# Panic at the Picture Show:
# Southern Movie Theatre Culture and the Struggle to Desegregate

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In High Point, North Carolina, two thousand Black patrons waited for the doors to open for a special midnight showing meant for only Black audience members. These midnight showings, often called Midnight Rambles, were common so that Black movie-goers could attend the theatre after white audiences finished "their screenings" for the day.[1] However, this summer night in 1936, mixed into the large, excited crowd were fourteen white community members coming to enjoy this screening. Why this small group of fourteen chose to attend this screening that was not meant for them is unclear. Perhaps the intrigue of a midnight showing made the movie-going experience compelling and exhilarating. Maybe the theatre was showing the 1936 Oscar-nominated San Francisco and the patrons wanted to gaze at Clark Gable, "The King of Hollywood," even past their typical viewing hours.[2] Or potentially these white movie-goers wanted to cause conflict— asserting their privilege and taking away the sacred leisure time of the Black patrons. The law stated that at any theatre that typically showed pictures meant for white audiences, when the audience was mixed, Black audience members were required to sit in the balcony seats.[3] Therefore the orchestra seats up front were occupied by the fourteen white patrons and the thousands of Black patrons were sent to the uncomfortable, crowded, and poor-visibility seats in the balcony. The balcony at this North Carolina theatre only had 653 seats and so, panicked, the theatre manager rushed to contact four other nearby theatres to rent their balconies. The reels were run over to these four theatres, the balconies were packed, and over an hour late, the movie began. All while the fourteen white movie-goers sat comfortably all alone in the main section.

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[1] Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 158.
[2] "San Francisco," Advertisement. *Variety*. Vol. 123, No. 5. July 1, 1936, 18.
[3] "800 Negro Theatres in 32 States Point to Growing Demand," *Motion Picture Herald*, 15 August 1936, 27.

This was the segregated world of the Southern movie theatre— one that left Black movie patrons with a demeaning, confining, and humiliating entertainment experience. The story of the High Point midnight showing reveals the situations, experiences, and conditions that were desperately fought against through the battle for movie theatre desegregation.

Throughout the South, Jim Crow laws segregated the physical space of movie theatres and often required separate screening times of films for different races. Movies were a highly regulated part of social life, including what was shown on the screens, how movie theatres were spatially set up, and who attended the theatres. Movie-going experiences varied throughout the South during the long battle for desegregation. As the High Point story indicates, there were segregated theatres with separate sections for Black patrons, while Black-owned movie theatres offered alternative viewing experiences for Black audiences rather than subjecting them to the undesirable balcony seats.[4] The work of movie theatre desegregation meant a shift away from both of these experiences and a pivot instead toward fully integrated theatres. That civil rights struggle involved sit-ins, demonstrations, and legal battles and varied based on the type of theatre.

Historians recently have acknowledged the critical need to study the Civil Rights movement through the lens of gender and sexuality. The battle for civil rights is unavoidably intertwined with concepts such as sexual violence and struggles for freedom of sexual expression. This paper seeks to fit into this new shift in scholarly discussion by identifying how movie theatres were viewed as sexual spaces and therefore were delayed in their integration. Recent writings on civil rights indicate how connected anxiety of sexuality and racial politics were. In her book *At the Dark End of the Street,* Danielle McGuire asserts that African American women's struggle against sexual violence should be the foundation on which the story of the Civil Rights movement is told. She explains that the battle for "bodily integrity and personal dignity" marked racial politics and African American lives during the modern civil rights movement. Furthermore, she explains how sexuality was a part of the segregation conversation as it was used as a weapon by segregationists to attack integration supporters as "sexual fiends."[5]McGuire and other scholars point out that sexuality was weaponized through sexual violence against and exploitation of Black women, making issues of gender and sexuality crucial to the Civil Rights movement. Additionally, Susan Cahn's work, *Sexual Reckonings,* provides an example of a historian articulating how sexuality was always at the forefront of social, political, and racial conversations. Cahn's work makes the case of studying southern history through the lens of teenage sexuality and argues that the roots of segregation trace back to anxieties around sexually active young women.[6] She writes about the history of adolescent girls as a way to investigate the web of connections between coming-of-age experiences and societal hierarchies

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[4] Charlene Regester, "From the Buzzard's Roost: Black Movie-Going in Durham and Other North Carolina Cities during the Early Period of American Cinema," *Film History* 17, no. 1, (2005): 117.

[5] Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 20.

[6] Susan K Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 309.

and political, cultural, and racial tensions. This paper's discussion of movie theatre desegregation builds on the historiography that recognizes the powerful link between sexuality and civil rights.

Movie theatres highlight the conflicts, anxieties, and fantasies of the society that creates and consumes entertainment. Therefore, they are particularly interesting to look at how both policymakers and citizens viewed them as racially divisive spaces. This paper will analyze how movie theatres were viewed distinctly as public spaces in the process of desegregating the southern United States. Movie theatres stand out in the movement to desegregate, and this was due primarily to the harsh reaction towards the perceived sexuality of these spaces. Movie settings varied, including both drive-in theatres and indoor theatres. Both of these venues must be examined to understand conceptions of simultaneous public displays of entertainment and private interactions at the theatres. As recent historiography has shown, the Civil Rights struggle should be studied as inexorably linked to gender and sexuality. The specific battle for movie theatre integration reveals a key relationship between the history of racial tensions and the worry over sexual expression. The darkness of movie theatres and their connection to a new dating culture linked them with concerns about unsupervised sexual encounters and intrigue. This study of southern movie theatres' unique complexity in integration reveals how regulations of youth dating culture in the postwar period and the fears of interracial intimacy produced an especially prolonged and complicated process of desegregation.

The battle for desegregation in the United States was complex— spanning decades, involving many different methods of organizing, and reaching staggered successes. It is important to understand one key element of this struggle: the segregation and restriction of leisure. Leisure in this context is a broad term, referring to both amusements and entertainment along with romantic relationships and sexuality. In order to understand the fight for movie theatre desegregation, it is essential to recognize how much of the reasoning for segregation was centered on a stated fear of different races interacting together in spaces that replicated the privacy of the home. For example, the railroad was a highly contested space of segregation in the nineteenth century. The danger of interracial intimacy dominated the discourse involving segregation, particularly involving transportation. Edward Ayers claims, "The sexual charge that might be created among strangers temporarily placed in intimate surroundings, many whites worried, could not be tolerated in a racially integrated car."[7]

The forms of entertainment along with the spaces of amusement were strictly segregated, especially in the southern United States, in order to regulate the intimacies of leisure that they produced. Mamie Garvin Fields spoke about how in South Carolina there were specific time slots when white people would stay away from the town in order to not interact with Black people entertaining themselves in the town. She said, "Really, certain whites didn't like to think you had leisure to do anything but pick cotton and work in the field."[8] Leisure must be

[7] Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction (*New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 140.
[8] Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 133.

understood historically as a privilege that faced regulations and policing. Through constrictions of leisure, white supremacy and privilege were maintained and potential social and sexual interracial interactions were thwarted. An understanding of the sentiments surrounding leisure and sexuality for Black Americans is a key background to analyze the work towards desegregation. Desegregation activists battled harmful stereotypes and unfair rules, regulations, and laws by employing methods such as protests, demonstrations, legal battles, and boycotts.

As with the American student movement of the 1930s and 40s, young people's participation has always been essential to the fight for civil rights. According to historian Robert Cohen, "The movement encouraged students to identify with the working class rather than the upper class, to value racial and ethnic diversity instead of exclusivity, and to work for progressive social change."[9] Before the *Brown v Board of Education* decision in 1954, which said that segregation in schools was unconstitutional, youth and student branches of major activist groups, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), worked diligently for civil rights. They organized boycotts about segregation of transportation systems, fought for workers' rights, formed Black community spaces, led anti-lynching campaigns, and fought tirelessly to end segregation in schools.[10] "We have rejected the concept that youngsters should not participate in civil rights demonstrations," James Farmer, chair of the Congress of Racial Equality stated, "They are not being forced to do anything against their will. In fact, most of the motivation for the Civil Rights struggle has come from the youth."[11] This youth activism continued to push desegregation efforts forward, even after the *Brown v. Board* decision.

Youth activism was particularly crucial to the organizing around movie theatre desegregation. Student groups led demonstrations throughout the South, some ending in mass arrests.[12] In 1961, Edward B. King Jr, a leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), stated "We have called for stand-ins at theaters throughout the South as our first move in the second phase of the student protest movement." Often these stand-ins involved setting up "revolving lines" at box offices so each time a Black patron was denied a ticket they would go to the end of the line and ask again, making it so white patrons could not get tickets.[13]These protests were waged throughout most of the southern states. In Greensboro, North Carolina there was a student-led boycott of movie houses in 1957 after a Black minister had been sent to balcony seats during a viewing of "The Ten Commandments."[14] Then later, in 1963, hundreds of Black college students from A&T College in Greensboro were arrested for

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[9] As quoted in Thomas Bynum, *NAACP Youth and the Fight for Black Freedom, 1936-1965* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2013), 1.
[10] V.P. Franklin, *The Young Crusader*s (Boston: Beacon Press, 2021), 17-34.
[11] Franklin, *The Young Crusader*s, 143.
[12] Janet Feagans, "Atlanta Theatre Segregation: A Case of Prolonged Avoidance," *Journal of Human Relations* 13, no. 2 (1965): 208.
[13] "Students Launch Drive to End Dixie Theatre Bias," *Tri-State Defender,* 17 February 1961, 8.
[14] "Negroes in Boycott: Act Against Movie Houses in Greensboro, NC," *New York Times,* 30 April 1957, 23.

attempting to enter segregated theatres and protesting outside of them.[15] Similarly, in Nashville, Tennessee, Black student groups had staged a series of "stand-in" demonstrations at theatres in 1960. Over a year later, through discussions between theatre managers and leaders of student groups, Nashville decided to grant "selected Negroes" admission to four downtown theatres.[16] In Louisville, Kentucky, students organized "open theatre" demonstrations that ended in violence and mass arrests as protesters called for the end of segregated theatres.[17]

It is evident that youth organizing focused specifically on the desegregation of public venues because many public spaces were essential to youth culture of the 1950s and 60s—including schools, restaurants, and recreational facilities such as movie theatres. While these spaces were meant for all generations, the newfound dating culture in the postwar era meant that young people were particularly invested in entertainment spaces. What's more, as we will see, movie theatres were important spaces for developing youth fantasy both with on-screen depictions and in audience interactions.

In the 1950s, the new postwar dating culture emphasized "necking and petting before marriage."[18] This dating culture existed alongside the push to define "normal" sexuality and control the performance of youth sexuality.[19] There was an imperative to promote a heteronormative ideal of American citizenship during the Cold War era, often manifested through regulations of teenage interactions. Heterosexual skills were encouraged to be practiced within regulated environments that discouraged any homosexual or interracial relationships, such as chaperoned school dances.[20] Scholars such as Mary Louise Adams argue that positioning teenagers as "the future" and those that would continue America's progress made them targets of "interventions meant to maximize normality and therefore maximize stability."[21] Sex and sexuality were the focus of this intervention. Sexuality was viewed as fragile and, more than anything else, as having the ability to be "abnormal." Adams points out that "dance halls, 'hamburger restaurants' and other unchaperoned and 'disreputable' commercial establishments were thought to provide the type of unsavory moral climate that would lead to sexual delinquency."[22] Movie theatres, especially any theatre with an integrated audience, would have fallen into this category of morally questionable spaces for teenage interaction.

During the Cold War period, the term containment was used to reference the foreign policy of preventing the spread of communism abroad. Domestic containment was a term that referred to efforts enforcing conformity of gender and sexuality to fit values closer to the

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[15] "150 in Greensboro Held in Protest: Negro Students Gather At Cafes and Theatres," *New York Times* 16 May, 1963, 24.
[16] "4 Nashville Movies Drop Color Bar on Experimental Basis: Agreement is Reached by Theatre Managers, Student Officials," *Philadelphia Tribune,* 2 May 1961, 5.
[17] Feagans, "Atlanta Theatre Segregation," 208.
[18] Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 118.
[19] Mary Louise Adams, *The Trouble with Normal: Postwar Youth and the Making of Heterosexuality* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 87.
[20] Adams, *The Trouble with Normal,* 95.
[21] Adams, *The Trouble with Normal,* 87.
[22] Adams, *The Trouble with Normal,* 94.

Victorian Era of "traditional" family roles.[23] These postwar sexual discourses stood in for fears about "changes in the global balance of power, about the changing shape of the family, about the effects of the new prosperity."[24] Historian's writings on the emphasis on enforcing heterosexuality and the desire to regulate postwar dating culture to promote "normalcy" in youth sexuality allow for an understanding of the pressures on postwar youth and the cautious lens with which the social spaces of movie theatres were viewed by those fearful of unregulated intimacy. Young people pushed back against the control over their romantic lives by finding unsupervised locations for intimacy, such as movie theatres. Additionally, many of these young people worked towards desegregating these public spaces to create more open sites for leisure.

Often the youth groups working towards integration goals were consolidated in church groups. V.P. Franklin argues that "religious beliefs provided cultural justification for social engagement."[25] For example, in Atlanta, Georgia, the Young Adult Group of the United Liberal Church was involved in specifically working toward movie theatre desegregation. The United Liberal Church was an integrated church that was a part of the national Unitarian Church but the group conducting one particular survey was all white.[26] On the evenings of October 11th and October 12th of 1961, the Young Adult Group conducted a survey in order to investigate the reaction of movie theatre audience members to desegregation. This survey took place a month after the completion of successful protests to desegregate all lunch counters in Atlanta.[27] The survey asked the following questions to the patrons of two different theatres: "Why do you come to this theatre?", "Are you aware of the desegregation of lunch counters in Atlanta?", "How do you feel about lunch-counter segregation?", and "How would you feel about Negroes coming to this theatre?"[28] For each question, they offered options to select from in order to gauge reactions to the questions posed. They polled 136 people between the two theatres and the results provide a small snapshot into what the conversations around desegregation in Atlanta looked like in the early 1960s. The survey results indicated that most people attended the theatres because of what pictures were being shown. They also showed that practically everyone surveyed knew about lunch-counters being desegregated and around 72% accepted or didn't care about this change. In terms of the potential for movie theatre desegregation, the percentage of those that would accept integration of the movie theatre was only slightly lower than those who accepted desegregation for lunch-counters.

The results of this survey provide key insights into popular opinion surrounding the desegregation of different public spaces in the South. The fact that this youth group chose to compare lunch counters and movie theatres, indicates that perspectives on desegregation could not be addressed as a uniform opinion. The question posed was not, "How do you feel about

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[23] Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books 1988), 14.
[24] Adams, *The Trouble with Norma*l, 87.
[25] V.P. Franklin, *The Young Crusader*s (Boston: Beacon Press, 2021), 23.
[26] "Query Filmgoers On Race Bias." *Variety*. Vol. 234, No. 8. October 18, 1961.
[27] "Movie Patrons Given Integration Views," *The Atlanta Constitution*, 12 October 1961, 14.
[28] Feagans, "Atlanta Theatre Segregation," 213-216.

segregation?" but rather there was a deliberate distinction based on the type of space in question. Therefore, one must look at what the specific battle for desegregation looked like for movie theatres in order to understand the unique tensions regarding this sort of environment.

In Atlanta, the process to achieve movie theatre desegregation was drawn out through extended periods of protests and attempted negotiations with theatre managers. In 1961, the Committee on the Appeal for Human Rights (COAHR) first approached theatre owners in Atlanta asking them to desegregate their theatres. This committee was formed in 1960 by a group of college students focused on organizing demonstrations for civil rights. They were consistently rebuffed by the theatre managers even when they were joined by the NAACP and Greater Atlanta Council on Human Relations (GACHR).[29] The survey conducted by the church youth group took place in the midst of these failed negotiations. The managers expressed anxiety based on alleged reports that business was lost when white patrons were "afraid to come downtown" after desegregation demonstrations occurred at theatres.[30] This fear of "loss of white patronage, and therefore, income" had been proven to be baseless from the examples of other successes of desegregating public facilities, such as the public library, the transit company, and the lunch counters.[31] Nevertheless, it wasn't until a second meeting in December of 1961 with eight theatre representatives, four members from civil rights protest organizations, the mayor, and the chief of police that a decision regarding the desegregation of Atlanta movie theatres was made.

Still, from that point, desegregation moved along at a snail's pace. The Metropolitan Opera was set to appear before a desegregated audience in May 1962 and so it was decided that they were going to wait until this example had been set before any further desegregation work was done.[32] There would first be a "cooling off period" during which there could be no attempts at desegregation. Then there would be a "control period" between May 6th and June 1st. During this time, at least two Black patrons per week were allowed at the four downtown theatres. At the three suburban theatres, the control period was set for an indefinite time but "within sixty days these theatre representatives were to meet with the students."[33] Clearly, the theatre desegregation process in Atlanta was highly regulated and stalled. The survey conducted by the young adult group importantly highlights how even though almost three-fourths of those surveyed were okay with desegregation, theatre segregation did not begin to occur in Atlanta until over a year later. Even on the second day of surveying, theatre managers were anxious about questions being asked about desegregation. The surveyors were "told that they would not be allowed to come back after their conduct of the evening."[34] Janet Feagans describes Atlanta theatre desegregation as a "case of prolonged avoidance,"[35] prompting a further investigation into what stalled movie

[29] Feagans, "Atlanta Theatre Segregation," 210.
[30] Janna Jones, *The Southern Movie Palace: Rise, Fall, and Resurrection* (Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2003), 27.
[31] Feagans, "Atlanta Theatre Segregation," 212.
[32] Feagans, "Atlanta Theatre Segregation," 211-212.
[33] Feagans, "Atlanta Theatre Segregation," 212.
[34] "Theater Bars 7 Integration Poll Takers," *The Atlanta Constitution,* 13 October 1961, 30.
[35] Feagans, "Atlanta Theatre Segregation," 208-218.

theatre integration more than other public spaces and why there was heightened anxiety regarding this specific issue.

Atlanta was not alone in this trend of delayed and prolonged movie theatre integration. The Carolina Theatre in Durham, North Carolina only allowed African Americans admission to strictly segregated areas— up 97 steps to the balcony section known as the "Buzzard's Roost."[36] This section was uncomfortable, overcrowded, had terrible visibility, and "assigned the viewers to an arena that connoted public humiliation."[37] The discomfort of the Buzzard's Roost was part of what motivated the formation of Black theatres to fit the needs, desires, and expectations of a black movie-going population. Eventually, however, Black theatres that had once provided a comfortable sanctuary for Black audiences were no longer enjoyable because of the limited screen offerings.[38] Black theatres lacked financial resources and facilities which meant major Hollywood productions were not being shown at these theatres. Instead, "race movies" made by Black production teams and featuring Black actors were shown. Charlene Regester explains that "race movies were made with a limited and unstable amount of capital; they were distributed in a limited market to theaters catering exclusively African American audiences; and their appeal as entertainment was less than that of the more technically sophisticated Hollywood pictures."[39]A perspective not explored within this paper is an investigation into the opinions surrounding theatre desegregation held by independent Black theatre managers and those who supported Black theatres as community spaces. An interesting concept for additional future research would be to compare these reactions with the push by so many Black moviegoers to desegregate theatres rather than attend Black theatres. Those working towards desegregation were seeking to create what they viewed as the best experience for Black audiences.[40]

In February of 1962, the Durham Youth Chapter of the NAACP petitioned Durham's city council to desegregate the government-owned Carolina Theatre. Following this, the Durham Sun reported that theater management said "the integration question is 'not negotiable now.'"[41] A large-scale protest followed in 1962, during which 200 demonstrators continuously asked for tickets, not stopping even when they were refused, and they eventually rushed into the lobby to continue the demonstration.[42] Later into the summer, eight students filed a suit in US Middle District Court aimed at ending racial discrimination at the city-owned Carolina Theatre.[43] In the suit, they asked for the barring of all policies and practices of racial segregation. Over a year later, the Carolina Theatre was finally desegregated.

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[36] Regester, "From the Buzzard's Roost," 114.
[37] Regester, "From the Buzzard's Roost," 115.
[38] Regester, "From the Buzzard's Roost," 119.
[39] Charlene Regester, "The African-American Press and Race Movies, 1909–1929" in *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle: African-American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era*, ed. Pearl Bowser, Jane Gaines, and Charles Musser (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 41.
[40] Janna Jones, *The Southern Movie Palace: Rise, Fall, and Resurrection* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 49.
[41] Jones, *The Southern Movie Palace,* 50.
[42] Jones, *The Southern Movie Palace,* 52.
[43] "8 Students Ask Court to Desegregate Theatre: Workshop Precedes New Drive," *The Afro-American,* 28 July 1962, 3.

In other southern states, such as Tennessee and Arkansas, movie theatre desegregation also occurred only after other public spaces had been integrated. In Nashville, it was announced in 1961 that "selected Negroes are being admitted to the four downtown motion picture theatres on an experimental basis." This was after the city had ended segregation of the municipal transit system, public schools, lunch counters, and department stores.[44] In Pine Bluff, Arkansas, in 1963, the decision to desegregate five movie theatres only came after lunch counters, schools, and parks had already been negotiated to be integrated.[45]

That movie theatre desegregation in the South was drawn out and delayed past the integration of other spaces was directly due to the perceived sexuality of movie theatres. Returning to the survey conducted in Atlanta, patrons were asked what brought them to the theatre. However, audience members were only offered pre-written options as answers instead of them getting to explain their own reasons. The options given were that patrons attended theatres for: the type of movie shown, the comfortableness of the theatre, the proximity of the theatre to their homes, or the attractiveness of the theatres.[46] The patrons were not given the option to say that they enjoyed going to the theatre because it was, for example, a good spot for a date or to spend romantic time with a significant other. Had this question been more open-ended, I believe that it would become evident how movie theatres operated as spaces for both active socializing and romantic intimacy.

With the darkness and the proximity of the seats, the theatre was an ideal spot for intimate private exchanges. Lauren Rabinovitz explained that for movie theatres since their inception "peril lay in the venue's capacity for unsupervised heterosexual interaction."[47] The theatre was a space that emphasized fantasy. Through on-screen fiction and adventures, movies presented the opportunity to envision a different future for oneself and for the collective group experiencing the film.[48] The theatre spaces were designed to create social exchange and pleasure, except in segregated theatres which were specifically set up to avoid these dynamics by having Black patrons in the balconies.[49]

From their earliest conception, the movie theatre as an entertainment space has been shrouded with concerns of immorality and obscenity. Nickelodeons in the early 1900s were popular spaces for immigrants and the working class to attend, due to the cheap ticket prices and the unsupervised nature of the theatre. In the early years of the nickelodeon, it was said that the theatre "occupied a kind of urban liminal space that resisted dominant culture." Additionally, the nickelodeon was considered a site for "a newly ambiguous commercial relationship between the

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[44] "4 Nashville Movies Drop Color Bar On Experimental Basis: Agreement Is …" *Philadelphia Tribune* 2 May 1961, 5.
[45] "Pine Bluff Opens Parks, Schools, and Movies to Negroes," *The Tri-State Defender,* 10 August 1963.
[46] Janet Feagans, "Atlanta Theatre Segregation," 213.
[47] Lauren Rabinovitz, *For the Love of Pleasure: Women, Movies, and Culture in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (Rutgers University Press, 1998), 112.
[48] Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 23-24.
[49] Cara Caddoo, *Envisioning Freedom: Cinema and the Building of Modern Black Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 65.

sexes."[50] The resistance to heterosocial interactions in the new mass culture amusements of the twentieth century indicated anxiety surrounding the ongoings within the theatre. *American Magazine* wrote about the dangers of darkness arising from the "indiscriminate acquaintance" and "foul air in the theaters" that darkness covered for.[51] Regulations frequently focused on censorship of on-screen content, but this did not always recognize or reform conditions within the theatre space. From their origins, movie theatres provoked anxiety of illicit sensual experiences in dark, intimate settings.

Especially in the southern United States, the theatre was depicted as a morally corrupt place, specifically for young children. Gypsy Smith, an evangelist preacher, spoke in Macon, Georgia preaching on the topic "Christians and Their Relation to the Amusements of Today." He declared, "I believe the people in our churches— I won't call them Christians, for they are not— who are theatergoers, who dance and who play cards, are doing more to damn the life of the churches than all the harlots and saloons in the world." While this preacher was also talking about stage plays at the theatre along with motion pictures, his stance was clear— the theatre was "no place for a person of delicacy and refinement."[52] Fundamentalist Protestantism in the early twentieth century rejected the new modern culture of amusement, a trend best exemplified in the concerns surrounding moviegoing.

Similarly, in Lexington, Kentucky, the Board of Education characterized the movies in 1916 by saying they are often "immoral, degrading and injurious in the extreme to the welfare of the people, especially the young."[53] Concern for the younger generations attending theatres was common as the movies were presented as a dangerous, unmonitored, and morally ambiguous social space. In New York, there was a city-wide campaign to stop unescorted children younger than sixteen from attending the movies. This drive was launched by the police department's Juvenile Aid Bureau and headed by Byrnes MacDonald. MacDonald argued that "The physical hazard presented by large groups of children gathering unprotected by adult supervision is a danger that cannot be easily overlooked. Fire, stampede or panic among young unsupervised children might cause great loss of life, and the morals of our children must be protected from the vultures who prey upon the youth within the dark confines of these public gathering places. Therefore, until some adequate provision for adult supervision of children within our public places is provided by law, it is my intention to enforce the present statute as completely as possible."[54] Even before movie theatres were more of the mass entertainment phenomenon they would become in the 1950s and 1960s, they were depicted as spaces of moral concern and anxiety-inducing sites of youth engagement.

The fear of intimate social interactions between the races was terrifying to many white southerners. Susan Cahn writes that the "mixing" of races "threatened the core beliefs and social

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[50] Lauren Rabinovitz, *For the Love of Pleasure,* 106, 120.
[51] Steven Joseph Ross, *Movies and American Society,* 2nd ed. (Malden: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2014), 28.
[52] "Church People Who Play Cards, Dance and Attend Theater Raked over Coals. 'Doing More to Damn Life of Church," *Macon Telegraph*, 15 January 1916.
[53] "Lewd Movies Condemned by Board of Education," *The Lexington Herald,* 29 February 1916.
[54] "59 Theatres Caught in Police Drive to Bar Young Children at Movies, *"The New York Times,* 5 January 1936, 6.

hierarchies that white southerners clung to as the basis of their "way of life."[55] When speaking about concerts, school classes, and dances, Cahn mentions a "heterosocial youth culture beyond the control of adults." The fear of these shared physical spaces and the potential sexual "mixing" that could occur was clearly present in the struggle for movie theatre desegregation. Movie theatres were consistently pushed to the end of the list of spaces allowed to be integrated. Clearly, southern whites desperately tried to avoid the creation of shared intimate spaces that had such a specific focus on dating culture.

To understand how this anxiety of the theatre venture presented itself later on in the 1950s and 60s it is helpful to briefly examine perspectives on another form of amusement popular among postwar young people: rock 'n' roll. This form of music allowed for sites of interracial interaction on the dance floor and at concerts. Whites' anxieties about rock 'n' roll were based on fears of sexual relationships between races. As Cahn explains, "with rock 'n' roll in their midst and school integration looming on the horizon, white adults faced the stark reality that it was their own emboldened daughters who might well initiate sexual "mixing" or "integration" in choosing boys to date or marry."[56] The popularity of rock music along with the integration of schools created deep concern in the southern United States. With teenagers having all of these newfound opportunities to interact with other races, many white adults felt that the social order of the South was being threatened. Movie theatres presented yet another source of potential corruption for southern youth.

When examining reactions to the space of the movie theatre, the complexities of drive-in theatres further the argument that the sexuality of movie theatre spaces was a contentious and divisive topic in the South. Drive-in theatres, known also as "ozoners" for their open-air atmosphere, were starkly different physical spaces than the traditional "hardtop" theatres and so present a distinct conversation regarding racial dynamics at the movies. Drive-in theatres first proliferated in the 1950s and peaked in the 1960s in connection with the postwar baby boom and the increased motorization of America. In 1960, around 5,000 drive-ins operated in America, compared to 13,200 conventional theaters, and Variety reported that this contributed 23 percent of annual box office gross.[57]

To begin with, one can look at the popularity of ozoners as opposed to hardtops in terms of attendance. It is difficult to have an exact measurement of how many people attended drive-ins versus indoor theatres. However, many surveys have attempted to present this data. In a well-publicized study published in *Look Magazine*, Alfred Politz claimed that 23,600,000 people attended a motion picture during one week in February of 1957. Albert Sindlinger— who specialized in gathering film industry statistics— claimed that "when people are asked if they attended a motion-picture show, they refer only to a four-wall theatre." Sindlinger explained that since the public viewed the drive-in as its own space, distinct from the movie theatre generally,

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[55] Susan K Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings*, 308.
[56] Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings,* 244.
[57] Thomas Doherty, "The Segregated Past of Drive-In Movie Theaters," *The Hollywood Reporter*, 27 June 2020, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/segregated-past-drive-movie-theaters-guest-column-1300306/. Accessed on 29 October 2021.

they needed to be asked specifically about outdoor movie attendance. Based on this conclusion, Sindlinger estimated that during the time frame that Politz was looking at, over 5 million people attended drive-in theatres. Sindlinger explained that many drive-ins are open even in February in the South and that in the North the drive-in theatres were open during the colder months because of in-car heaters.[58]

In Kerry Segrave's work on the history of drive-ins, she publishes the *Film Daily Year Book's* report on monthly film attendance by type of theatre. This charts attendance from 1952 to 1954 and indicates how in the summer months the attendance numbers at indoor and outdoor theatres were very close. In July of 1952, according to this report, 36.3 million people attended indoor theatres and 28.5 million went to drive-ins. Similarly, in August of 1952 it was said that 39.6 million and 40.9 million attended indoor and outdoor theaters respectively.[59] Drive-ins, then, must be understood as an essential component to movie-going in the 1950s. Their popularity warrants an examination into audience demographics, social tensions, and desegregation conversation of drive-ins.

Some argue that the drive-in theatre was seen as an inclusive space, "appealing to those who felt excluded from indoor cinemas."[60] A drive-in theatre meant that patrons could watch from the comfort of their own cars, could converse with those who they went with, and could move about more freely. In 1945, the president of a group of drive-in theatres wrote that "the drive-in audience consisted largely of those who had not been in the habit of going to the cinema, including: mothers with small children (about 80 percent); laborers and factory workers who, coming from a hard day's work in old clothes, did not want to go to the bother of dressing but wanted to relax in the open air; stout people who found the average theatre chairs uncomfortable; elderly people; people in ill-health; cripples and other shut-ins."[61] A *Variety* article explained that many attendees were there so that if their small children had a teary outburst it would be less embarrassing. It was concluded that 70% of the audience at a drive-in theatre would not go to a regular indoor movie venue.[62] The drive-in presented a new way of watching a movie, which was less physically restricting in its open-air setup.

Along with the new drive-in audience made up of those who did not typically go to the hardtop theatre, sometimes drive-in theatres were depicted as drawing more Black patrons than indoor theatres. An article from 1949, titled "Ozoners' Big Negro Draw," reported that "in many sections of the South where segregation in regular houses is strictly enforced, the rule is not applied to the ozoners. Because of this, Negroes flock to the open-air theatres which are attractive de-luxe affairs as compared to the second-rate flickeries generally available to them."[63] There could be no architectural separation of the races in the same way that there was with

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[58] "Politz vs Sindlinger Ticket Count." *Variety*. Vol. 207, No. 5. July 17, 1957.
[59] Kerry Segrave, *Drive-In Theaters: A History From Their Inception in 1933* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co, 1992), 237.
[60] Guy Barefoot. "My Search for 'Passion Pits with Pix': Cinema History and 1950s Drive-In Audiences," *Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 16, no 1. (May 2019): 824.
[61] Barefoot, "My Search for 'Passion Pits with Pix'," 833.
[62] "Ozoners' Big Negro Draw." *Variety,* Vol 175, No. 8. August 3, 1949.
[63] "Ozoners' Big Negro Draw." *Variety*.

indoor theatres' balcony sections. However, as will be discussed later, this did not mean the drive-in was free of racial segregation.

One reason for this emphasis on an inclusive outdoor theatre was that it constituted an attempt to switch up the narrative of drive-ins as "Passion Pits with Pix." This term was used frequently to describe the sexual nature of drive-in theatres, specifically among teenagers. The drive-in theatre provided both a public and a private space. It offered an informality and privacy closer to the experience of watching TV at home. However, there was also a socializing element to drive-ins that contradicted this notion of privacy. It was 'this element of forbidden mixing' that 'led to the perception of drive-ins as "passion pits", places of illicit contact.'"[64] Drive-ins' label as "passion pits" came with the understanding that they "drew the romancers,"[65] meaning the teenagers who were more interested in hook-ups in the privacy of their personal vehicles rather than the on-screen entertainment. Ladies Home Journal, in a special 'Profile of Youth,' interviewed eighteen-year-old Maxine Wallace from Mississippi, on her dating life. She pointed to a new drive-in theatre as a place where "everybody is too busy necking to watch the movie."[66]The romantic and sexual possibilities of the back rows of a drive-in brought hordes of teenage couples to their local "passion pits." All night drive-ins that operated from "dusk to dawn" were said by a committee made up of Theatre Owners of America to be "putting back the bad label drive-ins have fought to get rid of." One member of this group explained his disdain for the late hours of the drive-in by pointing to complaints of troublemaking and immorality. "We cannot feel that one or two nights of a temporary jump in the gross is worth such an aftermath," he explained.[67] Drive-in theatres hoped to avoid the label of unscrupulous sexual playgrounds but nevertheless, teenagers looking for private intimate spaces represented a large portion of their patrons and secured the title of "Passion Pits with Pix" for the venues.

Along with being sites of teenage sexuality, drive-ins were also spaces of fraught racial tension despite their presentation as a more inclusive theatre space. While it was initially difficult to plan for segregation at drive-ins because there was not the same architectural ability to create a Buzzard's Roost, drive-ins soon had their own method of segregation. Black patrons were either turned away entirely and denied entrance, or they were restricted to special sections of the parking lot. To protest this segregation, across the South there were similar "stand-ins" of continuous rotating ticket buying that occurred at indoor theatres. These were known as "drive-ins" at the drive-ins. The form of protest involved driving up and blocking the entrance until one was sold a ticket. In 1960 in Winston-Salem, nine cars went to each of the three segregated drives-ins in town. They were refused admission at each turn, so they just continued to back up and cycle back through, inhibiting any other patrons to get through.[68]

Drive-ins were not only segregated but as a venue, they also posed unique dangers for provoking racial violence. In a two-sentence newspaper article from 1957, the following was

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[64] Barefoot, "My Search for 'Passion Pits with Pix'," 834.
[65] "'Passion Pits with Pix' in Danger of Revival Via All-Nite Drive-Ins." *Variety*. Vol 192, No. 9. November 4, 1953.
[66] Barefoot, "My Search for 'Passion Pits with Pix,'" 828.
[67] "'Passion Pits with Pix' in Danger of Revival Via All-Nite Drive-Ins." *Variety*.
[68] Doherty, "The Segregated Past of Drive-In Movie Theaters."

reported: "A five-foot-high wooden cross was set afire recently in front of Springs Road Drive-In Theatre in rural Catawba County. "Island in the Sun" (20th), with a mixed white and Negro cast, was current at the ozoner."[69] Thomas Doherty explains that the "open-air nature and nighttime schedule of the venues proved particularly incendiary — and inviting — to the Ku Klux Klan."[70]

Eventually, around 1962 drive-ins began to slowly desegregate similarly to indoor theatres. Black moviegoers were first admitted during low attendance matinees, then to nighttime shows on weekdays, and eventually also on weekends. There was no advanced publicity of this integration in order to avoid the inevitable protests.[71] Just as was the case with indoor theatres, this desegregation occurred throughout the South long after other public spaces had been integrated.[72] Despite drive-ins' attempt to market themselves as a more inclusive space fit for "shut-ins" and families with young children, they remained deeply segregated, creating similar racial tensions of the hardtop theatres. The label of drive-ins as "passion pits" meant that they had an association with sexuality that was even more amplified than the indoor theatre. I assert that it is precisely this sexuality that prolonged the desegregation of the drive-in just like the traditional movie venues.

To better understand the sexualizing of desegregation and why it is so connected to the movie culture of the South, one must also look at tensions regarding on-screen interracial content. As seen from the Ku Klux Klan's cross-burning at the drive-in theatre, interracial depictions on-screen created volatile reactions. The film being shown at the drive-in on that occasion was *Island in the Sun*, a story of interracial romance set on the fictional island, Santa Marta. The reactions to this film indicate how movies involving interracial relationships were treated in the southern United States. A photograph from Charlotte, North Carolina in 1957 visualizes the racial tension over movies. The photo shows cloaked Klan members holding signs that read "We protest the showing of this integrated picture "Island in the Sun" in N.C." and then Ku Klux Klan is written at the bottom of the sign.[73] *Variety* reported that 20th Century Fox was dealing with the repercussions of an almost total southern boycott of *Island in the Sun.* The production company discussed either editing the film or putting out a special southern edition of the movie so that southerners who were furious at the presentation of interracial interactions on-screen would agree to put their money towards buying tickets to see the film. The article states that 20th Century Studios was "questioning the wisdom, in the current precarious market, of making "provocative" films that, by their very nature, alienate a good section of the badly needed domestic audience."[74]

*Island in the Sun* was far from the only film that faced southern boycotts and bans based on reactions to interracial interactions on-screen. Another prominent example is the film

[69] "Cross Burning at 'Sun'." *Variety*. Vol. 208, No. 5. October 9, 1957.
[70] Doherty, "The Segregated Past of Drive-In Movie Theaters."
[71] Doherty, "The Segregated Past of Drive-In Movie Theaters."
[72] Barefoot, "My Search for 'Passion Pits with Pix'," 833.
[73] "KKK pickets Charlotte's Visualite Theater for showing 'Island in the Sun'," Photograph. Charlotte, North Carolina, 1957, https://www.cmstory.org/exhibits/african-american-album-volume-2/1958-kkk-pickets-visulite-theater. Accessed on 31 October 2021.
[74] "Racial Romance in 'Sun' Upsets the Neighbors." *Variety*. Vol 207, No. 1. June 5, 1957.

*Brewster's Millions* which was banned in Memphis, Tennessee. Lloyd Binford, chairman of the Memphis Board of Motion Picture Censors, spoke adamantly against the film explaining that it depicted too much familiarity between the races and was "inimical to public welfare." He stated, "the movie has Rochester, the Negro comedian, in an important role. He has too familiar a way about him and the picture presents too much social equality and racial mixture. We don't have any trouble with racial problems down here, and we don't intend to encourage any by showing movies like this." The board ruled that there would be no "mixed" pictures anywhere in town but films with all-Black casts could be shown at Black movie theatres.[75] In almost every racial ban Binford imposed he used the phrase "social equality" as his rationale to ban the film. Sociologist Gunnar Myrdal studied the widespread use of the phrase in the South and explained that aversion to "social equality" must be "understood as a precaution to hinder miscegenation." Ellen Scott explained how "social equality" —as understood in the South— threatened to bring miscegenation and "further threatened to undermine the racial hierarchy."[76] A careful study of Binford's rulings on films reveals that each decision he made banning a film came down to anxieties around interracial relationships.[77]

Binford wrote a response from the censor board about the film *No Way Out* (1950). The film starred Sidney Poitier who played a Black doctor treating a racist white criminal, all while there is tension of near race riot. Binford could have written about how the film might have inspired race riots, a topic that had "ostensibly mandated his entire racial policy." Instead, he chose to link the film to miscegenation. "Do our white people and especially the actors have to be so dumb that they cannot comprehend the subtlety of this communistic plot of mongrelization *to destroy* them!" wrote Bindford. "We are having a rash of so-called socialites marrying negroes or hybrids," he continued. "The most extreme penalty of the law should be applied" to those who "violate the racial integrity and purity of both races, in these messegenation [sic] matings."[78] Additionally, Pastor M.E. Moore stated at the Jackson Heights Missionary Baptist Church, that *Brown v Board*, "makes possible the mongrelization of the white and negro races."[79] This sentiment, along with Binford's statements from the censor board, indicates a clear sexual reading of integration, both on-screen and in the public. Regulations on movie content and the segregation of spaces occupied by young people, such as schools and theatres, indicate the desire to control and monitor sexuality as a key dimension of the Jim Crow South.

The Memphis Committee on Community Relations eventually worked to desegregate theatres without any publicity so as to not cause turmoil and bad press. After downtown stores and local schools had been integrated, movie theatres in Memphis followed in 1962.[80] Censorship of films did continue beyond this point of desegregation. However, censorship was

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[75] Philip T. Hartung, "Trillions for Brewster," *The Commonweal,* Vol. 42. May 11, 1945.
[76] Ellen C. Scott, *Cinema Civil Rights: Regulation, Repression, and Race in the Classical Hollywood Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 6.
[77] Whitney Strub, "Black and White and Banned All Over: Race, Censorship and Obscenity in Postwar Memphis," *Journal of Social History* 40, no. 3 (2007): 694.
[78] Strub, "Black and White and Banned All Over," 695.
[79] Strub, "Black and White and Banned All Over," 697.
[80] Strub, "Black and White and Banned All Over," 696.

viewed critically by many who were horrified by the banning and editing of movies across the South. The Motion Picture Association of America stated that "To censor movies is tantamount to denying freedom of the press. We contend it is much worse than that. Movie censorship based upon racial prejudice is totalitarian bigotry; it is a vicious form of thought control."[81] Films were being banned for depictions of "social equality" or for fair treatment of Black characters in the southern United States. Prejudice and pressure from the South influenced Hollywood's film policies as John McManus and Louis Kronenberger explained "it may be stated fairly that the white, Southern film audience, totaling at the most one-eighth of the total American film audience, is responsible for Hollywood's wary policy on treatment of the Negro in films."[82] The Supreme Court attempted to regulate how films would be censored by creating a clearly delineated test of obscenity. On June 24th, 1957, *Roth v. U.S.* was decided and it was said that obscenity consisted only of material "utterly without redeeming social importance," and that "all ideas having even the slightest redeeming social importance" were protected. Nevertheless, a week after the *Roth* decision, the Memphis Board of Censors declared *Island in the Sun* obscene, ignoring the Supreme Court ruling.[83]

It is undeniable that Southern movie censorship was connected to anxiety around interracial relationships. This fear of miscegenation, as it is presented in the form of censoring on-screen content, was a crucial factor behind the prolonged desegregation process of movie theatres in the South. I argue that this fear of intimacy, specifically between races, is precisely the reason that movie theatres had a uniquely extended desegregation timeline. From the movie theatre's earliest stages as nickelodeons, their darkened private indoor settings generated fear of immorality and dangerous situations for young moviegoers. The fear of "mixing" in nickelodeons was present since there were not the same regulations of separated social classes within the theatre as there was expected to be in society outside the cinema. Later on, with the rise of entertainment such as rock 'n' roll, interracial mixing in amusement and leisure became a central fear for white southern adults. They were terrified of what these shared entertainment spaces and interests between different races would mean for the youth of the day. Movie theatres amplified these fears by taking the same anxieties about intimacy and adding a private darkened environment associated with teenage dating culture.

Drive-ins, with their label as "passion pits", further solidified the reputation of movie culture being connected with youth sexuality. While not the same intimate indoor space, the privacy of automobiles, and their association with dating, not to mention their ubiquity in American life, meant drive-ins were a hub for sexual and romantic relationships. It is impossible to separate sex and intimacy from a discussion of movie theatre culture and it is this connection that makes the desegregation of this public space uniquely situated. Theatres were perceived as bringing community members together "across class and gender lines into common spaces that

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[81] L. Baynard Whitney, "Vicious Censorship-." *Arkansas State Press*, 16 May 1952.
[82] John T. McManus and Louis Kronenberger, "Motion Pictures, the Theater, and Race Relations," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 244, no. 1 (1946): 152–158.
[83] Strub, "Black and White and Banned All Over," 697.

were constructed for the purpose of social interaction and pleasure.[84]" It was exactly this capability to create an environment that promoted pleasurable, intimate interactions that generated such deep anxiety in white southerners.

Desegregation generally throughout the South was a long grueling process that did not resolve entirely when laws were passed. De-facto segregation continued long after decisions such as *Brown v Board of Education* and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. However, as this paper indicates, movie theatres in particular were desegregated at a slower pace, long after other public spaces in the South, such as schools, lunch counters, and public parks, and at a slower pace.

The discussion of movie theatre integration reveals broader concerns of sexuality as a part of the Jim Crow South. Young people's sexuality was highly regulated during the postwar culture of domestic containment and motivated by the desire to maintain sexual "normalcy." As dating culture became more widespread in the 1950s so did the urge to regulate spaces of leisure that had sexual connotations. With the future of American prosperity and stability at stake, white southern adults were terrified of their teenagers finding entertainment in dark movie theatres where there could be unsupervised intimate interactions, including potential interracial relationships. The regulation of the on-screen content at movies reveals that fear of miscegenation dominated the anxiety of the South, highlighting the sorts of worries that prolonged movie theatre integration. The recent acknowledgment that sexuality must be studied as a critical component of civil rights history adds to the discussion of movie theatre integration. This struggle was one that involved youth culture, the importance of leisure, regulating sexuality, and racial tensions throughout the South.

Finally, returning to that disastrous midnight showing in High Point, North Carolina, it is evident that the battle for movie theatre desegregation was a struggle for the privilege of leisure and respect in entertainment spaces. As fourteen white patrons sat comfortably in the orchestra seats, white supremacy prevailed as the privilege to enjoy leisure was forcibly taken away from thousands of Black moviegoers. Black Americans fought to move out of the Buzzard's Roost and away from underfunded theatres to appreciate movies from a comfortable and accepting space. Entertainment culture presents desires, fantasies, and displays key social dynamics of the world around it. Through a study of the spaces that allow for entertainment to exist, a window is opened to assess the larger tensions of the society that enjoys the content. The distinctly complex struggle to desegregate movie theatres paints a powerful picture of the anxieties that plagued the southern United States.

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[84] Caddoo, *Envisioning Freedom,* 65.

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