guilt and finds salve in narratives of woe sung from the majority perspective

instead of the perspective of the afflicted. Based on McPherson, I argue that the Indigo Girls' lyrics, performances, and activism provide alternatives to boutiqueing the South and cycling past guilt into a mobile South.

New Southern studies scholar Scott Romine theorizes that efforts to locate and preserve a "true" or "authentic" South often exile the region and its people to a nostalgic past or utopian future. In an age where globalization and mass media consumption have promulgated numerous simulations of American culture, Romine is interested in the resistance of "Disneyfication" for what Edwin M. Yoder termed "Dixiefication" (Romine 1). Certainly the U.S. South has built a tourist economy based on recreating a sanitized version of its past for a mass audience. Romine writes, "The South is full of fakes—Civil War reenactments and plantation tourism, to name two—ininitely preferable to their originals and arguably descended from them" (2). McPherson refers to this phenomenon of performing a romanticized story of the South at physical sites once saturated in the blood of Civil War battles, slavery, lynching, and violent acts as "cultural schizophrenia" (3).

The antidote to a new plantation economy that thrives on a mythological or frozen South to attract tourist dollars is to reconstruct and reorient ourselves to other aspects of southern history and identity through the live and recorded performances of its people. Taylor uses her background in both performance studies and Latin American studies to spotlight the performances and protests of the families of Argentinians who have been disappeared by the military forces. These loved ones stand in for the missing who cannot be seen and give voice to those who can no longer be heard (Taylor xvii).

To give voice to a "South that is always already queer," E. Patrick Johnson recorded the oral histories of more than sixty African-American gay men who were born in the southern

region of the United States and lived there most of their lives (5). Part ethnography and part performance studies, Johnson's book *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* documents the presence of rural communities where gay men of all races, ages, class, and other categories of difference constructed their own definitions of southernness. Johnson created *Sweet Tea* to show that black men did not have to migrate to urban areas like New York or San Francisco to avoid persecution as racial or sexual minorities. Through the performance of certain behaviors considered both "southern" and "black"—such as good manners, coded speech, and religiosity--black gay have flourished in many rural communities of the South. Johnson illustrates this performance through the example of men who joined the choir at their local black church both to take their rightful place in society and socialize with other gay men (2). Interestingly, another account of gay men growing up in the rural South, John Howard's *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History*, says that the American Civil Rights Movement that gave rise to Atlanta's queer community in the 1960s, ushered in the first full-scale policing of heterosexuality in rural Mississippi. The destabilization of racial hegemony caused violence and oppression based on sexuality. Johnson writes: "Late-twentieth century queer empowerment foreclosed the quiet accommodation of difference characteristic of the 1940s and 1950s. By 1965, homosexuality was linked to the specter of racial justice—what white authorities understood as the most serious threat to the status quo" (xvii).

The ability of prevailing mores and power structures to affect the visibility or invisibility of a community's people or events in any given space or time necessitates certain cultural performances. Counter to the plantation homes that McPherson and Romine describe in their texts, where wedding guests and tourists gain an understanding of the South as romantic and genteel, some spaces in the South serve as sites of recovery of some of the atrocities committed

against minorities. Ray, who has said in numerous interviews that she takes pride in the fact that she grew up in the birthplace of the American Civil Rights Movement, also is not afraid to criticize her region or country's sites of racial injustice. Starting with "Nashville," continuing with "Become You," "Trouble," and numerous songs communicating their evolving political and social beliefs, the Indigo Girls perform a southern identity that does not boutique or freeze the South or downplay its negative qualities. A recent example appears on the duo's June 2015 LP *One Lost Day*. The song "The Rise of the Black Messiah" condemns mass incarceration and racial inequality that still plagues the United States and the South in particular in this song. Ray composed "Black Messiah" in memory of Herman Wallace, a prisoner at Angola State Penitentiary, who wrote to her in 2006. In his letter, Wallace detailed how he and two other African-American men, Albert Woodfox and Robert King—known collectively as The Angola Three—had gone to jail for robberies in the 1970s. The Angola Three claimed that when they started protesting prison conditions and organizing fellow inmates at Angola, a former slave plantation turned into a state prison, they were accused of killing a prison guard and placed in solitary confinement. At the time that Wallace wrote to Ray, he had been confined to a "6x9 cell, 23 hours a day for well over 30 years" (Ray "The Rise of the Black Messiah Note" n.p.).

The title of the song comes from Wallace's letter to Ray in which he quotes J. Edgar Hoover, the former FBI director who said he wanted to quash all Black Panther activity—like Wallace and the other members of the Angola Three were organizing at the Louisiana State Penitentiary—to prevent the rise of a black messiah (Ray "The Rise of the Black Messiah Note" n.p.). Ray addresses the Angola Three as "you" in the first verse of the song:

They called you the rise of the black messiah like so many boys before you  
And they'll be more, more to follow threatening and hard to swallow

I'm sitting underneath the hanging tree-just me and the ghost of the KKK

Poor man's gallows in the middle of the woods saddest tree that ever stood ("The Rise of the Black Messiah" n.p.).

Ray toggles through narrators and listeners during the song. In the first verse, the narrator could be Hoover or any member of the white establishment who has considered black men a threat to their authority. The term "boys" signifies both the young age of the Angola Three and many black prisoners when they are first incarcerated and the derogatory term used to describe and devalue black men as children who lack autonomy and need discipline. The narrator waits underneath the hanging tree with the "ghost" of the Ku Klux Klan. This line makes an obvious reference to the lynchings of black people at the hands of white people that have taken place across the United States, but mostly in the South, where Tracy Thompson estimates that between four and five thousand African Americans were tortured and lynched after 1865 (66).

Ray notes remembering Wallace's letter seven years later as she was reading the book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by a civil rights lawyer and legal scholar Michelle Alexander. The book charges that the for-profit prison system in the United States acts as the latest iteration of the Jim Crow laws that relegated black individuals to second-class citizens in the U.S. South before the American Civil Rights Movement. Ray calls mass incarceration and the Jim Crow laws variations of African American slavery in the song's second verse:

My friend you tell of slavery's end but have you heard of mass incarceration

That ol Jim Crow just keeps getting born with a new hanging rope for the black man's scourge

Hey Ol Man River what do you know of that plantation they call Angola?

The devil spawned a prison there- the saddest farm that ever lived (“The Rise of the Black Messiah” n.p.).

People often refer to the Louisiana State Penitentiary as “The Farm” because inmates still work the fields of the former plantation, which was named Angola after the area of Africa where many people were captured and later enslaved (*AngolaMuseum.org* n.p.). After 40 years in solitary confinement, Herman Wallace left Angola in 2013 but died from liver cancer just a few days after his release (Robertson n.p.). Ray describes this in the last verse of the song:

40 years in solitary, consider the man that they just can’t bury  
 I got this letter in my hand, saying tell this story when you can  
 He’s gonna rise, he’s gonna rise and all them lynchers are gonna be damned  
 When outta that hole walks a brand new man (“The Rise of the Black Messiah” n.p.).

The allusions to another messiah, Jesus Christ, cannot be denied in Ray’s song. Not only does the black messiah rise in status from a boy to a man through his suffering, he rises from the hole, a slang term for solitary confinement, just as Jesus was resurrected and rose from the tomb according to Christian gospel.

Vastly different from the highly produced and constructed video of “Galileo” from the early years of the Indigo Girls’ musical career, a 2015 behind-the-scenes video offers viewers a stripped down purview into the studio recording of “The Rise of the Black Messiah.” Ray addresses the camera directly as she says that she hopes to record the song in just one or two takes in which she sings and plays the mandolin with other musicians. The live performance technique differs from the Indigo Girls’ normal recording style of playing all the parts separately, then piecing the best recordings together in the engineering booth. Ray’s goal is to capture the

raw anguish and outrage of the heavy lyrics that she sings, backed by rock drums and bass (“The Rise of the Black Messiah – Behind the Scenes Ep. 3” n.p.). Ray acknowledges The Angola Three and Michelle Alexander in the liner notes of *One Lost Day*.<sup>11</sup>

If human beings know who they are through the stories they tell about themselves and others, as Friedman posits, and individuals mediate how they know the places they inhabit through reenactments and other performances, as we’ve learned from McPherson, then the Indigo Girls cannot possibly be “misfits” who downplay the negative aspects of the U.S. South. Using their platform as artists and activists, Ray and Saliers tell stories about their personal journeys and bring awareness to both the positive and negative aspects of the region they call home. The Indigo Girls have never taken their position as entertainers who make music that people enjoy listening to and singing along with to mean they had to strip all the seriousness out of their songs. To the contrary, they have had to balance their activism with the playful and creative sides of their music-making as a spotlight shines on their every decision in the public arena. The “Galileo” music video exemplifies one wobbly signpost in the Indigo Girls’ career continuum where they struggled at both personal and professional levels with how to perform the various aspects of their identity. These women who still make their homes in Georgia, one of many states in a diverse and dynamic region of the United States, never equate pride in their homeplace with ignorance of its past and present as a site of inequality. Instead, they lean into the fluidity of cultural identity and embrace the possibilities it holds for the future.

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<sup>11</sup> Albert Woodfox is the only remaining member of The Angola Three still in prison. He has been in solitary confinement now for 43 years, despite a recent federal court order to free him (Robertson n.p.). Ironically, while Woodfox remains in a 6x9 cell, tourists roam the grounds of the Angola Museum, heralded as the only prison museum in the U.S. that operates within an active prison. Opened in 1997, the Angola Museum welcomes more than 120,000 visitors each year. The acting warden and a group of concerned citizens established the museum to “document the history of Louisiana’s prisons so as not to repeat the horrors of the past” (AngolaMuseum.org n.p.).

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

On June 2, 2015, the Indigo Girls released their fourteenth studio album entitled *One Lost Day*. *One Lost Day* is the first new album from the Indigo Girls since 2011's *Beauty Queen Sister* (Sweeney n.p.). While four years is an unusually long stretch between LPs for the Indigo Girls, anyone interpreting the break as a sign that the duo is slowing down has not been paying attention to other areas of their lives. In the last four years, Ray and Saliers have experienced major life events that further illustrate the fluid and heterogeneous nature of identity.

After years of publicly advocating for marriage and immigration equality for same-sex couples in the United States, Saliers married her longtime partner Tristin Chipman in 2013. She announced the news during a concert in Chipman's native Canada, where the two had originally hoped to wed (MacNeil n.p.). Instead, they settled for a private ceremony in New York to secure Chipman's naturalization. Earlier that same year, Saliers testified on Capitol Hill that laws on same-sex marriage and immigration prevented Chipman from working in the U.S. and threatened to split up their family, which included the couple's newborn daughter Cleo (Saliers "Letter to the Community" n.p.).

Ray's views of matrimony have changed over the years. In 2011, she said that even if gay marriage were legal in the United States, she would not marry and subscribe to what she has called a patriarchal institution (Ray DVD 2). However, in a 2015 interview, Ray expresses her hope that Georgia will follow other states in the nation that have legalized same-sex marriage. She says she and her partner of thirteen years, Carrie Schraeder, will hold out until then because she does not want to get married anywhere else. "I don't want to leave it [the state of Georgia] because it's hard," Ray says. "I want to stay and help make change" (Tucker n.p.).

Attesting to the dynamic nature of an individual or community's identity, I edit these conclusions in the same week that the U.S. Supreme Court has legalized same-sex marriage. On June 26, 2015, the Indigo Girls extended an invitation to the public via social media to celebrate the landmark court ruling with them at a concert that had been scheduled months in advance at Atlanta's Chastain Park Amphitheatre. A post on the Indigo Girls' official Facebook page read: "This is about more than marriage; this Supreme Court decision validates gays and lesbians as deserving of the liberties the *Constitution* affords us" ("Today" Facebook post n.p.). Ray and Saliers opened the Friday night concert with "Power of Two," a song that has become associated with marriage equality. A photographed copy of the night's set list posted on the Indigo Girls' Facebook page identified the venue as "Home" and the date as "Gay Marriage Day" ("6-26-15 Atlanta, GA" Facebook post n.p.).

Another identity-altering event, motherhood, has shaped both the lives of Ray and Saliers. In late 2014, about a year after Saliers became a mother, Ray followed suit when Schraeder gave birth to their daughter Ozilline ("Ozie"), who is named after Ray's mother and grandmother. Now, in addition to fielding questions about their southern heritage, their sexuality, and their politics, the Indigo Girls are answering some variant of the banal question, "How has motherhood changed you?" Partners and daughters are joining Ray, Saliers, and their band for short stints of the *One Lost Day* tour. The tour is shorter so that the families will not be apart as long. The yearning for travel simultaneously coupled with bouts of homesickness that Saliers used to describe her college trips between Atlanta and New Orleans have endured; she still willingly answers the call of the road, but says she gets more homesick than ever when she is away from Chipman and their daughter (Nazarov n.p.). In the past, Ray and Saliers have spent little time together when not recording or touring, due in part to the fact that they live an hour

and a half apart from each other in Georgia. A budding friendship between two-and-a-half-year-old Cleo and one-and-a-half-year-old Ozie has increased the number of social visits. While Cleo and Ozie like each other and often participate in their famous mothers' unrecorded music making, Ray says the toddlers are not the next generation of the Indigo Girls. She hopes the girls will enjoy the kind of enduring friendship that she and Saliers have, but does not want their children to go into the music business (Graff n.p.).

If the Indigo Girls and other popular fem-folk-rock musicians who came out of the closet in the 1990s feared that identifying as queer might hinder their success, they may have had good reason. The Indigo Girls, who enjoyed multiple platinum album sales and critical acclaim in the beginning of their career, have left major record labels and sales behind. Dropped by their last major label Hollywood Records in 2007, Ray and Saliers now release CDs under their own IG Recordings label. Vanguard Records, a major distributor, supplies the CDs and digital files to retailers like iTunes and Amazon (Nunn n.p.). Despite a passionate fan following and sold out shows on regular concert tours, the Indigo Girls' songs receive little mainstream radio airplay. The last time they appeared on the charts was in 2006 when they sang backup for Pink, a younger, Top 40 artist, whose song "Dear Mr. President" openly criticized the policies of then-President George W. Bush (Tucker n.p.). Ray asserts that the Indigo Girls' multiplex identities as lesbian folk rockers who speak their conscience, which made them more marketable and propelled them into the pop music arena in the early 1990s, eventually hindered their commercial success: "We're a quadruple threat: we're women, we're political, we're gay and we're older. All of those things are strikes against us in this industry" (Hames n.p.).

In the thirty years since they first performed together as the Indigo Girls, Ray and Saliers have returned to a scrappy, independent approach to music production and promotion that allows

them to stay rooted, hometown favorites who can connect with a rootless fan base all around the world via digital technology. Long gone are the days of over-the-top, scripted music videos in which the Indigo Girls wear costumes and perform different identities for a music television network that actually played music videos. Leading up to the release of this year's *One Lost Day* CD, the Indigo Girls released a series of professionally produced, behind-the-scenes videos on YouTube of Ray and Saliers in the recording studio. They also solicited fans' homemade videos for the making of a video for their song "Happy in the Sorrow Key."

While they may voice a continuing disenchantment with their industry, Ray and Saliers are as busy as they have ever been musically. Ray continues to produce solo albums on her Daemon Records label. She released *Goodnight Tender*, her first country music CD, in 2013. Ray appears to have made some peace with her negative experience at Vanderbilt. In the thirty years since she transferred to Emory, Ray and Saliers have played numerous shows in Tennessee's Music City. The Indigo Girls recorded part of *One Lost Day* in a studio in Nashville and have scheduled an appearance this fall at the Ryman Auditorium.

While Saliers admits that she misses the glory years of performing in large arenas, she is content to play smaller venues like the Ryman and have a career that grants her the flexibility to pursue other interests. Saliers has co-owned two successful restaurants in the Atlanta area. One of the restaurants is named "Watershed" after the song she wrote and performed with Ray on the 1990 *Nomads – Indians – Saints* LP. She enjoys collecting wine and cooking for her family as part of her ever-evolving way of feeling southern (Keates W3). Saliers is more than halfway through writing and composing her first solo project, which longtime Indigo Girls' violinist Lyris Hung is producing. Saliers says she had hoped to release the solo album this year, but could not finish it while recording and promoting *One Lost Day* (Sweeney n.p.).

Early reviews of the Indigo Girls' most recent musical collaboration are positive, but understandably contrast with the reviews of their self-titled 1989 release. Instead of praising the Indigo Girls' brilliant debut or their coming-of-age material, reviewers note a "more contemplative" (Sweeney n.p.) quality and laud the musicians' "veteran sense of song construction and experimentation" (Horowitz n.p.). Ray's father died in 2013 as she was writing songs for *One Lost Day*, lending an elegiac tone to songs like "Happy in the Sorrow Key" and "Fishtails," in which Ray celebrates life and embraces mortality. In the liner notes, Ray memorializes her dad's "enduring spirit" (*One Lost Day* liner notes n.p.).

In interviews, Ray and Saliers seem less concerned when reporters steer the conversations to one aspect of their identity over others. Perhaps they are embracing their emeritus status as lesbian folk rockers who have come to symbolize the evolving gay rights movement. New audiences were introduced to the Indigo Girls on the trendy Fox television show *Glee*, when character Santana expressed her fears of coming out and being ostracized for her sexuality by saying, "I can't go to an Indigo Girls concert; I just can't" (Belcher 412).<sup>12</sup> The Indigo Girls were a punchline again in April 2015 when a comedienne published a blog post asking, "Who Said It? Jesus or the Indigo Girls" (Carrera "Who Said It?" n.p.). The blog post responded to a declaration from the owners of an Indiana pizzeria that said they would not cater a gay wedding on religious grounds. The author of the blog post satirizes lesbian and gay people as "scary and immoral and easily identifiable" before listing fifteen extracts of Indigo Girls' lyrics that contain religious imagery and positive messages like: "If the world is night, shine my life like a light" from the Indigo Girls' song "Let It Be Me" (Carrera "Who Said It?" n.p.).

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<sup>12</sup> Christine Belcher explores the connections between lesbian culture, musicality, and shame in her article, "I Can't Go to an Indigo Girls Concert, I Just Can't": *Glee's* Shameful Lesbian Musicality," first published in 2011 in the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*.

When asked her thoughts on the Indigo Girls' status as pop culture icons in the LGBTQIA community, Saliers admits that she first resisted any labels based on her sexual orientation; she did not want people to pigeonhole the band or its music. Now, Saliers says she is more accepting of the fact that "lesbian" is the first facet of identity that the public associates with the Indigo Girls. She says she is proud of the band's involvement in furthering the rights of LGBTQIA individuals and doesn't mind having her name be synonymous with being a lesbian if it helps other gay people who are struggling with their sexuality (Carrera "Emily Saliers" n.p.).

On the same day that the Indigo Girls and many in the United States celebrated the news that the U.S. Supreme Court had legalized same-sex marriage, President Barack Obama was in South Carolina to eulogize Reverend Clementa Pinckney and eight other men and women who were shot and killed in Charleston's historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Dylann Roof, a 21-year-old white man, has been charged with nine counts of murder and possession of a firearm. Authorities believe the June 17, 2015 mass shooting is racially motivated based on witness accounts, a racist manifesto allegedly written by Roof, and photos of the alleged gunman holding a Confederate battle flag. In response, politicians including South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley are calling for the removal of the Confederate battle flag that flies over the state capital (Sack n.p.). Not willing to wait for politicians to take action, Brittany "Bree" Newsome, a 30-year-old African American woman from Charlotte, North Carolina, traveled to Columbia on June 27, scaled the flagpole at South Carolina's state capital, and removed the flag herself. Police arrested Newsome and another activist at the scene. The flag flew over the State House within the hour of the arrest, just in time for a scheduled rally in support of the Confederate battle flag where at least one attendee held a sign reading, "Southern Lives Matter" (Contrera n.p.). These seismic shifts only reiterate the fluid nature of identity from

which no person, region, or country is exempt. By examining the milestones in the lives of Ray and Saliers, and analyzing the songs, performances, and activist interests of the Indigo Girls over time and space, one confirms that tracing the boundaries of the southern identity means following a path that has no end.

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