

“To work, write, sing and fight for women’s liberation”
Proto-Feminist Currents in the American Left, 1946-1961

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For my mother

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Introduction

For over fifteen years, the words written for women, and the words women used when they talked to each other, while their husbands sat on the other side of the room and talked shop or politics or septic tanks, were about problems with their children, or how to keep their husbands happy, or improve their children's school, or cook chicken or make slipcovers. Nobody argued whether women were inferior or superior to men; they were simply different....The "woman problem" in America no longer existed.

Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 1963.

In 1963, Betty Friedan published the now best-selling and classic feminist text, *The Feminine Mystique*. Billed as “the book we have been waiting for,” it resonated with and empowered many middle-class white women who identified with the domestic oppression and disillusionment that Friedan described.¹ Almost half a century later, *The Feminine Mystique* continues to influence popular memory and historical scholarship about the trajectory of American feminism. Historians commonly view its publication as a turning point in women’s history for marking, if not igniting, the start of Second-Wave feminism, the revival of activism for women’s rights in the 1960s. However, Friedan’s critique of the pervasive sexism of postwar society not only helped to bring women into the mass movement of the 1960s, but also left them with the task of reviving a feminist project that had apparently vanished. As Friedan articulated what she called “the problem that had no name,” she also declared that “for over fifteen years....the ‘woman problem’ in America no longer existed.” Her periodization of “fifteen years” alluded to her belief that women been forced back into home after the end of World War II to don aprons and play the roles of

¹ Ashley Montagu, quoted from praise on front cover of the original paperback version of *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963).

housewife and mother. Thus, *The Feminine Mystique* framed its call for gender equality around the image of dormant domestic womanhood. As a compelling example, Friedan's self-described awakening as a suburban housewife and subsequent transformation to feminist leader epitomized this simplistic narrative.

However, a careful reexamination of Betty Friedan's life challenges the perception that her understanding of sexism was simply the result of accumulated domestic unfulfillment. Historian Daniel Horowitz's groundbreaking biography of Friedan and her writing of *The Feminine Mystique* suggests that the origins of her feminism were neither accidental nor incidental.² Instead, Horowitz reveals that Friedan's activities as a labor journalist in the 1940s directly exposed her to the struggles of women workers, radical leftist politics, and a progressive feminist agenda. In fact, Horowitz believes that Friedan authored a 1952 pamphlet for the left-wing union United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America entitled *UE Fights for Women Workers*, which forcefully argued that the "real reason for discrimination" in the workplace was that "big business has found it profitable to maintain the old superstition that women are 'inferior' to men."³ Not only did the pamphlet attack the basis of rate discrimination against women, but it also acknowledged the long history of women's fight for workplace justice. This reconstruction of the development of Friedan's feminism in an older left tradition does not serve to refute the importance of *The Feminine Mystique* but to recover the origins of the powerful woman's movement that it seemingly launched.

² Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique: The American Left, the Cold War, and Modern Feminism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998).

³ United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America, "UE Fights for Women Workers [1952]," in *Public Women, Public Words: A Documentary History of American Feminism, Volume II*, eds. Dawn Keetly and John Pettegrew (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 439.

Accordingly, this thesis is not about Betty Friedan but an exploration of feminist thought in the radical Left circles of postwar America prior to the well-documented surge in activism for gender equality in the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, it is also part of a larger revisionist project that seeks to fill the gaps in the conventional “waves” model of American feminism that leaves the years between the passage of the 19th amendment and the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* unaccounted for. The recent work of historians such as Horowitz has uncovered evidence that points to women’s sustained activism for gender equality across the 20th century and the need for a “long-view” of the feminist movement to better understand its successes and failures.⁴ In the 1930s, activist housewives organized boycotts for price controls and led the consumer movement to raise living standards while working women fought for unionization.⁵ In the 1940s, women trade unionists campaigned for better jobs, equal pay, and social supports for child care.⁶

Beginning in the late 1930s, many women also took part in the broad progressive coalition known as the Popular Front, a term that characterized Communist Party (CP) chairman Earl Browder’s efforts to reach out towards the mainstream with his slogan of “Communism is 20th Century Americanism.” During these years, the CP’s membership

⁴ Nancy MacLean, “Gender is Powerful: The Long Reach of Feminism,” *Organization of Historians Magazine of History* 20, no. 5 (October 2006): 19-23; Linda Nicholson, “Feminism in ‘Waves’: Useful Metaphor or Not?” *New Politics* 12, no. 4 (Winter 2010).

⁵ Landon Storrs, “Left-Feminism, The Consumer Movement, and Red Scare Politics in the United States, 1935-1960,” *Journal of Women’s History* 18 no. 3 (2006): 40-67. Storrs argues that a “feminist, anti-racist, and pro-labor” consumer movement and female social scientists and policy experts influenced New Deal legislation and drew backlash during the Red Scare. Also, see Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁶ For the development of labor feminism, see Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women’s Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004) and Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900-1965* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

significantly grew and diversified with the addition of intellectuals, professionals, native-born workers, and women. Whereas women only constituted 10% of the CP membership in 1930, they constituted nearly 50% by 1943.⁷ Historian Michael Denning interprets the Popular Front as a powerful movement for the “social democratization” of American culture forged around “anti-fascism, anti-lynching, and the industrial unionism of the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations].”⁸ Though issues of sex and gender were rarely at the forefront, the Popular Front united working-class and middle-class women in mass action protests and organizing for various social justice causes that promoted egalitarian ideals. While mired in a culture of femininity and motherhood, Popular Front activism nonetheless allowed women to gain a sense of their collective potential.⁹

Despite the growing collection of scholarship on the continued struggle for gender equality after the victory of women’s suffrage, the postwar era, specifically the 1950s, remains characterized as a decidedly antifeminist time. Considering the conservative backlash and political repression of the period, this interpretation is logical and not entirely inaccurate. The U.S. census documents that the divorce rates fell to a low while more couples were getting married than ever before and at younger ages. Similarly, women were having more children and sooner after marriage, leading to the creation of the baby boom generation.¹⁰ Historian Elaine Tyler May explains this renewed and intensified domestic impulse to be the product of Cold War containment ideology, which she argues was an

⁷ James R. Bartlett, “Rethinking the Popular Front,” *Rethinking Marxism* 21 no. 4 (2009):540.

⁸ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: the Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997), xvii-xviii.

⁹ Constance Coiner, *Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel le Sueur*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 39-71.

¹⁰ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

American phenomenon as much as it was foreign policy.¹¹ Drawing from surveys completed by white middle-class couples, May argues that the dominance of the male-breadwinner nuclear family norm eliminated viable alternatives. Sexual containment and a reproductive consensus characterized marital relations. Men and women returned to the home because it provided security, personal fulfillment, and a therapeutic ethos that offered private solutions to social problems. May's portrait of the Cold War family, then, renders women willing actors in their return to the home and the personal sacrifices they made for their husbands and children.

Ironically, historians who have recovered women's role in the rise of McCarthyism have complicated this view of gender and postwar repression to emphasize how women's conservative activism challenged the boundaries of their gender roles. Housewives took part in local politics by forming women's clubs and neighborhood associations to promote patriotism and a militant anticommunism.¹² These women advocated for women's political participation in a right-wing agenda by glorifying women's roles as mothers and homemakers and the moral virtues of women. Though the National Women's Party (NWP), the self-declared feminist heirs of the suffragists, existed through the 1950s, it also became an elitist anticommunist group with anti-Semitic and racist tendencies.¹³ As its membership dwindled, only a small core of affluent older white women remained who preferred to maintain the group's exclusivity. Though isolated from other women's groups, the NWP continued to work to nominate qualified women for political office and lobby for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in Congress.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Michelle Nickerson, *Wives, Mothers, and the Red Menace: Conservative Women and the Crusade Against Communism* (Boulder, CO: University of Colorado Press, 2008).

¹³ Leila J. Rupp and Verta A. Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums: The American Women's Rights Movement, 1945 to the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

Women's postwar experiences clearly extended beyond the suburban fifties housewife portrayed on popular family sitcoms. Women not only found ways to enter the political arena using Cold War rhetoric, but also defied the conservative consensus through their participation in the civil rights movement, peace activism, and a range of other progressive civic reforms. Though they often fell back on a maternalist justification of their activism, they nonetheless pushed against the confines of the home. Historians have reassessed the conformity of American culture in the 1950s to uncover undercurrents of change and the diversity of women's public and private roles. This ongoing project is exemplified by the volume *Not June Cleaver*, a collection of essays that illustrates the heterogeneity of women's lives in the postwar era and, thus, questions the pervasiveness of the "feminine mystique."¹⁴ After a thorough examination of popular women's magazines during the postwar era, editor Joanne Meyerowitz finds that, contrary to popular belief, the media promoted both the domestic and the nondomestic and was often contradictory in its messages. Contributor Susan Hartmann details the rapidly increasing numbers of women working outside of the home, which reached 40% by the end of the 1950s.¹⁵ The spectrum of women's experiences as immigrant workers, trade unionists and peace activists and their sexual and cultural rebellion as lesbians, prostitutes and Beat authors indicate the complex ways in which gender played out in postwar society. Despite the prevailing power structures and cultural norms, the 1950s emerges as a decade of neither complacency nor consensus.

¹⁴ Joanne J. Meyerowitz, ed. *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994). Also, see Susan Lynn, *Progressive Women in Conservative Times: Racial Justice, Peace, and Feminism, 1945 to the 1960s* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

¹⁵ Susan Hartmann, "Women's Employment and the Domestic Ideal in the Early Cold War Years," in *Not June Cleaver*, 86.

While this revisionist historiography highlights the untold stories of the many women who lived outside of the stereotypical depictions of the postwar family, my thesis will specifically document the existence of feminist thought and activity in the American Left from 1946-1961. Thus, this thesis is confined to the analysis of communist, socialist, anarchist and other independent left-wing groups that operated outside of mainstream American politics. Likewise, the scope of this thesis is necessarily limited to the analysis of left-wing women's engagement with the various dimensions of women's rights and their expressions (or lack of) of a proto-feminist consciousness. This excludes discussions of left-wing women's participation in civil rights, peace, and other radical activism if not explicitly linked to issues of gender.

In attempting to understand feminist thought in the Left before the Second-Wave, it is necessary to address the fact that left-wing women did not identify with the "feminist" label. In fact, they went to great lengths to disparage "feminism" as it was associated with the NWP and their efforts to pass the ERA. To those on the left, "feminism" was a bourgeois ideology that limited the scope of women's liberation to attaining legal equality with men. Thus, they perceived it to be an individualistic approach that did not address the social, economic, and racial dimensions of women's oppression. Many factions of the left commonly used the historically socialist phrase "the woman question" in reference to the issue of women's rights. Historian Mari Jo Buhle summarizes the term to refer to the dilemma of "how could women make claims on behalf of the liberation of their sex and simultaneously, with equal commitment, advance the struggles of the working class?"¹⁶ Indeed, this was a major point of contention in both the Communist and Socialist left and

¹⁶ Mari Jo Buhle, *Women and the American Left: A Guide to Sources* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1983), viii.

over time, it appeared to be adopted as an accepted term by independent leftists as well. Still, I believe that the words “feminist” and “feminism” as we understand them today—in the broad sense of a commitment to fighting women’s subordination in society—are applicable when describing left-wing women who championed women’s rights in various ways. Thus, despite their aversion to these terms, I will use them in this thesis. Finally, to be clear, I use “proto-feminism” to indicate that the subjects of my thesis often anticipated the feminism of the 1960s and 1970s.

My thesis will significantly draw from and build upon historian Kate Weigand’s pioneering study of American Communist women’s attempts to address women’s oppression in society and within the Communist Party.¹⁷ Whereas Weigand provides a detailed account of her research of the Communist press and other Party documents and argues for the existence of a “red feminism” from 1945-1956, I hope to offer a more selective and analytical critique of the many ways in which Communist women addressed the “woman question.” Moreover, while recognizing the CP as the most vocal left-wing group on women’s issues during this period, I incorporate discussions of anti-communist left-wing milieus for a more complete understanding of left-wing proto-feminism.

In terms of structure, this thesis proceeds thematically and roughly chronologically in three parts. Beginning with the immediate postwar period, I analyze the Popular Front feminism of the CP-supported group the Congress of American Women (CAW) and the concurrent rise of attention to women’s issues within the CP in chapter one. Chapter two moves to the socialist left in an examination of the small nonconformist Correspondence group and its novel application of an anti-vanguardist and humanistic Marxist philosophy to

¹⁷ Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation*, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

conceptualize the “woman question.” Chapter three revolves around a discussion of the individual feminist contributions of former Communist women while adding an evaluation of the gendered politics of the newly emergent radical pacifist movement and the CP’s treatment of women’s issues before its near-collapse in 1956. I conclude with some remarks about the trajectory of left-wing proto-feminism from 1946 to 1961.

Thus, my thesis addresses the extent to which feminist thought existed and evolved during the postwar era as a bridge to the transformations of the 1960s. As Second-Wave feminists appeared to lack all knowledge of their immediate foremothers in the postwar era, a study of left-wing women’s proto-feminism seems vital to understanding the successes and failures of the modern women’s movement.

I

“An End to the Neglect”

Progressive Women & the Communist Left, 1946-1953

In January 1942, James Thompson, a 26-year old black cafeteria worker at a Kansas aircraft plant, wrote a letter to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the largest African American newspaper at the time, expressing mixed feelings about supporting the war effort. At the end, he urged to “let us colored Americans adopt a double VV for a double victory” so as to not forget “our fight for true democracy at home.”¹ Echoing black activists’ growing demands for social and economic equality as the government cast World War II as a defense of American democracy, Thompson’s letter led the *Courier* to officially launch a “Double V” campaign against fascism abroad and racism at home. Though the “Double V” logo became a symbol of African Americans’ fight against discrimination during the war, the idea of a “double victory” was also inherent in women’s participation in defense production and the armed forces.

“Women, let it be understood, have a double stake in the winning of this war,” wrote Susan B. Anthony II, the great-niece and namesake of the 19th century women’s rights activist, in her 1943 book *Out of the Kitchen—Into the War: Woman’s Winning Role in the Nation’s Drama*.² Applauding women who had started working outside of the home for the first time, Anthony argued that the wartime mobilization of women was a “two-

¹ James G. Thompson, “Should I Sacrifice to Live ‘Half American?’” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Jan. 31, 1942, p. 3. For more about Thompson and the “Double V” campaign, see Patrick S. Washburn, “The Pittsburgh Courier’s Double V Campaign in 1942,” *American Journalism* 3, no. 2 (1986): 73-86.

² Susan B. Anthony II, *Out of the Kitchen—Into the War: Woman’s Winning Role in the Nation’s Drama* (New York: Stephen Daye, Inc., 1943), 3.

edged sword” because it would not only provide the margin for victory on the battlefield but also “unlock millions of doors that have imprisoned millions of women.”³ In her view, the war had made women’s liberation from the home a national necessity—not simply because of the needs of the wartime economy but because maintaining “discrimination against women...*because they are women...*gives aid and comfort to our enemies.”⁴

Reinforcing the government’s promotion of the war as a struggle between American democracy and Nazi fascism, Anthony tapped into the patriotic spirit of the American public in arguing for the war as a “double V” for women. She went as far as to liken the significance of World War II to women to that of the Civil War to African Americans. Similarly, she noted that if the Ku Klux Klan symbolized the worst of white prejudice and violence against blacks, the Nazi slogan of “Kinder, Kuche, and Kirche” (Children, Kitchen, and Church) exemplified the oppression of women.⁵ Clearly both stood antithetical to the American ideal of freedom. Although Anthony couched her argument for women’s rights in the wartime rhetoric of freedom and democracy, her invocation of women’s liberation as a fight against the “fascist triple K” revealed a radical left-wing position that diagnosed society’s subordination of women as evidence of American fascism. Left-wing women relied on such language as they pressed for the participation of women in the war effort. Though the war came to an end in 1945, their attention to gender inequality did not. Instead, in the context of the Popular Front’s rebirth at the war’s end, progressive women unified and intensified their efforts through the organization Congress of American Women to ensure that women’s wartime gains would not be eroded while simultaneously embracing a maternalist tactic of protest. Although their coalition collapsed in the midst of

³ Ibid., 230, 246.

⁴ Ibid., 21.

⁵ Ibid., 4.

anticonmunist persecution, Communist women resumed the fight with a newfound militancy. Their diverse efforts encompassed an attack on antifeminist cultural backlash, a critique of male chauvinism, and a treatment of the special aspects of black women's oppression.

World War II: A Double V for Women?

While historians have more often treated the gains that women experienced during WWII as a minor rupture in a larger pattern of continuity,⁶ Anthony's hopes for the war to provide a breakthrough in the struggle for women's rights were not unfounded. In his study of American women in the 20th century, William Chafe similarly characterizes the war as a watershed moment, particularly in terms of elevating women's economic status. Six million women entered the workforce between 1940- 1945, more than doubling the number of working women; at the same time, their wages increased and women's unionization grew fourfold.⁷ Importantly, in addition to filling secretarial positions and other traditionally female jobs, many women gradually gained access to higher paying heavy industry jobs such as riveting and welding aircraft and artillery. The iconic "Rosie the Riveter" epitomized propaganda that encouraged women to assume historically male positions. Women also broke into the military—"the last firmly guarded male stronghold in the country" according to Anthony—through newly established women's reserves in the army, navy, air force, coast guard and Marine Corps.⁸ Finally, the war marked a significant change in the demographics of women in the workforce. Whereas most working women

⁶ D'Ann Campbell, *Women at War with America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984); Leila Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978).

⁷ William Chafe, *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 135-136.

⁸ Anthony, *Out of the Kitchen*, 53-54.

were young and single before the war, by the war's end, married women, including many with young children, composed nearly half of all women workers and over three-quarters of new women workers.⁹ In Chafe's view, the fact that urban middle-class housewives and mothers became a major constituency in the workforce for the first time underscored the extent to which the war changed public opinion about women's place.

However, while the government did actively promote women's employment during the war, the well-documented postwar reconversions suggest that it was largely out of necessity. Susan Hartmann documents how public discourse portrayed women's wartime mobilization as a temporary way to serve their families, and thus, limited the potential for meaningful social change.¹⁰ Enduring notions of femininity confined the majority of women in the military to clerical and supply work while the media and their male counterparts often sexualized them and glamorized their work. Meanwhile, units such as the Women's Airforce Service Pilots, which was notable for training and employing women to fly military aircraft, dissolved by the end of the war as Congress elected to deny the group military status and veterans' benefits.¹¹ Women in manufacturing and heavy industry similarly suffered the greatest setbacks as the men returned home. Indeed, even in instances where the crisis of war provoked the breakdown of traditional gender roles, it was only to be "for the duration," a widely used qualifier.

Nonetheless the short-lived opportunities that the war opened to women seemed to leave a residual impact that posed an implicit challenge to the emergent postwar backlash. In terms of women's attitude towards employment outside of the home, a 1945 survey

⁹ Chafe, *The American Woman*, 144-145.

¹⁰ Susan Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

conducted by the Department of Labor's Women's Bureau showed three out of four women who had taken jobs during the war wanted to continue working.¹² That year, Bryn Mawr College also completed a study on women's status for the Women's Bureau. Co-authored by Anthony, the publication presented a strong case for continuing to support women's participation in the workforce.¹³ Years earlier, Anthony had taken the same position in *Out of the Kitchen*. Foreseeing the temporary nature of wartime changes, she warned against the displacement of women from their wartime jobs and insisted that women "need the assurance that *never again will they be deprived of the right to work.*"¹⁴ In equal measure, Anthony called for the permanent provision and expansion of child-care centers that the government had set up during the war and additional public services to support working women.

As someone of Quaker background and whose social activism began with peace work through the American Friends Service Committee, Anthony's strong endorsement of the war was grounded in her belief that it had the potential to catalyze a feminist movement.¹⁵ Anthony outlined a broad vision of women's emancipation that included both political reforms and a distinctly socialist reorganization of housework and domestic life. While strongly supportive of women's participation in the workforce, she did not believe that women's employment alone would result in greater equality. Highlighting numerous cases of discrimination against women in the workplace, she joined the camp of working-class progressive women against the National Women's Party's (NWP) Equal Rights

¹² Chafe, *The American Woman*, 178.

¹³ See Bryn Mawr College Carola Woerishoffer Graduate Dept. of Social Economy and Social Research. *Women During the War and After* (Philadelphia: Curtis Pub. Co., 1945).

¹⁴ Anthony, *Out of the Kitchen*, 242. (emphasis in original)

¹⁵ For biographical information, see Jacqueline Castledine, "Gendering the Cold War: Race, Class and Women's Peace Politics, 1945-1975," (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2006), 68-73.

Amendment (ERA) on the grounds that it would eliminate protective labor legislation for women. Accordingly, she maintained that women needed to campaign for an “equal pay for equal work” bill as well as female politicians to ensure equal representation in government. However, beyond these reforms, Anthony drew from early 20th century socialist feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s ideas about the sexual division of labor and called upon the government to implement an extensive system of social supports to “abolish housekeeping-as-usual.”¹⁶ These included a 12-hour day-care program, low-cost cafeterias, federal housing projects, public laundries and housekeeping and shopping services. While Anthony repeatedly defended these measures as wartime necessities, in the final pages she conceded “but they are more than that—they are the key to the post-war position of women.”¹⁷ It was clear that she expected an upsurge of reactionary sentiment at the war’s end—and for women to respond against it.

Progressive Women & Popular Front Politics

Though Anthony was not a member of the Communist Party, her ideas in *Out of the Kitchen* suggested a strong Communist influence. First, Anthony’s assertions of the similarities between the status of African Americans and that of women was a common comparison used by Communists (as well as other leftists) when speaking on the “woman question.”¹⁸ Repeatedly referring to discrimination against women as a “Jim Crowism,”

¹⁶ Ibid., 73. In the 1980s, Anthony publicly acknowledged that her feminism was strongly influenced by Charlotte Perkins Gilman by way of Mary Inman.

¹⁷ Anthony, *Out of the Kitchen*, 234.

¹⁸ Weigand, *Red Feminism*, 33. Social-democratic economist Gunnar Myrdal’s characterized discrimination against women as “a parallel to the Negro problem” in the appendix of *An American Dilemma*, his highly influential study of race relations. See Appendix 5 to Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944). In addition, see Florynce Kennedy, “A Comparative Study: Accentuating the Similarities of the Societal Position of Women and Negroes” in *Color Me Flo: My Hard Life and Good Times* (Englewood Cliffs,

Anthony implied that sexism and racism were both historically rooted and institutionalized in American society. Since the CP held relatively advanced positions on racial equality, Communist women used such comparisons to advance the Party's work on women. Additionally, Anthony's treatment of the problem of housework exhibited an understanding of working-class women's work in the home on top of that in the factory, a kind of double oppression that Communist women had articulated as a "double yoke" and a "double burden" in the 1930s.¹⁹ Most prominently, CP member Grace Hutchins discussed the issue at length in *Women Who Work* (1934) and advocated solutions nearly identical to the socialized services that Anthony argued for.

Anthony likely gained exposure to such Communist insight on the "woman question" through her relationship with California CP member Mary Inman. It was Inman who introduced Anthony to Charlotte Perkins Gilman by way of her book *In Woman's Defense* (1940), a Marxist critique of women's oppression that reflected Communist women's writings of the 1930s. Inman's book drew the most attention for her theorization of housework as productive labor, but it also importantly went beyond the economic in an early effort to show the cultural oppression of women.²⁰ For example, she drew up a list of ninety-nine derogatory names used for women, pointing out that few existed for men.²¹ In a letter to Inman, Anthony credited Inman's book for having "crystallized the vague ideas

NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976). Kennedy, a black radical feminist active in the women's liberation movement, wrote this essay in 1946 while studying at Columbia University. As discussed in Chapter 2, members of the socialist Johnson-Forest Tendency also linked the struggles of women and African Americans in the early 1950s.

¹⁹ Grace Hutchins, *Women Who Work*, (New York: International Publishers, 1934). Hutchins used the term "double burden" in her book. In a 1930 *Political Affairs* article, Rachel Holtman termed it a "double yoke." See Coiner, *Better Red*, 42-43.

²⁰ Mary Inman, *In Woman's Defense* (Los Angeles: Committee to Organize the Advancement of Women, 1940). Inman's book was serialized in the West Coast Communist newspaper, *People's Daily World* in 1939.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 53-56.

that had been wandering around my brain”—not the least was her realization that “the role that even my very progressive husband expected of women [was] that of the docile servant of detail, whose main thoughts should be concentrated on buying a new chair cover and fascinating menus.”²² From there, the two began a series of exchanges about how to create “new down-to-earth women’s organization,” in which Inman stressed the need for a “Woman’s Congress” that “would be a powerful force for peace and would weld together existing women’s organizations, trade union auxiliaries, the most progressive of the women’s social clubs.”²³ In fact, Communist women had first pushed for a Women’s Congress in 1936 as the CP’s National Women’s Commission sought to reach out to women during the Popular Front.²⁴ After their efforts failed, Inman renewed agitation for the Congress with Al Richmond, a *People’s Daily World* editor only to meet opposition from the Party leadership.²⁵ Relations between Inman and the Party grew increasingly strained as a controversy developed over her argument that housework was productive labor, and in late 1941, Inman resigned from the CP.²⁶

Following Inman’s increasing bitterness and isolation after the dispute, Inman and Anthony also had an apparent falling-out and cut off their correspondence. However, their plans for the creation of a “Woman’s Congress” lived on as Anthony joined a diverse coalition of progressive women to found the Congress of American Women (CAW) in 1946. Buoyed by the momentum of the war, the CAW was born out of an international

²² Anthony, quoted in Weigand, *Red Feminism*, 51.

²³ Anthony and Inman, quoted in Weigand, *Red Feminism*, 51-55.

²⁴ James Weinstein, *Ambiguous Legacy: The Left in American Politics* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1975), 162.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ The Party initially supported Anthony before reversing its position, due to fear that Inman’s argument not only sought to re-define “wage-labor” but also “glorified” housework and would keep women in the home. Kate Weigand also believes that personality issues were involved. For the rest of life, Inman worked to vindicate herself from what she perceived to be a Party conspiracy against women. For an account of the “Inman debate” see Chapter 2 in Weigand, *Red Feminism*, 28-45.

effort to unite women in the fight to secure a global postwar peace. In November 1945, a group of French women involved in the wartime resistance movement, organized the first World Congress of Women. Meeting records indicate that 850 women delegates representing forty countries and 181 organizations attended the weeklong conference in Paris to found a global sisterhood for peace called the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF).²⁷ The four topics addressed during the Congress laid out the primary concerns of the WIDF: the eradication of fascism, the fight for democracy and peace, the advancement of women's rights, and the education and development of children.

On March 8 1946, International Women's Day, the CAW was formally established as the American affiliate of WIDF in a public meeting at the City Center Casino in New York City.²⁸ At the meeting, American women delegates shared their experiences at the World Congress and issued a press release reaffirming their commitment to advancing women's status:

The Congress of Women recounted in many ways the heroic role of women in the struggle against fascism and the place in the life of their countries which they have won and must sustain... women in the days of privation and suffering proved that they were superbly capable of sharing responsibility with men for the... regeneration and growth of their countries. These women told of the old and the new status which women hold, of their determination to achieve complete citizenship by reason of the fact that they earned it.²⁹

Recalling "the heroic role of women" in wartime, the statement suggested that the CAW was imbued with a sense of hope and optimism about the possibilities of the postwar world. Caught between an "old" and a "new" status, women were at a crucial juncture at which the

²⁷ World Congress of Women, "Congres International Des Femmes: Compte Rendu Des Travaux du Congres qui s'est tenu a Paris Du 26 Novembre Au 1er Decembre 1945" Paris (1946).

²⁸ "Congress of Women Plans Wide Activity," *New York Times*, March 9, 1946.

²⁹ March 8, 1946 CAW press release in Harriet Alonso, *Peace as a Women's Issue: A History of the U.S. Movement for World Peace and Women's Rights* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 186-187.

civil rights that they had earned were in reach. Further emphasizing the urgency and momentum of the moment, one CAW member at the meeting declared that “these new-old women are the most powerful factor in their part of the world.”³⁰ At a national meeting of 600 delegates in May of that year, the CAW adopted a three-part platform of world peace, women’s rights, and child welfare and set up corresponding commissions named Peace and Democracy, Women’s Status, and Child Welfare and Education.³¹

As their agenda mirrored the aims of the WIDF, the CAW also situated its pursuit of women’s rights as part of a continued antifascist struggle. While neither the WIDF nor the CAW was officially affiliated with any political party, their worldview reflected the influence of the Communist movement. The WIDF included the representation of many communist Eastern European countries and received financial support from the Soviet Women’s Anti-Fascist Committee.³² French and Soviet women with Communist Party connections dominated its leadership. In the U.S., the CAW leadership also featured prominent CPUSA women such as Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Claudia Jones, both members of the CP National Committee, and later, Betty Millard, an editor at *New Masses*, a major CP organ. From this angle, it is not surprising that the CAW became the first independent women’s organization endorsed by the CPUSA.

The CAW remained close to the WIDF as it publicized the work of its sister organizations around the world, hosted Soviet women at organizational functions, and sent delegates to attend international gatherings of leftist women. Moreover, the CAW’s focus on anti-fascism and world peace aligned with American Communists’ postwar efforts to

³⁰ “Congress of Women Plans Wide Activity,” *New York Times*, March 9, 1946.

³¹ “Women of American Organize Own PAC,” *New York Times*, May 26, 1946.

³² Francisca de Haan, “Continuing Cold War Paradigms in Western Historiography of Transnational Women’s Organisations: the case of the Women’s International Democratic Federation,” *Women’s History Review* 19 (September 2010), 555.

maintain an alliance with the Soviet Union and to fight the onset of U.S. Cold War policies. Muriel Draper, CAW vice-president and chairman of the Commission on Peace and Democracy, persistently criticized the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan as manifestations of American fascism.³³ In preparation for the 1948 elections, the group decided to break its non-affiliation principle to campaign for the CP-endorsed Progressive Party.³⁴ Given the CAW's Communist connections and growing anti-communist fervor, it was easy for the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) to characterize the group as a "Red hoax" after it landed on the Attorney General's list of "subversive" organizations in 1948.³⁵ The CAW's existence proved to be untenable in the repressive climate and, just in 1950, the CAW would vote to dissolve rather than pay hefty fines and register as a "foreign agent."

However, although the CAW displayed communist leanings and was open to Communists when many feminist organizations were not, the bulk of its members (and leaders) likely never joined the CP. Instead, it aimed to recruit women involved in a wide range of progressive causes to work together for peace and a women's rights agenda. As exemplified by the diverse American delegation to the World Congress of Women, the CAW emerged out of the unification of women such as Ann Bradford of the Congress of Industrial Organizations Auxiliary, Muriel Draper of the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship, Elinor Gimbel of the National Association for Child Welfare, Jeannette Stern Turner of the National League of Women Shoppers, and Ruth Young of the United Electrical Workers, and Gene Weltfish, a Columbia University anthropologist and eventual

³³ Rebecca Stiles Taylor, "Federated Clubs," *The Chicago Defender*, July 12, August 30, 1947.

³⁴ Castledine, "Gendering the Cold War," 67.

³⁵ "Women's Congress Branded Red Hoax," *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 23, 1949.

CAW president.³⁶ Black women had a noticeably strong presence in the CAW and included Mary McLeod Bethune, Vivian Carter Mason, Thelma Dale, Dr. Charlotte Hawkins Brown, and Thyra Edwards, representing organizations like the National Negro Congress and the National Council of Negro Women. According to historian Amy Swerdlow, the number of African American women in the CAW leadership was and remains unprecedented for a women's or mixed-gender peace organization.³⁷ Notably, the CAW also won unexpected allies in upper-class women such as actresses Faye Emerson and Florence Eldridge, suffragist Cornelia Pinchot, and ERA advocate Nora Stanton Blatch Barney, the granddaughter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. A minority of the women mentioned above have been identified as CP members.³⁸ Instead, women who joined the CAW were active in a broad political left of Communists and non-Communists. As such, the CAW belongs in the progressive milieu of the late 1940s that evolved out of the wartime Popular Front.

When Communists joined New Deal liberals and the non-Communist left to support the war against fascism, a wartime Popular Front emerged as these groups temporarily healed their divisions. Soon to split as a new anti-communist liberalism consolidated in the face of the "Red Scare," this left-liberal coalition nonetheless appeared to reinvigorate itself after the war and remained a significant force until the defeat of Henry Wallace and the Progressive Party in 1948.³⁹ Even though the CP dismissed Popular Front leader Earl

³⁶ "Women Gathering for Paris Parley," *New York Times*, Nov. 24, 1945.

³⁷ Amy Swerdlow, "The Congress of American Women: Left-Feminist Peace Politics in the Cold War," in *U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays*, ed. Linda K. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathryn Kish Sklar (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 300.

³⁸ For member information, see House Committee on Un-American Activities, *Report on the Congress of American Women* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1949), 79-85. Only Thyra Edwards, Ruth Young, Thelma Dale are identified as CP members.

³⁹ Mary Sperling McAuliffe, *Crisis on the Left: Cold War Politics and American Liberals, 1947-1954* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1978). Though McAuliffe focuses on the breakdown of the left-liberal coalition, she maintains that it remained "a large, diverse, and potentially powerful

Browder in favor of the more leftist William Z. Foster as Party chair, it remained united with the New Deal left in opposition to the conservatism of the Truman administration. So while Gene Weltfish, Muriel Draper and Susan B. Anthony II, three of the CAW's leading spokespersons, were never in the CP, CAW member Gerda Lerner remembers that, when she joined the Party in 1946, it seemed like an inconsequential and natural step up from her previous activism in the Democratic Party. She explains that "I had no particular love for the Soviet Union" and "believed I was joining a strong international movement for progress and social justice."⁴⁰ Lerner's comments make it clear that the CAW grew out of a hopeful alliance of women based upon their shared progressive values rather than rigid adherence to the CP. The renewed coalition building of the Popular Front also fostered the anti-colonialist and anti-racist activism of the Civil Rights Congress (CRC), in which several CAW women took part.

The CRC came out of the merger of multiple left-wing groups in 1946 and, like the CAW, contained several prominent CP members. However, as historian Gerald Horne stresses, it was not a "Communist front" for it frequently went beyond the CP line and succeeded in "popularizing the term 'civil rights' itself as a goal of progressives."⁴¹ From 1946 to 1956, the CRC organized both legal action and mass protest in support of victims in what the CRC saw as rape "frame-up" cases, usually involving black men and white women in the south. The CAW often collaborated with the CRC. Among the CAW's first actions was the establishment of an anti-lynch committee. The group circulated letters on recent

movement with a mass base in the left-led CIO trade unions" in the immediate postwar years. *Ibid.*, 9. Also see Barrett, "Rethinking the Popular Front."

⁴⁰ Gerda Lerner, *Fireweed: A Political Autobiography*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 254.

⁴¹ Gerald Horne, *Communist Front? The Civil Rights Congress, 1946-1956* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988), 24-25.

lynchings with actions for members to take and threw its support behind a national campaign for anti-lynching legislation in 1946.⁴² Due to the participation of black women and its attention to both racism and sexism, the CAW received significant coverage in the black newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender*, the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, and the *New York Amsterdam News*. In fact, Rebecca Stiles Taylor, a black trade union activist and Chicago CAW member, reported on the CAW in her weekly “Federated Clubs” column in the *Chicago Defender* with more regularity and in more detail than the Communist press ever did. Incidents such as the conviction of Rosa Lee Ingram, a black woman sharecropper, for killing a white man who attempted to rape her prompted the CRC and the CAW to work together as sexism and racism became intertwined. The Ingram case became a major focus of the CAW’s work. CAW leaders repeatedly publicized the injustice of the case and sent a delegation of its members to visit and consult Ingram in her Atlanta prison in 1949.⁴³

While the interracial and cross-class unity of the CAW and diverse scope of its peace and civil rights activism places it within a Popular Front tradition, it is clear that the CAW was intent on organizing women solely on the basis of their sex. Their constitution emphasized this point, declaring that “it is our aim to organize all women—from home, farm, office, professions and from industry, without regard to race, religion, national origin or political party, in their common interest.”⁴⁴ To do so, the CAW sought to unite existing women’s organizations, acting upon the tactic that Inman had suggested to Anthony years earlier. While membership was available on an individual or group basis, the CAW

⁴² Taylor, “Federated Clubs,” *Chicago Defender*, November 23, 1946.

⁴³ Taylor, “Federated Clubs,” *Chicago Defender*, May 21, 1949.

⁴⁴ Congress of American Women, “Constitution: Adopted at the First National and Constitutional Convention, May 6, 7, 8, 1949 in New York City,” New York, 1949.

conceived of itself as an umbrella organization that would “cut through a vertical line, embracing women through all walks of life to work together on a common program, wherein existing organizations work along a horizontal line reaching women of only one particular economic or social strata.”⁴⁵ Under this formulation, local CAW chapters popped up in urban areas across the country such as Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Detroit, Chicago, Seattle, and Los Angeles. Although they never came close to their goal of one million members and a chapter in every state, by 1947, they claimed to have a nonetheless impressive membership of 250,000 and over twenty active chapters.⁴⁶ The inclusive nature of CAW allowed the group to reach out to women who may not have been necessarily interested in the self-conscious feminism of the National Women’s Party. In a description of its recruitment goals, the CAW openly acknowledged that “a particular stress will be made to bring in the working women, who constitute a large section of our population heretofore inactive.”⁴⁷ With this need in mind, the CAW promoted a broad feminist ideology with special attention to the issues of women workers and black women. Therefore, though largely left unsaid, implicit in the CAW’s ambitions to unite women was an understanding of inequities rooted in the intersection of race, class, and gender.

Providing separate commissions for women to work for the three objectives of peace, women’s rights and child welfare, the CAW sought to take action “in defense of their full rights as equal citizens, their rights as mothers, the rights and future of their children.”⁴⁸ As they reconciled activism for women’s rights as “equal citizens” with a strong focus on

⁴⁵ Taylor, “Federated Clubs,” *Chicago Defender*, Sep. 28, 1946.

⁴⁶ *Woman Power*, Vol I, No. 2, June 24, 1946. For actual figures, see Swerdlow, “Congress of American Women,” 299. However, Swerdlow and other historians (including former CAW member Gerda Lerner) believe that 250,000 is an overestimate.

⁴⁷ Taylor, “Federated Clubs,” *Chicago Defender*, Sep. 28, 1946.

⁴⁸ Congress of American Women, “Constitution.”

women's roles as mothers and responsibilities to their children, a distinctly maternalist feminism arose. Much of their organizing was comparable to that of Popular Front women in the 1930s. The Detroit chapter led a citywide movement for a "50-cent meat week" in response to growing meat prices.⁴⁹ Los Angeles CAW women organized a demonstration on the steps of the State Capitol during a hearing on an increase in milk prices.⁵⁰ Nationally, the CAW participated in a "March to Washington" to lobby for the extension of the Office of Price Administration, a wartime institution for rationing and price control.⁵¹ Organizing for child welfare and safety was also a popular initiative. In New York, the Manhattan chapter sponsored a "Conference to Make Manhattan Safe for Our Children," at which it presented proposals for more traffic lights and play facilities with supervisors; the Brooklyn chapter held meetings to arrange a "planned summer vacation for every Brooklyn child" over concerns about teenage gang violence.⁵² The CAW's overriding objective of peace also emphasized women's unique roles in bearing and rearing children. CAW leader Mary Jane Melish called on women to vote for peace in the 1946 elections because "if women use their ballots wisely, their sons will never have to use bullets."⁵³ Similar language was used at other rallies against Truman's foreign policy; photographs of children adorned signs declaring "These are our children... We Won't Give Them To War."⁵⁴ While these types of protests undoubtedly gave women a public voice, they also implicitly reified

⁴⁹ Swerdlow, "Congress of American Women," 303-304.

⁵⁰ "Drouth Cited as Reason for Milk Price Rise," *Los Angeles Times*, February 5, 1948, p.1

⁵¹ *Woman Power*, Vol. I, No. 2 June 24, 1946, p.4; "March on Washington Marks Protest Against Living Costs: Children Hungry in Land of Plenty, Women Tell Congress" *Afro-American*, Dec. 20, 1947, p.11. A general account of activism related to the Office of Price Administration can be found in Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics*.

⁵² "Hold Conference on Playgrounds," *New York Amsterdam*, May 29, 1948, p.10; "Plan Conference to Halt Juvenile Delinquency Here," *New York Amsterdam*, March 12, 1949, p.17.

⁵³ "Women Urge Unity At Polls," *New York Amsterdam*, October 5, 1946, p.15.

⁵⁴ Photograph of CAW protest, March 25, 1947, in Alonso, *Peace as a Woman's Issue*, 188.

stereotypical gender roles. Thus, it is particularly noteworthy that the organization appeared to simultaneously challenge its maternalism with calls for gender equality.

The CAW's Commission on the Status of Women took on a more equalitarian women's rights perspective. Anthony, who headed the Commission, issued a report that emphasized the ways in which society misrepresented and degraded women. She defined the "social status" of women as the "Jim Crow status of women and public opinion of American women."⁵⁵ Underlying her word choice was her belief that American culture propagated a harmful ideology that subordinated women as a sex, irrespective of class and race. At a 1946 CAW conference, she made her position clear when she called for the formation of a permanent sub-committee to fight against the "misrepresentation of American women, long a favorite pastime and profession of maladjusted novelists, radio writers, playwrights (some unfortunately women) and reporters...to present the majority of women as they are—simple and dignified."⁵⁶ In many ways, Anthony's attack on media and entertainment continued Mary Inman's critique of the narrow and demeaning portrayal of women in culture. Most damaging, Anthony suggested, was when women internalized their oppression and "feel that they do not deserve and therefore should not ask for a better place in the world."⁵⁷ Thus, it was necessary to make the fight against the cultural sources of women's oppression a permanent fixture on the CAW's agenda. However, despite Anthony's articulation of this need, there is no indication that such a sub-committee was ever formed or that any other attempts to address sexist prejudice gained support.

Thus, while acknowledging the "social" element to gender inequality, the Commission was more active on the economic, political, and legal front. Coming out of

⁵⁵ Taylor, "Federated Clubs," *Chicago Defender*, February 22, 1947.

⁵⁶ *Woman Power*, Vol. I, No. 2 June 24, 1946, p.1.

⁵⁷ Anthony, quoted in Weigand, *Red Feminism*, 1.

WWII, the need to protect and support women's right to work was particularly stressed. For instance, the CAW took issue with the neglect of sex-based discrimination in the Fair Employment Practices legislation passed during the war. A left-wing socialist feminism pervaded its calls for government-run childcare services and an expansive domestic service program that families could opt into.⁵⁸ The establishment of socialized services was necessary to ease the burden of childcare and housework so that women could pursue work outside out of the home. Institutional supports were sorely lacking as a member charged that "our school systems are based on the assumption that the father works, the mother stays at home" without realizing that "working mothers will not want to return from an arduous task at an assembly belt to play nurse maid for another five or six hours."⁵⁹ Furthermore, the woman argued that in addition to reducing working mothers' double burden, nursery schools and extended after-school programs would also improve the quality of child care and benefit children. This justification subtly moved parenthood out of being an individual woman's innate duty to the realm of social responsibility. The CAW's discourse on women's right to work notably encompassed all classes of women and extended the advocacy of workplace protections and equal pay for equal work to professional women as well. The Commission articulated the need for "women's right to work with commensurate compensation in fields of their own choosing," and addressed issues such as discriminatory quotas for women in medical school admissions.⁶⁰

Another focus of the CAW's women's rights activism was the advancement of women's political and legal status. Despite the passage of suffrage, the Commission believed that a great deal remained to be achieved in these areas since women were

⁵⁸ *Woman Power*, Vol. I, No. 2 June 24, 1946, p.1.

⁵⁹ Taylor, "Federated Clubs," *Chicago Defender*, April 26, 1947.

⁶⁰ *Woman Power*, Vol. 1. No. 1, May 20, 1946, p. 3; Swerdlow, "Congress of American Women," 305.

politically only “half awake” and legally only “half free.”⁶¹ In terms of women’s legal status, Anthony noted that, in 1946, over one thousand state marriage and property laws still maintained “feudal discriminations” against women and treated them as “something less than a human being” by giving their rights to their husbands.⁶² The continued existence of these laws paralleled the lack of women in political power aside from a small number of token candidates. In 1946, the CAW launched a “48 Congresswomen in ‘48” campaign to promote women candidates in the 1948 elections. In line with its view of itself as “political action committee,” the CAW embraced electoral politics along with mass protest. Utilization of the vote was not discounted as a means to achieve progressive legislation and women’s economic, legal, and political equality. This reflected their respect for the long struggle for women’s suffrage and their desire to unite women along gender lines.

When speaking of women’s status, the CAW frequently referenced figures and events in women’s history and positioned itself as the contemporary heirs of a long struggle. In the preamble to their constitution, a dedication was made to Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton as well as less obvious choices such as the religious dissident Anne Hutchinson, colonial era flag maker Betsy Ross, abolitionists Harriet Beecher Stowe and Harriet Tubman, and the garment workers of the early 20th century.⁶³ They looked to these women as sources of inspiration and sought to use their achievements to empower the women of CAW. Moreover, their invocation of such a diverse collection of women demonstrated an understanding of the continuity of the struggle for women’s rights and its

⁶¹ Congress of American Woman, “Position of American Women Today” [1946], in *The American Women’s Movement, 1945-2000: a brief history with documents* ed. Nancy MacLean, (Boston: St. Martins, 2009), 47-50.

⁶² *Woman Power*, Vol. I, No. 2 June 24, 1946, p.1; Taylor, “Federated Clubs,” *Chicago Defender*, March 8, 1947. Taylor printed excerpts of Anthony’s report.

⁶³ See “Preamble” to Congress of American Women, “Constitution.”

indelible connection to women's participation in other social justice causes ranging from religious toleration to the anti-slavery movement to trade union activism. If anything, the CAW sought to articulate an inclusive all-encompassing feminism that reflected such a perspective. The conclusion to a 1946 report on women's present-day status made the CAW's position clear:

Until the day when the American woman is free to develop her mind and abilities to their fullest extent, without discrimination because of her sex, is free to work without neglecting her children, to live with her husband on an equal level, with adequate provision made for the care [of] that home without injury to her health; until she takes her full responsibilities as citizen and individual, supporting herself if necessary and her family where she has a family, at a decent wage, paid equally with men for the work she does; until she is freed from the terror of war, and lives in a world of peaceful friendship between nations, in a society without prejudice against Negro, Jew, national groups or women- her struggle for emancipation must continue.⁶⁴

While this expansive vision of women's liberation exhibited great idealism, it also reflected the spirit and solidarity of the Popular Front and its social democratic ideals. Gerda Lerner, now a feminist historian, remembers her time in the CAW as "the best experience of its kind I ever had."⁶⁵

In a recent interview with historian Nancy MacLean, Lerner also offered some insight into the organization's maternalist impulse. Did relying on women's roles as mothers and caretakers to work for the well-being of children and peace compromise the CAW's goals for gender equality? Lerner adamantly rejected this possibility. She asserted that having children was and is a "very good organizing tool" and criticized later feminists who "didn't understand the power of organizing women as mothers" because "there's nothing unfeminist about it...part of the occupation of women in their lifetime is to be mothers...Not all of them but most of them...it's like saying we're going to organize

⁶⁴ Congress of American Women, "Position of American Women Today."

⁶⁵ Lerner, *Fireweed*, 256.

workers but we won't go in the factory."⁶⁶ Later, Lerner likened organizing women as mothers to "organizing women as *women*."⁶⁷ To Lerner, appealing to women through their shared identities as mothers was not a call for a return to domesticity but a valuable tactic in unifying women along gender lines. Moreover, she suggested that it was a necessary tactic because it addresses a significant element of women's realities and concerns, thus constituting a materialist feminism. The underlying assumption was, of course, that most women wanted to and would become mothers. Lerner's intrinsic linkage of womanhood and motherhood suggests her personal maternalism but may also hint at how the dominant cultural and social expectations of the postwar era informed her feminism and that of other women in the CAW.

The "Woman Question" in the Communist Party

As with the postwar Popular Front, the "Red Scare" ultimately drove the CAW to its end as well as the progressive coalition that enabled its diverse membership and expansive outlook. Liberal supporters and non-Communist members like Anthony were among the first to leave the organization when the red-baiting began in 1948.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, the CP's influence over the CAW grew stronger and several CP women came into leadership positions. CP member and *New Masses* editor Betty Millard took over Anthony's position as chair of the Commission on the Status of Women. Around this point, CP member Eleanor Flexner claims that she was "drafted" by the Party to become CAW's executive

⁶⁶ Gerda Lerner, interview by Nancy MacLean, transcript of video recording, September 13, 2003, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, p. 3.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 27. (emphasis in transcript)

⁶⁸ Swerdlow, "Congress of American Women," 308.

secretary.⁶⁹ In an interview with Amy Swerdlow, Millard remembered that by 1950, the final year of the CAW's existence, the CP was essentially running the CAW with prominent black Communist leader Claudia Jones as the designated "ideologue of the movement."⁷⁰ As it turned out, the HUAC's charge that the CAW was dictated by a "hard core of Communist Party members" became somewhat of a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, by this time, the CAW's membership had drastically dwindled and the organization left ineffectual due to the purge.

Conversely, no doubt influenced by the CAW, attention to women's issues in the CP was greater than ever in 1948. The CP took an early stand to renew their Popular Front commitment to women by resurrecting the Party's National Women's Commission (NWC) in 1947, which had been dismantled in 1940 following the collapse of the Popular Front in light of the Hitler-Stalin Pact.⁷¹ The Party instated its two most visible women, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and rising star Claudia Jones as its chair and secretary respectively. While not known for speaking out in support of women's rights, Flynn, also a CAW vice-president, wrote several pieces in support of advancing women's status in 1947.⁷² In an article printed in the CP's main theoretical journal, *Political Affairs*, Flynn used the occasion of International Women's Day to publicize the work of the WIDF and CAW and to emphasize that "Red-baiting, labor-baiting, anti-Semitism, racial and male superiority" were all part of

⁶⁹ Eleanor Flexner memoir, p.II(e), Eleanor Flexner Papers, Box 1, Folder 8, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute of Advanced Study, Cambridge, MA.

⁷⁰ Betty Millard, quoted in Swerdlow, "Congress of American Women," 308.

⁷¹ "National Women's Commission, CPUSA," in *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, ed. Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas, (New York: Garland Pub., 1990), 511-512. According to Claudia Jones, the NWC was formally reinstated in 1945 but no actions were taken until 1947.

⁷² Rosalyn Baxandall, *Words on Fire: The Life and Writing of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987). Over her long career in the CP, Flynn wrote few articles on women's rights. In Baxandall's view, she was not a feminist but an "Aunt Tom."

the “Nazi pattern.”⁷³ In a pamphlet written in anticipation of the 1948 elections, Flynn promoted the CP as an advocate for women. Once again condemning the fascist tendencies of American society, Flynn claimed that “American women have the power to help stop it. Women are 50.6 per cent of our population. Let the voice of American women be heard.”⁷⁴ Flynn also employed the Popular Front politics of the CAW to appeal to women based on their sex and their roles as mothers in the fight for peace. At the end, she outlined an eleven-point program that the CP advocated for women. The list included demands such as legislation for maternity supports and child welfare, equal pay and workplace regulations in recognition of women’s “double duty,” removal of “legal disabilities” on women and quota systems in education and the professions, funding for child care centers, and full equality for black women.⁷⁵ In short, it was all but identical to the issues raised by the CAW’s Commission on the Status of Women.

That year, Flynn also wrote a scathing review of Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia Farnham’s best-selling *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* (1947) in *Political Affairs*. As Rosalyn Baxandall notes, the review is noteworthy since the Party’s main theoretical journal typically did not concern itself with mainstream publications.⁷⁶ Her review, titled “Hitler’s 3 K’s for Woman—An American Rehash,” picked up on Anthony’s indictment of the rise of cultural propaganda against women. Flynn voiced particular distress as she noted that *Modern Women* was not a singular text but part of “a veritable flood” of literature “for every slander and misrepresentation of women, for every argument for the home as a ghetto

⁷³ Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, “International Women’s Day” *Political Affairs* 26 (March 1947): 218.

⁷⁴ Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *Woman’s Place in the Fight for a Better World* (New York: International Publishers, 1947), 9.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷⁶ Baxandall, *Words on Fire*, 202.

and for depriving women of political, social, legal and economic rights.”⁷⁷ In fact, Lundberg and Farnham’s use of psychoanalysis to show that women who strayed from the home were an unfulfilled “lost sex” sparked several angry rebuttals from Communist women who used it to attack the tide of domestic ideology of the postwar era. Writing under the pseudonym Irene Epstein, Eleanor Flexner argued that *Modern Woman* was predicated on a “pseudo-scientific ideological basis for Hitler’s Big Lie about women.”⁷⁸ Popular Front feminist Elizabeth Hawes opted to use satire in her 1948 book *Anything But Love: A Complete Digest of the Rules for Feminine Behavior from Birth to Death; Given out in Print, on Film, and Over the Air; Read, Seen, Listened to Monthly by some 340,000,000 American Women*. The lengthy subtitle reflected Hawes’ position that if women were a “lost sex” it was due to the barrage of “feminine rules” that indoctrinated them from birth.⁷⁹ Hawes, a fashion designer and union activist, had written similarly satirical proto-feminist books including *Why Women Cry; or, Wenches with Wrenches* (1943) and *Hurry Up Please It’s Time* (1946). However, she soon abandoned her left-wing politics and moved to the Virgin Islands in 1950.⁸⁰

Out of this small but nonetheless significant influx of writing against the antifeminist cultural backlash following the war, the most influential within the CP was Betty Millard’s “Woman Against Myth,” a two-part essay published in *New Masses* and reprinted in pamphlet form in 1948. Historian Kate Weigand attributes Millard’s essay with sparking a new phase of discussion on the “woman question” by rank-and-file Communist

⁷⁷ Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, “Hitler’s 3Ks for Women: An American Rehash,” *Political Affairs* 26 (April 1947):376, 381.

⁷⁸ Irene Epstein, “Woman Under the Double Standard,” *Jewish Life* 4 (October 1950): 8-12.

⁷⁹ Elizabeth Hawes, *Anything But Love* (New York: Rinehart, 1948).

⁸⁰ “Elizabeth Hawes” entry in *Notable American Women: the Modern Period, Volume 4*, ed. Barbara Sicherman and Carol Hurd Green (Cambridge, MA: Radcliffe College, 1980), 321-322.

women. Given that 1948 was the hundredth anniversary of both the Communist Manifesto and the Seneca Falls convention, Millard offered a historical analysis of the “woman question” that linked women’s liberation to a class struggle. In this respect, she reiterated the CP’s orthodox position on the “woman question” that placed the struggle towards a socialist America at its center. Citing Frederick Engels’ *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Millard went through the phases of women’s oppression beginning with the advent of private property to their isolation from production and subjugation to household “drudgery” to the “new slavery and new freedom” brought by capitalism and wage labor.⁸¹ Ultimately, Millard held up the Soviet woman as exemplar of the liberated woman and maintained that women’s full emancipation could only be realized under socialism.

However, the main aim of her essay was to expose the myth that “women like to be dominated.” She perceived this myth to be unceasingly promulgated as truth by social institutions and cultural forces such as “laws, customs, language, religion...day-to-day attacks in books, films, radio shows, and magazine articles.”⁸² Her articulation of a myth that “women like to be dominated” spoke to an understanding that mainstream culture not only sought to confine women to the domestic realm but also to convince them, “if only subconsciously—of their inferiority to men.”⁸³ Thus, when Millard articulated that “women must continue to be a major force in their own advance,” she wrote of the need to join unions and work towards the class struggle as well as the need to start “a serious attack on male chauvinism, and its reflection among women.”⁸⁴ Millard’s use of the term “male

⁸¹ Betty Millard, *Woman Against Myth* (New York: International Publishers Co., 1948), 14-15.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

chauvinism” reflected a significant shift within the CP from focusing solely on the economic and social structure of society as women’s oppressor to relations between men and women. The term originated from Communists’ formulation of the term “white chauvinism” during organized campaigns to root out the racist behaviors of white CP members during the 1920s and early 1930s.⁸⁵ Mary Inman was one of the first to modify the term to “male chauvinism” to disparage the sexism of Communist men in her 1940 treatise *In Women’s Defense*.⁸⁶ However, as with many of Inman’s ideas, a critique of male chauvinism did not gain currency in the CP until after the war.

Kate Weigand’s detailed research of the Communist press during this period shows that the rise in awareness of the pervasive male chauvinism within the CP was in part due to the activism of rank-and-file Communist women. Beginning in 1946, letters from Communist women increasingly appeared in the pages of the *Daily Worker*. In these letters, they pressed for more attention to the “woman question.” Moreover, they often shared details about their personal lives such as the neglect and condescension they routinely dealt with as wives of Communist men. In 1949, women readers of the *Daily Worker* and *People’s World* successfully initiated a campaign for the newspapers to stop printing “cheesecake” in reference to the stereotypically sexualized photographs of female models, celebrities and beauty pageant contestants. One letter to the editor concisely summarized the opinions of many readers who wrote in, asserting that “these pictures have no liberating effect for women and the working class, but on the contrary, are used to perpetuate male supremacy though the idea that sex is women’s only attribute.”⁸⁷ While the Party did not

⁸⁵ Weigand, *Red Feminism*, 24.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

publicly address the issue, the newspapers acquiesced to readers' requests and eliminated cheesecake-style images from their pages later that year.

The Party's decision to republish Millard's "Woman Against Myth" for distribution in pamphlet form is another indication of its receptivity to the discussion of women's issues. However, the seemingly insignificant elimination of a footnote in the pamphlet edition may suggest the limits of the Party's tolerance. If the anti-cheesecake campaign subtly addressed women's sexual exploitation, Millard directly approached the topic of rape as form of male chauvinism in her footnote:

It might be interesting...to consider the question of rape as a form of violence practiced against women...it is a criminal act of a special kind—an anti-woman act...the lynching of a Georgia Negro is the violent expression of a pattern of white supremacy; rape is a violent expression of a pattern of male supremacy, an outgrowth of age-old economic, political and cultural exploitation of women by men.⁸⁸

While possibly purely unintentional, the deletion of these comments corroborates with the CP's silence on issues of sex and sexuality as well as its general conservative morality and separation of the political from the personal. Millard's interpretation of rape as an "anti-woman act" clearly challenged these boundaries as she connected sexual violence against women to their economic, political, and cultural oppression. As evidenced by a report written by a subcommittee of the NWC but published under Party chairman William Z. Foster's name in *Political Affairs*, some Communist women took note of the Party's failure to discuss sexual relations and considered it one of the Party's major shortcomings on the "woman question."⁸⁹ They charged that "a pronounced reticence in dealing with questions of sex" would make it "impossible for us to combat the male supremacy 'theory' and to

⁸⁸ Millard, "Woman Against Myth," *New Masses*, December 30, 1947, p.8.

⁸⁹ Historians believe that Foster was not the sole author of the article but that it was printed under his name so that it would be taken seriously. The article bears an unmistakable resemblance to an unsigned letter written to NWC secretary Claudia Jones. See Weigand, *Red Feminism*, 86, 179-181.

discuss fundamentally the relationship of woman to man and to society.”⁹⁰ It is significant that Foster supported the subcommittee’s work by lending his name to the article.

However, the fact that the article’s true authorship remained obscure and that the Party made no motion to correct its shortcomings on the subject of sex suggests the Party’s overall hostility to this aspect of women’s liberation.

While Millard’s comments on rape were not printed, an overtly feminist analysis of sex and sexuality was published that year in poet Ruth Herschberger’s collection of essays entitled *Adam’s Rib* (1948). Avoiding any discussion of politics, Herschberger articulated a radical critique of the socialization of women’s physiological difference. In her essay on rape, she similarly characterized rape as form of male domination, supported by “the legend of man’s natural sexual aggression toward women”⁹¹ While a woman could technically rape a man, Herschberger claimed that he would emerge “socially unscathed.”⁹²

Conversely, man’s rape of woman implicitly resulted in her personal humiliation and loss of honor. In other sections, Herschberger sought to empower women in their sexual lives as she dispelled various myths of women’s sexual submissiveness and argued for the existence of the clitoral orgasm. Her positions anticipated many of the arguments that radical feminists would make more than two decades later. In correspondence with historian Shira Tarrant, Herschberger recalled her strained relationship with the publishers and how the book was soon dropped after making “quite a splash;” the experience appeared to dishearten her and she chose remain “only emotionally involved with feminism.”⁹³

Historians Verta Taylor and Leila Rupp were surprised to find that feminists associated

⁹⁰ William Z. Foster, “On Improving the Party’s Work among Women,” *Political Affairs* 27 (Nov 1948), 988.

⁹¹ Ruth Herschberger, *Adam’s Rib* (New York: Pellegrini & Cudahy, 1948), 15.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 20.

⁹³ Herschberger, quoted in Shira Tarrant, *When Sex Became Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 197.

with the NWP paid no attention to *Adam's Rib*.⁹⁴ Despite their many differences, Communist women also showed no acknowledgement of Herschberger's book as it fell to obscurity.

Claudia Jones and the Intersection of Sex, Race, and Class

While readers' letters to the *Daily Worker* continued to be a major source of Communist women's activism for greater attention to the prevalence of gender inequality, Claudia Jones emerged to become the CP's main theoretician of the Party's work on the "woman question." As a member of the Party's National Committee and secretary of the NWC, Jones was not only the highest-ranking black woman in the CP but also the highest ranking woman aside from Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. It is important to note that Jones was elected to the National Committee in 1945 following the replacement of Popular Front leader Earl Browder with the more leftist William Z. Foster as Party chair. While historians have generally evaluated Foster's leadership of the CP as not significantly different from that of Browder since a Popular Front-style alliance continued after WWII, it is apparent that Foster did return the Party to a markedly more radical stance on the "Negro Question."⁹⁵ As a Trinidadian-born black Harlem activist, Jones' staunch support of Foster was undoubtedly linked to this development. Shortly following Foster's return to power, Jones began to voice her formulation of African Americans as an "oppressed nation" and their right to self-determination.⁹⁶ When she aimed to introduce a more militant line of

⁹⁴ Rupp and Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums*, 21.

⁹⁵ Weinstein, *Ambiguous Legacy*, 98-99.

⁹⁶ Claudia Jones, "On the right to self-determination for the Negro People in the Black Belt" *Political Affairs* 25 (Jan 1946): 67-77.

thinking about women's oppression, this element of Jones' thought and her identity as a black woman would figure prominently.

In retrospect, former CP leader Dorothy Healey believes that Flynn and Jones were resentful of being appointed to lead the NWC because it barely registered in the scheme of the Party's hierarchy.⁹⁷ In fact, whereas Flynn publicly defended the CP's work at all times, Jones strongly criticized the Party for its isolation and neglect of the NWC. Regardless of whether or not she was resentful, she used her position as NWC secretary to continually push women's issues to the forefront of the Party's ideological work during the late 1940s and early 1950s. In a 1948 article in *Political Affairs*, Jones discussed her experiences traveling around the country to help Communist women set up women's commissions in local districts. She identified with the many woman comrades who were "skeptical with justifiable reason" about the Party's efforts to promote the work of women.⁹⁸ This was understandable, she wrote and argued that "we would have to conclude that it is primarily due to the fact that our Party has failed to place the question of theoretical understanding of the woman question as a 'must' for every Party member...[it] has resulted in failure to combat male-chauvinist tendencies which are rampant in our Party."⁹⁹ She called for the need to integrate the work of the women's commissions into the Party as well as increased support for Communist women's Party work by increasing training and educational opportunities for women and social services for childcare. Finally, she stressed that the Party would benefit from "greater attention to the triple handicaps of Negro women."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Dorothy Healey, quoted in Van Gosse, "Red Feminism: A Conversation with Dorothy Healey" *Science & Society* 66, no. 4 (Winter 2002-2003): 511.

⁹⁸ Claudia Jones, "For New Approaches to Our Work Among Women," *Political Affairs* 27 (August 1948), 741.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 743.

With the “triple handicaps” being black women’s oppression on the basis of sex, race, and class, Jones’ articulated a position radically different from her Popular Front feminist contemporaries. Whereas the CAW advocated for women’s rights across lines of race and class, Jones did not believe that a woman’s sex could be isolated from her identities of race and class. In a 1949 essay that is now recognized as one of the founding texts of black left feminism, Jones asserted that “Negro women—as workers, as Negroes, and as women—are the most oppressed stratum of the whole population.”¹⁰¹ However, Jones did not originate the theory of black women’s triple oppression so much as promote and popularize it so that it became central to the CP’s position on the “woman question.”¹⁰² Due to the intersection of sex, race and class, Jones emphasized that black women experienced a “super-exploitation” and, being the most oppressed group in society, were also the most militant. Therefore, black women represented the vanguard of the black struggle, the class struggle, and women’s struggle for liberation. When Jones spoke of the need for “Negro-white unity” between women, she meant that white women had to “realize that this fight for equality of Negro women is in their own self interest, inasmuch as the super-exploitation and oppression of Negro women tends to depress the standards of all women.”¹⁰³

Accordingly, Jones was not afraid to indict white women for their indulgence in white chauvinism while fighting against male chauvinism. In particular, she condemned white women’s economic exploitation of and paternalistic attitudes toward black women in

¹⁰¹ Claudia Jones, “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!” *Political Affairs* 28 (June 1949): 52.

¹⁰² Esther Cooper Jackson described the “triple handicap” in 1940. See Erik McDuffie, “‘No Small Amount of Change Could Do’: Esther Cooper Jackson and the Making of a Black Left Feminist” in *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* ed. Dayo F. Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komazi Woodard, (New York: New York University, 2009), 25-46.

¹⁰³ Jones, “An End to the Neglect,” 60.

the “madam-maid” relationship. Whereas Communist women argued against women’s place in the home, Jones did not hesitate to point out that “Negro women are in other people’s kitchens.”¹⁰⁴ These charges led to her most controversial point:

A developing consciousness on the woman question today, therefore, must not fail to recognize that the Negro question in the United States is *prior* to, and not equal, to the woman question; that only to the extent that we fight all chauvinist expressions and actions as regards the Negro people and fight for the full equality of the Negro people, can women as a whole advance their struggle for equal rights. For the progressive women’s movement, the Negro woman, who combines in her status the worker, the Negro, and the woman, is the vital link to this heightened political consciousness.¹⁰⁵

As the CP’s main spokesperson on the need for a struggle against male chauvinism, Jones received some resentment from white Communist women for her perspective that the struggle against racism preceded that of sexism. In interviews with Kate Weigand and Lynn Shapiro, CP and CAW member Harriet Magill accused Jones of engaging in “the most awful reverse chauvinism” and for destroying the “original, wonderful broad leadership” of the CAW with her involvement.¹⁰⁶ Magill’s comments speak to the tension between Jones’ analysis of sex, race, and class and the CAW’s desire to “organize women as women.” However, it is clear that Jones’ intention was not to hinder the women’s fight for equality. Rather, she believed that so long as white women perpetuated racial supremacy and left black women’s “super-exploitation” unaddressed, a women’s movement would not be successful.

Jones’ commitment to promoting women’s rights is evident in numerous other articles she devoted to the subject in *Political Affairs*. She always reiterated the standard

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 61.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 63.

¹⁰⁶ Magill, as quoted in Weigand, *Red Feminism*, 107; Lynn Shapiro, “Red Feminism: American Communism and the Women’s Right Tradition, 1919-1956,” (PhD diss., American University, 1996), 283.

Marxist line that women's complete emancipation would only be achieved in a Socialist America and often quoted Marx and Lenin. Similarly, she rallied against the "bourgeois idiocy of the 'battle of the sexes'" since "according to bourgeois feminism, women's oppression stems, not from capitalism, but from men."¹⁰⁷ She explicitly argued that there were real fights for women to wage under capitalism and within the CP:

True recognition of the special aspects of equality for women means fighting to squeeze out every concession right here under capitalism relative to fighting women's numerous disabilities and inequalities in the home, on the job, in the community. It means above all fighting for the economic equality of women, because of her economic dependence on men in our society, her exclusion from production, makes for a double exploitation of women (and triply so for Negro women)...It means support to her special demands, for child care centers, health centers, etc. It means elevation of women to leadership on all Party levels. It means also taking into account biological differences which contribute to women's special problems. Greater education on what is meant by equality is also needed, with special emphasis...to men in our Party who should be more self-critical of these weaknesses, and who must overcome their patronizing attitudes to women.¹⁰⁸

Her conception of the "special aspects of equality for women" also stands as a criticism of bourgeois feminism, which lacked an understanding of women's "special problems" and "special demands." In the same way that she criticized white women for failing to see how the categories of race and class called for a "special approach" to black women's liberation, Jones was articulating the important ways in which woman's sex differentiated her oppression from that of a man, and thus called for more than just a simplistic understanding of equality. Thus, she also criticized the "petty-bourgeoisie 'equalitarianism' fostered by Social-Democracy" as she felt that the socialists were merely arguing for women to enjoy the rights of men.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Claudia Jones, "International Women's Day and the Struggle for Peace" *Political Affairs* 29 (March 1950): 44.

¹⁰⁸ Claudia Jones, "For the Unity of Women in the Cause of Peace!" *Political Affairs* 30 (February 1951): 166.

¹⁰⁹ Jones, "International Women's Day," 44.

As the Korean War set in, the topic of peace played an increasingly important role in Jones' later writings. Ultimately, she saw the need for an autonomous women's movement and for it to be a movement for peace. The fact that she stressed that it should be a "distinct women's peace movement" is significant because the participation of men was central to the CP's struggle against male chauvinism. She referred to the position of peace in the leftist sense of the word—an "anti-fascist, anti-imperialist, anti-war coalition"—and advocated for a "united front peace policy."¹¹⁰ Her argument seems strikingly similar to the purpose of the WIDF and the CAW despite her earlier reservations about the accommodation of Popular Front politics. In fact, Jones played a strong hand in creating two organizations that succeeded the CAW and involved many of its former members: American Women for Peace, an interracial women's peace group, and Sojourners for Truth and Justice, a black women's social protest group. Both groups were associated with the CP and neither lasted beyond 1953 mainly due to McCarthyist repression. Moreover, neither group espoused a women's rights agenda. Thus, while Jones called for women to unite in the cause of peace, the turn towards peace ultimately subordinated the cause of women's liberation.

¹¹⁰ Jones, "International Women's Day," 45; "For the Unity of Women in the Cause of Peace!" 158.

II

“A Woman’s Place is Wherever She Wants to Be” *Woman as Revolutionary in Marxist Humanist Thought, 1950-1956*

As Claudia Jones aimed to elevate the “woman question” to the forefront of the Communist Party’s theoretical work, her fellow Trinidadian-born Harlem resident, C.L.R. James, was leading a group of anti-Communist Marxists that also paid significant attention to women as an oppressed group. While known for his wide-ranging intellectual contributions to subjects from Black Nationalism to the sport of cricket, the noted Afro-Caribbean scholar and activist’s prophetic statements about American women at mid-century have generally been neglected. To be sure, James did not write prolifically on issues of gender and as contemporary critics have noted how his body of work evokes a heroic black masculinity, he acknowledged his relationships with women as a personal failing.¹ Likewise, one could argue that, *American Civilization*, James’ ambitious prospectus on American history and culture written from 1949-1950, stands as a celebration of “great men” for all but omitting a female voice in his discussion of numerous writers, intellectuals, and historical figures.² However, not to be overlooked is a chapter of the text titled “Negroes, Women, and Intellectuals,” in which James selected African Americans,

¹ Hazel V. Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Brett St Louis, *Rethinking Race, Politics, and Poetics: C.L.R. James’ Critique of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 139-147. Anna Grimshaw, “Introduction” in *Special Delivery: The Letters of C.L.R. James to Constance Webb, 1939-1948*, ed. Anna Grimshaw (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1996), 17.

² According to Robert A. Hill, James’ literary executor, the only two exceptions are passing references to Eleanor Roosevelt and Margaret Mead’s writings. See Robert A. Hill, “Literary Executor’s Afterword,” in C.L.R. James, *American Civilization* [1950], ed. Anna Grimshaw and Keith Hart (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993), 330.

women, and the uneducated to demonstrate the fundamental inequalities of American democracy.

If James exhibited contradictory attitudes towards women in his thought and life, contradiction was also how he characterized women's existence in *American Civilization*. Writing on the status of middle-class women, James asserted that "the American woman is undoubtedly the freest, the most advanced, with the most opportunities for self-development in the world."³ After all, he explained, women could vote, study at a growing number of co-educational universities, obtain a divorce with a trip to Reno, and lighten their work in the home with an assortment of new gadgets and technologies. Yet despite the opportunities and conveniences now available to American women, James concluded that they were actually "the most unhappy, the most torn, the most dissatisfied, the most antagonistic in their relations with men that it is possible to find in history or as far as can be gathered, in other parts of the world."⁴ While James' rhetoric may appear extreme, it served to illustrate his conviction that American women were becoming conscious of their oppression and the ways in which it fragmented their lives. Moreover, this was never more apparent; society appeared to offer women a façade of equality, thus making their circumscribed realities all the more frustrating.

What was the solution to women's tormented existence in a society of pervasive gender inequality? James posited that the establishment of "a genuinely equal relationship" between men and women required "a total reorganization of *all* kinds of labor relations in the world at large."⁵ In fact, such a complete reorganization of society was what James and

³ James, *American Civilization*, 212.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 212-213.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 216. (emphasis in original)

his colleagues sought to foster at mid-century. Their circle of dissident Trotskyists returned to the early writings of Karl Marx to formulate a revolutionary politics focused on the alienation of human beings under capitalism rather than property relationships. They postulated that women, along with African Americans, workers, and youth, would be the agents of their own liberation and impel the creation of a “New Society.” Drawing from their theoretical work of this period, Raya Dunayevskaya, James’ primary collaborator, would found the philosophy of “Marxist-Humanism.”

Ultimately, James never completed *American Civilization*, leaving his original draft to be published posthumously. In 1952, the Federal Bureau of Investigation arrested him due to his unresolved immigrant status and interned him on Ellis Island as an “undesirable alien.”⁶ Facing imminent deportation, James left for London the next year and ended his fifteen-year sojourn in the United States. However, his tentative ideas about women’s struggle for equality lived on in the small socialist group he helped to create out of his involvement in the Trotskyist left. Thus, in a decidedly different far left milieu from the Communist Party, another strain of profeminist thought found existence.

Towards Humanism

After several years in the British Trotskyist movement, C.L.R. James arrived in the U.S. in 1938 for a speaking tour sponsored by the Socialist Worker’s Party (SWP). As World War II progressed, James became increasingly critical of the SWP’s defense of the Soviet Union and split from the party in 1940 along with a substantial fraction of its

⁶ Anna Grimshaw and Keith Hart, “*American Civilization: An Introduction*,” in C.L.R. James, *American Civilization* [1950], 22. Selwyn R. Cudjoe and William E. Cain, “Introduction” in *C.L.R. James: His Intellectual Legacies*, ed. Selwyn R. Cudjoe and William E. Cain (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 4.

members, in particular the majority of the youth, to form the new Worker's Party (WP) under the leadership of Max Shachtman. The following year, Raya Dunayevskaya, a Jewish Russian intellectual and Leon Trotsky's former secretary, convinced James to stay in the U.S. to start a minority faction within the WP with her, giving birth to the State-Capitalist Tendency, the first incarnation of their small group.⁷ Their name came from their argument that, for all purposes, the Soviet Union had become a capitalist state and was not a "degenerated worker's state" as the SWP contended or a "bureaucratic collectivist state" as the WP maintained. In the mid-1940s, Grace Lee Boggs, a Chinese American philosophy PhD joined the leadership of the group which became better known as the Johnson-Forest Tendency (JFT) after the party names of James (J.R. Johnson) and Dunayevskaya (Freddie Forest).⁸ After reunifying with the SWP in 1947, the JFT definitively broke with both Trotskyist parties in 1951.

Renaming themselves the Correspondence Publishing Committee, their departure from the SWP and the WP represented more than a difference of opinion on the nature of the Soviet state. Their name, inspired by the Committees of Correspondence that fostered communication and solidarity between the American colonies during the Revolutionary War,⁹ signaled their desire to be a new kind of radical party that worked to promote the self-organization and empowerment of the masses rather than to lead them. Thus, in addition to their opposition to Joseph Stalin and the Soviet Union, they were highly critical

⁷ For a summary of James' early political activities see Anna Grimshaw and Keith Hart, "American Civilization: An Introduction," in C.L.R. James, *American Civilization* [1950], 9-11.

⁸ I will refer to Grace Lee Boggs as Grace Lee to avoid confusion with her husband James Boggs, who was also involved in their political circle.

⁹ Frank Rosengarten, *Urbane Revolutionary: C.L.R. James and the Struggle for a New Society* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2008), 25. While this became their official name, some historians continue to refer to them as the JFT during this period. Many others have shortened it to Correspondence. Since *Correspondence* was the name of their newspaper, I will refer to the group as the Correspondence group or collective.

of the concept of a vanguard party, thus substantially breaking from all the major left-wing organizations. Their intense anti-vanguardism reflected a deep faith in the revolutionary potential of the masses. Indeed, the JFT's position on the black struggle and engagement with the labor movement during WWII suggested that a rejection of the traditional vanguard party was not far off.

Though James had been a prominent writer on anti-colonialism and black liberation movements worldwide since the 1930s, his experiences and travels in the U.S. led him to further a strain of radical left thought which placed the black struggle at the forefront of a socialist revolution in America.¹⁰ As captured in "The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in the USA," a speech he gave at a 1948 SWP conference in Detroit, James' held a strong conviction in the innate vitality and validity of the black struggle outside of any movement or political party. "This independent Negro movement is able to intervene with terrific force upon the general social and political life of the nation...it is in itself a constituent part of the struggle for socialism," James declared.¹¹ James' perspective informed the JFT's prioritization of the "Negro Question." Grace Lee distinctly remembers becoming radicalized through her participation in the early civil rights March on Washington Movement during the early 1940s and being drawn to James due to his stance on black liberation.¹² As such, both historians and former political associates have drawn attention to James's frustration with the SWP and WP's treatment of questions of race as

¹⁰ See Christopher Phelps, "Introduction" in Max Shachtman, *Race and Revolution*, ed. Christopher Phelps (London: Verso, 2003), ix- lxiii.

¹¹ C.L.R. James, "The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in the USA" [1948], Marxists' Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1948/revolutionary-answer.htm> [accessed Jan. 20, 2011].

¹² Grace Lee Boggs, "Organizing in the U.S.A." in *C.L.R. James: His Intellectual Legacies*, 165-170.

secondary to the class struggle as a catalyst to the formation of the Correspondence collective.¹³

Meanwhile, an unprecedented wave of strikes swept across the country during and after WWII. From 1942 to the end of the war, almost seven million workers took part in over 14,000 strikes, the most strikes to take place during any period of comparable length in U.S. history.¹⁴ These unauthorized “wildcat” strikes directly defied the federal wartime “no-strike pledge” that virtually all the major unions had agreed to. Whereas the CP ultimately supported the “no-strike pledge” as it entered into a wartime Popular Front, both the SWP and the WP denounced the pledge.¹⁵ Still associated with the WP during this period, the JFT actively took part in the WP’s efforts to reach out to workers and build opposition against the pledge. James was a regular writer for *Labor Action*, the WP’s rank-and-file paper. Martin Glaberman, one of the original JFT members, relocated to Detroit, a major strike center, in the summer of 1942 to start a WP branch.¹⁶ According to Glaberman, who was also a labor historian, the move was part of an effort to “proletarianize” the party by “colonizing young students and others in key industrial centers.”¹⁷ Glaberman subsequently spent more than two decades as a machine worker and union organizer for the United Auto Workers (UAW). Several other JFT members were

¹³ Rachel M. Peterson, “Adapting Left Culture to the Cold War: Theodore Ward, Ann Petry, and Correspondence” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2008); Martin Glaberman, “Introduction” to *Marxism for Our Times: C.L.R. James on Revolutionary Organization* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999); Grace Lee Boggs, *Living for Change: an Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

¹⁴ Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1997), 243.

¹⁵ Martin Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes: the Struggle against the No-Strike Pledge in the UAW during World War II* (Detroit, MI: Berwick, 1980).

¹⁶ Glaberman, “Introduction” in *Marxism for Our Times*, xiv.

¹⁷ Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes*, 79

factory workers or went to work in plants during the war including Jessie Glaberman, Grace Lee, James Boggs, Johnny Zupan, Paul Singer, and Si Owens.¹⁸

Thus, as the JFT sought to express solidarity with rank-and-file workers, it viewed the organization of the workers independent of their unions as evidence of the “self-activity” of the rank-and-file and a glimpse of its potential.¹⁹ Martin Glaberman’s research on the UAW reveals a striking contradiction about the struggle against the “no-strike pledge” among the autoworkers. Glaberman found that while the majority of workers voted to sustain the no-strike pledge, the majority of workers also participated in the wildcat strikes.²⁰ In Glaberman’s analysis, the contradictory finding emphasizes the unpredictability of worker’s actions and the spontaneity of their rebellion. Drawing from Marxist theory, Glaberman located the cause of the workers’ behavior to a “contradiction between being and consciousness,” which produces change that is “sudden, explosive, and spontaneous.”²¹ This conceptual framework was central to the JFT and its belief that the vanguard party was obsolete. The post-war militancy of rank-and-file workers substantiated their belief that spontaneous grassroots rebellion would define a new phase of revolutionary activity.

The wildcat strikes also illuminated the foundations of the JFT’s Marxism. A defining characteristic to the JFT was James, Dunayevskaya and Lee’s dialectical engagement with Marxist texts. In particular, the trio spent much of their time reading, translating, and discussing Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, a then little known text that Dunayevskaya had discovered in a Russian volume of his writings. In

¹⁸ Grace Lee Boggs, “Organizing in the U.S.A.” Rosengarten, *Urbane Revolutionary*, 70-71. Rosengarten also lists their pseudonyms.

¹⁹ Grace Lee Boggs, *Living for Change*, 63.

²⁰ Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes*, 121.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 129.

1947, they published the first English translations of three sections of the work: “Alienated Labor,” “Private Property and Communism,” and “Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic.” In “Alienated Labor,” Marx argued that, under capitalism, the worker is alienated from the products of his labor and that, from this, the worker is alienated from himself and other workers.²² In an important way, the wildcat strikes spoke to workers’ struggle against “alienated labor” as they challenged the discipline and authority of both management and labor. In the majority of these strikes, the strikers’ overriding concern was not wages but issues such as company policies and the discharging or demoting of employees.²³ Workers’ dissatisfaction and hostility to the bureaucracy of unions and plant life was a central theme to JFT-sponsored publications such as *The American Worker* (1947), *Indignant Heart: A Black Worker’s Journal* (1952), and *Punching Out* (1952). In the introduction to their translation of Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, the issue of the alienation and degradation of labor was made explicit. Workers needed control over the production process for the “full development of the laborers’ natural and acquired powers.”²⁴ Furthermore, alongside this revolution in economic life, “family, education, relations between the sexes, religion, all would lose their destructive alienated quality in a new mode of production in which the universality of the individual would be the starting point and source of all progress.”²⁵

Thus, when James wrote that “the revolution in the home rests upon a revolution outside of it” as he affirmed women’s struggle for equality in *American Civilization*, he clearly conceptualized it as part of a larger struggle against the inhumanity and alienation of

²² Erich Fromm, trans., *Marx’s Concept of Man* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1961), 93-103.

²³ Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes*, 50.

²⁴ “Introduction” to JFT translation as quoted in Rosengarten, *Urbane Revolutionary*, 37.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

existing social and economic relations. As they did to African Americans and workers, the JFT also ascribed a militancy to women that would become explicit in the formation of the Correspondence Publishing Committee. When the postwar strikes seemed to have subsided, the JFT threw its support behind a West Virginia coal miners' wildcat strike from 1949-1950.²⁶ The miners protested the introduction of a machine that would automate part of the mining process, thereby eliminating jobs and increasing the pace of work. In doing so, the strike seemed to embody the JFT's philosophy about the problematic nature of work and the humanity of the worker. Notably, Dunayevskaya highlighted the role of the wives of the miners in an article about the strike for the SWP newspaper, *The Militant*. She observed that the women were not passive during the strike, but often more militant and determined than the men as they pushed their husbands to abstain from working and united to organize support for the strike in the community.²⁷ Thus, she suggested that women identified with the principles of the strike and were activists themselves.

In a 1953 document relating to the establishment of their new organization, Dunayevskaya provided some insight into the Correspondence group's understanding of women's status in society.²⁸ Similar to Communist women, Dunayevskaya attributed great importance to women's participation in the workforce during WWII and linked their oppression to that of African Americans. As James suggested the links between the

²⁶ For an account of the strike and the JFT's participation, see Peter Hudis, "Workers as Reason: The Development of a New Relation of Worker and Intellectual in American Marxist Humanism," *Historical Materialism* 11(4): 267-293.

²⁷ Raya Dunayevskaya, "The Miners' Wives" [1950], in *Women's Liberation and the Dialectic of Revolution: Reaching for the Future* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International Inc., 1985), 31-32.

²⁸ Raya Dunayevskaya, "On Women in the Post-War World, and the Old Radicals" [1953], in *Women's Liberation and the Dialectic of Revolution*, 31-35. This appears to be an excerpt of a much longer JFT document titled "Our Organization: American Roots and World Concepts," which according to Frank Rosengarten is a lofty 72-page statement of principle. See Rosengarten, *Urbane Revolutionary*, 78-79.

present-day struggles of blacks and women in *American Civilization*, Dunayevskaya emphasized the historical dimensions of this relationship by noting that, out of all the abolitionists, Frederick Douglass was the strongest supporter of women's rights. Though that was a century ago, Dunayevskaya maintained that "one thing was clear. There was a new type of response to certain historic incidents which would stress 'the affinity of the struggle of Negroes and women in America.'"²⁹ For women, like African Americans, joined the workforce by the millions during the war and faced unemployment at its end. According to Dunayevskaya, women's struggle for equality had only intensified when the war ended because, through their role in wartime production, women had gained a "new dignity" with which they "categorically refused to remain an appendage to the men."³⁰ Now, as militant as ever and displaced from their jobs, women had resumed their rebellion in the home—the site of a "daily, hourly struggle in which the woman wants to establish *new* relations with her husband, with the children, with other women and other men."³¹ In emphasizing their militancy and totality of their struggle, Dunayevskaya's interpretation of women's post-war status also stood as a confirmation of the "self-activity" of the oppressed.

From Theory to Practice

With the formation of the Correspondence Publishing Committee, the group formally declared workers, African Americans, women, and youth as the most oppressed groups in society, and thus, the forces for a revolution against it. The organization's role

²⁹ Dunayevskaya, "On Women in the Post-War World, and the Old Radicals" [1953], 33.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 31.

then, was to make their voices heard. Out of this emerged the conception that “the form of a Marxist organization today is a newspaper.”³² Indeed, the major thesis of what James retrospectively declared to be the group’s defining document *The Invading Socialist Society* (1947), was that “the self-mobilization of the masses is the dominating social and political feature of our age.”³³

To prepare for their newspaper, which would translate their anti-vanguardist philosophy into practice, the group created a temporary school to bridge the divides between workers and intellectuals. The so-called Third Layer School took place in New York City during the fall of 1952.³⁴ It was named after Lenin’s theory of “third layerism,” which held that society consisted of three hierarchal layers and that the bottommost layer should hold true leadership.³⁵ In this model, the political leaders in the first layer would submit to the trade unionists and community leaders in the second who would follow the rank-and-file workers in the third. The Correspondence collective sought to turn this model into reality with their school, which consisted of political education seminars taught by the rank-and-file to the intellectuals such as James, Dunayevskaya and Lee.³⁶ James Boggs and Selma Weinstein, two of the worker-instructors recruited to teach at the school, would eventually become the spouses of Grace Lee and C.L.R. James respectively; they would also become prominent figures in the Correspondence circle in their own right. Whereas Lee believes that the school “changed [her] life” as it instilled its “‘listening to the worker’

³² Constance Webb, as quoted in Rachel Peterson, “*Correspondence: Journalism, Anticommunism, and Marxism in 1950s Detroit*,” in *Anticommunism and the African American Freedom Movement*, eds. Robbie Lieberman and Clarence Lang, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 118.

³³ James calls it their “fundamental document” in the preface to the 1972 edition. See *The Invading Socialist Society*, Rev. ed. (Detroit, MI: Berwick Editions, 1972), 3.

³⁴ James Smethurst, *Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 187.

³⁵ Grace Lee Boggs, “The Continuity of Living for Change: An Interview with Grace Lee Boggs,” eds. Todd Duncan and Kathryn V. Lindberg, *Social Text* 67, 19 no. 2, (2001): 50.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

pedagogy.” into her consciousness, Glaberman did not think that the school was successful but recognized it as a “good faith attempt” to get “intellectuals discussing what workers had put forward, rather than the workers discussing what intellectuals put forward.”³⁷ Perhaps indicative of the ambiguous legacy of their organizational tactics, their comments nonetheless illustrate that a bottom-up approach was a core component of the group’s politics.

In 1953, the group officially relocated its headquarters to Detroit and began publishing their newspaper. Intended to remove them from the sectarian disputes between the SWP and WP and ground them in the real struggles of the working class, the move geographically and ideologically completed their break with the Trotskyist establishment.³⁸ As industrial center with a large working class population, the move seemed to fit into the leftist tradition of “proletarianizing.” Given an already strong presence in the city and its labor movement due to Glaberman’s leadership in local socialist circles, Lee recalls that the group was also drawn by accounts of black auto workers fighting racism in their workplace and in their unions.³⁹ Yet as the group remained faithful to its anti-vanguardism, a newspaper collective emerged as their primary if not sole means of activism. Although the newspaper was based in Detroit, it also had chapters in Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, New Jersey and West Virginia to report on the local struggles of each area. In total, the group never had more than three hundred members of which seventy-five were associated with the main Detroit branch.⁴⁰

³⁷ Boggs, “An Interview with Grace Lee Boggs,” 51, 58; Glaberman, “Introduction” to *Marxism for Our Times*, xix.

³⁸ Glaberman, “Introduction” to *Marxism for Our Times*, xviii.

³⁹ Boggs, *Living for Change*, 44.

⁴⁰ Peterson, “Adapting Left Culture,” 215.

If the Third Layer School was a learning device for intellectuals to align themselves with bottommost sectors of society, their paper *Correspondence* would be the medium through which intellectuals would project the voices of workers, African Americans, women and youth. The organization strove to achieve the model of a paper entirely run by its readers—ordinary people who would be empowered by writing, editing, and circulating their opinions. Intellectuals would, in theory, become “full fountain pens” wielded by ordinary people to record their views.⁴¹ In order to make *Correspondence* accessible to the widest possible audience, amanuensis, the practice of writing from dictation, was commonly used to collect articles and readers’ responses from those who may not have been inclined to write for a newspaper.⁴² The colloquial tone that imbued the pages of *Correspondence* reflected this journalistic practice and reinforced the spirit in which the project was conceived. Though the paper would go through several incarnations due to internal disputes, financial difficulties and McCarthyite repression, it remained committed to the recognition and promotion of the “self-activity” of ordinary people for the duration of its eleven year run from 1953 to 1964.

After a mimeographed trial run, the first issue was officially distributed on October 3, 1953. In the “Statement of the Editor,” editor Johnny Zupan, a trade union activist described the working-class perspective that the biweekly paper would convey. Readers could expect the pages of *Correspondence* to express “total hostility to all forms of bureaucratic domination, anti-Communist as well as Communist...the Almighty Dollar...McCarthyism, McCarranism and Taft-Hartleyism” so that “ordinary people can

⁴¹ Boggs, “An Interview with Grace Lee Boggs.”

⁴² Peterson, “*Correspondence: Journalism, Anticommunism, and Marxism*,” 123-124.

say what they want to say and are so eager to say.”⁴³ Airing the opinions of ordinary people would reveal that

Everywhere there is a deep and fundamental dissatisfaction with the conditions of life and work of the overwhelming majority of people. Everywhere and in every way there is taking place the search for new human relations, between a worker and his work, between races and nations, between men and women, between youth and adults.⁴⁴

The theoretical foundations of the newspaper directly reflected the anti-vanguardism and humanist philosophy that brought James, Dunayevskaya and Lee to break from the institutional Socialist left. Zupan’s diagnosis of the discontent of the masses and their “search for new human relations” exhibited the group’s sentiment that workers, African Americans, women and youth were on the verge of revolutionizing society through their everyday actions and relationships. Thus, it was the newspaper leadership’s duty to stay behind the scenes in order to allow these groups to speak for themselves. In addition to several pages of reader’s letters, every issue included sections such as “Special Negro News,” “On the Job,” “Young Guys and Gals,” and the “Woman’s Page.” The space reserved for each of these topics indicates the paper’s desire to be relevant to its readers and to encourage them to contribute to the *Correspondence* project.

While several leftist publications emerged in the 1950s both as expression of discontent with the repression of McCarthyism and as a vehicle for social change, few took up questions of gender in their analysis of postwar society. In this context, *Correspondence* is noteworthy for its discussion of women’s issues alongside those of race and labor. According to James’ literary executor, Robert A. Hill, James was the one who insisted that

⁴³ “Statement of the Editor,” *Correspondence*, October 3, 1953, p1.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

a section of the paper be devoted to women and edited by women.⁴⁵ It is apparent that the group felt that the left had not treated the “woman question” correctly. As Dunayevskaya told of women joining left-wing parties after the war because “they were out searching for a *total reorganization of society*,” she critiqued the “old radicals” of both the WP and the SWP for continuing to use “old political terms” that left them blinded to the “new element—that the Woman Question, in and of itself, was playing a new role, not alone outside, but inside the organization.”⁴⁶ Her perception that women were neglected and subordinated *within* the Socialist left is significant and reminiscent of Communist women’s critique of the CP’s male chauvinist tendencies. Likewise, it is worth noting the remarkable intellectual partnership between Dunayevskaya, Lee, and James that fueled the JFT and then the Correspondence collective. Though James has received most of the attention and credit in the historiography, the trio’s collaboration was closer to “a sort of interdisciplinary triumvirate” with James’ contributing his ideas about history and revolution, Dunayevskaya gravitating towards the economic analysis, and Lee bringing her background in philosophy and German.⁴⁷ Their relationship was far from perfect as time would tell, but such a division of labor between two women and a man was rare even in the radical left. In her memoir, Constance Webb, James’ second wife who was active in socialist and communist circles herself, corroborates Dunayevskaya’s indictment of the left. Webb recalls Dunayevskaya’s unhappy affiliation with the SWP because “the leadership, all male,

⁴⁵ Robert A. Hill, afterward to *American Civilization*, 330

⁴⁶ Dunayevskaya, “On Women in the Post-War World, and the Old Radicals,” 33.

⁴⁷ Boggs, “An Interview with Grace Lee Boggs,” 49-50; Rosengarten, *Urbane Revolutionary*, 67-69.

treated women as their handmaidens, leaving it to them to do all the mimeographing, the serving and cleaning up after making coffee, and sometimes the sweeping of the offices.”⁴⁸

While Dunayevskaya and Lee clearly rebelled against the relegation of women to gendered background roles, Dunayevskaya actually reserved her strongest accusations for women leaders in the SWP and WP. In her view, these “exceptional women” were no different from the “career women of the bourgeois world;” they had no sense of the struggles of rank-and-file women and had “reduced the whole fight to fighting for positions in the party itself, and accusing all and sundry who opposed them of ‘male chauvinism.’”⁴⁹ She suggested that these women were only concerned about advancing themselves to the point where they used the oppression of their sex to do so. While it is possible that her negative use of the term “male chauvinism” was a criticism of the CP, it is reflective of a conception of women’s oppression that placed value upon women’s work in the home. In a 1952 letter to fellow JFT and Correspondence member Freddy Paine, James explains that “the woman question for us is the question of the proletarian women or the proletarian wife who is condemned without choice to drudgery, degeneration and frustration.”⁵⁰ He elaborates that while the struggles of workers have received attention from mainstream society since they are organized, the housewife is unorganized and “suffer[s] in silence...almost ignored.”⁵¹ While upholding the working-class housewife as the face of women’s oppression, James did not mean that women would find liberation in the

⁴⁸ Constance Webb, *Not Without Love: Memoirs* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2003) 123-124.

⁴⁹ Dunayevskaya, “Our Organization,” in *Revolutionary Feminism: Women as Reason* (Detroit: News & Letters Committee, 1978), 25. This is an extended excerpt of “On Women in the Post-War World, and the Old Radicals” (emphasis in original).

⁵⁰ C.L.R. James, as quoted in Selwyn R. Cudjoe, “‘As Ever Darling, All My Love, Nello’: The Love Letters of C.L.R. James,” *C.L.R. James: His Intellectual Legacies*, 239.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

workplace when he condemned the “drudgery” of their domestic existence. His use of the term “proletarian housewife” and subsequent comparison of the housewife to the worker suggests that he equated the work that women did in the home to what the worker did in the factory. However, the housewife’s fundamentally alienating conditions of work in the home took on an oppression of a special character.

In a 1951 panel discussion on the “woman question” organized by a group of JFT women from Los Angeles, Selma Weinstein further addressed the problems that working-class women in the area had raised. Though she would soon marry James, at the time, she was a 21-year old single mother working in a Los Angeles plant and clearly identified with the perspective that she would articulate.⁵² In her speech, Selma also maintained that the home was the site of women’s oppression. Though she gave no concrete resolution, she discerned the need to breakdown the division between women’s place in the home and men’s place outside of it:

Woman’s place in the home is merely an extension of man’s place in the factory. It is clear that woman's life in the home is totally opposed to her as a human being and as a woman. Today women know they can no longer stay in the home as it is now constituted; nor can they allow men to leave the home as freely as they have in the past. Women do not want to leave the home entirely but have men enter it for the first time.⁵³

By equating the home with the factory, Selma was acknowledging that housework was also labor, an inherently working-class perspective that echoed the controversial arguments of Communist Mary Inman in the early 1940s. Recognizing the production value of housework necessarily expanded the boundaries of what was considered labor.

⁵² After marrying C.L.R. James in 1956, she became known as Selma James. To avoid confusion with C.L.R. James, I will refer to her as Selma.

⁵³ Selma James, “On the Woman Question: An Orientation” [1951], Marxists’ Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/dunayevskaya/works/1951/women/index.htm> [accessed Jan. 20, 2011].

Yet with the home fixed as “woman’s place,” housework was entirely relegated to women and the home constituted a site of exploitation as the factory was for men. Thus, while women had a place outside of the home, men also had a place in it, and it was this change, Selma suggested, that remained paramount. While housewives were not organized in the traditional sense, another woman at the panel noted that women were rebelling in their everyday lives:

Nearly every day housewives have revolutionary conversations. I can't go out in my backyard where my neighbor is constantly hanging her laundry (She has four little boys), without exchanging problems and troubles. She tells me how they come in tracking mud, how she has to do her housework at night because they are there all day. She cleans the house up at night and it's clean in the morning, but by noon it's filthy again. She discusses her husband's attitude. He comes in and makes a mess but says: “It isn't a mess; it's only my clothes.” Women feel very close to other women in the same position. They're rebelling as a whole group in their individual homes.⁵⁴

To most, these kinds of exchanges between women would hardly seem significant, not to mention “revolutionary.” Yet, they signified a level of consciousness about their shared oppression as a sex despite their isolation in the home. *Correspondence* sought to give value and permanence to these “revolutionary conversations” through the medium of a newspaper.

The “Woman’s Page”

As a full page of articles, editorials, and reader’s comments about women’s lives, the “Woman’s Page” of *Correspondence* recognized the many dimensions of women’s daily struggles and their potential as a revolutionary class alongside African Americans, workers and youth. Moreover, Selma argued that as “the only working class intervention in

⁵⁴ Ibid.

politics that exists....this paper, every part of it, is the voice of the class to which women belong.”⁵⁵ However, she justified the need to for a separate “Woman’s Page” so that “women are assured a special voice...for the special problems of women.”⁵⁶ What were these special problems? Topics such as the ERA and other political reforms never made the page. Neither did any discussion about the portrayal of women in the media. Instead, contributors to the “Woman’s Page” predominately wrote from a first-person perspective about problems in marital relations and family life. In the inaugural edition, the editor explained that “it is on this page where divorce rates will not be statistics but the struggles of men and women to live together in a new way.”⁵⁷ She went on to emphasize that women did not necessarily want a marriage where “he has half and she has half” but one in which they “share the decisions of the family and nobody is to be boss.”⁵⁸ These were the issues that women confronted in their day to day lives and the “Woman’s Page” would attempt to record their ideas about what needed to be changed.

Thus, on the surface, the “Woman’s Page” was not overtly political and did not necessarily impart a sense of revolutionary significance. Articles focused on practical matters from the benefits of a washing machine to how to get a raise, mixed in with stories with titles such as “I Live Alone, and I Don’t Like it,” “She Should Quit Him,” and “A Man I Know.” Drawing upon personal anecdotes, these stories were plainly and colloquially written. They rarely had a moral or conclusion and tended to recount dilemmas and express indecision, often asking for advice from others. A reader from Detroit noted the conversational gossip-like quality of the writing and praised the paper for reading like

⁵⁵ “The Need for Correspondence,” *Correspondence*, March 8, 1954.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ “A New Relationship,” *Correspondence*, October 3, 1953.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

“human life, not a story. It is just like women getting together and talking.”⁵⁹ She added, if more men read it, “we would have better homes.”⁶⁰ Women’s critiques and suggestions about the paper and the role of the “Woman’s Page” were also frequently printed, sometimes with responses from the editors.

As the Los Angeles chapter of *Correspondence* edited the “Woman’s Page,” Selma was a central figure in the newspaper leadership and its advocacy for women. Her column, “A Woman’s Place” written under the pseudonym Marie Brant, was the mainstay of the “Woman’s Page.” Notably, it embraced women across class lines as Selma aimed to “give a total picture of the American woman of all classes thinks and feels about her life as a mother, wife, and human being.”⁶¹ The column’s name was derived from an identically titled pamphlet she published in February 1953. The twenty-three page pamphlet was highly popular and distinguished as the most successful out of all the JFT and *Correspondence* publications.⁶² It also became available on the “Woman’s Page” as Selma reprinted several excerpts in her column.

In the pamphlet, Selma foreshadowed the development of the “Woman’s Page” as she asserted that “it is in the day-to-day lives of women that show what women want” and discussed the circumstances in which single women, married women and working women lived.⁶³ She found expressions of rebellion in their everyday lives as women were fighting “tooth and nail against being shouldered with the whole responsibility of the house” and

⁵⁹ “Reader’s Views,” *Correspondence*, Dec. 26, 1953.

⁶⁰ “Reader’s Views,” *Correspondence*, Dec. 26, 1953.

⁶¹ See “Reader’s Views,” *Correspondence*, Jan, 9, 1954.

⁶² Glaberman, “Introduction,” to *Marxism for Our Times*, xxiii.

⁶³ Selma James, “A Woman’s Place” [1951], in *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James (London: Falling Wall Press, 1972), 57.

“refusing to be just machines for raising children and getting their husbands off to work.”⁶⁴ Likewise, single women were hesitant to get married and divorce was a common phenomenon. As Selma continually came back to relations between men and women, she emphasized the need to respect women’s autonomy for “women have to fight those men that say women’s place is in the home, and that is where they should stay....women have shown these men that a woman’s place is wherever she wants to be.”⁶⁵ However, even as she made these strong assertions against women’s domestic confinement, she made sure to defend marriage and family as normal and natural desires. Women did not want freedom from men or children but a “new” and “human” relationship with them. How exactly this would come about was unclear as Selma only concluded to affirm that radical change was needed: “women are finding more and more that there is no way out but a complete change. But one thing is already clear. Things can’t go on the way they are. Every woman knows that.”⁶⁶

Then the informal style and seemingly haphazard content of the “Woman’s Page” was not unintended. Even as a blank canvas for women to express their opinions, “Woman’s Page” would help women realize their autonomy. By simply getting women to verbalize and share their experiences, the editors believed that the “Woman’s Page” was imbuing a sense of confidence and purpose in women as they struggled to realize “new” and “human” relations with men. As Selma explained in her column, this importantly differentiated the “Woman’s Page” from the multitude of women’s magazines so popular at the time:

⁶⁴ Ibid., 61, 71.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 74-75.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 79.

It [the women's page] doesn't push people to marriage counselors or tell them how to fix up their lives. But it does what these other magazines can never do. It takes the ideas and experiences that come up in little conversations and relations all the time and prints them...they help not just the few who hear, but all who read to understand more fully what it is that has to be changed. And that is the first step to changing anything.⁶⁷

Inherent in Selma's statement and her pamphlet is the belief that women were dissatisfied and that their rebellion was irrevocably already underway. The "Woman's Page" wanted to amplify that sentiment rather than to suppress or moderate it. Instead of claiming to have solutions to the problems that women were facing, the "Women's Page" was part of *Correspondence's* mission to give women an autonomous voice. Seeing their opinions in print gave them value and legitimacy. Hearing them being shared and discussed would build solidarity in their individual struggles. For instance, talking about issues such as divorce and domestic violence showed that "it happened to everyone and it was no secret or anything to be ashamed of."⁶⁸ The majority of the contributors to the "Women's Page" were anonymous and reader's letters were usually signed with descriptions like "housewife," "working mother" or "single girl." These identities not only provided anonymity but spoke to the common experiences that would lessen their isolation. On the most basic level, the "Woman's Page" was simply a medium for honest communication between women. However, this in itself was a crucial step to bringing women out of the isolation of the home and allowing for their self-empowerment and self-mobilization as a group.

In practice, the "Woman's Page" attracted a number of articles about women's concerns about work, both inside and outside of the home. Stay-at-home mothers and

⁶⁷ "A Woman's Place," *Correspondence*, November 8, 1953.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

factory workers alike expressed frustration about the lack of time they had due to their domestic duties. “Never Free” from Detroit wrote that as a mother, “my job is 24 hours a day. I don’t see any freedom for the mother until the child grows up.”⁶⁹ “GM Woman Worker” expressed similar sentiments and noted that women’s schedules made getting involved in *Correspondence* difficult. When one woman on the editing committee explained that her husband opposed her work with the newspaper because it compromised her time for the family, it seemed to inspire several responses from readers that argued for the need for women to be involved in political work. One reader was especially indignant and warned that “by capitulating to him she weakens women everywhere.”⁷⁰

An article entitled “To Work or Not to Work” illustrated one woman’s dilemma in deciding whether or not to return to work after having a child. She acknowledges that “working also gives the feelings that I’m really accomplishing something, contributing more than just my presence to my marriage,” but also expresses the desire to raise her newborn child. Moreover, she concludes “it would probably do me good to have a rest from the hum-drum, boring, frustrating job of staying home all day. But then I would still have the hum-drum, frustrating things to do on top of having worked all day.”⁷¹ The woman’s story highlighted the underlying problem of working women’s “double burden” of having to deal with the housework in addition to working outside of the home. Coming out of World War II, it is not surprising that this was a common issue. Communist women had also raised the “double burden” as a persistent hamper on women’s ability to manage a job. However, Communists’ calls for social services as the solution to the problem never appeared in the pages of *Correspondence*. Instead, as Selma articulated in *A Woman’s*

⁶⁹ “Do Women Have Time?” *Correspondence*, Jan. 1954.

⁷⁰ “Reader’s Views,” *Correspondence*, Jan. 23, 1954.

⁷¹ “To Work or Not to Work,” *Correspondence*, Nov. 14, 1953.

Place, contributors to the “Woman’s Page” voiced their desires for housework to be shared between men and women.

Thus, women’s accounts of their experiences trying to convince men to get involved in housework, the raising of children, and home life in general were regular fixtures on the “Women’s Page.” Occasionally sympathetic men contributed articles on the topic as well—one headline read “A Man Says Housework is Work.” Selma printed one woman’s perspective on the issue in her column. The woman asserted that the “the fight that every woman carries on for her husband to share responsibility for the home and children” would ultimately make both husband and wife “more human.”⁷² In her own case, she felt that “every time my husband and I fight and discuss it, we feel we have gone some distance...every battle and the discussion along with it is a kind of an advance, not a victory over him, but a glimpse by both of us into what the new society can be like.”⁷³ Thus, the “new society” appeared to be marked by greater respect and mutuality between the sexes, beginning with the sharing of household duties.

While the “Woman’s Page” was popular with readers, not all readers identified with the subject and tone of the articles. Plenty of readers wrote about their satisfaction they found in marriage and domestic life. For example, a woman from New York authored a two-part article titled “What Makes a Family?” and argued that marriage, children, and housework brought her pride and enjoyment.⁷⁴ Some readers objected to the long rambling nature of the articles and wanted more household hints. Perhaps a more insightful criticism was that of a miner’s wife who wrote to say, “The Woman’s Page—that’s the truth all right.

⁷² “A Woman’s Place” *Correspondence*, April 18, 1955.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ “What Makes a Family?” *Correspondence*, December 11 1954, December 25 1954.

How dull the housework gets and such. But what's the point of writing about it?"⁷⁵

Another reader who liked Selma's columns nonetheless admitted that sometimes "it is hard to tell just where it is going."⁷⁶ As a newspaper conceived to be a passive conduit for the opinions of oppressed groups, *Correspondence* lent itself to such criticisms. The "Woman's Page" often did lack direction and focus. Most of the time, it was just women sharing stories about their marriages and how they got along with their husbands. In some respects, the import placed on women's personal experiences and marital relations anticipated the radical feminist slogan "the personal is political." Yet, when contextualized in their assertions of the need for "a complete change" and "a radical reorganization of society," the "Woman's Page" seemed to fall short. One of the paper's editors explicitly acknowledged this weakness: "we have some very abstract ideas about the unity of home and factory, and unless these ideas are always kept in mind, developed and concretized, the woman's page will end up in a blind alley, and the controversy can never be resolved."⁷⁷ The editor's statement suggested that for all of *Correspondence*'s optimism and faith in the grassroots rebellion of women, the newspaper could not just stand to assume that a revolution would happen.

The clearest explanation of what a "new society" and the "unity of home and factory" entailed came when Selma James rewrote C.L.R. James' section on women in *American Civilization* in 1956. Selma greatly evolved and expanded the section to become a full chapter entitled "The American Family: Decay and Rebirth." She drew from James' conception of the contraindicated existence of American women to argue that women's formal equality only exacerbated women's lack of actual equality, and that this schism was

⁷⁵ "Back Talk," *Correspondence*, December 25, 1954.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ "Problems of Editing" *Correspondence*, March 5, 1955.

crushing. Moreover, Selma asserted that the “first vital connection between the position of women and labor relations” was that “both seek essentially the same thing, freedom and equality, the one in the cooperative character of the labor process, the other in family life. Both know that they must have it, or life is not worth living.”⁷⁸ This construction highlighted an understanding of the family as a site of cooperation and socialization, as a provider of “stability, unity, and sustenance” in times of crisis.⁷⁹ Yet at the same time, it was clear that “the modern family is incompatible with the freedom of woman.”⁸⁰ As it existed, the family subordinated woman’s independence to the needs of her children and husband. Thus, she argued that “in order to preserve the family, it must be completely reorganized. And in order for it to be reorganized, the woman finds herself the instrument of [its] destruction.”⁸¹ To describe the rebirth of the family, Selma chose to use the word “community,” suggesting an expansion and democratization of what the family encompassed. “What we are moving towards is a community of labor in the factory, a community of labor in the home, a community established between both, and children growing up in that community,” she concluded.⁸² This vision of a liberated yet mutualistic association of individuals would allow for the creation of “new human relations” and the destruction of the gendered division of labor as well as the alienating nature of that labor.

Selma’s articulation of the decay and rebirth of the family shows the strong influence of Marx’s conception of the relationship between private property and communism in his *1844 Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*. In “Private Property and

⁷⁸ Selma James, “The American Family: Decay and Rebirth” [1956], in *From Feminism to Liberation* ed. Edith Hoshino Altbach (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1980), 175.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 188.

Communism,” Marx denies that communism is the mere negation of private property, for this only results in communal ownership. He raises the specific example of marriage, wherein women are private property, and contrasts it to the “community of women, in which women become communal and common property.”⁸³ The “community of women” maintains the property relationship and fails to address the issue of man’s alienation. Instead, Marx posits that “*communism is the positive abolition of private property, as human self-alienation, and therefore as the real appropriation of the human nature through and for man....communism as a fully-developed naturalism is humanism and as a fully-developed humanism is naturalism. It is the definitive resolution of the antagonism between man and nature, and between man and man.*”⁸⁴ While Marx never suggested what marriage would look like in real communism, Selma’s conception of a “community of labor” seems to offer her interpretation of a formation that was fully humanistic and conducive to the full and free expression of both men and women.

The fundamental differences between the communism of the Correspondence group and that of the Communist Party could be seen in their approaches to women’s liberation. For the CP it was traditionally a question of women’s freedom from the home and participation in production alongside men facilitated by the aid of socialized child care and housework services. The intensified period of examination of the “woman question” after the war ushered in a critique of “male chauvinism” that argued for the need to fight the manifestations of male supremacy under capitalism. The Correspondence group perceived women’s oppression as intrinsically part of a capitalist set-up that alienated man from his work and men and women from each other. Accordingly, the struggle for women’s

⁸³ Fromm, *Marx’s Concept of Man*, 125.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.

equality was one that necessarily involved men and the transcendence of their mutual alienation and the creation of a more interdependent and humanistic relationship.

When Selma James' reworking of *American Civilization* was published in *Correspondence* in 1956, the newspaper and organization had drastically changed. In 1955, Selma left for London to marry and be with C.L.R. James. That year, Dunayevskaya also led a split in the group taking a substantial portion of the already small membership with her. Her departure from the group seems to have been mostly precipitated by arguments with James, who was attempting to manage the group from London. As a result of this split, Dunayevskaya and her followers would insist upon her origination of the "Marxist-Humanist" philosophy while positioning James, Lee and the other remaining *Correspondence* members as hostile to her work. Yet, as Frank Rosengarten points out, James' worldview seems to fully support the "Marxist-Humanist" perspective.⁸⁵ Dunayevskaya's group started their own workers' paper *News & Letters* (1955-), that also contained sections reserved for workers, African Americans, women and youth and was, in all, extremely similar to *Correspondence*. Meanwhile, *Correspondence* greatly suffered from the split and was forced to suspend publication for a period before returning as a four-page monthly. The "Woman's Page" was eliminated as the paper became a primarily theoretical discussion bulletin for a period publishing documents such as *American Civilization*. Eventually the paper returned to its original format, but the "Woman's Page" was no longer as significant.

Ultimately, if organizationally unsuccessful, the *Correspondence* group was remarkably ambitious in its theoretical and political engagement with Marxist thought. As

⁸⁵ Rosengarten, *Urbane Revolutionary*, 68.

they conceived *Correspondence* as a means “to recognize the fact of the socialist society and to record the facts of its existence,” the “Woman’s Page” was limited in its function.⁸⁶ In a 1972 postscript to her “American Family” essay, Selma James was forthright in acknowledging the limitations of their organization’s conception of the “woman question.” While they attempted to put forward a vision of women’s liberation in a radically transformed “new society,” Selma noted that “we did not put forward a program, transitional or otherwise.”⁸⁷ Indeed, it remained unarticulated how the “community of labor” would come about aside from relying upon the force of spontaneous grassroots rebellion. Nonetheless, she also emphasized that, in *Correspondence*’s belief that the U.S. stood at the brink of great social upheaval in the 1950s, “particularly unique was the view that women were an integral part of that movement to revolutionary social change.”⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Grace C. Lee, Pierre Chaulieu, and J.R. Johnson, *Facing Reality* (Detroit, MI: Correspondence Publishing Committee, 1958), 112.

⁸⁷ Selma James, “The American Family,” 191.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 190.

III

“Are Housewives Necessary?”

Old Radicals & New Radicalisms, 1954-1961

Correspondence was not the only group that strove to differentiate itself from the orthodox Socialist and Communist left while still opposing anti-anticommunism in the postwar era. In fact, whereas James and Dunayevskaya’s group remained obscure and primarily localized in Detroit, a diverse independent left emerged in this period to make a significant impact on the rise of the New Left in the 1960s. Among these, radical pacifism appeared to offer women the promise of liberation in the opportunity for egalitarian protest. For radical pacifism represented the branch of the peace movement that promoted nonviolent direct action combined with a moral politics that embraced “cooperative economics, radical trade unionism, socialism, and interracial justice.”¹ With its roots in the small circle of contentious objectors of World War II, radical pacifism reached its fullest expression in 1956 with the founding of *Liberation* magazine.²

In the March 1956 inaugural issue, its editors proclaimed that *Liberation* would seek to find a “third way” outside of both liberalism and Marxism to foster a nonviolent revolutionary politics.³ This would encompass a “transformation of society by human decision and action” through “experimentation in creative living by individuals, families, and groups; day to day support of movements to abolish colonialism and racism or for the freedom of all individualism from domination, whether military, economic, political, or

¹ Marian Mollin, *Radical Pacifism in Modern America: Egalitarianism and Protest*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 2.

² For a brief overview of radical pacifism see Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left*, (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1987), 125-170.

³ “Tract for the Times,” *Liberation* 1 (March 1956): 4-6.

cultural.”⁴ Thus, at least in theory, radical pacifism was pregnant with the possibilities for women to vocalize their opposition to the domination of patriarchy and to advocate for their rights as human beings. However, an examination of *Liberation* through the early 1960s reveals that its pages were dominated with articles about the atomic bomb and civil rights activism with little attention to women’s issues much less any explicitly feminist assertions. Likewise, the work of historian Marian Mollin shows that, in reality, the radical pacifist movement did not offer women much more than supporting roles to its male leaders.⁵

Mollin finds that the heavily male-dominated movement attempted to link pacifism to images of male heroism and masculine militancy as men appeared to consciously fight back against the notion that peace was an effeminate cause.⁶ While this appeared to push women into the background, at the same time, their notion of a “human family” signified an embrace of cooperative family values that emerged as an attractive means to justify atomic bomb and civil defense protest in the late 1950s.⁷ Both men and women used their roles as parents and the language of familial duty to justify their civil disobedience and protest. However, it was women who used their motherhood to not only overcome their invisibility in the movement but also to challenge the boundaries of gender roles.

While never articulating a clear feminist consciousness, women radical pacifists appeared to embrace a maternalist politics that allowed them to publicly defy expectations of a domestic motherhood. Activists such as Lillian Willoughby and Marjorie Swann, each mothers of four children, willingly risked, and sometimes acted to provoke, arrest and

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Mollin, *Radical Pacifism in Modern America*.

⁶ Marion Mollin, “Women’s Struggles within the American Radical Pacifist Movement,” *History Compass* 7, no. 3 (2009):1064-1090.

⁷ Mollin, *Radical Pacifism in Modern America*, 73-96.

imprisonment for their protests against nuclear testing.⁸ Similarly, Janice Smith and Mary Sharmat, two young Manhattan mothers, organized public demonstrations against mandated civil defense drills with the expectation of arrest.⁹ Recalling the maternalism of the Congress of American Women (CAW), Willoughby and Swann evoked their children and duties as mothers to justify their actions. Smith and Sharmat brought their toddlers along with them in their strollers. Without advocating for gender equality, they chose to take dramatically militant public actions that simultaneously rejected their domestic responsibilities. As Mollin points out, in addition to arrest, they also risked being seen as “bad mothers.”¹⁰ By reconciling their actions of political dissent and public disobedience with their identities as mothers, women radical pacifists created an activist motherhood that necessarily extended their rights and responsibilities outside of the domestic realm.

Thus, as the radical pacifist movement subordinated women to background roles, women’s use of maternalism functioned to justify their participation, confirm their commitment, and advance their leadership. Was this an implicit critique of the movement’s patriarchal qualities? If so, it seemed to be inadvertent as the protests of women radical pacifists always appeared to be based on sex difference rather than equality. Historian Dee Garrison argues that, by doing so, the women cultivated an image of “enraged motherhood” that helped their protests gain public attention and support.¹¹ Despite the movement’s egalitarian promise, a reliance on motherhood emerged as a tactical necessity for women activists.

If a feminist consciousness was lacking in the new radicalism that *Liberation*

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Dee Garrison, “‘Our Skirts Gave Them Courage’ the Civil Defense Protest Movement in New York City, 1955-1961,” in *Not June Cleaver*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz, 201-226.

¹⁰ Mollin, “Women’s Struggles,” 1074.

¹¹ Garrison, “Our Skirts Gave Them Courage,” 202.

embodied, it also seemed to be on the decline in the Communist left as women appeared to embrace broader social justice protests. Whereas Kate Weigand chooses to emphasize the continuity of Communist women's feminism from 1946 to 1956, it is apparent that the level of women's activism during the decade was not without change. As peace and civil rights activism gained currency among left-wing women, the militancy that characterized their postwar demands for gender equality appeared to subside towards the mid-1950s. After putting on the musical *Singing of Women* (1950) with Eve Merriam, Gerda Lerner turned to civil rights activism such as writing pamphlets for the Civil Rights Congress and organizing for racial integration in local neighborhoods and schools through the Parent-Teacher Association.¹² Betty Millard, author of *Woman Against Myth* (1948) pursued her interests in peace and international affairs through American Women for Peace for the duration of its short existence before becoming editor of *Latin America Today*.¹³ Meanwhile, Eleanor Flexner grew detached from the Party and turned towards researching women's history. Certainly, women were still active in the Party and all three of the women above kept loose affiliations until at least 1956. However, the rigor of analysis of the "woman question" and, in particular, a critique of male chauvinism seemed to be lacking.

Perhaps the most devastating loss to the Communist women's movement was Claudia Jones, who was convicted under the Smith Act, a piece of federal legislation used to prosecute political radicals, in 1953.¹⁴ While Jones appeared to have also turned towards a gendered anti-imperialist peace activism by 1952, she was nonetheless the foremost advocate of women's rights in the CP leadership. After nearly a year of imprisonment in a

¹² Lerner, *Fireweed*, 316-325.

¹³ "Feminist Pioneer Betty Millard Dies at 98," *People's World*, March 25, 2010.

¹⁴ Carole Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), xxv.

women's penitentiary, she faced deportation due to her immigrant status and left the country for London in 1955.¹⁵ Jones had consistently urged for the CP to take a vanguard position on the "woman question" and to incorporate it into the Party's theoretical work as no other male or female leader in the CP had. Indeed, after Jones' last article on women in *Political Affairs*, the CP's main theoretical journal, no articles focused on women's rights appeared in the journal through 1956. And while there appeared to be brief revival of discussion on housework in 1956, it was women had diverged from the Party who appeared to develop the "woman question" in new ways.

The Second Sex in the Communist Party

The voice of one Communist woman did prominently rise in 1954. Interestingly, it was that of longtime CP member, Elizabeth Lawson, who had previously not significantly engaged in women's issues as a historian of black history. Perhaps even more interesting, is the fact that Lawson's sudden advocacy for women's rights was sparked by French feminist existentialist Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Lawson had been in the CP since the 1930s as a teacher at the Workers School, the predecessor to the Jefferson School.¹⁶ She was an associate and mentor of prominent Communist historian Herbert Aptheker, and his daughter Bettina Aptheker, recalls meeting Lawson several times and knowing nothing about her feminist proclivities.¹⁷ Considering that Lawson's activism on women's issues began with her engagement with Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in 1954 and

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Marvin E. Gettleman, "The New York Workers School, 1923-1944: Communist Education in American Society" in *New Studies in the Politics and Culture of U.S. Communism*, 267.

¹⁷ Bettina Aptheker, "Red Feminism: A Personal Reflection," *Science & Society* 66 no.4 (Winter 2002-2003) 520.

promptly ended as the Party's internal crisis came to the forefront in 1956, Aptheker's remembrance is not surprising.

The Second Sex stands as an important feminist work that preceded and significantly influenced the women's liberation movement. Originally published in France in 1949, the first English translation arrived in 1953. Soon a best-seller in the U.S., the book was met with mixed reviews in the mainstream press.¹⁸ However, several factions of the French Left harshly criticized it and labeled Beauvoir as a "petite bourgeoisie."¹⁹ Likewise, the CP-run Jefferson School denounced the "big, new, heavily psychoanalytical book" as an example of bourgeois ideology in its 1953 primer on the "woman question."²⁰ Therefore, when Lawson reviewed *The Second Sex* in the *Sunday Daily Worker* and declared that it was "a truly great book, a magnificent contribution to the struggle for woman's rights," she acted to rescue its significance for Communist women.²¹

Although Lawson was critical of the Beauvoir's "idealist philosophy" and found the book to be "overweighted with consideration of sex problems," she nonetheless praised it as a "trumpet call to woman's liberation."²² In a complete turnaround from the Jefferson School, Lawson maintained that "the book skillfully refutes feminism with its idiocies about the 'battle of the sexes.'"²³ Pointing to Beauvoir's references to Marx and Engels, Lawson asserted that *The Second Sex* actually represented the Marxist perspective on the "woman question" and argued that Beauvoir advocated women's participation in

¹⁸ Tarrant, *When Sex Became Gender*, 184.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Irene Epstein and Doxey A. Wilkerson, *Questions and Answers on the Woman Question*, (New York: Jefferson School of Social Science, 1953), 9-10.

²¹ Elizabeth Lawson, "Woman: Second Sex," *Worker*, October 24, 1954, p.12. The Sunday edition of the *Daily Worker* was known as the *Worker*.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

production and, ultimately, socialism as the solution. Choosing to read it as a Marxist text, Lawson did not discuss Beauvoir's conception of woman as Other or the socialization of sex but emphasized Beauvoir's discussion of women's right to work and the burden posed by housework.

In a letter to left-wing writer Eve Merriam some years later, Lawson recalled how she had prevented a negative review of *The Second Sex* from running in the Party's cultural journal *Masses and Mainstream*, and managed to get her review published in the *Worker* with the aid of Claudia Jones.²⁴ In fact, prior to her October review, Jones helped her put out a discussion document on the book through the NWC. The 12-page mimeographed document "went all over the country" and anticipated Lawson's laudatory review.²⁵ One copy of the document found its way to Joan Jordan, a socialist who was part of a group expelled from the SWP in 1966 due to their agitation on women's issues.²⁶ In the document, Lawson offers a chapter by chapter commentary on *The Second Sex*, mainly consisting of quotations from the book. She intended for the document to serve as a corrective to negative reviews in the press and as a substitute for those who could not obtain the "very long and very expensive" book.²⁷ Lawson evaluated *The Second Sex* in the same way that she did in her review—embracing its socialist feminist elements while minimizing and criticizing Beauvoir's existentialism. Chapters on the historical construction of woman as a subordinate sex are skipped over as "nothing special" as are sections on sex and

²⁴ Elizabeth Lawson, letter to Eve Merriam, undated, Eve Merriam Papers, Box 4, Folder 87, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute of Advanced Study, Cambridge, MA. Based on the content, I believe this letter was written sometime in 1959.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Rosalyn Baxandall, "Re-Visioning the Women's Liberation Movement's Narrative: Early Second Wave African American Feminists" *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 27 No. 1 (Spring 2001), 232. Jordan helped to found Mothers Working Alone (MAW), a self-help group for poor women, in 1965.

²⁷ National Women's Commission, Communist Party USA, "Some Notes on Simone De Beauvoir's Book, *Woman: The Second Sex*," September 1, 1954, Joan Jordan Papers, Box 2, Folder 6, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, WI.

sexuality. Notably, Lawson took a moment to emphasize that Beauvoir's chapter on the lesbian "is not...a plea for Lesbianism; rather the contrary."²⁸ Ultimately, Lawson was able to overlook what she perceived to be the book's shortcomings and bourgeois tendencies to champion it as a call for women's liberation.

Despite her selective reading of the book, Lawson suggested that women faced a distinct oppression as a sex that was not just class-based. She reproached the "progressive movement" for ignoring the book and asserted that "we are not indifferent to injustices that affect even the bourgeois woman."²⁹ In her view, Beauvoir's book had illuminated that the heart of the "woman question" was woman's right to work. Lawson argued that "it must be stated unceasingly and without apology, that all women must have the *right* to work and should be encouraged to do so...without participation in social production women become stultified."³⁰ She emphasized that it was a *right* to counter against the notion that it was only an economic necessity brought on by men's low wages.

Soon Lawson became an advocate of working women's rights on the pages of the *Worker*. In June 1955, the paper announced that Lawson would be the new "woman's affairs" columnist following the departure of Claudia Jones.³¹ While her writing was sporadic, Lawson devoted her columns to coverage of women trade unionists and their battles for equal wages and social supports within their unions. In one article, she declared called women to take action "if you feel that the burning problem of equal pay is worth more than a footnote to a pudding recipe."³² Lawson's strong feelings about the issue of

²⁸ Ibid., 6.

²⁹ Ibid., 2.

³⁰ Ibid. (emphasis in original)

³¹ "Announcing our Women's Column," *Worker*, June 5, 1955, p.14.

³² Elizabeth Lawson, "Equal Pay for Equal Work" *Worker*, June 26, 1955, p.11. Also see, Lawson, "Unions Come a Long Way, But There's Still a Way to Go," *Worker*, June 5, 1955, p.14.

women and work became clear in a three-part series that appeared in *The Worker* in 1956 called “How Fare American Housewives?”

Lawson’s articles on housewives sparked considerable controversy a revival of interest in the “woman question.” The first in the series, “Occupation: Housewife, the U.S. Worker with the 100-Hour Week,” argued that the deluge of kitchen gadgets had actually added to the housewife’s workload.³³ Lawson believed that the development of do-it-yourself home technologies further entrapped and isolated the housewife in her own home by preventing the socialization of housework. She made her dislike of housework clear in “Abolition of Housework Seen Possible with Public Planning” as she praised the socialized cooking and cleaning services she had observed in the Soviet Union.³⁴ Insisting that housework was a social problem, she argued that it could not be solved by husbands and wives sharing the burden; it required a radical reorganization of society. In her final article, she continued with this point offering East Germany as an example.³⁵ Thus, Lawson fully supported the Communist maxim that “woman’s full emancipation can only be achieved in a Socialist America.” However, she upheld women’s right to work as the gateway to women’s liberation not because women workers needed to join men in a class-struggle but because domestic life suppressed women’s intellectual capabilities and equal development with men in society. In this explanation of why there were so few well-known women in the professions, she anticipated the words of Betty Friedan:

We have left our unwritten books on countless scrubbed and polished floors; our musical compositions have bubbled away in a million soup kettles; our genius at

³³ Elizabeth Lawson, “Occupation: Housewife, the U.S. Worker with the 100-Hour Week,” *Worker*, April 29, 1956, p.3.

³⁴ Elizabeth Lawson, “Abolition of Housework Seen Possible with Public Planning,” *Worker*, May 6, 1956, p.11.

³⁵ Elizabeth Lawson, “What Can Be Done About the Burden of Housework?” *Worker*, May 13, 1956, p.11.

organization has been sluiced down an endless series of kitchen drains; the science we learned at the university becomes vague and is forgotten as we turn hems and weave needles in and out of fraying textiles....there are those who would have us call ourselves homemakers rather than housewives; the distinction appears to me like the difference between mortician and undertaker.³⁶

Whereas Mary Inman and the Correspondence circle of the socialist left suggested that housework was as valuable as work outside of the home, Lawson resolutely believed that housework was degrading and stood as an impediment to women's equality.

Coinciding with the start of a period of reevaluation within the CP, Lawson's articles elicited a flurry of both supportive and critical responses from readers for months. The Party was in the midst of an internal crisis due to the revelation of Stalin's crimes at the 20th Congress of the Soviet Union in February of 1956. As historian Maurice Isserman recounts, these revelations exposed and intensified in-fighting that had already been brewing between reform and orthodox factions in the Party.³⁷ Under the editorship of reform leader John Gates, the pages of the *Worker* were opened to readers to debate the future of American communism. An examination of the *Worker* shows that at least twenty-five readers' letters, often quite lengthy, were published in 1956 in response to Lawson's housework articles.

While many women commended Lawson for her writing, a considerable portion of reader appeared to be offended by Lawson's depiction of the enslavement of housewives. For example, one woman attested that "some women like to cook" and another elaborated that housewives performed a "creative professional job" called "the maintenance of life."³⁸ Several readers criticized Lawson for neglecting working-class women who worked due to

³⁶ Lawson, "Occupation: Housewife."

³⁷ Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer*, 14.

³⁸ "Some Women Like to Cook," *Worker*, June 3, 1956, p.14; Bertha Reynolds, "Housewife's Job Seen as a Lasting Social Need," *Worker*, June 24, 1956, p.14

necessity rather than for their self-fulfillment and who would gladly welcome kitchen appliances if they could only afford them.³⁹ One reader showed an insightful understanding of the argument by advising that “our slogan must be: a free choice to be housewives, workers or both.”⁴⁰ Finally, readers also felt that Lawson had underplayed the need to probe men’s lack of participation in housework. As one woman put it, “the glaring omission in Miss Lawson’s article is any reference to the problem of male supremacy.”⁴¹ If anything, these comments testified to the proto-feminist consciousness of rank-and-file Communist women and their exposure to and involvement in the CP’s work on women’s issues.

Moreover, despite the diverse viewpoints of readers’ responses, they all called for more attention and analysis of women’s status in the home. Thus, Lawson appeared to have renewed interest in the “woman question” amidst the Party’s move to reexamine its positions. In her letter to the *Worker*, one woman directly urged that, “now that we are in a period of reevaluation and discussion, the woman question should also be reevaluated. This is the problem that has always been pushed to the background.”⁴² Readers voiced complaints such as “the women have pleaded for a Woman’s Page for as long as I can remember—but still NO woman’s page.”⁴³ The Party appeared to acknowledge these pleas when it printed one woman’s criticisms in its 16th *National Convention Discussion Bulletin* in November 1956.⁴⁴ However, as turmoil within the Party increased, action on Communist

³⁹ “Household articles told middle class woes,” *Worker*, June 17, 1956, p.6; “Facts and Figures on Working Women,” *Worker*, June 24, 1956, p.11; “Consulted Wife about Articles,” *Worker*, July 15, 1956, p.9.

⁴⁰ “Housewife wonders can marriage be a 50-50 Deal with Progressives?” *Worker*, Oct. 14 1956, p.11.

⁴¹ “More Understanding Needed at Home,” *Worker*, June 10, 1956, p.6; “Two Can Lighten Burdens of Wife,” *Worker*, June 24, 1956, p.11.

⁴² “Second Look at the Woman Question,” *Worker*, June 10, 1956, p.6.

⁴³ “Let’s Have More on Woman’s Page,” *Worker*, August 12, 1956 p.14.

⁴⁴ Weigand, *Red Feminism*, 134.

women's demands was never taken. It seems that Lawson lacked support from both factions of the Party leadership as her housework articles incited John Gates to remove her from her position at the *Worker* and party stalwart Elizabeth Gurley Flynn to indict her as one of the "career people."⁴⁵ While the CP leadership's stance on the "woman question" during this period remains unclear, it is most likely that they chose to subordinate it to other issues as the Party faced imminent implosion. Thus, if the Party's move towards self-re-examination allowed for Lawson's articles to be published and nurtured the discussion about them that followed, it also signified the end of a chapter of Communist women's proto-feminism. For by 1958, the CP had lost over three-quarters of its membership and discussion on the "woman question" was all but dead.⁴⁶

Old Radicals, New Feminisms

Although the CP's revival of discussion on gender inequality did not last beyond 1956, several women with a background in the Communist left emerged to independently express feminist positions in the late 1950s. By this time, women's issues were quietly catching on in the mainstream as reforms such as equal pay for equal work gained considerable support in the government. However, an examination of the feminist writings of Lorraine Hansberry, Eleanor Flexner, and Eve Merriam at the end of the decade reveals that their feminism clearly grew out of their education in the Old Left. On the other hand,

⁴⁵ In Lawson's letter to Merriam, she writes that Gates was "so enraged that he wouldn't let me continue the page." Otherwise, the nature of their dispute is unknown. See Lawson, letter to Eve Merriam, Merriam Papers, Schlesinger Library. It appears that Flynn personally disliked Lawson and objected to her articles, taking the stance that some women enjoyed being housewives. See "Letters to Anne K. Flynn and Muriel Symington" in Baxandall, *Words on Fire*, 245-248.

⁴⁶ Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer*, 31.

and perhaps more importantly, each of the three women also appeared to have moved away from a strict Marxist conception of the “woman question.”

In the case of former CP and CAW member Eleanor Flexner, a noticeable rightward shift is evident in *Century of Struggle*, her nonetheless pioneering history of women’s suffrage published in 1959. If Flexner seemed to drop much of her earlier radicalism, Lorraine Hansberry and Eve Merriam furthered Communist women’s strongest indictments of a male supremacist society as their feminist identities became more overt. Hansberry was an early supporter of the Daughters of Bilitis, the first lesbian organization in the U.S., and began to formulate a lesbian feminist consciousness in her 1957 letters to their journal, *The Ladder*. Merriam, a noted poet, illustrated women’s daily oppression in a book of poetry on intimacy and marriage while dissecting anti-feminist myths in satirical works and various projects up through the 1960s and 1970s into her old age. While cancer cut short Hansberry’s life and Flexner largely retreated from public life, the writings of these three women importantly show that each sustained a feminist consciousness rooted in a leftist worldview through the hostility of the 1950s. In different ways, Flexner, Hansberry and Merriam anticipated developments in the women’s liberation movement to come, thereby linking the Old Left to the emergence of an autonomous feminist movement.

Lorraine Hansberry’s Lesbian Feminism

In 1957, the same year that she completed the script for her most celebrated work, *A Raisin in the Sun*, playwright Lorraine Hansberry penned several letters to *The Ladder*, a pioneering lesbian journal affirming her lesbianism and began writing a feminist commentary on Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. The letters signed with only her initials and

location, as was customary for *The Ladder's* "Reader's Respond" section, were not traced back to Hansberry until *Ladder* editor Barbara Grier revealed this fact in her column in 1970.⁴⁷ Hansberry never completed her essay entitled "Simone de Beauvoir and *The Second Sex: An American Commentary*," leaving it similarly unexposed to a public audience until posthumously recovered and published.⁴⁸ In effect, the private nature and circumstances of these writings ensured that Hansberry's public persona as an award-winning Broadway playwright and civil rights spokesperson remained unaffected. Yet they confirm the feminist undertones of her plays and give voice to her feminism as a lesbian. As Robert Nemiroff, her friend, ex-husband, and literary executor, noted after her death, her lesbianism "was not a peripheral or casual part of her life but contributed significantly on many levels to the sensitivity and complexity of her view of human beings and of the world."⁴⁹

A life of education and activism in the Old Left preceded Hansberry's lesbian feminist assertions of the late 1950s. Born in 1930 to a politically active middle-class black family in Chicago, Hansberry grew up with prominent leftwing African American radicals such as Paul Robeson and W.E.B. Du Bois as frequent family guests.⁵⁰ While studying at the University of Wisconsin, Hansberry became active in leftwing campus groups. She campaigned for the Progressive Party as a chairperson of Young Progressives of America,

⁴⁷ Marcia Gallo, *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement* (New York: Carroll & Graff Publishers, 2006), 21-22. Barbara Grier (Gene Damon, pseudonym) identifies Hansberry as the author of these letters in her column "Lesbiana," *The Ladder*, vol. 14 nos. 5-6 (February-March 1970).

⁴⁸ Lorraine Hansberry, "Simone de Beauvoir and *The Second Sex: An American Commentary* [1957]" in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: New Press, 1995), 125-142.

⁴⁹ Robert Nemiroff, as quoted in Steven Carter, *Hansberry's Drama: Commitment amid Complexity* (New York, Meridian: 1993), 6.

⁵⁰ Carter, *Hansberry's Drama*, vii.

and then joined the Labor Youth League, the youth wing of the CP at the time.⁵¹ In 1949, she attended Paul Robeson's Peekskill concert to benefit the Civil Rights Congress. The following year, she forwent her studies at Wisconsin to "seek an education of a different kind" in New York City.⁵² Accordingly, she elected to take an African history course taught by W.E.B. Du Bois at the CP's Jefferson School. Most informative was the time Hansberry spent working at *Freedom*, Robeson's newly established black radical monthly. Joining the paper as a secretary-receptionist, Hansberry rose to become its associate editor by 1952 at the age of twenty-two.⁵³

Freedom was at the center of the Harlem Left in the early 1950s and part of the early Black Arts movement, which, while attempting to forge a "literary nationalism," was heavily influenced by the culture of the Old Left and the Popular Front.⁵⁴ Edited by CP member and Southern Negro Youth Congress activist Louis Burnham, the paper featured a column by Robeson, the cultural writings of black intellectuals, and coverage of the global anti-colonial movement. Not to be overlooked was the involvement of leftwing black women writers and activists such as Hansberry, Alice Childress, Shirley Graham Du Bois, Eslanda Goode Robeson, and Thelma Dale. Pointing to these women, historian Mary Helen Washington reclaims *Freedom* as a "founding text of black left feminism."⁵⁵ Dale, *Freedom's* general manager, was formerly secretary of the CAW while staff and editorial writers Childress, Du Bois, and Robeson were all members of Sojourners for Truth and

⁵¹ "Lorraine Hansberry," in *American Writers*, by Elizabeth H. Oakes (New York: Facts on File Inc., 2004), 150.

⁵² Carter, *Hansberry's Drama*, viii.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Smethurst, *Black Arts Movement*, 44-45.

⁵⁵ Mary Helen Washington, "Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, and Claudia Jones: Black Women Write the Popular Front," in *Left of the Color Line: Race, Radicalism, and Twentieth-Century Literature of the United States*, ed. Bill V. Mullen and James Smethurst (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 193.

Justice (STJ), the black women's peace organization that succeeded the CAW. The mentorship of these older black Popular Front women undoubtedly influenced Hansberry and likely exposed her to the theory of black women's triple oppression. In fact, for some time during this period, Hansberry was housemates with Claudia Jones.⁵⁶ Hansberry attended several STJ functions and covered the group's activities in *Freedom*. In her articles about anti-colonial uprisings, Hansberry paid special attention to the role of women.⁵⁷ However, the pages of *Freedom* did not include a critique of male supremacy. As Washington notes, it appears that the women writers sometimes used "creative and ingenious" methods to increase the paper's coverage of women such as inserting photographs of women to accompany articles about mainly male activists.⁵⁸

In 1953, Hansberry married Robert Nemiroff, a Jewish activist and songwriter, moved to Greenwich Village and stepped down from her position at *Freedom* to focus on her writing. She continued to contribute articles to the paper until it shut down due to financial troubles and anticommunist persecution in 1955. Hansberry remained among a handful of black cultural activists that openly retained their ties to the left.⁵⁹ If the CP nurtured her civil rights activism, it also shaped her feminism. Writing in 1957, Hansberry specifically credited the Party for their leadership on the "woman question":

As with the Negro question it seems American Marxists, Communists in particular, have been far in advance in the western world in their *recognition* of the "woman question"....American Communists have possessed...a not-to-be underestimated impetus (in the form of a collection of what must be the vigorous and insurgent women anywhere in the world—American women Communists) to lift the woman

⁵⁶ Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, 1. Unfortunately, Davies just mentions this in passing in her biography of Claudia Jones and does not talk about their relationship or Hansberry thereafter.

⁵⁷ See Lorraine Hansberry, "Women Voice Demands in Capital Sojourn," *Freedom*, October 1951, 6; "Egyptian People Fight for Freedom," *Freedom*, March 1952, 3; "Kenya's Kikuyu: A Peaceful People Wage Heroic Struggle against British," *Freedom*, December 1952, 3.

⁵⁸ Washington, "Alice Childress," 194.

⁵⁹ Smethurst, *Black Arts Movement*, 117.

question beyond the ordinary sphere of the “battles-of-the-sexes”-type nonsense which is so tragically popular in our country.”⁶⁰

Her affirmation of the need for women to extend their struggle beyond a “battle-of-the-sexes” aligns with the Marxist position on women’s oppression. Her praise of American women Communists most certainly emanated from her relationship with Claudia Jones and the women of the *Freedom* circle. However, in calling the CP out for not moving beyond their *recognition* of the “woman question,” Hansberry related with Communist women who felt that, as a whole, the Party had not actually taken serious action on women’s issues.

Hansberry’s remarks on Communist women were part of her unfinished essay on Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. Reminiscent of Elizabeth Lawson’s laudatory review, Hansberry deemed *The Second Sex* to be a “great book” that “may very well be the most important work of this century.”⁶¹ In her commentary on the book’s reception in the U.S., Hansberry acknowledged Lawson’s “exuberant and intelligent” review in the *Worker*, but also found it to be “shamefully brief and limited.”⁶² Despite their shared Communist background, the two women interpreted Beauvoir in strikingly different ways. Lawson read *The Second Sex* as an essentially Marxist text with a militant argument for woman’s right to work. In contrast, Hansberry’s essay reveals a more theoretically-inclined feminism informed by Beauvoir’s existentialist conception of self. Whereas Lawson chided Beauvoir for dwelling on “sex problems” and glossed over her chapter on the lesbian, these were paramount concerns to Hansberry.

⁶⁰ Hansberry, “Simone de Beauvoir and *The Second Sex*,” 130 (emphasis in original).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 129 (emphasis in original).

⁶² *Ibid.*, 130.

In Hansberry's view, *The Second Sex* was revolutionary because it "brilliantly destroys all myths of women's choice in becoming an ornament."⁶³ Her emphasis on "choice" invokes woman's right to self-determination, a concept that pervades Hansberry's critique of the glorification of woman as "Sex Object and/or Child Raiser."⁶⁴ Hansberry elaborated

The problem...is not that woman has strayed too far from "her place" but that she has not yet attained it; that her emergence into liberty is, thus far, incomplete, primitive even. She has gained the teasing expectation of self-fulfillment without the realization of it, because she is herself chained to an ailing social ideology which seeks always to deny her autonomy and more—to delude her into the belief that which in fact imprisons her the more is somehow her fulfillment.⁶⁵

Using Beauvoir's existentialist framework, Hansberry indicted woman's subordination in a male-dominated society as the denial of individual freedom and self-realization. This kind of existentialist feminism also led Beauvoir to her characterization of lesbians as a kind of independent woman, a perspective that was notably radical for the time.

A discussion of sex and sexuality was conspicuously missing from the CP's treatment of the "woman question." Though this was acknowledged at one point, no actions were taken to correct this shortcoming.⁶⁶ Lawson's treatment of lesbianism as a non-issue is indicative of the limits of socialist feminism. Moreover, the CP was decidedly hostile to homosexuals during this period; at the same time, the government openly persecuted Communist homosexuals as it linked the "Red Scare" to a "Lavender Scare."⁶⁷ As early as 1954, Hansberry wrote about her struggle with lesbianism in her diary and

⁶³ Ibid., 131.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 139.

⁶⁶ Discussed in Chapter 1; see William Z. Foster, "On Improving the Party's Work Among Women," *Political Affairs* 27 (November 1948): 988.

⁶⁷ Christopher Phelps, "On Socialism and Sex: An Introduction," *New Politics*; David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

letters.⁶⁸ She separated from Nemiroff in 1957 and openly affirmed her lesbianism that year in a letter to *The Ladder*, a lesbian publication started by the lesbian organization Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) in 1956. In a climate of homosexual repression and persecution, it is not difficult to imagine why Beauvoir's analysis of lesbianism as an existential choice would appeal to Hansberry. Literary scholar Cheryl Higashida argues that Beauvoir helped Hansberry conceptualize an "emancipatory political aesthetics" that resonated with her anticolonialist beliefs and extended to her embrace of lesbianism.⁶⁹

In spite of the pervasive conservative morality that homosexuals confronted, the first significant queer groups were also born in the 1950s, some with notable ties to the left. The Mattachine Society was created in 1951 by a group of gay Communist men and led to the establishment of ONE, Inc. after a split in 1952.⁷⁰ In 1955, a small group of lesbian women founded DOB in San Francisco, creating a space for women in the early homophile movement. However, like other gay organizations of the period, DOB was relatively mild in its politics. They depicted themselves as "a women's organization for the purpose of promoting the homosexual into society" with a focus on the education of the "variant" and the public.⁷¹ Even so, the sheer fact of their existence was meaningful to lesbian women. Hansberry echoed the sentiments of many *Ladder* readers when she wrote to say "I'm glad as heck that you exist."⁷² Affirming her support, Hansberry sent two dollars for a

⁶⁸ The finding aid to the Lorraine Hansberry Papers at the Schomburg Library states that "Notes to Self" is "a series of diary-like entries and five letters, 1954, 1955, 1962, n.d., the writer reveals her struggle with lesbianism, privately and publicly."

⁶⁹ Cheryl Higashida, "To Be(come) Young, Gay, and Black: Lorraine Hansberry's Existentialist Routes to Anticolonialism," *American Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (December 2008), 899-924.

⁷⁰ Gallo, *Different Daughters*, xvii-xxxvi.

⁷¹ "Purposes of the Daughters of Bilitis," *Ladder* 1, no. 6 (March 1957): 2.

⁷² "Reader's Respond," *Ladder*, vol. I, no. 8 (May 1957): 26.

subscription and promised future donations.⁷³ In her letter, Hansberry made clear the need to separate lesbians from homosexual men:

You are obviously serious people and I feel that women, without wishing to foster any strict separatist notions, homo or hetero, indeed have a need for their own publications and organizations. Our problems, our experiences as women are profoundly unique as compared to the other half of the human race. Women, like other oppressed groups of one kind or another, have particularly had to pay a price for the intellectual impoverishment that the second class status imposed on us for centuries created and sustained. Thus, I feel that THE LADDER is a fine, elementary step in a rewarding direction.⁷⁴

Hansberry's reassurance against any "strict separatist notions" aligned with the DOB's conformist stance and also reflected her leftist beliefs about the possibilities of women working with progressive men. However, in identifying lesbians as women, and thus an oppressed sex, Hansberry located lesbians' place within a feminist movement. Several months later, Hansberry wrote another letter that explicitly linked homophobia to male supremacy:

I think it is about time that equipped women began to take on some of the ethical questions which a male-dominated culture has produced and dissect and analyze them quite to pieces in a serious fashion. It is time that 'half the human race' had something to say about the nature of its existence. Otherwise...the woman intellectual is likely to find herself trying to draw conclusions—moral conclusions—based on acceptance of a social moral superstructure which has never admitted to the equality of women and is therefore immoral itself. As per marriage, as per sexual practices, as per the rearing of children, ect, In this kind of work there may be women to emerge who will be able to formulate a new and possible concept that homosexual persecution and condemnation has at its roots not only social ignorance, but a philosophically active anti-feminist dogma.⁷⁵

Hansberry's consciousness as a lesbian and a feminist is fully articulated in this excerpt.

She argued that marriage, sexual practices, and the rearing of children were circumscribed

⁷³ Gallo, *Different Daughters*, 21.

⁷⁴ "Reader's Respond," *Ladder*, vol. I, no. 8 (May 1957): 26.

⁷⁵ "Readers Respond," *Ladder*, vol. I, no. 11 (August 1957): 30.

by, and thus needed to be liberated from, a patriarchal *and* heteronormative culture. In this endeavor, she suggested that lesbian women should be the vanguard.

While Hansberry kept her lesbianism separate from her public life, she had several relationships with women and participated in the Greenwich Village lesbian social scene, which largely consisted of white women writers. Hansberry's lesbian friends remember her as the only black woman in their small group.⁷⁶ From 1960 to her death in 1965, she was in a serious relationship with Dorothy Seculis, whom she included in her will.⁷⁷ Whether Hansberry actually joined DOB is unclear and ultimately secondary to her clear enthusiasm for the group. When DOB founders Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon traveled to New York in 1958 on a trip to promote the group on the East Coast, Hansberry was one of the supporters they visited and consulted.⁷⁸ By 1959, Martin also showed signs of a lesbian feminist consciousness in a speech at a gay convention, in which she attacked male-dominated gay organizations' for treating lesbians as "second-class homosexuals" and proclaimed that "this twentieth century is the era of emancipation of women."⁷⁹ However, a lesbian feminist movement would not materialize until 1970 following the rise of radical feminism. Thus, although she kept her lesbianism private, Hansberry's articulation of lesbian feminist identity is not insignificant.

Hansberry provides an example of how early lesbian activity such as that of the DOB might be construed as lesbian feminist in nature and linked to women's liberation in addition to gay liberation. Furthermore, in understanding the making of Hansberry's lesbian feminism, her left-wing political background cannot be discounted even though she

⁷⁶ Elise Harris, "The Double Life of Lorraine Hansberry," *Out Magazine* (September 1999): 96-101, 174-175.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Gallo, *Different Daughters*, 43.

⁷⁹ Del Martin, "DOB Speaks for Lesbian," *The Ladder*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (October 1959): 18-19.

clearly went far beyond the CP on issues of gender and sex. She hinted as much in a never-mailed letter to the gay magazine *ONE*, in which she noted, “men continue to misinterpret the second-rate status of women as implying a privileged status for themselves; heterosexuals think the same way about homosexuals; gentiles about Jews; whites about blacks; haves about have-nots.”⁸⁰ Here she linked the struggle for the rights of women and homosexuals to other minorities and “have-nots.” At the very least, Hansberry drew from a leftist commitment to social justice and the rights of the oppressed. At the same time, the silence of other lesbian Communist women including Grace Hutchins, author of *Women Who Work*, and her partner, economist Anna Rochester, and CAW leaders Betty Millard and Eleanor Flexner, emphasizes how Hansberry dared to challenge the Left’s hypocrisy and complicity in the homosexual backlash of mainstream society.

Women’s History as Struggle

Although she lived with her partner, Helen Terry, for over thirty years, there is no indication that Eleanor Flexner ever openly discussed her lesbianism during her life.⁸¹ In addition, despite having established herself as an independent women’s history scholar, Flexner’s feminism in later life was considerably muted in comparison to her days in the CP and activism in the CAW. When she left the CP in 1956, Flexner was already largely disengaged from the Party and immersed in her own research on women’s history. The culmination of Flexner’s extensive research was the first comprehensive history of the women’s suffrage movement spanning roughly from efforts of women to organize themselves before the Civil War to the passage of the 19th amendment. Published in 1959,

⁸⁰ Un-mailed letter to *ONE*, April 18, 1961 as quoted from Carter, *Hansberry’s Drama*, 6.

⁸¹ She referred to Terry as her “beloved companion of thirty years” in a diary entry. This is the only significant mention of Terry that I came across in her papers at the Schlesinger Library.

Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States remains recognized as a pioneering text in the field of women's history. As young feminist academics reinvigorated women's history in the late 1960s as an outgrowth of the women's liberation movement, several historians with an interest in gender have noted the exceptionalism of Flexner's early contributions to the field.⁸² Indeed, even disregarding the lack of a powerful women's movement at the time, Flexner had no graduate training or background in academia, yet devoted over five years of her life to full-time research in historical archives across the country. When historian Ellen DuBois interviewed Flexner about her life and work in 1988, Flexner would not reveal what brought her to write *Century of Struggle*, only to say that the answer was located in her papers at the Schlesinger Library, which were not opened until after her death in 1995.⁸³

Flexner was clearly hesitant to publicly acknowledge her Communist past, no doubt influenced by the enduring legacy of the powerful anticommunist paranoia that arose with the Cold War. Yet, in a diary-like memoir in her papers, she felt the obligation to point out "the red thread that ran through so much of my life" and describe her journey from joining the CP in 1936 to writing *A Century of Struggle*.⁸⁴ What was central to this narrative, Flexner emphasized, was the "the fact of struggle itself."⁸⁵ Although she came from a prominent wealthy family, she felt that "struggle" was what bound her personal encounters with anti-Semitism during her undergraduate years at Swarthmore College to her experiences organizing unions in the 1940s to the courage and determination of the

⁸² Leila J. Rupp, "Eleanor Flexner's *Century of Struggle*: Women's History and the Women's Movement" *NWSA Journal* 4 no.2 (Summer 1992):157-169; Ellen DuBois, "Eleanor Flexner and the History of American Feminism," *Gender and History* 3 no. 1 (Spring 1991): 81-90.

⁸³ Ellen DuBois, "Eleanor Flexner," 83-84.

⁸⁴ Eleanor Flexner memoir, Flexner Papers, Box 1, Folder 8, Schlesinger Library.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

suffragists whom she profiled in *Century of Struggle*. In fact, Flexner stressed the deliberate word choice of “struggle” in the book’s title to Ellen DuBois. And while unaware of Flexner’s ties to the CP, DuBois perceptively observed that Flexner used “struggle” as a “term that comes from the left, and refers to mass based political efforts to challenge American society in a radical fashion.”⁸⁶ Following this, DuBois formulated the term “left feminist,” now frequently used by other historians to describe the activism of women in the Old Left, to characterize Flexner’s 1959 text due to its understanding of the intersections of race, class, and gender.⁸⁷

As Flexner makes clear, *Century of Struggle* was the product of her left-wing past and, in particular, her association with several inspiring Communist women. Flexner traced the seeding of her interest in women’s history to a talk she heard Elizabeth Gurley Flynn give on the young women workers at the Lowell textile mills among other notable American women. Flexner also had several discussions with Claudia Jones, who advised Flexner on her work with the CAW, introduced her to the special problems of black women, and generally got her “all worked up” on the CP’s lack of work on the “woman question.”⁸⁸ However, Flexner reserves her strongest praise for a comparatively unknown CP member Marian Bachrach, a journalist and party strategist who was also indicted under the Smith Act. Bachrach was not associated with the Party’s work on women but often clipped *Daily Worker* articles relating to women for Flexner and brought Flexner to hear Flynn speak. Flexner remembered Bachrach as “a totally unrigid, undemagogic Marxist,

⁸⁶ DuBois, “Eleanor Flexner,” 84.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Flexner Memoir, Flexner Papers, Schlesinger Library.

one of the few I have ever known.”⁸⁹ It is evident that these qualities led to a shared perspective that cemented their friendship. Despite being a member of the CP, Flexner claimed to have never considered herself “a real Marxist”; she felt that she was “too individualistic, too independent” and “knew that there could never be anything successful in this country along the lines of the dictatorship of the proletariat.”⁹⁰ Taken with Flexner’s affirmation of the importance of her left-wing consciousness, her criticism of the real limits of Party politics and Marxist thought helps to explain her shift to a liberal democratic ideology in *Century of Struggle*.

In *Century of Struggle*, Flexner situated the suffrage movement within a narrative of the forward progress of American democracy. A leftist sense of the radical possibilities of “struggle” was not present so much as the united efforts of a diverse group of women to claim their right to vote. Notably, these suffragists included African American and working-class women. To DuBois, Flexner’s choice to not only include but make these women central to the history of suffrage was testament to her “left feminism.” Flexner claimed that the section on black women was what she was most proud of and her greatest contribution to the history of “all American women.”⁹¹ Certainly, Flexner’s attention to the oppression of race and class led her to a broad conception of women’s rights that extended beyond the vote to matters like civil rights, education, and employment. However, political citizenship remained the overriding goal and appeared to be the means to women’s participation in a more democratic mainstream society rather than to substantially challenge or alter it. In her 1975 preface to a revised edition of the book, Flexner went to extra

⁸⁹ “Transcript of an interview with Jacqueline Van Voris,” January 8, 1977. Flexner Papers. Box 1, Schlesinger Library.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

lengths to defend her embrace of women's suffrage as "a solid political milestone" since "without the vote, no social or legal reform was either possible, or lasting."⁹² With its celebration of electoral politics, *Century of Struggle* demonstrates a strong faith in the heritage of democratic reform movements in American history. In a retrospective commentary on Flexner's book, historian Carol Lasser perceives a contradiction between Flexner's advocacy of struggle within a democratic society and her preservation of consensus.⁹³

From this perspective, her reconciliation of such tensions represents a significant departure from her earlier writings that called for women to engage in an anti-fascist struggle against capitalism to free themselves of the oppression of the "triple K."⁹⁴ However, even in some of Flexner's most militant writings, she acknowledged that "capitalism at the same time creates the conditions out of which equality for woman can begin to develop" because it forced them to enter the labor force and leave the home.⁹⁵ Historian Daniel Horowitz notes that, particularly in the women's history classes she taught at the Jefferson School, Flexner promoted a strand of Marxist thought which maintained that women could further their struggle for equality under capitalism.⁹⁶ However, looking back on her course outlines, Flexner was amused by "how very little they seem to have been Marxist influenced" and, instead, argued for their significance as an marker of her "realization that leftist organizations—parties, unions—were also riddled with male

⁹² Eleanor Flexner, "Preface, 1975" in *Century of Struggle: the Woman's Rights Movement in the United States*, Rev. ed., (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), xxxii.

⁹³ Carol Lasser, "Century of Struggle, Decades of Revision," *Reviews in American History* 15 (June 1987): 344-354.

⁹⁴ Irene Epstein (pseudonym), "Woman Under the Double Standard," *Jewish Life*, 1950.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁹⁶ Horowitz, "Feminism, Women's History, and American Social Thought at Midcentury," 195-196.

supremacist prejudice and discrimination.”⁹⁷ Flexner’s statement suggests that her deradicalization and disillusionment with the left was not just a matter of the impracticality of socialism but also because of her awareness of its deeply sexist culture.

In many ways, Flexner’s trajectory from the radical to liberal left mirrors the evolution of Betty Friedan’s feminism. Interestingly, it was Friedan who turned *Century of Struggle* from a “sleeper” to an enduring foundational U.S. women’s history text with a remark in *The Feminine Mystique*.⁹⁸ In a footnote, Friedan heralded *Century of Struggle* as the “definitive history of the woman’s rights movement in the United States.” She went on to explain its significance:

Published in 1959 at the height of the era of the feminine mystique, [it] did not receive the attention that it deserves...In my opinion, it should be required reading for every girl admitted to a U.S. college. One reason the mystique prevails is that very few women under the age of forty know the facts of the woman’s rights movement. I am much indebted to Miss Flexner for many factual clues I might otherwise have missed in my attempt to get at the truth behind the feminine mystique and its monstrous image of feminists.⁹⁹

It seems appropriate that Friedan reclaimed the suffragists of Flexner’s book as the closest foremothers to her feminism as she expounded upon the pervasiveness of the postwar “feminine mystique.” *Century of Struggle* gave no indication of the existence of the CAW nor any of the strong protofeminist Communist women whom Flexner herself acknowledged inspired her to pursue women’s history. Still, undertaking such a project at a time at which it appears she lost faith in the left, Flexner’s turn towards women’s history implied her recognition of its power as a feminist tool. Tellingly, by the 1970s, Flexner also grew disillusioned with the women’s movement due to the “extraordinary blind spot

⁹⁷ “Transcript of an interview with Jacqueline Van Voris,” p.70-71, Flexner Papers.

⁹⁸ Newspaper clipping, Flexner papers, Schlesinger Library. Flexner referred to her book as a “sleeper” as it was sparsely reviewed and mostly acquired by libraries when it first arrived in 1959. Sales picked up precipitously after Friedan praised it in *The Feminine Mystique*.

⁹⁹ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 2001 ed., 535.

that the ‘lib’ crowd is developing where history is concerned—*our* history, women’s history.”¹⁰⁰ In her eyes, these younger radical feminists were consumed with theoretical analyses and had neglected to give credit to the very real struggles that women before them had fought for and won.

Eve Merriam’s Feminist Satire

While Flexner made a point to distance herself from the new women’s liberation movement, poet and writer Eve Merriam embraced it. Like Hansberry and Flexner, Merriam also came out of the Communist left though her exact association with the CP is less clear. As Flexner’s contemporary, Merriam likely came to the left during the Popular Front of the late 1930s. She was part of the literary left and frequently published her poetry in Communist and socialist influenced publications such as *New Masses* (later *Masses & Mainstream*), *The Monthly Review*, and *Jewish Life* during the 1940s. In the late 1940s, Merriam joined Writers for Wallace to support the Progressive Party. She also served on the Committee to Re-Elect Benjamin J. Davis, a prominent CP member and black activist who was running for city council in New York. As the CP began to address women’s rights during this phase of the Popular Front, Merriam characterized both Wallace and Davis as advocates for women. In a Writers for Wallace flyer, Merriam is quoted as stating “Henry’s Wallace’s Progressive Party program is a basis for the real emancipation of women.”¹⁰¹ Similarly, it appears that Merriam helped write campaign materials for Davis, in which she included stories about Davis defending a mother in a child care custody battle

¹⁰⁰ Eleanor Flexner, letter to Gerda Lerner, Feb 8, 1971, Gerda Lerner Papers, Schlesinger Library,

¹⁰¹ “Writers for Wallace” flyer, Merriam Papers, Carton 1, Folder 8, Schlesinger Library.

and helping the wife of a debilitated veteran.¹⁰² Merriam was also close to Communist women active on women's rights issues such as Elizabeth Lawson and Gerda Lerner, with whom she authored the 1950 musical "Singing of Women."

However, it was starting from the late 1950s that Merriam began to produce a steady stream of explicitly feminist writings that included journalism, poetry, plays and children's books. Though Merriam was a well-established poet, she gained relatively little recognition as a feminist until the success of her 1976 off-Broadway play "The Club," which ran for nineteen months and won several awards. The play featured women actors dressed as gentlemen in a men's club acting out various male chauvinist behaviors. While Merriam's critique of female representation may have appeared to emerge out of the women's liberation movement, the play illustrated a militant feminist consciousness already present in Merriam's works by the end of the fifties. In these works, she extended the feminist critique of a male supremacist capitalist culture begun by Communist women to forcefully argue against several anti-feminist arguments dominant at the time.

Between 1958 and 1962, Merriam wrote several satirical social commentaries for *The Nation* with titles such as "The Matriarchal Myth," "Sex as a Selling Aid," and the "The Ogress in the Office." Merriam's correspondence with *The Nation* editor Carey McWilliams shows that he supported her work on women's status and prompted her to write these articles for the liberal magazine. In her articles, Merriam suggested that she felt that American society was blinded to rampant gender inequalities and used her sarcastic wit to expose them. Philip Wylie's best-selling book *A Generation of Vipers* (1942) was the subject of her attack in "The Matriarchal Myth." Wylie coined the term "Momism" in reference to his theory that overbearing mothers weakened their children and were thus to

¹⁰² Scattered pamphlets, Merriam Papers, Carton 1, Folder 8, Schlesinger Library.

blame for a whole range of society's ills. While controversial, "Momism" was also highly popular in the context of the postwar antifeminist backlash.¹⁰³ Describing men's efforts to blame women for their emasculation, Merriam claimed that the "winning mystery word is not Momism but capitalism," placing the culpability on the rule of corporations.¹⁰⁴ Her indictment of capitalism continued in an article on housework. While agreeing with the leftist notion that housework was "drudgery," Merriam went further to suggest that the excessive consumption of society was an anti-feminist ideology. The rationale behind keeping woman busy in the kitchen and confined in the home, Merriam argued, was the economy's need to exploit her as the consumer of never-ending array of gadgets.¹⁰⁵ Sparked by a recent news item that had revealed businesses were using women prostitutes to court their clientele, Merriam also took on the ways in which woman's sexuality was used to sell products in capitalist society.¹⁰⁶ Merriam's uncompromising attacks on the anti-feminist implications of capitalism exhibit the clear influence of her left-wing politics. She did not suggest socialism as the solution but advocated similarly radical change in a "complete examination and overhaul of our entire family structure, which would mean an examination and possible overhaul of the whole social structure and economic system it is hitched to."¹⁰⁷

Importantly, contrary to most Communist women, Merriam did not insinuate that a changed economic reality. The stance that women needed to struggle with working-class men, one that she had depicted in the finale of "Singing of Women," seemed far removed from her late 1950s work. In one of her *Nation* articles, she sharply discerned that "sex

¹⁰³ May, *Homeward Bound*, 74-75.

¹⁰⁴ Eve Merriam, "The Matriarchal Myth," *The Nation* (November 8, 1958), 335.

¹⁰⁵ Eve Merriam, "Are Housewives Necessary?" *The Nation* (January 31, 1959), 96-99.

¹⁰⁶ Eve Merriam, "Sex as a Selling Aid," *The Nation* (March 21, 1959), 239-242.

¹⁰⁷ Merriam, "Are Housewives Necessary?" 99.

prejudice is still one of the cornerstones of our social structure (you have only to compare the status of any extra woman at a party with that of any extra man).”¹⁰⁸ In fact, in 1958, Merriam published a volume of poetry entitled *The Double Bed: from the Feminine Side* on women’s experiences in interpersonal relations, marriage, and childbearing. In these poems, she went far beyond a discussion of the economic burden of housework into issues of alienation and intimacy. However, as an indication of the times, the book did not sell well and was only released to a limited public. When it was republished in 1972, Merriam included a note about her belief that the poetry she wrote over a decade ago was as pertinent as ever. Borrowing from the language of the radical feminists, she expressed her “ardent hope that this may be a consciousness-raising book.”¹⁰⁹ When the CP continued to show a lack of tolerance for women who sought to address sex and sexuality, Merriam wrote a letter to the *Worker* to assert that “sexual freedom for women has been a vital part of the emancipation movement.”¹¹⁰

In 1964, Merriam integrated several of her previously published *Nation* articles with some new material into a book that dealt with the various facets of women’s oppression. Perhaps due to its similarity to Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, which was published just months prior, Merriam’s book was all but neglected. Titled *After Nora Slammed the Door: American Women in the 1960s, The Unfinished Revolution* after the protagonist in Henrik Ibsen’s proto-feminist play *The Doll’s House* (1879), the book showed “Domestic Nora in the Land of Mom,” “Career-minded Nora in the Land of Men,” and “Unmarried Nora in the

¹⁰⁸ Merriam, “The Matriarchal Myth,” 334.

¹⁰⁹ Eve Merriam, *The Double Bed*, “A note from the author”

¹¹⁰ Eve Merriam, “Sex and Sensibility,” *Worker*, March 29, 1959, p.11.

Land of Limbo.”¹¹¹ A *New York Times* reviewer characterized Merriam to be “as worried as Simone de Beauvoir in the ‘Second Sex’ and as vociferous as Betty Friedan in ‘The Feminine Mystique,’” but remarked “she is not so clinical.”¹¹²

In comparison to the personal influences of Hansberry and Flexner’s feminism, it is unclear what led Merriam from her relative inactivity on women’s issues in early postwar years to a militant feminism by the late 1950s. Although Merriam was not as closely tied to the CP, she also appeared to consciously challenge the Party’s treatment of women and attitude towards the “woman question” in addition to the male supremacist notions of society at large. If nothing else, the sheer volume and scope of Merriam’s feminist writings by the end of the decade seems to suggest the gradual lessening of postwar conservatism and that would allow for dissident voices to be heard even if they still remained marginal.

Notwithstanding radical pacifists’ neglect of women’s equality and the decline of profeminism in the CP milieu, a left-wing emphasis on women’s rights survived among labor feminists, whose activism had some impact on attention to women workers by the late 1950s. While labor feminists largely identified with the politics of New Deal liberalism, Communist women shared their interest in the struggles of working-class women and supported much of their agenda such as the need for equal work for equal pay, workplace protections and social supports for childcare. Through the postwar years, labor feminists exerted a strong influence in their unions and advocated for what they called “full industrial citizenship” to include all women irrespective of race or class.¹¹³ During this period, historian Dorothy Sue Cobble detects a shift from the discourse of “protectionism” to that

¹¹¹ Eve Merriam, *After Nora Slammed the Door: American Women in the 1960s, The Unfinished Revolution*, (Cleveland, World Publishing Co., 1964).

¹¹² Beverly Grunwald, “Where is Women’s Place?” *New York Times*, August 9, 1964, p. BR14.

¹¹³ Cobble, *The Other Woman’s Movement*, 4.

of “wage justice” as women fought for economic parity with men *and* the need for attention to the special discriminations of women.¹¹⁴

In 1957, the National Manpower Council at Columbia University published *Womanpower*, an in-depth report on women’s employment started in 1955, and followed up with *Work in the Lives of Married Women* (1958).¹¹⁵ While mild in its recommendations, the report importantly supported women’s right to work, including that of mothers, and called for the elimination of sex-based discriminations in the workplace. Thus, it appeared that the “woman’s place is in the home” ideology had lost much of its appeal and power.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 95-96.

¹¹⁵ Hartmann, “Women’s Employment,” 84-100.

Conclusion

On November 1st 1961, fifty thousand women in sixty cities participated in a nationwide “strike” to protest nuclear testing and the effects of radioactive fallout. From Washington, D.C. to Los Angeles, women walked out of their homes and workplaces to march down streets and in town squares holding up signs along the lines of “Testing Damages the Unborn” and “Save Our Children.” Some brought their children too, outfitted with heart-tugging signs such as “I want to be a mommy sometime day.” The strike garnered a great deal of press and was deemed a success. Two years later, these women were credited with playing a crucial role in the signing of the Limited Test Ban Treaty. Yet who were these women? Having no formal organizational structure, their mass protests appeared to come without warning. Ideologically, they also seemed to have no roots. Wholly maternalist in their protest, they showed no awareness of their place in the history of peace movements or women’s movements.

In her study of the organization, historian and former participant Amy Swerdlow reveals that, in fact, the women of Women Strike for Peace (WSP) “came from liberal to left backgrounds, having been pacifists, Quakers, New Deal Democrats, socialists, anarchists, Communist sympathizers, or Communist Party members in the years before and during World War II.”¹ Swerdlow herself was a “red-diaper baby,” brought up by a Communist father and a Socialist mother. Yet these women had apparently renounced all ties to the politics of the radical left. As Swerdlow recovered the Congress of American Women from obscurity with her historical scholarship, she noted that it was striking that the

¹ Amy Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace: Traditional Motherhood and Radical Politics in the 1960s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 1.

women of WSP knew nothing of the CAW. She suggested that it was unfortunate since WSP might have then incorporated a more equalitarian women's rights approach to their activism, but the demise of the CAW ensured that "a connection between women's rights and female peace protest was lost."²

Despite the differences between CAW and WSP, there remains a glaringly similarity. For the CAW, too, practiced a maternalist politics in their peace and child welfare activism not unlike that of the WSP. Interestingly, in their examinations of the CAW, neither Amy Swerdlow nor Kate Weigand give much significance to the maternalist side of the CAW. Swerdlow describes their meat-price protests and peace activism without analyzing its implications while Weigand almost exclusively focuses on the Commission on Women's Status and suggests that their assertions for equal rights and against the cultural denigration of women overpowered any maternalist impulse.³ Thus, both seem intent on reclaiming the CAW's proto-feminism as a left-wing Communist-influenced group.

However, the maternalist linkages between the CAW and WSP are worth noting as the two organizations set up a fifteen-year trajectory of left-wing women's activism. From 1946 to 1961, feminist thought was very much alive on the left despite Betty Friedan's insinuation otherwise. Moreover, this proto-feminism often originated as a response to reactionary conservatism and the rise of a domestic mythology. On the other hand, expressions of left-wing proto-feminism were also limited and not always successful. In tracing a path from the CAW to WSP, the ebbs and flows of left-wing women's activism become apparent.

² Ibid., 39-40.

³ Swerdlow, "Congress of American Women" in *U.S. History as Women's History*, 296-312; Weigand, *Red Feminism*, 46-66.

Starting from World War II, the Communist left emerged to foster women's activism directed against the "fascist triple-K." Thus, Communist women argued for the right to work outside of the home and for socialized services to support working women, especially working mothers. A cultural critique of women's oppression likewise surfaced in the work of Mary Inman and Susan B. Anthony II and became a dominant argument among Communist women such as Eleanor Flexner, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Betty Millard as a postwar domestic backlash ensued. Claudia Jones powerfully vocalized a black feminist politics that argued for the need for white women to overcome their racism and stand in solidarity with black women in an interracial women's movement. Perhaps, most notable of all was Communist women's conception of "male chauvinism," signifying a shift from solely indicting capitalism as women's oppressors to the recognition that women also needed to be liberated from male domination.

Meanwhile, the CP was not the only far left milieu that began addressing the "woman question" with vigor. The independent Marxist group Correspondence turned towards addressing women's problems in the home as manifest in alienating marital relations and unsatisfying family life. Conceiving that women should, and could, act as the agents of their own liberation, the group offered the tool of a newspaper to facilitate their mass rebellion. While the "Woman's Page" attracted many readers and writers, the revolutionary consciousness that the group so often spoke of never seemed to come about. At the best, women proposed interacting more with their husbands and sharing household chores for more satisfying marriages. Thus, if Correspondence's vision of an imminent socialist revolution in human relations was more radical than that of the CP's, it turned out to be less so in reality.

Similarly limited was the vision of the radical pacifists at *Liberation* as they failed to acknowledge the prevalence of male supremacy while proclaiming to be for the freedom of all individuals in society. Thus, women radical pacifists turned to the path of well-worn path of maternalism but attempted to challenge the boundaries of maternalist protest by taking militant public actions that involved risking arrest and separation from their children and families. In many ways, these women anticipated those of WSP, who would follow in the steps of radical pacifist Lillian Willoughby to attempt to enter the Nevada nuclear test site only with strength in numbers.

Going into the 1950s, Communist women, too, seemed to take a few steps back from the militancy of their earlier writings on the “woman question” and turn towards peace and civil rights activism. Significantly, a critique of male chauvinism declined without women like Claudia Jones and Betty Millard. For when Elizabeth Lawson read Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, the argument that she took away was that of women’s right to work in professions of their own choosing. With women’s participation in production as the answer to their subordination, Lawson’s conception of women’s liberation lacked much of the force and insight of Communist women who had dared to challenge the patriarchal culture of society. The influence of Communist women’s more hard-hitting critiques could be seen to resonate with Lorraine Hansberry and her emergent lesbian feminist consciousness. Yet she nonetheless kept her lesbianism largely hidden from public view.

Ultimately, it may be Eleanor Flexner who provides the strongest link to the women of WSP and the erasure of the legacy of left-wing women’s feminist activism in the postwar decade. As someone who self-consciously renounced her radical political past to move towards the liberal mainstream, Flexner suggested that, in part, the defeat of Communist

proto-feminism came from within its own ranks. Moreover, it seemed to be less influenced by the anticommunist paranoia of McCarthyism and more to do with her real disillusionment with the authoritarian and sexist culture of the Communist Party. Thus, Claudia Jones' 1951 call for Communists to "release the collective talents of our wonderful women comrades to work, write, sing and fight for women's liberation" remained forgotten in the history of American feminism.⁴

⁴ Jones, "For the Unity of Women in the Cause of Peace!" 167.

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