

BLACK LEFT FEMINISM

AND THE

'OLD LEFT'

REAL GIRL'S

TALK

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arxism continues to influence the lives of radical black women. To paraphrase Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis*

*Bonaparte*, the traditions of the dead haunt the minds of the living. Black Marxist feminism, or black left feminism, rose during the ‘Old left’ of the 1920s and the 1930s. Black women worked inside and adjacent to the Communist Party in places like Chicago, Harlem, and the urban South. These black left feminists were profoundly shaped by the politics of the Communist Party. In turn, they pushed traditional Marxist theory to the left by developing alternative forms of street politics, deepening theories of women’s oppression, and expanding internationalist commitments. Through their work with the International Labor Defense, Unemployed Councils, Tenants Unions, and other CP-affiliated organizations, black left feminists carved

out a space for themselves that centered the basic needs of working people. Through their lived experiences, they challenged traditional notions of black womanhood and theorized intersections between race, class, and gender that demonstrated the unique revolutionary capabilities of radical black women. Their travels abroad and interest in Pan-African solidarity elevated commitments to internationalism. Even so, the dynamic between the Comintern’s directives and their own grassroots initiatives was complex due to black women’s rich legacy of collective agency.

Domestic workers organized for their rights as free laborers during the era of reconstruction. As Tera Hunter’s book *To Joy My Freedom* shows, domestics – many of them formerly enslaved - viewed their work as a means to self-sufficiency. They resisted Antebellum valuing of black women’s bodies in terms of their reproductive capabilities.<sup>2</sup> The politics of “quitting” was

“... we never talked about men or clothes or other such inconsequential things when we got together. It was always Marx, Lenin, and revolution – real girl’s talk.”<sup>1</sup>



widespread, as they left jobs that did not suit their liking. Quitting could not guarantee better working conditions or pay, but it was a political act that deprived largely white employers of their power in relations with laborers.<sup>3</sup> As early as 1866, black washerwomen organized strikes against predominantly white patrons in Jackson, Mississippi. Similar rebellions erupted in Galveston, Texas in 1877 and Atlanta, Georgia in 1881. At the same time, black women engaged in political work for the Republican Party and organized mutual aid groups, secret societies, and church groups.<sup>4</sup> Thus, many working-class black women were well versed in social and political organizing as the nineteenth century ended.

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The early twentieth century saw an organized left that swelled, despite its inability to adequately address issues of race and gender.

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Eugene Debs ran for president under the Socialist Party ticket five times – receiving nearly one million votes from prison in 1920.<sup>5</sup> In his article “The Negro in the Class Struggle,” written in 1903, Debs acknowledged that blacks were “doubly en-

slaved.” Personally, he felt a “burning sense of guilt... that makes me blush for the unspeakable crimes committed by my own race.” Nevertheless, Debs prioritized concerns of class over of race, arguing that “we have nothing special to offer the Negro, and we cannot make separate appeals to all the races.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, black socialist Lucy Parsons viewed sexism and racism as economic problems. She blamed employers for sewing identarian divisions among workers in order to exploit them.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, pioneering black socialist Hubert Harrison captivated black audiences with rousing street corner speeches that demonstrated the intersection between capitalist exploitation and racism. Harrison’s West Indian background and working-class demeanor appealed to black immigrants in Harlem. This contributed to the rise of a particularly transnational form of Caribbean socialism.<sup>8</sup> Recognizing the Socialist Party’s limitations, Black women concerned with everyday experiences of racism and sexism looked elsewhere for their politics.

Most importantly, it was the Women’s Conventions of the black Baptist church that gave black women reformers a voice for their political needs. They articulated what scholar Evelyn Higginbotham calls the “politics of respectability,” which advocated racial uplift and assimilation to high-class Victorian manners. Fundamentally, it championed individual moral reform as the path to structural change. To appeal to middle-class Americans and white philanthropists, Women’s Conventions condemned “idleness” and “vice” among the black lower classes, but also materialism among the upper class.<sup>9</sup> Women’s Con-



ventions tapped into Christian teachings that emphasized the struggles of the poor and downtrodden, echoing later pronouncements of liberation theology.<sup>10</sup> By the early 1920s, women's clubs were seen by the black masses as increasingly elitist, concerned with middle-class respectability, and disdainful of the working poor.<sup>11</sup> Despite its contradictions, the “politics of respectability” created a space for working class black women to engage in organizing that directly addressed their unique experiences.

In contrast, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB) appealed to African Americans who were impatient with assimilationism and moderate reforms. This ideological formation was committed to black nationalism, or what African American studies scholar Eric McDuffie calls “New Negro Radicalism.” Rooted in the urban United States, this militancy was sparked by Northern migration, anti-colonial struggles, and race riots in American cities that culminated in the Red Summer of 1919. The New Negro movement promoted racial uplift, self-help, temperance, and the accumulation of individual wealth.<sup>12</sup> In 1920, 25,000 UNIA delegates drafted a statement in Harlem, titled “Declaration of the Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World.” Exemplifying its Pan-African politics, it condemned European colonialism and demanded self-determination, independent social institutions, and an end to discrimination for black people.<sup>13</sup> In spite of the UNIA’s paternalism, the influence of women such as Amy Ashwood and Amy Jacques Garvey – Marcus Garvey’s first and second wife, respectively

– contributed to Pan-African theorizing and prompted a “lady president” at each local UNIA branch.<sup>14</sup> In *Black Marxism, the Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, Cedric Robinson contended that traditional accounts of the UNIA tend to focus on the cult of personality surrounding Garvey and accusations of opportunism. The aspirations and interests of black working people mobilized under its sway are rarely given attention.<sup>15</sup> Symbolic of the UNIA’s lasting influence, black nationalism was a major point of interest for the African Blood Brotherhood and the Communist Party.

The African Blood Brotherhood was formed in 1919 as the first group to fuse socialist politics and racial liberation in the United States. Its founding members included Cyril Briggs, Richard B. Moore, Harry Haywood, and Grace Campbell – all of whom were active on the Communist left a decade later.<sup>16</sup> Although the group was committed to liberation, Grace Campbell’s role was limited to secretarial work, as men assumed the lead positions in the organiza-



tion.<sup>17</sup> Liberation of women under capitalism was not a priority. According to scholar of black intellectual history Minkah Makalani, the ABB included some of the first black Communists in the world, but never adopted feminist leanings. In general, it viewed liberation through the lens of armed self-defense and black manhood, relegating women to caretaking positions as “mothers.”<sup>18</sup> The African Blood Brotherhood never matched the size and influence of the UNIA, but it was the basis for Communist International’s commitment to black liberation.

The Communist movement in the United States rose out of the ashes of a split in the Socialist Party after the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917. The Socialist Party’s left formed the Communist Party of America, consisting mostly of foreigners born in Eastern Europe and well versed in Marxist theory. Other left socialists - mostly American born and lacking experience in formal political work - formed the Communist Labor Party. Both groups were united as the Workers Party, later renamed the Communist Party USA under

pressure from the Communist International in Moscow.<sup>19</sup> The CPUSA was a unique fusion of previously existing tendencies in the left wing of the Socialist Party and principles of the Bolsheviks in Russia.

The rhetoric of “the new Soviet woman” attracted American leftist women, as it depicted women as modern and sexually liberated. Russian Marxist revolutionary and theoretician Alexandra Kollontai was one of the key drivers of Soviet women’s liberation. In her 1909 essay, *The Social Basis of the Woman Question*, she attacked middle-class feminists for their neglect of working-class women:

*It is true that several specific aspects of the contemporary system lie with double weight upon women, as it is also true that the conditions of hired labour sometimes turn working women into competitors and rivals to men. But in these unfavourable situations, the working class knows who is guilty.*<sup>20</sup>

Kollontai’s notion of “double oppression,” echoed similar American articulations, such as Sojourner Truth’s





1851 speech *Ain't I a Woman*. In comparison, Kollontai rooted women's oppression in class oppression. Soviet policy towards women was directly influenced by these expressions of socialist feminism.

The Soviet Union was the first nation in the world to legalize divorce and abortion, positioning it as a leader of progressive struggles for women.<sup>21</sup> In response to the "women's question," the Third Congress of the Communist International declared in 1921:

*But as long as the proletarian woman remains economically dependent upon the capitalist boss and her husband, the breadwinner, and in the absence of comprehensive measures to protect motherhood and childhood and provide socialised child-care and education, this cannot equalise the position of women in marriage or solve the problem of relationships between the sexes.*<sup>22</sup>

In essence, the Soviet Union insisted that women's rights had to be advanced beyond suffrage. Some of its policymakers recognized that the social position of women was rooted in their role as caretakers and providers of unpaid social reproduction in the home. The Bolshevik Revolution was seen as a model for women around the globe.

In the 1920s, two landmark directives on the "Negro question" came out of the Soviet International that directly addressed the position of African Americans. In the Communist Party's early years, its position on race differed little from the Socialist Party's class-reductionism. In 1920, Lenin addressed the American Communist Party's lack of interest in the "Negro question." This led to the CP actively organizing blacks in 1921. Inspired by the 1922 Fourth Comintern Congress resolution that endorsed black liberation, Cyril Briggs, Richard B. Moore, and other black left-

ists joined the Workers Party in 1923.<sup>23</sup> One year later, "Negro Women Workers," was published in the *Daily Worker*, the CP's main publication. Written by a white woman, it articulated the party's changing positions. It cited the unique struggles of black women both at home and at work, quoting a black mother who remarked, "I am so worried and worn in my strength that I feel at times as if I can stand it no longer. It is not alone the need of money but the responsibility of being nurse, housekeeper and wage earner at one time."<sup>24</sup> The special oppression of black working women was noted, but not theorized by the party. Drawn to Communism for its special recognition of racial oppression, black women brought their own talents and experiences that challenged the Party's positions on race and gender.

## Grace Campbell

Grace Campbell was born in Georgia in 1882 to an African American mother and a Jamaican father. She was one of the first black women to join the Communist Party. After graduating from Howard University, she taught in Washington D.C. and Chicago, seeing this as racially uplifting work. She moved to New York City in 1905 and became a probation officer for the New York Court of General Sessions. In 1916 she established the Empire Friendly Shelter for single mothers in need.<sup>25</sup> It was her experiences in New York City that exposed Campbell to poverty and discrimination in the criminal justice system that working class black women regularly faced. Grace Campbell was radicalized as she began to view the causes of oppression as systemic, rather than rooted in individual moral failures.

Campbell's changing views brought her into contact with intellectual and radical cir-

cles in Harlem. After World War I, she befriended black socialist luminaries such as Hubert Harrison, Cyril Briggs, Richard B. Moore, and A. Phillip Randolph.<sup>26</sup> Previously, women were absent from this milieu. In the summer of 1917, she helped launch the People's Education Forum. The PEF sponsored lectures and debates on Sunday afternoons. Some of the lectures included W.E.B. Dubois on "The War and the Darker World," William Pickens of the NAACP on "What I saw in Russia," and Hubert Harrison's talk "Is the White Race Doomed?" Discussion events included topics such as "The Relation of the Race Problem to the Proletarian Movement," which connected black liberation with anticolonial struggles and socialism. Referred to as an "intellectual battleground," it is hard to believe that Campbell did not interject concerns of gender at PEF events.<sup>27</sup> Campbell did not put much of her writing into print, but her activities set the stage for African American women to assert their own issues in the CP.

One of Grace Campbell's greatest contributions was her work with the Harlem Tenants League. Formed in January 1928, its original leadership included black radical women such as Elizabeth Hendrickson, Hermina Dumont Huiswoud, Williana Burroughs and Grace Campbell - reflecting black women's unique interest in addressing the basic needs of the working-class. Its activities included demonstrations, rent strikes, physically blocking evictions, and fighting for housing regulations to be enforced through direct action. In its rhetorical analysis, this group connected housing issues to imperialism, capitalism, and white supremacy. The HTL became the model for the CP-affiliated Unemployment Councils - which were some of the most popular organizing platforms during the height of the Great Depression. With as many as 500 members, the female led HTL connected

everyday experiences to capitalism by focusing on cost-of-living issues that directly affected families.<sup>28</sup> This suggests that black women on the left recognized the need for a different means to raise class consciousness, which then brought an entirely new swath of people into CP networks. Even more, it was one of the first uptakes of the Comintern's "Black Belt thesis."

Grace Campbell's intellectual thought progressed in tandem with her organizing. She published a column entitled "Women in Current Topics" in the *New York Age*—a column that differed remarkably from earlier views which blamed poverty on individual moral failings. In her column, she argued that the criminal justice system functioned primarily to reproduce hierarchies of race, class, and gender. She went on to note that institutional oppression reinforced stereotypes about poor black women as criminal and deviant.<sup>29</sup> Truly, this work was ahead of its time. It predates Louis Althusser's Marxist theory of *interpellation* - how ideology transforms individuals into pliant subjects through actions, which was illustrated in the early 1970s.<sup>30</sup> In addition, it was a precursor to *Are Prisons Obsolete?* - Angela Davis's landmark book on prison abolition.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, Campbell was one of the first black left feminists to argue that the hyper-exploitation of black women put them in a position to be the premier vanguard for social change.

## Williana Burroughs

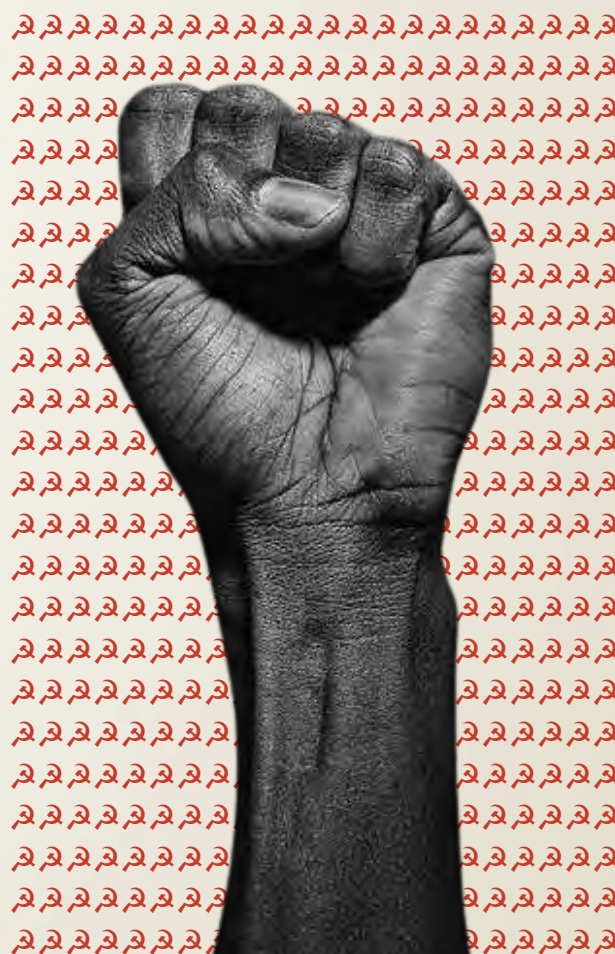
Williana Burroughs was another early contributor to the tradition of black Marxist feminists in the US. She was born to a formerly enslaved woman in Petersburg, Virginia in 1882.<sup>32</sup> After moving to New York City, she graduated from Hunter College in 1902 and met Hubert Harrison in 1909. She was radicalized as an elementary school



teacher in poor neighborhoods in New York City and joined the CP in 1926. Throughout the early 1930s, Burroughs was involved with the Rank and File Caucus of the New York City Teachers Union, which was dominated by Communists. In 1934, Burroughs was dismissed from her teaching position for “conduct unbecoming a teacher,” after she criticized the school board for failing to provide adequate lunches to students and for discriminating against black teachers. As historian Clarence Taylor argues, the militant actions of Burroughs and others increased the Rank and File’s favorability, showing teachers that radicals were willing to risk their livelihoods to advocate for colleagues and students.<sup>33</sup> In addition to running for lieutenant governor, she ran for city comptroller and received more votes than other candidate on the CP ticket for a New York City office.<sup>34</sup> Eventually, Burroughs became the director of the Harlem Workers School, a Marxist study center that offered courses and lectures on issues such as the national question. Following the Harlem riot of 1935, she was an effective witness for the Party. During her testimony, she indicted the city for the deepening structural racism and poverty that led to the riot. Thus, Burroughs demonstrated that she was a dedicated and daring grassroots activist who could be trusted by Harlem CP leaders.

It was Williana Burroughs’ international work, however, that elevated her status in the party. In 1928, she attended the Sixth Party Congress in Moscow. There, she came in contact with black Communists from all over the world, including Otto Hall, Harry Haywood, William Patterson, and Maude White. From new research in the Russian State Archive on Social and Political History, professor of history Minkah Makalani detailed Williana Bur-

In essence, the Soviet Union insisted that women’s rights had to be advanced beyond suffrage. Some of its policymakers recognized that the social position of women was rooted in their role as caretakers and providers of unpaid social reproduction in the home. The Bolshevik Revolution was seen as a model for women around the globe.





roughs's address. It was the first speech by a black woman to the Comintern. She argued that the Communist parties of the west poorly addressed racism and anticolonial struggles. She criticized the American Communist Party's lack of strategy in organizing Southern blacks. Even in the North, she called out the CP's failure to send organizers into cities. In her

view, Party organs for African Americans such as the American Negro Labor



Congress lacked resources. Most strikingly, she lambasted the CP for its complete lack of diversity in its leadership. To her, West Indian,

African, unemployed, and young black women were crucial to mass party work.<sup>35</sup> Williana Burroughs fought for black women to be recognized as revolutionary leaders by highlighting their ability to connect deeply with the African diaspora. Undoubtedly, her speech influenced the Comintern's 1928 "Black Belt thesis" and its emerging focus on black self-determination.

The International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers represented the Communist International's highest commitment to Pan-Africanism. Burroughs served on the ITUCNW's Provisional Executive Committee, which organized the group's founding conference in Hamburg, Germany. Internal reports in preparation for the conference reveal that she pushed the organization to address child labor. Furthermore, she wanted it to organize black women industrial workers across the United States and the Caribbean. Burroughs pointed to the fact that, "Negro women, among whom are a large number of foreigners from the Caribbean, [are] themselves sufferers from imperialism."<sup>36</sup> To her, struggles for women and anticolonialism were interlocking: they offered a means to capture women's cultural imaginations and to prove that a new world was possible.

During this time, Burroughs wrote regularly for the *Daily Worker* under the pseudonym Mary Adams. Her article in a 1928 May Day issue, titled "Record of Revolts in Negro Workers' Past," depicted the history of black struggles against racism in the United States.<sup>37</sup> In November of 1930, Williana Burroughs wrote an article for the *Negro Worker* on the importance of the ITUCNW to the black freedom movement in conjunction with the Red International of Labor Unions. She explicitly called for workers in the imperial metropolises of Britain and the United States to unite with

workers in the colonies. Showing the depth of her analysis, she detailed American imperialism's penetration into Africa with statistics of investments in Belgian copper mines in the Congo, as well as Firestone's investments in Liberia.<sup>38</sup> Her analysis showed an astute understanding of emerging forms of economic imperialism. Also, she called on leftist publications to pay closer attention to international workers' struggles:

*The Negro workers in America know very little about the heroic fight of the Chinese workers, very little about the revolutionary movement of the workers of India; they know almost nothing of the movement in South Africa, simply because our press is very small and very weak.*<sup>39</sup>

Burroughs concluded by demanding that workers in the west "make real to the workers in the colonies the solidarity of the workers of the world."<sup>40</sup> Despite Williana Burroughs's calls for internationalism, her article did not pay specific attention to women of color. Perhaps, her writing in high profile CP publications was limited by the desires of the men who dominated their editorial boards.

In 1937, Williana Burroughs returned to the Soviet Union to work with English-language radical broadcasts in Moscow — where she had previously sent her two children to school.<sup>41</sup> Williana Burroughs represented a Marxist feminist figure who pushed the Communist left to build international bridges between workers in the United States, Soviet Russia, and the third world. Still, other women emerged out of black cultural circles in similar roles.

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## Louise Thompson Patterson

One of the key conduits between the Harlem Renaissance, the American left, and the Soviet Union was Louise Thompson Patterson. Born in Chicago in 1901, her family moved to Seattle, West Oakland, and Arkansas. The reality of racism was glaring during her childhood and she suffered racist taunts from white children.<sup>42</sup> She recalled the impact that a lynching had on her perception of white Americans:

*They took this body and burned it in the main street of the black community in Little Rock and all of the top Negroes ran, left the town. They either went to Chicago or they came over to Pine Bluff [Arkansas]. I was enraged. I went around for days. I just couldn't see. I hated anything white.*<sup>43</sup>

She recalled how school board members in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, openly referred to African Americans with harsh slurs. Understandably, these experiences and Thompson's middle-class background motivated her to acquire a formal education and to work to uplift the black masses.

Louise Thompson was the first black woman to graduate from University of California, Berkeley. Her education itself did not bring her to the left, as she stated: "Imagine going through the school of economics at the University of California and I never heard of Karl Marx. Never heard of him."<sup>44</sup> Still, Thompson met W.E.B. Du Bois after a lecture at Berkeley. This meeting inspired her to dedicate her life to fighting racial injustice.<sup>45</sup> At this point, W.E.B. Du Bois's theory of the "talented tenth," which called for a black leadership to cultivate intellectualism among the black masses, was central to Thompson's philosophy.<sup>46</sup>

Louise Thompson's experience working at black political institutions such as the



Hampton Institute in Virginia and the National Urban League in New York City alienated her from traditional black elites. She criticized these figures for their "bourgeois fraternalism," coming to see their close ties to white capitalism as hypocritical. After supporting a strike by black students against segregation at the Hampton Institute in 1927, Thompson was asked to leave. Echoing the 'politics of respectability,' the administration condemned her actions as inappropriate for a teacher. In 1928, she accepted a one-year Urban League fellowship as a social worker at the Institute for Social Research in New York City. Building relationships with the urban poor, she was convinced that social work did not address the root cause of urban poverty.<sup>47</sup> Louise Thompson's disillusionment with liberalism brought her closer to the left.

Despite her problems with the outlook of the Institute for Social Research, Thompson's setting in New York offered other avenues for more radical political work. She left the institute to become the editorial secretary for Langston Hughes and Zora Neal Hurston. Through these connections, she organized seminars on race and labor for the Congregational Educational Society. But it was her founding of the "Vanguard Club" and its subsequent discussion groups that sparked her intellectual curiosity with the left.<sup>48</sup> The "Vanguard Club" was a public forum and a Marxist study group. Harlem Renaissance artist Aaron Douglas and writer Langston Hughes were regular participants.<sup>49</sup> In addition to discussing social issues during Saturday night parties, the "Vanguard Club" held Sunday forums involving writers, prominent figures who visited the Soviet Union, and leading intellectuals such as Carter G. Woodson. In one instance, they held a debate over whether the National Recovery

Act "was a step forward or a step towards fascism."<sup>50</sup> All in all, Louise Thompson Patterson's calling as an organizer changed her life.

In 1931, she helped establish the Harlem Chapter of Friends of the Soviet Union.<sup>51</sup> This group discussed events in the Soviet Union and raised funds for the defense of the Scottsboro Boys.<sup>52</sup> Interested in Marxism, Thompson began attending political science classes at the Workers' School in New York City. She read classic Marxist texts such as Vladimir Lenin's *State and Revolution* and Friedrich Engels's *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*. In her words, studying Marxism was "eye opening." She "began to understand much more about the character of the society in which we lived."<sup>53</sup> At this time, Thompson was more familiar with Marxism, but she was not a member of the CP. Such a step offered close friends and a sense of purpose, but often resulted in social isolation outside of the Party. Even so, many African Americans were drawn to the CP due to its support for black self-determination.

African Americans frequently saw the Soviet Union's interest in black history as admirable, but also tainted by propaganda. The Soviet state launched a project to create a musical called *Black and White* using American actors. Its goal was to depict the development of African American life in the United States amidst deeply entrenched racism. On June 14, 1932, twenty-two Americans, mostly middle-class, white-collar, and black, sailed for Moscow.<sup>54</sup> Louise Thompson Patterson and Langston Hughes, both participants, took issue with the script's stereotypical depiction of black life and the German director's ignorance of the complexities of African American history.

Thompson commented that "most people

think that all Negroes can sing and dance. Most of us could do neither."<sup>55</sup> In one scene, the film depicted white workers from the North saving black union workers in Montgomery, Alabama from a racist Southern mob. Russians had little concept of racial violence in the North, such as the Red Summer of 1919. The film was called off for reasons that are numerous and debatable, but it is clear that the script's content and the director's preconceived notions about race in America were not well received by Thompson, Langston Hughes, and others.<sup>56</sup> Despite these problems with *Black and White*, Thompson defended it.

Thompson's defense of *Black and White* was likely due to her travels in the Soviet Union that exposed her to the treatment of minorities in a foreign country. Soviet authorities, working for a new nation that was still an imperial power, probably exaggerated its equal treatment of minorities. Still, it contrasted sharply with Thompson's experiences with racism in the United States. She was impressed by the Soviet people's knowledge of the Scottsboro case, which was not widely known by African Americans at the time. Several of the cast members visited Soviet port cities across Central Asia and were surprised that so many Soviet citizens were non-white. Louise Thompson Patterson commented that, "many Americans don't realize that under the Soviet Union not everybody's white. And that in central Asia you have

In Patterson's view, the remedy for black women's oppression was solidarity. Progressive-minded women, both white and black, had to show support for each other without sadness or pessimism.

people that are brown and black. The only difference between them and blacks in the United States is that they don't have curly hair."<sup>57</sup> The absence of Jim Crow laws and blatant racism certainly left a profound impression on her as she commented that, "what I had witnessed, especially in Central Asia, convinced me that only a new social order could remedy the American racial injustices I know so well. I went to the Soviet Union with leftist leanings; I returned home a committed revolutionary."<sup>58</sup> To say the least, Thompson's visit to the Soviet Union fully convinced her that racism and capitalism were anything but permanent.

The Communist Party offered new opportunities for Louise Thompson, but some of her close friends criticized her choice.

After joining in 1933, her friends Mary McLeod Bethune and W.E.B. Du Bois expressed concern that her decision to join the Communist Party would ruin her career prospects. She chose to ignore their pleas, believing that the time for reform was over. Thompson no longer had patience for political moderation. She went on to join the CP-affiliated International Working Order.<sup>59</sup> The IWO functioned essentially as an insurance and fraternal organization for workers, but it also provided much more.<sup>60</sup>

In 1935, she became the IWO's national recording secretary, demonstrating the party's interest in promoting people of color to high positions. According to Thomp-



son, there were few black members in the organization, which sparked her interest in bringing black members into the IWO.<sup>61</sup> Although the IWO was primarily concerned with providing workers with a basic social safety net, Patterson was motivated by its potential to unite the international working class.

In Louise Thompson Patterson's view, the International Working Order helped bridge the gap between the experiences of immigrant workers and their native cultures. Speaking positively of the IWO, she commented that it was an "organization of which a great deal of the culture of the old countries was kept alive. And young people were given an appreciation of their history." She was likely referring to the effect of IWO sponsored native-language newspapers on second generation immigrants.<sup>62</sup> Such multicultural work defied ugly nativist traditions in the United States. More than being multicultural, Thompson saw the IWO as an organization that could directly counter manifestations of white supremacy:

*not only did the IWO help to keep alive and to perpetuate the contributions of the various ethnic groups that have come to make America the United States. But the concept of what is an American, which, by and large, over the centuries, has been what is the perfect American? An Anglo-Saxon. What is the culture? Anglo-Saxon.*<sup>63</sup>

Louise Thompson saw a distinction between the imagined "native born" whiteness of Americans, which was largely Protestant and Anglo-Saxon, and European immigrants with less social advantage. Many of these first and second-generation immigrants did not benefit from what Du Bois called the "psychological wage" of whiteness.<sup>64</sup> Additionally, Thompson recognized the allure of whiteness, both cul-

turally and as a marker of status:

*if you think of the early movies, and even up to today, the people who are the heroes are primarily blonde and blue eyed. The villains are swarthy and dark, if they're not black. And this affects the younger generations, so that the children of immigrants who wanna get away, who wanna become Americanized, what do they become?*<sup>65</sup>

To Louise Thompson Patterson, her work in the IWO was personal. Drawing back on her experiences in the Soviet Union with its minority population, she saw the IWO as a vehicle to combat racism and unite workers across ethnic lines. On the other hand, opportunities for women in the organization were limited to running the children's section, the youth division, and summer camps such as the leftist Kinderland Camp. Women were always in the minority of decision makers in the International Working Order. Although Louise Thompson was effectively restricted from the executive committee, she did not shy away from expressing the inferior position of black women.

In her 1936 article "Toward a Brighter Dawn" published in the CP-affiliated publication *Women Today*, Patterson cast light on the special oppression that black women faced as domestic workers. Through her poetic and lyrical tone, she described their near soul-breaking work:

*Early dawn on any Southern road. Shadowy figures emerge from the little unpainted, wooden shacks alongside the road. There are Negro women trudging into town to the Big House to cook, to wash, to clean, to nurse children – all for two, three, dollars for the whole week. Sunday comes – rest day. But what rest is there for a Negro mother who must crowd into one day the care of her own large family? Church of course, where for a few brief hours she may forget, listening to the sonorous voice*



*of the pastor, the liquid harmony of the choir, the week's gossip of neighbors. But Monday is right after Sunday, and the week's grind begins all over.*<sup>66</sup>

To Thompson, the pain and suffering that these women endured was symptomatic of employers' views that domestic workers were less than human. Sunday was both a blessing and a curse. It was the day for unpaid housework for the family, but also a day of spiritual rejuvenation and collective joy. Church services prepared domestic workers for the challenges of the following week. In comparison, Thompson described domestic work in the North using the image of the "slave market":

*So thrifty "housewives" drive sharper bargains. There are plenty of women to choose from. And every dollar saved leaves that much more for one's bridge game or theater party! The Bronx "slave market" is a graphic monument to the bitter exploitation of this most exploited section of the American working population – the Negro women.*<sup>67</sup>

With a sarcastic tone, Thompson excoriated middle class white women for their selfish materialism and hypocritical exploitation of black domestics. The symbolism of the slave market was not hyperbole. The Great Depression hit African Americans disproportionately hard. Notably, black domestic workers had to compete with white women who fell on hard times.<sup>68</sup> Middle class white women took advantage of this increased competition in what Ella Baker and Marvel Cooke referred to as "the Bronx slave market." Their 1935 article for the NAACP's *The Crisis* was a watershed expose of domestic workers' lives, but it did not explicitly theorize interlocking oppressions facing poor black women.<sup>69</sup> Baker, a well-known community activist, and Cooke, secretly a Communist, were probably in contact with Louise Thompson, as all





three of these women were active in New York City social movements. Driven by this rising consciousness, many black women joined organizations like the NAACP, the Communist Party, and the Domestic Workers Union (DWU) – which was formed in June of 1936 in New York City and quickly totaled around one thousand members.<sup>70</sup> Their anger against social and economic injustice fueled collective action.

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It was Louise Thompson Patterson's coining of the phrase "triple exploitation" that was most notable. In "Toward a Brighter Dawn," she remarked that, "over the whole land, Negro women meet this triple exploitation – as workers, as women, and as Negroes. About 85 per cent of all Negro women workers are domestics, two-thirds of the two million domestic workers in the United States."<sup>71</sup>

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This was a very clear expression of intersectionality – the overlapping of different identities instead of viewing them in isolation. As Ashley Farmer suggests, this was the first use of the term "triple oppression."<sup>72</sup> It was expressed later in different forms by Claudia Jones, Angela Davis, the Combahee River Collective, and Kimberlé Crenshaw. In Patterson's view, the remedy for black women's oppression was soli-

arity. Progressive-minded women, both white and black, had to show support for each other without sadness or pessimism. Her experience with the Women's Sub-Session at the National Negro Congress in 1936 sparked this realization, as she recalled that "women from all walks of life, unskilled and professional, Negro and white women found themselves drawn together, found that they liked being together, found that there was hope for change in coming together."<sup>73</sup> In sum, collective organizing was the means to develop an intersectional consciousness that viewed race, class, and gender as inseparable.

Louise Thompson remained an activist throughout her life. She was involved in the Scottsboro campaign, various workers' struggles, and the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. She married William L. Patterson, a leader of the CP-affiliated International Labor Defense and a Communist. Essentially, she married herself to a life of activism.<sup>74</sup> Louise Thompson's legacy demonstrates that black left feminists used the CP as a vehicle to address issues that were outside the Party's priorities. Chiefly, they pushed the Party further to the left. While the Communist Party was a space for middle class women such as Thompson, its mass politics attracted women from more modest means, such as Bonita Williams and Audley Moore.

## Bonita Williams

Most illustrative of women Party organizers among the masses was Bonita Williams. Born in the West Indies to a family of modest means, she took up the banner of Grace Campbell as the leader of the Harlem Unemployed Council and the Harlem Tenants League. In the party, she was an executive member of the New York

branch of the League of Struggles for Negro Rights - an anti-racist and anti-lynching mass organization that advocated for black self-determination. She was also a member of the ILD, and helped to organize campaigns in defense of the Scottsboro Boys. Her colloquial speech and lack of a formal education was strength that allowed her to develop close relationships with working class black Americans in Harlem whom she treated warmly with dignity . Widely known for her poetry, she published "Fifteen Million Negroes Speak" in the *Harlem Liberator* on the topic of the Scottsboro Boys. Expressing her views openly and without reservation, her poem demanded a civil rights bill for African Americans.<sup>75</sup> Williams' organizing shows how black left feminists imagined a political space that connected various struggles for basic living conditions, across various CP-affiliated groups, into a matrix of intersectional mutual aid.

In a mass action known as the "Revolt of the Housewives," Bonita Williams led hundreds of working-class women in Harlem – both black and white - against exorbitant meat prices. By the spring of 1935, butcher prices rose over fifty percent in most Harlem neighborhoods. Recognizing this issue, Williams formed the Harlem Action Committee in June of 1935.<sup>76</sup> Under the guise of this committee, women met in churches, lodges, and prayer meetings - all well-established social circles for women – to discuss direct action. An article in the *New Masses*, an American Marxist magazine published that year on June eighteenth, reported that, "women who have never ventured farther than a neighbor's flat to voice their views, have flung themselves into the activities of the meat strike."<sup>77</sup> This action galvanized housewives into militant action. Open air meetings and elections for local committees





against the high price of meat erupted across the city. Demonstrating their unity, the *New Masses* article depicted remarkable unity:

*In Harlem, where the unemployment rate - and the food prices - are higher than anywhere else in the city, three hundred Negroes, mainly women, stand before a single butcher shop and chant "Don't Buy Meat Until the Price Comes Down!" "Don't Buy Meat Until the Price Comes Down!!!"*<sup>78</sup>

In many cases, meat retailers closed their doors. Other butchers actually joined demonstrations against wholesalers and suppliers. In the aftermath of strikes, marches, and picketing, meat prices fell as far as Chicago, with local newspapers reporting that the New York Action Committee Against the High Cost of Living was to blame. As many as 300 butchers agreed to close their stores to pressure wholesalers from June twelfth to June fifteenth and other Harlem butchers lowered their prices to as much as twenty-five percent.<sup>79</sup>

The most significant impact of the "Revolt of the Housewives" was its effect on the rising expectations of working women in Harlem. During the protests, women connected meat prices to malnutrition and children's health in their street corner speeches. As one organizer proclaimed, "this is a fight for the right to eat - for the right to feed our children. Isn't it so, sisters?" Collective action galvanized these women to challenge prevailing notions of the 'politics of respectability.' Housewives aggressively pressured men who owned butcher shops. This was done unrepentantly due to political leverage, as one woman told a butcher, "we do hope you'll cooperate with us. Because, you see, if you don't, the women will picket your place. You wouldn't want that. So, we'll both cooperate." In another instance, a housewife signaled the in-

fluence of internationalism in Harlem's diverse communities, proclaiming "that's the way to do it - fight for your rights! That's the way they do it where I come from - in Panama!"<sup>80</sup> Not only did street politics arouse a strong sense of multiracial class consciousness, they encouraged women to assert themselves without reservations.

On top of organizing houseworkers, Bonita Williams participated in a number of actions that exhibited her dedication to grassroots activism and internationalism. In May of 1938, Bonita Williams, along with Party functionary Richard Moore, organized a protest in solidarity with Jamaican sugarcane workers who were shot by British colonial forces. In addition, Williams was involved in the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaign to address racial discrimination in employment in Harlem. At the Works Progress Administration where she worked, Williams helped organize a union with other black, Italian, and Puerto Rican immigrant women.<sup>81</sup> It seems clear that Bonita Williams was fearless and exceptionally capable of



organizing. While she participated in formal Party work, that was not her focus. Working class organizers such as Bonita Williams and Audley Moore represented the potential of black left feminism to truly transform the social order in an American context that was deeply divided on grounds of race, ethnicity, and gender.

## Audley Moore

Audley Moore came from a life of hardship in the rural South. She was born in New Iberia, Louisiana. Her paternal grandmother was raped by a white slave master, giving birth to her lighter skinned father.<sup>82</sup> He worked for himself and was a sheriff's deputy for a period. Her mother worked as a housewife. Both of her parents were enchanted by the politics of Marcus Garvey.<sup>83</sup> She was five years old when her mother died, while her father died when she was sixteen. Moore stopped attending school after the age of eleven because she had to take care of her siblings and was discouraged by her frequent tardiness. Her father was a part of what she called the "resistance movement" against Southern racists. He escaped a white mob that entered his home to attack him.<sup>84</sup> At a young age, Moore's brother was horsewhipped by a white man for playing with his white son. The threat of racism and violence in her youth was constant and it engendered in Moore a strong sense of racial consciousness.

After her father died, it was Audley Moore's experience as a domestic worker that brought her to a life of social struggle. She dropped out of school around the fourth grade.<sup>85</sup> As the caretaker of her siblings, she was compelled into domestic work.<sup>86</sup> She recalled one employer who molested her, remarking:

*that was every case. Every job I got was the same thing. I had to leave because the boss of*

*the house always came, found his way in my department, wherever I was. If I was in the nursery or if I was in the kitchen, and you just couldn't keep a job for the white man.*<sup>87</sup>

Facing rampant sexual assault that so many domestics faced, Audley Moore chose to leave domestic work. Yet, this experience imbued in her a sense of struggle: "There never was a time when we were not in struggle. I don't think that anybody needed to come on to the scene to lead us, either. Innately, in our very bones, we wanted to be free. Always."<sup>88</sup> Propelled by experiences of oppression and inspired by the imagery and rhetoric of Marcus Garvey, Moore left New Orleans for New York City during World War I.<sup>89</sup>

Moore's arrival in New York City was emblematic of her increasing engagement in politics. She came to the city to witness the launching of the UNIA's Black State Line and ended up getting involved in local Republican Party politics.<sup>90</sup> It was the appeal of street politics and the left's fight against racism that brought her into the CP. Prompted by her sister, she went to see a CP demonstration in Harlem in support of the Scottsboro Boys:

*I saw signs, "DEATH TO THE LYNCHERS!" Oh! That inspired me to no end. And I saw a young woman, carrying a sign, "DEATH TO THE LYNCHERS!" And I walked up to her and I said, "No you give me that sign!" I said "you can walk beside me, but I must carry the sign. I'm the black woman, I must carry that sign." So, I took the sign from her and I walked around."*

It was clear that the Communist Party spoke to Moore's burning sense of black nationalism. Inspired by thousands of black and white demonstrators fighting to free the Scottsboro Boys, Moore and many other African Americans joined the CP because they believed it would address their needs



and interests. As Moore later commented, “this was a wonderful vehicle. If they've got a movement like that, and they're conscious of this thing that Garvey had been speaking about, then this may be a good thing for me to get in to help free my people.”<sup>91</sup> It seems plausible that many radical-minded women of color in American cities saw the Communist Party as the next best organization for racial liberation after the decline of the UNIA in the 1920s. Truly, this was an organization that they believed would carry the banner of Garvey's black nationalism.

Audley Moore was active in leftist circles immediately after her first Scottsboro rally in Harlem. Moore remarked that she “worked like a beaver,” distributing pamphlets, while selling literature and picnic tickets. She was swept up so quickly in the fervor that she did not realize she joined the International Labor Defense, the CP-affiliated legal defense front, not the CP.<sup>92</sup> She became a card carrying member, but was distressed by the Harlem Party's overwhelmingly white membership, remembering that they were “all whites in Harlem, all positions. Everything was white. All, everything. All the leading people. And of course, they had James Ford, he was the chairman of the Harlem Communist Party. But everything else was white. All the people were white then.”<sup>93</sup> Certainly, her large figure, booming voice, and loose demeanor stuck out amongst party gatherings.<sup>94</sup> However, the Party's willingness to put her in positions of leadership and influence signaled its ability to adapt to new cultural and social demands.

Audley Moore's activism in the party was energetic and broad. She fought for the re-

moval of racist principles and against corporal punishment in the Harlem Committee for Better Schools. Formed in 1935, this committee was composed of community members and radical Jewish teachers who were shocked by physical decay and blatant racism in schools.<sup>95</sup> In other cases, principles concerned with white teachers' attitudes towards black students asked Moore for help. She recalled that, “the white teachers used to call our children [slurs], in the classroom. Yes, they did. The white teachers used to fling books across the room and have the blood gushing.” Whether this was exaggeration or not, it was personal for Moore, given racism's constraints on her own education as a child. Connecting these issues to racial advancement, she pointed out that “it's so disheartening to see our children come into school in first grade all bright eyed, eager, hungry to learn, and go out drooping in sixth grade.”<sup>96</sup> While such forms of organizing were not at the heart of the CP's program, Party women such as Moore pushed to prioritize everyday conditions of working African Americans.

Additionally, Audley Moore was at the forefront of struggles for tenants' rights and better hospital conditions. During the height of the Great Depression, struggles against evictions and for better housing conditions were a paramount concern. During the late 1930s, with the Consolidated Tenants League, Party activists such as Moore helped organize marches against high rents and for the construction of additional public housing. They carried out rent strikes against rent increases and poor conditions in buildings.<sup>97</sup> Self-educated Party members from working class backgrounds

were quick to recognize the importance of these actions, and, as Moore stated, “the first strikes we had, I organized 'em. I mean, I was organizing the houses when I joined the Communist Party. I was right in the process of organizing the houses.”<sup>98</sup> In addition to poor housing, African Americans in Harlem faced poor conditions in neighborhood hospitals. The issue of inadequate public resources was more than a depression-era problem; it was an issue of racial discrimination:

*we had to fight to get black nurses in Harlem hospitals, and we had to fight for decent treatment, every day, every day, every day was a struggle. We had to fight to get black doctors in Harlem hospitals. It was something, even to get clean sheets on the receiving table. There were dirty and bloody sheets and they didn't mind putting you right on somebody else's blood.*<sup>99</sup>

Audley Moore's movement building helped push the Harlem Communist Party closer to the people. As she remarked, “every struggle was Communist initiated.” Blacks in Harlem had a sense of this, as the Party was generally well received. Moore pointed out that, “our people didn't have the red scare like the white people had it. The party did so much positive things, fought so hard, against Jim Crow, and so on.”<sup>100</sup> Further, the Party's devotion to internationalism

and anti-fascism inspired growing grassroots activism.

It was Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 that sparked a wave of antifascist solidarity. This began in Harlem on August 3, 1935, as the Provisional Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia assembled liberal groups, church groups, and the Communist Party for one of the largest interracial marches

Harlem has ever seen, turning out over 25,000 people.<sup>101</sup> Inspired by black volunteers of the Abraham Lincoln Bridge who fought alongside Republican forces in Spain, Moore and others wanted to travel to Ethiopia to defend what they viewed to be the last independent African nation.<sup>102</sup> She reminisced that, “I participated in orga-

Early Communist Party leadership held onto the notion that men of the industrial working-class were often the vanguard of the revolution. Black left feminists argued otherwise.

nizing. Many of our people wanted to go and the United States government said if you go, you'll lose your citizenship. What citizenship? We would ask.” Thinking internationally, she viewed African Americans as a nation within a nation, more connected to Ethiopia than the United States. Instead, she opted to collect and send materials to Ethiopia, recalling that, “we collected bandages and sheets, old sheets and tore them up, and the nurses in Harlem hospitals, they sterilized 'em. We collected medicine and





so on.”<sup>103</sup> Although the United Front created opportunities to bridge connections between African Americans and the African diaspora, it eliminated other positions that were central to black women’s political organizing.

Ultimately, Audley Moore’s position as a Communist and her lifelong commitment to Garveyism became an untenable contradiction. In 1938, she was elected chair of the Harlem Communist Party’s Women Commission, in addition to becoming the executive secretary of the Upper Harlem Section of the Party.<sup>104</sup> Despite her status and emphasis on bread-and-butter issues in working class neighborhoods, the CP was relatively marginal in black political life. As Mark Naison contends in *Communists in Harlem during the Great Depression*, had the party, at the time, adopted rituals of the black church, embraced black culture more openly, and allowed black members to dominate branches in their neighborhoods, it might have created a mass movement akin to the UNIA.<sup>105</sup> Audley Moore’s sentiments were similar, reflecting the Party’s stance that shifted away from black self-determination during the “Popular Front” era:

*I resigned in 1950. I resigned because I couldn't get them to discuss the question that was bothering me uppermost, on the term Negro, and the fact that they had really relinquished their position, as a nation, that we were a nation. And I wanted to talk about those things, you know?*

Moore’s pronouncements foreshadowed her subsequent embrace of more explicit forms of black nationalism. Still, they reflected wider issues that occurred at the time. Many black Communist women were concerned with the number of white women who dated black men in the Party. Conversely, they argued that black women

rarely dated white men.<sup>106</sup> To her, this represented the broader internal problem of “racial chauvinism” in the Party:

*Being a Negro is a condition, not just a name. When I realized that we were going wrong, I went to the Communist Party. I really wanted the Communist Party to discuss the thing and analyze... if blacks wouldn't touch it - Ben Davis and none of them would touch it - and um, the whites wouldn't touch it because they said the blacks hadn't brought it up... and I kept getting bile in my stomach because I could see we were going wrong.*<sup>107</sup>

However, the Party allowed Moore to see

the world in a new light, as she admitted, “I’m grateful for the party. It taught me the class character of this society. It taught me the science of society.”<sup>108</sup> Fundamentally, the Party’s inability at the time to create a discourse of race that was as sharp and distinct as its analysis of class proved its obsolescence for women like Audley Moore.

## Conclusion

Early Communist Party leadership held on to the notion that men of the industrial working-class were often the vanguard of the revolution. Black left feminists argued otherwise. In doing so, they undoubtedly pushed the Communist Party to the left. Their organizing represented a politics that was unique in its ability to unite working people by directly addressing their needs. Ideologically, they centered the oppression of women in ways that emphasized their hyper-exploitation as domestic workers and redefined the notion of ‘black womanhood.’ In their eyes, black women were exceptionally militant, well-versed in the community, and capable of connecting to African American cultural traditions. Internationalism, anti-fascism, and anticolo-

nialism came naturally to these women, as they lived lives that were simultaneously American and immigrant West Indian, embodying what cultural studies scholar Paul Gilroy called ‘the Black Atlantic.’<sup>109</sup> Their identities were both nationally ‘west’ and culturally African, forming a politics that was noteworthy for its transnationalism. Significantly, the Communist International’s “Black Belt thesis” was an opportunity that black women seized upon. They used institutions of the political left to hone their unique talents.

Rather than essentialize the legacy of black left feminists, it is important to recognize how they contributed to the ‘black radical tradition.’ Later black feminists such as Claudia Jones, Angela Davis, the Combahee River Collective, and Audre Lorde are the intellectual descendants of the black Communist women who rose to prominence during the 1920s and 1930s. These pioneering women used Communism to advance their own vision of racial, gender, and class liberation. Visiting the Soviet Union and fighting for Pan-African solidarity helped them rethink the relationship between gender, race, and class and ultimately, the lives and the work of the black left feminists shed quite a bit of light on issues of identity within mass movements. These pioneering women also demonstrated that the social and political advancement of black women was not only urgently necessary, but could also be achieved through the application of practical dedication and fervent hard work.



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